

# observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY / VOLUME 46 / DECEMBER 4, 2025 / Nr 13

## Researchers and citizens come together over chips with mayo

Watches that track heart rate or sleep quality?  
"There is such a thing as knowing too much", they agree

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## Eighty students after ten years: is University College Venlo viable at all?

"It's an important cog in a larger machine. For the university, it's very important to have a presence in that area"

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This is the last printed Observant of 2025.  
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Illustration: Freepik



## editorial

## What do you want to be when you grow up?

“What would you rather do, make berry jam or organise your wardrobe?” When I was in secondary school, I remember being given a list of questions by a counsellor in either fourth or fifth year that was supposed to help with your options for further education. There were thirty or forty questions, in my mind they were all along the same lines: jam or wardrobe, design a bridge or change a tyre, manage supermarket staff or study bird nests. None of it felt right.

My eldest son is currently in this exploration phase, and while I’m pleased to say he knows more about higher education than I did in the nineties – and his school is actually pretty good at this whole career guidance lark – he still has his doubts. Thank goodness, there is at least a top three, but any interesting documentary, trip to a museum, or visit to a courthouse is likely to change that in the blink of an eye. He doesn’t yet know what will make him truly happy, or what he’s good at. I don’t blame him. Sixteen years is far too little life experience to really know that. The portrait of the final-year student in this edition – master’s student of European Studies, Marek Wittenberg – is an excellent look at how ‘bumpy’ that road can be. Neither journalism nor law were the right fit, he studied a higher professional degree in European Studies, then started working, before finally deciding to go to university after all.

I decided to check in with some colleagues. What did they want to be when they were little? “Writer or news reader”, “playwright, but before that I wanted to be a motorbike cop”, “no idea” (the most common response).

And given what they know now, would they have chosen a different degree at the time? “Yes!” The three who studied journalism would, in hindsight, have chosen something different. History, psychology, or a University College. You can learn to write later, they said. The only exception is the astronomer in our midst, who would apply to Leiden again in a heartbeat.

I’m not sure. Arts and social sciences have brought me so much, but I like the sound of medicine (I’d just need to learn to cope with the sight of blood), psychology, or the Rock Academy, where they teach you to sing and dance professionally. That last one sparks my imagination. Of course, reality is far less appealing. It reminds me of what Cleo Freriks said, having once considered studying archaeology before quickly realising: “Digging up the umpteenth iron spearhead in the Netherlands? Braving the cold, the rain, and the wind? No, thanks!”

Wendy Degens

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



## series the times they are (not) a changin’

# Bye-bye Zwarte Piet



Photo: Philip Driessen

50 Years of UM:  
The Times They Are  
(Not) A Changin’

## 2010

A knock at the office door, a flurry of commotion and sweets scattered through the air. But startled staff were quickly reassured – there was nothing to fear. They were on the nice list that year, so a merry band of Zwarte Pieten had come to deliver a small gift. Usually accompanied by Gerard Mols, rector from 2003 to 2012 (who never dressed as Sinterklaas), they turned up in early December with everything from USB sticks bearing the university logo to Sudoku books or chocolate letters. In 2004, they handed out blue umbrellas – the university’s colour – printed with “Maastricht weer de beste”, a nod to yet another high ranking in the Dutch university guide *Keuzegids*. Professor of General and Dutch Literature Wiel Kusters, the university poet, contributed a verse to the accompanying letter from the Executive Board:

“UM is rather baffled  
By all the praise it’s had  
And hands out gifts to everyone  
Just in case things might turn bad.  
For when complaints begin to rain,  
You’ll be glad of this umbrella again.”

It was the early 2000s. Zwarte Piet was not yet considered a controversial issue at UM. On the contrary, the small group of staff members dressed in colourful costumes, their faces painted black, was given a warm welcome in university buildings in the years *Observant* reported on it. It was uncomplicated fun – with

the classic threat that anyone who’d been naughty that year would get a one-way trip to Spain.

The tradition was retired in 2010, wrote *Observant*, after the Secretary’s Office of the Executive Board could no longer organise it. Around the same time, the nationwide debate around Sinterklaas’s helpers grew increasingly heated. In 2014 the activist group Kick Out Zwarte Piet publicly denounced the stereotypical and racist character, while supporters insisted Zwarte Piet was a harmless, child-friendly folkloric figure.

