

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY / VOLUME 46 / JANUARY 8, 2026 / Nr 14

EXAMS
!!!

I HAVE TO DO
EVERYTHING
PERFECTLY

DON'T
FORGET:
PAY RENT!

MENTAL HEALTH: STUDENTS ARE STRUGGLING

“It took weeks to recover. And when I had to go back for my second year, all I felt was stress”

P. 6-7-8



NOBODY
UNDERSTANDS
ME...

RECOGNITION & REWARDS

“Many things are subjective and related to a ‘club’ of mostly older, white full professors who decide who gets a promotion based on who they like”

P. 3

CYBERCRIMINALS

How Maastricht researchers help the police to track them down

P. 5



editorial

Stress

I have a confession to make. On 11 December, you should have been able to pick up a copy of *Observant* 14, the last edition before the Christmas holidays. That wasn't possible. We ended the year with number 13, on 4 December. You probably hadn't even noticed. At some point in November, we decided, somewhat impulsively, to only publish articles online for most of December. Anyone in the (newspaper) journalism industry knows that deadlines and 'stress' are just part of the job. In November, the pause button for *Observant* – available to us on 18 December, as that's when our Christmas break began – seemed *very* far away. We were counting down, three papers, two papers... Surely that couldn't be right? An exhausted team spending half their break feeling unwell (because as we all know, exhaustion only truly 'manifests' itself when you're not at work)?

Just skipping that one physical newspaper would alleviate a lot of pressure. It's not a decision we made out of convenience, we weren't simply resting on our laurels. Rather, we worked ahead, writing articles for January, and we still needed articles to maintain an interesting website and for our weekly newsletter. President of the university Rianne Letschert was appointed to an important role in forming the government, and the MUMC published a scathing report on social safety in the workplace. News we obviously wanted to share.

But we also realised that it's alright to only include eight or nine articles in the newsletter, instead of ten. For many organisations, always being available is a general, albeit unwritten, rule, diaries are chock-full of appointments, and performance is always on display and open to comparison. On the one hand, a top level performance is expected, while in the meantime, systems that consistently exhaust people are maintained, Joost van der Weide, Professor of social innovation and the Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, wrote in an editorial in *de Volkskrant* on 22 December. I was fascinated by his words. Coincidentally, we are working on an interview – initiated by the Maastricht Young Academy – with two young researchers about their work-life balance, workload, and how they manage to keep their lives running smoothly. Or take this week's centre spread about students struggling with mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and fear of failure. People who don't know how to keep their heads afloat in a world that is unrelenting in its forward march.

Although Van der Weide said it's good for people to learn to cope with stress, there is no point if you don't tackle the causes of that stress, he wrote. So that is what we did: tackled one cause of stress. I can't promise it won't happen again in 2026.

On behalf of the *Observant* team, I wish you a happy, healthy new year!

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 eyes of the world are on the Maastricht burger



Image: Still YouTube video

2013

Nearly the entire world press gathering for a presentation by a researcher from Maastricht – not an everyday occurrence. Nonetheless, professor Mark Post managed it on Monday, 5 August 2013, by unveiling the world's first lab-grown hamburger.

A tad dry, according to the two food experts sitting behind a table alongside Mark Post. But it tastes unmistakably of meat, they add. In front of the cameras of hundreds of journalists, from the *BBC* to *CNN* to Chinese state media, they have just cut into an incredibly expensive lab-grown hamburger that a chef just has cooked for them on stage. "Grown in three months, faster than any cow," assures Post. Millions of people bulletins around the world watch the scenes in news later that day. A true media spectacle, putting Maastricht in the spotlight. Although not because the concept of lab-grown meat was developed here. At the end of the last century, Dutch doctor and researcher Willem van Eelen was already working on the idea of growing meat in a lab from stem cells, without any animals actually ending up on the chopping block. Not only would it prevent animal suffering, it's also more eco-friendly: it takes less energy and farmland, and causes less CO2 emissions. In a future where meat consumption is set to continue increasing, that can only be a good thing. At the turn of the 21st century, researchers at the universities of Amsterdam, Utrecht and Eindhoven prove that, in principle, Van Eelen's idea is feasible. But then the money dries up: the government wants businesses to invest in the research, but nobody seems interested. UM professor of Vascular Physiology, Mark Post, thinks a publicity stunt might raise some interest. Initially, he suggests to cook the first sausage made of lab-grown meat on television, "on Pauw & Witteman [a Dutch talk show], next to the still-living pig [which donated the stem cells]," he told *de Volkskrant* in 2011. That does not happen, but an anonymous donor reaches out and offers to invest several hundred thousand euros. An American, so the sausage becomes a hamburger. It turns out later that the anonymous donor is Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google. The money is enough for Post and his lab technicians to

grow enough muscle tissue to form three hamburger patties. At a price of about 250,000 euros each. Incidentally, the very first hamburger isn't eaten in front of the world press in London at all, but months earlier, as a test, by Post and one of his colleagues in Maastricht.

