



SJOUKJE HEIMOVAARA:

‘Our independence is our biggest asset’

WUR’s new president Sjoukje Heimovaara loves doing research, but always ends up in a management position. That is the common thread running through her career. ‘I’ll see the potential for change, and be told: “So why don’t you do it?”’

TEXT WILLEM ANDRÉE PHOTOGRAPHY DUNCAN DE FEY

DThe room vacated by her predecessor Louise Fresco is full of cardboard boxes. Its new occupant Sjoukje Heimovaara (1965) is starting her WUR presidency by unpacking, putting things away and arranging the furniture – a parallel process to the way she is shaping her ideas about the years ahead. She shares her thoughts freely. ‘I’ve just had a conversation about online meetings. A meeting in New York? Join online. We mustn’t fly to Bogota or Beijing for two days just for a meeting. There’s no need for that.’ This is typical of her way of thinking and working, as becomes clear as the conversation progresses. If she thinks things can or should be done differently, she has to make sure that happens. Heimovaara studied Plant Sciences in Wageningen and worked for 17 years for the plant breeding company Royal Van Zanten, most of them as Director of Research

& Development. She is a member of the Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) - ‘a job on the side that I cherish’ - and knows the plant and research world inside out. In the last two years, as director of the Agrotechnology & Food Sciences Group (AFSG) in Wageningen, she has also become familiar with the world of food. On 1 July, WUR announced that she would succeed Louise Fresco as President of the Executive Board. ‘I am of course honoured by the new job, but it is a pity that I have to leave AFSG already, as I don’t generally move on so fast. I like to build.’

From your CV, it seems that you always end up in a management position.

‘Yes,’ she laughs. ‘It is a common thread in my working life: I’ll be working somewhere and I’ll see the potential for change. Then someone will say: “So why don’t you do it?”’

And where did the ambition to become President of the Board at Wageningen come from?

‘Wageningen is very dear to me: an amazing, unique and important institute. Our planet is facing so many challenges where we can and must make a contribution and I think about that all the time. I did have my doubts about the idea of being President, though. Mainly because Louise Fresco was such a strong figurehead and did so much for us. With me, Wageningen gets someone with a different profile. I had to get used to that idea. As a manager, I am more of a facilitator.’

‘What interests me is the big picture. Which direction should we go in, and how? A few years ago, together with the AWTI, I wrote an advisory report for the Dutch government and parliament about the future of higher education in the Netherlands. In it, we stated that universities, including the >



SJOUKJE HEIMOVAARA

President of the Executive Board of WUR

Higher Education:

WUR Plant Breeding 1989, PhD Leiden University, cell biology 1995

Career:

1989-2003 TNO

2003-2020 Royal Van Zanten

2020-2022 Managing director of AFSG (WUR)

Current board positions:

Member of AWTI, Top Women, NWO KIC, Supervisory Board of the Institute for Sustainable Process Technology, Top Institute Food and Nutrition, Carbohydrate Competence Centre

applied science universities, should present a clearer identity, and that the government should exercise more control over the effectiveness and coherence of the entire research and education system’.

And where should Wageningen be heading?

‘Wageningen should devote everything it has to working out how we can continue to inhabit our planet sustainably, in the broadest sense of the word. In the debates here in the Netherlands on climate, water and nitrogen, you can see different camps emerging. One group wants to solve the problems with technology, while another wants nature conservation, less livestock and organic and eco-friendly farming methods. I’m exaggerating deliberately here, but this is really happening. If there is one institute that can help bridge that divide, it is WUR. And then, how do we get people to actually use the solutions we come up with? We must also get the Netherlands out of the regional mindset and into the global mindset. There is no other university in the Netherlands that is such a global player as Wageningen.’

Should WUR speak out more on societal issues?

