

# observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY / VOLUME 46 / MARCH 12, 2026 / Nr 21

## “VOTE? ME? BUT I DON'T KNOW A SINGLE PARTY”

The municipal elections will be held on March 18th.  
Many Dutch and international students are eligible to vote.  
Will they?

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FHML Council and MUMC+ Works Council shoot down UM and hospital integration plans

## No, no, and thrice no

*Following the University Council's decision last week, both the Faculty Council for Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) and the hospital Works Council voted no unanimously on the plans to integrate Maastricht University and the MUMC+.*

To clarify: the FHML Faculty Council was not eligible to vote on the proposal to merge the hospital and the whole university, only on the integration of their faculty and the MUMC+. A plan the council could not and would not approve in a meeting held behind closed doors on Tuesday afternoon. The worry is that the much larger hospital would overshadow the faculty, said council chair Iwan de Jong in an initial reaction. “We are concerned about the position of our dean in the bigger picture,” he said. They would be made vice chair of the new MUMC Board, while the head of the hospital would be chair. The council did not like that, said De Jong: “They are worried it would take away our influence. The two should be given equal roles.”

Additionally worries also relate to the double role of the head of the hospital, who would also be a member of the new Executive Board in charge of the whole university and the hospital. The council was clearly not convinced by an

earlier answer from Helen Mertens, the current head, who said that there was no other option, because it should be somebody who knows the hospital inside out.

And then there is the role of the Faculty Council. It is “insufficiently explained” in the plans: “Who do we talk to about what, exactly? We were told, ‘That won’t change’, but you want to see that reflected somewhere in the official documents.”

Why was the decision taken behind closed doors, without the press or even dean Annemie Schols present? “I felt that the council should be given the option, which it preferred. I can’t read the minds of all the council members, but I feel our relationship with the board is good and safe.”

The council will likely present a letter explaining the decision to the Faculty Board on Thursday. It is not the end of the road: cooperation is absolutely still desirable, said De Jong, just not in this way. After all, many people at FHML also work at the hospital, which brings with it all sorts of practical problems. “We want to help brainstorm solutions to those problems.”

### MUMC+ Works Council

The MUMC+ Works Council also advised against the plans on Monday. The advice, given

in a closed meeting, was unanimous, said chair Marc Bemelmans and official secretary Claudia Backes. It was an easy decision. “We have been working on this for a long time, everyone was agreed.”

For example, about the role of the participatory body: the plan is for all the various councils at the university and the hospital to send a representative to ‘negotiations’ with the new Executive Council. An impossible construction, said the Works Council. “They would have to keep going back to their own people to discuss. It would be unworkable,” said Bemelmans. Furthermore, “how much influence would we have?”

Then there is the new governance model, rather loftily labelled ‘the Maastricht model’, unique in the Netherlands: integrating a hospital with an entire university has never been tried in this country. That was also shot down. Bemelmans spoke of “a monstrosity. Nobody knows whether it will work. And you can’t just stop it, it would cost months to unravel again if you want to turn it back. It’s an experiment. A well-reasoned one, yes, but will it work in practice?” The Works Council, which had a legal expert examine the plans, is highly doubtful. “This is an amalgamation of two organisations with an extra layer on top,” said Backes. How

that would result in a more decisive, more efficient organisation, is beyond the council. However, the Works Council is not against closer cooperation. “On the contrary, just not in this way.”

### U-council

The decision by the University Council to reject the plans last week came as a surprise to president Pamela Habibović, she told *Observant* earlier. She was disappointed and puzzled by the decision. She also said she would wait for the reactions of the other representative bodies, before determining “the position and the next steps”, together with the Supervisory Board and the deans.

There is also still the question of the Staff Council, the hospital’s medical staff participatory body. It is expected to publish its advice on 31 March. But concerns were also raised there in an earlier interview with *Observant*. They were likewise not impressed by how the new governance model and decision-making would work in practice.

