Close-up #3

Public engagement at Utrecht University

Ozan Alakavuklar on getting your hands dirty

Valuable encounters between art and science

Mara Yerkes on taking the stage
When academics engage in discussion with a broad audience, they tend to encounter people who were already interested in the first place. People who value science or are critical of it. However, there are also lots of people who do not feel much of a connection with the subject. Science does not appeal to them because it does not seem relevant to their lives, even when actual researchers are interested in talking to them. That is why the Centre for Science and Culture actively seeks people out rather than simply inviting them to take part in the conversation. Focusing on people’s questions, concerns and expectations is at least as important as taking the scientific perspective in that context. In other words, you need to ask questions and listen first. You can respond to their questions and share your views as a researcher afterwards. That is how you build real dialogue. This approach reflects Minister Robbert Dijkgraaf’s vision for a new national expertise centre on science and society. The envisaged centre will connect knowledge with the real-world practice in an attempt to facilitate dialogue (see pages 10 and 11). This edition of Close-up features lots of inspiring examples of our existing efforts here at Utrecht University.

Femke den Boer is director of Utrecht University’s Centre for Science and Culture.
Visitors get to become researchers at the new University Museum

University Museum Utrecht (UMU) is currently being remodelled and renovated. The Netherlands’ very first research museum will open its doors in September 2023. Five new galleries offer families the opportunity to actively experience scientific research at Utrecht University and explore the work of its current and former researchers. Hester Ketel and Suzanne van der Wateren are working on the renovation effort with a large team and share a glimpse behind the scenes.

The research process
The museum has a varied collection of over 200,000 objects, from preserved animals and skeletons to fossils and natural science instruments. A selection will be on display soon at the newly renovated museum. While other science museums tend to focus on scientific phenomena, UMU is mainly centred on the research process. As Van der Wateren explains: “We’re set to become a research museum where visitors get a behind-the-scenes look at the research process. We aim to promote scientific literacy and show visitors that academic research is an ongoing process.”

“Visitors experience the research process first-hand by taking on the role of researcher,” Hester Ketel explains. “Each exhibition offers visitors the opportunity to actively engage in the process. From historical research to physics, from psychology to geology. For example, visitors get to design an eye mirror in the ‘Uitdokteren’ (figuring things out) gallery. Before starting on the design process, visitors examine each other’s eyes and pupillary reflex. For example, does the pupil change when a light comes on? Or perhaps it changes when the room goes dark? This helps connect the topic to visitors’ lived experiences. Visitors can experience these interactions, as we refer to them, in each of the museum’s galleries. All our activities are multilayered. Everyone can get started right away, even if they don’t have any prior knowledge. There’s also a more in-depth layer for those who really want to explore the subject matter.”

Looking for that spark
The museum also showcases present-day research and research findings. Museum staff work closely with 20 Utrecht University researchers. They translate concrete research projects into family-friendly exhibitions, interactive activities or videos with the help of an interaction designer. Ketel: “Some researchers already have their own ideas and know exactly how to appeal to a broader audience, while others need a bit more guidance. We tend to start by asking, ‘Which aspects of your research are you most excited about?’ Once you see that spark in their eyes, you know you’re probably onto something.”

An inquisitive mindset
Ketel hopes children visiting the museum will get to experience the research process first-hand and learn that you can research anything. “It would be great if they’re suddenly a lot more interested in the world around them on the way back home.” Van der Wateren adds, “I hope our visitors discover that academic research also relates to them and gain a better understanding of the research process.”

Call for collaborations
Utrecht University researchers can also contribute to UMU’s programming. For example, they can give a family lecture, invite visitors to participate in a citizen science project or collaborate with artists. The museum welcomes any ideas that can help bridge the gap between research and the general public. UMU has the necessary expertise to connect with a broad audience and is especially focused on families. The museum’s extensive collection is also available for research purposes. If you are interested in collaborating with the new UMU, please get in touch with Suzanne van der Wateren, s.c.vanderwateren@uu.nl

Eline Dondorp
Photos: Lize Kraan

Behind the scenes

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Hester Ketel is education coordinator at University Museum Utrecht
Suzanne van der Wateren is head of University Museum Utrecht’s Visitor and Presentation Department

The search for answers
Carlijn van den Boomen studies children’s ability to recognise emotions in adults and other children. “Kids will soon be able to do their own small-scale version of my research project at UMU. They’ll be studying emotions with the help of a computer and all sorts of tests. I think it’s important to share my research with children, because I want to teach them how the process works and show them it’s all about asking questions first and then looking for an answer. Kids are naturally curious and ask a lot of questions. I want to stimulate them to keep asking questions, but I also want to teach them how to look for answers themselves.”

