

# observant

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Law dean

Jan Smits Rector

Pamela Habibović President Executive Board

Rianne Letschert Minister of Education

## Shuffle

Now that Rianne Letschert has been sworn in as Minister of Education, rector Pamela Habibović will take over her duties as President of the Executive Board, at least until September. Departing Law dean Jan Smits will assume the role of rector during that period.

### Read the interview with Letschert

“Leadership is hugely underestimated – like anyone can do it”

on page 5-6-7

### Read the interview with Smits

“Work pressure is a many-headed monster, but people often make it unnecessarily difficult for themselves as well”

on page 8-9



## 1995: Computers in education

Were students always tech-savvy? “Most of them start at zero, with a heavy dose of reluctance”

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## Closing the gap

It will become easier for law students at the applied sciences level to transfer to the university

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## editorial

## Blacklisted

“Can I just vent for a moment? I have another one for on the black list.” It’s the first day back after the carnival half term, a colleague knocks on my door, very annoyed. What is it about interviewees that gives them the impression they can do a journalist’s job for them, when they are sent their article to read through before publication? Are they surprised by what they said, afraid to lose their jobs, do they want to polish it up a little? Would they have preferred to write it themselves? Sending out articles before publication, so that the interviewee can check if there are no factual errors (for example, getting someone’s name wrong; it happens, not a good look), is something we do regularly. Sometimes you miss something important during the interview, or you misunderstood what they said. In those cases, it’s good that the article is checked before it gets sent to the printer. Even though we are not, in fact, obligated to. As with many national newspapers, we do not offer interviewees the right to read through as standard. It’s more of a gesture, good etiquette if you’ve written an article about something very personal or a very sensitive topic.

Nine times out of ten, everything is fine and there are only minor comments. Excellent. But there are cases that make you feel like your professionalism is being questioned. As if you’re just some random nobody scribbling words. You open Outlook and read, ‘Article looks good, I just have one or two suggestions’, then open the attachment and almost fall off your chair in shock. More tracked changes than not, a dozen comments in the margin. All the jargon you’ve removed (a lot of people speak in buzzwords, from ‘roll outs’ to ‘bringing vision to a community’) has been added right back in. Who needs clarity, right? It’s worth noting that the higher up the person is (board members), the less they comment on the writing. Rianne Letschert and Jan Smits, who were both interviewed for this issue because they are leaving, made (almost) no corrections. Are they now such veterans that they know no fear?

A few years ago, we had a colleague who gave such messages short shrift: ‘Thank you for your email, I’ll look into it, cheers’, he’d write – usually before ignoring every single suggestion. That is not how the current editorial team works. What most people don’t know, is that they end up on the ‘blacklist’ (or ‘very dark grey’, if we’re feeling merciful), a list of names that only exists in our minds. And yes, another name has indeed been added.

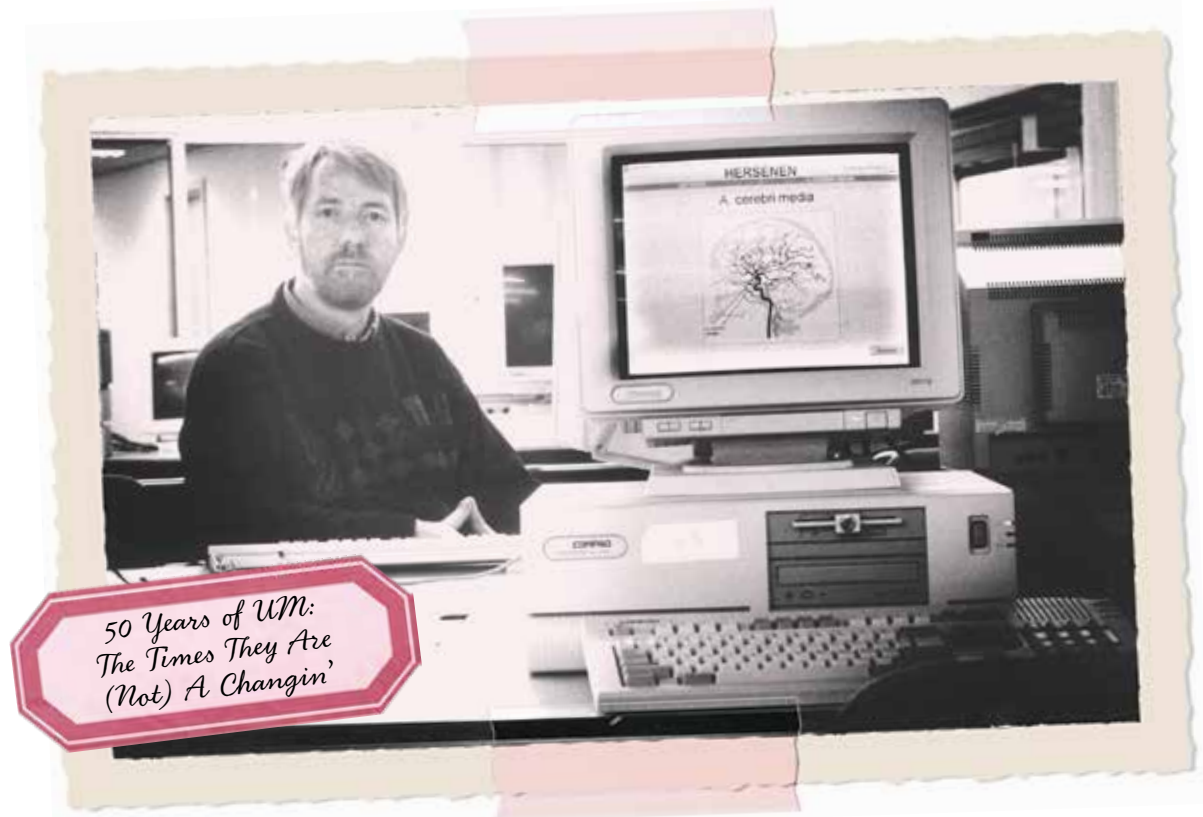
Wendy Degens

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



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

## Computers take off in higher education



Frans Rontertap next to a PC with a medical ‘module’ Photo: Nelis Tutkey

## 1995

“Personal computer pushes aside pen and paper” ran a headline in *Observant* in 1985. The “digital beasts”, insiders predicted, would become established in higher education within five years. Even disciplines like theology and anthropology would have to embrace them. But in reality, the arrival of PCs at Maastricht University was more of a gradual process – until a decade later, when things suddenly took off.

