

# observant

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The puzzle appears complete, yet many questions remain about **the marriage between the hospital and the university**

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Illustration: Simone Golob

## ALAAF!

How student fraternity Epicurus poked fun at the tradition of *vastelaovend* and crowned a unique Princess Carnaval

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## HOORAY!

There is less academic pressure at Psychology – but that isn't necessarily a good thing

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This is the last printed *Observant* before the Carnival break. Keep following us online next week via [observantonline.nl/english](http://observantonline.nl/english), social media, and our newsletter. A new print edition will be available on 26 February



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## editorial

## Silent recluses

I studied Arts and Social Sciences in Maastricht with her in the nineties. We were both from the same area and had no desire to move go and live ‘above the rivers’ somewhere else in the Netherlands. There was an instant click. As it happened, we both started questioning our choice of degree in our second year. Lots of philosophy, history, theory, analytic, critical thinking. How much did we enjoy that? And more importantly, where would we get a job afterwards? At one point, changing to a practical, social pedagogy degree seemed the best solution to us. We persevered, though – you have to finish what you started. Subsequently, this dynamic duo from Limburg started an internship in Rotterdam, at a museum about the human body and health that was yet to be built. The entrance was going to be iconic: a brightly coloured female figure, some thirty metres high, by the French artist Niki de Saint Phalle. The museum never materialised – financial issues. Nothing to do with us, actually, as the pay we received for our internship was just about enough to cover the rent on a shabby flat. In Dordrecht, of all places. I doubt our work was of an academic level. But we were being wonderfully creative, having fun, and our supervisors were happy enough. We lost touch after we graduated. She ended up in the world of art, books and culture. I chose journalism.

A while ago, I discovered she was very ill. She had suffered a brain contusion and her whole world had been thrown into disarray. A message on Instagram was enough to reconnect, but there was no chance to meet up, nor would there be for the foreseeable future. She recently announced her departure from her ‘professional’ life on LinkedIn. She wrote about how, as a “hermit in quiet seclusion”, she had found again and again that she was unable to keep up with the rest of the world, but – as positive as always – that there were still reasons to be hopeful. I leant back and thought of the young women around me who were now living like hermits as a result of burnouts, long covid, debilitating migraines, or ME/chronic fatigue syndrome. Unwell and trapped in a body unable to move. Who had also had to say goodbye to their professional lives and have no reason to still be on LinkedIn. It is no great coincidence that the media is currently also full of articles about ‘silent recluses’ – last Thursday, there was a debate in parliament about post-covid and extending the specialist care in Dutch expertise centres (such as Maastricht). In an essay for *Volkscrant Magazine*, journalist Lisanne van Sadelhoff, who also ended up stuck at home on medical leave, wondered: Who am I without my work? “I loved my job, but my job didn’t love me all that much when things started to get tough.”

No tales of editorial choices, deadlines or spelling mistakes, this time. This time, an editorial about the reality of life outside the office, because we are all just people and we all know someone who is a ‘silent recluse’ nobody really talks about.

Wendy Degens

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



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

# Help, Prince Carnaval is a princess!



*Epicurus’ Council of Four is clearly delighted with Debbie the First, the Carnival princess appointed by the men’s fraternity itself Photo: Philip Driessen*

# 2000

“What do these students actually contribute to our city, apart from bike chaos and noise?” Maastricht locals have been known to sigh. In March 2000, the front page of *Observant* provided an answer to that question: a proper *Princess Carnaval* – the first in the city’s history. The somewhat unexpected instigator of this historic moment was the independent student fraternity Epicurus.

The “Epicurists”, recognisable by their trademark cow-print waistcoats, freely admitted that they hadn’t been motivated by a sudden burst of progressive and feminist social critique, alcohol-fuelled or otherwise. One of their stated criteria for the princess was “looks that make every man fall head over heels”, as they unabashedly put it. Coincidentally or not, the accompanying photo shows the newly crowned Princess Debbie the First looking rather uncomfortable as she faces the singing members of Epicurus’s Council of Four (the article doesn’t explain why four rather than the traditional eleven).

No, their main goal was to wind up the *Tempeleers*, the city’s largest Carnival association. Traditionally, each year the *Tempeleers* selected the city’s official “Prince Carnaval”, a man from a particular social background – upper middle class, “one of the boys”, respectable. The year 2000 was no exception, despite ongoing debate in the local media about diversifying the tradition. When the mask came off, the prince was revealed to be Peter the Second: a white, married police commissioner in his early forties. “Not a woman, not a gay man, not a person of colour”, *Observant* noted alongside his photo in February 2000. For Epicurus, it was reason enough to take a jab

at the *Tempeleers* and to poke fun at Maastricht locals who had “debated the matter extensively in the press”. Enter thirty-year-old Debbie Essers, “Café C’est la Vie’s well-known bartender”, a born-and-bred Maastricht local (presumably to avoid straying too far from *Tempeleers* tradition) and “a familiar face in the student scene”.

## Student fraternity Epicurus mainly wanted to wind up the *Tempeleers* and poke at their tradition of a male prince

According to *Observant*, Princess Debbie’s crowning was supposed to mark the beginning of “a long and rich history of Carnival princesses”. It was a noble ambition, but reality had other plans. Maastricht’s Carnival is still ruled exclusively by middle-aged white princes, and although Epicurus is still around, Debbie remains the city’s first and only Princess Carnaval.

