KEER OM VOOR NEDERLANDSE EDITIE

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY / VOLUME 46 / NOVEMBER 20, 2025 / Nr 11

# BILINGUAL

Dutch *and* English is preferred, but after years the language policy still hasn't been implemented everywhere P3

# FINAL YEAR

The last stretch of the degree. "Everybody has moments of doubt, that puts the mind at ease" P6-7

# RETIREMENT

Profs at FASoS are due to retire in coming years, opportunities for 'homegrown talent' to move up P5

# EXPERTISE

Review teacher policy at Law faculty, council is concerned about the quality of teaching P3

www.observantonline.nl observant-um observant_um @observant-um.bsky.social

editorial

# No gap in the paper

"How come applicants ask whether they can work from home two days a week during their first interview? You want to be a journalist, don't you? Then you have to be *at* the university, where it all happens," a fellow editor in chief remarked during a meeting of 'the Higher Education Media Circle'. We were talking about working from home. Someone wanted to know what the standard is (most editorial teams allow one day of working from home, at most, including *Observant*). The unanimous view was that it is healthy and beneficial, after all, to be around each other, *and* the people you are writing for.

Last Monday, editor of the week Deborah Blekkenhorst was just as anxious as I was about whether we would have enough to fill the paper – enough news articles, columns (one of our columnists had recently said goodbye to UM but had promised one last piece, what if he forgot...), and particularly, a centre spread? There is usually some 'larger' scientific article or background story for page 6-7, but now I felt we had a gap.

Riki Janssen, fellow editor and former editor in chief (who faced this same issue for years), had worked on an interview with a final-year student and wondered why we couldn't just use her article for the centre spread. "Sometimes you have to lower the bar a little, or you'll never make it," was her advice. But still, it's a story about one student, moreover, one of the three we will be following throughout the year, I argued.

By the end of the afternoon, after a few more conversations and some time for the idea to marinate, I was convinced. The article gives an insight into the life of a third-year Global Studies student, which many students will recognise. Problem solved. But what about the front page? We didn't really have a good picture or any ideas for an illustration. After some collaborative brainstorming, we decide to go for a typographical creation.

Paul Onkenhout, a journalist retiring from *De Volkskrant*, recently wrote about the good old days of newspaper offices and what all that "waffling" is good for. In his piece, he quoted a number of people. One quote struck a chord, and I couldn't agree more: no other profession "relies so heavily on cross-pollination, on simply being around other people" as journalism.

***Wendy Degens***

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

series the times they are (not) a changin'

# Resistance to "elite" UCM programme


***Photo: archive Observant***

## 2000–2002

"An elite programme", complained an Economics student when hearing about the plans to establish a University College in Maastricht at the turn of the millennium. "Those students will end up knowing a little bit about everything and nothing about anything", sneered another. A third interviewee furiously added that "they want to poach the best lecturers from the faculties" at the expense of existing programmes.

The first plans for University College Maastricht (UCM) date back to the late 1990s. Rector Arie Nieuwenhuijzen Kruseman and founding fathers Louis Boon and Louk de la Rive Box envisioned a liberal arts college – Utrecht had introduced the concept in the Netherlands in 1998 – where motivated students could design their own curriculums, meet up in a common room after class and build an intellectual community with their lecturers. They were to become genuine academics.

At first, deans at UM were enthusiastic. ("Who could object to this on intellectual grounds?")

But their support quickly faded when they realised that they would have to supply UCM with not only their best lecturers, but also a large chunk of its funding – between €500,000 and €700,000 per faculty. For the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, there was an additional concern: Dean Tummers warned that the new programme might lure away prospective FASoS students.

The local student union NSEM said it was unfair that only UCM students would receive a broad education. In an opinion piece in *Observant*, they argued that existing degree programmes had become "impoverished" and the whole university ought to operate like a University College.

Still, interest in the upcoming programme was encouraging: 84 prospective students attended the Open Days in late 2001. The aim was to attract 100 students in the first year, rising to a maximum of 150 in subsequent years. But enrolment was supposed to open on 1 December 2001, and as little as two weeks beforehand, the University Council and the deans had yet to give the green light.

