Alumnus Marcel van Poecke has created two awards with the aim of supporting enterprising students and researchers with starting capital for their start-ups. ‘Of course, I am hoping that some fantastic companies will have come out of it in a few years.’

TEXT ANJA JANSSEN

I myself went into business when I was about 30,’ says Marcel van Poecke, an investor in the energy sector. ‘At the start, you need a helping hand as an entrepreneur. A grant can be that helping hand.’ Van Poecke (WUR Forestry, 1985) and his daughter Heleen van Poecke want the AtlasInvest Entrepreneurship Grant to support start-ups working in the Wageningen domains. ‘I think we should do more to help start-ups in the Netherlands. They have a lot of added value for society,’ says Van Poecke.

SUSTAINABILITY AWARD
His new grant covers two categories. One is for the best business idea and the other is for the best initiative targeting sustainability. The first Sustainability Award - in 2020 - went to Mylium, a company that develops leathery materials made out of fungal mycelia. The Start-up Award went to the Wageningen start-up Greencovery, whose founder Carlos Cabrera and his team won 35,000 euros. ‘We are going to use it to set up our own lab and buy a membrane separation unit,’ says Cabrera, who did the MSc in Biotechnology in Wageningen and got his PhD at Delft University. ‘We shall use that unit for a new application of our technology to extract food ingredients from pectin-rich waste streams such as orange peel. This way we can speed up our development and explore a new market at the same time.’

‘I am an active investor myself, partly through our investment company AtlasInvest,’ says Van Poecke. ‘So I see how important start-ups are for innovation.’ One of the problems for start-ups is getting hold of starting capital. ‘Often they can’t go to banks and there are very few venture capital funds for risky investments in new companies.’ But a grant isn’t all you need, Van Poecke stresses. For start-ups to find investors or partners, they also need to network and let people see what they do. That is why the selection process for this grant takes the form of a pitch competition. It was Van Poecke’s daughter Heleen who came up with the idea of the competition.
The AtlasInvest Entrepreneurship Grant is one of University Fund Wageningen’s named funds. With its Start-up Award, it supports entrepreneurs with commercially promising solutions to global challenges. The Impact Award rewards social and public initiatives by entrepreneurs related to the environment and sustainability.

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