Peter Doorakkers

*Maastricht University was founded fifty years ago, on 11 September 1975, when the Dutch House of Representatives gave the official go-ahead for the State University of Limburg. In this anniversary series, we delve into our own archives to rediscover memorable, funny, relevant and curious news stories from the past. we tegen?*

## “It’s okay if some students find the programme demanding” How much academic pressure can students handle?

*How demanding should a degree programme be? This question prompted a brief discussion at the Faculty Council meeting of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN). Following an overhaul of the curriculum, bachelor’s students of Psychology are significantly less stressed. But has the pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction?*

In 2024, the Bachelor in Psychology underwent a major overhaul. Specialisations were introduced in the third year, such as clinical psychology. Mentors were given a more prominent role and the programme implemented a “programmatic assessment” system. Students now build up a portfolio documenting feedback and reflection on their developing competencies. At the end of the year, a committee assesses whether they have made sufficient progress to move on to the next year. The hope was that moving away from a relentless focus on marks and exams would ease the pressure on students.

This has been achieved, judging by the results of the National Student Survey (NSE) 2025. Students were asked to rate the “academic pressure” they experienced on a scale ranging from “much too low” to “much too high”. Before the overhaul, 42 per cent of Psychology first-years felt the academic pressure was too high; this has since dropped to 10 per cent. 64 per cent said it was “precisely right” (compared with 49 per cent before) and 20 per cent even find it “too low” (compared with 3 per cent before). But is that last figure a cause for celebration? Anna Sagana, academic staff representative on the Faculty Council, raised this question during its meeting in January, where the survey results were discussed in connection with the nominal plans, next year’s teaching plans. “Everyone needs challenges in order to learn and grow. Are students still being challenged enough if one in five think it’s too easy? I don’t even mind if some find it too difficult. Not everyone has to go on to an academic career – it’s okay if some students find the programme demanding.”

Rob Ruiter, who succeeded Anke Sambeth as

Vice-Dean of Education on 1 January, agreed with Sagana to some extent, but stressed it was too early to draw conclusions. “The new curriculum was launched in September 2024. The National Student Survey was carried out in January and February 2025, so first-years had only been studying for a few months.” The situation is quite different for the Bachelor in Brain Science, also offered by FPN. 30 per cent of Brain Science students rated the academic pressure they experienced as too high, and 11 per cent even rated it as much too high. The programme committee is aware of these results and is trying to address the issue, said student council member Roos Spierings, who studies Brain Science. “But they also told us there’s just a lot of material.” She was backed by Michael Capalbo, chair of the Faculty Council. “This is the biggest concern for Brain Science students, but I don’t see any changes in these plans. That is worrying.”

Cleo Freriks



## Bored by student writing

“

I feel bad to say this, but this past academic year has probably been the one where student writing has bored me the most. Bachelor and master theses, take-home assignments and, the worst, motivation letters. Yes, the content was more “polished” than other years, but it all felt dreadfully the same and soulless. Grading is rarely an academic’s favorite task but this year, while grading, time seemed to drag on even more slowly than before.

Sharing this experience with my colleagues, I learned that I wasn’t the only one with these feelings. The culprit, we think, is generative artificial intelligence, or gen-AI. Students rely increasingly on gen-AI to “improve” their writing and, in some cases, to generate entire blocks of text (this year, I had to report several cases of students who used gen-AI to write most of their assignments). University guidelines on the use of gen-AI are continuously updated, and students have told me that they find it hard to know what is the “correct” use of gen-AI and what crosses a line.

Regardless, what bothers me is the idea that we are sacrificing the “soul” of writing (and yes, even scientific writing can have soul) for qualities such as grammatical perfection. Especially when it comes to pieces like motivation letters, I’m not looking for perfectly written letters and generic statements about enthusiasm for my research topic. I want to know about the person writing it and who I will be investing my time and effort with over the coming months.

Research currently shows that most people are not very good at guessing whether a text has been made by gen-AI. Among the general population, rates are about 50-50, no better than a coin toss. Interestingly, accuracy rates among university educators are often higher (up to 70 percent) and I swear that we have a sixth sense for it. Beyond distinguishing whether a single piece is AI-generated or not, our feeling that across students’ work, everything feels “same-y” is a signal that something is seriously amiss.

Of course, I am writing from the perspective of the university teacher, and the question is whether it should matter what our personal experience is of reading students’ written work. For the sanity of me and my colleagues, I think that enjoyment and interest in our work is extremely important. Further, we care about educating students who cannot only produce well-written, meaningful work, but who also care about and deeply understand what they have written, both within their education program and beyond.

”

Jessica Allea,  
assistant professor at the faculty of  
Psychology and Neuroscience

## Visually impaired student transforms “far too much” information into podcast “I hope it will help others”

*Long reading lists and longer glossaries. For many students, it is a challenge to learn it all by heart, but even more so for Noortje van Maldegem. The second-year Data Sciences and Artificial Intelligence student, who only has 20 per cent vision, was looking for – and found – a simple but effective way to get to grips with the material.*

“Podcasts!” Van Maldegem reveals the secret immediately. She makes them herself, although she says that does sound more significant than it is. Her podcasts are generated by a computer and are able to break down the course material thanks to information entered by the student. “It’s not very exciting, but it is very effective. And an absolute game-changer for me.”

It all started with her Computational and Cognitive Neuroscience class, says Van Maldegem. “A fantastic subject, but there is a lot of literature. I would spend a whole weekend working through the reading material for just one lecture.” The topics discussed turned out to be complex, full of terminology that Van Maldegem didn’t know. It also takes her longer to read through everything as it is. Her impaired vision is the result of a tumour on her optic chiasm, where the optic nerves intersect.

