

‘Don’t do the obvious thing’

What can you learn from the president of WUR? Two Master’s students ask Louise Fresco how you can get the most out of your degree programme. ‘It is a good idea to keep a diary, and not just about your love life.’

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Looking back on your university career, you are quite a Wageningen ‘veteran’. You obtained all your degrees here.

‘Yes, I was here for most of my academic career, and now I have been reappointed as president of the Executive Board, but I’ve been away for a long time in between. Thanks to my time at WUR in combination with my time outside Wageningen, I gained more of an overview of the breadth of our field. That makes it easier for me to make sound decisions, and to talk to the staff, the professors and the students at this university.’

▲ Executive Board president Louise Fresco talking to students in The Spot.

How do you think studying at WUR now is different from when you studied here?

'There was more freedom in the past. The university was a lot smaller and it was not as regulated as today. And in my day the university buildings were scattered around the town centre so we had to cycle fair distances from building to building. Now everything is concentrated on the campus. The plus side of that is that it is easy to meet people from different backgrounds. You can go to the research institutes, startups, or even Friesland Campina to meet students from other disciplines, chemists, entrepreneurs, or anyone. You can see here how ideas and knowledge get translated into tangible things. The campus constitutes a true innovation ecosystem.'

The fundamental advantage of Wageningen University is that you can choose among many different courses. That hasn't changed much over the years. When I was a student, I took any course I was interested in. And then Wageningen has always had an international dimension, which is very important too. Multiculturalism is like a window to another world and helps us understand how other people think and live. That is an investment for life, I think.

And right from the start, the people who work at WUR have always been highly motivated to make a difference to the world. They are not here simply because they don't know what they want to do. I taught in several universities and that difference is very clear.'

'Ask yourself: who do I want to become?'**What is your advice to new students, for getting the most out of their time here?**

'The main thing is to ask yourself: "Who do I want to become?" Of course, this is difficult to define on the first day of your degree course. I always think it is a very good idea to keep a diary, and not just about your love life. What courses and subjects seem interesting to you, what books would you like to read, what people would you like to meet? And see how that evolves over time. It sets off a sort of awareness-raising process. By writing things down, you start to be able to define yourself better and better. When I was a student here, I lived above a bakery in the Hoogstraat in a group of 10 girls. We did not have much: only one loo, one kitchen, and one shower for the 10 of us, and it was very cold in the winter. But what we did have was a book club. We would read things way beyond our own disciplines. And that's another piece of advice: get out of your comfort zone. In our house, we

had girls of different ages and I advise students not to only stick to people in their own year.

Finally, students should do things that are not the obvious option. Do not just look for confirmation of what you already know. Read books about countries you don't know, meet people who are from different backgrounds. That forces you to open your mind. For example, even as a student, my eyes were not really good, so I was hopeless at detecting birds. However, I would still go bird-watching with the students from the ornithological society. I didn't have a clue, I couldn't see the birds. But it was fun to be with people who looked in a completely different way than I did. It's so nice to learn something about other people's passionate interests.'

'Discipline has negative connotations but it can be a very positive thing'**Now for a more practical question. Do you have any smart tricks for studying more efficiently?**

'There are two skills that I would recommend everyone to develop. One is to get a feel for calculation and quantification. A lot of the work we do has a quantitative side to it. So it is essential to have a sense of the order of magnitude – I still hear people confusing millions and billions – and of how to assess whether what a paper says is right. Don't be afraid of facts and figures. They are good tools. It is essential to learn to be critical about statistics.'

The other skill, perhaps the most difficult one, is to develop real discipline - without becoming a workaholic. Set your priorities and be honest with yourself. If you want to finish something in three weeks, you have to make a plan, start working and not leave it until the last minute. If you do that, you create unnecessary stress, the quality of your work will suffer, and you will get frustrated. Discipline has negative connotations, but it can be a very positive thing when you handle it well.'

And what could you learn from the students of today?

'Students on our campus teach me something every day. Apart from IT knowledge – that difference is very obvious – they convey their passion in their own way. Young people and students are so open-minded and have very inspiring opinions and ideas. Resistance to innovative applications usually comes from the older generations and not the youngest. It is a joy for me to see how willing students are to try out new things.'



▲ Louise Fresco: 'Students are very open-minded and have very inspiring opinions and ideas.'

How important do you think it is for the students to follow the 'standard' academic path? What would you advise the students who can't decide whether to do a PhD?

'Don't do the obvious thing! I get to see a lot of CVs and I look carefully at the gaps. A lot of people take a gap year to travel. This can work out well if you set out your goals very clearly. I believe working for some years after your Master's can enrich your personality. I worked for several years before I started my PhD and I am very glad I did so. It gave me more experience and a more realistic idea of my field. But it all depends on what your interests are and who you want to do. In the end, you have to define your own path.'

Recently, the university allocated extra funds to stress prevention. Apparently, many students suffer from stress. Do you have any advice on how to deal with it better and maintain a healthy balance between studying and personal life?

'Firstly, the social media like Facebook are too time-consuming and create a lot of pressure and stress. Most stress is self-induced due to the lack of planning and prioritizing. Also, nowadays, a lot of people are overam-

bitious. Students need to have a more relaxed attitude towards their responsibilities and keep a balance between their professional and personal lives.

I can be quite busy and I often have to prepare speeches but I do not often get stressed. I can be productive even when I haven't had much sleep. I do get tired sometimes. But then I realize that I have one of the nicest jobs in the world. We should always keep in mind how privileged we are to be living in this country, where we have so many rights and opportunities. We need to be grateful for the things we usually take for granted.'

And to finish off with, what do you enjoy doing in your free time, when you are not chairing boards or speaking at conferences? What are your hobbies?

'I have a lot of hobbies! Hobbies are very important, as they define us too. I enjoy music, going to the movies and cooking. Books are a big part of my life, of course. I love walking, especially when the weather is nice. And I have a lot of friends to share these things with. Many of my friends are artists or writers. It is very interesting to interact with people who have different interests than you.' 🗨