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UM President Habibović: “This is far too important to just go ‘never mind, then’”

University Council unanimously rejects board integration plans

A resounding and unanimous no. The University Council has not consented to the plans for a board integration between the university and the academic hospital. Pamela Habibović, president of Maastricht University, did not see this coming, she tells* Observant*. She is disappointed and puzzled by the outcome: “The criticism voiced by the University Council, suggesting that the boards came up with all this behind closed doors over the past months, is simply not true.”

“If the representative bodies do not back the proposal, the board integration will not go ahead”, University Council chair Teun Dekker said after the University Council’s meeting last Wednesday. Pamela Habibović, the recently appointed president of the Executive Board, confirms this: “In principle, no. It would be highly unusual to push ahead with a proposal that has not received the University Council’s consent.” That said, she stresses that the views and recommendations of other representative bodies, including the hospital’s Works Council and the Faculty Council of Health, Medicine and Life sciences (FHML), remain “extremely relevant”. Those are expected in the coming weeks. The Executive Board will wait for those reactions before determining its position and the next steps, together with the Supervisory Board and the deans.

Concerns

At the University Council meeting on Wednesday afternoon, 25 February, members said there were too many concerns. They were not convinced that the proposed course was the only – let alone the right – way to achieve closer cooperation between the hospital and UM. Their statements prior to the vote made it clear that the plans were likely to be rejected. Habibović tried to change their minds: “Haven’t we worked towards this proposal together, as partners? I feel its content should not come as a surprise to you.” “But to the community, it does”, replied support staff representative Werner Teeling. Over the previous weeks, it had become clear that the wider university community has doubts. The academic action group WoinActie took the floor to voice its concerns during the meeting on Wednesday, as did the Maastricht Young Academy; the institute directors of FHML sent in a letter stating their objections; the FHML Faculty Council and other faculty councils raised numerous questions; and critical opinion pieces appeared in *Observant*.

> *“Haven’t we worked towards this proposal together, as partners? I feel its content should not come as a surprise to you”*

Not turning a blind eye

At the meeting, Habibović said she was not turning a blind eye to the community’s concerns, but “the question put to you is: can we move on to the next phase? Will you give us that trust? This is not the end point; we still need to develop things further, and a thorough evaluation will follow.”

Support staff representative Maarten van Wesel responded: “The question put to us is whether or not we are in favour of this board integration, whether we agree with the documents, some of which have binding legal effects. The question isn’t whether or not we are in favour of a next phase, is it?”

Although the University Council said no to the proposals currently on the table, it strongly supports strategic collaboration between the hospital and UM. For that reason, it has recommended that the Executive Board institute a period of reflection to explore alternatives and determine the best way forward. Crucially, this should involve the entire university community, staff and students alike. The University Council would like to play an active role in this.

Justification

But which arguments were decisive in the University Council’s decision to withhold consent? These were not shared on Wednesday 25 February. This week, University Council chair Dekker again declined to go into detail. “We are currently writing a statement explaining our position – you could call it a justification of how we reached this decision. We intend to share it with the Executive Board very soon, so they can study it before questions are raised. It will then be made public. We want to be as transparent as possible. We will certainly push for an evaluation of the whole process: how did the decision-making process unfold?”

Disappointed

UM President Habibović is not just disappointed by the outcome, but also puzzled by some of the criticism voiced in various council members’ statements. One council member complained about the last-minute publication of a big stack of documents, saying, “This is such an important issue, but staff were given almost no time to read and reflect on it.” Habibović now responds, “Other bodies asked for more time. They could have done the same. This wasn’t a deadline.” She also refutes the claims that the university community was not sufficiently involved and the process lacked transparency: “I asked the programme team to compile a list of everyone we spoke to since

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WHAT IT COSTS (MENTALLY) TO GET YOUR DRIVER’S LICENSE

Getting a driving licence was a horror story for European Law School student Nora Grolig. It led to a “mild existential crisis,” not to mention the impact on her bank balance

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SAUDI STUDENTS IN MAASTRICHT

We delve into our *Observant* archives. This time: how Saudi students cost more than they brought in

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SCIENCE POSTERFAIR

“It is important to dispel fears about science, especially among girls.” High school students meet academic audience

