KEER OM VOOR NEDERLANDSE EDITIE

observant

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Brain research:

"By sacrificing our most advanced scanner, we hope to secure the replacement of the other two"

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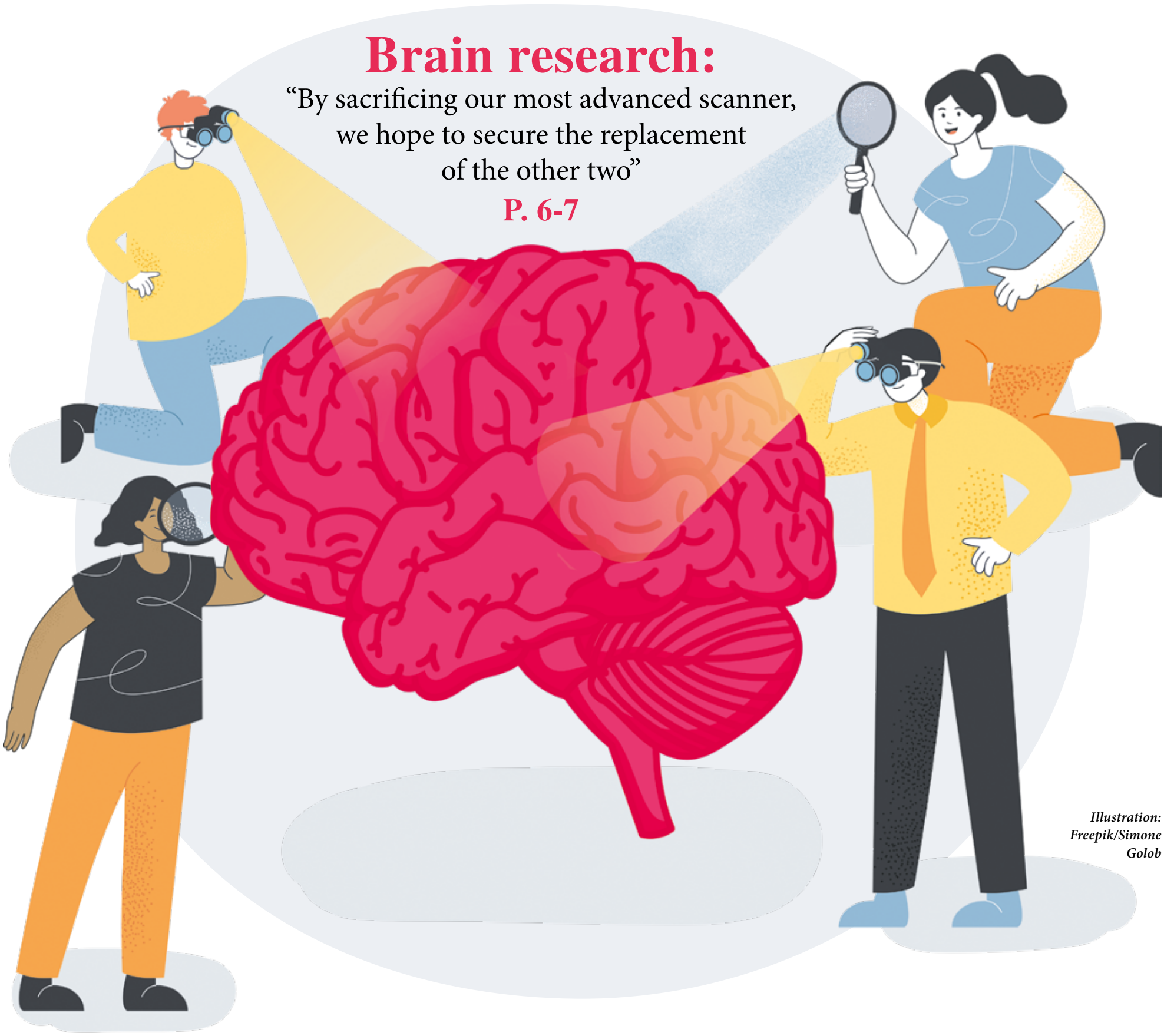

Illustration: Freepik/Simone Golob

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Students mainly report intimidation by landlords to the municipality

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editorial

The desk

"We received some emails I'd like to discuss with you, see if there's anything worth pursuing," colleague Deborah Blekkenhorst said after our Monday morning meeting. She opened the general *Observant* inbox that she maintains. Lots of spam, of course, but mixed in is a handful of emails about books, lectures, a new company for students, and an event. We sift through them quickly: yes, no, maybe (needs more information first).

The inbox is empty, but when I cast half an eye over my desk, I see that it is overflowing with Post-it notes and other scraps of paper scrawled over with handwritten notes about potential topics: "new policy for professors", "University College Venlo", "language requirements for lecturers", "toe nails", "illegal tenancy agreements", "vulnerability of lecturers" (a very yellowed piece of paper), "the horror of student evaluations", "recognition and reward". We've been told there's a lot of to-do about that last one. According to sources, the programme, aimed at effecting a culture change by allowing researchers to develop the skills they are good at – teaching, or leadership, for example – would only lead to increases in bureaucracy, workload and distrust. We'll look into it.

And those toe nails, you might be thinking, what's that about?! It would be a fantastic subject for our series *the times they are (not) a-changin'*, in which we delve into the *Observant* archives. Since as far back as 1986, the Netherlands Cohort Study on diet and cancer has been gathering human tissue, including toe nails. They are stored somewhere in a UM building, nearly a hundred thousand strong. Are they of such great scientific value? Why would you keep them? Questions that still need answering – we still need to make an appointment with the 'project leader'.