Until then, computers had mostly been used for word processing and “simple question-and-answer games” to test knowledge. By 1995, however, Medicine students could work through 51 modules on the 25 PCs in the faculty’s computer room. “Complex multimedia programs that can replace entire lab practicals”, reported this newspaper.

And the greatest revolution was yet to come – the internet.

It would “drastically change” teaching, predicted Frans

Rontertap, head of the Computer-Assisted Education project at the medical faculty, in the same article. Unlike some of his colleagues, he wasn’t worried about the prospect of students gaining access to sources from around the world. “They will undoubtedly come across material that conflicts with what they are taught here, but why should that matter?” He added, “It’s better to teach them how to navigate that wealth of information intelligently than to shield them from it.”

Swap out “the internet” for “artificial intelligence” and the statement will sound familiar to lecturers today. “We have to move with the times. AI is here to stay. And if students can use it critically, it can be beneficial”, said Anke Moerland, vice-dean for research at the Faculty of Law, last October. *Observant* spoke to her about new guidelines for AI use at the Faculty of Law, a “living document” designed to keep pace with the rapidly evolving technology and the students using it.

One might expect young people to be tech-savvy, but that was not always the case. “Most of them start at zero, with a heavy dose of reluctance”, grumbled Dean of Psychology Louis Boon about first-year students’ IT skills in April 1997. “Our students know very little. Faculties will have to do a lot of remedial teaching in the first year.” Computer classes, in other words – almost unimaginable today.

Students must have started spending a lot more time at screens though, because two years later, a new problem arose. More and more people began to suffer from a painful strain injury from too much computer use, often referred to as a “mouse arm”. The Faculty of Arts and Culture, now Arts and Social Sciences, was the first to develop policy in response. Students suffering from RSI were given fifty per cent extra time in exams, computer desks became height-adjustable, and periodic reminders urged computer users to take breaks.

The condition would eventually become widespread: one year later, UM felt compelled to set up a

## ‘Mouse arms’ were given extra exam time by the late nineties

dedicated reporting point at a cost of two hundred thousand guilders. But the director of the Faculty of Arts and Culture at the time, Ben van Wersch, felt like they were “the only faculty in the Netherlands, or even in Europe, dealing with this problem”. And this was despite the fact that his faculty was already ahead of the curve in preventive measures. “I recently visited the computer rooms at Economics and Law. Don’t even get me started. All our chairs are height-adjustable, but over there, they still use ordinary conference chairs.”

Cleo Freriks

*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*

# Unique structure of law programmes: “a sign of something much bigger to come” UM and Zuyd University of Applied Sciences take first steps towards joint first year

*Undergraduate law students at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences will soon be able to count part of their ECTS credits towards the pre-master’s programme in Law at Maastricht University. It’s “a unique structure”, says Koen Savrij Droste, who is responsible for the collaboration between the higher vocational institution and the research university. In the future, the two even hope to introduce a joint first year.*

Back in 2021, Zuyd and UM signed a cooperation agreement to improve progression between the two programmes in order to keep well-trained legal professionals in the region. Many higher vocational graduates apply to UM to pursue a university law degree, which is required to become a lawyer, public prosecutor or judge. To enrol in a master’s programme, they must first complete a pre-master’s programme worth 60 ECTS credits, which must be completed successfully within one year and is a national requirement. The programme is designed to address any gaps in students’ academic or legal knowledge. But the pre-master’s programme is far from easy. “It’s a big step from higher vocational education to university”, says Savrij Droste, “partly because of the more academic and theory-heavy approach.” He points to an earlier

article in *Observant*, in which pre-master’s students complained about having to “perform in a knockout competition” and struggling to find their feet. They also said they felt like “second-class students”, partly because they do not have a tailored curriculum; instead, pre-master’s students take existing courses alongside later-year undergraduate students. That is about to change. From 1 May, Zuyd law students will be able to take elective modules within their own undergraduate programme that count towards the pre-master’s programme at UM. Fifteen Zuyd students will lead the way with a minor in Criminal Law. Setting it up proved quite a puzzle: “Criminal law did not feature prominently in Zuyd’s curriculum. We had to develop the module and are still refining it together with the university. What exactly is the basic knowledge students need to have?” Teaching will be done by Zuyd staff, who will also create the exam. But UM’s Board of Examiners will oversee assessment “to ensure quality”, explains Savrij Droste, and so the credits will be recognised by the university. Ultimately, the aim is to incorporate the entire pre-master’s programme within Zuyd’s undergraduate law programme. Modules in legal theory and civil law are up next. Students will be able to choose how they complete the pre-master’s programme. They can

complete all modules at Zuyd, but the option of taking them at UM will remain available. They are also free to combine both options. And the institutions have even bigger plans: they envisage a joint first year with no distinction between higher vocational and university students. “At the end of the year, students will know where their interests lie, what they are capable of, and whether they are drawn more to the practical side or an academic path. We would then be able to offer them that choice.” The coming period will be one of trial and error. “We’ll have to wait and see if and how this all works out”, says Savrij Droste. He is mindful of cultural differences between university students and higher vocational students. “The latter sometimes feel – wrongly – like the underdog. Things will certainly change for them, if only because they will suddenly be studying at the university level. On the other hand, higher vocational students are much more practically oriented. Time will tell.” As for what UM stands to gain, Savrij Droste believes the answer is straightforward: “The university will no longer be saddled with a programme that feels tacked on. We can strengthen each other instead of competing for the same talent.”

*Deborah Blekkenhorst*



## On being polite in the Netherlands



I was born and grew up in Canada, though have now lived for more years in the Netherlands. On my way back to the Netherlands after a recent trip to Montreal, I thought to myself, as I always do when returning from the country of my birth, that I would have become a much nicer person had I stayed there. My New Year’s resolution for 2026 is to be more Canadian in my everyday interactions, and engage in very small random acts of kindness. Not life-changing gifts of money, but I’ve been opening doors, letting people ahead of me in queues, stepping out of the way of those engrossed in their mobile phones, thanking bus drivers, and not pushing buttons impatiently at traffic lights. Montreal does not have the latter. People simply wait for the lights to change and don’t anxiously jab buttons, most of which have no effect anyway. This was a ‘breaching experiment’: being polite in a country full of people who pride themselves on their directness, often experienced as rudeness by foreigners. When I first moved here, I quickly learned the phrase for ‘I’m next’, otherwise I could still be waiting in a poorly formed queue at a bakery. Breaching experiments are associated with the American sociologist, Harold Garfinkel (1917-2011). He was interested in the unstated rules and expectations that guide social life. He would ask his students to challenge these, by behaving like guests in their family homes, or asking people to give up their seats in a relatively empty bus. This sometimes resulted in difficult questions, family arguments, and aggression. Maybe I am a bit calmer after two months of consistent politeness. Some of those on the receiving end have been surprised and grateful, leading to pleasant chats. But on the whole, these small acts were rarely acknowledged. Maybe one in four said thank you when I let them go ahead of me. My Dutch partner sometimes finds the politeness of Canadians to be insincere. I like to think my compatriots are genuinely kind. Even so, hypocritical politeness makes for more pleasant everyday interactions than sincere rudeness.



