During a recent UNU-MERIT activity day we were testing our limits on a course involving rope climbing, archery and beer-crate tower construction among other things. The person voted (Action) Man of the Day is Iman Rajabzadeh so it seemed fitting that he should be our face of the month too. Iman is a second year PhD student from Iran. Here he gives his thoughts on academic life in the Netherlands and in Iran.

* What is your PhD about?

My topic is “Robust growth of Iran”. It is a study that aims to make a framework which will enable us to minimize the risks and bring about robust growth by determining the best alternative sectors for the oil industry, which is one of the most vulnerable sectors in the economy. In this sense, applying an Input-Output method on a portfolio framework will help us to reach this goal.
* You are from Iran but left to do your PhD here at UNU-MERIT—how come you chose this institute? And what was it like to first move to Maastricht to live and study?

I chose UNU-MERIT because of the international reputation of the UNU, the interesting fields which UNU-MERIT is working on, and especially its focus on developing countries. Also, the international environment which this institute provides appealed to me. At the beginning it seemed quite hard to live far from those you know and people you can easily communicate with (in your own language). However, if you open your mind and view to new environments you can adapt to the changes and this was the case for me as well. Especially after I made my friends I found it easy to adapt to the new situation.

In my point of view the Netherlands and especially Maastricht is a calm and happy place without any stress—life is not harsh here. People are so friendly and their ability to speak English lets those of us who do not speak Dutch enjoy their company. I also like the beautiful and green nature here.

* It is an eventful time for Iran, what is it like living abroad, quite far away when so many things are happening at home? Do you see things differently to your friends and family at home?

Being far from your country has some advantageous and disadvantageous: although you miss the chance to directly intervene in current events, it brings the opportunity to study all events out of box and with more information. Here in the Netherlands you can find a larger variety of views on what is going on in Iran. People with different nationalities can bring new and different views.

* You obtained both a bachelor and a masters degree from Iran, and did some teaching— in what way do you find academic life differing here and in Iran?

I do believe that academic life is the same around the world—reading papers, making surveys, struggling with different models or data, teaching and etc. The main difference with Iran compared to here is the accessibility to information. The lack of data and information resources is the main problem scholars in Iran face. Just as in the Netherlands, in Iran academic projects can be funded by the state, industry and international sources. However, the amount of funding is very limited which makes it more difficult to get research funded.

* A related question— as somebody who is getting their PhD outside of Iran, do you feel your experience differs a lot from colleagues getting a PhD in Iran?

Maybe the research approach doesn’t differ that much but studying and living abroad has brought and will bring new experiences which you can hardly you can get inside the country. For instance you meet new people with different kind of thoughts and views to you. Furthermore, scholars here in the Netherlands are more up-to-date as they have access to new sources of data and to more networking and interaction with other researchers, which helps them with new thoughts and ideas about their research problems.
* What about the field that MERIT is in- innovation, science and technology- are there established researchers and research institutes in this field in Iran?

A related institute has been established in Iran and some universities have been making efforts to establish this research area. However, they are still at the beginning of establishing themselves in this field and more centralized programmes are needed.

* Finally, on a less serious note, you say that one of your favourite sports is chess, yet you turned out to be the most eager and daring participant of our away day- how is that possible?? Where did your hidden action man skills come from?

Interesting question!!!
I like chess because it makes me to think beyond the current possibilities and strategies. Though, on the other hand I always like to be an active person and take up new challenges and activities.