

observant

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University and hospital integration plans made public

Unique in the Netherlands but not without risks

The whole story surrounding the integration between the university and the hospital is finally out in the open. Why is it necessary? Not only would both institutions benefit, but according to the board members, so would Limburg, Europe, and even the world. This time, there is also mention of the 'vulnerable position', threats from politicians that could affect them, such as budget cuts to healthcare and restrictions on the number of international students.

For the first time since the announcement of the administrative integration between the university and the hospital in June 2023, documents have been made public. These were published on intranet UMPLOYEE on Tuesday afternoon. Until now, both the participatory bodies and board members have only met behind closed doors. But – in a new development – they want “broad involvement” from the community in the further implementation. Various committees from both institutions will give their final verdict in February or March. Although rejection is seen as unlikely. The plans – totalling two hundred pages – are at such an advanced stage that rejection seems almost inconceivable. If everything goes ahead, there will be a “transition phase” of twelve to eighteen months.

Maastricht model

The documents that have now been published discuss strategic choices for four substantive themes (such as sustainability and a healthy society), HR, culture and student welfare, but also provide an answer to the question of how such a huge organisation with more than ten thousand employees and 23 thousand students will be run. The governance plan has been renamed the ‘Maastricht model’: unique in the Netherlands because nowhere else is a university merged administratively with an academic hospital. In any case, the outcome is that the current UM Executive Board will disappear and be replaced by a five-member Executive Council headed by two chairs: one who will focus on healthcare, and thus effectively be the ‘head’ of the hospital, and a university chair, the rector, who will be responsible for education and research. In addition, there will be three members with separate areas of responsibility (finance, human resources, valorisation and impact). A striking detail is that the Council’s decisions must be unanimous (“to prevent the formation of

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Collage: Simone Golob

FASOS EXPERIMENTS WITH REFORMING ITS PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING,

staff and students have questions and concerns.

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Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

A TABLE FOR THE KING, festive trumpets and impressive speeches: a photo reportage of UM’s 50th Dies Natalis.

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editorial

Ultra VIPs

"I'm in group 7." Another colleague: "Group 12." A third: 13. The latter was very nervous, concerned they'd end up in the church cellars. "Does that mean we're not sitting together, then?" he asked hopefully. We didn't have a clue when we set off to the Sint Servaas Basilica on Friday afternoon for the 50th anniversary of Maastricht University. All we had was our e-tickets with the group numbers printed on them. In 1976, Queen Juliana signed the founding charter of what was then the State University of Limburg in the basilica. This time, with King Willem-Alexander as an honoured guest, they decided that of course, they were going to host the celebrations there. We had heard a while ago that the table that Queen Juliana had sat at would be moved to the basilica for the occasion from its usual place in the Law Faculty. Bart Zwegers, lecturer and conservator of academic heritage, was going to take charge of that personally. So we organised a photographer to capture an amusing peak behind the curtains of the big day. The organisers were less amused, we have since come to understand. The stress levels were high. Thankfully, our photographer, Ellen Oosterhof, did manage to snap a picture of Bart with the table (see front page).

To be honest, I had had my doubts about the basilica. Beautiful and enormous, sure, but I remembered watching my children's Nativity plays there, from the back of the church or leaning against a pillar, barely able to distinguish the Virgin Mary from the angels or one of the Wise Men. It was more like a Nativity in miniature.

On Friday afternoon, at the Dies, we were not seated in the area reserved for the press (at the back) – we had deliberately chosen not to, for fear of similar 'miniature Nativity scenes'. Instead, we ended up with the other members of staff in groups 7, 12 and 13. On one of the tables by the entrance, there was an A4 labelled "Ultra VIPs", a crib sheet for the hosts. I didn't recognise the faces – journalists are noseys, especially when it comes to Ultra VIPs. Either way, we weren't on it.

This Dies celebration is one of the best the *Observant* team has ever seen. It was an excellent choice to award an honorary doctorate to climate activist Roger Cox, nephrologist Peter Stenvinkel and Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, who gave an honest, emotional and powerful speech. Unfortunately, we didn't have a view of the front stage, as the vast pillars were in the way (instead, there were screens in the side aisles).