### Walking

She asked her lecturers whether there was an alternative that might allow her to keep up, but they didn’t have any ready solutions. Then something gave Van Maldegem pause for thought. “I walk to the university and back every day, about a six-kilometre round trip. What if I were able to listen to the course material while I was walking?”

Initially, the student tried university software which converts text into speech and is offered to students who might benefit from that. “But it wasn’t that great. I wasn’t even able to upload all the material I wanted to convert. And the speech it was able to produce was

very cold and synthetic. Not something that will help you remember.”

More natural speech, as if somebody were talking to you and explaining things, would have a much greater impact. “Like on a podcast.” This led Van Maldegem to NotebookLM, Google’s AI-assisted note-taking tool which

analyses and summarises documents, such as PDF files. She selected the most important pages of the book, added the lecture slides and the glossary, and generated the first podcast in Dutch – a promising result. “It was just

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Photo: Observant/Illustration: Shutterstock

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



Maxim Braat (Düren, Germany, 2004)

\ Master's student of Neuropsychology and chair of Ferro Mosae, the student triathlon association of Maastricht

\ Relationship status: single

\ Lives in: Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“

My parents would support me in anything – except if I decided to take up smoking

”

**I feel...** like a *Limburger*. I was born in Germany because my parents were living there at the time for work, but I have Dutch nationality. My father is from Brabant and my mother is from Limburg. When I was a few years old, we moved back to the Netherlands. My parents now live in Belgium, and I came to Maastricht for my studies.

**Swimming, running or cycling?** I do all of them as a triathlete, although I hesitate to call myself that – it sounds very official. I got into the sport by chance. I played American football, but after five years I was advised to stop. I had a misaligned cervical vertebra, and the pain was unbearable. I was 19, I was seeing a physiotherapist, and I started running more. I was already a cyclist; my father and grandfather are huge cycling fans. One thing led to another and I started doing triathlons. There are different types, but officially, a triathlon consists of a 3.8-kilometre swim, a 180-kilometre bike ride and a 42.2-kilometre run. That's what they call a classic Ironman Triathlon. What's so great about it? You have to work incredibly hard for it; nothing comes easy. I wasn't used to swimming in open water, which is really difficult because of the current. You don't just get the hang of it straight away. I like that challenge.

**My go-to chip shop order.** Just chips with mayonnaise. I eat lots of vegetables and carbs to stay in shape, and I have to watch my diet, but it's okay to indulge every once in a while.

**I dream of going pro.** My sport is important to me; I even have a professional coach from the triathlon world. Almost not a day goes by without training. I work a lot on my swimming technique, and I hope to get good enough to compete. I'm currently focusing on half triathlons; full ones would require even more training time, and as much as I enjoy it, my studies come first. I see my future in academia. Ideally, I would like to become a clinical neuropsychologist. I'm more of a practical person; I can't sit at a laptop all day. When I was younger, I wanted to be a pilot in the armed forces, but I'm too tall for a fighter jet. I'm 1.84 m tall, but I was expected to reach 2 m. Luckily, an alternative was easy to find. I'm fascinated by the brain, so I just had to decide between biology and psychology. I chose the latter, and I've never regretted it.

**My sister is my best friend.** We have a good relationship. She has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), a rare connective tissue disorder. It means she has a lot of pain and little energy. In 2024, I raised money for research by doing the Ironman in Duisburg. I wanted to do something for her and other patients.

**What is the hardest conversation you've ever had with your parents?** [Thinks] Hmm. I talk to my parents a lot, but it's never difficult. We have a good relationship. I'm grateful for the way they raised me

and the values they taught me, like respect. Were they strict? Well, that's a subjective question. How strict is strict? They have called me out on my behaviour, like all parents do with their teenagers. They wanted me to do my best and get good marks. Now that I'm more involved in my sport, we talk about that. My parents would support me in anything – except if I decided to take up smoking.

**Failure is not an option.** I don't see it like that. I'm a perfectionist, yes, and that is my biggest weakness. At the same time, I believe that if you're going to do something, you should do your best. But it's part of life to fall flat on your face sometimes. After all, I'm only human.

**Who doesn't like you?** I'm not afraid to say what I think. I'll always be respectful, but you can't be friends with everyone. Dutch people are quite direct; I realise that. I try to be aware of it when I talk to international fellow students. Sometimes you just have to be firm and call someone out, like if they're not pulling their weight in a group project. But I try to be gentle about it.

**My ideal partner is...** I don't have a specific type or requirements someone has to meet; I don't think it's right to talk in those terms. Someone is either a good match for you or not, and it's about more than just the colour of their hair or eyes. A relationship is about live and let live, giving each other the freedom to keep doing your own things. That's how you grow together. If you don't get that space and you're constantly on top of each other, you start getting on each other's nerves. I would love to meet someone who gets my love of my sport, but if not, I can make it work. It wouldn't be an instant deal-breaker.

**What would you like God to say to you when you arrive at the pearly gates?** That I lived my life to the fullest and that I made a difference, for example for people with EDS. That's what matters. Possessions don't mean anything up there.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

# “This generation is not weaker; its predecessors made the playing field tougher”

The idea that the current generation of students is less able to cope with stress and is labelled as weak is unjustified, writes Dominique Waterval, student advisor at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML). Their brains are no different from those of previous generations, but they do live in a more hectic world where everything seems to have to be better, more beautiful and faster.

People and fellow lecturers around me often ask me whether students today are less resilient. Whether they are more stressed, more easily overwhelmed and more prone to burnout. They often conclude, with a mixture of concern and disdain, that this is a weaker generation. That makes me angry, because this conclusion points the finger at the wrong culprit. This generation of students is not weaker. Previous generations, and by that I mean ourselves, have changed their environment and presented them with greater challenges.

