

[You win some & you lose some]

A failed experiment, an error in your model, a rejected article: in academia such things tend to be labelled failures. And do we talk about them? No way! But in this feature, WUR co-workers do just that. Because failures are useful. In this instalment, we hear from Iris van Damme, a PhD student in the Department of Human Nutrition and Health.

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'The unique thing about my PhD research was that there was no research question when I started. I enjoyed the freedom that gave me, but it also took time. I wanted to develop better dietary guidelines for people with type 2 diabetes, but there are already a lot of publications on that subject. What was innovative was that we conducted a randomized control trial, in which we tracked

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people for more than a year. But it was difficult to decide on the control group. You are not going to deliberately put people on an unhealthy diet. I wanted patients and healthcare professionals to be involved in the research design, but it took a long time to arrange that.

Due to time pressure, I started writing up the research plan in advance. I should not have done that, because when I had everything on paper, both patients and dieticians doubted whether

my research group was different enough to my control group. I had to go back to the drawing board, even though I'd already been at it for a year.

But I went on holiday and managed to get some distance from it all. At the same time, the time pressure galvanized me into action. I came up with a new focus: increasing the fibre intake of the intervention group. But six months later, the Medical Ethics Review Committee cast doubt on the relevance. After that I was grumpy for a week. Then I sharpened my research question and the committee approved it. Much relieved, I could start doing the research after 18 months of preparation.

As a PhD student you are still allowed to learn, so I never really felt like I was failing. I learned to invest more time in getting the research question clear – whether or not by involving the target groups – before writing a research plan. And not to be afraid to ask for input early on. I now take that into account in my research and when I develop new research proposals.'