Building manager Roy van Kessel ('group 12') sent *Observant* a letter that same day (see page 8). "Minor irritation at the Dies Natalis", he wrote. He felt compelled to air one grievance: why had the university chosen this seating plan? The "hoi polloi" at the sides who were stuck with tv screens and at the whims of the edit versus the honoured guests and professors in the middle who were able to look right in the faces of André Rieu and his musicians. I understood how Roy felt. Which leaves us with the question, how can we get some of those premium tickets next 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'

Attracting the best talent: top 3 per cent of students get their tuition back



Student parade during the 2010 introduction week. The top 3 percent of that year would get their tuition fee back
Photo: Loraine Bodewes

2006 – 2011

Getting top marks instead of scraping by with a pass? In 2006, Maastricht University came up with a plan to recruit the brightest of the bright. Any student who ranked among the top 3 per cent of their year would get to study "for free", according to the Strategic Plan 2006–2010. Upon careful reading, "free" turned out to be a bit of an overstatement: housing and living costs weren't covered, but the top 3 per cent would get their tuition fees reimbursed – then €1,500 for EU students and €8,000 to €11,500 for non-EU students. UM's PR machine kicked into gear, and the story went national in the summer of 2006. Even international media picked it up. Each year, around 350 bachelor's and master's students would benefit from the scheme. Price tag: half a million euros. Where the money would come from was still unclear that summer, but by late October the Executive Board revealed its intention to draw on private funds, including profits from UM's holding company – money that had originally been set aside for around forty master's scholarships for non-EU students. The scheme was launched in September 2007. As for the rules, beneficiaries had to continue studying at UM the following year. After all, the point was to retain talented students in order to raise the overall level of education. In tutorial groups, the logic went, the strongest students would lift up the rest. The scheme was to be rolled out gradually: first for first-year students, then for second-year students, and so on. Graduating master's students, who usually leave UM, would receive a maximum of €1,500, even if their tuition was higher. This didn't sit well with the University Council, which pointed out that a non-EU master's student would get back only a fraction of their €11,500 tuition fee. "If you keep saying students can study for free, when that isn't true for master's students, you're attracting students under false pretences."

Rector Mols was willing to accommodate the University Council, though he warned this might have consequences for the number of students who would benefit from the scheme. Would the loudly announced 3 per cent rule still apply to the top 3 per cent of students? In

the end, the university dug deeper into its pockets, and the 3 per cent rule remained intact.

In October 2008, 139 brand-new second-year students received their tuition back, along with a certificate. Most were German or Dutch. An Italian European Law student interviewed by *Observant* was pleasantly surprised – she hadn't been aware of the scheme, but now planned to aim for the top 3 per cent again in the second and third years of her studies.

But by then, criticism was mounting. At the Faculty of Law, members of the student representative party DOPE demanded to know how the top 3 per cent was determined. The process turned out to vary from one faculty to the next. Albert Scherpbier, director of the Institute for Education of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, doubted whether the best students were truly identified. "They only look at grades, but I think motivation and extracurricular activities should count too." At the Faculty of Psychology, people questioned the compatibility of the scheme with Problem-Based Learning: students chasing a top ranking might be tempted to keep their ideas to themselves rather than share knowledge in tutorials.

"If you keep saying students can study for free, when that isn't true for master's students, you're attracting students under false pretences"

In 2011, the Executive Board announced it was scrapping the scheme, not because of the criticism but because of the cost. In 2010 alone, the university paid out €700,000 – money that was supposed to go to talented but financially disadvantaged students. With budget cuts looming, the university decided the money would be better spent there. On top of that, the scheme proved labour-intensive for faculties, which only added to the overall cost.

Riki Janssen

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

Now more defensive reasons are visible

Continuation from page 1

cliques”). If they cannot reach agreement, the (new, merged) Supervisory Board of the ‘integrated knowledge institution UM-MUMC+/azM’ (quite a mouthful) may consider the matter.

One budget

There will be no administrative changes for the Faculties of Psychology and Neuroscience, Law, Arts and Social Sciences, Science and Engineering, and the School of Business and Economics. Management there will remain with the deans and faculty boards.

