

ALUMNUS GIE LIEM TAKES HIS AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS TO THE NETHERLANDS

'I have praised Wageningen

After his PhD in Wageningen, nutrition researcher Gie Liem left for Melbourne. Regardless of the enormous distance, he comes back regularly, and this year he brought a group of enthusiastic Australian students with him. 'The links between nutrition research, government and industry are strong in the Netherlands.'

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Wrapped up warm in woollen scarves and hats, a group of Australian students walks across Wageningen Campus with a biting east wind against them. At home last week it was over 30 degrees. 'I'm practically freezing to death,' says a girl in a thick down jacket. 'I had hoped it would get even colder,' says a fellow student. 'I've never seen snow!' Nutrition expert Gie Liem (45), who took the initiative for the study tour, can't help laughing. 'Some of these students have never been outside Australia,' says Liem. 'That is why we organize our International Food and Nutrition Study Tour every other year. It's a two-week tour of top-ranking international research institutes, and I've taken my students to various countries, including the US, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. This year it's time to visit the Netherlands.'

Liem embarked on a degree in Human Nutrition in Wageningen in 1994. He is now associate professor of Sensory & Consumer Science at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. His motive?

'I want our students to get an international perspective.'

GENERATING KNOWLEDGE

'The Netherlands is the second biggest food producer in the world. In this country, the knowledge generated in Wageningen gets applied in agricultural practice. Australia is 183 times bigger, but is only in 15th place as a food producer. And the Australian food industry is a lot less innovative than the Dutch one. A nice thing about this kind of study tour is that you have so much more contact with your students. I chat a lot with them about their career prospects and I encourage them to seize the opportunities they get, for example by finding out about the options for further studies in the Netherlands. I have praised Wageningen to the skies to my >

Alumnus Gie Liem, associate professor at Deakin University in Melbourne, with his students of Nutrition and Dietetics on campus in Wageningen.



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students.’ The group is made up of 27 BSc and MSc students of nutrition and dietetics, most of them women. Some of the participants are already working in the food industry and are doing a Master’s at the same time. There is also a paediatrician who is doing a Master’s in nutrition to deepen her knowledge of the field. The students have to apply to join this study tour, and pay a contribution to the costs of about 4000 Australian dollars. From their base at the StayOkay hostel in Soest, the group is visiting not only the Nutrition and Food Technology department in Wageningen but also the Nutrition Centre, the Netherlands National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), the ministry of Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research (TNO), the Nutrition Alliance at the Gelderse Vallei hospital, FrieslandCampina and The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Liem has connections everywhere – university friends and other Wageningen contacts. ‘Just like me, they have climbed slowly up the ranks over the past 20 years. When I got in touch, all the doors flew open for us.’

AFTER GRADUATING

‘An intensive study tour like this helps students to look beyond national borders and explore what they want to do after or maybe even during their degree course. Spend a term studying in the Netherlands, perhaps? The links between nutrition research, government and industry are strong in the Netherlands. And thanks to the Nutrition

Centre, communication about nutrition research to the general public is done well here. There are lots of ex-Wageningen students at the Nutrition Centre.’ Conversely, two groups of Wageningen PhD students have travelled to Australia, where Liem was in charge of hosting them at Deakin University, and put them in touch with other Australian institutes. Liem: ‘We set up an exchange programme, too. Students from Wageningen can come to Deakin for a short period, and vice versa,



GIE LIEM (45)

Works: As associate professor, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
Studied: Human Nutrition, 1999
PhD: Monell Chemical Senses Center, Philadelphia, USA and Wageningen University, 2004

without having to pay extra tuition fees.’ The group’s hostess on this bitter Wednesday morning is Monica Mars, who started her degree in Human Nutrition in 1994, like Liem, and is now an associate professor in the Sensory Science and Eating Behaviour chair group. Mars and Liem did research together on children’s flavour preferences as part of their graduation thesis work. And that is still a relevant theme in this chair group. ‘You cannot make children unlearn their inborn preference for sweet things, but you can teach them to enjoy new flavours,’ says Professor Kees de Graaf, who taught both Mars and Liem 25 years ago. He is now leading a large-scale research project focussing on the potential for influencing the preference for sweetness, with a view to weight loss. Test subjects follow a sweet or a non-sweet diet for six months, to find out to what extent that alters their preferences.