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The Botanic Gardens organised the Summer Science festival in partnership with the Centre for Science and Culture and the Faculty of Science on a rainy summer evening in June 2022. Set against a backdrop of lush greenery, the inspiring evening programme included live music and talks by researchers on topics such as ocean currents, immunotherapy and the impact of job loss. The researchers had all participated in previous editions of the Breaking Science pitch competition, and the evening offered a great opportunity to put their skills into practice.

Bridging the gap

While working as a researcher in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Ozan Alakavuklar found himself in an environment of small-scale, bottom-up and self-sustaining community organizations tackling societal challenges. There, he noticed that academia is perceived as something entirely different from the world of community work. And so he wondered: how can we do our research differently to accommodate this gap? How can the university become an anchor institution in the city – a long-term partner for social change?

In Utrecht, he initiated Anders Utrecht. In this project, researchers of Utrecht University promote local knowledge sharing to build a network for long-term collaboration on issues like food and sustainability. The network consists of fifteen formal associations, social enterprises, citizen movements, neighborhood initiatives, and a group of Utrecht University researchers. “The organisations’ initial response was: what’s in it for us? So we invited them to meetings to find ways to collaborate as equal partners and explore how these initiatives could reinforce the value of engaging with our expertise and academic knowledge.”

“We really want them to get their hands dirty”

Active contribution

As part of the new master program ‘Organizing Social Impact’, Anders Utrecht also connects students to organisations to actively contribute to their activities. The organizations involved may already have a practical issue that would benefit from research conducted by the students. Alakavuklar explains: “We really want them to get their hands dirty. If the organization is dealing with community gardening, then students will do gardening. This is what we call engaged fieldwork. It is no remote consultancy: it is truly seeing how societal impact is organized in day-to-day practice.”

Stepping out of the comfort zone

Should all departments of Utrecht University collaborate actively with local partners? “It is not a ‘one size fits all’ because every societal domain has different needs. However, I believe in the value of close collaboration”, Alakavuklar states. This does not imply that a university loses its autonomy or independence, or that it should work for the direct interests of the organization involved. But it does mean that a university can step out of its comfort zone by uniting theoretical and practical knowledge for social change.

Text: Eline Dondorp
Photos: Anna van Kooij
I recently learnt a new word. Offcuts: the scraps of fabric you are left with after cutting out a sewing pattern or leftover pieces of tile after installing a floor.

I have been combining two jobs at Utrecht University since last spring, and this leaves me with offcuts as well. I work as a science communicator at the Faculty of Science, where I need to get to the heart of other people’s research quickly and accurately. I spend the other half of my working week as a public engagement researcher at the Centre for Science and Culture and the Freudenthal Institute. That involves independently developing plans, and I need enough space and time to explore all the literature and get the details down on paper. Switching back and forth between those two roles takes time and energy.

But I miss another word, because there is also an upside to those offcuts. It is not just hard work: the combination also makes me happy. I am constantly making connections, between different disciplines and people. I gain new insights, I am helping my colleagues, the process makes me more creative and I get to go to twice as many Christmas drinks.

In the same way I suddenly felt inspired to write this column during my holidays, it tends to be helpful to put the things I need to do for one of my jobs on the back-burner for a few days and then get back to them with a fresh perspective. Did you know Nobel laureates are more likely to have serious hobbies than the average person? I guess switching between completely different activities really does have its advantages. In other words: half + half = more than one (that calculation is not likely to land me any Nobel prizes).

The upsides of offcuts: the benefits of switching between different activities, the joy of connecting, the creativity sparked by unusual combinations; and the mosaics or patchwork toys you can make from leftover pieces of tile or fabric.

As a scientist, you try to deduce reality using commonly accepted models and concepts. The question is, how do you come up with totally new ideas? Artists aren’t constrained by any scientific protocols. Their focus on imagination and experimental thinking opens up new horizons that can inspire us as researchers. The writers participating in The Futurists managed to connect my abstract observations with a lived reality. They translate my research into a format that appeals to a broad audience. That’s not something I’m particularly good at, and I don’t really see the need to learn how to do this myself."

"As a researcher, I think it’s important to take an interdisciplinary approach. Still, it’s hard to step out of your own discipline in practice. You know exactly where you want to go and how to get there. Working with artists and observing their unique approach to problems automatically inspires me to think out of the box more. Artists also have an ability to impact people on an emotional level, which really helps the audience to retain scientific information more effectively."

"As I’m noticing at The Futurists, creators and researchers both get inspired when they meet and interact. Science reveals possibilities and sparks our imagination. On the other hand, we can do the same for science, because we’re able to use free association and come up with unconventional perspectives. It’s important to share our reflections on social and technological developments with the general public. Our world becomes a more interesting place when we allow different voices to join the conversation."