*Peter Doorakkers*

See page 5 for more: U-council explains “no”



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## editorial

## "Good job"

We came across an article in an *Observant* from 26 October 1989 about the first psychological counsellor for students at Maastricht University by complete coincidence. The counsellor was appointed to help students with "a fear of failure, problems of identity, lack of social skills, concentration issues, conflict with parents, and relationship issues". It was an immense relief for colleague Deborah Blekenhorst, who had been frantically searching through the physical copies in our archives (heavy, bundled books, each weighing several kilos, stacked high on her desk and riddled with Post-it notes). Because why had they appointed a psychological counsellor for students, how many FTE was it, what were the responsibilities, when was the department expanded (and professionalised), were there waiting lists in the nineties?

You can read all about it next week in the series *The times they are (not) a changin'* – alright, maybe not *all* about it, nobody here has the time to read through every single one of the 19,000 scanned *Observant* pages from the eighties, nineties and noughties. But we are hoping to cover all the major developments. You may be asking yourself, why would they search manually? Have they never heard of digitising? Of course, we have! Every article from 2012 to now is available digitally on our website. Every newspaper before then has been scanned by staff at the university library – many thanks – and can be found on a special UB website. The downside: the search function, it's not very good. So we often choose to search the old-fashioned way instead. And honestly, it's fun to flick through the pages, you never know what you might come across, such as a piece about Pim Fortuyn. In 1988, he worked for CES, the Centre for European Studies. Part-time, on a two-year contract that he didn't complete. "He did have new burundy carpets put in," it says a little further on. Browsing through the archive always leads to criticism of the 'interesting' language choices (old-fashioned spelling), interesting leads (200 words, where the guideline is 50), interesting layout choices (lots and lots of text, very few pictures). Colleague Cleo Freriks has been looking for the keyword 'sustainability' for ages – how has UM tackled this over the last fifty years? She noticed that there was often no follow-up: decisions would be made and reported but the paper never explored the 'what now' aspect. And why was so much time spent on stories with seemingly no link to UM? Such as a symposium about the Erasmus programme in Paris. "There is zero mention of what this has to do with UM," she said. "Good job, Jacques (editor-in-chief at the time)," has become a somewhat sarcastic slogan here.

Bring it on, I say. In thirty years' time, I'm sure the current *Observant* team will be given the same treatment: "Good job, Wendy."

Wendy Degens

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



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

## Students Pieter van den Hoogenband and Tom Dumoulin drop out after a few years of struggling



Tom Dumoulin in conversation with Twan Huys during a College Tour at UM Sports in 2017 Photo: Roy Borghouts Fotografie

## 1999 and 2009

"Who is that woman?" asked Jeroen Pauw, host of the talk show Pauw en De Wit, in December 2025, when it was announced that UM President Rianne Letschert would become the new informateur. She may be well known in Maastricht and her hometown of Helmond, a member of countless national committees and advisory bodies and a familiar face at the Ministry of Education, but she had only recently appeared on the Dutch media's radar.

The same cannot be said of Pieter van den Hoogenband and Tom Dumoulin, two former UM students who have since become well-known public figures in the Netherlands. The two have a lot in common: both were born in Maastricht, went on to become world-class athletes, studied at UM – and both dropped out before completing their degrees.

Swimmer Van den Hoogenband, who would later become a three-time Olympic champion, sixteen-time European champion and one-time world champion, certainly came here intending to finish his degree. In March 1999, as a first-year Medicine student, he told *Observant* that he had been over the moon when, almost a year earlier, he heard that he had secured a place on his preferred programme in his favourite city. He found the approach stimulating: working in groups, doing a lot of independent study and the programme's block structure. At the time, Maastricht was only just beginning to develop support services for elite athletes, and Problem-Based Learning (with compulsory attendance and intensive small-group sessions) was not exactly known for being athlete-friendly. Even so, the faculty did all it could to make things easier for him. By then, Van den Hoogenband had already won a European 200 metre title, and his star was rising fast. He was assigned a mentor whom he described as his "rock", and the education office proved highly considerate: "We accommodate his wishes."

In his first year, Van den Hoogenband hoped to pass three of the seven exams – all that his training schedule

would realistically allow. On average, he spent twenty hours a week in the pool, plus another six hours of strength training.

After two years of struggling and passing just three exams, he decided it was time to give up. The combination had proved impossible. His professors, he later recalled, advised him to focus on his sport: "I can do something special, something perhaps only two or three people in the world can do. Everyone has their own talents. I discovered that mine happened to be moving through water very fast."