*Sally Wyatt, professor Digital Cultures*



*Illustration: Shutterstock*

## Institute directors express concerns about integration plans “These roles are difficult to reconcile from a legal and administrative perspective”

*How will the dual role of the head of MUMC work? And what are the financial consequences of the integration plans between the hospital and the university? The scientific directors of the eight research institutes of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life sciences (FHML) expressed their concerns in a letter to the participatory bodies.*

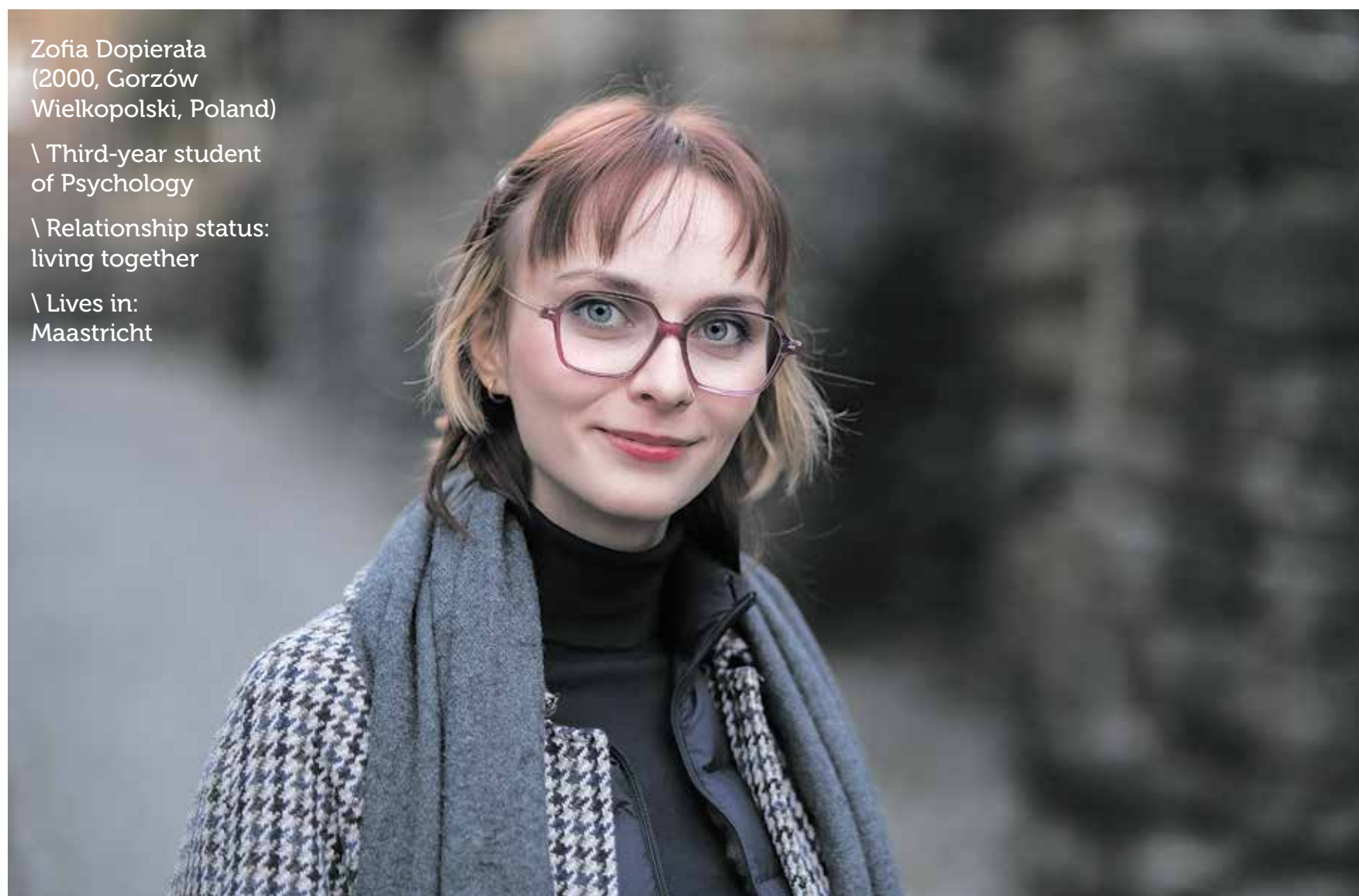
is addressed to the Faculty Council of Health, Medicine and Life sciences and the University Council. Both bodies have an important say in the integration process and may yet put the brakes on it in the coming period. What particularly concerns the scientific directors is the dual role of the hospital director, currently Helen Mertens. Not only does she occupy the most important administrative position in the MUMC structure of hospital and FHML, but she will also become co-chair,

just like the rector, in the central Executive Council that will rule over the entire integrated institution of UM and hospital. There are increasing complaints that the composition of these ‘structures at the top’ is flawed, including in almost all faculty council meetings that *Observant* has recently attended. Is such a dual role desirable? Is it legally possible? The directors of the research institutes

*To be continued on page 10*

Four objections are listed in the letter, which

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



Zofia Dopierała  
(2000, Gorzów  
Wielkopolski, Poland)

\ Third-year student  
of Psychology

\ Relationship status:  
living together

\ Lives in:  
Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“

I needed time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life

”

**City or countryside?** I like a good balance of both: living closer to nature, but still near a major city. When I spent nine months working in Iceland, I first lived in a rural area. That was a bit too much nature for me – I felt very isolated. I preferred Reykjavik. What's funny is that I'd decided to go in January so I'd mostly be there during the lighter months, but the experience actually made me appreciate the dark more. If the sun stays up for too long, you lose your natural rhythm of when it's time to rest.

**As a child, I was...** rather shy and very clumsy. I'm still clumsy. [Laughs] I was also creative from an early age. I started drawing lessons when I was six years old because my sister, who is four years older, was taking them and I was jealous. Painting is still my favourite art form. Later, my brother gave me a book on art history that I read to bits. I eventually went to the Academy of Fine Arts, first in Kraków and later in Warsaw, where I, among other art commissions, worked as an art teacher.

