

## NUTRIM Graduate Programme

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### *NUTRIM Graduate Programme: a new tradition*

**The first interview is with the four members of the committee who are responsible for the annual selection of the laureates.**

**The second interview features the four PhD students who were the first to receive the scholarship in 2013, which at the time was funded by NWO, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. In 2014 and 2015 NUTRIM has continued the programme with own scholarships.**

**Following an inspection of the quality of research and the programme track for master's and PhD students, NUTRIM was awarded the prestigious NWO Graduate Programme grant.**

**The four-person 'GP committee' then selected the first four laureates, who commenced their PhD in summer 2013. The most important difference to a normal PhD tracks is the tremendous freedom granted to the PhD student to write his or her own research plan, to choose his or her own supervisors and also the emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration.**

**"Even though normal PhD students already receive plenty of opportunities in this area," stresses one committee member, "and you don't yet know whether these people will turn out to be good researchers," says another. The GP committee explains why NUTRIM is nonetheless happy to continue the programme.**

Theoretically NUTRIM could have rested on its laurels after the award of the Graduate Programme grant by NWO. Once you've received the grant, as a school you aren't eligible a second time and moreover it's only after the PhD students have completed their tracks that you have a real picture of the programme's 'added value'. But the board saw it as a good beginning to a new tradition and so awarded several comparable scholarships in the following two years as well. Three-quarters of the money came from the programme's own budget and a quarter was guaranteed by the PhD thesis supervisor. In this way, the PhD student's salary is paid and he or she can apply on his or her own initiative for supplementary scholarships to cover other research costs. The four members of the GP committee are sitting together at the table: Annemie Schols, Ronit Shiri- Sverdlov, Roger Godschalk and Harry Gosker. Coincidentally, the latter is also supervisor of one of the three PhD students who were awarded the scholarship in 2014. Only two of the three available scholarships were awarded in 2015 because there was no third candidate who met the criteria. Lowering the bar in order to fulfil the quota is not an option.

### *How do you select these PhD students?*

Gosker: "There are three rounds. In the first round we chiefly look at the CV. Someone who has spent a while studying abroad, who has already written a paper or acquired a scholarship, for instance, will already have an advantage. Things like this show that someone is rising above the average."

Godschalk: "In the second round, external assessors judge the quality of the research proposal and the committee looks at things like: does it fit in NUTRIM and is optimum use made of all expertise present in the school."

Sverdlov: "And the third round, the interview with the committee and a few other NUTRIM members, is very important as well. Then you can see whether someone has really come up with it all himself or herself, or whether it's more the work of an intended PhD thesis supervisor."

### *What distinguishes the laureates from normal PhD students?*

Schols: "To begin with they have designed their own project, although we don't yet know whether that will ultimately be an advantage or disadvantage. They are innovative projects and thus are vulnerable as well. The ultimate result of the PhD dissertation may turn

out very differently than anticipated.”

Gosker: “The expectation that they will collaborate on an interdisciplinary basis carries the risk of them biting off more than they can chew. And as a supervisor I notice that I approach such PhD students a little more reservedly than I do others, even though I think that self-reliance is important in every PhD track.”

Godschalk: “Normal PhD students are encouraged to work together as well, of course, but these people already have more of an innate drive to do this. They are intrinsically motivated to carry out research.”

Sverdlov: “Things seem to go more easily for them, especially at the start, because they begin the PhD track with more self-confidence.” It almost sounds like an ideal form for all PhD tracks.

Schols: “You have to be realistic: not everyone has what it takes. You have all kinds of PhD students and I don’t even think it would work if you had only this type of PhD student in a research group. Someone who begins slowly and uncertainly can still become a successful researcher with good supervision. We put these PhD students on a pedestal to some extent, but they respond well to their special status. To give one example, this year they themselves organised the annual information meeting for new master’s students. And I think it’s great that some of the four from the first year’s selection have indeed applied for supplementary scholarships and are thus empowering themselves to carry out their research in an optimum way. These four are going to make it.”

***Nonetheless, one female PhD student wonders whether she can combine a career in the scientific community with, say, a young family.***

Godschalk: “If you decide to go into science then you must indeed be prepared to relocate now and again.”

Schols: “I think it’s a pity she has doubts, all the more so because the climate for women with children has improved considerably in the scientific community since the time when I had mine.”

Sverdlov: “What I find ideal is that I can organise my own time and thus spend plenty of time with my four children. I can regularly pick them up from school and work in the evening or, if necessary, at night.”

Schols: “It’s easier here than if you work for a company, for instance. And yes, you have to put in long hours as a scientific researcher, but then your work also feels like a kind of hobby. In that respect I find the combination of training as a medical specialist and scientific research more problematic. It would be a pity if Van Dijk and Koelfat, for instance, weren’t able to do any research during their years of specialisation. I regularly talk to the dean of the medical faculty here and at the hospital about this issue.”

***What motivates NUTRIM to continue to invest in this programme?***

Gosker: “You retain talented researchers at your school, or you attract them here.”

Schols: “In principle the programme is open to external students as well, and in the future we can place a greater focus on this, for instance through the school network or the PIs. We have something to offer PhD students. As an institute we aim above all to facilitate researchers, in all kinds of ways. And we see this as a great instrument for getting researchers to work together, bottom up.”

Gosker: “And with a bit of luck you also retain these researchers in the future, too.”

Sverdlov: “I expect that this will benefit the level of NUTRIM in the long term. And nonetheless the experience is still very valuable for people aiming to get the scholarship, but who narrowly fail to make it.”

Schols: “I took on someone like that this year as a regular PhD student.”

***How do you think things can be improved in the future?***

Schols: “We hope to inspire other schools within the faculty to continue this programme. If this can be taken up across the faculty then the resulting collaboration will be even broader, between institutes as well. And to some extent we’re still searching for our role as committee after the laureates have been selected. We see them once a year and apart from that our door is always open to them. And so far there haven’t been any situations

where we would have needed to intervene.”

Godschalk: “Of course, the progress of a project lies primarily with the PhD thesis supervisor and the other supervisors. We’re more of a secondary sounding board.”

Schols: “But we make sure that the groups with whom our PhD students collaborate also get the credit for this, for instance as co-supervision. To this end we also hold a discussion with the designated supervisors regarding the definite award of the scholarship. After all, this is a different kind of trajectory than the regular one.”

Sverdlov: “But all PhD students are given equal chances here.”

Schols: “Absolutely. And moreover, it’s not a given that these people’s PhD theses will be better than those of other PhD students.”

Sverdlov: “It’s mostly a question of talent and hard work. And luck, too...”

**Sverdlov:**

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