The deans were the first to give in, once it became clear they wouldn't have to dip into their own budgets after all. For the first few years, UCM would be funded from a central pot originally intended to fund additional research across the faculties. Executive Board member Anne Flierman put it simply: "No one will have to pay any money – they'll just receive a bit less of it."

The final hurdle was the University Council. In a chaotic November meeting, the university rector turned up the heat: if the Council didn't give its approval, the entire proposal would be shelved – and that, it was implied, would be the Council's fault. After three adjournments, a reluctant "yes" was secured, allowing UCM to go ahead. Decisions on funding, representation and tuition fees would follow in December.

Just before Christmas, the University Council gave its approval – though there was still grumbling about using research funds, and strong opposition to higher tuition fees (which had been built into the budget from 2005 onwards). Raising tuition fees, it was argued, would increase inequality and restrict access to higher education.

In September 2002, 75 first-year students began their studies at Bouillonstraat 8-10. The University Council remained critical in those early years. It opposed the Binding Study Advice (BSA) policy, which Dean Louis Boon – much to the Council's annoyance – referred to as "preventive culling" (a joke, he said later). Boon hit back: "So far, the University Council has done nothing but get in the way whenever UCM is involved."

> "Those students will end up knowing a little bit about everything and nothing about anything"

The popularity of the programme was unaffected by any of this. Student numbers rose rapidly; UCM soon outgrew its premises and moved to its current home on Zwingelput. It went on to gain two sister programmes in Limburg – the Maastricht Science Programme and University College Venlo – and continues to earn top ratings and accolades in the Dutch University Guide *Keuzegids* to this day.

***Riki Janssen***

*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

Law Faculty Council raises concerns over plans for new lecturers to teach more broadly

# “We already have tutors who don’t know everything and fall back on generic answers”

***Entry-level teaching staff (“Lecturer 4”) at the Faculty of Law will no longer be assigned to specific departments but instead to a central research institute of the faculty, allowing them to teach in other fields than their own. This plan has been put forward by the Faculty Board. Members of the Faculty Council, however, fear that the quality of teaching will suffer as a result.***

Since October 2024, the Faculty of Law has renewed very few fixed-term contracts and hired fewer Lecturer-4 staff to keep the budget in good shape. The Faculty Board now sees this as an opportunity to overhaul policies for this category of teaching staff. Currently, these typically young, early-career academics are assigned to a specific department and teach almost exclusively in their own field. But as busy teaching periods alternate with quieter ones, they sometimes struggle to make their hours. Career prospects also vary between departments, leaving this group uncertain and vulnerable, according to the Faculty Board.

The plan is to assign new lecturers – on fixed-term, four-year contracts – to the Maastricht Institute for Legal Education (MILE), which will provide them with training and support. They would then be deployed centrally and, above all, flexibly. The Faculty Board says it aims to create a “flexible layer” of around ten lecturers. “This will allow us to handle busy teaching periods more effectively, provide stability and better prepare lecturers for the future”, explained Dean Jan Smits at the most recent Faculty Council meeting.

Student members in particular expressed concerns about the consequences of requiring lecturers to teach subjects outside their expertise. “We already have tutors who don’t always know everything and fall back on generic answers”, one remarked. “The best classes are taught by people working in their own field. With a good tutor, you take more risks and learn more. You feel safer speaking to someone who knows what they’re talking about; you feel more comfortable asking questions and going deeper into the material.”

Academic staff representative Nora Vissers agreed. “When I teach in my own field, I know when student discussions are heading in the right direction and when I need to intervene. That’s what you want in Problem-Based Learning.”

Speaking a few days after the meeting, Smits explains he does not share these concerns. “Busy and quieter departments already sometimes exchange lecturers – people with different areas of expertise.”

Council members also questioned whether the new situation will actually improve career prospects. Academic staff representative Anna de Jong wondered aloud if the faculty would still be an attractive employer. “If I’m specialised in a particular field, and I couldn’t be sure I’d be able to teach it here because I’d be part of a flexible pool, I wouldn’t want to work here.”

