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50 years of UM, 50 years of quarrelling

Illustration: Berend Vonk

editorial

To write or not to write?

A former senior civil servant for the province of Limburg (and a VVD councillor for Maastricht) was arrested for threats of terrorism, various local media outlets reported last Wednesday. He is alleged to have messaged about deliberately driving his car into people on a shopping street to kill them. A number of *Observant*-editors had already seen the news. Shortly afterwards, a former colleague messaged to say it concerned a former student and former member of the University Council. We searched for his name in our archives and found something from 2019. But he had long since left the university. And so, we all quite quickly agreed that we wouldn't publish the article on our website. Moreover, we read that he was suffering from mental health problems and was on long-term sick leave from his current employer. This young man needed the right care and not more media attention, we concluded.

Deliberating what you do or don't choose to write an article about can be a challenge, and is often based on instinct. I spoke about it with my colleague Deborah Blekkenhorst, who worked as an NOS sports editor for years. She remembers discussions about whether the NOS should publish articles about top athletes' pregnancies. One side thought that they should, because that's what the people want to read, that's what they talk about by the water cooler. The other side thought they shouldn't, because that's not what the NOS is for. In the end, a decision was made, and if it's a slow news week, then the answer is more likely to be 'yes'.

Our small team also considers whether it's absolutely necessary. If you want to spend time on article X, then you have to realise that you can't do articles Y and Z. We produce quite a lot of articles in one week, our site is refreshed frequently, meaning stories often disappear off the front page and don't always get the attention we think they deserve, which is a shame. Decisions get made every day. The Studio Europa evening that featured a Ukrainian historian talking about the historical and cultural importance of Ukraine in Europe gets axed. As does the proposed interview with an economist from Maastricht who, together with 69 colleagues throughout Europe, is advocating for a complete implementation of the digital euro. The European Parliament will be voting on this implementation in the spring. Maybe we'll do something with it then. On Friday, the first episode of the '50 years' podcast with Sjeng Kramers, former governor of Limburg and vital for UM, is being recorded. Just like with the articles in this extra thick issue, we didn't hesitate for a moment (well, almost).

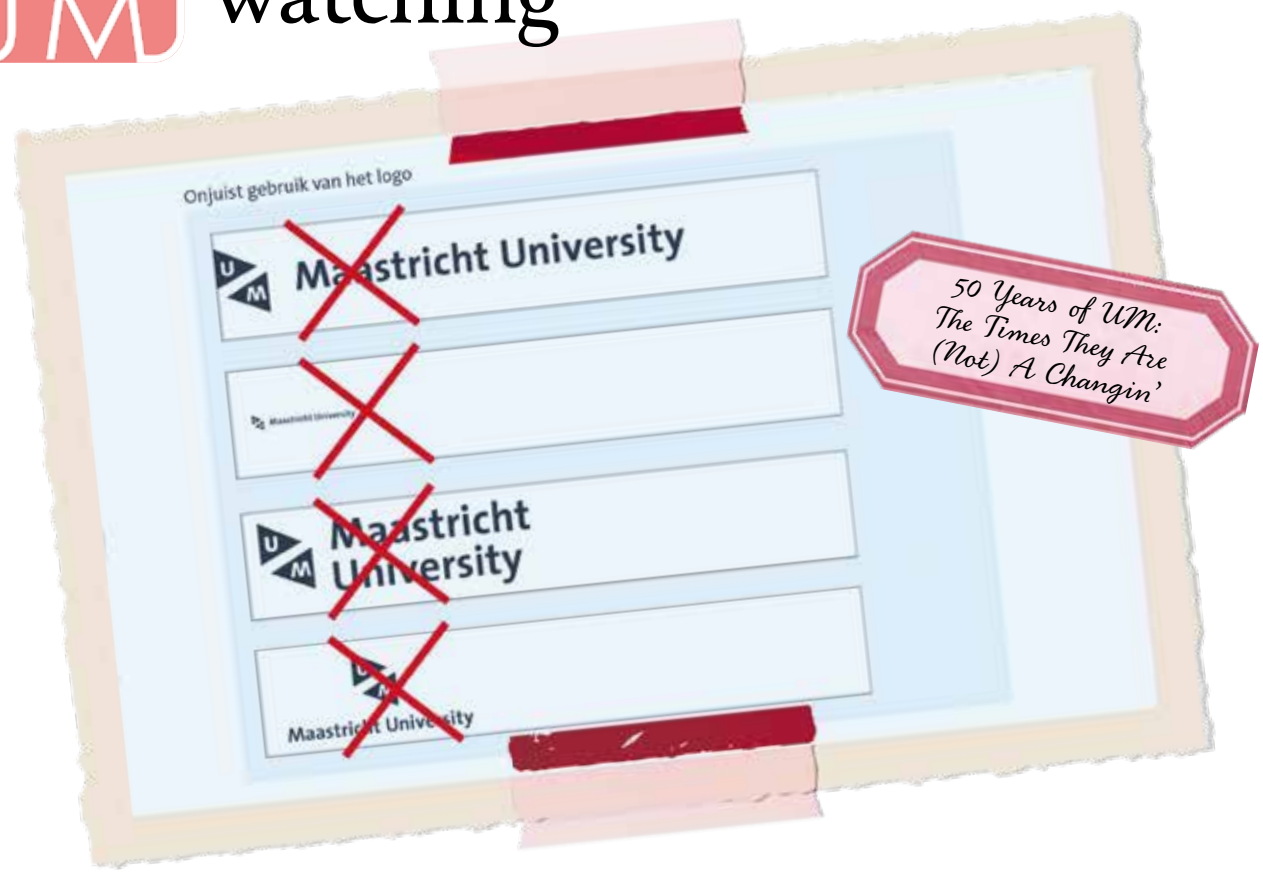
Wendy Degens

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

series the times they are (not) a changin'

50 YEARS UM

A new visual identity? The logo police are always watching



1992–now

If you're looking to rile up the university community, all you need to do is announce a new logo that everyone will be required to use. It's guaranteed to spark criticism, grumbling and quiet resistance. That is exactly what happened in spring 1992, when the Executive Board announced a new UM House Style. They'd hired an external agency and everything. Total cost: 321,000 guilders. And no, it wasn't a joke, as *Observant* columnist Frans van Wijmen briefly wondered at the time.