Cyclist Tom Dumoulin, having failed to secure a place on the Medicine programme, began studying Health Sciences in September 2009. He hoped to combine his studies with his cycling career and was determined to make it work, he told *Observant* in 2014. By then, the university offered elite athlete support, but it left something to be desired. "My plan was to complete my first year in two years, but it kept getting harder. Talking to my study advisor and block coordinators helped a bit, but not enough. Deadlines for resit assignments were often pushed back, but ultimately, you still had to do the same amount of work – or even more – in too little time. You can hardly call that elite athlete support."

During his second year, Dumoulin gradually drifted away from his studies and eventually stopped attend-

## "I'm a little jealous of someone like [elite gymnast] Epke Zonderland"

ing altogether. It was something he regretted, as he was close to completing his first year. In 2014, he admitted, "I'm a little jealous of someone like [elite gymnast] Epke Zonderland – he studies medicine and has become a great ambassador for the University of Groningen." In 2017, Dumoulin won the Giro d'Italia; a year later, he finished second in both the Giro and the Tour de France. Had he and Van den Hoogenband not dropped out, they might well have become UM's most famous alumni and great ambassadors for the university.

Riki Janssen

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

## Plans should be ready before the summer break

# U-Council student members want more affordable language courses

*Dutch courses for international students at the Maastricht University Language Centre should be cheaper and more accessible. That is the wish of the student members of the University Council. In a committee meeting in February, they were given the go-ahead by the Executive Board to formulate plans together with the Language Centre.*

The hope is that students with a higher proficiency in Dutch are more likely to remain in Maastricht and the surrounding area after graduation, which is important in a region where it can be hard for businesses to attract employees. And more Dutch is also important in view of the heated debates about internationalisation and the increasing use of English in higher education.

At the moment, over 1100 internationals are following Dutch courses at the Language Centre, documents showed. For some 700 of them, it is a free course (subsidised by the university) in Social Dutch. On completion, speakers will have attained level A1, the lowest level on the European framework. Enough to manage day-to-day conversation, but not enough for integration (the government requires level B1) or a Dutch-speaking job.

The dropout rate is also high, about 30 per cent of students who start don't complete the course, a report from mid-2024 showed. It is a point of concern, student member Milo Cheng responded when asked. "We are including this in our plan. We could ensure that language courses are better matched with the students' timetables. Maybe charge a small fee, or award credits for completing a course."

Of the students who do complete the course, many don't move on to subsequent courses at the Language Centre. Despite a reduced fee of €300, it is too expensive for many, said Cheng. Their degree also takes up a lot of time, and language classes often clash with exam time-

tables and study groups. Even though, according to Cheng, internationals often do want to improve their Dutch. "To integrate and find a job", according to a questionnaire filled out by 74 students. "A small number, sure, but it does give us an idea."

Ilja Schreinemakers, director of the Language Centre, is pleased with the students' initiative. What could the proposed plans look like? Language courses could be integrated into the wider programme, he said, an option which is currently being trialled at the Faculty of Psychology and Neurosciences. And the Language Centre timetable could be coordinated with the timetables from the faculties. Would that be possible across so many different programmes?

"Yes, I think so. Experience has shown, where there is a will, there is a way."

What about money from UM, to remove the financial hurdle for students? "If we organise the language courses better, and the university includes support for a number of languages in its strategy, then we could talk about it," Schreinemakers said carefully. He has spent a long time arguing for more money for language education. Why would it work this time? "Because language education is seen less and less as a 'must', and high language proficiency is seen as something that leads to better course results and integration."

Peter Doorackers



Illustration: Simone Golob

## Oral History Project: Retired FPN professors' stories preserved

*Why did the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN) nearly get a Department of Aviation Psychology? And what important lesson did Louis Boon learn from his forced departure as dean? The Archive and Documentation Centre for Dutch Behavioural Sciences (ADNG), which preserves the heritage of Dutch psychology and education studies, has captured it all in their Oral History Project.*

Since it started in 2021, the project has grown to include over a hundred one-hour interviews on YouTube. In these videos, emeritus professors look back on their careers. To mark the 50th anniversary of Maastricht University, interviews have recently been added with Wim Riedel (emeritus professor of Experimental Psychopharmacology), work & organisational psychologist Fred Zijlstra and Louis Boon, co-founder of the faculty. Earlier interviews featured prominent FPN figures such as Gerjo Kok, the late former dean, and neuroscientist Be de Gelder.