There are some new Post-it notes this week, thanks to our editorial council, which came together to discuss the latest editions of *Observant.* Those meetings are always fertile grounds for new topics. "Defence", about the ministry's investment in teaching and research – will UM be taking part? Or what about one faculty's decision to end 'small' Master's programmes and another faculty's decision to continue no matter what (even if there are only five or ten students)? There are set to be local elections in 2026: "That might be an interesting topic", said one of the council members. And of course, fifty years of UM. "Are you doing anything with that yet? Maybe you should talk about PBL, is that even still relevant today?"

I am frequently asked (by people who don't know the academic world at all) what my job actually entails. "A university newspaper, how interesting," I hear them say. Often followed by a somewhat wary, "But is there really that much to write about?" I try to explain that we write about more than just the academic research, about student life or about policy matters, for example, and that yes, there are lots of things to write about. But it probably still seems impossible to comprehend.

I have a solution. I've taken a picture of my desk, focusing particularly on all the Post-it notes, papers and the open diary.

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words.

Wendy Degens

The editor-in-chief gives a look behind the scenes at the editorial office.

series the times they are (not) a changin'

The rocky road of the anti-smoking vaccine comes to a dead end

Photo: Pixabay

2002–2014

An injection that could help inveterate smokers overcome their addiction – it sounded like the perfect solution to the smoking problem. So it was no surprise that, at the turn of the century, Maastricht University's research into an anti-smoking vaccine attracted widespread attention. "It's a brilliant idea", Onno van Schayck, professor of preventive medicine at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML), told *Observant* in 2002. The vaccine stimulates the production of proteins that bind to nicotine molecules, making them too large to reach the brain and trigger the release of dopamine. The result: smoking becomes less pleasurable and, theoretically, easier to give up.

The US pharmaceutical company Nabi had been working on a vaccine for some time. Trials with rats and guinea pigs had been successful. For the next step – trials with human participants – the company approached Maastricht University, which already had a strong reputation for research on smoking cessation.

By early 2003, the search for participants was underway.

Expectations

The media were quick to take notice. The Dutch *NOS Journaal*, *CNN* and German television contacted UM's Extra research institute (now part of CAPHRI). To *Observant*, lead researcher Van Schayck admitted that he wasn't entirely thrilled by the attention: it wouldn't help if expectations were too high. Still, Dutch media continued to follow the research closely over the next few years, from *AD* and *De Telegraaf* to *de Volkskrant*.

And so the general public was able to witness the many obstacles and setbacks that usually happen behind the scenes. The study almost immediately hit a snag due to a lack of participants. It was easy to find thirty smokers – who would have to continue smoking for 38 weeks to ensure reliable results – but non-smokers and ex-smokers, needed for a non-smoking control group, were less eager to undergo the injections.

After a rocky start, the first positive results were reported in 2005. The vaccine did, as hoped, trigger the production of antibodies against nicotine, with hardly any side effects. But this did not necessarily mean it actually helped people quit smoking. While the vaccine took the pleasure out of smoking, it didn't take away the craving. The next step involved providing support in the form of counselling and anti-smoking pills to around six hundred smokers who wanted to kick the habit, half of whom received the vaccine.

Tobacco companies

Researchers also explored what exactly happened in the brain and considered the ethical implications. What if parents wanted to vaccinate their children preventively? Or if tobacco companies started exploiting the idea in their advertising that addiction could be more easily overcome?

Meanwhile, the study became a race against time. Two pharmaceutical companies in Switzerland and England had both developed similar vaccines, each hoping to bring theirs to market first. But UM was still ahead, Van Schayck told *Observant* in 2005. "I expect our vaccine to hit the market within two to four years."

But that didn't happen. By the end of 2007, research came to a halt. The financial crisis was in full swing and the American client, Nabi, was in financial trouble. The study did not resume until 2009.

> "I expect our vaccine to hit the market within two to four years"

And it ended in disappointment. In 2014, twelve years after the first promising reports, the vaccine was shown to offer no significant benefit. Smokers who received it were no more likely to quit than participants given a placebo. Nabi, now acquired by another company, abandoned the project, and competing vaccines also failed.

Van Schayk's response was down-to-earth: "It took a lot of time and energy, we had high expectations (...) but that's the nature of research – you never know what you'll find."

Dennis Vaendel

Maastricht University was founded fifty years ago. In this anniversary series, we delve into our own archives to rediscover memorable, funny, relevant and curious news stories from the past

news

UM removes three-year-old article from website

Incorrect figures used in fight against obesity

Maastricht University has removed a three-year-old article about the sociatal costs of overweight and obesity from its website. The article incorrectly stated that these costs amount to €79 billion annually, according to a report by television programme* Zembla *this week.

Photo: Shutterstock

The Maastricht study, published in early 2022, does not mention the figure of 79 billion euros at all. The researchers, including Silvia Evers and Mickaël Hiligsmann from the FHML and Karen Freijer from the Dutch Obesity Partnership (Partnerschap Overgewicht Nederland, PON), did write that obesity and overweight cost society around 11,500 euros per person per year. However, they caution that due to the small research group and the relatively high number of women in it, "it's not possible to generalise the results to the entire Dutch population."