After 'London', the physiologist is heaped with praise, although there is also criticism: some people say he's a researcher with a flair for the dramatic, raising expectations he can't possibly meet, and who is taking all the credit. Yet, Post's overwhelming feeling is of "incredible satisfaction", he tells *Observant* a month later. His fears that it would be "mocked so badly as to sink the entire enterprise" were unfounded. Other than the occasional accusation of 'Frankenburger', there is no real negativity, and even the backlash Post had been expecting from the meat industry is minimal. The Maastricht Executive Board – which even just the week before the presentation had voiced concerns of possible reputation damage to the university – sent a bottle of champagne to the professor's house.

And possibly most importantly, the media spectacle does lead to more interest and funding. The founder of Google, Brin donates more money to the project, and his example is echoed in the following years by a number of

In front of the cameras of hundreds of journalists they have just cut into an incredibly expensive lab-grown hamburger

other big names, including Leonardo DiCaprio. In 2015, Post becomes co-founder of the company Mosa Meat, which aims to scale up the production of so-called cultivated meat, including a pilot plant.

Ten years later, cultivated meat is still not yet available for purchase on the European market, and Mosa Meat is certainly not the only company seeking to make that happen. So when will we be able to take our own bite of a 'Maastricht' burger? Nobody really knows. "Ten years, twenty years, two years (...), it's all just nonsense. There's nothing to say about it yet," Post told *Observant* back in 2013. The only thing we know for sure is that since 5 August 2013, Maastricht has been indelibly linked to the history of cultivated meat.

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

Maastricht Young Academy publishes critical report on Recognition & Rewards

Lack of transparency and unclear career paths

The Recognition & Rewards programme has so far had little impact on the careers of many academics at Maastricht University, according to a study by the Maastricht Young Academy (MYA) among over one hundred respondents. There is a lack of transparency regarding assessment criteria and uncertainty about career paths. Various respondents point out that the programme has not yet put an end to academic nepotism.

Respondents are familiar with the Recognition & Rewards (R&R) programme. They fully support its underlying idea – less emphasis on academic publications and grant acquisition, and more recognition of other factors such as teaching, leadership, contributions to team science and social impact. But that’s about as far as the positive feedback goes. “The problem isn’t with the programme itself, but with the implementation by the faculties”, adds Costas Papadopoulos, speaking to *Observant*. He is an associate professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) and chair of the MYA Recognition & Rewards group, which conducted the quantitative and qualitative research.

Older, white professors

The report highlights concerns about transparency and fairness in the assessment pro-

cess, as there are no clear assessment criteria. According to an assistant professor at the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE), “There is nothing specifically discussed as to what will be recognised and, more importantly, how precisely ‘good’ academic labour will be rewarded.” A FASoS faculty member adds, “Unfortunately, the R&R initiative appears to make it easier for the friends of Faculty Board members and department chairs to get promoted. The rest of the colleagues struggle.” And according to a lecturer at the School of Business and Economics, “Many things are subjective and related to a ‘club’ of mostly older, white full professors who decide who gets a promotion based on who they like.” Although R&R aims to diversify academic career paths, respondents feel the focus is still overwhelmingly on research and teaching – the former in particular.

Mindset

Moreover, the R&R programme has led to more forms and documentation, increasing individual academics’ workloads. Implementation also varies greatly from one faculty to another. “Each faculty applies the criteria in its own way”, according to Papadopoulos. Another point of criticism is that managers often lack the necessary knowledge to assess employees. According to an FSE faculty

member, there is “misalignment at various levels about implementation”. A Law faculty member states, “It’s a bad joke. My line manager is younger than I am at the faculty. He knows nothing about R&R.” As Papadopoulos explains, “Assessments used to be based on the number of articles someone had published and journal impact factors. Now, managers have to consider many other aspects as well, which requires a different mindset.”

One of MYA’s recommendations is mandatory training (at the moment only on a voluntary basis) for all managers, which the report identifies as a prerequisite for cultural change. Clear assessment criteria and promotion frameworks (when does someone qualify to take the next step in their career, whether vertically or horizontally?) are also essential, as are simpler procedures and effective communication. “Make it clear that R&R does not automatically lead to promotion, but it can influence it”, the report advises.

If Maastricht University successfully makes these changes, the report states, R&R could “grow into a powerful tool for fair recognition, inclusive career paths and academic quality”. But failure to do so will further erode trust. The report has been presented to the Executive Board.

Riki Janssen



New Year’s resolution: Be unreasonable



The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” I stumbled upon this George Bernard Shaw quote recently and, while I believe it holds true to any human being, not just men, it has not left me since. Probably because I have been watching my four-year-olds negotiate bedtime over the holidays.

They are spectacularly unreasonable. They do not accept “because I said so” or “because most people do eat with cutlery and not their hands” as an explanation. They ask why until you run out of answers. It is exhausting. But if I am being honest, it is also exactly what I hope the PhD candidates I work with will do.