## Survival

Thanks to evolution, our human brain has developed to compare, to belong, to take signals of status and exclusion seriously: if you don't belong to the tribe, you have less chance of survival. That's not a defect, it's biology. And it still applies. What has changed, however, is our environment. Social media constantly exposes us to material for comparison. Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat function, day and night, as permanent showcases of other people's highlights: bodies, achievements, social lives, productivity and apparent happiness. In a brain that naturally compares, this incessant stream of likes, lists and highlights creates constant pressure. Add to that the fact that our brains are sensitive to quick rewards, and it becomes clear why the advice to “just scroll less” rarely works. This is not a lack of willpower, it is neurobiology doing exactly what it was designed to do. But in a world that mercilessly exploits it.

*“If you receive hundreds of signals every day that you need to do more, then stress is not a sign of weakness, but a logical reaction”*

## Luxury product

And that's just one obstacle. The pace at which stimuli are presented to students has also changed. Take, for example, contemporary cartoons for young people. They are fast-paced, short, and a new stimulus is broadcast every few seconds. The effect is not that young people “no longer have any focus”, but that we have created an environment in which peace and attention have become a kind of luxury product. It is as if we are asking students to learn to swim, while at the same time increasing the current, making the waves higher and then saying, “Gosh, they can't cope very well”. Many students I see are not lazy, not weak, not “too sensitive”. They are often dutiful, ambitious and committed. They want to do well, for themselves and for those around them. That is precisely what makes them susceptible to stress in a world that constantly suggests that you are falling short.

## Logical reaction

If you receive hundreds of implicit signals every day that you need to do more, that you need to be fitter, more sociable, more productive, more successful, more attractive, more efficient and more fun, then stress is not a sign of weakness, but a logical reaction. If we really want to help students, the so-called “Generation



Illustration: Shutterstock

Z”, we must stop making easy judgements and start taking the context in which they live seriously. Less preaching about “poor resilience” and more attention to the preconditions for healthy functioning (such as providing these young people with the skills to become more resilient in a demanding environment). And as a university, we must dare to take an honest look at our contribution. Through an accumulation of tests, grades and a continuous focus on comparison, we are feeding precisely that brain mechanism that always wants more, wants better and wants faster.

In short, this generation is no weaker than the previous one. Those who claim otherwise are confusing symptom with cause and looking away from what has really changed: the context that we, the previous generations, have created ourselves. And they are wrongly placing the responsibility for the problem on the students.

*Dominique Waterval, student advisor at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML)*

## The administrative integration in nine questions

# “It’s a difficult choice, because so much is still unclear”



The “wedding plans” between Maastricht University and the academic hospital MUMC+ have been published on the intranet. After a lengthy period of confidential discussions, the boards are now seeking “broad engagement” from the community. Plenty of questions remain (see box). *Observant* posed nine of them to representatives on the University Council and to experts both inside and outside UM.

### Text:

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### Illustrations:

Simone Golob

## 1 Two captains on one ship: will it work?

If the university and the academic hospital merge, leadership will be needed for over ten thousand employees and 23 thousand students. How do they plan to go about this? Enter the “Maastricht model”, unique in the Netherlands. The hospital and university will share a five-member Executive Board with two chairs: one in charge of healthcare, the other in charge of education and research. Two captains on one ship – will it be smooth sailing? In these kinds of structures, organisations often try to cover all risks – from power struggles to unclear responsibilities – by very precisely defining the balance of powers and duties in the articles of association, says **Rogier Deumes, assistant professor of Corporate Governance at the School of Business and Economics**. But that isn’t the main risk, he says. “Everything can look perfect on paper, but it’s ultimately about how the dynamics work in practice. If something goes wrong, the chair’s reaction sends a message to the organisation. And two leaders, each in charge of their own domain, can send mixed messages.”

This is rarely intentional, Deumes adds. “It often happens unconsciously, but that is precisely why it’s so important to be on guard against it. You need to make sure your policies form a coherent whole and stay consistent, or else you’ll increasingly drift apart.” Staff pick up on those unconscious cues, for instance what gets priority or which problems are addressed the most, and use them to work out what truly matters within the organisation. “That’s why one chair often ends up having more influence in practice. It’s rarely about personality.”

The risk is greatest when pressure is unevenly distributed across the two domains. “Healthcare, education and research each have their own pace and deadlines. A patient safety issue requires an immediate response; there’s little time for delay or room for nuance. In academia, processes tend to move more slowly. When tensions rise, the pressure will almost

automatically fall on healthcare. And leadership dynamics follow that pressure.”

How can this be avoided? According to Deumes, the three other board members will be of crucial importance. “They are in a great position to monitor the situation. They must point out unconscious cues and make implicit tensions explicit – and, like the chairs, stay in touch with the day-to-day reality of the organisation. You must keep your finger on the pulse. After all, this is a risk, but that doesn’t mean it’s inevitable.”

The Supervisory Board also has a role to play, “mainly as an advisor and sounding board. But it must take care not to exacerbate these dynamics by – again, unconsciously – primarily turning to one chair.”

## 2 Will there be a reorganisation?

From the outset, the board members have insisted that the integration was

intended to create a stronger, more resilient organisation that would be more attractive to both staff and students. And while the merging of support services (such as finance, purchasing, HR and IT) has also been on the table from day one, it was repeatedly stressed that this isn’t the main reason to pursue integration. The documents published last week show that, for the time being, everything will remain as it is, but the idea of a shared services centre is being explored. Does that mean a reorganisation might happen after all?