That is exactly what the PON, where – it should be noted – co-author Freijer has been manager since 2019, did in a press release at the time though. How that found its way onto the UM website is difficult to ascertain, says spokesperson Mark van der Linde when asked. Reports on research conducted by consortia or foundations involving Maastricht researchers are often simply reproduced, he says. Departments and institutes can also write posts themselves. In any case, "this article should not have been there. We removed it in response to questions from *Zembla*."

A salient detail is that earlier this year, Evers and Hiligsmann signed a manifesto on combating overweight and obesity. In that document, which was presented to the State Secretary for Health in May, the controversial claim of 79 billion euros is again presented as fact. Did the two, who should have known better, sign the text without reading it? Both have been approached for a response. Hiligsmann is unavailable, and when *Observant* went to print, no response from Evers or the secretariat of her research institute CAPHRI had been received.

UM professor of Health Economics Wim Groot, who was not involved in the original study, also signed the manifesto. When asked, he said that he was not aware of the incorrect extrapolation at the time. "It is, of course, an error", he agrees. "But it's not very important for the argument in the manifesto. Whether it is 79 or 25 billion, overweight and obesity are a problem and we need to do more to treat and prevent it."

On Wednesday morning, PON announced that it was distancing itself from the manifesto (co-signed by Freijer), partly because it cited the figure of €79 billion. "This figure came from economic research that should not have been extrapolated and included in the manifesto and our communications." The statement does not explain how this erroneous extrapolation came about in the first place.

Peter Doorakkers

Messaging about 'paid parking' causes confusion

Local Consultative Body wants better communication

The new mobility policy – commuting by car, bicycle or public transport – was called a sensitive issue in a meeting last Wednesday of the Local Consultative Body, consisting of the Executive Board and trade union representatives. So it is important that the university improves its communication on the subject, the members emphasised.

The principles have been fixed, but the details of the scheme are still a topic of debate. What are those principles? Both cyclists and motorists will receive commuting mileage allowances, although motorists will have to pay for parking. Exactly how much is still unknown, but the further away from the university you live, the lower the cost.

At the moment, the university is still working out the details of the scheme, set to go into effect more than a year from now, in January 2027. The first scheme to be discussed by the Local Consultative Body this coming December will be the commuting scheme, followed later by the parking policy and the bicycle compensation scheme.

Communication about the policy has been far from perfect, according to the Local Consultative Body. A message posted to UMployee in early September caused confusion. Although a careful reader might have noticed that nothing had been confirmed and the exact policy details were still being worked out, many people took the message to mean "it was a *fait accompli*", they said. "It looks like the Local Consultative Body has already agreed to everything."

An article by *Observant*, published a day after the message on UMployee, also gave that impression, because in it, the project leader said he had managed to get the mobility policy through the participation council. Incorrectly. Both the Local Consultative Body and the University Council say they have not agreed to anything yet.

President Rianne Letschert promised to pay more attention to communication. She agreed with the suggestion by Mark Govers (representative of the AC/FBZ union), to have any message posted to UMployee checked by the relevant party of the message (read, the Local Consultative Body), on one condition: "I don't want to have to talk to 15 different people, there should be a single representative."

Riki Janssen

column

A second soul

"

One of the biggest advantages of living in Maastricht is its cross-border location, situated right in the middle between the borders with Belgium and Germany, enhancing the opportunity to travel and explore beyond the Dutch *grens*. And I, personally, do not know a student, who would not at least once go to Aachen to see the cathedral on the random weekend - or at least make bankrupting shopping in the DM, because it takes less than an hour by train to commute there and find yourself surrounded by the sounds of a different language.

And when it comes to languages, Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperor whose royal chapel was constructed into the Aachen cathedral and became this city's symbol until this day, once said "to learn another language is to possess a second soul". And honestly, I think there is no other quote which would fit so perfectly with the multilanguage environment of international students. All of them know at least two languages, and the vast majority know more than three, mostly due to mixed ethnicity or frequent domicile changes. And this means that with every language, there is a history to be told and an additional layer of someone's personality to be unveiled, gifting a person additional lives. Because of this, those polyglots-by-accident can make a lot more connections within much more environments and get across to the hearts of people. Just imagine, you speak with someone in English and then it turns out you both speak some other language, preferably native to at least one of you. The chat itself progresses, shortening the distance between you.

Being able to speak in different languages also comes with a trade-off of losing one of your personality traits – sometimes it is hard to express a Spanish thought in Finnish: maybe because such an expression does not exist? Maybe in German you are not that funny? Maybe in Polish you curse too much? Maybe in English you cannot speak about emotions?

This is why, you should never forget to incorporate gesticulation – after all, it is a language too, that could clarify the chaos coming from your mouth. But if you ever happen to be in Middle East, you can do without thumbs up. Unless you really mean it - and your broken middle finger is stopping you from using it.