In his interview, Boon describes working

with young people as "a mixed blessing". Having worked at various faculties himself, he describes psychologists as "second only to historians in being terribly self-important. If you haven't studied psychology, you count for nothing in this field. Which, of course, is complete nonsense."

When asked about the most important lesson he learnt, Boon admits his own fault: "My demotion at Psychology [Boon was removed as dean] was due to overconfidence. I was so annoyed that some people did nothing and were easy to push around. I got carried away. Bullying, harassment – eventually, it catches up with you."

Zijlstra recalls the early days at UM – he had been brought in to help set up what would eventually become the Department of Work and Organisational Psychology – when Gerjo Kok, the dean at the time, asked if they could do something with aviation psychology. "The UM psychology programme was only approved because it was very different [from existing psychology programmes in the Netherlands]; experimental and cognitive." When

they wanted to add applied research, it had to be "something completely new, a niche that didn't exist yet."

Kok even went ahead and hired someone with a helicopter pilot's licence, but the plan never came to fruition. Riedel, a hobby pilot himself, did conduct research on pilots' performance after taking sleeping pills, using a flight simulator at Beek Airport (now Maastricht Aachen Airport). It was an interesting study, but not what he considers his proudest achievement. That, says the man who today calls himself a "recreational neuroscientist" ("I keep up to date with the literature, but there's no pressure"), is the research master's programme in Drug Development and Neurohealth. Laughing, he adds, "At first, we wanted to call it Psychopharmacology, but they came up with a slightly sexier name."

Cleo Freriks

All interviews can be found on the YouTube channel "ADNG Erfgoedcentrum Nederlandse Gedragwetenschappen"



## No chocolates on Women's Day?

“

Someone once said that when you are abroad, you carry the responsibility for how your country and its people are perceived by the foreigners you encounter. I take my diplomatic mission very seriously, and whenever there's a chance to enlighten outsiders, I embrace it. Mostly, my mission involves traumatising Western European men with the behavioural standards expected by Slavic women. Once, I left a guy from Belgium speechless by explaining the importance of giving flowers on a regular basis – while at the same time talking him out of dating an Eastern European woman, I'm afraid. As 8 March drew near, which is International Women's Day, I wondered how many boyfriends in international couples had let down their girlfriends from countries where the celebration of International Women's Day is as important as celebrating your significant other's birthday or Mother's Day. The streets of Maastricht looked particularly ordinary that day. Bouquets were nowhere to be found. Chocolates on supermarket shelves hadn't sold out. Did the appreciation of women have a deadline on Valentine's Day?

In Poland, it's a big deal. You receive good wishes from relatives, fellow students and work colleagues. Flower sales double compared to a regular day. If you're close to a girl, you are expected to deliver on this day. Why? Because Polish boys are raised with this belief – at school, they buy at least one tulip for every female classmate. In Russia, it's even a national holiday, a day off for everyone. And even though Women's Day may carry communist connotations for history buffs, as it was heavily used by the Soviet Union as a propaganda tool to promote the regime as a paternalistic caretaker of the "gentle sex", this tradition of dedicating a day to celebrating women is something Western European feminists should appreciate. Unfortunately, in France and Germany, they've chosen to forgo this pleasure in favour of street rallies and demonstrations. But I suppose, now that we have freedom of choice, this is what it looks like in practice.

”

Rita Wiśniewska,  
a third-year European Law student

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

Manon Duchateau  
(Borgharen, 1982)

\ People & Development  
policy officer at MUO

\ Relationship status:  
married to Thijs,  
three sons

\ Lives in:  
Eijsden



Photo: Joey Roberts

“

I was a bit of a wild one as a child.  
I still am, but I've got it under  
control now

”

**What do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning?** [Laughs] Wrinkles! And grey hair. And a lot of energy – I'm a morning person. My alarm goes off at 6:15am. I always put a load of washing on first thing in the morning; with three sons, the laundry never ends. Then I walk the dog, and by 7am I'm waiting for the rest of the family to come downstairs.