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A governmental perspective on science communication

The Netherlands will have its own national science communication centre. These words from Minister Dijkgraaf in May 2022 sparked a momentum that has not stalled ever since. Erik van Zwol, who has been closely involved in the process since the beginning, shares his story.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science’s Research and Science Policy Directorate found itself in urgent need of reinforcements after the Minister’s announcement. The Ministry hired me as part of their dual career programme, aimed at attracting professionals from the field to spend a year working at the Ministry. The initiative aims to strengthen ties between the Ministry and the professional field through the sharing of experience and knowledge. I will be spending my one-year secondment on behalf of the professional field.

The national government in The Hague always seemed to be something of an abstract concept at the knowledge institutions I worked at. People would mention it in sentences like “They want us to focus on ‘x’ more...”. So it was a huge eye-opener to see how they divide up responsibilities for the various issues and just how hard everyone there is really working. Science communication might be a relatively minor priority there, but the Ministry is the perfect place to raise awareness among colleagues working on some of the “major” topics like Open Science and Recognition and Rewards. Science communication needs that kind of broad framework to genuinely flourish.

Dialogue with the professional field

The dialogue between science and society is taking shape across many arenas. From passionate biologists to inventors who design their research in consultation with citizens. From research universities and universities of applied sciences to companies and science museums. That long list called for some solid representation in the start-up phase. We appointed two trailblazers for that purpose: Alex Verkade and Ionica Smeets. They both have a strong track record in science communication, an extensive network and – crucially – broad support among “the target audience”. The sheer scope of that target group became even clearer as the process unfolded.

“First and foremost, the centre should play a connecting role.”

The trailblazers held lots of conversations with professionals from the field, and it was not long before they had spoken to 150 people. As we discovered early on in the process, there were strong shared interests and a list of shared concerns. We managed to address those by outlining some of the things the centre will not be doing, like actually conducting or funding science communication. “There’s plenty of momentum in the field already, so there’s no need to add more,” Alex Verkade explains.

“First and foremost, the centre should play a connecting role,” according to Ionica Smeets. Lots of organisations are already doing great work. “The centre needs to be aware of all the players in the field, the ongoing efforts and the latest developments.” Its name should also reflect that connective role. As it turns out, the term science communication does not really convey that to most people. The working title (at the time of writing) is currently National Expertise Centre for Science and Society.

The centre envisioned by the trailblazers will both advocate science communication’s value to broader society and the knowledge system. “The centre will take part in consultations and keep its finger on the pulse of developments in the field in order to highlight the importance of science communication,” as Verkade explains. Smeets adds, “We know international centres spend about a third of their time on that.”

Plenty of momentum

On 27 January 2023, I organised an open working session so that everyone who had not met the trailblazers yet would have an opportunity to do so. One hundred people showed up. I used an open-space approach in order to help participants take ownership of the conversations. Among other issues, the conversations focused on the impact we aim to achieve and the centre’s staffing and working methods. The approach worked well and really highlighted just how much momentum there is to achieve great things at the centre. I believe the centre can really take off if the field supports us and feels a sense of ownership.

The trailblazers expect to present a recommendation to the Minister in April 2023. It has been an honour to support that process, and I look forward to reading their findings. If I could give the trailblazers some advice, I would tell them to use the existing momentum in the field to their advantage and make the national government work for them.

Text: Erik van Zwol
Portrait: Ivar Pel / Photos National Science Communication Day / Lize Kooi

Behind the scenes

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Erik van Zwol is a Science Communication Coordinator at Utrecht University’s Life Sciences strategic themes. As a public engagement fellow, he is focused on scientific communication as part of his academic career. Van Zwol has been seconded to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science since July 2022, where he will be charged with science communication for a period of one year.

Prof. Ionica Smeets is professor of Science Communication at Leiden University. Alex Verkade is Head of Positioning at Taskforce for Applied Research SIA (Dutch Research Council). The two are both working to spearhead the new national science communication centre.
On the evening of Saturday 15 October 2022, two canal boats brimming with science cruised through Utrecht’s canals. On these boats, University Museum Utrecht (UMU) contributed to the Utrecht Kids Museum Night event.

Families on the research boat carried out experiments and explored a range of questions, including: will a double cone roll up or down? Can we really do two things at once? On the other boat, various Utrecht University researchers shared stories about their research. For example, researcher Francesca Sangiorgi talked about her extraordinary trip to Antarctica.

