



Marketing knowledge

Researchers and students are increasingly being challenged to think about how they can market their knowledge. Various startups and spin-offs are already under development. ‘We no longer wait until an enterprising researcher wants to go into business.’

TEXT ANJA JANSSEN PHOTOGRAPHY BRAM BELLONI

His research should be meaningful for society, feels virologist Jeroen Kortekaas. That is why in 2017 he helped launch BunyaVax, a spin-off of Wageningen Bioveterinary Research. The aim of BunyaVax is to use a technology for creating safe vaccines in 16 weeks to nip outbreaks of infectious diseases in humans and animals in the bud. ‘Up till now we are always too late with vaccinations when there is an outbreak. A recent case in point was Zika: there is still no human vaccine for that,’ says Kortekaas. This is an example of the entrepreneurial spirit that Value Creation director Sebastiaan Berendse would like to stimulate in Wageningen. ‘Being more enterprising is one of the ways of ensuring that the knowledge we generate gets applied.’ Then knowledge can have a

‘By being enterprising, we put our knowledge into practice’

greater social impact, he expects. That is why entrepreneurship is prominent in the Wageningen strategic plan for the coming years. This entrepreneurship is about much more than setting up startups, says Berendse. ‘Entrepreneurship also means being enterprising in our relations with research

partners. It is looking at the steps needed to put knowledge into practice.’

CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCHERS

Berendse and his team want to offer researchers opportunities to develop in this direction through things like participation in one of the challenges Wageningen is running. ‘We put out a call for teams of researchers to present ideas that meet a demand on the market,’ explains Berendse. They get support in developing their proposal, perhaps in developing a product, for instance, with questions such as: What is the demand? Who is the client? How does the client want to use the product or technology? What do they want to pay for it? Which route is the best for creating the product? An example of what can come out of a challenge is the SoilFertility tool. >

MEETING PLACE FOR INVESTORS AND BUSINESSES

Startups and spin-offs need investors in order to grow. A place for them to meet each other is the annual event F&A Next, which Wageningen University & Research, StartLife, Rabobank and Anterra Capital started in 2016. As well as investors and startups, the event brings together agri-food companies and business developers on Wageningen Campus to meet, get to know each other better and close deals.

Young knowledge-based companies are interesting for investors. The amount of risk capital invested in agri-food startups has risen sharply in recent years – to about 18 billion euros per year globally. Collaborating with, investing in, or buying startup knowledge and technology companies is a new way of innovating for established companies.

Wageningen does not invest any money in startups itself, but it collaborates closely with two risk capital funds: Innovation Industries (together with other Dutch science universities and the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research, TNO) and Shift Invests (Rabobank, TU Delft and OostNL). Shift invested in the Wageningen spin-off ChainCraft, which produces biobased chemicals using waste. Innovation Industries contributed to A-Mansia Biotech, which wants to launch a nutritional supplement on the market.

www.fanext.com

This is used to help farmers to apply the correct amount of artificial fertilizer, depending on the crop and the soil characteristics.

Challenges can also lead to new companies being formed. Berendse's team works closely on this with StartLife – a foundation co-founded by Wageningen which supports startups and spinoffs in the agricultural and food sectors. 'We no longer wait until an enterprising researcher wants to start a company based on their inventions,' says StartLife director Jan Meiling. 'Instead of that, we organize these challenges, as well as meetings, so as to find useful knowledge or technology for setting up new companies. And if a researcher wants to collaborate, but doesn't want to go into business themselves, we look for an external entrepreneur.' StartLife and the new Corporate Value Creation department are building up six spin-offs based on knowledge or technology coming out of Wageningen.

MEAT SUBSTITUTES

One of the spin-offs is Plant Meat Makers, a company being set up now on the initiative of Birgit Dekkers and her PhD supervisor Professor Atze Jan van der Goot. 'We have developed a technology with which you can make large chunks of plant protein with the structure of meat,' says Dekkers. 'So we can produce meat substitutes that resemble beefsteak or pork fillet. They don't exist yet.' The step they want to take with Plant Meat Makers is to upscale the production process. 'A startup is the best way of doing that. We can start small and tackle it step by step. Now we first want to develop products for chefs and sell them in a few restaurants.'

With StartLife's help she has drawn up a business plan. She got 25,000 euros through Climate-KIC, a support programme for startups that contribute to sustainability. 'We are working on expanding our team, making arrangements with partners, such as Wageningen

University & Research, and talking to financiers. There are several investors in the area of plant-based meat substitutes. We are now looking into who we are going to work with.'

