'WORLD FULL OF OPTIMISTS IS BORING'

'I am not an optimist by nature,' said professor of Physical Chemistry and Soft Matter Joris Sprakel at the start of his inaugural lecture last Thursday. Professors too can be unsure and have doubts. But that is not a problem as academia needs pessimists as well, says Sprakel.

'I am not self-assured in daily life and am inclined to worry. As a result, I have often felt an outsider,' explains Sprakel. 'I am blessed with a somewhat sombre view of

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life.' But Sprakel finds science gives him cause for optimism: 'Science shows that even the toughest challenges can be overcome.' 'It took me a while to find my way in this field of research. I had a tendency to change course if others said something wasn't feasible.' As an example, he cites the common approach in molecular biology of looking at averages as they are easier to understand than the individual molecule. 'But averages never tell the whole story. In our research, we achieved a scientific breakthrough precisely by concentrating on molecules that differed from the average.'

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Sprakel finds it important for science to be integrated into society and for there to be a debate about diversity. 'But we mustn't simplify the issues by focussing exclusively on gender equality. There are other challenges that the world of science needs to tackle in order to be truly diverse. There are many groups of young students and researchers who are underrepresented, whether in terms of gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

And let's not forget personality. Here too, we need to beware of focussing too much on averages. A world full of optimists may sound like a paradise to some but I think it would soon get boring.' According to Sprakel, it is precisely the differences between us that lead to more balance. 'As the playwright George Bernard Shaw said, both optimists and pessimists contribute to society. The optimist invents the aeroplane, the pessimist the parachute.' ® TL