Vissers asked how lecturers themselves feel about the plans. “Have there been any conversations with them? Have they been asked for input? Or has the decision already been made?”

“No”, Smits says when asked. “We’ll be putting together a group of lecturers who already work flexibly, along with a few lecturers from specific departments. We want to find out what matters to them when it comes to their position in the faculty. The findings will, of course, be shared with the Faculty Council.”

The issue will be discussed again at the next Faculty Council meeting on 4 December.

***Deborah Blekkenhorst***

Bilingual university: everyone should be able to get by in Dutch and English

# Language policy still far from fully implemented after seven years

***Although the bilingual language policy was adopted in 2018, it has yet to be implemented across the university. The Faculties of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN), Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) and the School of Business and Economics (SBE) have yet to start implementing it, as have the ICT Service Centre, Facility Services and Finance.***

Maastricht University is officially bilingual, which means that all staff should be able to get by in both Dutch and English. The required level of proficiency depends on their role, ranging from intermediate B1 in both English and Dutch to advanced C1 for staff with teaching responsibilities. Courses are available to help everyone brush up on their language skills. For example, international students can take an introductory course in Social Dutch, while their Dutch peers can attend a workshop on academic writing in Dutch.

The policy was adopted in 2018, but implementation was delayed by the December 2019 cyber-attack and the Covid pandemic. It has been extended several times, most recently in October 2024 due to uncertainty surrounding government decisions on the Internationalisation in Balance Act (WIB) and related language regulations.

Seven years on, many staff members who need language training still haven’t taken a course. This became apparent during a meeting of the University Council’s Strategy Committee in early November. The Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the

*Continued on page 8*


***Illustration: Shutterstock***

## column

# Farewell to my second home

“

Twelve years ago, in the summer of 2013, I arrived in the Netherlands without knowing that this country would become such a profound part of my life. Today, as I return to Spain, I write my final column for the *Observant* with immense gratitude and a touch of melancholy.

The Netherlands welcomed me with open arms. From the very beginning, I felt truly included. Dutch society, with its deep-rooted values of openness, tolerance, and pragmatism, made it easy for someone like me to find a home here. I was struck by how naturally diversity was accepted and even cherished in daily life: in classrooms, offices, cafés, and neighborhoods.

This cosmopolitan spirit is one of the greatest strengths of Dutch life. It is what has made Dutch universities among the most international and forward-thinking in the world. It is what has allowed companies based here to thrive globally. It is what made Maastricht, with its unique European character, feel like a tiny yet incredibly diverse microcosm.

But I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge certain concerns I feel as I leave. In recent years, political voices have grown louder that seek to redefine what it means to be Dutch in narrower, more exclusionary terms. They speak of a supposed homogeneity, a mythical past of cultural purity, as if the richness of Dutch society today were not the result of centuries of exchange, migration, and openness. I confess, I still don’t know what this “true Dutch identity” is supposed to be, but I do know that the Netherlands I fell in love with is anything but closed or uniform.

Despite these troubling currents, I remain hopeful. I have seen too much kindness, too much solidarity, too much curiosity and courage in the people I’ve met here to believe that the tide cannot be turned. I trust that the Netherlands will remember what made it strong in the first place: diversity is a feature, not a bug.

From Spain, I will continue to watch, cheer, and care. The Netherlands is no longer just a place on the map for me, it is a second home, one that will always occupy a special place in my heart. Thank you for twelve unforgettable years.

”

***Pablo del Hierro***
***was associate professor of history***

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


*Photo: Joey Roberts*

> In Namibia I found myself again

**Dogs or cats?** Dogs, without question. I grew up with our dog Socke, an Australian Shepherd. I can't remember a time without him. He passed away last year at the age of seventeen. I've never been much of a cat person – they're too self-willed for me. They jump onto your bed, curl up and then get cross when you get under the covers yourself. Dogs are much friendlier.