‘We must definitely share our knowledge and scenarios in public debates. But that does not mean we have to speak with one voice. We just don’t all agree with each other here, and that’s only natural. Someone who looks at things from the “organic” angle will see things differently to someone who thinks in technological terms. What’s important to me is that people in Wageningen who seriously disagree should talk to each other here on campus, not only in the newspapers, and get to understand each other’s point of view better. And I would like it if people only did that in the areas they know about. If I am asked questions about nitrogen, I can take part in the discussion

but ultimately I will refer the person to our experts, such as Wim de Vries.’

Heimovaara started studying Plant Breeding in Wageningen in 1983. She was interested in social issues, she says, but her choice of degree was for academic reasons. ‘I was really thrilled by plants and genetics. I liked genetics best, but I also remember a practical class in which we had to estimate the yields of fields and one in which you had to identify the variety of potatoes. Fantastic. And going into nature areas with Jan Just Bos to identify plants with *Heukels’ Flora*. I was good at it, and I knew them all, because my father dragged me around nature areas all through my childhood. He was a plastic surgeon, but he also knew loads about birds and plants. So as we walked, he would ask “What is this? We are going to identify that”. I got fed up with it, because he already knew what it was!’ ‘My husband studied here too, Soil Science. I met him during the introduction camp for my degree programme. He “borrowed” my bike, but I didn’t realize that at the time, ha ha. He only told me later. We are a real Wageningen family, so my daughters didn’t want to study in Wageningen. I think that’s a real pity, I would have liked it very much. But I think I wanted it too much’.

After her studies in Wageningen, Heimovaara worked at TNO for 14 years. She started with barley genetics and got her PhD for a study of the signal transduction of abscisic acid in barley. ‘In the end, I increasingly shifted towards biochemistry, working more and more for companies, and getting involved in management. And so I kept ending up in a leadership position, because I would have a strong opinion about something. Then I wanted to go back into research again so I went to Van Zanten. But there too, I became more and more of a manager and worked as director general for more than two years. That is a bit of a common thread running through my career.’



‘How do we get people to actually use the solutions we come up with?’

Is the application of knowledge your main passion?

‘No, fundamental research is just as important. You can’t have one without the other. I am not particularly worried about too little attention being paid to applications. What I do worry about is that there is enough money for independent, excellent research. Without that, we will dry up; it lays the foundation for applications. That money has to come from The Hague. They say that industry must invest more in research, but you can hardly ask companies that have to

cover their costs to invest in something that probably won’t earn them anything. There are highly knowledge-intensive companies, such as pharmaceutical firms and breeding companies, that are quite prepared to co-invest in fundamental research. In the Dutch Research Council programmes, for example, in which companies contribute about 10 per cent. They do this even though they know that their chances of making a profit on it are zero. In that case, an investment of about 10 per cent, like it is now, is the most you can ask for.’

How do you view collaboration with the private sector?

‘If we want to have maximum global impact, we’ve got to collaborate with the private sector. There is a lot of black-and-white thinking about this. Of course, we have to think about who we want to work with to pursue our mission, and there are certainly dilemmas; it is important that we are transparent about this, and share the issues at stake.’
 ‘At the same time, WUR really needs to pay attention to our independence. Everyone is dependent – on grants, bringing in projects, bringing in funding. It is difficult to stand firm if a client says: “Are you really going to write that?” And we do sometimes come under that kind of pressure. Or the report is ready, but we are asked to put it aside for another three weeks. That happens.’

Putting a report aside for three weeks?

‘It happens that the results of a study are not convenient for a client at that moment and that they want to shelve the report. The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) did a study of the influence of clients: one quarter of researchers in the Netherlands experience this pressure. In at least half of the cases, it comes from the government, but it also comes from other clients. And Wageningen has had its share of cases, and of course we are opposed to this. At the same time, in many cases a condition for submitting a project for approval is that the researcher seeks a company that will support the research. This can put pressure on the researcher to answer certain research questions and not others. That is a grey area that cannot be resolved just like that. We need to be able to say: “We don’t want this”. And we can do so, but it needs to be more widely felt and supported. Our independence - together with our creativity and intellect - is our biggest asset.’ ■