**UMU takes to the water**

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Text: Eline Dondorp
Photos: Lize Kraan

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**‘Bending over backwards to achieve something can lead to great things’**

A n experiential festival inspired by our ability or inability to hear sound, that is Sencity in a nutshell. Festival organiser Bas Wierikx invited the Centre for Science and Culture to produce the festival’s science content. The result: a titillating experiment in which philosopher of science, historian and composer Susanna Bloem discusses our experience of music and time with the audience. What drives Wierikx? And what value will the collaboration generate?

A shared experience

“I love creating new experiences with a deeper social layer,” Wierikx explains. “How do you get people to think and behave in a more inclusive way? That’s what we’re trying to achieve at Sencity.”

A festival where deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing people mingle and party together. The music, art and science experiences are designed to be the same for everyone, regardless of their hearing.

Getting deaf people to lose themselves in music might seem impossible, but that is exactly the kind of challenge Wierikx relishes. “Bending over backwards to achieve something can lead to great things.”

Text: Tessa de Vries
Photo: Jessie Kamp
Collaborating for a more inclusive audience

The Centre for Science and Culture works to make programmes appealing to a more inclusive audience. We teamed up with societal partners as part of the Betweter Festival and Science Weekend. We wanted to attract Utrecht residents that would not normally take part in scientific activities.

Betweter Festival
Tessa and Natnael are buddies at Buddy to Buddy Utrecht. Tessa lives in Utrecht and Natnael arrived in Utrecht from Eritrea several years ago. They do all sorts of activities together. This time, they were invited to attend the Betweter Festival. How was their experience?

Tessa Laan is project coordinator at Buddy to Buddy Utrecht and Utrechtse Heuvelrug. Among other responsibilities, she serves as a liaison for the buddies and organises the overall project. What are her views on the Betweter Festival’s contribution to their programme?

Buddy to Buddy
Buddy to Buddy Utrecht connects current and former refugees to other residents of Utrecht in an effort to help newcomers out of their social isolation and involve Dutch nationals in their integration process.

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Tessa

“Language doesn’t have to be an issue as long as you’re aware it requires attention. It also depends on the topic. We attended the lecture on the migration crisis, which was easier to follow because the terms and issues are more familiar. I think the festival could also be made more accessible by choosing specific topics, such as cultural differences, migration, language and identity, for example. I think those subjects would really connect. People might be struggling with the language, but they’ll be familiar with the words and concepts. I also think a diverse audience can be really valuable when you’re dealing with those kinds of issues. You get an interesting exchange of perspectives.”

Natnael

“I didn’t really know what to expect, because I’d never heard of the festival. I couldn’t understand everything, but you could also just listen to what they were saying. That was fine too, even though they were talking about complicated things.”

Tessa

“There were so many activities! You could wander around the festival all evening without getting bored. They had experiments set up in the corridor, so you could not only walk from room to room, but there were also lots of other activities in between. Natnael also really enjoyed that. We also attended a lecture, but his Dutch isn’t that good yet, so he couldn’t really follow what was being said.”

Natnael

Science Weekend
Sara Broerse and Maartje Bake – lecturers at the Department of Human Geography and Planning – organised an activity on inclusive cities and diverse food landscapes during the Science Weekend, attracting lots of visitors.

Petje Af
Local kids from Utrecht were invited to participate in the Science Weekend through Petje Af Amersfoort. At Petje Af (Hats off), inquisitive kids aged 10 to 14 get to explore the world through a hands-on programme for children in need of extra support.
Crafting knowledge together

The University has a long-standing tradition of civic engagement. That is practically inevitable, since we are obviously part of broader society. The 1960s and 1970s saw a growing emphasis on civic engagement. That became less of a trend in the 1980s, but we have been seeing another rise in civic engagement over the last decade or so. Public engagement is an attempt to do this in a more conscious and visible way.

Despite that positive development, I think the essence of academic societal engagement tends to be overlooked. All too often, public engagement still tends to be about “broadcasting”, science for citizens and making them aware of what we do. But public engagement should be mainly something we engage in with citizens. That involves devoting time and attention to societal partners and making room for their insights.

Community Engaged Learning (CEL) might be a good way to help us achieve that. CEL emphasises the actual learning process. It assumes that everyone is a co-learner and co-teach and that knowledge exchange has little value if we do not reflect on it together. This is proving to be quite a challenge as well: we tend to focus on the way students learn rather than the lecturer’s or societal partner’s role as learner. As CEL is all about learning together, it can help us build more reciprocal relationships between academia and society.

“The democratisation of knowledge will inevitably pose a major challenge for the University”

Community Engaged Learning and Public Engagement are long-term projects. We need to be firmly rooted in society in order to collectively develop knowledge. While this democratisation of knowledge will inevitably pose a major challenge for the University, it is the essence of civic engagement. Thankfully, several parties – like the Open Science Programme – are currently working towards that goal. But we are still at the very start of the process.