**Bernard Koekoek of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV)**, who is responsible for higher education in South Limburg and has witnessed multiple mergers between public institutions, wouldn’t be surprised. The devil is in the details, he explains: “No changes for now’ is far less concrete than ‘no changes for the next X years.’ I do believe that they don’t intend to make cuts in the new organisation immediately, but it would be naïve to think it will never happen. Who knows what the situation will look like in three or five years, especially if different people are in charge? My experience with previous mergers shows that, at some point, management will start looking at whether things could be run more efficiently” – and decide to reorganise after all. “It’s better to acknowledge that up front”, Koekoek says. “And to set down in writing how it would be handled. After all, IT and finance staff didn’t sign up for a merger with the hospital, but they will still have to deal with the consequences.” But Koekoek doesn’t think that compulsory redundan-

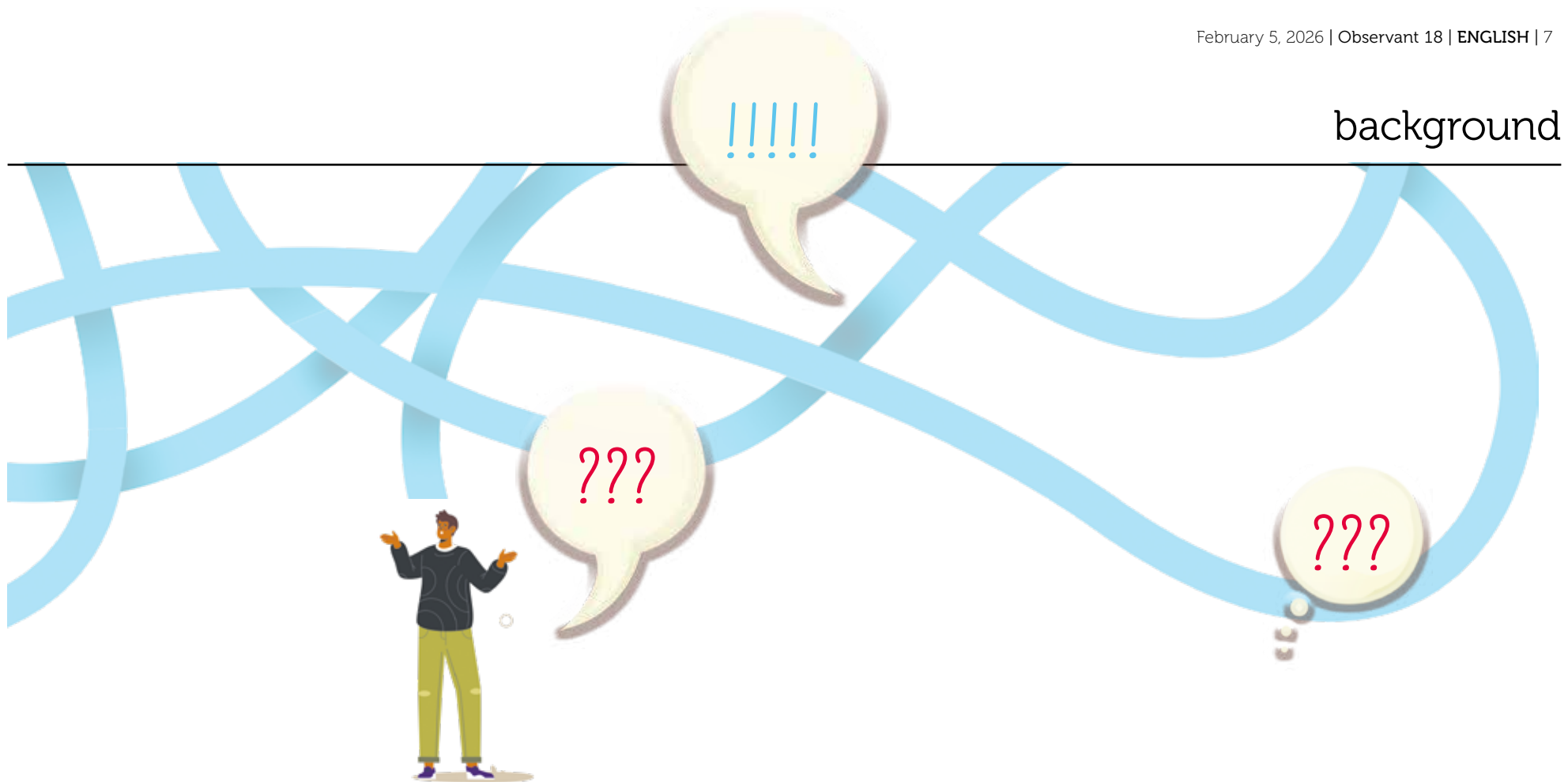
cies would be likely in Maastricht’s situation. “Compulsory redundancies are a last resort. If they were really necessary, they would happen immediately.”

What about the shared services centre? Could it really help solve problems in departments struggling to recruit staff, like legal services, as management claims? “That’s how they’re selling it, yes. I don’t think they genuinely believe it will solve those problems. If two departments are each lacking different expertise, combining them is a gain. But if the issue is that you can’t find the right people, merging departments won’t change that. This is just a drop in the ocean, not a solution to the problem.”

## 3 Will MUMC+ lose its academic status without an integration?

One reason why both parties are pursuing administrative integration, apart from the opportunities it offers, is the vulnerability they both feel in today’s political climate. Is it likely that academic hospitals will face budget cuts? And if so, should Maastricht University Medical Centre (MUMC+) be worried about losing its status as an academic hospital?