**My roots are in…** Germany, but Namibia feels like my second home. I first went there when I was eight, in 2013, when my sister – who's ten years older than me – was volunteering in a children's shelter. When she was due to return home, my parents set up an NGO from Germany, a non-profit organisation supporting education projects and food programmes for children in Namibia. I go back every year; I even lived there for a few months, teaching ten- and eleven-year-olds. I always feel at ease there. It's where I find inner peace and know all the special spots. My sister never left, by the way; she married a Namibian man, and they have a son, my wonderful nephew Lio.

**Maastricht was a deliberate choice for me.** Despite my love for Namibia, I didn't want to go to university there. Not just because of its poor education system, but also because the country is a refuge for me – a place where I go to unwind, not to study. I briefly considered South Africa, but my father insisted I take a look at Maastricht. He studied here for a short while as an exchange student, and he still loves the city. So do I.

**Being twenty isn't easy.** You have to learn to deal with society's expectations – the assumption that, after secondary school, you'll go straight to university. But the truth is that everyone moves at their own pace. I took two gap years myself. When you're twenty, you're still allowed to learn and make mistakes. It's fine to fall out of step or end up on a different path; you can always find your way back. That becomes harder as you get older, although there are plenty of people in their thirties who still have no idea where they're headed. They just have more money. [laughs] My parents gave me a lot of freedom. They've always told me I have plenty of potential and encouraged me to go out there and figure out what I wanted.

**What makes you angry?** There are so many people, including politicians, who just say whatever comes to mind without thinking. They just blurt out things, for example about migrants and the negative impact they supposedly have on society. It's like they don't realise the impact their words can have. I find that really problematic.

**What would you change about yourself?** I never stop thinking. I'd like to switch off sometimes. I always want to keep everyone happy and worry about everything: my family, my friends, their problems, which I then try to solve. It's annoying and sometimes exhausting.

**I'm afraid of…** spiders, but they aren't my biggest fear. I'm afraid of missing out – not on parties or other social events, but life in general. I want to make the most of it, not just sit passively on the sidelines. When I was sixteen, I became depressed. I could no longer enjoy life the way I wanted to. I was a cheerful child; my father used to say I lit up the room when I walked in. I danced my way through life. But the last years of secondary school were tough. I did so many things I didn't want to do, trying to fit into the ideal of the hard-working pupil. I put a lot of pressure on myself and came close to quitting school just before my final exams. My parents would have supported me either way – they just wanted me to be happy again. In the end I sat the exams, and after two years I started to feel better, thanks in part to my time in Namibia. It was there, free from outside pressure, that I found myself again.

**What's the most attractive quality in a partner?** I don't think I could pick just one. It's about a mix of important qualities: trust, support, empathy. And a good partner definitely isn't selfish. I don't take anything for granted – life is too short to settle for less.

**Would you rather be rich or famous?** Rich. If you have money, you can change things and help people who need it. When I was younger, I wanted to be an actress, but the older I got, the more I realised how nice it is not to live in the spotlight. If you're famous, people are always judging you. With money, you can do good while staying under the radar.

**What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?** Nothing. Failure isn't a bad thing; it's part of the journey. My grandparents always told me that what matters most is doing your best. That's what counts, not the outcome. But if I had to answer this question, perhaps I'd become the actress I once dreamt of being.

***Deborah Blekkenhorst***

*Weekly personal interview with a student or employee*

Faculty faces wave of retirements in coming years

# FASoS prefers investing in homegrown talent over hiring new professors

Almost a third of the professors at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) are due to retire in the coming years. Not all of them will automatically be replaced by new professors 'from outside' – to create opportunities for existing staff, but also for financial reasons.