The biggest change will affect the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. It will be merged with the hospital under a single board, with the dean of the FHML as vice-chair and the ‘head’ of the hospital as chair. The plan is one strategy, one policy, one budget. In this respect, this structure is not that different from other Dutch UMCs. However, by linking the entire university to the hospital – there will be a single knowledge institution with a five-member Executive Council – the UM hopes to keep the FHML on board. Helen Mertens of the MUMC+ previously told *Observant* in April 2024, in a joint interview with UM President Rianne Letschert, that there are enough examples in the country – she mentioned Leiden and Rotterdam – where integrated UMCs have “drifted apart” and become too distant from the rest of the university. Both considered this undesirable. Letschert previously said: “If that faculty were to go to the UMC, we would lose it.” It would be at the expense of the others; instead, they are trying to keep everything together.

Spectre

How does this benefit UM as a whole? Since the start the emphasis has been on pooling knowledge, greater influence, a robust organisation, more attractive to students and staff. But now more defensive reasons are visible: the location on the periphery of the Netherlands, in a region with a tight labour market and increasing demand for care, two relatively young institutions of limited size. All of this makes them vulnerable, it seems. Added to this are the pressure of national budget cuts on research and healthcare, the restriction of the number of international students, as well as plans for the concentration of highly complex care; the latter is a spectre for the hospital.

Once again, emphasis is placed on “preserving the individual character and autonomy” of both institutions. They will still be free to make their own choices, for example, how to organise teaching and research within the faculties. Academic freedom remains guaranteed.

Cultural differences

Other areas investigated include a new ‘student welfare’ centre (in Randwyck) and HR, culture and leadership. With a damning report published just before Christmas on social safety in the hospital (which leaves much to be desired), this is an important topic. The MUMC+ report, which the board itself commissioned after a number of crises, shows that a lot of work needs to be done to address mistrust, fear and distant administrative leadership.

As far as HR is concerned, the preliminary conclusion is that both institutions will maintain their own collective labour agreements. The higher wages at the hospital will therefore not be decisive, not even for FHML employees,

which has been recognised as a potential cause of friction and frustration. There will need to be a lot of communication about this, according to the documents.

Cultural differences have also been investigated. Yes, there are differences, but there are also similarities. Both work in a “people-oriented, value-driven and socially oriented” manner. However, academic freedom is highly valued within UM and decision-making is much slower than at the hospital, which is more results-oriented and hierarchical. According to the rather optimistic working group, the differences should not be an obstacle, but should instead be “consciously linked” to create added value.

Risks

Suppose the participatory bodies give a green light in February or March. Who will then keep a close eye on developments? An ad hoc committee has considered this question (including emeritus professor André Knottnerus and health economist Professor Wim Groot, who has repeatedly expressed criticism of the plans in his columns in *Observant*). In their advisory report ‘evaluation’, they identify a number of risks that an internal committee (to be established) will have to keep an eye on, because “a single major change, however great the opportunities associated with it” is not without its dangers. Among other things, they mention the possible dominance of the hospital or the university, the fear of a ‘health university’, but also an unbalanced distribution of money between the various scientific disciplines, less room for academic freedom, underestimation of cultural differences, and the risk of bureaucratisation.

Wendy Degens



Don't kiss me, I'm British

“

When greeting a new person in Britain you generally have two options: hand-shake or hug. The correct choice used to be based on gender, with the British conforming to the cold computational logic of: if both men then shake hand, if both women then hug, if one of each then also hug. However, we have moved away from the gender essentialism to a social proximity rule: if new/ formal then shake hand, if friendly then hug. And while I say “hug” we’re still British so it’s often more of a one-armed back pat. It’s awkward and stiff, and we love it.

These options are also much less intense than the horror stories we’d heard of how the French impart a couple of kisses upon greeting, which always sounded like the most intimate option for greeting a stranger... and then I moved to the Netherlands.

A lot can be said in favour of the Dutch, but the greeting practice of three kisses is outrageous. Three whole kisses (which, frankly, would be classed as assault in the UK) is an insane number of kisses to be throwing around to people you’ve just met. It’s shocking enough to experience this meeting one new person, but Dutch birthday parties are another experience altogether. Entering the circle of terror and being subjected to more kisses in 2 minutes than my parents would give each other in a whole year is psychologically disturbing – to be fair my parents did divorce when I was 7, so their lack of intimacy was probably more of an early warning sign in retrospect. Still, three kisses with a stranger is mental.