Saint Martin in the city

The city of Utrecht celebrated its 900th anniversary on 3 and 4 July 2022, with events including a festival in honour of city patron Saint Martin the Merciful. The festival, initiated by Prof. Els Rose, was themed “The miracle of Saint Martin, the happy city”. The event highlighted Saint Martin’s importance to the people of Utrecht, from Medieval times to the present day. The festival programme was designed to make scientific research more accessible to the city’s residents. It included performances of medieval music, an exhibition in the Dom Church produced by students, a visitors’ book, a symposium and documentary on Saint Martin and a concert that saw primary school pupils from Utrecht singing new Saint Martin songs composed by conservatory students.

Organising a festival like that must have been a lot of work. How did you pull it off?

“The main challenge was giving other people a role in the project and allowing them to approach that in their own way. For example, I told the lecturers working on the children’s songs to explore the raw material – i.e. Gregorian church music – first. Then we brought in the conservatory students. They worked on the songs and coordinated the whole process with the kids. You need to give your partners a lot of freedom. Then it was up to the kids to really breathe life into the festival.”

What kind of issues did you run into during the collaboration?

“We were working with a lot of different partners, so it was a complex process. I had to delegate a lot of tasks because of the sheer scale. Staying in control of the overall process was definitely challenging. I would have approached some things differently with the benefit of hindsight. Still, we cooperated really well with all the colleagues, interns and students involved in the exhibition. I couldn’t handle all the details myself, but we coordinated everything smoothly, and it all went well. I got to see lots of things to the interns. I also got a lot of help from our Faculty’s Communications & Marketing department. For example, they came up with the idea of calling it a festival and gave me some personal media training.”

As a professor, how do you manage to balance all those different tasks?

“I think public engagement is very much part of your research remit, so you have to choose. That means I won’t be publishing much in academic journals or attending many conferences if I’m spending the year on a major public engagement project. I also promised to write a scientific monograph as part of my research project, but I pushed that forward in order to focus on this project. That was definitely a conscious decision.”
Every autumn, Studium Generale organises a challenge: a citizen science project in which participants team up with researchers to explore a topical issue. In 2022, the theme was “mental health”. Participants found out how they coped with pressure and stress, discovered whether they can improve their well-being by dancing or meditating and explored how they give meaning to their lives. The outcomes helped them gain more self-knowledge while simultaneously benefiting science. The programme also included three talk shows during which the scientists involved in each challenge interacted with each other and the audience.

**Know Yourself Challenge**

The National Education Programme was introduced to restore student well-being during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Utrecht University offers additional counselling, activities and facilities – such as the Know Yourself Challenge – with the help of National Education Programme (NPO) funds. The challenge offered students a fun, accessible way to explore the topic. From activities like meditating and dancing to self-reflection exercises: why do I behave the way I do, and how did I become who I am now. It was great to see so many students attend the talk shows, and I hope it helped them gain some self-awareness.

Iris Nieuwenhuizen is coordinator of Utrecht University’s National Education Programme (NPO)

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“We can put the data to good use. And the challenge will still be available online after it’s over, which is great. We’ll also be doing ‘the national Nature Intelligence Test’ with pupils in the final year of primary school in collaboration with IVN over the next few months. We’ll also be asking teachers to take the NQ test. They can do that on the challenge website, which is really helpful. Teachers appreciate the fact that they can immediately check their results.”

Dr Agnes van den Berg is an environmental psychologist

“‘That was a nice bonus for me; I got to compare my findings with those of other researchers. The live lectures and debates are still the best activity, though.’

Participant in the Know Yourself Challenge

“We had no idea what direction the challenge would take when I first started, to be honest. I started calling lots of researchers focused on mental health and student well-being in January 2022 to ask them if there was anything they wanted to explore with a broader audience. We helped them find ways to make their research small-scale, accessible and engaging, which was a fun process. For example, participants got to dance with MC Hammer, discussed their personalities with Freud and took stock of their personal experiences in nature.”

Nieneke de Haan is project manager at the Know Yourself Challenge and event curator at the Centre for Science and Culture

Following up on A word about tomorrow

Some 300 visitors at local libraries in Utrecht struck up spontaneous conversations with Utrecht University researchers during the ‘A word about tomorrow’ programme in November 2022. Over a cup of tea and a biscuit, they discussed and exchanged views on issues including growing up, sustainability, health and freedom.

The conversations took place in follow-up to the 2021 edition, when library visitors formulated 500 questions for science with the participating researchers. Four of those questions formed the starting point for this year’s discussions. Participating researchers received dialogue training beforehand from the Centre for Science and Culture in collaboration with PhD student Cathelijne Reinicke. Both researchers and library visitors felt the conversations were very worthwhile.