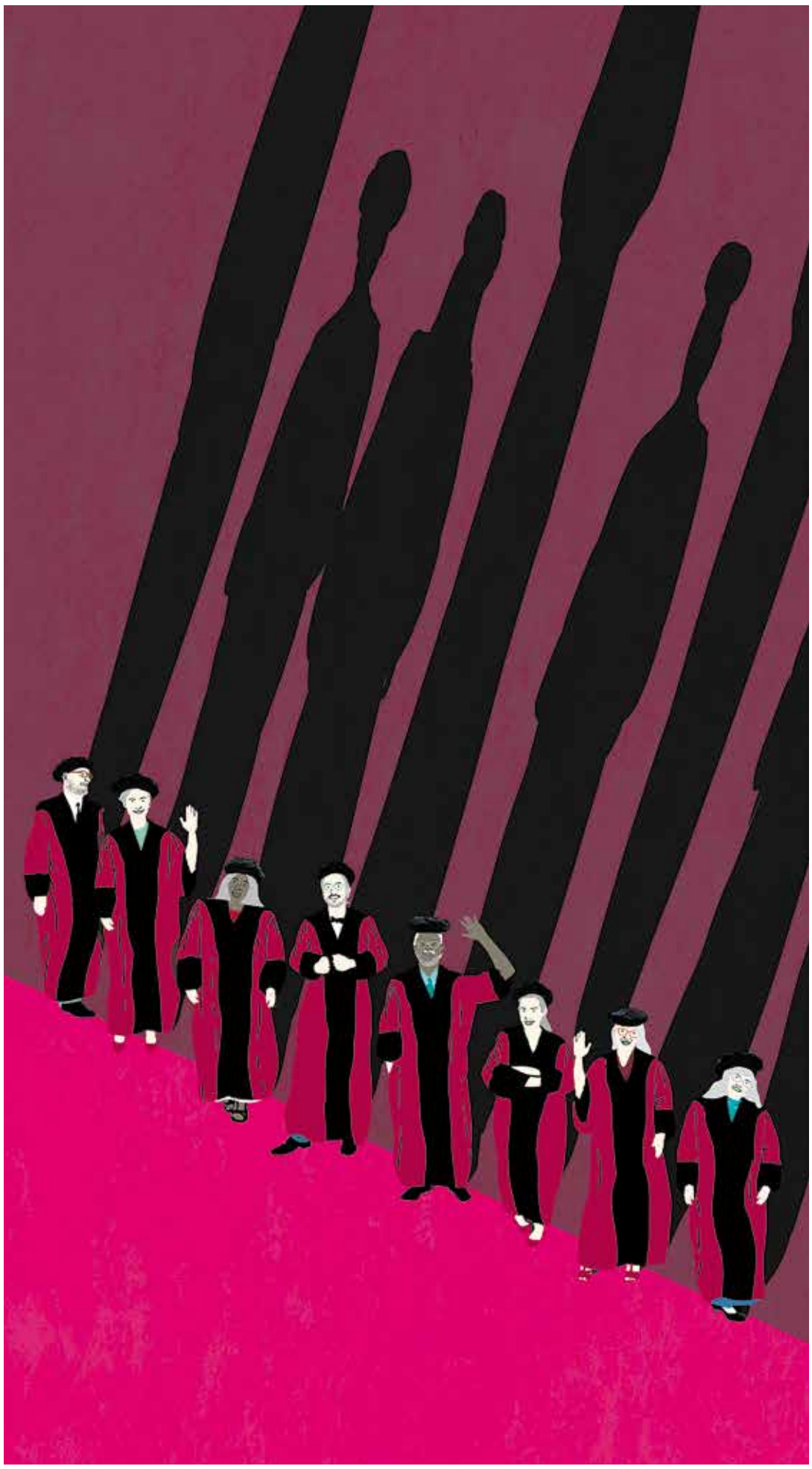

*Illustration: Simone Golob*

The faculty, which celebrated its thirtieth anniversary last year, currently has 21 'regular' professors and seven endowed professors. By 2030, nine of them will have retired. How will FASoS handle this? Not by immediately filling every vacancy with a new professor, says Dean Christine Neuhold.

New professors will only be hired if it's "really necessary", she explains. "For example, if there's no one else who can lead a research group, or if we need someone from outside with a large network. They must also be a good fit. We want people with the FASoS DNA: able and willing to take an interdisciplinary approach, open-minded and multilingual."