**As a child, I was...** a bit of a wild one. I certainly wasn't a girly girl who played with Barbies. I loved being outdoors, which kept my parents on their toes. I was born and raised in Borgharen, on the Meuse River. I'd wander through the meadows and once got chased by a bull who decided I was getting too close to the cows. And a police officer once drove me home after I'd smashed some empty beer bottles I'd found. No, I wasn't afraid of anything. I was independent, a doer, an extrovert. [Chuckles] I still am, only now I've got it under control.

**My biggest parenting frustration.** When one of the boys is quick to say, "This won't work" or "I can't do this". Just try, I tell them. Ask for help. There's always a step you can take. Am I an optimist? Absolutely. My glass is always half full. I see opportunities in every situation, and I try to pass that attitude on to my children.

**What is your partner's most attractive quality?** He's the complete opposite of me. He's an introvert, a thinker, risk averse. He keeps me balanced. We fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. We've been together for 25 years now, but I still get butterflies from time to time when I look at him. When we met, he wasn't especially interested in dating. I'd be all dressed and made up, ready to go out to meet him, and he'd just casually ring and cancel at the last minute. I could've tried to find someone else, as my parents suggested, but I stuck with it until he felt the click too. It turned out to be the best decision of my life.

**Which book should everyone read?** *The Seven-Day Weekend* by Ricardo Semler, about balancing work and private life in a flexible way. If the sun is shining today, why not go outside and do your work on a rainy Sunday afternoon instead? I'd be all in favour of that. In general, I mainly read for work, not for pleasure at home. To relax, I take the dog for a walk, spend time with the children or watch series, sometimes of rather questionable quality, like *Bridgerton* or *Emily in Paris*. Delicious.

**I spend most of my money on...** the move we're currently in the middle of. But apart from that: shoes. When my eldest was little, he once asked, "Mum, do you work for

Zalando?" My husband sometimes sighs, "More shoes?" when a parcel arrives. But I'm not reckless with money. I think saving is important.

### **Are you a mummy's girl or a daddy's girl?**

A daddy's girl. My parents got divorced when I was 4, and I haven't seen my biological father since my teens. My mother eventually met someone new, so I got a stepfather. He really felt like my dad. If he was fixing or doing something, I'd be right there beside him. I loved that. Sadly, I haven't been in contact with them for about ten years now. I was the one who ended it. It was the hardest conversation I'd ever had. Let's just say there was quite a mismatch in our expectations of each other. It all started when my husband and I moved to Geldrop, where we lived for seven years. Our eldest was born there. We couldn't just pop over from Geldrop to Maastricht, so if we did visit, we also wanted to see our grandparents and in-laws. I gave everyone equal attention, but all I ever heard from my parents was, "Well, that was another lightning visit". They always felt wronged. It became suffocating to the point where I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm choosing myself here".

**My greatest fear.** Snakes and other creepy-crawlies. Earthworms, slugs... I can't deal with them. My husband and middle son enjoy recreational fishing. We've agreed that they can keep a small amount of live bait in the house, as long as I never come across it.

**The best advice I ever received.** I can't single out just one thing. I'm like a sponge when it comes to what people say to me. That includes criticism – I can take it. If something about me rubs you the wrong way, just tell me so we can talk about it. That way, I'll get to know you a little better, too. I'm a very straightforward person; you can tell what I'm thinking from my face. I may be born and bred in Limburg, but I'm not one for beating around the bush.

Peter Doorakkers

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

University Council explains why it rejected board integration plans

# Too many risks, too little consideration of alternatives

Non-medical faculties risk being overshadowed in a health-focused university, and even the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences would be adversely affected by a board integration between the hospital and the university. This is what the University Council states in a letter to the Executive Board.

Two weeks ago, the University Council unanimously voted against the board integration plans as proposed by the university's Executive Board and the hospital's leadership. The council has now published a 2.5-page explanation of its decision, showing that the "no" did not come out of the blue. Much of the reasoning echoes a previous letter, dated 25 June 2025, in response to earlier integration plans. The implication is clear: the Executive Board didn't do much with the earlier feedback, and the concerns raised then remain largely valid today.