LOWLANDS POP FESTIVAL

After the introduction there is a demanding substantive programme in which the results are presented of a multi-sensory study at Lowlands pop festival in the Netherlands. Test subjects were invited to smell, taste and evaluate all kinds of foods at an improvised food market, and then had a memory test sprung on them. Where did you see this product? People have a kind of spatial memory for where you can find which food. And it transpired that they recall the locations of high-calorie foods significantly better than those of other foods. No doubt this characteristic was helpful for survival in prehistoric times. Nowadays it just helps you get fat. The students are surprised to hear that the degree programme is taught in English and that almost all Wageningen Bachelor’s students go on to do a Master’s. ‘Higher education works differently in Australia. There is no distinction between applied and academic degree courses,’ says Liem. A student adds, ‘A Bachelor’s degree is considered a good starter’s qualification for the job market.’ The opportunities for distance learning, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), appeal to them too. Liem: ‘Deakin University is itself very active in the field of distance learning. That is quite usual



Australian students have lunch in The Spot student café on Wageningen Campus.

in Australia, as you could see in the TV series *The Flying Doctors*. Long before the internet existed, children in the outback of this vast country received distance education through transistor radios.'

The students are fascinated by the new technologies they get the chance to look at today. 'Food out of the 3D printer, and gastroenterology research *in vitro*, what astonishing ideas,' says Jasmine Wright. 'I'd never seen anything like it. Up to now we have mainly sat in the classroom. On a study tour like this you suddenly discover a ton of possibilities for using technology for food research. I've picked up loads of ideas for topics I would like to do research on later, such as links between nutrition and health, or personalized dietary advice.' Her fellow student Kobe Ferteis would like to go on to work on campaigns to promote healthy diets and public health. 'Very interesting to hear how all that is funded in the Netherlands and which strategies have been

adopted. I would love to set up a similar system in Australia.'

Matthew Silipo was fascinated to hear first-hand about the relations Wageningen nutrition researchers maintain with the private sector. 'Nice to see that applications of scientific research in daily life are so much in evidence. That keeps both students and professors motivated.'

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In passing, Gie Liem tells us a bit about his career. 'I originally came to Wageningen to study Environmental Protection, but I soon found out it was too technical for me, and that I would prefer to work with people. My family are all in the medical world. The cutting edge where nutrition meets health and psychology fascinates me. Why do people eat what they eat? And why do they sometimes eat so much they get far too fat? Liem was involved in numerous extracurricular activities alongside his degree in

Human Nutrition. Like driving the veterinary ambulance in Rhenen. 'But that mainly came down to scraping dead cats off the asphalt and answering phone calls from people who had seen a lost dog but couldn't catch it.' He was also a reporter for the local radio station Rijnstad FM. 'Local news about all sorts of things, first on Friday evenings and later from seven to nine in the morning before I went to lectures.'

That was how he came to interview Marije Weits during the introduction days for new students. She was a biology student on his corridor in the Rijnsteeg student residence, whom he was eager to impress. 'She was not best pleased.' But they have now been married for 19 years and have three children. Monica Mars still uses a video in her lectures of Liem's firstborn baby Stijn pulling a face the first time he was offered tastes of sweet, sour, salty and bitter foods.

ADVENTURE

In 2004, Liem got his PhD for comparative research on the taste preferences of American and Dutch children, done in Philadelphia and Wageningen. 'After that we wanted to go to Australia because it was an adventure. So when a job came up at Deakin University, I went for it and we have stayed there ever since.'

Liem comes to Europe regularly for conferences, and always pops in on friends and colleagues in Wageningen. Two years ago he had a five-month sabbatical at WUR and FrieslandCampina. Wageningen's nutrition research is among the best in the world, according to Liem. It is more structured here than in Melbourne. 'The presence of all those big companies on the campus adds value. And there is a lot of money here for nutrition research, as well as good facilities.' He stayed in a static caravan with his nine-year-old daughter Loren. 'It was a special experience to cycle through Wageningen with her. She went to the Jozefschool, where I did a study on children and sour drinks in 2003, as part of my PhD research. So Wageningen felt very familiar. The same supermarkets, cyclists everywhere, the directness of the people. And Loren loved the drinking chocolate in the Leeuwenborch.' ■