## Move up

The faculty prefers to look for internal candidates, adds Neuhold. "We want to invest in our existing staff. There are so many driven researchers here – people at the peak of their careers who fit our culture. They deserve the chance to move up. If we don't create opportunities for them, they'll go elsewhere, and that would be a real loss." Not replacing 'expensive' professors one-for-one frees up the necessary funds for this. "It will allow us to take on more assistant professors and to help existing staff eventually advance to professorship positions. This will also help us improve gender balance, for example, and nurture our own talent."

Government cuts and political uncertainty also factor into the equation. "We don't want to spend the entire available budget and leave nothing for the next Faculty Board. Every two years, as a board we review our situation to determine whether we can afford to spend more or need to cut back."

## Shift focus

Will the approach also allow the faculty to make strategic choices and shift its academic focus? "Certainly", says Neuhold. Among other things, consideration is being given to more emphasis on themes such as "diversity and inclusion, sustainability and security."

Does that mean certain areas of expertise will be lost? "That's hard to say right now, but it is something we're aware of. Take the expertise in the history of medicine and psychiatry we have lost in recent years. You can try to cover that creatively with researchers taking an interdisciplinary approach, looking at it from not just a historical but also an anthropological or philosophical perspective. But sometimes you just conclude that you can't preserve everything."

*"We want to invest in our existing staff. There are so many driven researchers here"*

The Faculty Board will soon meet with all department heads to discuss replacement plans for retiring professors. "The situation varies widely between departments. Some won't see anyone retire for a while, whereas others will lose several professors. Each department has proposed its own approach, and we're now looking into what's feasible within the budget."

Finally, Neuhold stresses that FASoS does not intend to reduce its total number of professors in the long term. "We're keeping an eye on that. We've followed this strategy since I became dean in 2020." Since then, six professors have retired, while eight staff members have eventually advanced to professorship positions.

*Dennis Vaendel*

# THE FINAL YEAR

## "MY FAMILY HAS ACCEPTED THAT I WON'T BE LIVING

*"I enjoy discovering new things all the time, the course had to be interesting. Yeah, maybe I am easily bored, I certainly don't like drudgery"*

# DOWN THE STREET FROM THEM”

Just some final revision and then it’s time to put the books on the shelf (for now) and hang the diploma on the wall. *Observant* will follow a few students during the final year of their degree. What are their plans for the future? And is the last stretch the toughest? This time: third-year Global Studies student **Nour Rigo**.

“Everyone sounds so smart, seems to know so much about so many things.” The Belgian Nour Rigo was impressed by her fellow students more than once during the first six months of her Global Studies degree. It gave her some doubts, did she know enough? Was her English good enough? How was she supposed to catch up on all this?
But that all changed when she moved to student accommodation in her second semester. “I wanted to live by myself, wanted the full student experience. I wasn’t involved with student life at all in those first six months; after class, I would leave more or less straightaway and head back home just over the border in Zichen-Zussen-Bolder.” She ended up in student housing in the city centre, enjoyed having her “own little household”, experienced the freedom and the responsibility that comes with living on your own (“you’re the only one to blame if you don’t do any laundry for a week”), and made friends. “Lots of people from the course, very international.” While talking to others, she learnt that everybody has moments of doubt. That put her mind at ease.

## HOPE AND POSITIVITY

Nour Rigo is a quarter Italian, hence the surname. “My grandfather comes from a place near Venice, he moved to Belgium to work in the mines, but he and my grandmother quickly took over her parents’ café in the village. My father was born there. My mother is from Maastricht.”
Her first name? She laughs, “When my mother was pregnant, my parents heard an opera singer in the car. That was Nour. It’s an Arabic name and means ‘light’, it symbolises hope and positivity; they liked it.”
After secondary school, she wanted to study a broad degree. “I enjoy discovering new things all the time, the course had to be interesting. Yeah, maybe I am easily bored, I certainly don’t like drudgery.” She went to an open day in Leuven and Maastricht, where her mother once studied psychology. There, she heard about problem-based learning, which she enjoyed. “In Belgium, you’re just a number in a large lecture hall. There are two exam periods, for which you have to spend a month revising hard. You have to learn a lot by heart and literally be able to replicate it. Here, you have to think critically, and you can voice your own opinions during discussions in the seminars.”
She chose Global Studies because she felt that was an “even broader” option than European Studies, for example. Is it as broad as she thought? “Yes, we tackle problems from all around the world. This term we are looking at peace and justice and places like Sudan, Congo, Palestine, and the United States. You learn a lot about the history, about international relations.”