Being a scientist means being unreasonable. Spending years on questions most people never ask. Insisting on evidence when intuition feels easier. Pushing into territory where you will probably fail, and doing it anyway.

Look at our own backyard. ASML exists because Dutch engineers refused to accept that extreme ultraviolet lithography was impossible. They spent decades on technology the industry had written off. Here in Maastricht, Mosa Meat grew the first cultured hamburger while the world laughed. And right now, Limburg is hoping to win a bid to build the Einstein Telescope, an underground observatory to measure ripples in spacetime that Einstein himself thought unmeasurable. Unreasonable, all of them.

And yet our universities seem increasingly designed to produce reasonable people. We reward those who optimize for teaching evaluations, chase publication KPIs, follow the path of least resistance to the next grant. We reward students who game the system, who figured out that complaining about grades sometimes works, who optimize for credits rather than curiosity. We are breeding lambs when we need wolves.

Universities should be greenhouses for unreasonable scientists. Places where someone can spend a decade on an idea that might not work. Where failure is data, not career death. Where we protect the stubborn, the obsessed, the ones who refuse to stop asking why.

Shaw was onto something: adaptation is not always a virtue. Sometimes the system is just wrong.

So here is my wish for 2026. Let us be a bit more like four-year-olds. Keep asking why until someone runs out of answers.



Jonas Heller, assistant professor Marketing & director SBE DEXLab

New professorship policy with roughly two types



Dies 2024: Professors on their way to the Sint-Janskerk Photo: Joey Roberts

Maastricht University has a new policy when it comes to professors – the last one dates back to 2017. From now on, there will be roughly two types of professor: you’re either an ‘ordinary’ professor or you hold an endowed chair, funded by an external organisation or foundation.

A lot has changed since 2017, the last time the professorship policy was set in stone: a new law on the legal status of civil servants, the Recognition and Rewards project, and

increasing media attention on external funding for professors and transparency around work carried out for third parties. According to the explanatory notes in the policy document, the practical implementation sometimes deviated from what was strictly permitted on paper. Another important point: the Executive Board wants more diversity (fewer old, white men but also people with different socio-cultural backgrounds or ideologies) and strives to appoint no more than half the professorial positions to people of the same

sex or gender identity. Currently, four out of ten professors at UM are women (*Women Professors Monitor* from last December). There are two types of professor set out in the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW): (ordinary) professors and endowed professors (i.e., the researcher usually works at the university one day a week, and the chair is funded by an external organisation or foundation where that person is employed). These are the two categories UM will use from now on. It’s a major change of course, because there were more ‘options’ available before. For example, a personal chair, someone who was granted a chair for strategic reasons (e.g., because a particular subject required extra attention), or a professor with a specialised remit, an associate professor who was allowed to move up the career ladder. These will all now be ‘ordinary’ professors. The combination of assistant/associate professor and part-time endowed chair will be abolished. That will no longer be permitted, “to ensure a clear human resources policy”, the new policy says. “After all, a professor is expected to carry out the job in its entirety and at that level.” It is unclear how many researchers are currently using this construction. Some research shows that the UM website, which lists all the professors and their job titles by faculty, is not up to date. As far as we know, there are at least some associate professors at the Faculty of Law who hold an endowed chair, less than a handful. According to dean Jan Smits, these members of staff will be appointed as professors, “otherwise their legal status would be downgraded, which is obviously something we wish to avoid”. Top researchers can still be appointed as distinguished university professors, a position that has existed at UM since 2014. In the past, Michel Dumontier, Peter Peters (since retired), Clemens van Blitterswijk and Ron Heeren were recruited for this position.

Wendy Degens

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

Harm Askes (Delft, 1972)

\ Vice-dean at the Faculty of Science and Engineering as of 1 December 2025, professor of Computational Mechanics of Solids & Structures

\ relationship status: married to Inna, two daughter (12 and 18)

\ Lives in: Enschede for now, moving to Maastricht as of 14 January



Photo: Joey Roberts

“
What if I don't solve that Killer Sudoku in that half hour?”
Chuckling: “That doesn't happen”
”

Hardest conversation you've ever had with your parents? My parents come from Drenthe, descendants of poor farmers. Thanks to my grandmother's persuasiveness – she was a clever woman who died to young – my father went to university. He is a civil engineer, worked as a structural engineer for years, and was my teenage role model. In my second year studying civil engineering at the TU Delft, doubts started to creep in. I was progressing as I should, knew lots of the theory – which I enjoyed – but was useless at the design courses, the practical part. Should I drop out and start a more theoretical degree, or carry on and add a second degree? I needed something to spice up my life. When I spoke to my parents about it, I could see how shocked they were, they hadn't seen this coming at all. But they gave me the room to figure out what suited me. In the end, I did a year of psychology, followed by a year of philosophy [alongside a civil engineering degree], both were a nice change of pace. Philosophy was tough, I failed to pass half the modules.

