

Science and academia in Utrecht city centre



Niels Tjoonk studied Biomedical Sciences from 2014 to 2018 followed by a Master's degree in Cancer, Stem Cells & Developmental Biology at Utrecht University. He gives academic tours of the city centre and has been working as a programme officer at Studium Generale since early 2021.

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As a programme officer at Studium Generale and guide at Utrecht Free Tours, Niels Tjoonk (24) connects the past and future of science and academia at Utrecht University. 'The city really comes to life when you start exploring its history.'

So how did you end up choosing your degree programme? 'I must say moving to this city was a more conscious choice than my actual degree programme. I love the University buildings in the city centre, but I switched from English Language and Culture to Biomedical Sciences after six months and all my lectures were at De Uithof. I liked the degree programme, but I must say the surroundings were less impressive.'

What do you enjoy most about working life? 'I get to apply all the things I'm interested in at work. Although I'm fascinated by the world of cells and the human body, I don't like lab work. I'm much more interested in the history and the stories behind it. I get to share that passion with others in a more relatable way at Studium Generale and in my role as tour guide.'

Can you describe your relationship with the University? 'I really explored the University's history from its early beginnings to today to prepare for my scientific tours. That research really brought the University and the city to life for me. There are amazing stories everywhere, if you only know where to look. The home of the first Dutch female student or Louk Roëll's galaxy, which connects the entire city of Utrecht with the Domplein.'

How did you build your network? 'I spent a year at Veritas, and made some great friends among my fellow students. We still keep in regular touch. I'm not very active on LinkedIn, but I enjoy going to lectures and asking lots of questions. If there's one thing academics love, it's answering questions. If you show genuine interest, you'll build up a network in no time.'

So what's next?

'I want to make science more accessible to a wider audience. I can obviously keep doing that through my current work, but maybe I could also try podcasting or some other format. The medium doesn't really matter as long as the message comes through.' ◀◀

A longer version of this interview will also be published on DUB, Utrecht University's independent news site. Visit dub.uu.nl for all the latest news and background information on our academic community.

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