"

Rita Wiśniewska,
a third-year European Law student

series sing, fight, cry, pray, laugh, work and admire

Maja Henigman (1999, Ljubljana, Slovenia)

\ First-year student of Psychology

\ Relationship status: been in a relationship for 3.5 years

\ Lives in: Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

> When I write songs in Slovenian, they come straight from the heart

Psychology or Law? Psychology, absolutely. This is my second bachelor's degree; I previously studied law in Slovenia. When I was a child, everyone always told me I should become a lawyer. I was very communicative, always eager to participate in class discussions, and I loved history and politics. Until I was bullied and excluded by my peers for about two years. That deeply shaped me as a person. The effects weren't visible right away, but towards the end of primary school, I began to notice signs of social anxiety. Because it went untreated and no one really understood what was going on, the anxiety slowly grew. When I started university, especially during Covid, everything seemed to pile up. I went through a very difficult episode of depression, ended an important romantic relationship, and my grandmother, who I was very close to, passed away. I felt like I needed to rebuild my life from the ground up, to take a completely new direction. Studying law wasn't making me happy. When I worked in different law firms, I felt unfulfilled. That's why I never pursued a Master's in law. Taking a gap year would've helped me a lot, but that's not really a thing in Slovenia. If I had taken that time to pause and breathe, I think I would have found my path to psychology much sooner.

First performance ever? It must've been a dance performance – I've been dancing since the day I could walk. I did jazz ballet and tap dancing, both performances and competitions. I also played piano and performed in music school. I quit dancing in secondary school so I could focus more on singing, and I don't regret that decision. I've just released my first EP as a singer-songwriter. It's called *Maja's 4 Seasons*, with four songs, each representing a season. But dance will always be a big part of me – it's shaped me as an artist. And who knows, perhaps I'll include it in my first album.

Do you prefer to write songs in English or Slovenian? Slovenian. That's when I can write straight from the heart. I collaborate with my boyfriend, who is a music producer and songwriter. We met when he heard one of my covers and reached out to collaborate. One thing led to another. We released a single two years ago – that was more his story, his song. The tracks on the new EP are based on my own experiences. The first two are a bit heavier, more ballad-like, which suits me; I tend to get inspired by intense emotions. But to challenge myself, I've also written two lighter, upbeat tracks, to be released in winter and spring.

I feel Slovenian when… I'm walking around Maastricht while recording a voice message. No one knows what I'm saying, so I can gossip freely about the people around me. [laughs]

Dream trip? I'm curious about any country that's far away and has a very different culture. And I don't want to be just a tourist, snapping photos of the highlights for Instagram without actually learning about the place. I'd like to stay somewhere longer, connecting with people more deeply through music or perhaps a spiritual community.

What do you look for in a partner? A source of calm. I'm quite neurotic and always on the go, so it's nice to have a boyfriend who can calm me down and is generally a bit more relaxed. I want someone who knows how to compromise, so the relationship feels equal. And I want someone who is passionate about something. I know people who aren't really enthusiastic about anything, which is so boring. Luckily, my boyfriend has all these qualities.

I make friends easily. Yes and no. I can be quite sensitive to other people's energies and tend to pick up negative vibes very quickly, perhaps a bit too quickly sometimes. Through therapy, I've learned techniques that help me stay more objective in social situations, so I don't take everything so literally or personally. At the same time, I think this sensitivity is also one of my strengths. It allows me to really understand people and feel what they're going through. With those I click with, I've built wonderful friendships based on complete mutual trust and support.

My sister and I are very close. My sister is eight years younger than me. When she was little, she copied everything I did. If I took up dance, she wanted to take up dance. It was cute, but I also found it annoying. Because of our age difference, I was quite bossy when we were younger, and eventually, she had enough of that. [Laughs] We don't see each other very often now; she's in her third year of secondary school and very busy, just like me. But if anything's going on with either of us, we know we can always turn to each other.

This is a book I keep rereading. I rarely reread books. I rewatch films and series, but once I've finished a book, that's it. That said, I would like to reread the classics we read in school, such as books from Slovenian novelists or Shakespeare's works. I didn't really absorb them back then.

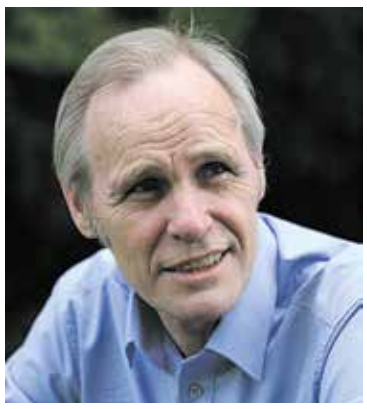
In ten years… I'll be a psychologist. I'm very interested in the psychology of addiction and substance use disorders, but I've only just started my studies, so who knows what might come next. I might end up combining law and psychology; I know we have an option to decide on that in our third year. I hope to release more albums and have time to perform, but I'll always continue to combine music with psychology. Music is my source of energy and my therapy, and psychology lets me help others.

Cleo Freriks

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Primatologist Carel van Schaik to deliver Tans Lecture on why humans fight each other

"We need to breathe and eat; we do not need to wage war"



Carel van Schaik
Photo: own collection

It is commonly believed that war is in our DNA: "Just look at human history." Carel van Schaik, professor and director of the Anthropological Institute at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, did just that. But he came to a very different conclusion – one that will be the subject of the annual Tans Lecture on 17 November.

"War, in one form or another, appeared with the first man. At the dawn of history, its morality was not questioned; it was simply a fact, like drought or disease", said Barack Obama when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. The then US president was voicing a popular belief, writes primatologist Carel van Schaik in the recently published book *Waarom we vrede willen, maar oorlog voeren [Why We Want Peace But Make War]* (Uitgeverij Balans, ISBN 978 94 63824 23 1): the idea that humanity is hardwired for war, and war is just a regrettable but inevitable fact of life.
For a long time, Van Schaik himself shared that belief, the Swiss-based professor admits during a Teams interview. That was until he began working on the book with historian Kai Michel and archaeologist Harald Meller. Together, they examined the history of *Homo sapiens* – the modern human species that evolved some 300,000 years ago – and arguments for the human propensity for war. What they found made Van Schaik change his mind.