The whole operation was supposed to foster a much-needed sense of unity and to stop the uncontrolled proliferation of logos at the State University of Limburg (RL). The fifteen-year-old RL logo was increasingly being pushed aside by people's own creations. For that very reason, all departments and faculties would be required to use the new visual identity, which came complete with a manual explaining what to do and what not to do. The assumption that everyone would readily follow this manual to the letter was "a gross underestimation of the university community's anarchist tendencies", *Observant* gleefully wrote, inviting readers to send in their own ideas to strengthen the sense of unity and the public image of the university. The response was underwhelming.

A few years later, at the Dies Natalis celebration in January 1999 – three years after the State University of Limburg became Maastricht University – a completely new logo was unveiled: the now familiar pair of vertically aligned blue triangles, slightly offset, containing a U and an M. On the same day, brightly coloured flags with the UM logo flew for the first time outside university buildings, each faculty with its own colour. Design and implementation cost 250,000 guilders. Opinions were divided, ranging from "looks like a set of building blocks; there's something childish about it" and "the balance is off, it's about to topple over" to "an excellent logo. Nothing revolutionary, but simple and clear". Once again, any parts of the university still clinging to their own visual identities were warned that they would be required to use the new house style.

Nine years later, in 2008, it happened again. The house style was updated and, you guessed it, no one would be allowed to stray from it. The university's logo police are always watching. In an effort to emphasise the university's international ambitions, "Maastricht University" was added beneath the two triangles that form the abbreviation "UM". This combination – Dutch abbreviation, English name – immediately got on the University Council's nerves. It was inconsistent, they complained. And why hadn't they been consulted, grumbled a student member. The accompanying slogan "Leading in Learning" (then-UM President Ritzen, a former minister, didn't seem much concerned with humility) was met with contemptuous snorts. Why just "learning"? What about "research"? The snorting grew louder when UM dropped in the Dutch University Guide rankings, and louder still when signage in Randwyck was updated to match UM House Style 3.0. The letters were far too small ("even young people with good eyesight will need glasses now", according to a letter sent to *Observant*), there were typos ("embryology" became "embyology"), and the rumoured price tag of €450,000 ("the equivalent of two Veni grants") prompted another reader to write in suggesting that "Leading in Learning" be changed to "Superior in Spending".

The slogan also raised eyebrows outside the university. In 2016, UM appeared in the "Stupidity Ranking" of the Dutch University Reform Platform, founded by academics frustrated with modern university branding campaigns and slick PR machines. UM didn't make the top three but finished sixth. The top spot went to Groningen's "Born leaders reach for infinity".

> The assumption that everyone would readily follow this was "a gross underestimation of the university community's anarchist tendencies"

"Leading in Learning" quietly disappeared from the scene, but the slogans didn't stop there. In late 2024, UM launched a new one, "Finding real answers together", part of a campaign aimed at attracting Dutch students. Once again, not everyone was impressed: "All style, no substance", critics said.

Riki Janssen

The UM corporate identity is changing again. Read about it at page 5

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

Students guess how old UM is and are closer than expected

“Let me think, it is a newer university. 75 feels like a good number”

How old is Maastricht University? Seemingly an easy question to answer for members of staff, but what about students? Do they know how many candles are on this year’s cake? “I saw something with a 5 come past, but where was that 5?”

It doesn’t take the Swiss Ines long to answer the question of how old the university is. “50 years old.” She admits it’s a guess, but a well-reasoned one. “Before I came here, I had heard it was a relatively new university. It would be weird to think it’s centuries old.” She’s a first year and says she hasn’t heard much from the university about the upcoming anniversary, but she does remember an email, “about a gala or something? I can’t remember the exact topic, but that stuck with me.”

Fellow student Hannah helps her out: “The King is coming. I rang my grandma immediately; she loves royal families, so I wanted to let her know.” Although she has failed to remember that he will be coming for the fiftieth anniversary, as she thinks UM is 75 years old. “I saw something on social media with a 5. I couldn’t remember where the 5 was, though.”

She’s not the only one who is a few years out, a short investigation by *Observant* around university buildings in the city centre reveals. Although most do manage to get close to the right answer. All the students are aware that there has not been a university in Maastricht for very long. “When I applied, I read that UM was relatively young. A hundred years wouldn’t make sense,” says the American Sydney, who has just arrived in Limburg as an exchange student. “55 years old?” Not bad for someone who has barely had any time to read up on the subject.

“You never hear stories about the past in Maastricht, about the university and how it was. So you know it can’t have centuries of history. I’ll say 40, because I think he’ll say 50,” says the German Felix, pointing to his table-mate. Who is indeed correct. “My sister studied here too, and two years ago, she told me this anniversary was coming,” explains the Hungarian Balint. His time at Maastricht is almost up, Felix still has a year to go. “I like that everything is a bit more relaxed here. In Germany, education is so rigid. There’s much more contact here, in smaller groups. I like that.”

“Isn’t this the largest international university of the Netherlands? I read that when I was looking into studying abroad,” says the Australian Grace, after writing the number 75 on a piece of paper. “That feels like a good number. I know it doesn’t have a huge, long history yet – we were told that during our introduction, we were also given a tour of all the university buildings.” Why the university is so young, she can’t say. “Because there was nothing else?” Partly correct – she knows nothing about the story of the closure of the mines in South Limburg , the promised compensation, and the considerable lobby to establish an institution of higher education in the province.