How many hours a day do you spend on your phone? Half an hour, not much. I'm no tech-geek. At the University of Sheffield [where he worked until 2021], I had an old-fashioned flip phone. Amazing. You only had to charge it once a month. I don't spend any time on social media. At Sheffield, as the chair of the department, I had to be on Twitter for outreach and marketing; I hated it, awful place. All those anonymous reactions are very annoying. I think if people were forced to leave a name and address, the platform would be a much more civil place.

Little habit. I start every day with two cups of coffee and

a Killer Sudoku, a tougher variation on an ordinary sudoku. It's my morning ritual, just half an hour in my own little bubble. What if I don't finish it in that time? [Chuckling] That doesn't happen.

Something that shaped me as a human being. I was working at Delft as an assistant professor, when I was offered a professorship from Sheffield. I thought it was terrifying, and much too soon. At lunch, I shared my thoughts with René de Borst, professor at Delft at the time, my PhD supervisor, and the man who showed me that you can work in academics even if you graduated in engineering. He was silent for a long time and then asked, 'Harm, why *wouldn't* you do it?' I couldn't think of any reasons and decided to go for it. A few years later, I was made chair of the department. I learnt a lot there, and quickly. The most important thing? I can't always get an eight or a nine, sometimes a six is good enough.

I make a good vice-dean, because... I used to be much more about 'being the best you can be', a PhD defence, chasing research grants, setting up research projects for your own personal glory. Holding a chair is basically constant self-promotion. Becoming chair of the department changed me. Now I want to help *others* 'be the best they can be', create a framework so others can grow. 'Do you think it'll work, can you do it? I'll say: Go for it!' Whether that makes me the best man for the job, you'd need to ask other people. My ancestors in Drenthe were a humble people, they would say, 'Act normal, keep your head down.'

Where would a time machine take you? To

Barcelona in the 1930s, at the time of the Spanish Civil War. The city was the centre for the republicans and anarchists, until it was captured by General Franco's fascist army in 1939. That time sounds fascinating. I'm particularly interested in how the anarchism of the time worked, how did they do it? My mother is a historian. I have lots of history books at home. Every now and then I'll go down a rabbit hole.

The best thing about your partner. I met Inna [Gitman, professor at the Faculty of Science and Engineering] during a conference in Saint Petersburg. Inna is half Russian, half Ukrainian, and grew up near the Ural Mountains in Russia. She was looking for a position as a PhD researcher and we had one in Delft. I fell in love with her *joie de vivre*, her opportunism. That is almost blasphemous here, but where she's from, it just means seizing every opportunity. And that is what she always does. She encouraged me to go to Sheffield and become a professor.

My parenting frustration. I find it hard to strike a balance between saying no out of principle and pragmatism. The kids often ask the same thing repeatedly, and you tell them 'no' every time, but there comes a time when, just to make it stop, you just say 'alright then'. I shouldn't make those short-term decisions. It doesn't help in the long term. I should first take a moment and think about my answer. My eldest daughter is eighteen, she's studying at Maastricht, has her own life. The youngest is six years younger. My wife is actually stricter, she is very clear when it comes to saying 'no' to behaviour. I have a firmer 'no' when it comes to buying things. If they want something, they should earn the money themselves first. I was bullied at school as a child, was such a bright, bookish little boy that I had trouble fitting in. It got better by secondary school. There was lots of support at home during those horrible primary school years.

I'm the chef at home. I love cooking, especially stews or making stock. That's a weekend thing, when there's plenty of time. Not that I mind cooking after working all day, it's one way to release my frustrations [he laughs], especially after a hard day. I'll chop carrots, bam!, onions, bam! [making a chopping motion]. When we lived in England, we had our own herb garden, delicious. I don't need a full vegetable patch, I'm too lazy for that. Picking snails off the lettuce, no, life is too short for that.

Wendy Degens

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

How Maastricht researchers help the police track down cybercriminals

A game of cat and mouse with online scammers

Cybercriminals are getting better at scamming their victims, thanks in part to artificial intelligence. But AI can also be used to track down those same scammers, and data scientists at Maastricht are helping the police do just that.



Illustration: Simone Golob

“I remember those emails back when I was graduating, some 20 years ago, from a purported Nigerian prince who was willing to send you part of his fortune, if only you gave him a few thousand euros first,” says Anna Wilbik, now a professor at the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE). “People fell for it then, too.” Which just goes to show, if scammers could be successful when sending a generic email to a complete stranger, what happens when they can send a personalised message that looks like it came from someone you know?

Because thanks to AI, that is increasingly the case. There are numerous examples: a fake text message from a son or daughter in need of some money in an emergency, a phone call

from a fake police officer or bank employee about an insecure situation which requires you to transfer money to a ‘secure’ account, disclose login details, or hand over valuable items and bank cards to a ‘colleague’ in person.

