

Research Board Prize 2021 – Frans Verbeure**Laureate:****Dr Simon Baeckens****Supervisor:****Prof. Raoul Van Damme**

Simon Baeckens graduated from secondary education in 2007 specialising in science. For his outstanding marks for biology, he received a copy of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. At the time, Simon was unsure if he should pursue a career as a footballer, DJ or scientist. Reading Darwin's famous work won him over and he started studying biology at our university. Four years later, during an internship week on a Croatian island, I first noticed his football skills. Professors should know better, but there is a persistent prejudice that football talent and high intelligence rarely go hand in hand. So when Simon asked me to be the supervisor of his master dissertation, I hesitated. Fortunately, Simon also proved to have an unusual amount of persuasive power, so I agreed. It resulted in an excellent master dissertation on the curious relationship between colour and immunity in island lizards. With the same persuasiveness, Simon also secured funding for a PhD on chemical communication in reptiles, won a scholarship for a post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard, secured a post-doctoral position at the FWO, and a Visiting Fellowship at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Worldwide he is currently regarded as one of the rising stars in the firmament of evolutionary biology.

Would he be standing there today if he had not been given *On the Origin of Species* 14 years ago? Curiously enough, this question is reflected in Simon's research. Like many evolutionary biologists, he struggles a little with an image problem. It is believed that he studies lizards, their colours, their immune system, their skin. That he does so in the hope of learning from nature, of imitating its products in some ingenious application. And Simon does all that. But the real crux of his research lies much deeper – his analyses are about the predictability of life. On how important contingency and convergence are in our history. Are we (and the other life forms around us) the only logical end product of rigid natural selection – or just one of many possible outcomes, of random twists and turns in a random story? I am certainly glad that gifted footballers are also tackling all these kinds of questions. It shows how very basic and strategic research can go hand in hand.

For the aforementioned reasons, I ask Rector Herman Van Goethem and Vice-Rector Ronny Blust to honour Simon Baeckens with the Research Board Prize 2021 – Frans Verbeure of the University of Antwerp.