THE DIVE INTO POST-GRAD LIFE

What happens with the graduated student?

Let me start in the middle. I graduated June 2009 from the Faculty of Aerospace Engineering at the TU Delft, more specifically on Space Systems Engineering. Here I had been for the past three years, enjoying myself very much. Next to my studies I was a member of DARE (Delft Aerospace Rocket Engineering). A couple of months before my graduation we (a team of about fifteen students) went to Kiruna, in the very north of Sweden, to launch our two-stage rocket which ended up breaking the European amateur rocketry height record by boosting up to 12.55km! I can tell you this: that kind of experience you can only get during your student years! You get to solder electronic boards, learn how to draw PCB schematics, make composite material structures, mix rocket propellant, set up a launch tower, write the control logic software for the flight and much more... No company will ever let you do all those things in just a two year time period. That’s for sure!

But how did a Norwegian breakdancer girl end up in Delft of all places? Funny enough, I heard about the university while I was at the International Astronautical Congress in Japan! So you see, it pays off to go to these conferences... And yes, I have been a space geek for quite some time. While I did my bachelor's degree in physics in Norway I also participated in building parts of a student rocket, went to space camp and did ESA’s Parabolic Flight Campaign. What I can say is, do grasp these opportunities while you can! There are so many activities targeted at students and only students. Hence, once you graduate you are no longer eligible... Having no time is not a good enough excuse, it is better to delay your graduation than to miss out on these opportunities. Because once you go to your job interview, they will actually pay attention to your extra-curricular activities, and often most of the conversation ends up being about these.

So, where am I now? Well, right after my graduation I went for 2.5 months to California to do the International Space University’s summer program – which is well worth it! I not only have gained a huge group of enthusiastic international friends, but now am also part of one of the world’s most powerful networks, which can really help open some doors. When I returned from that incredible experience, I began my job at Science & Technology B.V. in Delft, which is a small but “gezelig” software and consultancy company, targeted at space projects. We do, among other things, satellite data analysis and rocket engine health monitoring. Here I experienced the transition from student to employee. Suddenly you are expected to know what you are talking about! Strict deadlines apply, and you are faced with various types of customer relations, both good and bad, official and informal. It is no longer possible to party with your student friends on a Tuesday evening without still having to wake up at 7:00 the next morning – which therefore gets much tougher! And if you are working alone on a project, then suddenly no one is monitoring or reviewing your work like your thesis supervisors used to do, and you actually catch yourself missing the comfort of it!

Nowadays I am actually starting up two companies in Norway, with the help of S&T Corp. One company is a daughter company, which will extend our activities of data analysis and system health management to the Norwegian soil. The other company is based on my thesis work at TU Delft, namely the conceptual design of nano- and microsatellites (NA-MISAT.com). So suddenly I am faced with yet another role-change: from employee to employer. Suddenly all you do directly affects your ability to financially survive in the future. You have to make sure you gain new work orders and contracts, by going around talking to various companies and paying attention to new projects being developed. Everything is your decision now, and you have to start trusting your instincts. New areas need to be learned, such as taxation rules, pension schemes, work environment regulations, etc... But you also gain the ultimate flexibility in deciding your own tasks and direction. It is a liberating, yet challenging feeling! However, throughout this process it is important to keep in mind that asking people for help or advice is not a defeat, but rather a sign of wisdom and that you are in control of your own resources and capabilities. Because no one has all the answers!