Letters from Alumni
life after the PhD thesis defense

Combining theory and practice
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They seemed difficult to combine, the two things that I wanted to pursue when I was putting the finishing touches on my thesis and brooding about my future career. Certainly, I needed a change. I had just spent four years building theoretical models of markets and I was more and more often overwhelmed (as I sat staring at my computer) by doubts about the relevance of my work. I longed to do something of which the relevance would be seen immediately. Yet, I wanted to maintain contact with the academic world and keep the possibility open that one day I might go back to science.

So when my supervisor, Maarten Janssen, asked if I would like to work at SEOR (Sociaal Economisch Onderzoek Rotterdam) and become a fellow of the newly established Erasmus Competition and Regulation Institute (ECRI), I accepted the position with enthusiasm. SEOR is a commercial research institute affiliated with the Faculty of Economics of Erasmus Universiteit, while ECRI is a virtual network of researchers from SEOR and various departments of Erasmus Universiteit doing applied research in the field of competition and regulation. Both institutes aim to make use of scientific insights to solve ‘real-life’ problems and to feed this practical experience back into scientific research. Answering a research question presented by a customer thus begins by studying the relevant scientific literature, where my experience as a PhD student has proved invaluable. My colleagues and I also try to select scientifically interesting questions out of consultancy projects and to develop them further, so that they can result in publications. The time that we do not use for commercial research can be used to pursue our own academic interests, not necessarily related to the consultancy work.

The Competition and Regulation section of SEOR consists of only six people, which means that the scope for specialisation is limited, and everyone works on a variety of topics. During the last three years, I have worked on competition and regulation in mobile telephony, bicycle- and notary markets, but also on other topics such as the competitive position of Dutch companies in Europe. Most of us, however, have a field on which we focus most. For me, it is telecommunications—broadly understood—including, for instance, the TV-cable market. We usually work in small teams, writing reports for private companies on regulatory measures proposed, for example, by the Dutch regulator of the telecommunications market (OPTA). I’ve enjoyed hearing practitioners discuss market developments and seeing how they deal with the ‘eye-opening ideas’ developed by academics. At such a moment you have the feeling that, as a famous psychologist Kurt Lewin once said, nothing is more practical than a good theory.

My office is located in the same building as the Faculty of Economics—just one floor below my old microeconomics group. That makes it easy to contact people from the Faculty, go to seminars and— not unimportant—access the university library. Having close contacts with the Faculty means that I am also regularly asked to teach—on average, one course per year, microeconomics or industrial organisation. In some ways, teaching resembles consultancy; in both you have to explain economic ideas in a way that your audience can understand, and in both your audience wants you to link theory and practice. This combination suits me perfectly.