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editorial

Ping pong

"I have a ping pong brain," I sometimes shout as a joke. And if I hadn't had one already, I'm sure this job would have given me one. A hundred thoughts whizz through my mind, each one needing to be ticked off. In his farewell interview, Jan Smits – now rector – said how wonderful it would be to be able to concentrate on one thing at a time: "I cannot imagine anymore what it would be like to spend a whole day, let alone a whole week, working on an article." Neither can I. And there are many colleagues who feels the same way. If you want to spend the day quietly typing away, you work from home. Turn off your inbox. No housemates around.
To illustrate, Tuesday's ping-pong session:
-8.20 am Biking to the office. There's honking at Emma-plein. What is that share-biker doing? The girl seems to have absolutely no idea how a roundabout works. Used gestures to indicate we're all supposed to go in the same direction.
-Shit, almost half past eight, the worst possible moment to cycle past the School of Business and Economics. Everybody wants to go through the main gate at the same time, demanding right of way, ignoring any and all traffic rules. It's an ants' nest. Once again I'm surprised it all ends well, no blood or ambulances, or worse...
-Reach the office just in time for a meeting with a coach about a potential Team Day.
-Text message to spokesperson Koen Augustijn asking whether Pamela (President) has seen Monday's email and whether she has time today for a call, because what's the next step, now that the university has said no to the integration plans with the hospital.
-Email exchange with someone contemplating a career change who wants to do an internship in March.
-The PvdA wants to place an advert for the local elections, do we still have space? Yes, but we'll have to move some stuff around.
-"Do you have the layout for me?", an email from Simone Golob, who gets an overview of the newspaper from one of the editors every week, so that she can get to work.
-Colleague Dennis Vaendel arrives at the office. He's just been to hospital to have another x-ray done of his shoulder. He took a bad fall during a game of football a few days ago. Thankfully, the damage is minimal.
-"Nothing from Teun yet," says colleague Riki Janssen, who has asked U-Council chair Teun Dekker why the 'merger' was given a resounding and unanimous 'no'. That was never explained during last week's meeting.
-The doorbell rings: two journalists from *De Limburger* have turned up unexpectedly. They're working on an article for the Saturday paper about the integration between the hospital and UM. Can they just ask us a few questions, they need a bit more guidance on this complex matter.
-"I have an answer from Teun. He'll call at three thirty."
-Message from the sixteen-year-old at home: "Can we have chips for dinner tonight? *Please*... The list says it's bobotie and nobody wants that."
It's only half past one. I need some fresh air. Wait, just a quick message to say that there will be *no* chips tonight.

Wendy Degens

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

series the times they are (not) a changin'

How Saudi students cost more than they brought in

Medical students from Saudi-Arabia at a conference in Maastricht ***Photo: archive Observant***

2007–2015

The attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 had unexpected consequences for Maastricht University. For the Saudi government, it meant their programmes to send students to the West were disrupted – they were no longer welcome in the US and the UK. The Netherlands emerged as an alternative, especially Groningen and Maastricht. Over a period of five years, 560 Saudi students were to be trained in medicine there. Why these remote corners of the country? The dean in Groningen had an explanation ready: "The Saudis don't exactly see the west of the Netherlands as the pinnacle of civilisation, shall we say."
One person who was enthusiastic about the idea was Jo Ritzen, then president of Maastricht University. He saw great opportunities to raise UM's international profile and strengthen its position in the Arab world.
The medical faculty itself – which, compared to other UM faculties, had been lagging behind in terms of internationalisation – also seemed positive.
But all did not go smoothly. Even the Dutch House of Representatives got involved, demanding to know how a study programme with an enrolment quota could make room for so many extra students. In a sarcastic letter to the newspaper *Trouw*, a reader asked if rejected applicants could try their luck by simply becoming Saudi citizens.
The answer was simple. The enrolment quota was based on the Dutch job market, so it didn't apply to these students, who would return home after graduation. Moreover, the Saudi government was prepared to pay handsomely for their education: roughly €20,000 per student to cover costs, plus an additional €12,000 – €32,000 in total.
Faculty staff also had concerns. Forty extra students per year (a number that was never actually reached) – weren't they already busy enough? And what about language skills, prior education, cultural differences?

From the start in 2007, misunderstandings abounded. The Saudi government – as represented by its cultural attaché, who oversaw everything first from Bonn and later from Berlin – wanted the students to get a full Western cultural immersion, in other words, to integrate socially and to study in Dutch. The students themselves, once in Maastricht, proved unaware of this. Many objected: what use would it be to them later in life? The language of instruction therefore became English, but their English skills often left much to be desired. So the faculty asked the cultural attaché to please select students more carefully. In turn, the cultural attaché angrily confronted the faculty about issues with timetables and exams; students brought their grievances to him personally, and they had a lot of them.
Then there were visa problems, housing issues, female students arriving with their brothers as chaperones, and so on. Clinical rotations with patient contact posed further challenges: as the programme was taught in English, clinical rotations would have to take place in English-speaking countries such as Ireland or Australia, which proved difficult – and ultimately impossible – to arrange.
Meanwhile, the Saudi government insisted on clinical

A bit of a cultural wrinkle

rotations in the Netherlands, which the faculty opposed.
Finally, there was a bit of a cultural wrinkle. A coordinating staff member told *Observant*, "Their attitude is an issue. They often skip tutorials, skills labs, even exams. They don't properly participate in groups or stick to appointments. As for our part, we didn't respond firmly enough – we should've called them out."
That never happened. The constant issues and extra workload outweighed the financial benefits. In 2015, the plug was finally pulled. Only a small handful of Saudi students completed their degrees. The one positive outcome was the International Track in Medicine that grew out the experiment – but that programme recently fell victim to budget cuts.