“The chances of that are virtually zero”, says **professor of Health Economics Wim Groot**. “It wouldn’t make sense in the wider Dutch context. Losing that status would have serious consequences for the quality of the Medicine programme, as the hospital serves as a training ground for the next generation of doctors. But it would also affect research, innovation (new treatments) and complex medical care. “There is a national trend towards concentrating certain treatments, particularly in oncology and cardiology, in specialised hospitals. The same could happen for highly specialised care that requires a licence under the Special Medical Procedures Act. For example, the former health minister wanted to restrict paediatric heart surgery to Groningen and Rotterdam, to the disadvantage of Utrecht and Leiden/Amsterdam. This was blocked by the courts last year. Take Maastricht, which has a proton accelerator [an innovative form of radiation therapy for cancer]; there are three in the Netherlands, but two would suffice. Maastricht’s peripheral location is a risk factor, as licences may be more readily granted to hospitals in the centre of the country. But I don’t see how a merger would improve Maastricht’s chances in this respect.”



## 4 Will working closer together reduce healthcare costs?

A positive reason for closer cooperation, according to the report, is that it will reduce healthcare costs. Is this true? “No, that’s nonsense”, according to **Wim Groot, professor of Health Economics**. “Having a cultural studies researcher at a patient’s bedside won’t drive down costs. They’re referring to more prevention, to keep people out of hospital, but prevention is already a focus in the existing partnership with the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML). What will change is that other faculties will be brought in, but that won’t reduce healthcare costs.”

## 5 What value will a joint student wellbeing centre actually add?

A proposal is on the table for a joint student wellbeing centre in Randwyck. This is part of the “added value of the integration”. What will this joint approach look like and why is there a need for a centre like this?

The plan to establish the centre emerged at a later stage in the integration process, says **Bram van den Berkmortel, a student and member of the University Council (LEX-Motus)**. He, along with several other student

members, served on a University Council committee that discussed the integration at an earlier stage. “We felt that those documents paid little attention to student wellbeing and education. That was the feedback we gave to the Executive Board. This plan came out of that.”

In October and November 2025, a working group was tasked with developing a joint approach to student wellbeing, encompassing both mental health and “physical, social and cognitive wellbeing, characterised by resilience.” The aim is to give students a “solid foundation for a healthy life.” This ambition should “become a permanent part of the academic and medical foundation of both institutions.” But what does that mean, exactly?

In this joint ambition, prevention is key. The plans stress the importance of preventing mental health issues among students by “developing students’ mental health skills”. Current support is described as “fragmented”, with students needing better guidance to access appropriate support. There is a strong need for information among international students in particular, as they may struggle to find a GP or get suitable health insurance. Finally, the plans point out that almost none of UM’s student support staff has a medical background or related expertise, making adequate support in times of crisis a challenge. Both the hospital and the university agree this must be improved – but how?

First, a Student Wellbeing Task Force will be established, including UM and MUMC+ staff as well as students. They will advise on the strategy and approach to be developed.

Existing effective services, projects and initiatives within both UM and the hospital will continue.

The hospital and university aim to learn from each other by sharing best practices and launching joint initiatives, such as wellbeing weeks, vitality programmes, online mental health courses and a joint communication campaign.

The ultimate goal is a proper student wellbeing centre, “a single point where students and professionals work together” – a place where students can find a listening ear, much like @ease or the student chaplaincy The Innbetween in the city centre. Support will primarily be provided by trained peers, with one of the nine UM psychologists providing psychological support. There will also be a Randwyck branch of services already offered in the city centre by the Student Services Centre, such as Disability Support. The centre may even include a student GP, as well as space for research and innovation.

This raises the question: why offer the same services as in the city centre? After all, the new centre is explicitly meant for *all* students, not just Randwyck students. “The whole idea of the centre, including its location, was news to us”, says Van den Berkmortel. “We never discussed a specific setup in our initial feedback.” The plans point out that Randwyck is currently home to the hospital, the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN) and UM Sports, but lacks the informal initiatives, wellbeing activities and services that the new centre would provide.

Van den Berkmortel sees the centre as a good



Continues on the next page

# WO in Actie on integration plans: too much remains unclear

In an open letter, the Maastricht branch of the campaign group WO in Actie has criticised the plans for the administrative integration between the university and the hospital. The letter raises concerns about

the unclear “double role” of one board member, the absence of a cost-benefit analysis and the lack of attention paid to the hospital’s social safety issues. According to the group, the plans leave

a lot of questions unanswered. Take the role of the chair of MUMC+, who will present budgets to the new joint Executive Council – a body of which they will also be a member. How will that work in prac-

tice? The letter also mentions a report released just before Christmas, which was highly critical of social safety at the hospital. The integration plans make no mention of this report, says the group.

(This may be because both the report and the current version of the plans were finalised in mid-December.) And despite nearly two hundred pages of documents, the group says it is “very difficult”

to weigh the costs and benefits of the integration. Neither an estimation nor a risk analysis has been published, despite the “fundamental impact” these plans will have on the governance of the university.

The group urges UM employees to share their questions and concerns about the plans with WO in Actie at the website [maastrichtintegration.info](https://maastrichtintegration.info). The full letter, in English, is also available there.

step in the right direction. “It’s important that the board, in pursuing close collaboration and organisational renewal, never loses sight of the students. It is fitting that they not only look at what all this means for employees, patients and even Limburg, but also take into account what it means for students.”