Fellow student and Australian Ellie has also not looked into the history of the place that much, but does know exactly how many candles will be on the cake: 50. “I was at the presentation of Prince Carnaval last weekend, and they were handing out flyers with that number and something about UM. I thought they might have something to do with each other.” Yes, carnival society ‘De Tempeleers’ will also be celebrating the university’s anniversary, and this year, instead of awarding a *Prinseorde* to people who contribute to *vastelaovend*, they will award *’t Perfesserke* (the Professor), a medal bearing an image of Sjeng Tans, joint-founder of Maastricht University.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

column

Home, where is it?

“

Winter holidays for me are unfortunately over, as I came back to the Netherlands a little bit earlier than my university peers. I decided to hop on a flight before the start of the next period to see the national paralysis of Dutch people in response to snowfall. Just kidding – the real reason lies in my attempt to force myself to believe that being away from home will enable me to procrastinate less and focus more on my thesis. But am I still allowed to say I left my home?

I have to admit that I have lost the sense of feeling at home. Not even a dictionary definition could help me identify where my home is. Now I understand how children raised in ethnically mixed families feel, never being able to feel commitment to only one country, one nationality and one culture. Every time I am asked to fill in my address on a document, slight discomfort sets in. I know I should put my Dutch address as my home, but it is the Polish one where I was raised, where my room is, where my favourite books are, where my mum is, and where I always come back.

When I leave a house, there is always something I leave behind. Saying goodbye to the Netherlands is saying goodbye to my friends, my career, my habits and my routine. Dutch soil is where my character development took place; it polished my skills, tested my strength and independence. But it will never be a place that carries my identity. It will never be responsible for how I view the world.

Saying goodbye to Poland is saying goodbye to my favourite bakery. It is saying goodbye to the daily ritual of listening to the radio and understanding the jokes. To all those small but ever so important things.

And every time I am unable to reply to a stranger in Dutch, I feel guilty for not having sacrificed enough time to learn the language of the country I live in. And every time I struggle for words in Polish to explain to my relatives what I have learnt at university, I see that I have lost my panache. And I am starting to wonder, will I ever find a place I feel fully connected to again?

”

Rita Wiśniewska,
third-year European Law student

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

Photo: Joey Roberts

> Sitting at a computer all day, in my own bubble – I didn't want to do that until retirement

If you google me… [checks phone] you'll find my website, which I built for my master's in industrial design in Eindhoven. We had to create a digital portfolio. I kept it when I started applying for jobs, but I haven't touched it in ten years.

I'm a bit of a nerd. My girlfriend would agree. I always want to know how things work and enjoy getting to the bottom of things. I also love *Star Wars*, and the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. That's usually when you start being labelled a nerd. Although I'm not quite at the level of a good friend of mine who can quote those films word for word. Around this time last year, I watched the extended editions of *The Lord of the Rings*; they're even better than the cinematic versions.

I regret… very little. Life goes the way it goes. If I had to pick something, maybe never properly learning to play the guitar. I didn't have the patience, and now I have a love-hate relationship with it. There's one in the house, but I rarely play. Have I made any bad life choices? [Laughs] Maybe the order of our relationship – we moved in together before having a child and we still aren't married. According to my girlfriend, that's the wrong order. I will pop the question one day. I think it would be a lovely way to affirm our relationship and celebrate it with our loved ones. It has no religious significance for me. I was raised Catholic, but I don't believe I have to get married because otherwise God would be upset with me.

Moving to Maastricht was a step for me. A small step, but still a step. I was born and raised in Bunde [a nearby village] and stayed there through university. My girlfriend, on the other hand, is a true Maastricht local. When we were house hunting, she drew a circle around the city centre: "This is where I want to live." And that's where we managed to end up. After ten years in the city, I can say I love it here.

There's nothing as boring as… routine. I'm always looking for new stimuli and ways to challenge myself. We've been living in our current house for a year now and I'm still finding jobs that need doing. They're often things I've never done before, so I figure out how to do them myself. Bungee jumping for fun? [Laughs] The older I get, the more aware I am of what could go wrong – maybe because I'm a father now. Somewhere in the back of my mind I'd be thinking: what if the cord snaps?

Books I like to reread: *1984* by George Orwell and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Both are beautifully written dystopias that make you think about the world today. In *1984*, screens manipulate people into obedience; in *Brave New World*, they're numbed into an artificially induced sense of happiness. You can see that around you: if we want, we can be distracted all the time. I doomscroll on the sofa sometimes, but it's important to make an effort to pause and reflect. It would be a shame to one day look back and regret things I didn't do because I was always distracted or too busy.

My biggest parenting frustration. Lately, our son has been refusing to eat any faster. Everything would be a lot easier if he did. We think it's important to eat together and we stay at the table until everyone is done. Eating with him has turned into a kind of hour-long mindfulness exercise – that's how long it takes.

When was the last time you cried? Last November. I was having breakfast on a Saturday when my brother called to say our father had been rushed to hospital with heart failure. I shed a few tears then. We had to have difficult conversations with him about death and his wishes. We needed to, because we didn't know. In hindsight, I wish we'd had those conversations earlier, with less pressure, but at home we never really talked openly about those things. He's doing better now, but there's still a lot I haven't asked him. We've all been pulled back into the rat race. I love my parents, but I don't really say it out loud. I'm not sure why. I'd like to say it more often.

If I had a time machine, I'd go to… ancient Rome, to see what life was like then. And I'd love to travel to the 1960s to see Jimi Hendrix live.

My partner's most attractive quality. She's very direct and passionate. I never have to wonder what she's thinking – I can always tell. We've been together for 10 years and we always have a good time together, wherever we are. The covid lockdowns really confirmed that for us; we never felt like we were living on top of each other.

Best decision ever? Studying industrial design in Eindhoven. After my bachelor's in mechanical engineering, I worked for a year. My first assignment was for the company I'd always said I wanted to work for, but I quickly realised that sitting at a computer all day, in my own bubble, making calculations and technical drawings, wasn't for me. I didn't want to do that until retirement. Industrial design, by contrast, taught us about innovation, interactive technology, the business side of things and how to involve users in product and service development. We were given assignments and told, "Off you go, good luck." That combination of creativity and applied technology pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me stand on my own two feet.