Wammes Bos

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

news

“No, we have not been naive”

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we started this process in June 2023 – people who took part in working groups, staff who were invited to brainstorm sessions. Rianne Letschert and I visited faculty councils, faculty boards and service councils. In May last year, we shared a confidential first draft with University Council members and asked for their feedback. That draft did not differ significantly from the proposal now on the table. In my view, we did our best to discuss this thoroughly with them.”
She also disagrees with the council member who commented that the timing is unfortunate because the boards are “unstable” following Letschert’s ministerial appointment and the earlier departure of the hospital board member responsible for finance. “When we submitted the plans to the University Council last December, both boards were complete. Moreover, this is not about the people currently in post, but about whether the proposed governance model is deemed sustainable.”

Not naive

Still, this firm rejection calls for self-reflection by the boards. After nearly three years, doubts and fears remain. Not everyone is convinced that the integration is necessary. Some worry the hospital might gain too much influence, while others fear the university will become too focused on health. How does Habibović account for these anxieties? Is this something the university community actually wants? Have the plans not been explained clearly enough? Have the boards failed to build enough confidence? Were they too naive? “No”, she says to that last question, “not naive. We worked hard to come up with a plan that would inspire enough confidence. The University Council disagreed. Fortunately, we agree that closer cooperation is important for both the university and the hospital. That’s why we need to figure out how we can make it work, with input from all representative bodies. This is far too important to just go ‘never mind, then.’”

Wendy Degens, Riki Janssen

“Could the university block things we really want?”

Doctors “desperate” for closer cooperation, especially with FHML

The University Council has voted ‘no’ on the integration of UM and the hospital, but there are still bodies who have yet to discuss the matter. For example, the Staff Council, the participatory body for medical staff. Which way will their advice lean? Will that be a ‘no’ too? Or are there fewer objections at MUMC+?

The Staff Council will have to advise the hospital board on the integration plans soon. However, according to surgeon Geerard Beets (also a professor at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, FHML) and internist Janine van Elssen (also a lecturer at FHML), there has not yet been a definitive verdict on the “mountain of paperwork” encompassing the plans. “The fact we had to answer within a month of the documents being published is not right,” said Van Elssen. They asked for an extension and were given one, until 31 March.
However, there are some things they want to say now. That the medical specialists are “desperate” for closer cooperation, for example. Particularly with FHML, where many doctors also hold an appointment. “That would get an unequivocal ‘yes’ here,” said Beets. “The reaction to integration with the whole university is more like, ‘Alright, if that’s what it takes to get closer to the faculty...’”

The biggest concern

Not everyone is pleased with how that would look in practice. The biggest concern is “that the new governance model, with an Executive Council governing both the hospital and the university, would make decision-making slower and more expensive.” With the added fear that it would give the university too big a say in the running of the hospital: “Could they block things we really want?”
Ironically, those same objections were mirrored in various faculty councils. Can either of them imagine the apprehension at the thought of a ‘health university’ and the power of the hospital? Yes, “but that fear is ungrounded,” said Beets. “The fact that more people work here and that there is more money involved in the hospital doesn’t mean that we would have a greater say. And nobody here is looking to interfere with the teaching and research elsewhere at the university.”

Photo: Loraine Bodewes

Surprisingly

Somewhat surprisingly, there has been no contact yet with the University Council, which voted ‘no’ on the plans last week. “But we would love to know their main objections. The university and the hospital often seem to talk at cross purposes.”
In the meantime, the MUMC+ Works Council has chosen not to comment. They will be voting on the integration plans on 9 March. “In a bid not to influence this process”, they will not be speaking to the media until then.

Peter Doorakkers

column

The geese have landed

“

Last week I went running along the Savelsbos in eighteen-degree weather, the first real warmth finally reaching Maastricht. Above me, formations of greylag geese cut across the sky in their characteristic V-shapes, dozens of birds returning to the Limburg wetlands after winter. I stopped to watch them pass overhead, listening to their calls echo across the fields between the Savelsbos and the Maas. These geese migrate without committees or negotiations, just the ancient rhythm of survival and renewal. When winter ends, they return.
Dutch academia just survived a harsh winter. About two years of budget uncertainty, protests, anxiety about the future. The kind of cold that makes you wonder if warmth will ever return.
But now there are genuine signs of thaw. A new government that at least promised to invest in education. Our former president, Rianne Letschert, now serving as Minister of Education. Last week, the University Council voted ‘no’ on the proposed integration of the hospital and the university, a small sign that academic freedom comes first. The temperature is rising. The geese are back.
Watching the greylag geese settle back along the Maas, I think about what their return means. They did not fly hundreds of kilometers to enjoy the warmer weather. They came back to build nests, to breed, to raise the next generation. What strikes me about these birds: they return to the same breeding grounds their ancestors used, but every nest is constructed fresh from whatever materials they find. Every generation adapts.
Academia has that same work ahead. Teaching students with new tools, not just old methods. AI has reshaped education while we debated whether to allow it. Here in Maastricht, we pioneered problem-based learning when others thought it impossible. We should know better than anyone that innovation requires using the tools that the season brings.
Winter taught us what we can survive. The thaw will show us what we can create.
The greylag geese are already at work in the Savelsbos. They do not celebrate their arrival. They descend from the sky, land, and just get started.
The warmth is here. Time to move.

