

# Log in to Wageningen

**Thanks to the lockdown, digital education has come in for quite a boost in 2020. Online courses for professionals are booming business too. More and more people all around the world are logging in to learn about typical Wageningen themes such as food safety, plant breeding, animal behaviour and post-harvest technology. Not to mention the science of beer.**

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**H**orticulturalist Carl Kroon is used to early starts as general director of Fides Guatemala, one of ornamental plant-breeding company Dümmer Orange's farms. But in the past few weeks, his Fridays have started extremely early. He was at his laptop by four in the morning to follow the live Q&A session in the Wageningen online course on Postharvest Technology from Antigua, Guatemala.

'The sessions start at 12 noon Dutch time, so it is still night here, but luckily I'm not the only one who has to get up early. My coursemates come from all around the world, from Asia to South America. The guest course leader is at UC Davis in California, so for her it was three o'clock in the morning. Fortunately, it's just two hours and I can use the rest of the online learning materials at a time that's convenient for me.'

Kroon thinks it is worth sacrificing some sleep to do the course. 'On our farm, we produce cuttings of all sorts of ornamental plants, and sell them to professional plant

growers, mainly in North America. Because the cuttings have a limited shelf life, postharvest technology is very important for us. It's quite a time since I studied horticulture at Wageningen; I was in the class of 1986. This course helps me brush up my knowledge and get up to date on new developments. I learn a lot, about ethylene inhibitors, for example, and about packing products in a controlled atmosphere. I've even got a separate appointment next week with a few experts from the course, and I'm very pleased about that.'

## WATCHING SCIENCE CLIPS

The Postharvest Technology course is run by Wageningen Academy. 'A group of participants all start together and follow a programme over several weeks in which they watch previously recorded web lectures and short knowledge clips, and do assignments,' says Monique Tulp, a programme manager at Wageningen Academy. 'There is a live Q&A session every week at a fixed >



Professor Sander Kersten (Nutrition, Metabolism and Genomics) making a recording for a MOOC.

time, with interaction between the participants and the experts. Interaction is also possible through the discussion forum on the online learning platform.’  
These are interesting courses for professionals who want to expand or brush up their knowledge, perhaps because they want to make a career switch. The prices vary: the Postharvest Technology course costs 1250 euros, while Refrigerated Transport Technology costs 575 euros.

‘We try to plan live sessions at doable times in the different time zones’

Tulp: ‘Some companies include our courses in their staff training programmes. Then we get some of their staff taking a course with us every year. And we run tailor-made courses, which can also be done online.’

### A SUCCESS

Until recently, most of these courses for professionals were taught on the Wageningen campus. Because of the coronavirus crisis, many courses had to be rapidly moved online, just like the degree courses. Wageningen’s extensive experience of running Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) came in handy when people had to make this switch. As the word ‘massive’ suggests, large numbers of students from around the world sign up – on the online platform EdX – for these online lectures. With the odd exception, the courses are free and participants can take them at their own pace. Wageningen launched its first MOOC in 2015, and there are now 43 WUR courses available online. In August, the millionth participant embarked on a Wageningen MOOC, a milestone that was reached much earlier than expected thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic. ‘There were two or three times more registrations than usual during the lockdown,’ says Suzanne de Bruijn, Wageningen’s business developer for lifelong learning. ‘Some courses had up to 30 times more participants than usual.’

Thanks to the experience of making MOOCs, Wageningen did not find it too hard to switch to online education, says Ulrike Wild, director of online learning at WUR. ‘Over the past five years we have built up the infrastructure, including a professional recording studio and ICT support.’