The debate polarised the country, but in Maastricht, things remained fairly quiet for a while. That changed in early 2020, when Maastricht Students Against Zwarte Piet presented a petition to the Executive Board. Then-rector Rianne Letschert only promised that the university would warn international students

## In the early 2000s, Zwarte Piet was not yet considered a controversial issue at UM

that they might encounter Zwarte Pieten in the city during the Sinterklaas season. She also made it clear that Pieten would no longer appear inside university buildings.

But a few months later, on 10 June 2020, the Executive Board issued a statement leaving no room for doubt: Zwarte Piet is a racist character with no place in UM’s diverse and inclusive environment. Bye-bye Zwarte Piet.

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

## Maastricht to keep cum laude for PhDs

## “Keep hallmark for excellent research”

*It was recently revealed that the University of Twente will no longer award cum laude to PhD defences: the criteria are not always clear and research shows that they are awarded disproportionately more to men than to women. Maastricht University has chosen to retain the opportunity to obtain one's doctoral degree 'with honours' for now.*

“We want to keep it as a hallmark of excellent research,” senior policy adviser for research Serge Mordang said in response to questions. ‘We’ here refers to the college of deans, which, according to Mordang, recently discussed the news from Twente. Every year, about 5 per cent of doctoral candidates graduates cum laude at UM. That is in line with a national guideline that is also set out in the Maastricht graduation regulations. The distinction is intended for PhD theses which the assessment committee and the supervisor consider among the best

research in a particular field. Included in the decision is what the PhD thesis contributes to the field, what its impact is and whether the approach used was creative. If the defence is also good enough, and two independent experts and the graduation committee agree, then the latter can award the PhD thesis cum laude.

Over the last calendar year, that has happened seven times at Maastricht, in previous years, “a few more”, said Mordang. He cannot comment any further, including about the number of men versus women. The numbers are currently being compiled and will first be sent to the deans for discussion. The question whether there may be a gender bias when assessing PhD theses has “not yet been discussed in detail”. Should that be the case, “then that will of course be discussed”.

In 2023, at least, the numbers appeared to be balanced. In the five years prior, 63 people were

awarded cum laude at Maastricht, *Observant* reported at the time: 34 men and 29 women. Although Mordang now says it should be noted that “we generally have more female candidates than male candidates”. The proportion nationally is different, as shown in research by Thijs Bol, sociologist at the University of Amsterdam: men were awarded cum laude for their PhD thesis nearly twice as often as women.

When asked about the other point of criticism, the objectivity (or lack thereof) of the criteria, Mordang stated that aspects such as creativity and innovation are hard to express in grades. It is effectively a peer review. “The way to safeguard the quality is by ensuring as many independent experts as possible consider the work worthy of honours. In itself, not that strange, because that is how academic articles are also assessed.”

Peter Doorackers

## No reorganisation, no redundancies

## Maastricht University Office set for overhaul

*The various units that make up the Maastricht University Office (MUO) too often operate in isolation. Many are unaware of what the others are doing, partly because they vary widely in nature and scope, and they do not work together as a matter of course. This needs to change, which is why MUO's organisational structure is being revised. The ultimate aim is to provide the university administration with better support and advice.*

This is not a reorganisation, stresses Nieke Guillory, secretary to the Executive Board; no one will be made redundant. But units – and in some cases staff – will be moved around, new units will be established, and People & Development (formerly HR) will move out of MUO. The revamped central office will focus on “strategy, policy, advice and leadership support. We’re hardly involved in day-to-day implementation.”

The group leaving MUO will become an “expertise centre”. The current service centres – including the Student Services Centre (SSC), the University Library and Facilities – will also be called expertise centres as of early next year. “It better reflects their role of sharing as well as facilitating knowledge and expertise. The current name only highlights the service aspect, but they also have a lot of policy and advisory tasks.”

New units will also be introduced: the Sustainability Office, the International Office and a team dedicated to risk and safety management. “Our current approach is too fragmented. We’re coming at it from too many disciplines – finance, social safety, information management. We need a more coordinated approach to identifying risks, analysing how they affect each other and what actions we should take.”

