

“Follow your radar and make it transmit beyond this place.”

Dr. Julian Schaap shares his experiences with engaged research and Recognition & Rewards

Dr. Julian Schaap is an Assistant Professor in sociology of music at Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication. Over the years, his research has been closely engaged with diverse societal stakeholders and has resulted in impactful expressions through media and public events. Impact is one of the key focus areas within the [Recognition & Rewards](#) (R&R) programme and an accent scientists can have in their career in academia. Here Julian talks about his experiences with R&R and reflects on intertwining research and impact.

Home-grown beginnings

Julian describes himself as ‘home-grown’, referring to his studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) and remaining there after obtaining his PhD in 2019. Where did his passion for research, which is closely connected to and engaged with society, begin? “I wrote my dissertation about rock music and why it tends to be occupied mainly by white men, on stage and in audiences. It was a way to understand structural inequalities on a racial level by looking at music and music genres.”

During Julian’s PhD track the debate about Zwarte Piet (‘The Black Piet’) intensified in the Netherlands. “There was a lot of societal interest then about institutional discrimination and whether there was racism in the Netherlands. It is hard to imagine, but in 2011-2012 that was still a reasonable question you would get.” This prompted Julian “to try to understand why people may, often unintentionally, discriminate groups through music tastes.” As this societally urgent topic (discrimination) related to something people see as relatively harmless (music), he was often asked to talk about his research. Julian sees this as a start of societal engagement becoming an integral part of his academic work. “I got questions from media to say something about this topic of discrimination. Every time you say ‘yes’, you get more requests, and it builds up.”

“Dig into that together.”

Impact is one of the five key focus areas within the R&R programme, together with research, education, leadership/management, and patient care (for University Medical Centres). In short, [EUR sees](#) creating positive societal impact as making a (sustainable) contribution to a better understanding of societal issues through the University’s teaching, research, or societal engagement, which can take many forms. When asked why he continues sharing and discussing his research results with societal stakeholders, through television and radio shows, publications in newspapers and magazines, and artistic symposiums such as ‘Music Talks’, Julian replies: “I do not necessarily have a big sense of motivation to bring my own work to people. I just love to be in communication about research that I am engaged with and that helps me understand the world - it does not have to be my own.”

So why the need to take research and its outcomes beyond the University campus? “Research was giving me answers to questions I had about social life, about how people make life meaningful. That is a central question in my field, cultural sociology.” Music continues to be the red thread of inspiration here. “Music has an important, meaningful place in my life, and I try to understand why that is or is not the case for others as well. And I think research is a fantastic way to dig into that, together. You spark the enthusiasm and the curiosity that you have yourself, see it resonate with others, and hopefully gain answers and ideas for interventions that get more people on board.”

Research and impact

How does Julian see the impact of his research being brought to society? “Academia is a little bit like a cult, with very small circles of people talking to each other, which sometimes makes sense scientifically, but can also feel very enclosed. When you share your work with people outside of academia, you realise whether what you are doing is actually useful or relevant. It really helps you to ask the ‘so what?’ and

‘why would anyone care?’ questions of your work. But for me to make research feel relevant, I need it to resonate with more people than just reviewers in a journal.”

So what does it mean for Julian to keep building a career with focus on engaged, impactful research? “I suppose it comes down to ‘follow your radar and make it transmit beyond this place’.” He explains: “I think it is important that there are people who mostly do cutting-edge research that does not immediately ‘translate’ well to the outside world, but it is also important that there are people who do something different and act more like a scientific spokesperson or try to bridge research and impactful societal engagement. That is why R&R is so nice.”

Walking a tightrope

One of the goals of the [nationwide](#) R&R programme is ensuring that scientists are equally appreciated for their unique talents and contributions and have more room to pursue the path in academia that reflects their passion. In part, this is made possible by introducing differentiated career paths where academics can focus on area(s) of activity that fits their talents best. This is a change all Dutch universities are actively working on. Julian recognises that being in academia still often produces the belief of ‘I have to fit into the system, otherwise I fail.’ He explains: “You have to make sure to tick all the boxes because it is an encroaching bottleneck where it is increasingly difficult once you get past the PhD phase. That was when I realised: you really have to walk a tightrope to get the highly aspired Assistant Professor spot with a permanent contract.”

This sentiment touches upon one of the goals of R&R – to ensure that less scientists leave academia because they could not find a place and appreciation for their talents and ambitions. Julian continues: “This is a system that primarily rewards research in the form of journal publications and research grants. I think all these tasks that happen on the background, in education, societal engagement and administration, should be lifted to a more equal ground.” He is also a proponent of differentiated career paths. “I think it can make people’s lives more relaxed and focused. I have felt the stress when I was doing many impact-related activities, teaching, administrative tasks and working on research papers. You feel it becomes too much and you wish you could just pick two things and that it would be okay if you did them really well, rather than doing four things poorly while stressed. I am convinced that if you give people the time and space to focus on those two things, this will almost naturally give rise to innovation, engagement and – in the end – better outcomes for everyone.”

R&R for younger scientists

Julian is also a board member of the [Young Erasmus Academy](#) (YEA) – an organisation uniting talented earlier career academics at EUR. Contributing to the implementation of R&R at EUR is one of the key themes of YEA, and as Julian points out, a highly important topic at other Young Academies in the Netherlands. Julian believes that R&R is very relevant to earlier career scientists and would enable them to explore the growth paths based on their talents while being able to progress in their careers. “You should definitely have a couple of years to explore, have a taste of everything. See what fits you best.” Julian also sees the importance of role models in academia who forged their own unique path in line with their talents. “I have been involved with people who make me feel that it is okay to try things and go your own way. I have many examples of teachers who were not the ‘beaten path’ kind of professors.” He concludes: “It does help a lot to have a sense that whatever you do it is okay to fail, to experiment, and to not fit into the rubric or the assessment matrix.”