I say, we need a new international option. An early signal that communicates “I don’t know the culture here and want to say a friendly hello with as little contact as possible”. High fives could be an option, but they’ve always felt a bit too American somehow. Maybe a sort of wave? But that might look a bit odd up-close. Honestly, bring on another pandemic so we can go back to the beautiful simplicity of the elbow bump.

”

Tom Smejka,
lecturer at the faculty of Psychology
and Neuroscience

New FHML institute focuses on health impacts of climate change

Heat stress, poor air quality and water pollution

If you overlay Maastricht’s urban heat map with a city map of mortality among older people, you will quickly see the pattern: the hottest neighbourhoods during the summer months are also home to the largest numbers of isolated over-75s, who are particularly vulnerable to heat. Why is that? And what can be done about it? These are the kinds of questions that the new Climate Health Institute of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) will study.

The Climate Health Institute (CHI) is different from most other research institutes at FHML. While it has a scientific coordinator, the institute does not employ any staff of its own. What it does do, explains FHML dean Annemie Schols, is “bring together knowledge, infrastructure and networks. UM researchers with good ideas about climate change and its health impacts can meet like-minded colleagues here”. The institute also helps translate research results into practice, “as we hope that climate-related research will lead to concrete policy changes”, says Schols.

In the example above, this would involve identifying high-risk neighbourhoods. “The municipality can then call to check up on older residents in those areas using an AI algorithm, arrange for home visits to be made, make sure they learn how to gradually acclimatise to periods of heat and give them access to well-cooled buildings in their neighbourhood at certain times.”

Another example is Valkenburg, where GPs have reported a marked rise in a range of



Image: Shutterstock

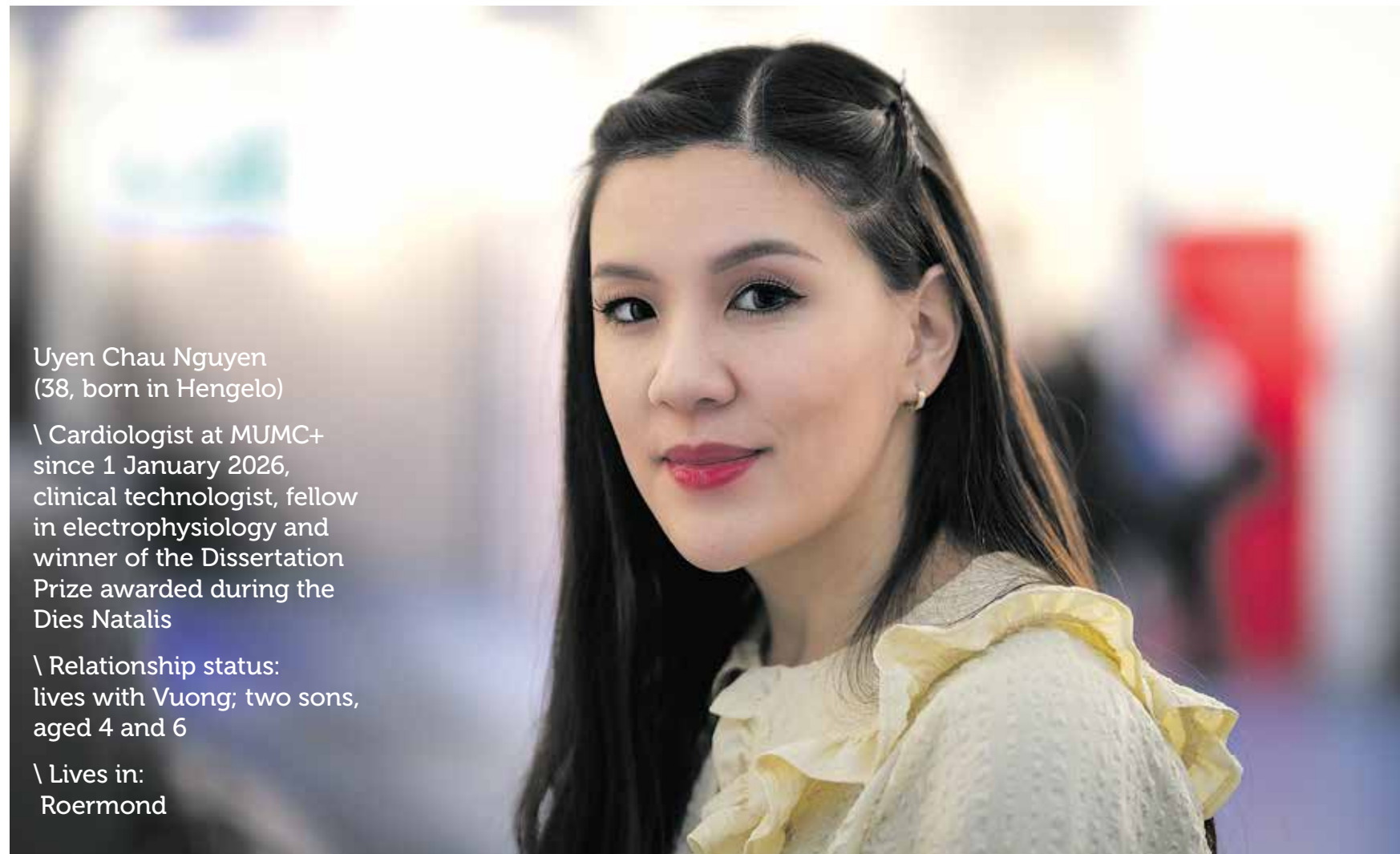
health problems since the flooding of the Geul River in 2021. “These include psychological stress”, says Schols, “as well as fungal infections and other skin conditions.” The mayor “is keen for us to meet with local GPs” to explore how these problems could be addressed quickly in the event of another flood.