The overhaul has been given careful consideration. Guillory consulted the Executive Board, directors and MUO management to identify strengths, weaknesses and needs, met with the Employees’ Council and analysed how other universities have organised their central offices. She also spoke with MUO’s roughly three hundred employees. They pointed out

that their building on Minderbroedersberg is overcrowded yet full of “walls and closed doors”, hindering collaboration. “People often don’t know if a colleague is in, if they can drop in on each other. A small team is now working with an external company to explore ways to improve the design of the building. We’re

still in the vision stage, but a partial renovation is one of the options being considered.” The changes are expected to be completed by February 2026. From then on, MUO will also carry a new name: General Executive Affairs.

Riki Janssen

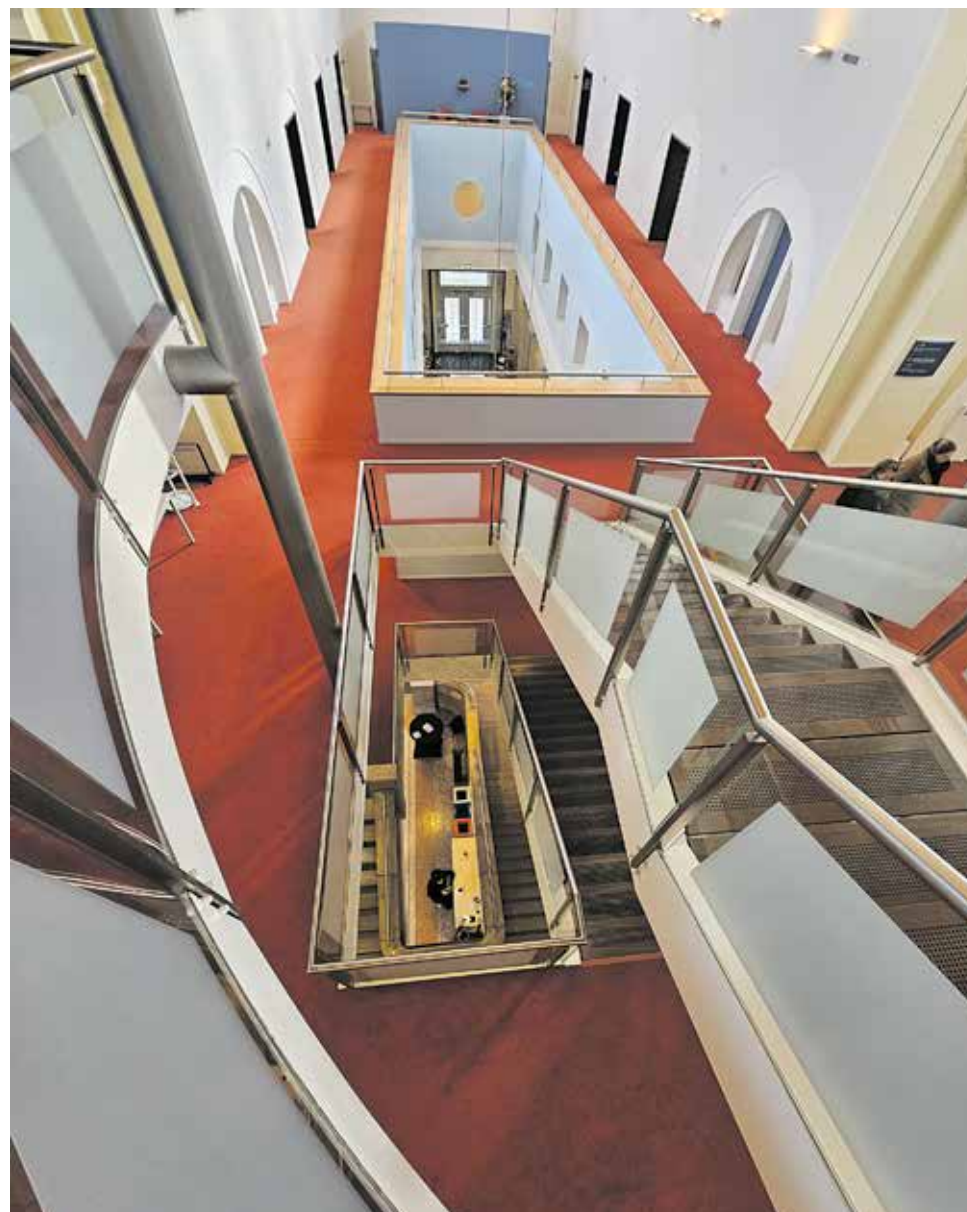


Photo: Observant

## column



## Sinterklaas knows

“

The season of gift giving is upon us. For Dutch people, ‘parcels evening’ is coming up, under the direction of an old bishop who spends most of the year in Spain. Together with his surveillance team (brightly dressed people, all named Piet), he keeps track of how we’ve all been behaving and what we might like as gifts in his ‘Big Book’.

I’ll be celebrating Sinterklaas this year with my partner’s Dutch family. We’ve drawn lots to determine for whom we have to buy a gift and write a poem.

I find the poem difficult, not so much because of the Dutch but the often somewhat teasing tone is hard to get right. The ten-year old has, like Luther, nailed her list of possible gifts to a door. Book tokens and bottles of wine might simply be circulated amongst the ten adults.

Gift giving plays a role in academic life. I’ve received book tokens, chocolate, bottles of wine and bunches of flowers. I appreciate them all, but wine and flowers are difficult to transport if I’m about to get on a plane, and only have hand luggage. Socks with pictures of Erasmus were given to me after a lecture at the university bearing his name.

These were re-gifted to my philosopher partner who is not embarrassed to wear such socks in public.

There is also the gift exchange that we call peer review or taking part in PhD committees. We don’t get paid for this, nor is it accounted for in the grand reckoning of how much teaching and administration we do. We do it because it’s important for maintaining academic quality, and because other people review our articles and book manuscripts. If you submit an article to a journal, you really should feel obliged to write three anonymous peer review reports for other journals. Similarly, if you call on five people to serve on the committee of your PhD candidate, then you need to reciprocate. Some people don’t do this, instead they prioritise their own research and writing at the expense of collegiality. But Sinterklaas knows.