“‘As a researcher, I think it’s really important to contribute to society with my research. This was a great opportunity for me to find out what sort of issues people really care about.’

Dr Yara Al Salman is assistant professor in Ethics and Political Philosophy at the Faculty of Humanities

“I mainly talked about my own experiences, and the researcher discussed the scientific aspects. We managed to tie those in really well.”

Aarti struck up a conversation with a researcher at Kanaleneiland Library

“Thanks to the training, I could keep the conversation on track, and we developed a real interest in each other’s situations.”

Jonas Mars is PhD student in developmental biology at the Hubrecht Institute

“I really felt I was being heard. The conversation really made me reflect on my own ideas.”

Visitor at Overvecht Library
Exploring the world of research at Summer School Junior

Summer School Junior offers pupils in the final four years of primary school the opportunity to explore the fun and fascinating world of science. The tenth edition in July 2022 saw 400 children spend 4 days exploring Utrecht Science Park. Together with some 100 students acting as group mentors and programme supervisors, inquisitive children got to explore some of the research being conducted at Utrecht University: from robots to song lyrics and from DNA to the city of the future. Project manager Maartje Kouwen of the Centre for Science and Culture gives an insight into the program.

Anouk Neerincx researches social robots designed for youth health care and counselling services. She works with children, parents and experts to figure out how robots can be put to good use helping children at schools or care facilities. Summer School Junior offered participating kids the opportunity to design and program their own robot.

Anouk Neerincx is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Science

The children set out on their mission equipped with special sniffer equipment designed by Roel Vermeulen. They examined the air quality at Utrecht Science Park by conducting various experiments. The children also presented recommendations on the further improvement of air quality to Utrecht University’s Executive Board.

Prof. Roel Vermeulen is professor of Environmental Epidemiology and Exposome Analysis at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

How do people use texts, poems and songs to understand and change the world around them? This is one of the main research questions Feike Dietz is currently dealing with. The kids at Summer School Junior listened to and analysed new and old songs by the Dutch children’s choir Kinderen voor Kinderen to find out how they had evolved over the years to reflect children’s changing environment.

Feike Dietz was still a language researcher and lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities at the time of Summer School Junior. Next, they got to work designing the City of the Future. The programme is based on research by Jesse Hoffman, exploring people’s shared narratives about the future and the way in which our perceptions of the future influence all kinds of decisions.

Dr Jesse Hoffman is assistant professor at the Faculty of Geosciences

As part of the Utrecht 900 anniversary celebrations, the children took a trip back in time by interviewing grandparents about their childhood. Next, they got to work designing the City of the Future. The programme is based on research by Jesse Hoffman, exploring people’s shared narratives about the future and the way in which our perceptions of the future influence all kinds of decisions.

Dr Jesse Hoffman is assistant professor at the Faculty of Geosciences

“It’s all things you don’t learn at a regular school! The best thing about Summer School Junior is that you get to work like a real researcher.”

Participant Summer School Junior

Lonneke IJsseldijk studies beached porpoises, dolphins and whales. The programme saw children examine all kinds of evidence in an attempt to figure out what caused hundreds of dead porpoises to wash up on shore. They also learned how to rescue a live stranded porpoise.

Dr Lonneke IJsseldijk is a biologist and researcher at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

The DNA programme introduced children to the subject of DNA and its role in determining characteristics like hair or eye colour. They also learned about DNA’s role in illnesses – the subject of Susanne Plugge’s research on fixing flaws in DNA.

Susanna Plugge is a molecular cell biologist working at UMC Utrecht

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Participant Summer School Junior
Public engagement can take on any form

Nearly three years ago, brandishing an umbrella to protect myself, I let parents and kids throw yellow and green colored balls at me while on stage. No, I didn’t have some strange desire to be pelleted by plastic. It was all part of Operatie Breinbreker, a corona-based alternative to Weekend van de Wetenschap (A Weekend of Science). Before 2020, my stage presence was mostly limited to playing a dog in a middle school play. But on stage at TivoliVredenburg? As a scientist? Nope. Certainly not talking to kids aged 8-12 (and their parents) about my research (that can even sometimes be difficult to explain to adults).

My performance that day taught me that public engagement really could take on any form, no matter what your topic of research. Kids that were there learned about historic Roman borders, one-sided deafness, the recycling of CO₂, and how parents differ in caring for kids. All in a fun, play-based, gameshow format. For me, it meant broadening my public engagement experience beyond working with stakeholders, like policymakers. And learning the value of these diverse forms of public engagement.