Police manpower

“Nowadays, scammers know a lot about their victims,” says Wilbik. “Just think about how much information people put on social media. But also on registers of places like the Chamber of Commerce.” AI can use that information to quickly and easily create thousands of ‘personalised’ messages, adds PhD researcher Spruha Joshi. “Or scammers use AI to make a

situation look more realistic, by recreating entire websites, for example, or by creating deepfakes using the voice of someone you know.” It means people are more likely to fall for the scam, says Wilbik, referring to a report by the Central Bureau of Statistics, which showed that last year, one in six people in the Netherlands aged 15 years or older was the victim of cybercriminals.

At the same time, tracking down those cybercriminals is increasingly difficult. Not just because of a shortage of police manpower, says Frank Thuijsman, also a professor at the FSE. “But also because the perpetrator doesn’t have to be physically present, but can operate remotely, at home, somewhere far away. And can therefore target people in many different places at the same time.” Meanwhile, the police reports are still submitted regionally, says Joshi. “Often, detectives across the whole country investigate crimes, while being unaware that they involve the same perpetrator or organisation, or they don’t find that out until it’s much too late.”

And that is where AI could come in handy. “AI is good at finding patterns, at making connections. It notices things that people might easily overlook,” says Thuijsman. It could be used to create a tool that analyses police reports from around the country and shows which cases might be connected, continues Wilbik. “It would make the police much more efficient and help solve more cases.”

Detectives

It is precisely that sort of system Joshi is working on at the moment. Her PhD research – based partly at Maastricht and partly at the national police headquarters in Utrecht – is part of a collaboration that Thuijsman and Wilbik set up with the police two years ago. “At a BBQ, a member of the police force said they were looking for clever data scientists who had recently graduated,” says Thuijsman. “And I thought, why not set up a joint research project? That way, you’ll get a whole department working on it.” Thuijsman emphasises that the researchers at Maastricht don’t solve cases, but that they make it easier for detectives to solve them.

“Often, detectives across the whole country investigate crimes, while being unaware that they involve the same perpetrator or organisation”

Not only by showing potential connections between cases, but also by giving more insight into how scammers operate online. That’s another thing AI is good at, says Joshi. “Revealing structures and networks. There are lots of different roles.” For example, there are the ‘clients’ or the people who make the initial contact with potential victims, but also the accomplices who physically collect victims’ bank cards or use them to withdraw large amounts of cash. “They’re often young people who have been recruited through social media, such as on TikTok, where it is presented as a sort of game, so-called ‘f-games,’” says Thuijsman. “They’ll earn some cash but might not always realise that what they’re doing is illegal.” There are also more and more “criminal services” popping up worldwide, says Joshi. “For example, agencies that send phishing emails for you, something you can just subscribe to like it’s Netflix. Those ‘companies’ sometimes even have actual call centres. Once you understand how everything is organised, you can pass that insight on to the detectives.”