Around five million euros have currently been earmarked for a research programme on heat stress, air quality and water quality, as well as for a teaching programme. What these programmes will look like in concrete terms should become clear in the coming months, explains Schols. Part of the money comes from government “sector plans”, for which the fac-

ulty received funding from the ministry in 2023. The hospital and other faculty institutes are also contributing financially – a generous gesture, as the money will not go into their own budgets. Why were fellow institutes so supportive? According to Schols, it was “not a point of contention”. The institute directors wanted to show “genuine commitment” through their contributions. “They wanted a separate institute; they do not see it as a threat. No one was trying to secure the money for themselves.”

Peter Doorackers

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



Uyen Chau Nguyen
(38, born in Hengelo)

\ Cardiologist at MUMC+ since 1 January 2026, clinical technologist, fellow in electrophysiology and winner of the Dissertation Prize awarded during the Dies Natalis

\ Relationship status: lives with Vuong; two sons, aged 4 and 6

\ Lives in: Roermond

Photo: Joey Roberts

“My father warned me that I would have to work twice as hard to achieve the same things as a Dutch child”

Cardiology is a male-dominated field.

[Laughs] There are a lot of self-assured, persuasive men in this field. They're lightning fast and medically excellent. I don't see myself that way. I'm currently subspecialising in electrophysiology, not yet fully confident in the cath lab, and I'm very cautious. I'm softer and more soft-spoken. I'm a sensitive person. If someone says something unkind, or I do something wrong, I can really dwell on it. I used to be very timid and too shy to speak much. It might have something to do with my Asian roots, but I'm not sure – I've never really analysed myself that closely. As a med student I was told, “You need to make yourself more visible, you need to speak up.” It helps to be bold; I had to rely more on hard work. I'm less timid now. I've been here since 2015, I know everyone well, and I feel comfortable engaging in discussions. If I'm somewhere else, it still feels a bit intimidating. This does mean I can relate more to young med students and PhD candidates. Maybe the quieter ones are just afraid. I try to instil confidence in my junior colleagues. As for patients, they sometimes come in angry, but I try to look past that. Most are simply scared. If I can make them feel heard and, as they're leaving, they ask if they can come back to see me, I'm happy. That's where my strength lies.

Are you happy? Yes, I'm very happy. I have lovely children and I'm very grateful to have been given the opportunity to grow up in the Netherlands. I've been able to do everything I wanted. I've become a doctor here, which never would've been possible in Vietnam, even just financially. It pains me to see all asylum seekers being lumped together now. The world is harder than it was in the early 1980s, when my parents came here as refugees. They were picked up by a Dutch ship when their boat sank in the sea near Southeast Asia. First they ended up in a refugee camp in Singapore, then the Dutch government brought them to the Netherlands.