No mass graves

"Take my own field", he says. "Chimpanzees are the only primates apart from humans that engage in group attacks on members of their own species. It was long thought that if our closest genetic relatives behave like that, then group violence must be in our nature too." But research on bonobos – genetically closely related to both chimpanzees and humans – has since flourished. And what did it reveal? "Bonobos rarely attack one another." In other words, our taste for war cannot be explained by our genes. "We need to breathe and eat. We do not need to wage war."
Moreover, Van Schaik points out, research on human violence tends to focus on the very tail end of our species' existence: the past 10,000 to 12,000 years, when humans began to settle and take up farming. But *Homo sapiens* is far older than that – and for almost the entirety of our history we lived as nomads, roaming in groups and surviving on what we could hunt and gather. According to Van Schaik, all the evidence suggests that these nomadic groups lived in relative peace, resolving conflicts by negotiating or simply moving on. "We're quite sure about this", he says, citing archaeological findings from the nomadic hunter-gatherer period. "Whatever we find, there are no mass graves, no evidence of defensive structures, no depictions of battle and no weapons buried with the dead" – all things you would expect if these groups engaged in warfare. "That's negative evidence", he admits, "but we also have positive evidence. Ethnographic research among Aboriginal peoples in Australia, for example, shows that nomadic hunter-gatherers hardly ever wage war against each other."

Defensive instinct

If armed conflict is not innate to human nature, why are today's headlines full of it? War, argues Van Schaik, is a cultural phenomenon that flourishes under certain conditions – and those conditions arose when humans began to settle and farm. "When we were nomads, encounters with other groups mainly served as opportunities to exchange partners, knowledge, tools. Researchers have found volcanic glass tools hundreds of kilometres from the source. Groups also had agreements to share food in hard times. But that no longer works once you settle somewhere and start stockpiling your own supplies. You no longer need to share with others, so you start defending what you have instead. That creates the conditions for war. And that's why, from that point on, we start finding evidence of mass graves and defensive structures. Once agriculture became productive enough to generate food surpluses, war could even become routine, because people could now afford to maintain soldiers. This is what we see in the first cities, which emerged 5,000 to 6,000 years ago."
Even then, he explains, war does not simply happen automatically. "People have a natural instinct to defend themselves", but attacking, let alone killing, members of our own species? "We're very reluctant to do that. There is such a thing as *Tötungshemmung*, an inhibition against killing. There's a reason why we say war is 'unleashed': that defensive instinct has to be overridden. Offensive wars have to be justified. Ordinary people must feel like they stand to gain something that outweighs the risk of dying in battle."
One notorious example of such manipulation is Adolf Hitler's speech after invading Poland. He claimed that Poles had attacked Germans: "He said they were just 'firing back'. In reality, the border incidents Hitler was referring to had been staged by the Germans." Van Schaik sighs. "Sadly, such manipulation is far from rare."

La Guerre, 'War', 1919. A painting by French artist Henri Rousseau ***Photo: Wikimedia/Musée d'Orsay***

"People have a natural instinct to defend themselves", but attacking, let alone killing, members of our own species? "We're very reluctant to do that"

Pacifism

Still, the book isn't a pessimistic one – quite the opposite, in fact. "We can strengthen the democratic institutions that protect peace, even when people's interests clash", Van Schaik says cheerfully. "A functioning democracy is unlikely to go to war with its neighbours. And we can prevent people from being manipulated by promoting free speech and a free press that exposes lies and fake news."
In that light, how does Van Schaik view politics in his native country [this interview took place just before the 2025 Dutch general election]? He chuckles. "The book deliberately steers clear of current events, so it won't date too quickly. Let's just say that any form of populism carries a potential risk of warmongering. But I don't see the Netherlands heading in that direction anytime soon. We're just a small country, after all, and our military isn't particularly strong."
Finally, do he and his co-authors ever get accused of naivety for arguing that war is not an inevitable part of human nature? He laughs again. "That's precisely what we tried to avoid by stating that defending yourself against attack is legitimate. Pacifism – a world where conflicts are resolved peacefully – is the goal, not the path to get there.""

Peter Doorakkers

“Saying goodbye to **our most advanced scanner** was a huge sacrifice”

In early 2013, cranes lifted a massive cylinder into the new neuroscience building on Oxfordlaan 55. The 9.4T scanner was the latest and most advanced of three fMRI machines capable of producing highly detailed images of the human body. At the time, it was only the fourth of its kind in the whole world. How did this state-of-the-art machine end up in Maastricht? And why was it retired earlier this year?

Text: **Cleo Freriks**

Illustrations: **Shutterstock**

It all started in 1998 when the research line (later department) cognitive neuroscience was established. The first researchers – Bernadette Jansma, Lisa Jonkman, Leo Blomert – are mainly focused on EEG-research (measuring brain activity through electrodes on a test person’s head). They want to extend the expertise to MRI and convince Rainer Goebel, a German professor of cognitive neuroscience, to come to Maastricht University in 2005.
He goes to work with a 3T scanner – the “T” stands for Tesla, the unit used to measure the strength of a magnetic field. The stronger the field, the more detailed the images.