Highly adaptable

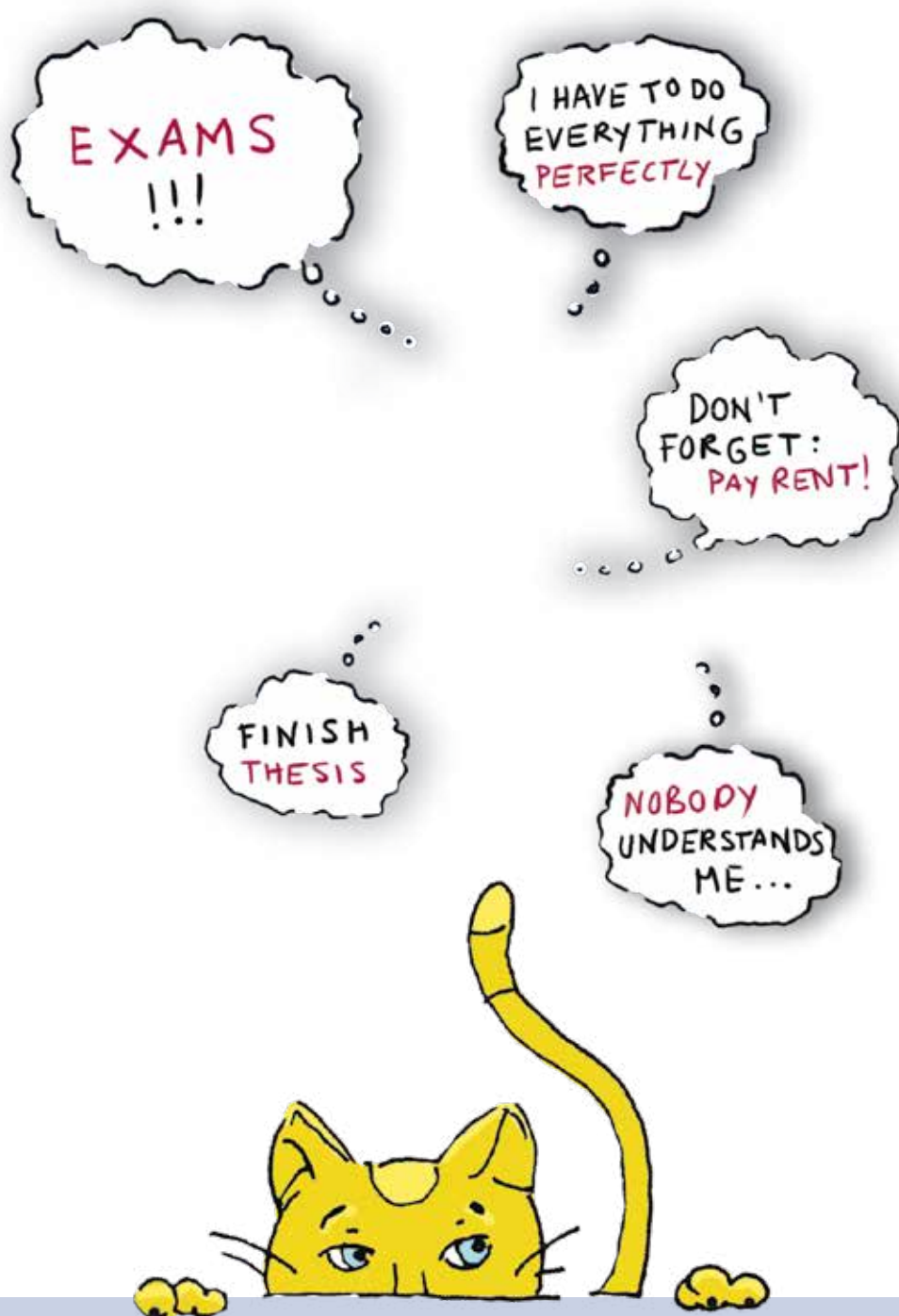
The three are unwilling to give examples of what information Joshi ‘feeds’ her AI tools so that they connect cases and reveal networks. “Cybercriminals are highly adaptable, so we don’t want to give them too much information,” says Wilbik. After all, investigating scammers is game of cat and mouse. “The time when you could use the same method of investigation for years has long since passed,” says Thuijsman. “Just look at the latest version of ChatGPT, it can do so much more than the last one. Criminals have more options every day. It’s a bit like playing hide and seek. Every time we get better at finding them, they try to get better at hiding again. If there were an easy solution, we would have found it ages ago.”

It also serves as a warning, the researchers say. Scammers are getting smarter all the time, anybody can be taken in. “So, be careful, think about what you should look out for,” says Wilbik. And equally important, adds Joshi: “Never be embarrassed you were scammed, always report the crime. It also gives us more data we can use to create better models to track down the criminals.”

Stress, anxiety, fear of failure: UM students, too, struggle with mental health

“I studied 12 hours a day so I wouldn’t miss anything. After the first course period, I was exhausted”

Students in Dutch higher education are struggling with their mental health. In a large-scale study published late last year, many reported experiencing stress, loneliness, symptoms of burnout and sometimes even suicidal thoughts. Students at Maastricht University are no exception: UM psychologists have seen a rise in the number of students seeking help. “I’m naturally a very positive person, but at a certain point, all I could do was cry.”



ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

For this article, *Observant* tried to reach as many UM students as possible across all faculties. We put out a call on our Instagram, contacted the UM psychologists, the Door het Geluid Foundation and The InnBetween and asked our student freelancers to approach their peers. Students proved reluctant to share their personal stories; in the end, we were able to get in touch with Anna and Marie through The InnBetween, the student chaplaincy.

Text: Deborah Blekkenhorst
Illustrations: Ivana Smudja

She remembers it vividly, her first summer back home in Cyprus after months of feeling “overwhelmed” by her studies. “For the first two weeks of the summer holidays, all I did was sleep. I was completely exhausted. Even my mother commented on how hard it must have been.” Anna, now 22 (surname and study programme known to the editors), is currently in the third and final year of her bachelor’s degree at UM, but she has few fond memories of those first months. “I came from an education system where we had maybe two exams per year. Here, we had far more. And all those compulsory tutorial meetings... I had to get used to it, but there was hardly any time to do so. Everything just kept going, on and on. I’m a perfectionist; I want to excel, to get high marks. But Maastricht quickly crushed that expectation. The pressure was immense.” Although she ended up doing well academically in her first year, it took her weeks to recover, she says. “And when I had to go back for my second year, all I felt was stress.”

Crying

The stress didn’t go away, even though Anna was better prepared for the new academic year. “I now knew what to expect, but there were a lot of new challenges.” For example, tutors were often absent from tutorial meetings. “There turned out to be a reason for that,” Anna says. “They wanted us to discuss much more amongst ourselves and learn to think critically. After all, no one will hold your hand later in your career – you have to do it yourself. I was being tested.” After a few months the proverbial lights went out. “I felt utterly exhausted, like I was paralysed. I’m naturally a very optimistic and positive person, but at that point, all I could do was cry. I went to tutorials because I had to, but I was unable to retain anything. Mentally, I wasn’t there.” Anna started experiencing physical symptoms; she fell ill and barely recovered. “My body just couldn’t cope anymore, on top of the mental exhaustion.” She became isolated and hardly saw her friends. Loneliness set in. “You end up in a vicious cycle – feeling unwell makes you pull away.”