I'm following in my parents' footsteps. My father studied architectural engineering in Vietnam and his

family was politically active. The communist regime arrested him and his entire family, sent them to a re-education camp and stopped him from continuing his studies. He fled, taught himself Dutch using Dutch-English and English-Vietnamese dictionaries – there was no Dutch-Vietnamese dictionary yet – and earned a Dutch secondary-school diploma within two years, after which he enrolled in computer science at the University of Twente at the age of 26. We're a STEM family. I studied clinical technology at the University of Twente. I guess it must be in our genes.

At home, we talk each other's ears off. Our family carries silent grief. Fleeing Vietnam, relatives on my mother's side going missing during the perilous journey, leaving friends and family behind, settling in a foreign country... We don't talk about it much. You are very open with your children, but Vietnamese families don't talk about emotional stuff.

A wise lesson my father taught me. My father warned me that I would have to work twice as hard to achieve the same things as a Dutch child. And I did. I completed the highest level of secondary school, took additional subjects, completed two degrees – clinical technology and Medical Doctor-Clinical Researcher (AKO) in Maastricht – and earned a double doctorate in computational medicine. I'm a second-generation migrant with a refugee mentality. You feel like you have to make up for something; you don't want to disappoint your parents, who worked so hard to give you opportunities. That's why I found it very difficult to switch to the Medical Doctor-Clinical Researcher programme. Clinical technology is a demanding six-year degree programme. You work alongside doctors, but you don't treat or operate on patients yourself. When I was halfway through the programme and doing hospital placements, including in Maastricht, I found myself jealous of the doctors performing procedures like implanting pacemakers. The way they interacted with patients, the way they searched for solutions... As a cardiologist, you're dealing with matters of life and death.

Being able to help when a patient's life is in immediate danger – that's what I live for.

I was named after... My full name is actually Vũ Uyên Châu Nguyễn. [Laughs] Vũ is my mother's family name. Uyên Châu is my given name. At home, they call me Châu [pronounced “ciao”], but when I was doing a placement in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland during medical school, my name caused confusion and they started calling me Uyen instead.

What's the best decision you ever made?

Coming to Maastricht for the Medical Doctor-Clinical Researcher programme. That's where it all started. It's where I met my mentor, Frits Prinzen, a physiologist and professor of Electro-Mechanics of the Heart, who saw my potential. It was incredible. When I asked him if I could do a placement with him in the summer between my first and second year – I wanted to keep going, to do something useful during the holidays – he put me in touch with his colleague Angelo Auricchio, a professor and electrophysiologist in Switzerland. In Switzerland, physicist Mark Potse taught me how to work with computer models and measurements of the electrical activity of the heart. His institute works closely with computer scientists and model developers, which suited me. I learnt so much there, and Angelo kept asking me to come back, sometimes between clinical rotations. He became my PhD supervisor, along with Kevin Vernooij, a UM professor and electrophysiologist. Electrophysiology is a subspecialty of cardiology I've only just started in. It's all about heart rhythm disturbances and how to treat them with pacemakers, implantable cardioverter-defibrillators (ICDs) or with ablation – burning away tiny areas of heart tissue. I wouldn't want to do anything else.

What does your partner find annoying about you?

He was born in Vietnam, came to the Netherlands as a child and is eight years older than me. His Vietnamese roots run deeper, perhaps, so his parenting style is stricter than mine, which is more Dutch. He says I'm too soft with the children. He's an electrical engineer with a PhD in experimental physics. He has always worked very hard, but when he comes home from work nowadays, he's done. I often work and study in the evenings, when the children are asleep, and on weekends. He accepts that; he knows that when a paper is due, it's due. I appreciate that.

Riki Janssen

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee
Read the extended version of this interview
at observantonline.nl/english

Staff and students have concerns

Larger tutorial groups, merging courses: FASoS set to 'reform' PBL

If the board of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences gets its way, over the course of the next few years, the problem-based learning (PBL) of its three bachelor programmes will be reformed. Initially envisioned to reduce the workload, it has since also become a cost-cutting measure. Staff and students have concerns and questions.

Plans for this 'PBL reform' have been talked about around the faculty for a number of years. The board wants to "future proof" the programmes: less dependent on the number of enrolled students, and with a reduced work pressure and enhanced 'work pleasure' for staff members (and students). In essence, it means that staff should spend fewer hours teaching, with measures being considered including merging some courses, bigger tutorial groups, shared skills courses for bachelor programmes and more self-directed learning for students.