”

Jonas Heller,
assistant professor
Marketing & director SBE DEXLab

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

Photo: Observant

> I miss Limburg. Every time I leave, I feel homesick

I love old things. I grew up in the Limburg village of Sint-Geertruid, where I spent a lot of time playing outside. I was always bringing rocks home – the area is known for its prehistoric flint mines – and displaying my finds in my room. On birthdays, my family would come and have a look at my collection. I was an adventurous child with a vivid imagination. Growing up in a place with such a rich history sets you on a path. It plants a seed. I'm convinced it's different from growing up in a polder in the western Netherlands. In secondary school, I became more of a dreamer. I hardly gave any thought to what I wanted to do with my life. I went to Maastricht to study law, one of those degrees you choose when you don't really know what you want to do. One day, I spent hours watching people carry out fieldwork on the remains of a Roman bridge in the Meuse River. I'd thought about studying archaeology before, but that was the moment it clicked. I finished my first year and then moved to Leiden.

The first thing I do when I get home… is cuddle Oskar. He's four months old now. The first few weeks with a newborn are very abstract. Babies can't do much. He's becoming more interactive now, responding more and more. What kind of father do I want to be? I want to give Oskar the freedom to develop his own personality, discover his passions and explore the world, while still setting boundaries. The book *How to Raise a Viking* puts it well: you always have to make clear why something isn't allowed. Keep communicating.

My taste in music… is eclectic. My parents listened to classical music. I brought myself up on Pearl Jam and Bob Dylan. I'm also fond of blues and country. I sing Beppie Kraft songs to Oskar and speak to him in dialect. It's a bit of a mixture, though – my roots are in Sint-Geertruid and my parents are from Nieuwenhagen and Kerkrade.

Who do you take after? My father, I think. He doesn't have much hair left either. [Laughs] But we're quite similar in character as well, although he may be slightly more reserved. He worked for the police in Maastricht, a male-dominated world. He disapproved of people attempting to advance at the expense of others and wasn't afraid to say so, which didn't always make him popular. Other than him, I never really followed anyone's example or had a role model. Indiana Jones? [Laughs] Maybe – but without the whip.

I miss Limburg. It still feels like home to me. Every time I leave, I feel homesick. Ten years ago, I bought a piece of land with large fruit trees, to have a patch of Limburg to call my own. It's close to my parents' house. I love being there in nature. I would like to move back south, but when? I have a wonderful job in Leiden at the National Museum of Antiquities, close to the university. That would all change – not necessarily for the worse, but my life would become more regional. I feel like it's too early to let go of what I have now, but at the same time I know it would be a shame to wait until retirement. Perhaps I should take that step earlier, but I find it very difficult.

Who does the cooking at home? Frederike, my lovely girlfriend, who brings calm and stability to our home. I know how to cook, and I do it once or twice a week, but I rush it too much and don't put as much love into it. I hope I make up for that with other jobs in and around the house.

When was the last time you laughed out loud? [Thinks] During excavations, when you're working closely with a team, you tend to develop bad jokes and a peculiar kind of humour together. Sadly, I don't get to do many digs anymore – I'm too busy with other work – but it's what originally drew me to archaeology. I've been to a lot of different places: the Middle East, the Caribbean. Sometimes it felt like one big adventure.

What is your biggest pitfall? I tend to get a strong sense of FOMO, fear of missing out. My work is my passion. I have so many interests, I'm ambitious and I quickly feel like I'm missing out if I don't do it all. That's why I tend to say yes to things, and the balance can tip. My appointment as Dubois Visiting Professor is an extra commitment as well. I'm very pleased with it, though. Archaeology is highly multidisciplinary, and I want to use my field to look at history and society in different ways.

When I look in the mirror… I see someone who is changing. I still recognise myself, but I can see time catching up with me. I'm not afraid of getting older, but sometimes I feel like it's happening very quickly and wonder if I'll manage to do everything I still want to.

What would you be if you weren't an archaeologist? As a child, I wanted to be a knight or an astronaut. They do archaeological work on the International Space Station – I would've liked that. But honestly, I can't imagine ever doing anything other than what I do now: finding, investigating and exploring traces, and sometimes gaining a new perspective on the distant past and even the present.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

"Much work to be done" to smooth the transition from school to university

Classes with an academic twist, poster presentations and lectures to inspire interest in STEM

How do you get secondary school pupils interested in studying STEM? Plant the seeds early by offering them classes and workshops with an academic twist. That's the idea behind Bètasteunpunt Limburg, an outreach initiative by the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE). Not all pupils are convinced just yet: "I'd rather study law."