**What's the last book you read?** *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. I had to convince myself that it's okay to read just for fun. I also enjoy audiobooks. One of my favourite authors is Haruki Murakami. I love the dreamlike worlds he

creates – they inspire me. I'd especially recommend *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

**What was the best decision you ever made?**

Going to Iceland after my internship in Paris. I needed time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Work as an artist, even if it meant compromising on commissions? Do a master's in art? Or take a different path altogether? I'm glad I gave myself time to slow down and reflect. I'm now in my third year of studying psychology, which has always interested me. Studying at university stimulates my mind and teaches me new skills, like reading academic papers. In the future, I hope to combine a stable job as a psychologist with working as an independent artist.

**Pet peeve?** The amount of plastic packaging in supermarkets. Before you know it, you've got a rubbish bag full of plastic. I believe it doesn't have to be that way.

**My siblings were my best friends growing up.** We were close, but best friends...? As the youngest, I had my own dynamic with them. If I fell out with one, I'd be friends with the other, and the other way around. Now that we're adults, we all have our own lives, but we agree on what

matters most, like staying in touch. It can be difficult, since each of us lives in a different country.

**Favourite food?** Soup, especially Polish soups. It's what I always make when friends come over for dinner. Even just having a pot simmering on the stove makes me feel at home. In Poland, people make soup from anything. You use the same base and just add whatever you have on hand.

**I take after...** my mother in terms of looks. Personality-wise, I'm a mix of both my parents. My mother likes to challenge herself and experience new things, and I'm the same. My father and I both tend to keep our thoughts to ourselves. We have rich inner lives. [Laughs]

**What do you look for in a partner?** Someone I can share daily life with, talk to about my day and rely on for support.

**What do you miss about Poland?** Knowing how everything works. When you move to another country, you are forced to relearn how to navigate your professional field. Every opportunity must be actively fought for, as you are expected to build an entirely new network without support. Based on my experience, despite having a strong background in teaching and administrative work, I found it extremely difficult to secure a long-term collaboration with an art school in the region.

**Do you ever pray?** I meditate. My New Year's resolution is to be more present in the moment. I was raised Catholic, and there are aspects of the faith I still appreciate, but I don't feel the need to place myself under the supervision of an institution.

**Favourite artist?** That's a tough one. The first name that comes to mind is the Spanish painter and sculptor Joan Miró. You can completely lose yourself in some of his works. But I'm already starting to doubt my answer, because the last time I went to an exhibition of his work, I found it slightly disappointing.

Cleo Freriks

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

A farewell interview with UM President Rianne Letschert

# “When it comes to people stabbing you in the back or questioning your integrity – no, I don’t have thick skin”

This week, Rianne Letschert was officially appointed as the new minister of Education, Culture and Science. She was part of Maastricht University’s leadership for nearly a decade, first as rector and later as president of the Executive Board. “Long enough”, she says. “It was time for something new.” But she will miss everything about this university – well, almost everything.

*Text: Wendy Degens and Riki Janssen*



Visiting the student associations by bike in 2017 with former Board members Martin Paul and Nick Bos Photo: Joey Roberts

“You’re in for some exciting times with me,” Letschert said in 2016 when she arrived from Tilburg to become rector in Maastricht. “Did I really say that?” She can’t remember, but *Observant* does. In fact, it was the headline above *Observant*’s first interview with her. “Well, I think it certainly turned out to be an exciting ten years.” At one point, she admits, she longed for “an uneventful term, but it was an illusion to think that would ever happen. Society is under pressure, and it filters down into our jobs and institutions.” Ten years of events at UM flash by in a matter of minutes. First up is the December 2019 cyber-attack that brought the university to a standstill. Just when that was over and Letschert was hoping for a quiet spring break, all universities were forced to close due to Covid. “It was a difficult time.” Letschert’s son and daughter had to take online classes from home; her youngest, still in primary school, needed a lot of support. On top of everything else, Letschert was going through a divorce. “At the same time, I wanted to be there for the university. Operational processes were still running, and everyone had their

own worries, fears and feelings of loneliness. I worked very closely and enjoyably with the heads of the Education Offices to decide what to do about exams, how many exceptions could be made and how to invigilate online exams without infringing on students’ privacy. After all, they were taking exams from home.”

## THREATENING

In 2021, Letschert moved from her role as rector to president of the Executive Board. As university president, she was soon confronted with an issue that would remain a headache until late last year: the national debate on the internationalisation and increased use of English in Dutch higher

*“As language became an increasingly central issue, the situation started to feel threatening to UM”*



In 2022 Photo: Harry Heuts

education. It was Ingrid van Engelshoven, the D66 minister of Education in the third Rutte cabinet, who proposed the Language and Accessibility bill. “As language became an increasingly

central issue, the situation started to feel threatening to UM.” Letschert began lobbying in Limburg, finding many allies who, like her, wanted “UM to be allowed to remain what it is – both international and European”. She delivered that message to the national government, loud and clear. It wasn’t difficult to get local and regional authorities on the university’s side: collaboration was already in full swing, with UM working on campuses in Venlo and Heerlen, and Letschert made sure to show her face everywhere. “I visited municipal councils and attended events like *Cultura Nova* in Heerlen and *Carnival Saturday* in Maastricht. I genuinely enjoyed it and wanted to show my commitment. If I invest in a relationship, I feel more comfortable asking for something in return, otherwise it would feel opportunistic to me.”

## A COUP OF SORTS

“A tense time for me personally was the conflict with the University Council over a new procedure for appointing deans.” This happened in October 2019. Under the rules at the time, deans were appointed by the Executive Board based on the recommendation of an appointments advisory committee, of which the rector was a member. Letschert proposed new rules under which the entire Executive Board would sit on the committee – effectively issuing recommendations to itself. She also proposed that UM recruit internally and externally at the same time (under the existing rules, the university turned to external recruitment only if no suitable internal candidates were found). The University Council opposed the new procedure. They described it as “a coup of sorts”, a power grab by the university’s top administrators. The dispute was referred to the Supervisory Board, but it never came to a formal dispute process. After the Supervisory Board’s mediation, the Executive Board withdrew the proposal. Looking back, Letschert is still of the opinion that external dean candidates should be considered alongside internal applicants. This is allowed under the current rules. “Being a dean is hard, and not everyone is cut out for the job. Why not simultaneously look for external candidates? It brings more diversity.” How did she feel about being accused of a coup? She understands the concern that the board was trying to gain more power, “but that was never the case here. I actually

find it odd that only one Executive Board member is allowed to sit on the appointments advisory committee. All three of us have to work with the deans.” She recalls her time as an academic staff member in Tilburg: “Back then, I sometimes found myself wondering: ‘Why is the Executive Board sticking its nose into this?’, so to speak. But now that I’m in this central role myself, I understand the responsibilities much better. I wish everyone could swap roles once in a while, try on a different hat.”