”

Sally Wyatt,  
professor of Digital Cultures

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



Ben Dew  
(Luxembourg City,  
Luxembourg, 2003)

\ Second-year bachelor's  
student of European  
Studies, vice-chair of the  
Latino Society Maastricht

\ Relationship status:  
been in a relationship  
for 5 years

\ Lives in:  
Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“

“That year in Argentina ended  
my dream of becoming a professional  
polo player”

”

**As a child I was...** rather serious. I always wanted to sit at the grown-up table, was very alert, and always felt a great sense of responsibility for everything. My parents say I was already like that as a baby, I almost never played with toys. The funny thing is, my brother, who is two years younger than me, is very relaxed, likes to have fun. That went well together. Any time I wanted to stay safely tucked up at home, he would drag me outside to do something fun. Take me out of my comfort zone. We've always been great friends, never argued – even our parents thought that was strange. I don't see him as much now, because he's studying in Barcelona. I miss him. Thankfully, we speak on the phone often and make the most of the times we do meet up.

**I feel British.** Not really, although my parents are from the United Kingdom and I have a very strong English accent. But when I visit family there, it always feels like a holiday, not like home. I would never want to live there, especially after Brexit. Honestly, I feel more Luxembourgish, as I was born and raised there – my parents met there and have lived there ever since. It's a very international place, over half the population is foreign. Lots of people leave again eventually. I also grew up with the idea that I would live in another country later.

**It has always been my dream to...** be a professional polo player. I've been playing since I was eight years

old. A friend of my dad's took me to the only polo club in Luxembourg at the time. There were only eight players in the whole country. I'd always been quite bad at sports, but I was good at this from the start. I loved the speed of the horses and got addicted to the game. After secondary school, I left for Argentina – the place for polo – as a semi-professional player. I had a five-year deal with a sponsor – you need several horses, which is really expensive – and started university at the same time. That didn't work. Polo takes a lot of time and discipline, you can spend up to 10-12 hours a day training, looking after your horses, mucking out the stables. I soon fell behind in my studies. After a year, I quit. It was the end of my dream of being a professional player, but in a good way. *Needing* to win a match feels very different to *wanting* to win a match. Now, I only play polo when I visit my parents, but I hope to pick it up again later, as a hobby.

