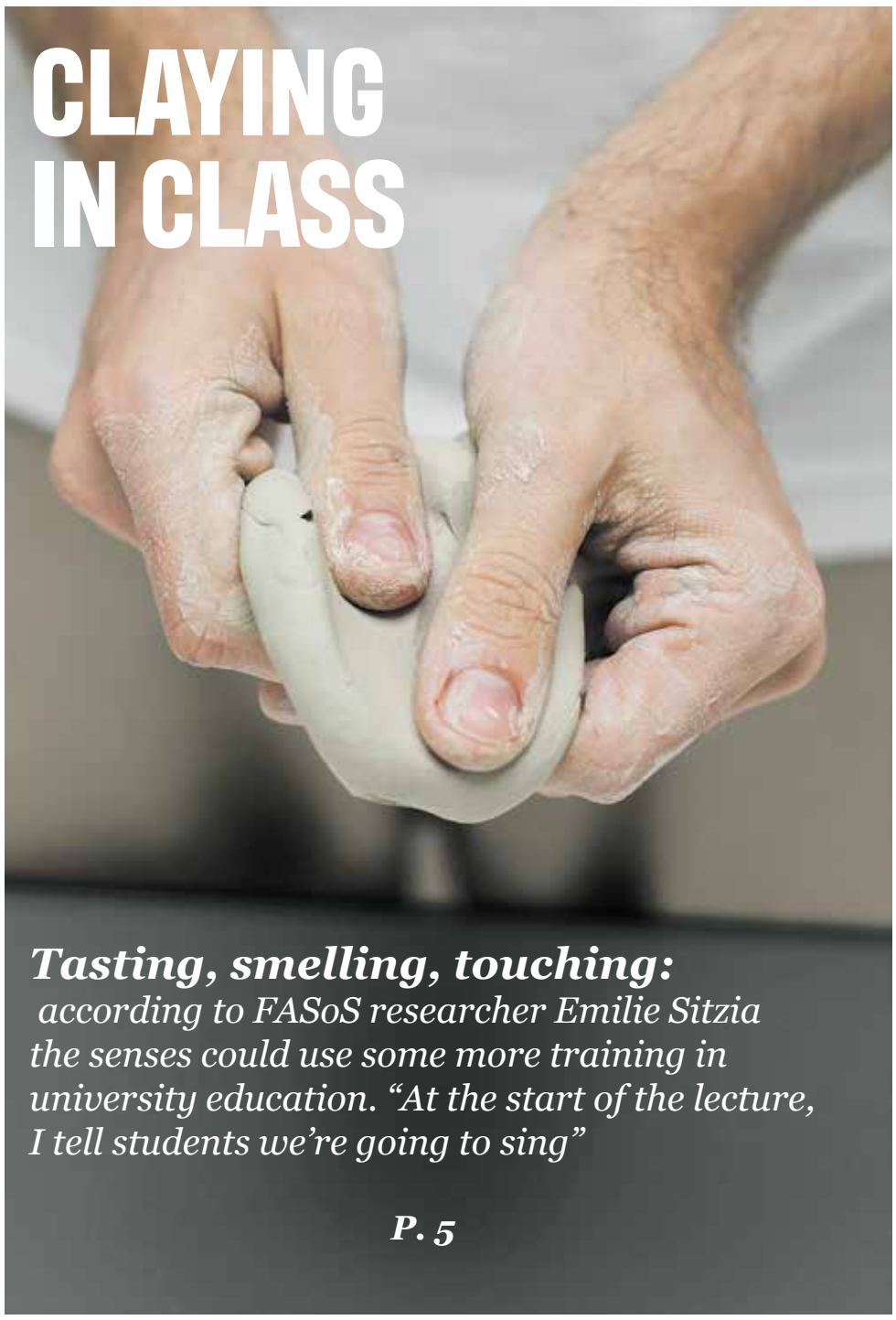
KEER OM VOOR NEDERLANDSE EDITIE

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY / VOLUME 46 / MARCH 19, 2026 / Nr22



CLAYING IN CLASS

Tasting, smelling, touching:
according to FASoS researcher Emilie Sitzia the senses could use some more training in university education. "At the start of the lecture, I tell students we're going to sing"

P. 5

AND ANOTHER HR DIRECTOR LEAVES EARLY

The rate of turnover among HR directors at UM is significant. What makes this position so difficult?