My biggest fear. Something happening to the people closest to me – my parents, girlfriend or child. Ending up in a nightmare situation where I can't protect them from something terrible. That would be the worst possible thing.

Peter Doorakkers

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

background

New UM corporate identity

“We’re keeping the two triangles, an iconic image”

The Maastricht University corporate identity is changing. Not drastically, not in one day. “We’re not going to start ripping signs off the wall.” The university’s anniversary will be used to slowly allow people to get used to the “refreshed identity”. A sorely needed refreshment, after 25 years, says Roel van Herpt, director of Marketing & Communications.

An impression of what the new ‘visual identity’ of UM could look like ***Collage provided by Marketing & Communications***

An interview about the new corporate identity? Roel van Herpt and programme manager Kirsten Engbersen, another staff member of Marketing & Communications, prefer the term “fine-tuned positioning” by Maastricht University. A term requiring explanation. “Positioning is the place that, as an organisation, we take up in the minds of our target audience. Who are we? What does UM stand for? We can influence how others see us using communication,” explains Engbersen.

Vacancies

Is now when we should be finding a way to stick in people’s minds again? “We’re facing enormous challenges. The Ministry of Education expects that between 2024 and 2031, there will be an 11 percent drop in the number of VWO pupils. Consequently so is the number of bachelor students,” says Engbersen. That applies to all of the Netherlands’ higher education sector, but Maastricht University faces an extra challenge, situated as it is in the southern-most tip of the country. Not to mention that the government’s ‘anti-internationalisation trend’ is detrimental for the self-styled ‘European university of the Netherlands’. Engbersen: “How can you set yourself apart in a way that allows pupils to find UM?” And it’s not just about students, it’s also about staff. “We’re managing to fill all the vacancies, but are we attracting the best people and are we able to retain them in the long run?”

Iconic

According to Engbersen and Van Herpt, positioning has been “neglected. We weren’t doing enough with it.” For example, the ‘visual identity’, including the two triangles followed by the name ‘Maastricht University’, dates back to the late nineties. “A pre-digital age,” says Van Herpt. “You can tell by the font. When you enlarge it, the letters start ‘dancing’ and become harder to read.”

The two triangles are staying, “a strong, iconic image. We won’t be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” But there will be a new font and colour scheme. “Some people won’t notice the change and that’s fine. Look at Amazon or PostNL, they also made small changes – you don’t always have to do something drastic to modernise a brand.”

The project is expected to take three years. There won’t be an official start, says Van Herpt. “It will be silent and gradual.” A special UM50 website will be launched on Friday, the day of the Dies. “You will see a lot of the new corporate identity there, and at the celebration itself.” In honour of the anniversary, a ‘50’ has been added, drawing on the old logo of the ‘State University of Limburg’, recognisable by its lines.

People who are interested in all the details are welcome to dive into the style guide – all 90 pages – meant particularly for all of UM’s internal communication experts and external design agencies who will be using the new style. It was developed by Vandejong Creative Agency in Amsterdam, the agency who were contracted for the project.

Corporate identity police

So, what else will be new? New flags, signposts, prospectuses, signage, email signatures, an overhaul of the UM website? “This will also be gradual.” The website is a different, more complex, story, says Van Herpt. The website was completely revamped in the autumn of 2024, given a refreshed look with more pictures and less text. The style will now be changed slightly again, “but it will be purely aesthetic. We have to think more about the function of the website, our digital business card, and how that should influence the way it looks.”

On a different note, how will you ensure people stick to the new rules? Will there be a ‘corporate identity police’, ready to jump in as needed? “We’re making it easier by offering more options. This also honours who we are, diverse, with different personalities.” The colour scheme (currently limited to orange, blues, black and white) will be expanded (to include browns, pinks and greens). Although ‘more options’ doesn’t mean a free-for-all. Engbersen: “Communication is one of those areas on which everybody has an opinion, and that’s fine, but we will be giving people guidelines.” The plan has been discussed (confidentially) by the University Council. Van Herpt: “Thanks in part to their remarks, we will be asking the Disability Inclusion Group and Unlimited (for students and staff with disabilities, chronic illnesses or neurodivergence, ed.) to take another look.”

> “You don’t always have to do something drastic to modernise a brand”

Design

‘New positioning’ for UM, meant to attract more students – is this update going to fix that? “That is a question we’ve been asked before,” say Van Herpt and Engbersen. “Positioning and communication will definitely contribute to the challenges facing UM. But there are other factors, too, such as the programmes on offer, how an open day goes, who you get to present on the day, etc.”

Lastly, is it necessary to contract an external agency (via a tender) for this job (total costs: 140,000 euros to fine-tune the positioning, refresh the ‘visual identity’ and create a ‘brand story’)? Van Herpt: “Designing is an art. We don’t have any graphic designers at UM, which is fine. It also helps to get an external party involved.”

In the next phase, “the brand story, what UM stands for” will be explored together with Vandejong, says Van Herpt. “Problem-based learning, our ‘international classroom’, the European university of the Netherlands, sure, all true, but how do we tell that story, what shape does that take, how do we ensure people outside UM really believe that? That’s what we’re working on.”

Wendy Degens

50 YEARS UM

HONORARY DOCTORATES

At UM's 50th Dies Natalis on Friday 23 January, honorary doctorates will be awarded to Peter Stenvinkel, Roger Cox and Mirjana Spoljaric Egger for their extraordinary achievements. Due to a busy schedule, Spoljaric Egger, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, was unavailable for an interview.

"BIODIVERSITY LOSS POSES ENORMOUS RISKS TO OUR HEALTH"

At first glance, **Peter Stenvinkel** – professor of nephrology at Karolinska Institutet in Sweden – seems to have taken some unusual steps in his career. How did the kidney specialist end up studying hibernating bears? And why is he so committed to environmental issues? But a closer look reveals that everything is connected.

