

‘We want to make a dif

Wageningen will be collaborating even more with partners. That is one of the main themes of the strategic plan for the next four years. Executive Board members Rens Buchwaldt and Arthur Mol explain the choices.

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‘Innovation is concentrated at the areas where fields of knowledge overlap,’ says Arthur Mol, rector magnificus at Wageningen. ‘If we want to remain at the top, we need to have strategic partnerships with other universities and science institutes.’

In January, the Executive Board presented the strategic plan for the period 2019-2022. A central element in the plan, entitled Finding Answers Together, is the call to current and potential partners to collaborate even more. Rens Buchwaldt, the Executive Board member responsible for finance and HR: ‘We need to be more proactive in collaborating with one another within WUR. And we need to partner other organizations more.’

The priority is impact, stresses Mol. ‘We want to make a difference in the world. But we can’t do that alone. We want to collaborate more with Utrecht University, for example, on biological systems and sustainability. We will also be working on hi-tech areas such as robotics in partnership with the technical universities.’

DIGITAL TWINS

The strategic plan identifies three investment themes that Wageningen plans to spend four million euros a year on: Connected Circularity (renewable raw materials), the Protein Transition (alternative sources of protein such as plants, insects and seaweed) and Digital Twins (models for understanding organisms better). ‘In the Digital Twins theme, we plan to build digi-



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tal copies of cells, plants, animals and ecosystems,' explains Mol. 'We won't be setting up our own big digital sciences group for that; instead we will look to link up with other universities that are strong in data sciences and sensors, such as Eindhoven University.'

The Connected Circularity theme includes the topic of circular agriculture. There has been a lot of talk about this but ideas still need to crystallize, says Mol. 'Agriculture minister Carola Schouten's circular economy vision is a picture of the future. If you listen carefully, you realize that we don't yet know how to put that circular agriculture into practice, or on what scale. Which cycles could you close and what does that mean for food safety, food waste, farmers' incomes and the Netherlands' position in the export market? We'll be assigning a group of people to set up a research programme in consultation with the ministry of Agriculture, the Dutch Federation of Agriculture and Horticulture and nature organizations.'

'We will work out the details of different options and scenarios, identifying the pros and cons,' adds Buchwaldt. 'Hopefully that will play a role in the public debate so that we end up with a feasible plan.'

LIMITING STUDENT INTAKES

The strategic plan also takes some big decisions on education. For example, it keeps the option open of enrolment restrictions for some degree programmes. Mol: 'We mustn't abandon our small-group teaching, with lots of contact between the teacher and



'We will be paying more attention to entrepreneurship'

Rens Buchwaldt

the students. That is difficult now that more and more students are coming. That's why we are looking into digital education and the "flipped classroom", innovations that let us use our teachers where they have most to offer. We also look every year at each degree programme to check whether the increase in student numbers is still manageable. We decided to set an upper limit again for

Nutrition and Biotechnology, but we scrapped the enrolment limit for Molecular Life Sciences.'

The ministry is unhappy with the limits on student intakes, says the rector magnificus, but more money is needed for science education if you want to keep up teaching standards. 'We want to maintain the quality of the education, come what may.'

BECOMING ENTREPRENEURS

More emphasis will be put on entrepreneurship over the next few years. That is a demand from below, emphasizes Buchwaldt. 'Students are showing an increasing interest in this. They are more likely to want to start a business or work for one.' Wilfred Dolfma, the new professor of Business Management & Organization, is currently thinking up new educational paths that include entrepreneurship, for example in Master's degrees. There will also be courses for PhD candidates and a minor in Entrepreneurship in the BSc programmes. 'The second reason for doing more with entrepreneurship is that we want to make more of an impact,' explains Buchwaldt. Wageningen has relatively few spin-offs compared with the technical universities, although that has improved a lot in recent years and it now has more start-ups. 'We organize student challenges and we have investment funds that inject capital into new Wageningen companies. We've created an environment that attracts investors.' ■

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