Given the threat of government cuts, the board now also views the plans as a way to partially cover looming deficits – if nothing changes, by 2029, the decreased funding from the government is expected to lead to an annual deficit of over a million euros. The board estimates a maximum of 6,000 teaching hours could be saved across the three bachelor programmes by merging courses only, which would save the faculty almost half a million euros a year.

A pilot has been prepared for each programme for the coming academic year. Tutorial groups for some courses in Digital Society will be increased from a maximum of fifteen students to a maximum of thirty. Arts and Culture will be experimenting with a (partial) merger of a 'substantive' course with a 'skills/methods' course in the same period, with one joint exam and the same tutors serving both courses. In European Studies, a maximum of forty students will be allowed to take part in a group research project which will replace the thesis and a number of courses in the 4th period.

Not everyone is convinced yet, the most recent faculty council meeting showed. Council members have received many questions from concerned colleagues. Council chair Tullio Viola said that while everyone understands that this is necessary to reduce

the costs, "How do we know for sure that this will lead to fewer teaching hours, and not actually increase the workload? And are there no other ways to cut costs?" Other concerns: have the potential negative consequences been sufficiently considered? How do you ensure everybody's view is taken into consideration? Students would welcome the chance to contribute to the reforms more, said student member Lena Brenken. "We don't see how some of the proposals are beneficial. Tutorial group meetings sometimes already feel like mini-lectures. What will that be like when there are thirty students?"

Associate dean of education Patrick Bijsmans assured the council that many of these con-

cerns had already been discussed with students and staff over the past few years. "We are aware of this. Small-scale teaching remains our base. Larger tutorial groups will be the exception rather than the rule. And the result of a pilot could also be that we choose not to use larger groups at all." Nothing is set in stone yet, said Bijsmans. "For now, everything is being discussed very broadly, we will start working out details over the coming period." Discussions for which will take place during amongst others a number of workshops, the first of which was held this week, allowing all members of staff to have their say and suggest new ideas. "We have that space."

The faculty is also considering other ways to

save money, added director Constance Sommerery. "But the majority of our costs simply are staff costs." In other words, something has to be done there. "We do currently have the luxury of foresight when it comes to a deficit, giving us time to work out adjustments." Furthermore, said Bijsmans, "if we don't reform PBL, then we also don't reduce the work pressure. That has to go down, as that was the original intention behind these plans, so you would then still have to find a different solution there." Sommerery: "We have to give this a serious try."

Dennis Vaendel



Students at the FASoS-building on Grote Gracht Photo: Joey Roberts

50 years of UM podcast: How Sjeng Kremers put the university on the map

"I thought, 'They've gone mad'"



Sjeng Kremers in 1997 Photo: Philip Driessen

He arrived in the south of the Netherlands when the State University of Limburg was still in its infancy and immediately took the fledgling institution under his wing with wholehearted conviction: Sjeng Kremers. Appointed in 1977 as Queen's Commissioner of Limburg, one of his tasks as the head of the province's government was to revive employment after the closure of the coal mines. And the university played an important part in that. "I always had its back, whether locally or nationally."

Kremers had a clear vision of how the university could put itself on the map. But his vision sometimes clashed with others, he recounts in an *Observant* podcast recorded to mark UM's fiftieth anniversary. "After the medical faculty was established, there was a plan to set up a

faculty for policy civil servants. I thought, "These people have gone mad". I just knew that other Dutch universities would love the idea – with an initiative like that, Maastricht would no longer be a threat to them."

Kremers advised against the idea and urged the Executive Board to go back to the drawing board. In his view, the focus should be on setting up affordable faculties. "Not disciplines like the natural sciences, with their laboratories, but faculties that would attract large numbers of students. To me, that meant law and economics."

And so it happened. Kremers' strong political connections, notably with Prime Minister Dries van Agt (CDA), enabled him as Queen's Commissioner to push through various decisions in support of Limburg's economic restructuring and the university's interests. He

also ensured the academic hospital was built. That UM is now celebrating its fiftieth anniversary is "wonderful", he says. "Maastricht had so much potential – and it has lived up to it. Credit where credit is due."