Secondairy school pupils present their posters ***Photo: Ellen Oosterhof***

On the Thursday before the February half-term holiday, the FSE atrium is full of colour and energy. Not because carnival is just around the corner, but because about one hundred pupils from five local secondary schools are here to present their final-year research projects to an academic audience. They quickly put up the colourful posters they've designed on towering display boards. Subjects range from the engineering behind Formula 1 cars to vegan ice cream and the effects of exercise on older adults. Once everything is in place, a three-member jury, including FSE Vice-Dean Harm Askes, begins to make the rounds.

Inspiring interest

FSE staff member Monique Scheepens watches with satisfaction. She initiated Bètasteunpunt Limburg two years ago, bringing together local secondary school teachers and academics. This poster presentation event is one of its results; FSE lecturers and students visited secondary schools to help pupils shape their research. "It's just one of the things we do. One of our lecturers recently gave a lecture on climate change and biodiversity. We want to inspire pupils to choose a STEM degree and create a smoother transition from secondary school to university."

Part of that effort involves classes that are being developed, with input from FSE, by secondary school teachers who work at Bètasteunpunt Limburg once a week. One of them is Leonie Titulaer, a chemistry teacher at Porta Mosana College in Maastricht. For the past eighteen months, she has spent every Monday working at FSE. "Look", she says, pulling up information on mass spectrometry, a technique used to identify molecules. "This is a topic I would cover anyway with older pupils, but we've given it an academic twist, made it more challenging, so they get a sense of what it would be like to study this at university."

"At university, you choose a discipline, not necessarily a specific job"

Girls

"We want to give pupils a clear idea of what their future could look like", adds Melissa Cremers from Graaf Huyn College in Geleen, who is involved as well. "At university, you choose a discipline, not necessarily a specific job. Once they understand that, choosing a STEM degree may feel less daunting – especially for girls, who often decide against it."

At today's event, the gender balance appears roughly equal. The vast majority of the pupils present take STEM subjects such as mathematics, chemistry and physics. Still, the boys seem more certain about studying hard science than their female classmates. "I'd rather study law", says one girl in her final year, who researched the impact of social media on eating disorders. The girl next to her: "Business administration, or maybe something related to health sciences." A little farther along, two girls are standing next to a poster with Batman on it. They did their project on painkillers, which they call "the invisible heroes of healthcare". Will they continue in that direction? "No, I want to study cybercrime", one replies, leaving the door slightly open for a STEM degree such as computer science.

There's still much work to be done, says a physics teacher who has come to support his pupils. And it's not just about encouraging young women to pursue STEM degrees. "The overall level of physics and other science subjects is declining. More and more is being removed from the curriculum. The girls who go for it are very strong. What this initiative is doing is great, but there could be even closer collaboration. Even in this project, more knowledge could have been shared. There's still a long way to go."

Budget

Scheepens would welcome that. If it were up to her, Bètasteunpunt Limburg would get a permanent place in the FSE plans and budget. "We're currently funded through RAP [a grant to address regional teacher shortages] and received funding from Landelijk Overleg Bètadecanen (National Committee of STEM Deans), but we'd like structural funding. To secure that, we have to demonstrate our added value."

After the poster presentations, Vice-Dean Askes is convinced of that value, although he can't promise any financial support. "I'm enthusiastic about what I've seen today – pupils from across the region, some further along than others, but each with an inspiring story to tell." The fact that some may later become students at FSE is a nice bonus. "It's important to show who we are as a faculty and to reduce STEM anxiety, particularly among girls. We need them: they're driven and often have a broader perspective, while boys tend to be more focused on solving equations."

A little later, Askes – after admitting that all the poster presentations were better than the work he produced at seventeen – announces the winners. First prize goes to a project on how sport and school affect pupils' motivation and mental wellbeing. The winners? Three girls.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

A student's journey to getting your licence

DRIVING US CRAZY

It was a nightmare, Kafkaesque, an assault on her self-confidence and her bank account. European Law School student Nora Grolig failed her driving test in November. Her second attempt at getting a driving licence failed before she even got behind the wheel. *Observant* asked her to write about her experiences and ask fellow students about their 'driving licence stories'.

TEXT: Nora Grolig **ILLUSTRATION:** Bas van der Schot

When I passed my theory test in Brussels last August, the shadow of a new federal law already loomed over my shoulder. From January 1st 2026 onwards, candidates would have to pass all their exams — theory, practical, risk perception, and the mandatory Red Cross training — in the same region. For the uninitiated: Belgium is divided into three regions — Flemish-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia, and bilingual Brussels. As one exasperated driving school manager put it, "It's not even a lasagne at this point, it's a ratatouille with mashed lentils on top."