**Favourite band?** Arctic Monkeys. They're from the same part of England where my mum grew up. The accent, the words they use, it's so familiar. And I love rock, I was raised on rock. Our parents often took us to gigs. And there was always music playing, at home, in the car, we even shared headphones on walks. It's a habit that stuck with me, I still listen to music all the time.

**I like to surround myself with Latinos.** The people at the polo club in Luxembourg, where I used

to spend all my time, were almost exclusively Argentinian. I started speaking Spanish too, it's become my second language. I even started feeling a bit Argentinian. That's why, when I came to Maastricht, I joined the society for Latin-American students, the Latino Society, formerly Mi Casa Tu Casa. I like getting to know more Latinos and working on my Spanish. When I said I'd like to take on a role on the board, I did get a few odd looks. 'Aren't you British?' But I think it's very important that people are introduced to other cultures. Maastricht is very international, but you do see that students stick to their own nationality bubbles, their own countrymen. That's why we also organise events in English, everyone is welcome here.

**City or nature?** I'm a real city person. When I left Argentina, I knew straightaway that I wanted to come to Maastricht. My girlfriend, who I've known since secondary school, was already at university here, and I had visited her a few times. It feels unique here. Very relaxed, safe, open, international. Not too many distractions but still enough to do. I just think it's a little too flat here, and yes, Dutch people are very surprised when I say that. But I love hiking along steep paths. We regularly head to the Ardennes to do that now, I see it as a break from city life.

**My partner's best characteristic.** My girlfriend is very caring and involved, which I really appreciate. If you share something with her, she takes it very seriously, she'll never just tell you to 'get over it'. She's very passionate in everything she does. I'm the same. Sure, sometimes that clashes, but it does help us understand each other in how we think and why we do the things we do.

**In ten years...** I hope we'll be living in Argentina. That's my dream, and thankfully, my girlfriend likes the idea too. Maybe I'll work for the EU, something in international relations with South America. I love both continents, and that way I can help both of them with my ideas. I don't really care if I earn a lot of money either. The most important thing is to be happy. I think they understand that much better in South America than here.

Dennis Vaendel

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

## Researchers and locals foster mutual understanding at 'Chips Talk'

# The snack bar as a neutral meeting place

Chatting about health over plates of chips with mayonnaise and glasses of cola – it may sound somewhat contradictory, but it's exactly what around 25 UM researchers, health workers and local residents did last week in the Heugem neighbourhood. The aim: to foster mutual understanding.

"I'm pretty sure I can smell them already!" A conversation about digital healthcare is briefly interrupted as the smell of frying oil drifts through De Oude Harmoniezaal in Heugem. The door to Snacktaria St. Michel, at the front of the building, is open, and trays of chips and other snacks soon begin to arrive.

The mood is light, even if the topics aren't. In the past hour, plenty of concerns have come up. From booking hospital appointments online and video-calling nurses to smart devices and sensors taking over tasks from GPs or home care workers, almost everyone present has some experience with digital healthcare – and many are wary of it. Is human interaction disappearing from healthcare altogether? How do artificial intelligence (AI) and big tech companies use our medical data? And then there are the practical issues, an older participant points out: "I'm scared to even scan a QR code because I'm afraid I'll do something wrong."

Tonight is all about talking through those fears and concerns, explains Rowan Smeets, researcher at Maastricht University's Living Lab for Sustainable Care (AWDZ). She leads the project *Ik snap je zorg* ("I Care About Your Concerns"), a collaboration between UM, citizen participation organisation Burgerkracht Limburg and communications agency Zuiderlicht, launched last year with funding from the Dutch Research Council (NWO). "The aim is to bring research and society into closer contact and connection."

The subject of healthcare is particularly suited to this, says Smeets. "Everyone needs it at some point, and there are a lot of people who only engage with research when it affects their daily lives. Other than that practical aspect, they're not so much interested in science – they think it's too complicated or see universities as ivory towers."

The project aims to reach exactly those people. And you can't do that by organising meetings in university buildings or hospitals, explains Smeets. "You need to go into the community." That's why they meet at a snack bar – a neutral place, frequented by professors and binmen alike. "And with pubs, churches and community centres disappearing from neighbourhoods, the chip shop tends to be one of the few places left where neighbours really run into each other. Sure, most of the food isn't healthy, but health isn't just about what you eat. It's also about social contact and connection."