Why are they so valuable? Because science is a part of society, and society a part of science. I find public engagement energizing but also educational; engaging with multiple publics has strengthened my research and teaching. How? Because doing public engagement makes us look at what we do through the eyes of others, giving new insights. That doesn’t mean there aren’t any challenges involved in doing public engagement. We recently highlighted some of these challenges, in relation to the role of public engagement in the context of open science: reflections from early and mid-career academics. Research for All. Vol. 6(1). DOI: 10.14324/RFA.06.1.23. It is published Open Access, meaning it is accessible to everyone online.
"Meaningful public engagement in the context of open science", a paper by a group of researchers from Utrecht University, describes the role of public engagement in promoting open science and outlines the steps involved. Mirko Schäfer has been working with social partners on the issues of datafication and democracy through Utrecht Data School since 2013. He spoke with one of the article’s co-authors, Maud Radstake.

Dr Mirko Schäfer is a researcher and lecturer at the Faculty of Science's Computer Science Department and founder and Science Lead at Utrecht Data School.

Dr Maud Radstake is head of the Centre for Science and Culture’s Programme Office and Public Engagement consultant to the Open Science Programme.

Mirko Schäfer
Our publicly engaged research is always driven by a sense of social urgency. That might not necessarily always coincide with the current debates in your scientific discipline, but you are working to solve problems in those social sectors. We refer to that process as public engagement, which is very different from science communication. How do you view that, Maud?

Maud Radstake
On paper, we apply a broad definition of public engagement. That covers everything you do at Utrecht Data School, but it also includes science communication. After all, if science aims to engage with broader society, we also need to make sure the parties we want to engage with can actually determine whether that’s interesting and relevant to them.

Mirko Schäfer
We’ll have to learn how to listen and realise we don’t have all the answers either if we aim to genuinely engage with broader society. The social sectors we’re involved in have a lot of existing knowledge, and we’ll need to leverage that expertise if we aim to do better research.

Maud Radstake
Exactly, that has two sides to it!

Mirko Schäfer
I share the concerns described in the article about the lack of recognition and rewards for public engagement. A growing number of universities want to pursue public engagement, but we’re ultimately still being judged by the grants we bring in, our articles and our teaching evaluations. Everything else is seen as a nice but unnecessary extra. It’s time to take the next step. After all, where are you supposed to find the time to make an impact and do these kinds of social activities?

Maud Radstake
That actually applies across the full spectrum of public engagement. For example, how do you count efforts to set up a project with schools or engage on science with library users? I’m glad we’re addressing that in our Open Science Programme, which covers both Public Engagement and Recognition & Rewards. We have a clear vision, but we still need to implement it in practice.

Curious?
This is the referenced article: Wouter Boon, Judith de Haan and Carien Duisterwinkel et al. Meaningful public engagement in the context of open science: reflections from early and mid-career academics. Research for All. Vol. 6(1). DOI: 10.14324/ RFA.06.1.23. It is published Open Access, meaning it is accessible to everyone online.
**Wetenschnapps XL**

The leading networking event on public engagement

Wetenschnapps XL, the extra-large edition of the series of inspiration and development sessions organised by the Centre for Science and Culture, took place on Tuesday, 4 October 2022. Over 100 researchers and support staff involved in public engagement exchanged knowledge and experience. For the first time, this edition welcomed participants from the University of Technology Eindhoven, Wageningen University & Research, Erasmus University Rotterdam and Leiden University as well as Utrecht University. The edition was themed around collaboration, with an emphasis on cooperation between researchers and the public.

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**“I want to share knowledge about the terrestrial system”**

Prof. Douwe van Hinsbergen is Professor of Global Tectonics and Paleogeography at the Faculty of Geosciences. He is a communications consultant at TU Eindhoven’s Department of Chemical Engineering and Chemistry.

**Geology of the Tour de France**

Endless Tour de France stages in which cyclists struggle to climb a mountain ridge suddenly become a fascinating geology excursion in Geology of the Tour de France. For example, did you know that those weird cones dotting the landscape — many of which are topped by a statue of the Virgin Mary like the one in Le-Puy-en-Velay — are called volcanic necks? Time to chat with geoscientist Douwe van Hinsbergen about his initiative.

So how did you come up with the idea for Geology of the Tour de France?

“I’m a big cycling fan myself, and I love watching a screen for four hours while nothing much is actually happening. They fill that time by having commentators discuss all kinds of topics. Apart from the riders, they discuss things like cities, architecture, history or gastronomy. It occurred to me that subjects like the beautiful landscapes, the geological history, the subsoil and the impact of our land use are at least as interesting. And that I can offer that knowledge.”

It proved to be a huge success. How did it all start?