## 6 Can two partners join forces on equal terms?

Can a large hospital and a much smaller university, in terms of staff numbers and finances, really join forces on equal terms, as they intend?

Won’t the bigger organisation inevitably end up wielding more power and taking control? **Bernard Koekoek, of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV)**, is sceptical. “It’s tricky. If two organisations aren’t equal now, an administrative integration won’t magically change that.” He’s also sceptical about the persistent use of the term ‘integration’. “It’s mostly a marketing thing. Legally, there’s not much difference with ‘merger’. ‘Administrative integration’ is supposed to convey that ‘we’re all doing this together and it’s a very positive thing’. ‘Merger’ is a slightly more loaded term, implying that both sides have to give up part of their identity.”

Either way, if the smaller partner doesn’t want to be overshadowed, it needs to “effectively put up fences around the parts of the organisation that mustn’t change – the parts its new big brother shouldn’t touch”. And then make sure those boundaries are strictly enforced. But is that realistic in practice? Koekoek’s experience with mergers of public institutions has made him wary. “I’m sure things will be equal the day after the decision. But what about a few years down the line, or if new people are in charge? That’s our concern – that the balance of power will slowly shift.”

And what about the planned new five-member Executive Council? It will make decisions unanimously, which, in theory, should prevent old loyalties from influencing matters. Koekoek chuckles. “Let me put it this way: if you’re merging to become more effective, this is a rather complicated way to go about it.”

If the Executive Council can’t reach an agreement, a new joint Supervisory Board will step in. “It’s good to have that in place”, Koekoek agrees, “but if an issue ends up there, it’s already gone further than you want.” In other words, something has gone seriously wrong.

## 7 Will the hospital be able to draw on FHML’s financial reserves?

The Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) will be fully integrated with the hospital. The aim is to create a single policy framework and a single budget. But how do you achieve that when funding comes from two different ministries – Education on the one hand and Health on the other? The faculty also has healthy reserves, decentralised through its research institutes. Will MUMC+ be able to draw on those reserves and invest them in patient care, new beds and equipment?

“It all depends on whether the reserves have been earmarked”, says **Jaap Bos, professor of Banking and Finance**. “I understand why there would be concern on the university side if they are not. In that case, money could be drawn from the reserves freely, which is bound to cause friction. But I don’t expect that to happen. At the School of Business and Economics, if a research project generates a positive return – in other words, if the income exceeds the costs – you keep that surplus in reserve so that it can be used later, when costs are higher. I can imagine FHML working in the same way. In that case, the money is earmarked, which means no one can simply dip into those funds.”

On the topic of a joint budget for FHML and MUMC+, Bos says: “The main issue I see is the funding cycle. Our teaching is funded with a ‘lag’: you receive the money for your students a long time after they have started.” As a result, the balance can be negative in some years and positive in others. “So you have to put money aside in good years. I don’t know if the hospital

operates on the same cycle, but I think that’s unlikely. So how do you align those different cycles?”

Another key issue Bos raises – and one he has previously highlighted, at the university’s request, in a presentation to members of the University Council – is “the lack of counterfactual”. “In other words: what if? Has anyone looked into an alternative? What happens if you do something else? Suppose I run a company and want to take over a competitor. I explain to my shareholders that profits will rise by 10 per cent if we go ahead with the takeover. That’s a significant increase, so they agree to it. But what if profits would rise by 20 per cent if I didn’t take over that company and invested elsewhere? I didn’t present that option to my shareholders. That’s why I think you should always consider the alternative. If you decide not to integrate with MUMC+, a different situation emerges. What would that mean for costs and revenues? Personally, I don’t see a lot of alternatives here, and I think this step makes sense. The new government has plans to cut healthcare spending. In finance, there is one key strategy when a sector is facing change: create scale. If you want to convince the government that Maastricht has a highly capable hospital that deserves to survive, the same applies here: create scale by joining forces with the university.” And what does UM stand to gain? “I told the University Council: make sure you demand commitment from the Executive Board. If they do this, you need to know very concretely what the benefits are.”

## 8 How democratic has the process been?

Since the integration was announced in June 2023, representative bodies, university boards and several working groups have been meeting exclusively behind closed doors. Much information remained confidential, leaving staff and students with no way to scrutinise it. Only now can they review two hundred pages of documents – just a few weeks before the University



## Information session

Many questions are answered in the 200 pages of documents available – how the organisation will be managed, what will happen to the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, which strategic themes have been chosen, how the two different collective labour agreements

will be handled. But much remains unclear. Next Monday, the Executive Board will hold an online information session on what they are calling the “integrated knowledge institute UM-MUMC+/azM”. Anyone with a question is welcome to sign up.

Council is due to vote on them on 25 February. Isn't that far too late for the council members to take the community's questions and concerns into account? How democratic has this process been?

According to **Teun Dekker, chair of the University Council**, these questions touch on a tension inherent in all democratic systems. "As an elected representative, are you simply a conduit – someone who gathers and conveys their constituents' opinions and questions? Or have voters appointed you to dig into issues and ask the right questions on their behalf?"

Because all discussions have been confidential, the emphasis has so far been on the latter. **Sophie Vanhoonacker, professor of Administrative Governance at FASoS**, understands why, she says to Observant. "It's a very complex process with plenty of opportunities as well as risks. You really have to think it through. Most people at the university are only keeping an eye on it from afar, because everyone is busy with their own work."