Collage: Simone Golob

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is on the rise. Since the 1990s, the number of CKD patients has more than doubled; today, nearly 15 per cent of adults worldwide live with the condition. They have permanent kidney damage, which can lead to high blood pressure, brittle bones and calcified arteries – all of which increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Stenvinkel wanted to know where this increase was coming from. "It turns out that the effects of climate change, such as air pollution and longer periods of heat, make things worse. This also applies to the consumption of ultra-processed foods and the microplastics in what we eat. CKD is sometimes referred to as the 'black lung' [lung disease caused by inhaling coal dust] of climate change."

Improving health and the environment

Stenvinkel argues that taking better care of the planet will benefit human health too. Take biodiversity loss: "Species are disappearing at a rate we haven't seen since the five prehistoric mass extinctions, increasing the risk of pandemics. Monocultures in our livestock farms are ideal breeding grounds for new viruses. Declining soil fertility is making the crops we grow less nutritious. And we're losing opportunities to expand our knowledge and discover the drugs of tomorrow. Approximately a third of current pharmaceuticals are derived from natural sources. How many potentially life-saving treatments might we miss because species became extinct before we could explore their therapeutic value?"

Or consider our food production system, which uses huge amounts of water and contributes significantly to CO2 emissions. "At the same time, the unhealthiest foods – like ultra-processed foods and red meat – cause the most environmental damage. So eating a more plant-based, unprocessed diet is a win-win for both our own health and that of the planet."

Learning from bears

Stenvinkel believes we can learn a great deal from nature. For more than fifteen years, he has been exploring biomimicry, studying how nature solves certain challenges and whether those solutions can be applied to humans. "It all started with hibernating bears." These animals barely eat, drink or move for months without it harming their bodies. "They seem immune to artery calcification, almost as if they have a natural vaccination. It would be incredible if we could translate that into a medicine for human use."

And why do some animals live exceptionally long lives? Why are cats – both domestic and big cats – particularly prone to kidney disease? A research group that Stenvinkel is a part of, lead by Leon Schurgers, professor of Biochemistry at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML), has recently submitted a grant application to study more of these "animal models". The two know each other from when Stenvinkel spent a year as a visiting professor at the Cardiovascular Research Institute Maastricht (CARIM), where Schurgers also works. "He was researching vitamin K. CKD is often associated with vitamin K deficiency, which increases the risk of artery calcification."

Interdisciplinary

If funded, the study – expected to involve around ten PhD students – will likely fall under the new FHML institute Climate HEALTH, which examines health issues through the lens of climate change. Stenvinkel also plans to work together with veterinarians, biologists and ecologists and other disciplines, as he has in the past. "Tackling these kinds of complex problems requires communication across disciplines. Medical professionals have a lot to learn from other fields. This situation can't be solved from one perspective alone. We need to connect the dots."

Cleo Freriks

50 YEARS JM

"Resistance MEANS YOU'RE PUSHING IN THE RIGHT PLACE"

Attorney **Roger Cox** has made history with his landmark climate cases against the Dutch government and oil giant Shell. But his work is about much more than climate change, he says. "The real issue is power. Most people just don't see it."

Receiving an honorary doctorate from the university in the city where he has worked for 25 years, and where both his daughters studied, feels like "a gesture of support, an encouragement to keep doing what I'm doing", says Roger Cox in his office at Paulussen Advocaten in Maastricht. It sounds modest coming from an attorney who has received global recognition, from being named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world in 2021 to winning the Dresden Peace Prize, placing him alongside Aleksei Navalny and the European Court of Human Rights.

What is all the more remarkable is that Cox started out in construction law rather than climate litigation. His career took a different turn 20 years ago, when he watched Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and began to ask himself what he personally could contribute to the fight against climate change. "I first looked into environmental law – it seemed the obvious place to start. But along the way, I found out that its primary purpose is to protect the status quo, so companies can keep doing what they're doing."

Cox realised he needed to take a different approach. "Climate change is about much more than the environment. It affects finance, energy supply, human rights. Focusing on the latter in particular can drive real change." The logic, he explains, is that major contributors to climate change are failing to meet their "duty of care to society": the actions of these companies and institutions put others at risk. "Even if there are no specific laws and regulations requiring them to reduce emissions, for example, they should still take responsibility for that. The emissions they produce today will harm humanity decades from now – that's scientifically undisputed."

Major players

He set out his ideas in his 2011 book *Revolutie met recht [Revolution Justified]*, which laid the groundwork for his climate litigation. His best-known case is undoubtedly the one he brought against the government of the Netherlands on behalf of the Dutch Urgenda Foundation. The court ruled that the government had to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 25 per cent by 2020, compared with 1990. It inspired new cases around the world, says Cox, "with a lot of judges adopting our reasoning. We hope the Shell case will have the same effect." With that case, brought on behalf of Milieudefensie/Friends of the Earth Netherlands, he aims to force the oil giant to halve its carbon emissions; the Supreme Court is expected to rule on it next year.

Next, Cox and Milieudefensie are taking on the Dutch bank ING together. "We're focusing on the major players, not the corner bakery. A lot of industries are dominated by a handful of multinationals. They largely determine the systems we live in."

The real problem

That's what it all comes down to, says Cox: power dynamics. "I think a lot of people don't see – or don't want to see – the underlying structures. Climate change is only a symptom of the real problem: oil and gas companies have become too powerful. Since the 1970s, neoliberal ideology has increasingly shifted power from governments to corporations. These companies are increasingly organised on a multinational scale, giving them new leverage. If they don't like something, they can threaten to relocate to another country. And through mergers, they become ever larger, with enormous revenues. With that kind of money, you can buy anything."

That power is then used to preserve existing systems, Cox continues. "Political lobbying, greenwashing, hiring the best lawyers… It's what made Amsterdam's financial district rich. The climate crisis could already have been solved, but companies would rather give profits to shareholders than invest them in innovation. And when things get tough, it's never the shareholders who have to tighten their belts. Cuts and redundancies are borne by workers and citizens. That's where much of the discontent in society comes from. And who gets the blame? Those who cannot defend themselves – asylum seekers, LGBTI+ people."