## RECOGNITION AND REWARDS

One of her proudest achievements is the Recognition and Rewards programme, behind which she was also a national driving force. The programme aims to change academic culture so that researchers are recognised not only for research, but also for teaching, leadership and other academic contributions. But implementation of the programme has been slow, according to a recent survey among early career researchers by the Maastricht Young Academy. Many have noticed no difference, and they criticise the lack of transparency, unclear assessment criteria and uncertain career prospects. Letschert acknowledges some of these concerns: “We as the Executive Board need to do something about this. We can keep talking about cultural change, but it’s taking so long. We can’t and shouldn’t want to go back – it’s already too deeply embedded. And who knows what I might be able to do as minister? I’m not entirely sure yet, because I think it’s up to the universities now, but if I can help speed things along, I certainly will.”

She takes pride in the fact that a considerable number of academic staff members with teaching responsibilities have been promoted to professorships. She also praises the deans for “the progress they’re making. It’s also important to understand that it was never the intention that everyone would notice a difference. We can’t promote everyone. In a football lineup, you only need one goalkeeper. Sometimes someone can’t pursue their chosen career path within their department. We need to be able to have those difficult conversations – something academia isn’t always good at.”

## “I VALUE CLARITY”

Is she good at having those difficult conversations? “I value clarity. If things escalate, I face them head-on.” She cites the example of the Institute for Evidence Based Education Research (TIER). Its master’s programme was discontinued after failing a quality assurance assessment. The Executive Board had decided not to draw up a plan to remedy the shortcomings, and in 2017, the entire institute was closed down. “As rector, it was my job to inform the staff. If looks could kill, I would have died on the spot. Everyone was furious, from the secretary to the lecturers and professor. And you know what? I would have been just as angry if it had been my institute. I explained the decision and helped make sure that all those people ended up in good positions elsewhere in the university. I believe you have to be able to back up difficult decisions and be honest and respectful – that’s the key.” But perceptions can differ: the staff involved did not feel that respect at the time, as they told *Observant*.

## DISMISSAL CASE

Letschert has a reputation for getting involved in matters beyond her immediate purview. For example, there was friction between two (far from friendly) departments within the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life sciences. She received complaints about social insecurity in her mailbox. In addition, a professor had (wrongly) accused a fellow professor of sexual misconduct. Letschert decided to conduct an independent investigation into the situation in the workplace at both departments. Should this not have been Dean Annemie Schols’ responsibility? “I didn’t bypass her – we agreed on handling the situation that way. There was a vote of no confidence against the dean, so the dean couldn’t deal with it herself.” Ultimately, a dismissal case followed, “which is up to the Executive Board anyway.” Letschert personally met with staff from both departments multiple times. “They wanted to talk to me, and I don’t walk away from that. Some people were deeply affected by everything that had happened.” Many of these meetings took place in the evenings, since her schedule was already packed, “but I wouldn’t have had it any other way. Having the opportunity to tell their stories made them feel seen and heard.”

## NARCISSISTS

Social safety was a major theme throughout those ten years, “and it’s never done”. All managers at UM are now required to complete a module on social safety, including training using actors. Letschert calls it “an important statement. One module won’t change everything, obviously, but it shows that we take the issue seriously. And it reaches the bullies and narcissists who would never have completed it voluntarily.” In some cases, the message still falls on deaf ears. In a 2020 interview with the Dutch daily newspaper *Trouw*, Letschert said that she had fired “several macho narcissists. And no, it wasn’t pleasant, but it was necessary.” Now, she says, “I’ve become firmer about that. If that’s how you behave, you don’t belong in our community. At the same time, dismissal procedures take a very long time. You have to provide thorough justification, and the investigations involved take up a lot of time, not to men-



During the Maastricht version of College Tour in 2019 Photo: Joey Roberts

tion the potential legal procedures afterwards. Non-leadership staff often don’t understand this, and I get that.” Leadership itself is a skill, Letschert says. “It’s hugely underestimated – like anyone can do it, show vulnerability when needed, or take criticism well.” She recently demonstrated that vulnerability herself when meeting with the directors-generals of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. “I told them, ‘I’m new to this job, so if I do something wrong, too fast or too slowly, please tell me so I can do something about it.’ They appreciated me saying that. To me, it just made sense.”

## NAÏVE VIEW

What did she have to unlearn during those ten years? “I’m very attuned to my surroundings. If I pick up on discomfort, or sense that someone is feeling uneasy, I want to jump in and fix it. I’ve learnt that sometimes I just need to let it go and literally sit on my hands.” There have inevitably been disappointments. “When I started here, I had a somewhat naïve view of people. I believed that if you supported someone enough, and gave them the opportunity to grow, the good in them would naturally emerge. People aren’t monsters. Even in wartime situations, which I’ve researched extensively, things aren’t black and white. But that view wasn’t entirely accurate. I’ve come to realise that some people have little or no capacity for self-reflection. They simply don’t see the

effect they have on their own staff, for example. They refuse to take a helping hand or engage in efforts to improve. I’ve learnt to let go sooner and stop wasting energy on things like that. It eats up so much of your time.”

She also hadn’t anticipated how slow decision-making at a university can be. She isn’t referring to the fact that many proposals have to pass through the University Council and the Local Consultative Body; she describes them as “very constructive and well prepared” and praises their commitment. Rather, she’s talking about departments that hesitate to act. “Just come to the Executive Board. Or make a decision. Too often, people are afraid to take risks.”

*“I’ve learnt that sometimes I just need to let it go and literally sit on my hands”*

## PRO-PALESTINIAN PROTESTS

Some issues are simply incredibly complex. As she has said before, the hardest decision in her ten years at UM was calling in the police to end the occupation of University College Maastricht by pro-Palestinian protesters in June 2025. “In a situation like that, you can never get it right. There’s no room for nuance on either side. At the same time, I’m both a scholar and an administrator. My own academic community [Victimology and International Law] concluded that what is happening in Gaza is genocide. But as university president, I had a



Having dinner at a student house in 2017 Photo: Joey Roberts



During the 2022 Dies Photo: Joey Roberts

different role. I had to be there for the pro-Palestinian protesters, whose concerns I understood very well, but their methods less so. And I also had to be there for our Jewish students and staff, who felt threatened and deserved support. I usually sleep well, but this kept me up at night: am I doing the right things? It was a very tense situation. Just like UM's 50th Dies Natalis – it was supposed to be a celebration, but with the announced pro-Palestinian protest, we were mainly preoccupied with whether everyone was safe and we hadn't overlooked anything. Walking to the drinks afterwards, I mostly felt relief. Of all the issues I've dealt with, this one caused the most stress."