## Dual role

One concern is the dual role of the hospital president, who would hold two board positions: one on the five-member "Executive Council" (responsible for MUMC+) and one on the MUMC+ Executive Board, including both the hospital and FHML. "This creates a fundamental conflict of roles and gives this person, and the MUMC+, a disproportionate amount of influence over the whole organisation."

There is also the risk that a health-focused university could come to dominate the university's non-medical faculties. This could lead to less focus on non-medical research, reduced influence of other faculties on strategic decisions and "possibly fewer investments". "It could change UM's culture and identity." The university's current governance structure protects the interests of both faculties and service centres, "even though FHML is much bigger than the others".

At the MUMC+ level, the council sees a similar risk: a potential disruption of the current – relatively equal – relationship between the hospital president and the FHML dean, to the disadvantage of the latter.

The letter also warns that the proposed integration would create a large gap between the new Executive Council and non-leadership staff, at a time when direct contact is essential to hear the views of faculties, service centres and students on "strategy development and decision-making".

## Together

Despite its criticism of the current plans, the University Council sees the importance of a closer relationship with the hospital. This applies to both practical matters – such as access to buildings, use of bike sheds and car parks and reducing bureaucracy – and broader challenges in health research. "You need to make strategic decisions that are aligned with each other", explains Teun Dekker, chair of the University Council, to *Observant*. "If, as a hypothetical example, UM wants to use one type of [extremely

expensive] scanner and the hospital prefers another type, it makes sense to agree on a unified approach together." The letter stresses the importance of exploring alternative forms of cooperation "together" – not just with the University Council, but also with stakeholders such as FHML institute directors as well as the wider university community. Many "feel they have not

*"The situation that we are in now should not repeat itself"*

been adequately informed or given the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution".

The University Council also doubts whether a board integration is really necessary to achieve the stated goals.

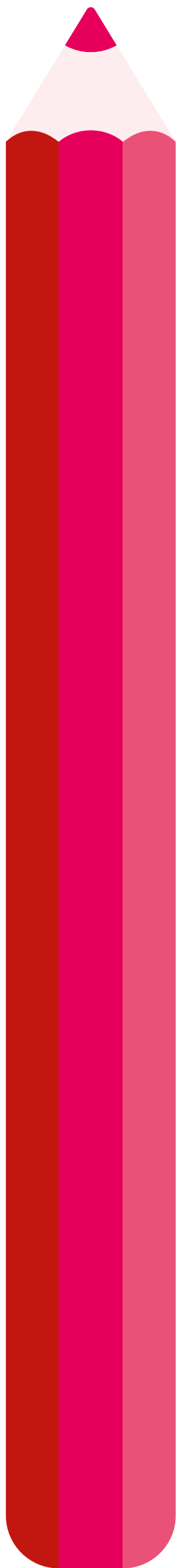
Much, if not all, "could be achieved in other ways, with fewer consequences for the organisation and lower risks". Alternatives were not sufficiently considered. The council is clearly unimpressed with the

process so far and calls for a thorough evaluation. "The situation that we are in now should not repeat itself."

But the council is not shutting down the conversation, Dekker says. "What can we learn from this? How can we, after a period of reflection, move forward together with the Executive Board, which believes in these plans and has invested a lot of time and energy in them?"

Illustration: Simone Golob

Riki Janssen



Not all students in Maastricht are interested in the local elections – if they're even aware they can vote

# "I'M ONLY HERE FOR THREE YEARS, WHY WOULD I VOTE?"

On 18 March, Maastricht will elect a new municipal council. These elections typically draw very few students to the polls. Are they more popular this year? *Observant* spoke to fifty students in Randwyck and the city centre. "It's ridiculous how many parties there are."

**Text:** Dennis Vaendel **Photo:** Ellen Oosterhof

"Elections? That international students can vote in? The European ones, right, but those aren't for few more years." The expression on the faces of the Portuguese and Austrian students we spoke to in the Law Faculty garden is one of surprise. One of them did receive a poll card in the post last month. "But when I skimmed it, I only saw Dutch text, so I put it away."