Sacrifices

Taking on powerful polluters has required personal sacrifices. In interviews, Cox often speaks of the years when he spent countless nights and weekends at the office, missing much of his daughters' upbringing. "It's the only way to win these kinds of cases." Won't that discourage law students and young graduates from following in his footsteps? "Not everyone needs to follow my path – it's not representative. We're trying to break something open. Once that's done, others can build on our work. They can do so with a healthy work-life balance."

But anyone can make a difference outside the courtroom, Cox says. "Talk to each other about why things are happening the way they are. Make your voice heard. Show that it doesn't have to be this way. We can go vegan or vegetarian all we want, but that alone won't change enough." He points to Fridays for Future, the school strikes for climate. "Before the pandemic, they had a huge impact on the way politicians talked about the issue."

Silence people

What about the fear of being labelled an activist? "No one should lose sleep over that", Cox says firmly. "It's a tried-and-tested strategy used by certain groups – the far right, neoliberal think tanks – to silence people. They go out of their way to give the word a negative connotation. The same thing is happening with the word 'woke', which is really about empathy. Activism is about engagement; there's nothing wrong with that."

It's simply "how the game is played", says Cox. "I'd always take resistance as encouragement – it means you're pushing in the right place. If there's no pushback, the status quo isn't feeling threatened and you're just going along with the crowd. If anything, you should actively seek out resistance."

Dennis Vaendel

50 years of UM, 50 years of quarrelling

From its earliest days, the then State University of Limburg (RL), now Maastricht University (UM), has had to fight for its place in the world. It often faced hostile outside forces, from national politicians and civil servants to other universities in the Netherlands. The institution was still in its infancy when an economic crisis struck. Budget cuts were inevitable, and the "last in, first out" principle made the newcomer in the far south an easy target to point the finger at. But people underestimated the fighting spirit down here – a spirit running so deep in the young university's DNA that it has even caused frequent internal conflicts.

Text: **Wammes Bos**
Illustrations: **Berend Vonk**
Photos: **archive *Observant***

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DISASTROUS PLANS

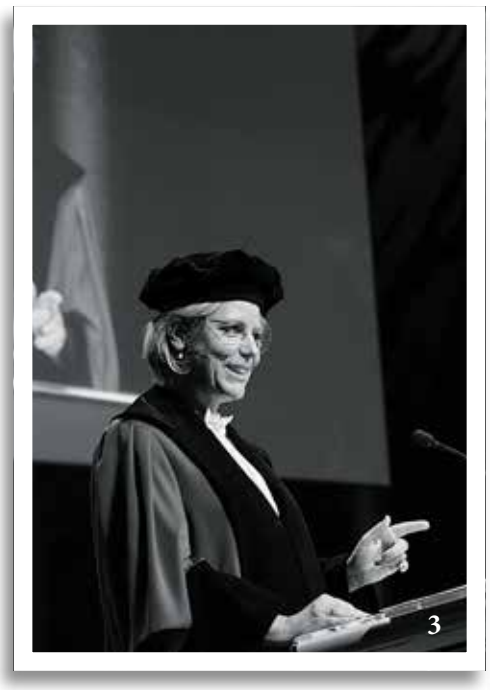
The most recent battle, of course, was the lobbying effort to stop the government from going ahead with its disastrous plans to limit the internationalisation and increased use of English in Dutch higher education. Disastrous for UM, that is. Having fewer international students and mainly Dutch-taught degree programmes would be a death blow to this university, UM President Rianne Letschert warned anyone who would listen. She even argued in *Observant* that the whole region would take an economic hit, "bakers, restaurants and cinemas" included. Together with local politicians and industry, Letschert lobbied tirelessly over the past few years, practically wearing out the carpet at both the Ministry of Education and the House of Representatives ("Yes, you could put it that way…" she says now). And it worked: Maastricht will get an exemption, as long as nothing goes wrong while the law is being finalised. Letschert's efforts on behalf of UM have placed her in a long line of activist university presidents, stretching all the way back to Sjeng Tans – the man widely regarded as the university's founder. His successors have been just as willing to stand their ground for the institution.

CONTROVERSIAL FROM THE START

In the 1960s, the Dutch population was growing, more doctors would be needed, and the country's seven medical programmes were increasingly popular and at capacity. In short, the Netherlands needed an eighth medical faculty. Where, though? Maastricht put up its hand: after the forced closure of its coal mines, South Limburg could do with a boost. On top of that, too few pupils from Limburg were going on to university, and everyone knows that universities mainly attract students from their surrounding regions. It only made sense for the eighth medical faculty to be established in Maastricht and grow into a full university. At least that was the view in Limburg.
But there was strong competition from Brabant and Twente, which pointed to their objective advantages: they already had higher education institutions (Tilburg University and Eindhoven University of Technology and the University of Twente, respectively), so they wouldn't need to set up a brand-new institution complete with an academic hospital. This was also why Maastricht's candidacy was opposed by key government advisory bodies and civil servants in the Ministry of Education. The House of Representatives was divided, even within the large Labour Party. But its education specialist managed to win the party over, and in 1969, the cabinet finally opted for Maastricht. Cue celebrations in Vrijthof Square, and the great bell of the Basilica of Saint Servatius tolling in triumph.
The Labour Party's education specialist was Maastricht native Sjeng Tans, who would become the university's first president. He was a fighter – and he had to jump straight back into the ring, because in the years that followed, doubt crept in. Population growth was less than anticipated, and some argued that the seven existing medical faculties could cope in the long run. Would the cabinet's decision stand? When the ministers involved kept delaying the necessary concrete steps, the future started looking uncertain again.