## PROUD

What is she proud of? "Of the fact that many more women now hold important positions, and of Europe, of course! UM is now the 'European university' of the Netherlands. Before I came here, I barely knew Maastricht – I sometimes went shopping in the city with my mother. I didn't know the region or the university, except for a few colleagues in my field." Europe was already a focus of research and teaching at UM. This was further reinforced by initiatives such as Studio Europa, an expertise centre for research, public debate and European heritage in the context of the Maastricht Treaty. The centre was headed by Europe expert Mathieu Segers. Segers and Letschert became friends. His death in 2023, at just 47, was one of her most difficult moments. "Being there at his funeral, his children still so young – it was devastating." A year later, Nanne de Vries passed away shortly after retiring as professor and administrator at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. "I was friends with him, too. We supervised a PhD together. He always criticised me, but in a friendly way: 'What are you up to with HR now?' At the same time, he was very protective: 'You work too hard.'"

## INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

Letschert will bring her international outlook to her ministerial role, she says. "I know all fourteen Dutch universities well. We've had extensive discussions about balancing internationalisation in higher education; those conversations were very open and strategic. I know their concerns. I've also worked closely with universities of applied sciences, and I'm familiar with the vocational education sector, partly through my role as chair of the National Growth Fund. Many of its projects focused on collaboration between universities of applied sciences and vocational institutions. All of this knowledge will definitely help me, but



With king Willem-Alexander during the last Dies Photo: Philip Driessen

I also want to draw on experiences abroad. Take Scandinavia, where a lot of universities of applied sciences have merged with universities, or the UK, which has recently developed a global talent strategy. I want to know how they deal with issues and learn from their experiences. Culture and media are new policy areas for me – I'll need to get up to speed."

## THICK SKIN

Does she have thick enough skin for a ministerial post? "Does that mean being callous? I don't think that would be a good thing. But when it comes to people stabbing you in the back or questioning your integrity – in short, when others aren't playing fair – no, I don't have thick skin. I'll need [husband] Sander's shoulder to cry on, and then move on. Because I don't walk away from things. At the same time, I've promised my children and family that I won't change as a person. I am who I am. I'm quite open and honest. I'm used to sharing information, and it has never steered me wrong – not at UM, not at Universities of the Netherlands, not in any of my roles. I'll see what happens. I'll be learning a great deal."

## SMALL EGO

Finally, her party leader Rob Jetten keeps stressing that he wants ministers with "small egos". How's hers? She laughs. "I don't really have an ego. At least, I think it's small enough. I don't need to be in the spotlight or on stage, although that sometimes comes with the role. I'm not the kind of leader who has to show off everything I do, 'look at me'. Not to criticize people who do – it can be very effective – but it's not my style. As *informateur*, I deliberately didn't seek out the media every day. It was a break with tradition, but I explained that I didn't have news to report every day, which was primarily up to the three negotiators anyway. That was respected. As a minister, I intend to continue to do things my way."



In 2019 Photo: Loraine Bodewes

## BRIEF CV RIANNE LETSCHERT (1976)

Studied International Law in Tilburg, Amsterdam and Montpellier

- ◆ 2005: PhD on minority rights
  - ◆ 2011-2016: professor of Victimology and International Law at Tilburg University
  - ◆ 2015-2016: chair of the Young Academy
  - ◆ 2015: awarded Vidi grant
  - ◆ September 2016: appointed rector at UM
  - ◆ 2017-2023: member of Adviescollege Levenslanggestraften (Advisory Board for Life-Sentenced Prisoners)
  - ◆ 2019-2021: chair of Commissie Implementatie nieuw Wetboek van Strafvordering (Committee on the Implementation of the New Dutch Code of Criminal Procedure)
  - ◆ 2019: named topvrouw van het jaar (Top Woman Executive of the Year)
  - ◆ Since 2019: member of the Supervisory Board of the Catharina Hospital
  - ◆ November 2021: appointed president of the Executive Board at UM
  - ◆ Since February 2023: chair of the National Growth Fund Advisory Committee
  - ◆ December 2025: appointed *informateur* [mediator appointed to explore the options for a new cabinet]
  - ◆ As of 23 February 2026: minister of Education, Culture and Science
- Rianne Letschert is married to Sander Kleikers. She has a son and a daughter from a previous relationship and two stepchildren.

A farewell interview with Jan Smits, dean of the Faculty of Law

# “They said, ‘We’ve done enough talking.’ Well, certainly not with me”

How ironic it was that he, of all people, published a research article last year arguing why academic leaders should step down in good time – after a maximum of six to eight years. Jan Smits is leaving well beyond that eight-year mark. Colleagues describe him as a dedicated dean who always puts the faculty first, a hard worker who sets high standards and has “just a little bit” of a need for control. Smits himself, of course, wouldn’t put it that way.

*Text: Wendy Degens*

*Photo: Jonathan Vos/ adjusted by Simone Golob*

When he took over from Hildegard Schneider in 2017, Smits radically changed the look of the dean’s office. Out with the heavy, dark wooden furniture; in with modern, lighter pieces, like the eye-catching orange chairs around a white table. Where will all this stuff go at the end of February? Will it be moved to the second floor of Minderbroedersberg, perhaps, where the Executive Board is based? We ask Jan Smits directly. By the time of this interview in January, it was already an open secret that UM President Rianne Letschert was likely to take up a ministerial post in the new cabinet. Within the Faculty of Law, rumour had it that Smits might step into her

role as president of the Executive Board.

Ahead of the interview, *Observant* asked several Law staff members what Smits was like as a dean, what he excelled at and what occasionally ruffled feathers. One staff member said, “See

how he reacts when you ask him about the university presidency. If he starts talking about a garden and birds, you’ll know he’s looking forward to it.”

## SATISFACTION

Smits crosses his arms. With a faint grin, he says, “As far as I know, there’s no vacancy.” Not a word about a garden, or birds. “Seriously, there’s no vacancy.” But would he like to be university president? “I can only give a politically correct answer to that question, and that isn’t what you want, is it?” No, it isn’t. (Almost two weeks ago, it was announced that he will take on the role of rector for six months; Pamela Habibović will become the new temporary president on March 1, all in anticipation of the integration between the hospital and the university).