Pressure to perform

Marie, 26 (surname and study programme known to the editors), knows exactly what Anna has been through. She came to Maastricht in August 2023 for her master’s degree, just two weeks after completing her bachelor’s

in Germany, and she too felt overwhelmed by all the new impressions and the university’s education system. “It’s very different from what I was used to. More exams, more teaching periods, long days, weekly assignments. I felt so rushed. In Germany, you have more freedom to choose when to do what. I studied 10 to 12 hours a day so I wouldn’t miss anything. After the first course period, I was exhausted.”

There was no time to recover: after one weekend off, she was right back in the thick of it. Marie, who had been diagnosed with migraine – a neurological condition that causes severe headaches – in 2021, fell ill. “I went to my study adviser, as I quickly realised it would be difficult to keep it all up.” Together, they decided it would be better for Marie to study at a slower pace, spreading her courses and exams over a longer period. It was a workable solution for her, but one made possible by financial support from her parents – a luxury not all students have.

“It was a great relief, but at the same time I felt like I had to perform even better so I wouldn’t fall behind. I don’t want to fail, and I constantly put pressure on myself, or feel outside pressure to build a successful career or achieve something big. And within the university, students are constantly competing with each other – there’s always something at stake.” Partly for that reason, she sees no future for herself in academia after finishing her master’s degree. “It’s too competitive and stressful. Before you know it, you just boil over.”

Anxiety, depression and stress

Anna and Marie’s experiences are far from unique. November 2025 saw the publication of the third *National Monitor on Mental Health and Substance Use Among Students in Higher Education*, a study by the Trimbos Institute, the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and the Netherlands Municipal Public Health Services (GGD) surveying over 25,000 students. More than half of the respondents said their studies were their main source of stress, followed by financial worries, personal problems and uncertainty about the future. Four in five students struggled with anxiety or depression, and 25% reported sometimes feeling tired of life.

This comes as no surprise to UM’s nine student psychologists. The most common requests for help they received in 2024 (figures are not yet in for 2025) were related to stress, anxiety and fear of failure. That year, 925 students came to the daily walk-in hours and 383 received individual counselling.



Over the past three years (2022-2024), an increasing number of students have sought help from UM psychologists. More students made use of the daily walk-in hours and “the number of intake and follow-up appointments clearly rose in 2023 and again in 2024”, says team leader Frederike Vrancken-Hanouwer, referring to the individual counselling programme that offers students five sessions on average. “Students also seem more comfortable seeking help and opening up. But just because they find it easier to reach out doesn’t mean they aren’t in distress – their requests for help are often more complex and intense.” In recent years, the university has invested in additional staff; students can now be seen within a week.

Those who seek help come from all segments of the student body. No single group stands out, including international students, who are often away from home. There are also no clear differences between genders or between first-year students and those further along in their studies. “It’s a fairly accurate reflection of UM’s student population”, says Vrancken-Hanouwer. The university psychologists have noticed that international students who are not registered with a GP or are insufficiently insured for mental healthcare find it harder to get appropriate, regular support.

Help

Marie experienced this first-hand. She sought psychological help in her home country of Germany because she did not have Dutch health insurance. “I did reach out to UM, but five sessions weren’t enough for me.” She has since found a psychologist in Maastricht whom she sees regularly. “We talk about the things that cause me anxiety, stress and uncertainty about the future. It all just builds up at some point, and that’s when you need

help. I’ve seen it among other students too – they’re depressed or anxious, and some struggle with eating disorders.”

Unlike Marie, Anna did not seek professional help. Not because she didn’t want to, but because she simply didn’t know where to turn. “Our course coordinators kept saying we shouldn’t come to them with our problems. I felt intimidated. But I didn’t know how else to get help. University psychologists? Where? I felt abandoned, cast adrift.”

“That’s truly awful to hear”, says Vrancken-Hanouwer, head of the UM psychologists. She emphasises that they do everything they can to be visible and make students aware of their services through the university website and social media, for example. “But students

can also turn to lecturers, mentors and study advisers at their faculties for help and support, including workshops.” The fact that some students still don’t manage to find their way to the university psychologists despite all these efforts “remains a key focus of attention”, Vrancken-Hanouwer adds.