Something innovative

But the people behind the idea weren't easily put off. The setup of the new medical faculty was still fairly traditional; what if they made it something unique instead? Something innovative – an experimental, "problem-based" educational system? And what if they trained a new



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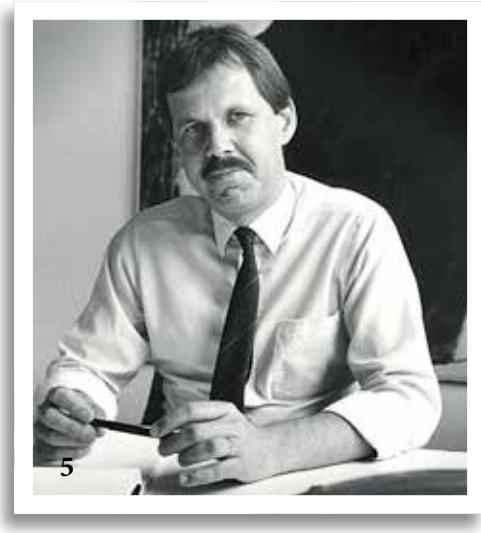

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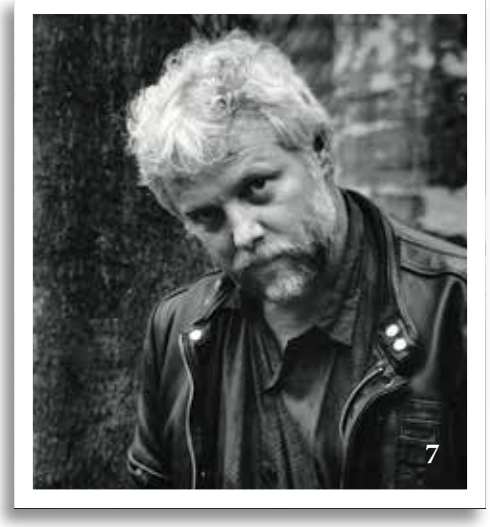

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1. *Temporary accommodation for the first psychology students*
2. *Students during the INKOM of 1986* ***3.*** *Rianne Letschert*
4. *Sjeng Tans and Queen Juliana at the start of the RL* ***5.*** *Karl Dittrich*
6. *Queen Beatrix opens the AZM* ***7.*** *Louis Boon* ***8.*** *Co Greep*

kind of doctor, with an emphasis on primary care and general practice, and more focus on the social aspects of illness and health? This new direction became known as the university's Basic Philosophy. Amazingly, Maastricht got the go-ahead. But everything had taken so long that it was 1973 by then. Tans, who knew all too well that nothing is guaranteed in politics, realised that the decision needed to be made irreversible as soon as possible. So they needed students, and fast. After all, who would dare turn away a bunch of enthusiastic young doctors-to-be? That's exactly why fifty "course participants" – they weren't officially allowed to be called students yet – arrived in September 1974. That first cohort (and the second one too) was brave and confident, at least as feisty as the institution's founders. They would make their voices heard.

A HOSPITAL, REALLY?

Take the heated discussions about whether they needed an academic hospital. Today, the question seems absurd – a medical faculty comes complete with an academic hospital, doesn't it? That was certainly the view of the people who had been recruited from other universities to form the core team here in Maastricht. Among them were surgeon Co Greep and other professors, all of whom wanted to get a proper faculty and hospital up and running as soon as possible – if only to ensure its long-term survival in a political climate increasingly focused on budget cuts around 1980. That was the threat hanging over the brand-new institution well into the 1980s: closure to relieve the national education budget. It was clear that something had to be built, and fast – something nobody could ignore.

It was a formidable struggle, partly because supporters of the idea were fighting on two fronts. Opponents within the university interpreted the Basic Philosophy to mean that they did *not* need a full-blown traditional academic hospital; they could make do with existing hospitals and other care institutions in the region, and the academicisation of general practices.

It was a formidable struggle, partly because supporters were fighting on two fronts

Idealistic types

This interpretation found plenty of support among younger staff and especially within the first cohort of students. Mostly leftist idealists, they imagined a different kind of medical practice – which was exactly why they hadn't chosen a more traditional medicine programme.

They also knew how to reach the right people in the healthcare industry, the relevant ministries and the parties in the House of Representatives. Their proposal for a medical faculty *without* an academic hospital gained national traction, much to the annoyance of Greep and his allies. They were even more annoyed when parliamentary questions were raised – prompted by the Maastricht troublemakers – asking whether building a new hospital went against the Basic Philosophy.

When this news reached the university's headquarters on Tongersestraat (now SBE), it was like a bomb had gone off. Stabbed in the back – by their own students, no less! Co Greep's swearing could probably be heard far and wide. But the opposition was eventually worn down. Ten years later, an academic hospital – now known as MUMC+ – had been built in Randwijck. Did that settle the matter? To the surprise of many in Maastricht, it didn't. As late as 1994, civil servants in The Hague were still talking about shutting down the medical programme and academic hospital. Karl Dittrich, the university president at the time, called it proof "that the higher education budget cuts were conceived in an office by a full-blooded desk jockey".

WHERE IS THE MONEY?

The Maastricht medical faculty was long known for its conflicts, both internal and with other new faculties and the Executive Board. They stood their ground and weren't about to hand over their fairly generous funding just because other faculties came knocking – much to the newcomers' despair.

Between 1982 and 2003, René Verspeek was director of what is now the School of Business and Economics (SBE). In an interview for SBE's anniversary book (2022), he said: "In

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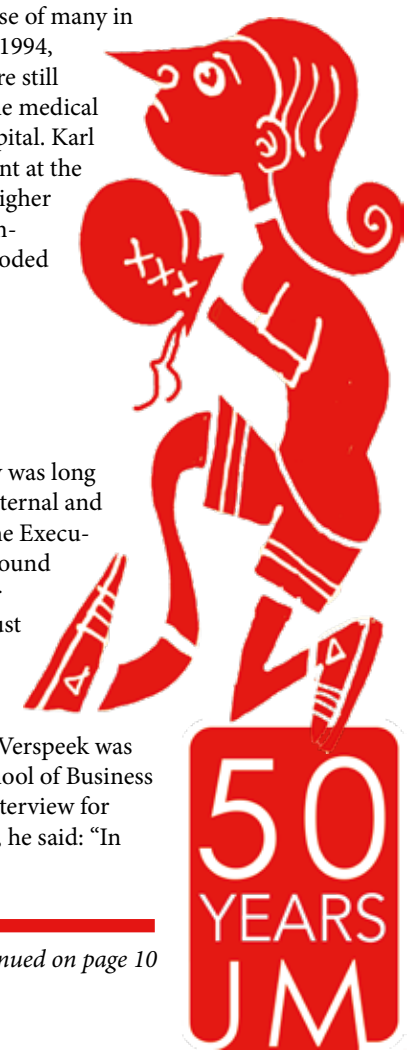