In 2017, at the start of Smits deanship, he was adamant: “I’ll do this for four years and then go back to research and teaching.” That’s not quite how things turned out. “It ended up lasting a bit longer. I enjoyed the leadership role – well, not always, but it was certainly challenging. That’s an odd word, but you can get a lot of satisfaction from making a difference for others.” Still, he feels the time has come to step aside: “I even wrote an article about why it’s important to step down at a certain point.” That same afternoon, *Observant* is sent a PDF of *The Comparative Law and Economics of Term Limits for Academic Leadership*. Smits examined the tenures of the last thirty deans

across all ten law faculties in the Netherlands. On average, they remained in post for 5.4 years. (At 8.5 years, a certain dean at UM raised the average considerably.) Smits concluded from his research that two four-year terms should be the limit. Those who remain in charge for too long start losing touch with everyday academic life. Smits also wrote that leaders should come from within the faculty – his successor, Ronald Janse, is coming from the Open University – and ultimately return to it.

But is it realistic to return after so many years, during which he inevitably didn’t have time to keep up with the literature in his field, European private law? “I love focusing on a single thing. I can no longer imagine what it’s like to lock yourself away for a day, let alone a week, to work on an article. I’ll have to see if I can still do it, but I think I probably can.”

## OVERHAUL

From the outset, Smits wasted no time: the curriculum, especially of the bachelor’s programme in Dutch Law, needed an overhaul. For years, the Dutch-taught programme had attracted far fewer students than the English-taught European Law School, and Smits was eager to fix that imbalance. He also felt that Maastricht had to do something different to stand out from nearby universities such as Tilburg and Nijmegen. A unique programme, he hoped, would attract students from beyond the region. The curriculum has since been significantly revised, with greater emphasis on personal development through portfolios, but Smits has to admit that growth has remained modest. Last September, the Dutch-language bachelor’s programme welcomed just over two hundred first-year students. The difference with the European Law School, capped at 550 students, remains considerable. “Things never turn out exactly as you expect. It’s clear that student intake is becoming more regionalised, and definitely not just at UM. To attract students from further afield, you have to offer something unique. A good example is our master’s programme in Forensics, Criminology and Law.” The extent to which the curriculum could be reshaped was limited by the fact that there are certain courses the Dutch bachelor’s programme must include in order to grant graduates admission into the legal field, the Dutch Public Prosecution Service and the judiciary court system. “Eight years ago, I thought we’d be able to do a lot more than we ended up being able to do.” Smits is, however, pleased that the faculty has made research into Dutch law a much higher priority.

## HEAVY WORKLOADS

During his tenure, student numbers rose by one thousand, and staff numbers by around one hundred full-time equivalents. But the faculty is still feeling the pressure of heavy workloads, Smits says. “It’s a complex issue. We’re definitely aware of it – that’s why so many new lecturers were hired.” The introduction of starter grants for young assistant professors has also taken off some of the pressure. “But people tend to make things too difficult for themselves – yes, you can write that down. We’ve told them over and over again that they don’t have to produce ten publications per year. Quality is what matters. If you’ve published one great article in addition to teaching, that’s fine. But people are always inclined to do more.” Are leaders perhaps failing to set the right example? “Could be. It’s frustrating – no matter how many times you say it, the message doesn’t get across.”

## SOCIAL SAFETY

Smits is “a dean I’ve never heard complain about how busy his job is”, one Law staff member told *Observant*. “He’s an extremely hard worker.” Others also praise his dedication: “He’s always there”, “very approachable”, “genuinely interested in how you’re doing”. And: “a leader who dares to ask for advice and help”; “he sets high standards for himself and others”.

Has Smits ever tried to lower those standards? “I can’t. It stems from... well, ‘a need for control’ is putting it too strongly, because it depends on what it’s about. I give people plenty of freedom and trust when it comes to teaching and research. But creating the conditions that allow them to do their work properly is, in my view, the dean’s responsibility – the responsibility of the entire Faculty Board. And yes, on that front, I’m much more hands-on, including when it comes to solving problems.” He is referring in particular to issues of social safety. “It’s good that there’s so much awareness, and it’s important to intervene when something is wrong. But I do find it difficult when the ‘I feel unsafe’ card is played unfairly. It’s something we hear a bit too often.”

