

UP CLOSE

A bridge to the frontier

The Delta Institute for Theoretical Physics – Delta ITP – brings together theoretical physicists from the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University, and Utrecht University. Leiden string theorist Koenraad Schalm reflects on how this collaboration is paying off. 'Because of the enormous achievements of physics in the twentieth century, the level at which research takes place is often quite a bit higher than the level at which you graduate as a physics student. An important part of Delta ITP is teaching joint courses to students from all three universities. These courses bridge the gap between the lecture hall and the research frontier.

This frontier is not imposed from above. The research questions in a fundamental science institute come from the researchers themselves. What makes an institute flourish is creating an environment in which the interesting questions can be asked. That is the real success of Delta ITP.

I am proud of the fact that, as a small country, we are among the world's best because we have created an environment in which it is easy to work together. Our so-called triangle meetings – meetings between the three institutes focused on a specific topic – are a great example of this collaboration. During these meetings, there is plenty of time for free discussion with confrères. That is when the ideas are born. Theoretical physics is not sitting in your attic room à la Einstein; on the contrary, it is a very social profession. You are only in that little attic room when you are working out the details of your ideas.

What does the future of Delta ITP look like? I don't rule out further expansion, although the geography of the Netherlands would be a challenge. Part of Delta ITP's strength is physical meetings, and because Utrecht, Amsterdam, and Leiden are so close to each other, we have been able to make them happen. On the other hand, the triangle meetings are such a success that colleagues from Groningen and Leuven also participate.'

Text: Wouter Schreuder