Wageningen's focus on entrepreneurship does not mean that all scientists with a good idea must start a business, emphasizes Gitte Schober of the Corporate Value Creation department. 'Good scientists should certainly go on doing research. We might suggest to researchers who want to stay in science that they work with companies on developing prototypes. The mindset of an entrepreneur is different to that of a researcher, more restless. That is why we focus on young researchers, PhDs and postdocs, to give them a chance to combine their curiosity – the wish to know – with the experience of realizing an idea in practice.'

LOOKING FOR CLIENTS

Iris Houthoff is a young graduate with an enterprising spirit. A year ago she started Mylium, a company that develops new, sustainable material by growing fungi on agricultural waste flows. She used the fungal mycelium to create a material that has the appearance and feel of leather, but is lightweight and with the elasticity of foam. She is now trying to find clients and applications for this material. 'It is biobased, biodegradable and locally produced.'

Houthoff gets the full support of her boss, professor of Bioprocess Engineering René Wijffels. 'He is wholeheartedly supportive of the fact that I have a startup alongside my part-time job as a teacher of bioprocess engineering. He considers it important because just like me, he aims at implementation and impact. He helps me with things like finding a place in a production lab.'

Houthoff enjoys the many sides to running a business. 'Each week is different. New possibilities keep cropping up and that makes it very enjoyable work. For example, I got the chance to move to the Biotech

‘The mindset of an entrepreneur is different to that of a researcher’



PHOTO JONNE SEIJDEL

Investors and companies got together in May at the annual two-day event F&ANext.

Campus in Delft, where I would be able to make use of the expertise of DSM and set up a product lab. But I first want to try and set one up in Wageningen, since I work here.’ She got a starter’s loan of 8000 euros from StartLife, and Climate-KIC is contributing 10,000 euros. When she started Mylium, Houthoff benefitted a lot from the Startup Week run by StartHub, Wageningen’s support centre for enterprising students, during which she worked on a business model. She also cherishes the moments with her mentor Christian Koolloos, who she got through StartLife. ‘He mainly helps me by asking the right questions. That helps me discover what I should invest my energy in.’ She obtains further funding for development from subsidies and projects. And wherever possible, Houthoff tries to take part in competitions. Winning StartLife’s Young Hero Award, for instance, brought in 2500 euros.

BUSINESS COURSES

Wageningen’s ambition goes beyond instilling an entrepreneurial spirit in researchers. Such an attitude needs to be fostered in students too. ‘We want the fewer than 10 per cent of students that we currently reach with courses on business skills to grow to 80 per cent. That is a

major challenge. It means that we should integrate elements of business education into all the Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes,’ says Berendse. ‘In their further careers, all Wageningen graduates are expected to help to think up and to implement solutions. That requires you not only to look at what you might be able to do, but also how you can actually make it happen.’

So the curriculum will be altered over the next few years. But for years already, students who are interested have had the option of various courses on entrepreneurship. That has led to more and more students choosing to go into business. Berendse: ‘The number of student startups has grown from a handful to about 10 per year.’

For Fabian Lindner from Italy, his interest in entrepreneurship was a reason to come to Wageningen in September 2016 for the Master’s in Management, Economics and Consumer Studies. ‘I chose this university because here you can learn entrepreneurship alongside your academic studies. If I hadn’t come here, I probably wouldn’t have had a business now.’ Lindner’s business, Zzinga, brews mead (honey wine). He chose Entrepreneurship as his Master’s track and participated in StartHub’s Startup Week to see whether he

could turn his love of mead into a business plan. ‘In that week you work with a team on a business model. We decided to position Zzinga as a modern interpretation of mead: a lightly sparkling honey drink. Some of the profits go to local NGOs that protect bees and promote biodiversity.’

PERFECTING THE RECIPE

Through one of the StartHub coaches, Lindner, who graduates in June, got in contact with Döhler, an international supplier of food and ingredients. ‘We talked to them and they liked our idea. Together, we have perfected the recipe and now they are producing our drink.’ His company is taking other big strides too. ‘The Rabobank has given us an innovation loan. And thanks to StartHub, we have got in touch with the supermarket Marqt. They are selling Zzinga now.’

Wageningen students and researchers are extremely highly motivated, reckons Jan Meiling of StartLife, but they often tend to associate entrepreneurship with ‘right-wing tendencies and getting rich.’ ‘That image is not true. A business is a powerful instrument of change. We want to make that penny drop as often as we can.’ ■

www.wur.eu/entrepreneurship