The problem? I had passed my theory in Brussels but planned to take my lessons and the practical exam in Wallonia, closer to Maastricht. So instead of the usual 20 hours, I opted for the more expensive 30-hour package, which grants "direct access" to the practical exam and skips the three-month waiting period.

If I started in mid-September, I would be finished by mid-November and beat the clock. Efficient. Strategic. Slightly unhinged.

In retrospect, imposing that deadline on myself was unwise. For an obsessive perfectionist, cramming everything into three months — while juggling academic, social, and personal commitments — was less "a rite of passage" and more "a recipe for burnout".

Because, let's be honest: a driving licence is adulthood's baptism of fire. You turn eighteen and suddenly a clock starts ticking: get your permit, become functional, contribute to society. There are two types of people. The first passes smoothly at 18 and never mentions it again. The second enters a bureaucratic spiral of repeat exams, rescheduling fees, and mild existential crises — their fate hovering somewhere between Sisyphus and Prometheus.

I belong squarely to the latter. So far, trying to get my licence has resulted in chronic back pain, anxiety, and a tour through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (that last one is still pending).

Curious whether this was a personality flaw or a systemic trap, I asked other students about their experiences. Is success a matter of character, national procedures, or just dumb luck?

THE NETHERLANDS: EFFICIENT... IN THEORY

The Dutch process — theory exam, lessons, practical test — usually takes three to six months. Because EU rules on cross-border permits are not harmonised, international students can obtain a Dutch licence and have it recognised across the EU.

Second-year Global Studies student Melissa Moussa (19, French-Turkish) chose this route. Lack of time and motivation had discouraged her from getting her licence in Chamonix, but once in Maastricht, she gave it a try. Within minutes, she had booked her theory test in Roermond. For a small extra fee, she could take it in English.

She was lucky, normally waiting times for theory tests range from days to weeks. Practical exams can take three to four months; in Belgium and France, up to six. The consequences are costly: the longer you wait, the more you forget — which means more lessons, more money, more quiet resentment.

Melissa now takes lessons in Maastricht. Most learners need 39 to 43 hours to feel confident — a significant investment in both time and money. Though initially very motivated, she has struggled to fit lessons around her part-time job, university schedule, and friends.

THREE DAYS BEFORE MY UNIVERSITY EXAMS IN DECEMBER, I GOT A SECOND CHANCE. STANDING IN LINE AT THE EXAM CENTRE, I REACHED FOR MY ID. NOTHING. THE REGULATIONS ARE CLEAR: NO ID, NO EXAM

MY EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN SIMILAR.

Last autumn, I rushed between tutorials and trains twice a week to attend lessons at a French driving school in Visé — a 15-minute ride that somehow cost €10.50 each time. I missed trains, reshuffled classes, and, on one memorable occasion, even had my phone stolen at Maastricht station. Meanwhile, a persistent lower back pain settled in — the physical embodiment of administrative despair.

STICKING TO IT

Starting at an early age doesn't guarantee success. Momentum is key, as European Law student James Wallace (19, French-American) discovered.

At sixteen, he passed his French theory exam on the first try. In France, candidates complete about 20 hours with a driving school, then log 3,000 kilometres with a 'guide' (usually a parent) before booking a practical exam. James ran out of time to reach this target before moving to Maastricht.

For a year and a half, he tried to align exam dates with trips home. Finally, he secured a slot on January 30th. With no classes during Period 3 and his driving now a little rusty, he moved back home to practise intensively and take extra lessons before the exam. "It was intense and expensive," he says, "but worth it." On the 30th, my phone lit up: "I PASSED!"

I felt genuine joy — and a hint of envy.

GERMAN EFFICIENCY

Carla Stellwag (22, German) approached getting her licence with calm pragmatism: it was simply something to get done. "Why postpone it? Just do it in high school while you still have time." In her rural town in Eastern Bavaria, nearly everyone gets their licence as soon as possible. By graduation, only two out of sixty students didn't have one.

Germany's system is rigorous: mandatory preparatory classes, strict standards, high expectations. Carla was a model student: she started at sixteen and passed both exams on her first try.
Carla's friends, especially the non-Germans, regularly point out what a good driver she is. She credits the demanding process — ranked among the toughest globally — for producing skilled drivers. "I feel safer driving in Germany than anywhere else in Europe," she says, even on the Autobahn without speed limits. Because everyone undergoes thorough training, trust in other drivers is high. Her year as an au pair in France felt far more chaotic. "Driving there taught me a lot," she laughs — a diplomatic way of saying it was terrifying.

SIBLING RIVALRY AND PARENTAL DIPLOMACY

Siblings can raise the stakes. When I passed my theory exam while my 23-year-old sister still didn't have her licence, a subtle competition emerged — encouraged by our parents' quiet strategy of divide et impera. Nothing motivates quite like the prospect of being crowned the 'responsible' child.

