

WUR to study its colonial past

A new historian will be appointed to investigate WUR's past activities in Indonesia and Suriname.

The initiative for the three-year study came from WUR's Executive Board. It fits with a nationwide trend of Dutch organizations investigating their links with colonialism.

The new historian will join Professor Ewout Frankema's Rural and Environmental History chair group. 'We are constantly doing research on colonial history but we don't usually take a particular institution or university as

the starting point for the study.

In this case, we will explicitly be examining ourselves.'

'The idea is not to assess people's actions according to some moral yardstick'

Frankema says the intention is not to make moral judgements. 'We want to avoid that. The idea is not to assess people's actions according to some moral yardstick. The aim is rather to learn more about our own past. The initiative is driven primarily by a healthy academic curiosity and desire



Growing tea plants on Java in about 1926 • Photo Tropenmuseum

to reveal something of our own history.'

Publicity

The study should answer various questions. Frankema: 'First there is the "what" question: what were the Wageningen scientists doing there and who did they collaborate with? So that's about the facts. Then there is the "how" question: how was it all organized and financed? Thirdly, there is the "why" question. What were the motives driving certain programmes

and preventing alternatives. Finally, what has been the legacy of all this activity?'

The study period starts in 1876, the year when agricultural education began in Wageningen, rather than in

1918 when the Agricultural College was founded.

Frankema: '1876 is the

'What did the Wageningen scientists do and who with?'

first year in which we could have had activities abroad, because agricultural research was already being done in the tropics before 1918 and Wageningen people were gradually brought in for that.'

The intention is to publish the findings in a book. The candidate needs not only to be a good researcher and write well, but also to be able to deal with the 'public attention' the study is expected to get. The deadline for applications has now passed. ^{RK}

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