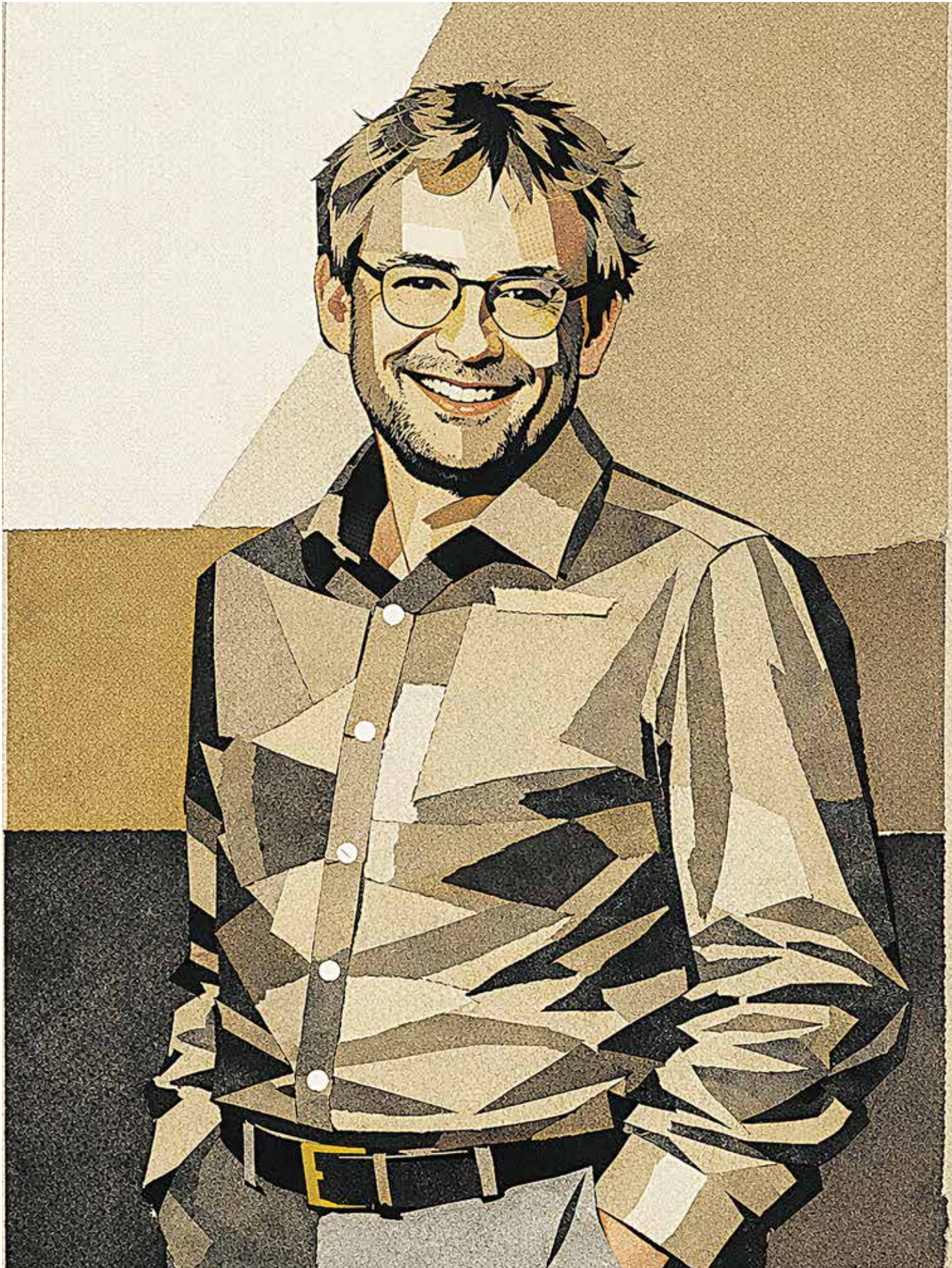
## HIERARCHY

Smits wholeheartedly embraces the national Recognition and Rewards programme, under which researchers are no longer assessed on publications only, but also on their contributions to teaching, social impact and leadership. “It’s great that things are changing. In the past, directors of studies were told, ‘If you want to get ahead, you’ll first have to return to research and publishing.’ That fails to acknowledge how much they do for the faculty.” If it were up to Smits, every academic staff member would be given the title of professor after completing their PhD, as is the case in Flanders. He wrote an opinion piece about it in the national newspaper *NRC* in February 2023. According to Smits, the hierarchical structure of universities isn’t doing us any good: “It only leads to frustration among people who aren’t getting promoted for one reason or another.”

## PROTESTS

And that article wasn’t his only opinion piece during his deanship. In April 2022, Smits spoke out in *Observant* after the university newspaper’s website was taken down by a DDoS attack. The attack followed the publication of an article about free menstrual products that stated the products were intended for “women who menstruate”; critics, including Feminists of Maastricht, argued that it should have said “people who menstruate”. *Observant* came under heavy criticism and was accused of transphobia. In his opinion piece, Smits condemned the University Council’s silence on the incident. In his view, academics –

*“I enjoyed the leadership role – well, not always, but it was certainly challenging”*



and representative bodies in particular – should take a clear stand against attacks on freedom of speech.

Have there been times where he felt like he couldn't speak freely in his position as dean?

"If something is important to me, I won't hold back." Ever? The pro-Palestinian protests were different, he admits, choosing his words carefully. "It's a complex issue. As dean, I'm cautious

for the same reason the Executive Board is – you don't want to stifle free thought. Within the university, opinions are divided on the issue. Protests are fine. People may think of them as disruptive, and some of them were, but that's allowed as long as nothing gets damaged. When the toilets were defaced, we reported it to the police; that's vandalism.

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*"If something is important to me, I won't hold back my opinion"*

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to handle the situation. It was tense, but everyone had the opportunity to give their opinion. I would also have liked to sit down with the protestors, but they said, 'We've done enough talking.' Well, certainly not with me."

Some colleagues raised their eyebrows and said, 'Surely we have other priorities?' When emotions were running high internationally and nationally, I organised a faculty meeting to discuss how we wanted

#### **LEGAL AID**

His successor as dean, Ronald Janse, will chart his own course – "as well he should" – but are there any areas Smits would have liked to continue working on? "AI. An obvious answer, but it's a highly relevant topic." He would also like to see the programme focus more on legal aid practice, something encouraged by the Ministry of Justice. "It's a bit paradoxical. The ministry itself drastically cut back on spending, and now it's requesting law faculties to train legal aid lawyers. But I support the idea."

news

# “The escalation ladder is effectively being undermined”

Continued from page 3

also question this.

What if there are problems and people want to escalate (i.e., to the Executive Council) an appeal? Then they will encounter the same person: the head of the hospital. This puts pressure on the internal checks and balances, and the escalation ladder “is effectively being undermined”, according to the authors of the letter. Not to mention the demanding nature of the jobs. Can they be performed with sufficient attention, independence and quality, they wonder.

### Vice-chair

Furthermore, the institute directors propose that the FHML dean should not be made a ‘less important’ vice-chair in the MUMC, as is currently planned, but co-chair (together with the hospital director, as in the Executive Council). According to authors of the letter, this equality is a must if you say that you want to make decisions “jointly” and become “stronger together”.

Another point: in an important consultative body (the so-called GMO, the Integrated MUMC+ Consultation), academic input only comes via the vice-dean of education; the



Illustration: Simone Golob

directors believe that researchers should have a much stronger voice here.

Finally, there is the issue of finances. They complain subtly, but in no uncertain terms, about the fact that some of the underlying financial documents have not been shared

with the community. How are the finances set up and what are the financial consequences for healthcare, education and research?

The directors are not opposed to the integration on principle. They are “positive in principle” about it and recognise “the further

development and strengthening of both institutions”.

### Consulted

The question remains why this letter was sent at this stage of the plans. Were these directors, who are not insignificant figures within the faculty, not consulted in recent months? Or were they asked for advice, but insufficient action was taken? At the time of publication, *Observant* had not yet received an answer to this question. The University Council discussed the integration in a public meeting on Wednesday, 25 February. Whether they voted on it then is highly questionable. The FHML Council will discuss it (again) in March.

Wendy Degens

*If you want to know more about the broad outlines of the integration plans, how various faculty councils have discussed the matter recently, and the nine questions about the integration that we have submitted to experts, go to our online dossier.*



THE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY, FACULTIES, SERVICE CENTRES AND STUDENT ORGANISATIONS CAN BE FOUND ON [WWW.OBSERVANTONLINE.NL](http://WWW.OBSERVANTONLINE.NL)

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