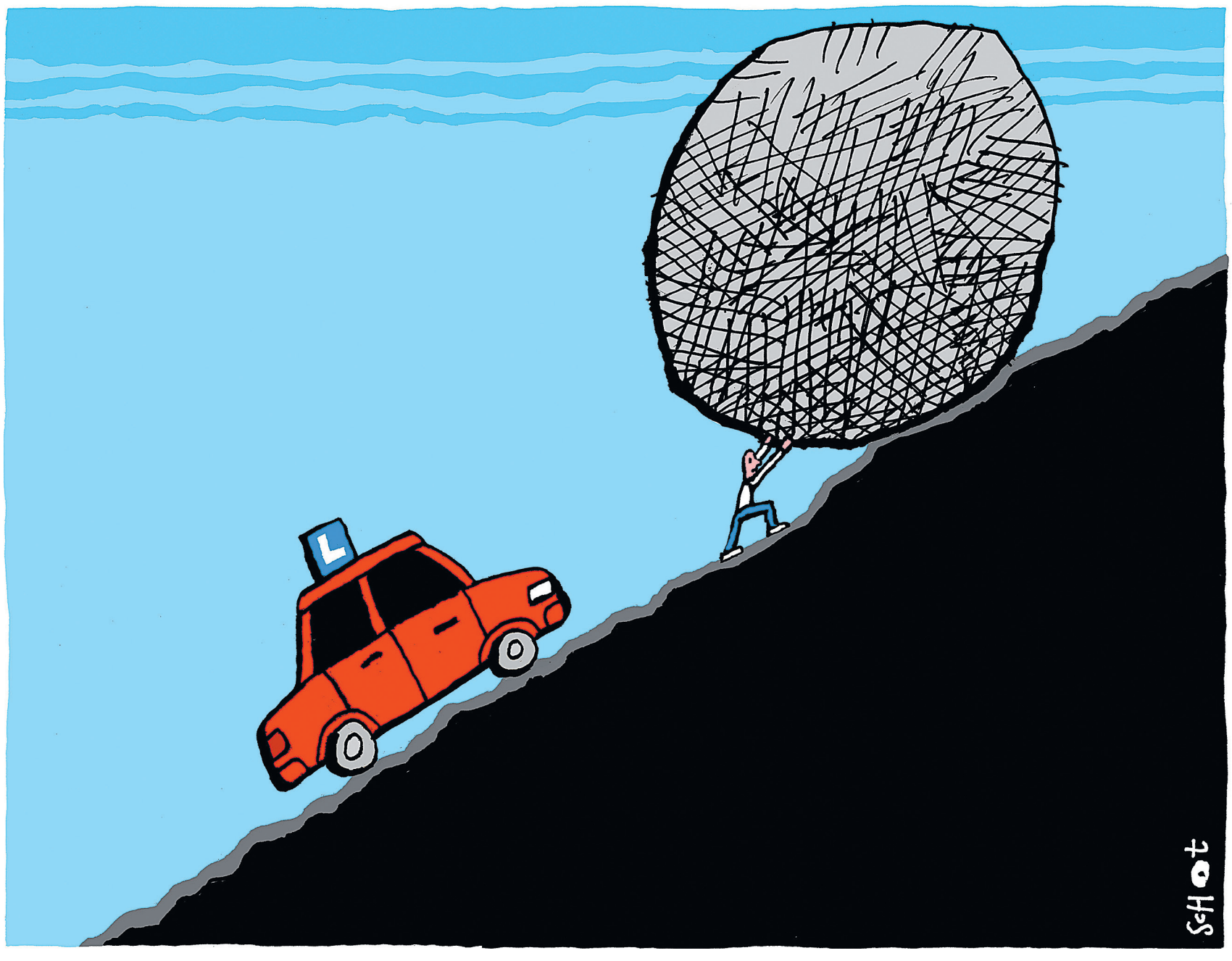
For Sara Janssen (22, Dutch), however, sibling dynamics were irrelevant. Growing up in the rural town of Puth, northeast of Maastricht, the freedom that a car provided was motivation enough. She got her licence as soon as she could and has since developed a genuine love for driving.
Parental pressure also varies. Melissa feels none — she pays for everything herself, so her parents don't pester her. And yet James, who hopes to live in walkable cities and doesn't plan to own a car, persisted solely because of his parents' insistence.

"IF YOU DON'T LAUGH, YOU'LL CRY"

I failed my first driving test in November within three minutes — a STOP sign. For the record: I did stop. But apparently with insufficient conviction for the examiner's liking.
The devastation that followed revealed how much pressure I had placed on myself. Until then, failure hadn't seemed like an option. Now I felt certain I would never succeed.
Three days before my university exams in December, I got a second chance. Standing in line at the exam centre, I reached for my ID. Nothing. The regulations are clear: no ID, no exam.
How could this happen? I'm the organised one. The checklist enthusiast. The obsessive planner. This is the kind of thing that happens to my ADHD sister, not me. And yet, beneath the panic, I felt something unexpected: relief. No exam meant no immediate failure. No judgement. No three-minute tragedy. Was it self-sabotage? A subconscious rebellion against months of self-imposed pressure and irritation? Possibly.
I didn't spiral this time. You know how the saying goes: "If you don't laugh, you'll cry".