This places a heavy responsibility on representatives, says Dekker. Even staff and students who have only been on the University Council for six months will soon have to vote on detailed regulations that have been years in the making, with far-reaching consequences for the university. "We've done a lot to make sure everyone is well-informed, organising technical briefings by civil servants, presentations by experts. My impression is that the University Council will be able to vote with confidence." Having served on an ad hoc advisory committee, Vanhoonacker saw the representatives' work up close. "These are highly principled and capable people who take their responsibilities seriously. I have no doubt their final decision will be carefully considered."

Still, Dekker calls it "frustrating" that everything has happened behind closed doors. "You want to show people you're taking it seriously. It wasn't our choice to do it that way, but the Executive Board's decision. Though I do understand why. If everything was public, it would weaken the university's negotiating position relative to the hospital. And do you really want to see how the sausage is made?"

The University Council has consistently pushed for transparency, claims Dekker. "That's why the documents are now public." On the intranet, he has encouraged staff to share their views on the plans with the University Council. Several council members are also visiting their faculties to discuss the proposal, Dekker says. He also appreciates that the

Executive Board will answer questions from staff and students in an online session next week. Will the University Council run its own information session? "We haven't decided. Ultimately, it's the Executive Board's responsibility to keep everyone informed; we don't want to overstep."

But can staff and students realistically grasp all the implications of such large-scale plans in so little time? Dekker believes they can, as they only need to focus on the main points. "Those make up just a small part of the two hundred pages. Everything else is rules, regulations and details. Scrutinising those is the University Council's job."

## 9 Could the plans still be rejected?

Over the past few years, a great deal of time and money has been invested in developing the integration plans. Can the university's representative bodies still realistically give a firm "no"? Moreover, detailed documents have suddenly been released. Has everything already been decided during the confidential meetings, leaving only a few minor points to be ironed out? Is the community's input just for show?

"No, it is by no means a done deal that the council will approve the plans", **Teun Dekker, chair of the University Council**, insists.

"I understand why it might seem that way. But the fact that a detailed proposal exists does not mean everyone has already agreed to it. You need those details to determine whether everything has been thoroughly considered." According to Dekker, it shouldn't matter that the university's Executive Board wants the University Council to approve the proposal. "The council must form its own opinion."

Dekker also points out that the University Council hasn't had the documents for long. "We only received them ourselves in December, just before Christmas. We saw an initial version last May, discussed it at length and gave a lot of feedback. After that, the plans went 'underground'. Whenever we asked questions,

the Executive Board said that all answers would be covered in the new version. We are now working hard to check if that's true and whether those answers are satisfactory."

Not everyone is convinced. In a post on the intranet, **support staff representative An Stevens** writes that she is facing a "difficult choice" as a University Council member because "so much is still unclear" and on some points "a positive vote would feel like blind trust". She has invited colleagues to share their views with her. "I think a discussion needs to get going", Stevens explains to Observant. "I don't think I can make a good decision without hearing as many opinions as possible. This is such an important decision – some say the most important one since the university was founded."

Stevens says she feels pressure increasing. More and more people have been approaching her, while she also has to keep up with her regular duties. Will 25 February come too soon? "We may decide that we feel it's too early to vote, but that's not just up to me." Although Stevens is generally in favour of the integration, she believes "it has to be done properly. I feel free to vote according to my conscience."

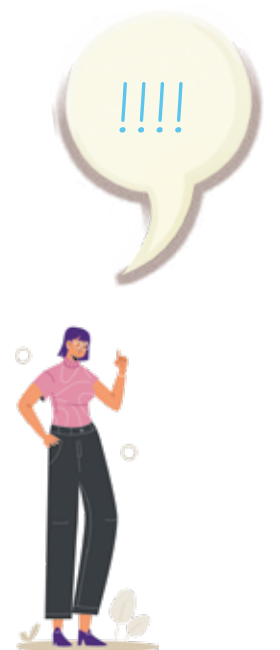
If the University Council rejects the proposal, several

outcomes are possible, explains Dekker. "The proposal would go back to the Executive Board. They could decide to drop it altogether or revise and resubmit it, unless they strongly believe we should have approved the plans in their current form. That would create a conflict, involving the Supervisory Board, which might lead to a legal dispute. I don't see that

**"Most people at the university are only keeping an eye on it from afar, because everyone is busy with their own work"**

happening quickly."

If the plans are approved, the University Council's role is far from over, Dekker adds. If other representative bodies, including the FHML Faculty Council, also give their approval, a transition period of twelve to eighteen months will begin. "During that time, a lot of details will need to be worked out, and the University Council will continue to have a say."



news

# “It was like a conversation between two people”

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like a conversation between two people talking about the reading material.” Van Maldegem showed the result to her teacher Michael Capalbo, a member of the Faculty of Psychology and Neurosciences, who applauded her initiative and encouraged her to write a report about her findings, which would then count as an extra assignment for the subject. Van Maldegem discovered that the podcasts were even better when generated in English. “In Dutch, they were quite superficial and



usually lasted less than ten minutes. In English, they varied between 21 and 48 minutes, and were far more in depth. Not that strange, when you consider that many of the AI models are trained with English data.”

**Value**

Now the next step is to broaden the accessibility of the application. The idea is to present the concept – together with Capalbo – to Disability Support (which supports students who have physical, mental or sensory disabilities, or a chronic disease or condition).

“We haven’t got that far yet, though,” says Van Maldegem, who is particularly keen to help other students. The budding data scientist is unsure whether she wants to develop an independent tool (unrelated to Google) to create podcasts. “I’m not that proficient yet. There are also so many already, and developments are so quick, that I don’t know what value I can add to the field.”

*Deborah Blekkenhorst*

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