### COVID CATALYST

Staff at the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WCIDI) even talk of a Covid catalyst that has accelerated their progress down the digital route they had already chosen. WCIDI supports capacity development among professionals in developing countries. ‘Professionals in the food sector can brush up their knowledge with us on subjects such as stakeholder management or climate change. We used to travel a lot to Ethiopia, Cambodia, Colombia and other countries to do that,’ says Riti Hermán Mostert of WCIDI. ‘And participants came to the Netherlands for two-week courses. With sustainability in mind, we were already working on online learning materials. This year our team has gone all out to expand what we offer.’  
Because most of the WCIDI participants come from low and middle income countries where the internet is not always reliable, the course organizers had to be creative. ‘We try and plan live sessions at times that are doable in the different time zones, and when the internet is usually stable for our course participants. We use learning materials and knowledge clips that are downloadable at low bandwidths and can be used offline. We also use WhatsApp to distribute information.’  
Working online generates a lot of new possibilities, says Hermán Mostert. ‘If I organize a meeting for former participants now, I can easily ask someone from India or Nigeria who took part last year to give a presentation. The budget I have wouldn’t stretch to flying them over. And we can now spread fulltime courses that used to take two weeks over a longer period, and have smaller groups that get more coaching. That makes it easier to combine participation in the course with your work and your private life. We can also start offering short in-service courses now.’  
All these advantages notwithstanding, Hermán Mostert does not expect all WCIDI’s educational work to stay online in the future. ‘Sometimes we’ll end up with a mix of online and on-campus. The obvious advantage of being on campus is that participants can expand their networks and can visit companies.’

The range of online courses for professionals offered by Wageningen Academy will go on growing too. Eelke Westra, who leads the course on Refrigerated Transport Technology, sees that as a good development. ‘My colleagues and I provide training and consultancy to companies that request it from all over the world, from China to South America. If we can do that online too, it cuts down on travelling time and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Besides, I think universities should be making use of the technical possibilities that exist now. They greatly expand your reach.’

The first time Westra recorded his presentations, it took a bit of getting used to. ‘You are looking at a camera instead of at a class that you’re interacting with. The live Q&A sessions felt a bit strange at first too. I felt like a radio presenter.’

Westra’s colleague Sanne Boesveldt, who teaches the online course Basic Principles in Sensory Science for Wageningen Academy, had a similar experience. ‘I had to remake my first five videos of lectures four times each. Eventually you get the hang of it and start finding ways of livening up the classes. One of the topics on this course is the role of our senses in how we experience our food. So in one of the videos I take a mouthful of crisps to demonstrate that crunching on crisps is part of the experience. Interaction is harder to achieve online, but there are more possibilities for it than you imagine at first.’ So Boesveldt is enthusiastic too: ‘The nice thing about online courses is that you can reach far more people with them. And because course participants can organize their time themselves, it is a good way for them to update their knowledge alongside their work. And I can use a lot of elements from the online course in my teaching on campus.’

### HARD WORK

Sensory Science and other online courses from Wageningen Academy usually get positive evaluations from participants. Ahmed Ragab, a refrigerated transport specialist with Maersk shipping company in Cairo, Egypt, took Postharvest Technology and Refrigerated Transport Technology, and would give both courses 8 out of 10. ‘It was hard work. I spent a lot of time studying every weekend, but I learned an awful lot. We transport goods, mainly fruit and vegetables, to countries such as Turkey, Ukraine, Lebanon and Syria. On the course, I learned how we can deliver the cargo in optimal condition. The knowledge was very detailed: we



were taught about the molecular structure of fruit and vegetables, for instance. My background is commercial, so some of it was like rocket science to me, but I got a lot of support from the experts. Although some experts were easier to follow than others, and they could have facilitated more interaction between the course participants.’

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The free Wageningen MOOCs generally go down well, too. In fact, two of them – The Science of Beer and Sustainable Tourism – were rated among the top 10 EdX MOOCs in the world in 2019. These and other MOOCs on the open source platform EdX are used by universities worldwide. Suzanne de Bruijn thinks that is a great development: ‘There are many global issues in the areas of sustainability, agriculture, climate and nutrition, in which Wageningen has a strong knowledge base. If we can spread that knowledge more widely, thus reaching more people, all the better.’ ■

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