

Three highlights of the ISTR PhD Seminar 2018: Or why participation is highly recommended

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Do you know that feeling of anticipation preceding an important presentation or event? You anticipate your own excitement, helpful feedback of others, interesting encounters and wonder how you will experience the ambiance of the event. Preparing for the fourth ISTR PhD Seminar from 8th to 10th July on the train to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, I had this exact feeling. Like [Mieke Berghmans](#) I expected to have the (rare) opportunity to talk, discuss, and work with other early career researchers who are all interested in the same field, concerned with phenomena such as the third sector, philanthropy and social entrepreneurship. This promised the chance to discuss my PhD in a different way than I present it to my peers in educational science.

From the moment I arrived at the hotel, the feeling of excitement became a feeling of joy. We had all been booked in the same hotel which meant that we met right before the start of the seminar. Having been given the opportunity to share a room, I first met my roommate from Jamaica. This was a perfect match since he not only is a very empathetic person and great roommate, but also works on the engagement of foundations. So, we were on the same page from the very beginning. Arriving at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, we experienced a very welcoming atmosphere that instantly made us feel comfortable. After hearty welcoming words by the organizers Pelle Åberg (Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College) and René Bekkers (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), and an interesting keynote speech by Taco Brandsen (Radboud University), we were ready to go for very valuable two seminar days. In the following I am going to sketch three aspects that in my opinion significantly shaped that experience:

Group sessions: a key element of the PhD Seminar were the group sessions of about six or seven students and two faculty members. Every student had 45 minutes that were approximately divided into 15 minutes of presentation and 30 minutes of discussion. As stated by [Mieke Berghmans](#) this turned 'normal' presentations at conferences upside down, thereby providing more space for discussion of ideas, concepts, and most importantly challenges that you face at the moment. What I found to be most special in comparison to other



workshops was that presentations went completely without slides. Instead, prepared with the abstracts of each participant, we sat together speaking to and discussing with each other. This implied for the presenter to come straight to the point; otherwise you risked that your audience would lose your line of thought. Still, in cases of confusion participants could easily make

additional clarifications. The group sessions had a very positive atmosphere as described for the years before by [Christiane Rudmann](#), and we received valuable feedback by students and faculty members alike.



Community: another important element of the PhD Seminar was the interaction outside of group sessions. There were tons of opportunities to enter into conversations with each other: We mingled in breaks (with delicious catering), enjoyed a lovely BBQ together, drank a glass of wine at the reception, or danced at the PhD party (to the music played by René Bekkers and band). This allowed us to meet fascinating people from all over the world in a more informal setting (more than 50 students from over 20 countries). At the same time, the range of interests was overwhelming,

ranging from measuring the third sector in Malaysia for the first time, seeking civil society and the public sphere in social media, to research on volunteering by vulnerable groups. All the interaction gave us the opportunity to connect with each other and exchange not only knowledge, ideas, and daily challenges in the PhD life, but also talk about matters apart from our academic identity.

Professional development: the PhD seminar as well as additional workshops during the conference provided the opportunity for us to also think about our future careers. During the seminar we were offered three workshops on scholarly identity, the tenure track, and getting published that were chaired by a faculty member. These were open formats, in which information on the subject was mixed with personal experiences and stimulated by additional participant inputs as well as questions. For example, scholars in third sector research often face the challenge that they need to specialize in another discipline since (at least in Europe) schools in nonprofit / third sector studies are rare. Thus, we discussed what strategies are suited to cope with this challenge. Furthermore, during the subsequent ISTR conference, there were more workshops on professional development such as ‘post-doc opportunities’, ‘teaching and learning’, ‘non-academic job market’, ‘navigating job-market and career strategies’ and ‘academic job interviews’. These workshops provided food for thought and offered opportunities for further exchange on our future plans.

These are only three aspects of the PhD Seminar, however, there was even more to experience (e.g., a 3 Minute Thesis Competition as described by [Steph Haywood](#)) that would not fit into the space of this post. Thus, I highly recommend applying for the next ISTR PhD Seminar in 2020 – because of both the excited feeling before meeting your fellow PhD colleagues and the joyful, interesting, and valuable experience during the seminar sessions, social exchanges, professional development workshops and many more. A big thank you to the team at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the ISTR, the faculty members and all the fellow PhD students for making this experience possible. I am looking forward to seeing you at another seminar or conference.