Director

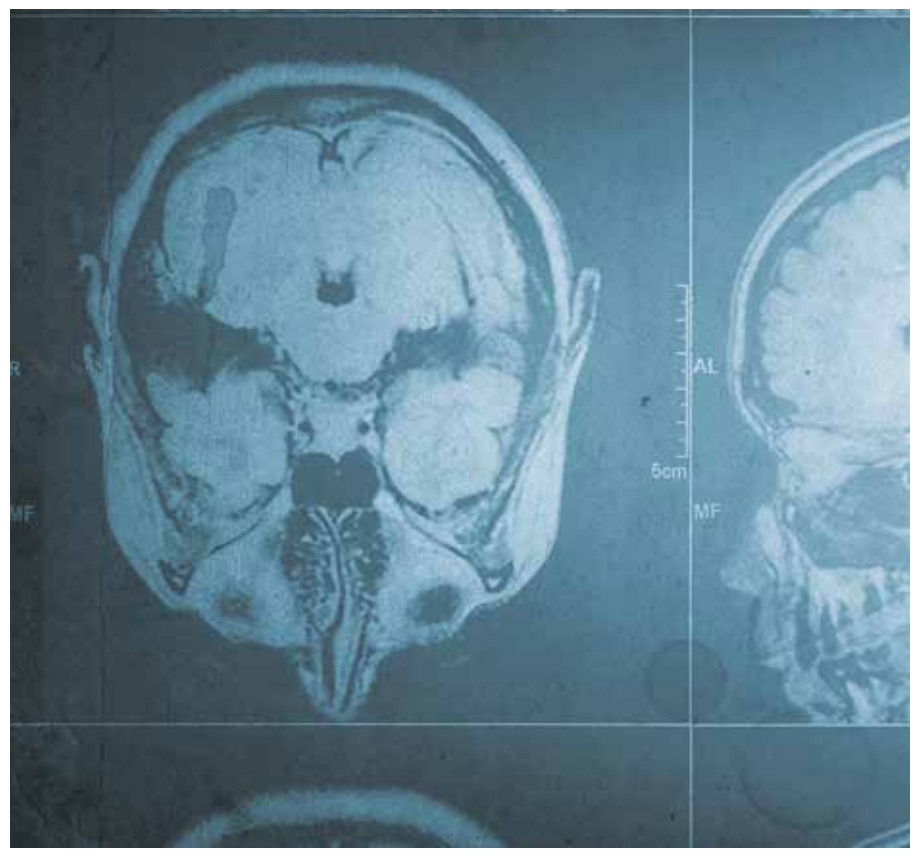
“I was very happy with that scanner”, Goebel recalls in his office. “But my interest shifted to parts of the cortex and layers of the brain you can’t see with a 3T scanner.” For context: the human cerebral cortex has an average thickness of 2.5-3 mm. A 3T scanner typically captures image slices of 2 mm, whereas a 9.4T scanner can achieve slices of 0.5 mm. “If, for example, you don’t just want to see *that* someone is talking in the brain’s language centres, but exactly what words are communicated, you need a more advanced scanner.”
So when Goebel was offered the role of director at the yet-to-be-built Spinoza Centre for Neuroimaging in Amsterdam, complete with a 7T scanner, he said yes. “It didn’t occur to me to ask whether the same could be done in Maastricht. It’s such a huge investment.”
But Jo Ritzen, the UM president at the time, surprised him. “When he heard I was leaving, he said, ‘If you stay, we won’t just bring a 7T scanner to UM – we’ll bring in something even better.’ It was a gamble – nothing was guaranteed – but I decided to stay.”