Turnout for municipal elections is often low, especially compared to general elections. In 2022, only about half of the eligible voters nationwide cast their vote; locally, Maastricht's turnout was lower, 45 per cent. Among voters aged 18 to 25, that percentage is even lower.

The eighteen Dutch students *Observant* spoke to were almost all aware of the upcoming elections – barring the occasional one who said they were "not interested" in politics – compared to ten out of 32 students from around the EU who were unaware. Often they "haven't checked their letterboxes recently", and so haven't seen any municipal post, and the campaign posters posted along the road have also passed them by. "Even at our programme, where we are explicitly taught about the importance of voting and your rights as a citizen, many have no idea," sighed a German student of European Studies. Even though this group is eligible to vote – as long as they are registered with the council – as are people from outside the EU who have legally been in the Netherlands for at least five years.

## Absolutely no idea

One German Law student who is "very interested in politics" has known that for a while. "I wanted to know whether I would be able to vote and looked it up. When I found out, I told my fellow students immediately." Most other internationals who are aware, however, only found out recently. Usually because they received a poll card, or heard it from a fellow student or housemate, or through an activity organised

by their (study) association. "Quite surprising," is a frequent response. Another German, who *Observant* spoke to outside UNS40, has "only been here since September and will probably leave again in 2.5 years" and said it's "funny" that he has a say at all. But he will be voting: "It's important, students do form a large part of the inhabitants."

About half of the people we spoke to said that they are also planning to cast a vote next week. About nine are still unsure, and seventeen – mostly international students – said they won't be voting. An oft-cited argument among the latter group is that they have "absolutely no idea" how the Dutch political landscape works, let alone at a local level. "I think voting is important, but only if you're properly informed and have a clear idea of who you're voting for," said a French UCM student, giving words to the thoughts of many. That requires learning about the parties' manifestos and the political context, and many of them don't feel like doing that. Either because they've only just moved here, or because they know they will be leaving again in a few months or years. Not to mention that they are "busy enough" with their degrees and are more interested in the political situation back home. The nine undecided feel similarly: they will only vote if they can find the time to read up enough.

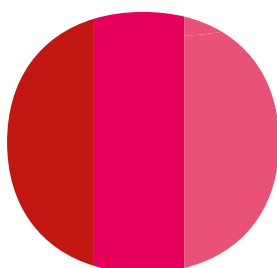
## Negative publicity

Most international students who are going to vote also need time to read up (a repeated statement: "I always do that only right before the election"). Two German students – one is an active member within the university participatory body, the other has political ambitions – have managed to choose a party to vote for and are something of an exception in this case. Some others know they would like to vote "liberal" or "on the left", but as yet, have no idea which parties would fit that description.

Even just naming a single standing party is hard for a number of the international students. Some know one or two names, but only because they were in the news. For example, D66, the party of the new Dutch prime minister Rob Jetten, winner of the general elections in October, and Geert Wilders's PVV – although in that case usually because he "has a lot of negative publicity, because I would never vote for him", said a Slovenian and a German student. Volt is another name some people know. A Belgian student saw the party during INKOM, whereas a German student recognised the name "because they are also active in my country". Another has also heard that there is something called "green left".

## Crash course

What doesn't help is that there "are a ridiculous number of parties", said a German student at FASoS. 'Quickly' reading up on the seventeen party manifestos is impossible. "Thankfully, I now have some idea, after speaking to Dutch friends who are interested in politics." Others are still planning to that in the coming week, and one will even be taking "a crash course from a housemate who has lived here for five years". Yet more are hoping to get some idea by using the English version of *Stem Wijzer* (a test to find out which parties fit your political preferences), which they had read about in the accompanying letter – also





## WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

There are an incredible seventeen parties, including six local ones, up for election in Maastricht next week. What do they have to say about Maastricht University and student life? That varies quite a lot. The PVV manifesto doesn't mention the word 'student' or 'university' even once. Forum voor Democratie and Partij Veilig Maastricht are similarly silent, mentioning those words only once or twice. The front-runners by far are M:OED and Volt, who use the terms 43 and 59 times respectively.

