

## [ Live & Learn ]

**A botched experiment, a rejected paper: such things are soon labelled as failures in the academic world. As for talking about them – not the done thing! But that’s just what WUR scientists do in this column. Because failure has its uses. This time, we hear from Alan Pauls, a PhD candidate at the Laboratory of Genetics.** Text and illustration Stijn Schreven

‘At the start of my PhD, my supervisor asked me to take over the work of a technical assistant from our LettuceKnow consortium, a collaboration between Utrecht University and a few departments at WUR. Having just finished my Master’s, it felt like a completely different league. I was hyping it up in my head. As a PhD, you have to be independent, I thought, so I said to myself: whatever problem comes up, I’ll solve it by myself.

One Friday, researchers from Utrecht were going to come to launch an experiment together. We wanted to grow lettuce in a climate chamber. The special thing about this room was the cameras in the ceiling, which could take pictures of all the plants. On the day before the get-together, I checked that everything was in order and took some test photos of an empty table. I noticed that the image was tilted. Why was that? And how could I solve it? I had never worked with those cameras before. I kept trying to fix the problem, until closing time, but to no avail. And the people from Utrecht were coming the next

day! They would be disappointed, and I would be disappointed. My supervisor was sure to fire me.

At no point did it occur to me to call a colleague, or my supervisor, or the people from Utrecht. After a sleepless night, I got up early to go to the climate chamber, where I was on the verge of tears when Uniform manager Gerrit passed

**‘I was on the verge of tears in the climate chamber’**

by. He said: “Alan, I think you need some help.” I told him about the cameras. “Oh, that’s easy.” The cameras were not welded to a fixed point, as I thought. In two minutes, the problem was solved. The biggest lesson: the moment you get stuck with something, ask someone. Independence is not about doing everything by yourself. It’s being in charge of what you know and don’t know, and where to get that information. Research is collaboration. That was the worst day of my PhD, but the best learning experience. It completely changed my PhD experience.’