Chips Talk is the result. Tonight is the second of four editions. "We keep the groups fairly small so everyone gets a chance to speak. It works both ways – it's very useful for researchers and health workers to understand the challenges people face."

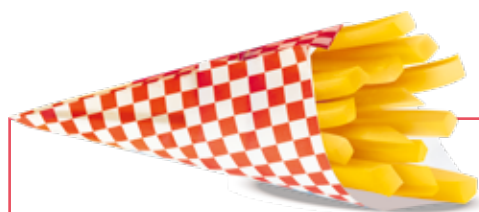
You never quite know how it'll go, says Smeets. "There is immense pressure on healthcare. It's an emotional subject. At our first edition in Kerkrade earlier this year, one participant spoke very sharply at first. I thought, 'Where is this going?' But then it became clear the approach works – mutual understanding was reached."

Tonight seems no different. Participants quickly agree that smart devices, like watches that track heart rate or sleep quality, don't always add value. "There is such a thing as knowing too much", says one local. "My wife sometimes wakes up feeling well rested, but if the watch says otherwise, she starts worrying." One of the researchers concurs. "There's a common saying: 'If you don't take your temperature, you don't have a fever.' What's important is how you feel. There are even nappies that measure protein in pee; that's information you really don't need, except maybe if you have serious kidney problems. Health workers should feel more comfortable pointing that out."

The fear of losing the human touch in healthcare sparks more discussion. Vending machines for prescriptions, digital scales or blood pressure monitors that automatically send readings to your GP to remove the need for appointments... "But a computer can't tell from my face if I'm sad", says one participant. Another adds, "Some people need genuine contact – a brief chat to get things off their chest."

It's a paradox, says one of the researchers. "We actually want to use technology to free up more time for personal contact. This is essential. Staff shortages are already a huge problem, and in forty years, one in three people in the Netherlands will have to work in healthcare." And it needs to be done with care, stresses another researcher. "We're not just putting AI everywhere – only after careful consideration, when and where it makes sense."

*"A lot of people only engage with research when it affects their daily lives"*



### More connections

Bringing research and society into closer contact is also the aim of the Citizen Science Matchmaking Event, organised by UM at Monday December 15 in Theater aan het Vrijthof. According to the organisers, the event is "a combination of a science fair and speed-dating, designed to connect research projects with citizen volunteers". The topics vary from financial literacy to AI and Maastricht history. Registration via the UM website.

Dennis Vaendel



Researchers and locals coming together over chips in Heugem Photo: Joey Roberts

## series the final year

# “I WAS A LITTLE BIT DONE WITH THE RAND- STAD”



Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

Just some final revision and then it's time to put the books on the shelf 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: European Studies Master's student Marek Wittenberg.

“Are you sure?” It was a question 25-year-old Marek Wittenberg from Dordrecht was asked more than once when he announced he would be quitting his job at DutchCulture, an organisation that stimulates international cultural exchanges, to embark on a Master's degree. Many of his friends were delighted to finally leave the school rooms behind. “But I was actually really looking forward to it.”

It's not the first degree he has attempted. As a fresh-faced secondary school graduate, he chose a higher professional education (HBO) degree in Law. “I once ended up talking to some friends who were talking about studying Law – they were unaware that I wanted to study Law at the time. They said, it's always people who don't know what they want to do, and I thought, ‘but that's me!’” After a few months, he quit. “I had little in common with the rest of the group. I was just 16, the next youngest was 23. In the end, I thought we spent too much time talking about little problems, things I thought you could solve without involving a judge.”

#### RACING THROUGH

His next choice was Journalism at Tilburg. “My father, brother and sister are all journalists.” But the programme didn't really match his interests. “I knew I wanted to focus on written journalism, but we also had to learn about television and radio. And there wasn't enough of a focus on how to write a good article and too much about how to get people to click on your article.”

Third time's the charm. After a gap year, he decided to do a HBO Bachelor's in European Studies in The Hague. “My first year was during Covid and that worked out well for me. I'm easily distracted, but there was nothing else for me to do then, so I raced through the course. I also enjoyed the content of the course, especially in the first two years, and the people were great. I was far from the oldest one there, a number of fellow students had already done a degree or had a job.”

#### SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

In third year, he took part in an exchange to Lithuania. “I wanted to go to a country I hadn't been on holiday to.” It was fantastic. “I was constantly surprised, by the people, by the customs, by how cold it was – just before I left, it was -28 degrees Celsius, although it does sometimes feel colder in the Netherlands – and by how little sun they get.”

What made the greatest impression on him was the level of support for Ukraine, and how much Russia is hated. “It ended up being the topic

of every conversation, even when it wasn't initially. There was a huge banner on one of the buildings that said ‘Putin, The Hague is waiting for you’; it had been hung there by the government. The destination on every bus was listed as ‘Ukraine’ and you could only tell where the bus was actually going by looking at the number.”

#### DEPTH

Once he returned home, he finished his degree and found a job in Amsterdam, but the desire to learn never really left him. “My Bachelor's was incredibly broad, so I started to wonder exactly what I could do now. I would have loved to do a Master's that focuses on European culture, which I find an underexplored subject when it comes to the European Union, but there's no such programme in the Netherlands. Instead I chose European Studies at Maastricht, which is focused more on political studies.”

It also meant moving from Rotterdam to a new city. “That was part of the appeal. I was a little bit done with the Randstad. I looked forward to a type of socialisation that I hadn't needed there, because I already knew enough people. And I knew this would be one last chance to enjoy the spontaneity of student friendships. Yesterday, someone asked me if I fancied coming over in fifteen minutes to watch some football, you can't do that if you've all got jobs.”

#### PROTESTS

He's also looking forward to working on his thesis. “During my Bachelor's, I put it off as long as possible, but now I really want to get started. I want to talk about how the democratic right to protest has been hollowed out over the last few years in Germany. I was inspired by a pro-Palestinian protest I saw when I was in Berlin over the summer. There were about 250 protestors and 400 police officers. I found out that protestors are bound by all sorts of rules and looked into it further. There's a whole list of things you aren't allowed to do, such as drumming because that makes too much noise. Whereas the whole point of a protest is to draw attention.”

Cleo Freriks

*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.*

Why University College Venlo is so important, even with only eighty students

# “A SMALL COG IN A LARGER MACHINE”

In previous years, University College Venlo (UCV) sat proudly near the top of the list of the best programmes in the Keuzegids, the Dutch university guide. Students were full of praise for the programme, lecturers, assessments and atmosphere. This year, Venlo is still doing well, but is no longer at the top. It is also a different picture financially, because the cost of the programme is higher than its income. At the moment, there are eighty students in total. Which begs the question, why does the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) continue to support an unprofitable degree programme?

## SMALL-SCALE

Neither dean Thomas Cleij nor director Bakir Bulić would consider closing down UCV, not for a moment. Not even considering the disappointing number of new students. Eighteen students is a “minimum”, says Cleij, but UCV should not be seen as a “stand alone” institution, he considers it “an important cog in a larger machine”. UCV started in 2015, following in the footsteps of its older sister, University College Maastricht (UCM): taught in English, small-scale, and with the freedom to organise your own programme. The difference lies mostly in its themes, with Venlo opting for health and nutrition in its

University College Venlo is ten years old. A milestone for, thus far, the only bachelor’s programme in the north of Limburg. However, the number of students is in sharp decline: fewer than twenty students started there in September. Is the programme still viable? “We shouldn’t look at UCV in isolation. It is about more than just a sum of parts, it is very important for the university to have a presence in that area.”

liberal arts curriculum. While UCM and the Maastricht Science Programme (the third branch of the Colleges system) usually attract two hundred first years, Venlo welcomes far fewer. Last September was a low point with only eighteen new students, previous years had hovered around thirty or forty. 2021 was a record year for UCV’s student population: 147 students in total.

Cleij: “There was a tremendous recruitment drive in the first few years, and after a while, it was thought to be enough. We never managed to attract hundreds of students, but they were an enthusiastic group, a nice community, pre-

dominantly international students, who often moved on to the two UM master’s programmes in Venlo (which have been there since 2009, see box page 8).” The political climate of the last few years has meant that universities were more reluctant to recruit international students. And, says Cleij, that also meant that a programme such as UCV was unable to reach as many interested prospective students.

## SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

It was important for UM to establish a presence in the area, says Bulić. “It is a region with much to offer in terms of sustainable agriculture and

food innovation.” Millions have been invested in buildings, labs, and research groups (see box page 8) by the university, the municipality of Venlo, and province administration. Although it was always Cleij and Bulić’s desire to offer more programmes in Venlo alongside UCV, that was no easy task. They would have liked to be able to offer the bachelor’s programme Sustainable Bioscience and the master’s programme Crop Biotechnology and Engineering (set to start in September 2026) two years earlier. Unfortunately, the Commit-

*To be continued on page 8*



Illustration: Freepik

## background

### “IN A FEW YEARS, VENLO WILL ATTRACT OVER A 1000 STUDENTS”

Continuation from page 7

tee for Effective Higher Education (CDHO), which advises the Minister of Education, was convinced in an earlier stage that the two programmes would not sufficiently fill a demand in the labour market, and that there was too much overlap between the proposed master’s programme and an existing degree programme at Wageningen University. Wageningen University raised their objections with the Committee, but were ultimately unsuccessful.

#### BY BUS

Cleij calls the addition of Sustainable Bioscience and Crop Biotechnology and Engineering “a huge development”. He is convinced that in just a few years, Venlo will attract over a thousand students. A large proportion will live on the Brightlands campus, where construction of student accommodation will begin shortly. There are, however, still other logistical challenges. Bus routes between the campus and the city centre have been limited (for years) – the bus only goes once an hour. FSE directors would like that to change. The new Sustainable Bioscience students who will soon be present on campus will occasionally need to head to UCV in the centre of Venlo for classes. In turn, UCV students will need to travel to Brightlands to use the labs.

#### BUILDING

Cleij and Bulić are in no doubt about the value of the Brightlands campuses outside Maastricht (Sittard-Geleen, Heerlen, Venlo). “If we were to ignore the different regions in the province, things would look very different for UM, especially considering the recent political climate,” says Cleij. “It is part of FSE’s DNA to want to build, to experiment.” And yet, pioneering brings risks, too. They depend on external funding, such as the province or the municipalities. Not to mention, it takes time to build a presence (just look at the number of students in Venlo), and then there is the lack of structural university support. In Maastricht, there is one cleaning crew for all the university buildings, one Wi-Fi system, student psycholo-



Illustration: Simone Golob

gists, security, reception services, library support, and so forth. The campuses have to organise all that ‘by themselves’. President of the Executive Board, Rianne Letschert, and vice-president Jan-Tjitte Meindersma stated clearly in an article in *Observant* last year, that there would be no cuts to the campuses. In an interview about potential austerity measures at UM as a result of the plans of the government at the time, Letschert said: “Our lobby (in The Hague) is about UM as the ‘European university of the Netherlands’, but also about embedding the university in the region.”

Wendy Degens

### WHAT IS HAPPENING IN VENLO?

#### Education

From September 2026, students wishing to study at Maastricht University in Venlo can choose from the following options:

- University College Venlo (FSE, bachelor)
- Sustainable Bioscience (FSE, starting September 2026, bachelor)
- Global Supply Chain Management and Change (School of Business and Economics, master)
- Health Food Innovation Management (Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, master)
- Crop Biotechnology and Engineering (FSE and Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, starting September 2026, master).

The new programmes will all be located at the Greenport Venlo Brightlands campus.

#### Research

The campus is a combination of education, research and entrepreneurship. UM has a high-tech greenhouse complex for research into sustainable vegetable production systems and plant genetics, the Brightlands Future Farming Institute. The campus is also home to the System Earth Science research group and the Food Claims Center Venlo, which focuses on nutrition and food law. There are also plans for a robotics lab for agritech (e.g., automating greenhouses, autonomous growth aimed at providing for a plant’s individual needs using sensors).

**PODCAST**  
**OBSERVANT**

THE AUDIO SIDEKICK OF MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY’S WEEKLY, in which we keep you up to date on interesting facts, special features, and news about the university and student life.

THE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY, FACULTIES, SERVICE CENTRES AND STUDENT ORGANISATIONS CAN BE FOUND ON **OBSERVANTONLINE.NL**

**Agenda academic ceremonies**

Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

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