Thirteen parties mention student housing in their manifestos. Most can agree

that more accommodation is needed. The question remains where it should be: throughout the city or on a campus outside the city centre, or even outside Maastricht entirely, in the region? And should they be new houses, or is the solution repurposing (empty) buildings and protecting "real" student houses? While some parties are seeking to provide better and more affordable student housing, others are more interested in limiting the nuisance and creating more space for other inhabitants. Another question on many parties' minds: how can Maastricht retain more students after they graduate? Suggestions such as free or more affordable Dutch courses (or even Maastricht dialect courses), or providing more meeting places and a better nightlife. Furthermore, almost half the parties are proponents of investing in the Brightlands Health Campus or the Einstein Telescope, which could provide more jobs and opportunities for start-ups.

written in English – that the council had added to their poll cards. One Czech student plans to go to the political debate at the Law Faculty, and a German student plans to ask ChatGPT for help.

Many Dutch students, on the other hand, say they "can't be bothered" to read up on the local parties ("I'll be moving away in a few years anyway") and are considering voting the same way they did during the general election. Only one Dutch student can even name a local party. "I heard about M:OED through word of mouth, because they want to keep the libraries open longer to study at." The name doesn't ring a bell with any of the others. Remarkable, as with two UM students as party leaders, M:OED is explicitly positioning itself as a student party.

### Bin bags

Municipal elections aren't much of a conversation topic anyway, is another frequently given response. Not that people never talk about politics, but that is usually reserved for the national or international stage. Many respondents are also not clear on what exactly is covered by the municipal council. In many cases, silence is the initial response to a question what topics or positions people find important. This is then sometimes followed by topics that municipal councils have no influence over, such as student finance, the healthcare system and the debate on internationalisation ("haven't they decided that it should be mandatory for some degrees to be taught in Dutch?"). Those few students who complain about "the terrible rubbish collection system with the expensive bin bags" or who want "more green spaces in the city" are closer to the mark. A number of international students observed that "a lot of things are actually very well organised here already". When students do appear in the party manifestos, it is usually related to student housing (see box). Fair, many thought when the point was raised. Almost all of them can list examples of badly maintained

houses, high rents and frustrating landlords. Is that going to determine their vote? Not completely, said most. "I think it's important how they approach a range of topics," said a student from Luxembourg at UNS40. A Dutch student nearby added: "But they do have to be pro-student. I've seen posters for parties who want to take Maastricht 'back' and would, I guess, prefer students to be as far outside the city as possible."



# MAASTRICHT FOR THE MANY, NOT THE FEW!

We are the Socialist Party. We want a different Maastricht. Our team is ready to tackle the issues we face head on:

- **Make Maastricht affordable!** We want to build affordable homes for students and locals alike.
- **Save the Landbouwbelang (LBB).** LBB is of priceless importance to our city. No eviction without an alternative!

## VOTE SP ON MARCH 18TH

Visit [maastricht.sp.nl/en](https://maastricht.sp.nl/en) to learn more about us and our plans for Maastricht!  
Visit [maastricht.nl/en](https://maastricht.nl/en) for general election information.



Dit is een politieke reclameboodschap in het kader van de gemeenteraadsverkiezingen. Meer informatie op [politiekereclame.nl](https://politiekereclame.nl)

MAASTRICHT IS ALIVE AND BUZZING THANKS TO THE **YOUNG PEOPLE** WHO **STUDY, WORK, AND STAY HERE**. YET, THEIR IDEAS AND THEIR VOICES ARE ALL TOO OFTEN IGNORED

- 1 HOUSING:** AFFORDABLE, HIGH-QUALITY STUDENT HOUSING.
- 2 CYCLING:** CLEAR AND SAFE CYCLING ROUTES THROUGHOUT THE CITY, WITH THE ABILITY TO PARK YOUR BIKE ANYWHERE.
- 3 INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:** BETTER INFORMATION, NO WAITING TIMES, AND FREE DUTCH LANGUAGE LESSONS.
- 4 A VIBRANT MAASTRICHT:** A THRIVING NIGHTLIFE AND AN EXCITING RANGE OF SHOPS AND HOSPITALITY VENUES THAT MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE.



SEE OUR PLANS ON OUR **INSTAGRAM**

# M:OED

Maastricht: Open Eerlijk Democratisch



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# AFFORDABLE HOUSING NOW

VOTE **Voit**  
18 MARCH ★ **Maastricht**



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