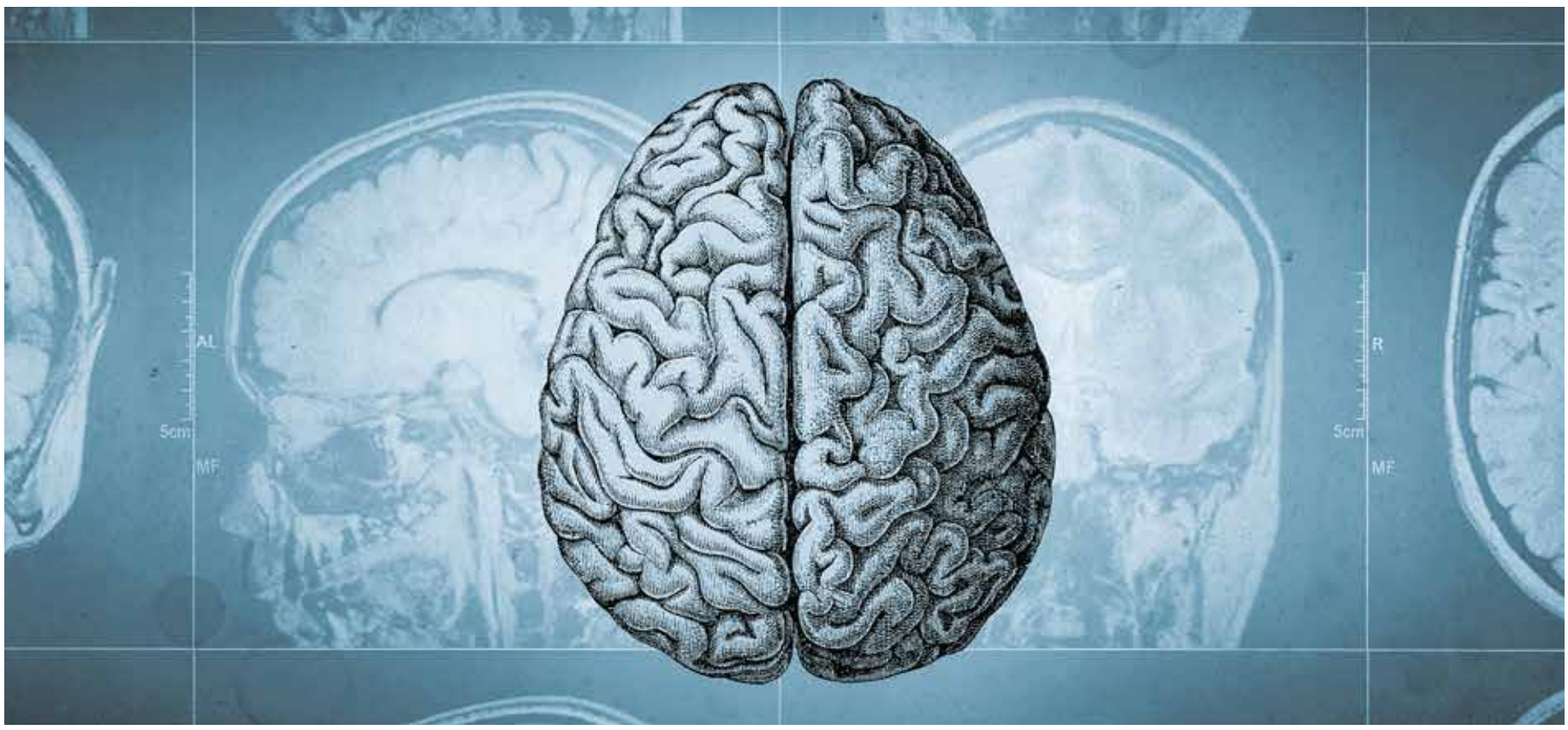
€45 million

It took Ritzen considerable effort to convince the rest of the Executive Board and the Supervisory Board. The three new scanners – a 3T, a 7T and a 9.4T, replacing the old 3T – and their new home, including offices for researchers in the same building, would end up costing €45 million, with UM investing €26 million. But Ritzen managed to get both boards and, later, the municipality, the province and the hospital on board. “It helped that I had already secured a European ERC Advanced Grant for research using an advanced scanner”, says Goebel. “It showed that the researchers would contribute financially as well.”
Together with Bernadette Jansma, the then dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN), Ritzen toured Europe “to see how others managed their scanner facilities”, Jansma recalls in a phone interview. They eventually decided to establish a limited company, now Scannexus. FPN, the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences and the Maastricht University Medical Centre+ each purchase a fixed number of scanning hours per year. The faculties partially ‘recoup’ these costs, as researchers pay for scanner use from their own research budgets.
Jansma was never very enthusiastic about this arrangement. “It meant that we, as researchers, had to pay VAT on our scanning hours – an additional 21 per cent. But it was apparently necessary for collaboration with Siemens [the manufacturer of the scanners] and to obtain certain grants. I accepted it; otherwise, we wouldn’t have got the scanners.”

Groundbreaking research

In October 2013, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands inaugurated the building, then called Brains Unlimited. Expectations were sky-high. “This could lead to a Nobel Prize”, claimed the then director of Siemens Healthcare.
Research grants quickly began to pour in at the Department of Cognitive Neuroscience. “Being able to state in our applications that we’d be using a 9.4T or 7T scanner in our study gave us an edge over other universities”, explains Goebel. This attracted talented researchers; the department grew rapidly from





ten to twenty people to the current number of about a hundred. “People like Elia Formisano, Bea de Gelder, Alard Roebroeck, Teresa Schuhmann and many others would likely not be here if it weren’t for the scanners.”
Groundbreaking research followed. “We were the first in the world to visualise letters that someone has in their mind’s eye. Participants imagine a letter of the alphabet, while in the 7T. Through their brain activity we can show which letter it is. We now work on translating this to a mobile, non-invasive device to enable communication with locked-in patients – people who are almost entirely unable to move, let alone speak. Using a simpler device was only possible because we first used a high-end scanner to study how the brain worked.”
New degree programmes were established: a research master’s in Cognitive Neuroscience and, since last year, a bachelor’s in Brain Science. “We’re very proud of that”, says Goebel. “It gives students the opportunity, early in their studies, to see research with scanners firsthand and draw conclusions by learning data analysis and modelling.”

Setbacks

But money remained an issue. Dean Jansma lobbied for FPN to be officially recognised as a STEM faculty by the Dutch government, as these receive more funding than humanities and social sciences faculties due to their expensive infrastructure such as laboratories and equipment. But the plan failed. Jansma’s successors cut back costs: they reduce FPN’s annual contribution to Scannexus and discontinue the master’s programme in Neuroeconomics, a collaboration with the School of Business and Economics.
A master’s programme for professionals, designed to bring in funding, never quite took off. “Our aim was to teach people who work with scanners at other universities or large companies how to use the equipment, but employers preferred in-house training”, explains Goebel.
Around 2017/2018, a number of physicists and computer scientists left UM, taking considerable expertise about the scanners with them. “We couldn’t offer them professorships”, says Jansma. “They stayed for quite a while, but there comes a point where people prioritise their own careers. It takes time to rebuild that expertise.”

