

THE PROPOSITION

For PhD candidates, their thesis propositions are an opportunity to publicly express their professional and personal convictions about science and society. In this feature they explain their most thought-provoking proposition. This time, a proposition from Patrick Schimmel, who received his PhD for research in the Microbiology Laboratory on 6 December.



‘There is a racist in everyone; the way to get rid of it is education’

‘Many of the wrongs in our society stem from an unconscious fear of the unknown, which leads to unconscious racism. I think the only thing you can do about that is to raise awareness of diversity from an early age. Education is the only way to prevent prejudice and racism. In the Netherlands, education is kept separate from politics and it should be kept that way. Post-secondary curricula more often do have a political slant to them, but it is hard to get people to think in new ways by then.

In the sciences, I notice that people sometimes look at Dutch and Chinese PhD students differently, purely on the basis of where they come from. Their assumptions can have negative connotations. An example is the assumption that a person who works hard and puts in extra hours must need to do so

because they are less capable. But if you don’t know what motivates their behaviour, you can’t simply assume that. We can learn a lot from other cultures, actually. Becoming aware of and understanding other perspectives helps you collaborate better. My PhD research in a chair group with many nationalities made me more open to other views. I grew up at a time when it was taken for granted that Saint Nicholas would arrive with a Black Pete, but I now understand that that can be offensive to others. Education should be diverse so that students get to know and understand a range of languages and cultures. And the university can teach students to work together in a diverse group as early as possible in their studies.’ ss