LICENCE TO PERSEVERE

With the exception of Sara and Carla, nearly everyone else I asked about this topic (ten to fifteen people) described a Kafkaesque journey. Some are too intimidated by the bureaucracy to try. Others are on their fourth or fifth attempt, losing hope. And those who did pass are still recovering from the ordeal.
It is hard not to feel cheated out of time and money, as if the odds are not stacked against you. At some point, you wonder whether you'll be rewarded with anything more than crippling anxiety and self-doubt.
And yet, there may be no better training for life than trying (and failing) to get a driving licence. If nothing else, it teaches grit — and humility.



How do EU countries compare?

Reputation has it that the Dutch theory exam is tougher — and Dutch examiners stricter — than elsewhere. Statistics from the Centraal Bureau Rijvaardigheidsbewijzen (CBR) seem to confirm this: only 48.6 percent of candidates pass the theory test on their first attempt, and most need two or three tries. Belgium and France perform slightly better, but remain close behind, with just 53 percent passing on the first go. In Germany, 45 percent.
The outlook for the practical exam is no brighter. In the Netherlands, just over 50 percent pass their driving test the first time, with most succeeding on their second or third attempt. In Belgium, only 47 percent pass initially, and the rate exceeds 60 percent only after a third attempt. France and Germany fares somewhat better at 57 percent. During my search on the internet I noticed that those seeking an easier route should look to Spain, Latvia, or Poland, where prices and waiting times are lower and English-language services widely available.
Costs add another hurdle. The Netherlands is the second-most expensive country in the world to obtain a driving licence, with an average cost of €3,125. Germany ranks sixth, with costs ranging between €2,550 and €3,850. France averages around €2,650. Belgium remains comparatively affordable, with total costs between €1,500 and €2,500, depending on the chosen track.

news

Globalisation, new technology and sustainability remain important topics in teaching and research

School of Business and Economics to free up millions for strategic investments

The School of Business and Economics (SBE) is investing heavily in its strategy plans, with a maximum of 18 million euros by 2030. Part of that money will be raised by improved efficiency. Other sources of income are also being explored, including through closer cooperation on post-academic education between UMIO and the Maastricht School of Management, which has been part of the faculty since 2022.

Photo: Observant

These are just a few points from the strategic document which was recently passed – without significant debate – by the Faculty Council, and which is the result of eighteen months of deliberation, discussion and calculation. It sets out the priorities for the coming years. As in previous years, sustainability, new technology and globalisation remain important topics in teaching and research.

'Organisational development' is another important topic: how do you ensure the faculty is adequately able to respond to a rapidly changing world? Because the process of formulating the strategy happened under something of a cloud. Firstly, due to the budget cuts to higher education announced by the previous government, said dean Mariëlle Heijltjes. Reason enough to divide seventy members of SBE into work groups to brainstorm about how and where the faculty could function more efficiently and effectively. For example, personnel: "Do we always have to replace retirees with someone at the same level? Or could we appoint a junior instead?" The new government seems to have dropped the planned budget cuts, "but they still have to find majority support for those plans". The faculty hopes that working more efficiently would free up a total of 6 million euros by 2030 for investments.

Then there is the decreasing number of teenagers – and thus potential students – in the Netherlands. A problem for universities in general, where finances depend for a large part on the number of students. Time to find alternative sources of income, for example, through closer collaboration between UMIO and the Maastricht School of Management. Both offer post-academic education. With the increasing importance of 'lifelong learning', it is a market with solid financial potential, said Heijltjes.

Overall, the new strategy is not radically different to the previous one: sustainable development, new technologies (such as artificial intelligence, AI), and 'globalisation with regional embedding' remain important topics. However, where in the last period, 1.2 million euros a year was needed for strategic initiatives, that figure now rises to 3.6 million a year. Where will that money come from and would it come at the expense of budgets for departments? The answer is no: it comes from an increase in expected income and plans to improve efficiency. More activities will also be marked as strategy activities, including some that have already happened and have already seen investments, for example, contributions from the SBE to the Brightlands campuses, such as the programmes in Venlo. Researchers will also be able to submit plans to the board that align with any of the priorities. Although it is not a guarantee they will receive the requested funding, "only if the proposal is supported sufficiently".

The proposed integration of the MUMC+ and the university is not mentioned in the strategy document at all. Heijltjes does not think that necessary; rather, that merger offers opportunities for interfaculty research. She is not worried that non-medical faculties such as hers will get lost in the integration. "SBE employees will still be able to do non-medical related research."

Peter Doorakkers