



PHOTO ALAMY

GREEK ALUMNUS NIKOS MYLONAS:

‘I want to bring knowledge and technology to farmers’

Nikos Mylonas is developing agricultural applications for artificial intelligence in Athens. He got his inspiration in Wageningen, where he took the MSc in Biosystems Engineering with support from the Pavlos Condellis Fund. ‘I want farmers to benefit from it.’

TEXT ANJA JANSSEN

Nikos Mylonas grew up in Patras as the-son of an amateur olive farmer and winegrower. After a Bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering in Athens, he was eager to pursue agricultural applications. ‘I have helped on the farm since I was a child, from sowing to harvesting. After that I initially opted for aero-

nautical engineering, but I always wanted to combine my technical know-how with agriculture.’

Wageningen was Nikos’s first choice for a Master’s. ‘I was attracted by both the theoretical side of the Master’s programme here and the practical experience it offered, with its thesis and internship options. And of

course, Wageningen is number one in the field of agriculture.’

The grant from the Pavlos Condellis Fund covered his accommodation and living costs. The fund was established in 2016 by the Greek farm mechanization entrepreneur Pavlos Condellis, in order to give scholarships to outstanding Greek students want-

ing to do an MSc in Biosystems Engineering in Wageningen. ‘Without that money, it would have been very difficult to study in Wageningen. The scholarship made it a lot easier.’

Mylonas was not disappointed by the hands-on experience he was looking for. ‘The programme gives you realistic cases from actual practice. We worked in groups on projects for farmers and companies. Exactly what I wanted. We tested mobile robots and robotic arms, for instance.’ For his thesis, Mylonas studied the use of drone footage for detecting weeds in sugar beet fields. ‘And I went out to the farms for as well, to take measurements and fly the drones.’

In Wageningen, Nikos explored the potential applications of artificial intelligence, such as detecting weeds or diseased plants using camera footage. That inspired him to go on to a PhD at the Agricultural University in Athens, delving into image-processing techniques and deep learning – a computer technique for recognizing patterns, based on the way human neurones work. ‘I want to bring this knowledge and technology to practitioners so they can benefit from them.’

NEW KNOWLEDGE IS NEEDED

This endeavour is a perfect fit with Pavlos Condellis’s motives for setting up a fund for talented Greek students wanting to take the Master’s in Biosystems Engineering – preferably specializing in precision agriculture. ‘As well as new machines, what our agriculture sector needs most is new knowledge. I want to prepare young Greeks for the future of the world and of our country, and to give them the chance to develop to a high level,’ said Condellis when he set up his named fund.

Mylonas graduated in September 2018 and started his PhD research in Athens this spring. There are currently three Greeks studying in Wageningen on a Pavlos Condellis Fund scholarship. Last year the scholarship students, including Mylonas, met Pavlov’s widow Ariane Condellis in Wageningen. She has kept the fund going since her husband’s death in 2017. Ariane Condellis found her visit to

‘I enjoyed the intensity of the MSc programme’

Wageningen a very positive experience, she tells us in an email. ‘I was impressed by the many different sides to the degree courses, by the atmosphere, by the professors’ enthusiasm and by the obvious orientation towards sustainable development. And I also appreciate the practical approach in the degree programmes, focusing on the business world and not just on careers in the academic world. If I were younger I would have liked to do something like this too. That is a reason for me to carry on supporting students.’

MORE COMPETITIVE

The approach to university studies in the Netherlands took a bit of getting used to, says Mylonas. ‘It is more competitive than at Greek universities. To me the Dutch system is more inspiring because it challenges you

to perform in a top university environment. The teachers expect more of you. I have enjoyed that intensity. On the other hand, teachers are open to feedback from students. That makes the learning process more interactive.’ He found the contact he had with students from other countries interesting too. ‘In Wageningen I made friends from all around the world. My best friend comes from India but I also got to know South American and Chinese people. It was a unique experience to work with them and spend leisure time with them.’ Cycling around Wageningen and the outstanding infrastructure for cycling was another unforgettable experience for Mylonas. ‘I thought it was highly unusual to have the bike as the only means of transport, but I enjoyed it – although not on rainy or wintry days.’ ■

PAVLOS CONDELLIS FUND FOR EXCELLENT GREEK STUDENTS



The Pavlos Condellis Fund is the first named fund under the University Fund Wageningen umbrella to be established by an international donor. Condellis set up the fund in 2016 to provide excellent Greek students with scholarships for the MSc programme in Biosystems Engineering at Wageningen University. The fund expects beneficiaries to contribute to the development of the agriculture sector in Greece after they graduate.

www.universityfundwageningen.eu/pavlosfund

If you are interested in setting up your own fund, please contact Arianne van Ballegooij at University Fund Wageningen: ufw@wur.nl