Deborah Blekkenhorst

Scan the QR-code to listen to the *Observant* podcast (it is in Dutch with English subtitles) with Kremers and learn where the table stands today at which Queen Juliana sat in 1976 to sign the university's founding document.



THE KING, A FESTIVE MOOD AND REVERENT SILENCE: LOOKING BACK ON THE 50TH DIES

There was “the most festive music ever composed,” according to André Rieu, who provided the musical accompaniment with his Johann Strauss Orchestra and the Maastrichter Staar (he was referring to Händel’s *Hallelujah*). There were speeches that brought the entire Basilica of Sint Servaas to complete silence; the King signed his name at the very same table where his grandmother once had; prizes were handed out in abundance; and afterwards, of course, there was a reception. Last Friday, Maastricht University celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Read a report of the events on observantonline.nl/english



*Following in the footsteps of his grandmother, Queen Juliana, King Willem-Alexander signed a document concerning the university
Photo: Philip Driessen*

THERE WAS “THE MOST FESTIVE MUSIC EVER COMPOSED”...

*Images of the university’s past and present were projected onto the administration building on Minderbroedersberg – here, former dean of the Faculty of Law Hildegard Schneider
Photo: Joey Roberts*



dies natalis



*Among professors: former rector Luc Soete (centre) in conversation with two professors
Photo: Joey Roberts*



*Dean of the Faculty of Science and Engineering Thomas Cleij
Photo: Joey Roberts*



*King Willem-Alexander has a private conversation with UM President Rianne Letschert under the watchful eye of many cameras
Photo: Philip Driessen*

...PRIZES WERE HANDED OUT IN ABUNDANCE...



*Chair of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mirjana Spoljaric Egger (centre), was awarded one of three honorary doctorates. Her speech left the audience in silence
Photo: Philip Driessen*



*Around twenty pro-Palestinian demonstrators made their voices heard on the Henric van Veldekeplein
Photo: Philip Driessen*

...AND OF COURSE, THERE WAS A RECEPTION AFTERWARDS

submitted letter

Minor irritation at the Dies Natalis

Maastricht University's birthday celebrations kicked off on Friday with the Dies Natalis. The party was made even more special by the presence of King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands.

Fifty years of UM is a very good reason to celebrate, and of course I didn't want to miss it. So, not yet knowing that the king would also be present, I registered on time and arrived at the entrance to Sint Servaas Basilica well in advance and in good spirits. After passing through the ID check, I was directed to my seat based on the colour of the wristband I had been given.

That place, where in times gone by many an altar boy may have learned about another side of the Roman Catholic Church, turned out to offer an excellent view of the side of the enormous stage where André Rieu and his orchestra, among others, would later put their best foot forward. This would have been difficult or impossible to follow from the folding chairs, but fortunately, a small screen had been set up for the crowd on the side (the "hoi polloi"). The approximately 70 to 80 colleagues around me all appeared to have received a white wristband based on their ticket classification.

I was assigned to category 12, which triggered my curiosity about how many categories there actually were, who was responsible for this fleet review, and who thought it was a



good idea to place colleagues out of sight of all the dignitaries present in a remote corner of this beautiful church on this joyful day. Almost all of my colleagues sitting around

me in the "coal shed" belonged to the support staff, with, to my surprise, a few stray academic staff members (category 7) thrown in.

Of course, UM is not about me; I am obviously not that important, but the apparent ease with which my colleagues and I have been placed in an irrelevant category and thus literally sidelined perhaps says something about this university. The awards for the support staff, which are normally presented at the New Year's reception that was cancelled this year, were ultimately omitted altogether on this anniversary. I decided to leave; after all, the party was sure to go on without me. Leaving the church turned out to be a bit of a problem, but when I promised not to come back, I was allowed to go after all. I got home in time (after submitting a proper two-hour leave request via Successfactors, of course) to watch the live stream. It was a beautiful ceremony and a celebration as a celebration should be, and one I would have loved to be part of.

It's a shame that I deprived the King of the opportunity to take a selfie with me. But that's a minor disappointment, especially in light of the honorary doctorate awarded to Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, whose impressive, or should I say chilling, speech was my personal highlight of this Dies Natalis.

Roy van Kessel, category 12 (and UM building manager)

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