background

the early years, we had to fight endlessly for our right to exist. Medicine (…) was everything. And they kept getting most of the money – the allocation model was flawed. Meanwhile, the Executive Board kept pushing growth, almost obsessively. We were growing, but where was the damn money?"
So the economists reasoned that if the Executive Board wouldn't listen, they would just have to dig in their heels. Verspeek: "At one point we said: we'll just take fewer students. We're growing too fast anyway; we're already struggling to find staff, especially in business economics. (…) There were a few moments in our history where we put the brakes on. (…) I saw it as one of my tasks to chip away at the love for medicine in discussions about the allocation model. (...) Our point was: teaching should be funded on the same basis. We too have groups of ten students, and besides, we're doing well in the rankings – we consistently finish first or second, unlike those complacent types in medicine who are slipping to third or fourth place."

GIVE THE UNIVERSITY AN INCH…

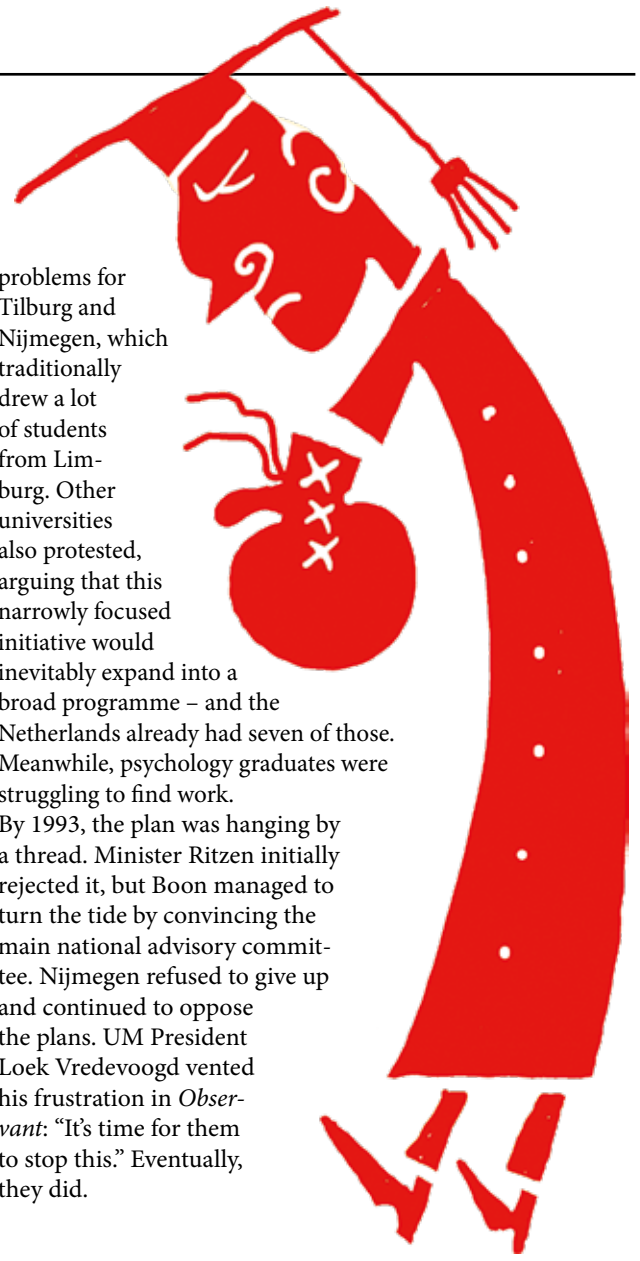
The young university also frequently bumped heads with its older peers. It needed to grow to be viable, which meant adding new degree programmes. But nearby universities often saw this as competition. Take the now highly successful and steadily growing Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE).

A niche programme would soon grow into a full-blown faculty

From the very start, Maastricht had dreamt of a proper science faculty, but real and potential opposition meant it remained just that – a dream – for forty years. Radboud University Nijmegen was the fiercest opponent of the early plans for a Science College in Maastricht. It has since changed its mind and now even collaborates with FSE.
This wasn't the first time that Nijmegen stood in Maastricht's way. If it had been up to Nijmegen in the 1990s, there would never have been a psychology programme here, let alone a whole faculty. The first plans for the programme emerged in 1992, focusing on the science side of psychology: biological and cognitive psychology, a niche in the broad field. Initiator Louis Boon argued that it wouldn't overlap with what was already on offer elsewhere in the Netherlands – they had looked into it carefully – and so the minister had no grounds to refuse permission. "Nonsense. They must not have looked further than Sittard", a Nijmegen board member told *Observant* in disbelief.

Deep distrust

It marked the start of ever more stubborn opposition, including from Tilburg, where psychology had been all but eliminated by budget cuts. The opposition was fuelled by a deep distrust of the young university – the fear that if you give them an inch, they will take a mile. A niche programme in Maastricht would soon grow into a full-blown faculty, and that would cause real problems for Tilburg and Nijmegen, which traditionally drew a lot of students from Limburg. Other universities also protested, arguing that this narrowly focused initiative would inevitably expand into a broad programme – and the Netherlands already had seven of those. Meanwhile, psychology graduates were struggling to find work.
By 1993, the plan was hanging by a thread. Minister Ritzen initially rejected it, but Boon managed to turn the tide by convincing the main national advisory committee. Nijmegen refused to give up and continued to oppose the plans. UM President Loek Vredevoogd vented his frustration in *Observant*: "It's time for them to stop this." Eventually, they did.



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