“I started writing short blogs about each stage of the Tour. I sent them to an NOS reporter, and that got the ball rolling. They used my essays in the live coverage, I was commissioned to do a column on Radio 2 and the NRC newspaper wrote about it. Once the Tour was over, I started expanding the platform. Geology of the Tour de France now boasts a team of 28 writers from eleven different countries and can offer the content in many different languages. We used financial support from the Public Engagement Seed Fund of the Centre for Science and Culture to create a website (www.geotdf.org) for the information. We also share the stories in an entertaining format on Twitter. Thanks to funding from the Dutch Research Council’s Communication Initiative Award, we can now hire a communications specialist to develop stories in vlog and blog format to reach a really diverse and broad audience.”

**Why do you feel it is so important to educate people about geosciences?**

“Many of the big issues our country is currently facing, from climate change to the energy transition and from water management to the nitrogen crisis, all relate to the way we treat the planet. Every political party has at least some points on these issues in its election manifesto. I want to share knowledge about the terrestrial system so that everyone can make informed choices. Apart from that, it’s just something I really enjoy doing. Social media can be a pretty negative environment, but the initiative has received nothing but happy and positive responses. That’s been the best part for me. It’s been a real breath of fresh air.”

**Text:** Sigrid Deelkens

**Photo:** Maaike van den Broek

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**Behind the scenes**

**Close-up** 26 27 Utrecht University
Academics in the Public Arena

Engaging in public debate is important and offers opportunities for researchers, but there are also inherent risks. For example, you need to be prepared for angry reactions – sometimes from unexpected quarters – when you are dealing with difficult issues. This prompted Utrecht University to organise the “Academics in the Public Arena” programme. This interactive series features researchers and support staff discussing their role in the public debate and explaining what it takes to do so effectively and safely. The series is being organised by Sicco de Knecht and Sake Slootweg from Utrecht University’s Open Science Programme, press officer Iris Kruijjen and Stephanie Heßler Herz from the Centre for Science and Culture.

Since that role can take many forms, we do not believe it wise to introduce any rigid rules. It is more important to give academics a theoretical framework and the opportunity to gain experiences and learn from others. That way, they can make informed decisions.

As we noticed during the sessions, each and every colleague had had similar experiences. These ranged from positive experiences to less pleasant ones. We believe it can be useful for our colleagues to reflect on that. It gives them the sense that they’re not alone.

“The hotline also cooperates with the national ‘media harassment hotline’ in the autumn of 2021, which was a huge plus: it ranged from people with lots of media experience to others who were mainly run into. I learnt a lot about that during this series by exchanging experiences with colleagues from different disciplines. As a press officer, that’s really valuable knowledge. You never really know what kind of responses you’re going to get when you discuss your research in the media. Communicating with the outside world is interesting and exciting, but you also tend to feel vulnerable. As a press officer, I think it’s really important to be aware of that and factor it into the advice you give.”

Renée Tuijnman is press officer and science communication advisor at the Faculty of Humanities.
Is there such a thing as a right to sweaty feet?

Tony Barshini was one of 93 researchers and students to take part in Science Weekend, an annual event for young and old organised by Utrecht University. From re-enacting a court case to dancing with a robot and creating your own plant library: the varied programme offered visitors the opportunity to learn how research works in practice, ask researchers questions and participate in experiments and workshops. In the process, they learnt about the wide range of research activities at Utrecht University.

“Children’s book De Zweetvoetenman (The Sweaty Feet Man) – which deals with the Dutch legal system – inspired a Science Weekend activity. Children taking part in the activity re-enacted the Sweaty Feet Man trial – an actual case that caught the public imagination. The play covered all aspects of the trial: from the various roles in the courtroom to the passing of the verdict. I designed the activity to let children experience the workings of the legal system first-hand. Almost everyone has to deal with it at some point, so I think it’s important that children know how it works. The activity also offers a great opportunity to talk about the subject of Law and the importance of research.”

Tony Barshini is a researcher and junior assistant professor of Environmental Law at the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance.

Eline Dondorp
Photos: Lize Kraan

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What is for you the essence of public engagement?

Nieske Vergunst
Interaction between a researcher and one or more people outside their particular discipline, in a form that is not limited to intellectual exchange, e.g. involving game elements, music, physical objects, etc.

Mara Yerkes
Public engagement is primarily about establishing interactions between science and different groups in society in order to clarify, strengthen and further develop the relationship between society and science.

Ozan Alakavuklar
Collaborating for social change.

Els Rose
Exchanging ideas on the significance of heritage.

Erik van Zwol
A dialogue of equals between academia and society.

James Kennedy
Civic engagement should especially take place with citizens. That involvement is giving time and attention to community partners, and giving space to their own insights.