Use

PhD students also struggled with the 9.4T scanner. “Think of it as a Formula One car”, says Goebel. “It’s high-end, but that also makes it highly sensitive. When something breaks – which happens regularly – repairs often take weeks or even months, when a part has to be shipped to the US. PhD students have tight deadlines, so I understand why they might opt for the 7T scanner, which has much less issues, instead.”
In 2023, FPN set up a fund to encourage researchers to make more use of the 7T and 9.4T scanners, as scanning hours frequently went unused. The fund had the desired effect: according to Goebel, about 70 per cent of the available hours were used in recent years. Other institutions also began using the scanners more. “MUMC+ uses the 7T to prepare for deep brain stimulation surgeries, where an electrode is put into the brain to affect brain activity, for instance in Parkinson’s patients. And FHML used the 9.4T for research on various types of cancer.”

Sacrifice

Even so, the Department of Cognitive Neuroscience itself proposed retiring the 9.4T scanner earlier this year. It was a huge sacrifice, says Goebel. “This scanner put UM neuroscience on the global map. If one of our research master’s students wants an internship at Oxford or Stanford, all I have to do is make a call. And if I’m in the US for work, I often get free access to other universities’ scanners. They know us and the reputation we’ve built thanks to this machine.”
But they had to be pragmatic about it, he says. In 2027 and 2028, the current scanners will be fully depreciated and due for replacement. “That’s another huge investment. The 9.4T scanner uses far more helium than newer scanners, even when idle, and the price of helium has skyrocketed in recent years. It’s also the most expensive machine to maintain. Retiring it three years earlier than planned saves us hundreds of thousands of euros – almost enough for a new 3T scanner. That’s why we suggested it to the Executive Board. It’s a hard pill to swallow, but it had the desired result: the university is developing plans to replace the 3T and 7T scanners.”

14T

In the meantime, Goebel and his colleagues aren’t resting on their laurels. A 14T scanner is currently being built in Nijmegen. “It’s intended for national use. Elia Formisano and I are on the grant application team, and about 20 per cent of the scanning time will go to UM. My focus will be on studying brain activity in layers and parts of the cortex at a fine-grained resolution of only a few hundred micromillimetre, to crack the code of the brain. Understanding how the brain ‘codes’ thoughts, mental images and emotions could help in treating conditions such as depression. This way, we can continue our work, but it remains a compromise. We’ll have to ask our researchers to travel to Nijmegen, for example.”

news

Complaints desk receives fewer complaints than expected

Students predominantly report intimidation by landlords

Over the last two years, fewer tenants than expected have submitted reports about their landlords to the municipal complaints desk. Students are the most likely to submit complaints. So far it has led to exactly one fine.

Since 1 January 2024, every municipality in the Netherlands is required to have a reporting office for 'landlords good practices' ('*goed verhuurderschap*'), so that tenants and those in search of housing can report landlords or letting agencies who don't follow the law of the same name, which deals with intimidation, discrimination and (exorbitant) costs. The municipality then has the power to enforce the law through warnings and fines, which can range up to tens of thousands of euros.

Fewer people than expected have made use of the office so far, said Timo Schouten, project leader for Huurteam Zuid-Limburg, which maintains the complaints desk for Maastricht and thirteen other municipalities in Limburg. "We assumed there would be an increase after the introduction of another new law, the Affordable Rent Act, which allowed tenants to report excessive rents from the start of the year, but that effect has been minimal. There are also often complaints that are not actually handled by this desk, such as noisy neighbours, pests, or leaks." A spokesperson for the municipality of Maastricht said that there had been 155 complaints so far this year, with 28 cases potentially involving the Landlords Good Practices Act.

Threaten

According to Schouten, students are the most likely to submit complaints. "It's usually about intimidation. For example, a landlord who threatens to end a tenancy agreement because the tenant wants to go to the authorities with a complaint about insufficient maintenance, or who shuts off the electricity or water to pressure a tenant into leaving. Another common complaint is landlords entering someone's room without permission. That's not permitted and can be quite intimidating. Only, it can be hard to prove; you'd have to already have a camera up. Although there are absolutely students who do that."

There are "only incidental" reports of discrimination. In itself remarkable, because an oft-heard complaint amongst students is that some landlords will only rent to a man, or only to a woman, or for example only to someone from the Netherlands or Germany. "If that is explicitly mentioned in the vacancy, then in principle, that is sufficient evidence of discrimination. But we can only deal with it if someone actually reports it."

Illustration: Simone Golob

Reimburse

It is up to the municipality how to tackle the complaints. "If it does lead to a fine, then the offence and the offender's name will both be listed on the municipality's website," said Schouten. That has only happened once so far (the fine is not listed, but it does say it involved a case of intimidation). A municipality spokesperson said that an attempt is first made to find a solution. In cases of excessive or unauthorised costs, they might call the landlord or agency and ask them to reimburse the costs. Only if that is unsuccessful it may actually lead to a fine.

Schouten has noticed the effects. "Think of brokerage fees, for example, sometimes up to €300, which some agencies in Maastricht charge for things like drafting tenancy agreements. That's not allowed. Since it has been reported a number of times, we have seen a decrease. The same with deposits, which should be a maximum of double the rent, but in the past, sometimes used to be significantly higher. That has more or less stopped now."

In addition, this summer, the municipality started 'proactively' investigating – so not triggered by complaints – things like exorbitant rents, the spokesperson said. Tenants at four of the 24 addresses investigated were found to be paying too much. In all those cases, the landlord made adjustments to avoid incurring a fine.

Dennis Vaendel