## KHMER ROUGE

Nour felt she made the right choice back in her first year. She had thought she might discover where her heart truly lies and that the right Master’s programme would reveal itself. “But it’s not that simple. I thought it would be easier to cross things off the list. For example, we focused on law for a whole semester, and initially I thought I wouldn’t enjoy that at all, but I really did! Or, take economics. I did economics and languages at secondary school and thought I would have had enough by now. But that was also fascinating.”
And then there are the guest lectures, where speakers are invited to talk about subjects she knows very little about. “Niyalic Khun made a movie about life after the Khmer Rouge’s reign of terror in Cambodia: *Three legs in the Evening*. His story was impressive. I’ve found that I enjoy discovering stories that aren’t always shown on the news, such as migrants’ personal stories. They are an easily accessible way to show a big group how the world works, regardless of whether they’re on screen or on paper.”

## PARIS

That last one in particular led her to a two-year Master’s programme in International Relations and Journalism. “In Paris. A double Master’s degree, where you study journalism *and* international relations. It’s a whole process to get in: you have to have a 7.8 average, write a letter of motivation and provide letters of recommendation.” So that is what she will be doing shortly.
It’s no hardship for her to have to move to Paris for two years. Although at the moment, she does still go home every weekend because she works at a brasserie in Zichen-Zussen-Bolder. She laughs, “Paris will be good for my French, even though the course is in English. My family has accepted that I won’t be living down the street from them. I don’t really need to work in Belgium or the Netherlands, either. I love travelling, adventure. I’m very curious. My maternal grandfather worked on a ship, he was in the United States a lot. My father used to be a tour guide in America, my mother climbed Kilimanjaro after she graduated, my older brother (eighteen years older) used to work on a yacht and travelled around the world that way. I went backpacking round Thailand for six weeks over the summer. Yes, alone. It was my second solo trip. Two years ago, I spent a fortnight travelling to Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm by train. I really enjoyed myself. Before that, I was afraid to approach people; not really shy, I just left the ball in their court. This time I had to, and it helped me greatly. I’m much more confident socially. It’s not always fun at the start. On that first trip, I would very quickly turn to a book or my phone to hide away. Later on, I was less likely to look for distraction. This year, in Thailand, I felt much more at ease, I enjoyed meeting people – which is very easy to do when you’re alone and staying in hostels – but I also didn’t mind just being on my own. Discovering my passions and thinking about what I really want.”

*In this irregular series, Observant follows a few students during the final year of their degree; this academic year, we will interview them on three separate occasions.*

**TEXT:** RIKI JANSSEN

**PHOTO:** ELLEN OOSTERHOF

news

# Not losing jobs


*Photo: Shutterstock*

*Continuation from page 3*

University Library and the Maastricht University Office have completed implementation, and the Student Services Centre is close to completing it. But at the relatively international Faculty of Science and Engineering, not a single staff member has taken a Dutch language course (staff *are* taking English courses), and the implementation process has yet to start at SBE, FPN and FHML. SBE has twice requested postponement, first due to uncertainty about government budget cuts and later because of the development of its strategic plan.

Janosch Prinz, an academic staff representative on the University Council, was surprised to hear that not all faculties have a plan in place. UM President Rianne Letschert responded that FHML is working on one, including a deadline for when the policy must be implemented.

"What happens if a staff member doesn't meet the requirements?" asked Donna Yates, another academic staff representative. Could they be dismissed? Staff reportedly fear losing their jobs. Letschert was quick to put these concerns to rest: "They will not be dismissed." UM is currently working on a new language policy, which is expected to be finalised by the end of 2026 and come into effect in January 2027.

***Riki Janssen***