Through a friend, Anna eventually found her way to the student chaplaincy The InnBetween, where she began attending *Tafelen* on Thursdays – three-course meals organised for students. “One day, I met Glenn Proctor there, one of the chaplains. He always asked how I was doing, and when it feels like someone genuinely cares, you just start to share your story. It happens very naturally; you don’t feel like you’re being analysed.” That

is partly the aim, Proctor explains in a written response to *Observant*. He and his colleagues at the student chaplaincy seek to engage

Continued on page 8



European research into the cause of mental illness

In more than 60 per cent of cases, mental illness starts before the age of 25. But where one person improves after just a few visits to a therapist, another might struggle with problems for years. Why, what factors play a role? That is what the European degree programme Youth-GEMs, led from Maas-

tricht University by professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience Bart Rutten, is hoping to discover.

The research will follow young people aged 12 to 25 in the early stages of mental illness. “They have been on the waiting list or have received treatment from a psychologist or psychiatrist for less than two months. Or they have sought help from other professionals, such as a doctor or student counsellor,” said research assistant Veerle Boesten. If they want to take part, they are first put through an extensive base reading, said her colleague Zjulia Rutten. “A clinical interview, physical and cognitive tests, blood samples and saliva samples – required for

researching a potential genetic factor: are you predisposed to sensitivity for mental illness? And questionnaires.” After that, an app is installed on their phones to collect data. “How much time do they spend on social media, how often do they go outside.” Over the course of two years, the participants are asked to fill out a questionnaire online five times.

This is the first time this type of research will be carried out on this scale. “We are collecting data in six European countries,” said Rutten. Youth-GEMs is still recruiting participants. For more information, visit youth-gems.eu.

background

“It helps to know I’m not the only one”

Continued from page 7

students in conversation in an informal and accessible way to understand their needs and arrange appropriate professional support.

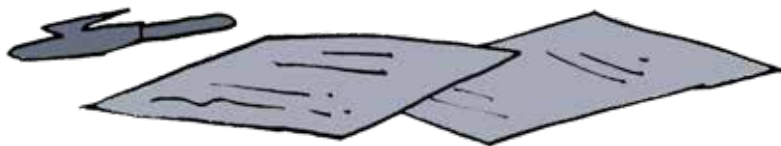
Giving back

There are other places in Maastricht where students can freely share their stories and,

as Marie puts it, “feel seen”. “I like going to Thuis, a Christian student community, and I’ve also been to @ease, where young people with problems can find a listening ear. I’ve tried a lot of things.” She is now a volunteer with UnliMited-Students, where students with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health conditions support each other. “It helps

to know I’m not the only one struggling. It makes me feel like I can give something back.” Anna does the same at The InnBetween, where she is now one of the coordinators of *Tafelen* and, she says, has “found a whole new family I can share my experiences with”. She’s happier now and doing much better, although the pressure to perform is never far from her mind. “I still wish I’d had a better sense of what studying in Maastricht would be like and how competitive it can be. For international students in particular, it’s a completely different world. I expected more support from the university and especially more consideration in terms of scheduling so I could plan

trips home earlier. Last-minute flights are often unavailable or extremely expensive. It would be wonderful if there was a bit more understanding of the fact that students are far from home, need to make new friends and can feel lonely. Working hard is part of being a student, but at the end of the day, we’re just people.”



“Helping yourself and others starts with spotting the signs”

Since 2023, the Door het Geluid Foundation – currently active in seven cities in the

Netherlands – has been working to improve student mental health, including through student-run workshops. Their student ambassadors regularly engage their peers in conversation. “We run workshops at student associations or educational institutions, explaining how to spot the signs that show you’re struggling”, says Pup Halmans, a student of Medicine at UM who has been a Door het Geluid ambassador in Maastricht for several months. “Or we explain what signs to look for in others so you can help them. For example, I’ve learnt that

people who drink a lot tend to do so for a reason – there’s usually something behind it.” “It’s about raising awareness in an accessible way. Ultimately, we want to point struggling students in the right direction and give them practical information – where to go, what to do”, says Door het Geluid ambassador Ties Rouschop, a master’s student of Mental Health at UM. He too has seen that fear of failure and pressure to perform are major stressors for students. “Especially if you’re just starting university – you have to

find a new place to live, deal with expectations from the outside world, get your finances in order. And once that’s all settled, you have to worry about your CV and securing a good job.” According to Rouschop and Halmans, you don’t necessarily have to see a psychologist if you’re struggling. “There are alternatives, as we try to explain to students. A good conversation with friends or family can make a big difference. We always say: don’t be afraid, just talk about it. It’s not always easy, but we hope we can help.”

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

WWW.OBSERVANTONLINE.NL

Agenda academic ceremonies

Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

SCAN THE CODE

Maastricht University

Vacatures

Werken voor de meest internationale universiteit van Nederland? Scan de QR-code voor ons actuele vacature overzicht*.

Voor meer informatie over werken bij de Universiteit Maastricht, ga naar <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/nl/werken-bij-de-um>

*Medewerkers van UM kunnen een volledig overzicht van interne- en externe vacatures vinden door in te loggen op SuccessFactors via Umployeee.

www.maastrichtuniversity.nl