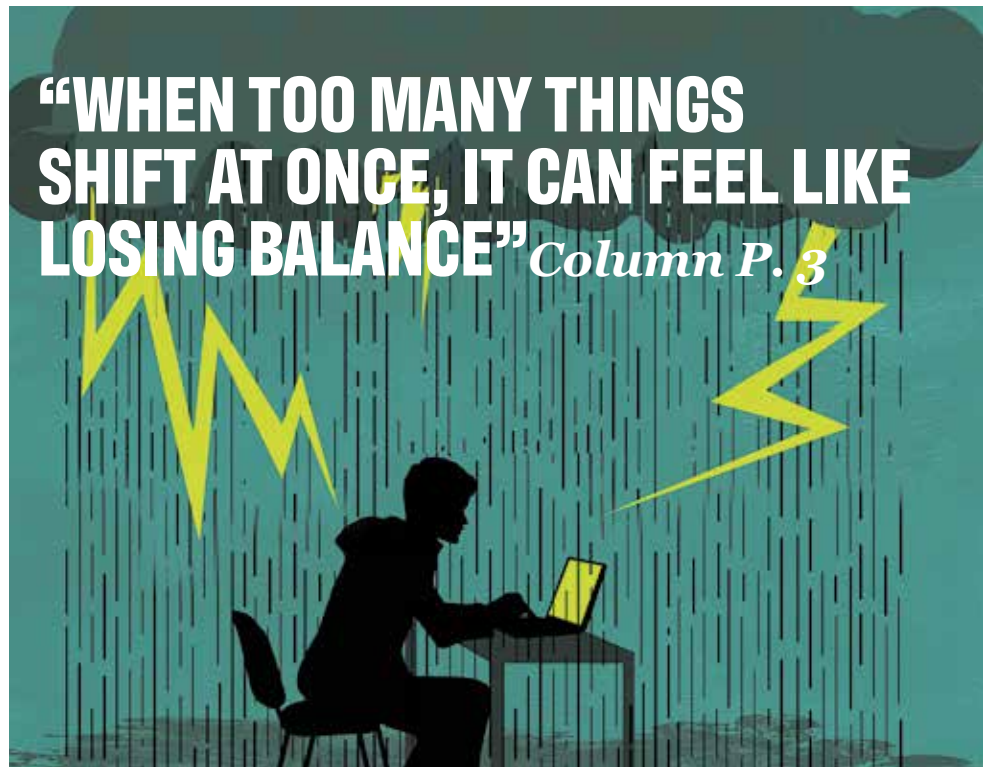
"Supervisors have to understand the importance of a good human resources policy. That's hard to do when the priority is on research projects"

P. 6/7

"WE WERE ONLY TOLD WHO IT WAS ONE HOUR BEFORE THE MEETING"

Law Faculty Council unhappy about the way the Executive Board informed them about the appointment of the new dean

P. 3



editorial

Confidential

In 2016, there were reports that a journalist working for *De Limburger* had been sentenced to twenty hours of community service after secretly recording a closed-door meeting in the Kerkrade town hall. Comments made in a confidential meeting (plans to save Roda JC football club) were thus made public. The newspaper had since fired the journalist for this 'cardinal sin'.

Things that are not intended for the eyes and ears of a wider audience are always of interest. For example, if you tell your child to 'just play outside for a bit' while you're in a meeting with their teacher, you can guarantee that they're lurking in the hallway, hoping to catch something.

It must be important if the doors are closed, right? That thought crosses our minds whenever we reach the 'confidential portion' of meetings of the University Council or Faculty Councils. It's actually usually not that interesting, they'll want to discuss a professorial appointment or similar. They want to name names and they'd rather not have outsiders looking over their shoulder.

The integration plans for the hospital and the university were different though. We would have loved to know more about that (as would many on the work floor). The number of times we sighed, 'Oh, to be a fly on that wall'. Or joked, 'Go and press your ear to the door of the meeting room'. Don't worry, we never did that. Leaving a recording device in the room? Never even crossed our minds.

We were so disappointed when we were told that the council members at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life sciences would be voting on the plans behind closed doors. Initially, the chair of the FHML Council said that "every council member must feel comfortable speaking up", but that doesn't make sense to us. It is a democratically elected body, like the municipal council, or Parliament. Imagine if voters weren't allowed to follow those debates.

In Groningen, the editor-in-chief of 'sister paper' *UKrant* also had a spot of bother over confidentiality. The Executive Board had sent round a confidential email (to a limited group of supervisors) about a significant recruitment freeze. *UKrant* published an article about it. The editors are now being reproached for also being employees and thus bound by the Integrity Code of Conduct (obliged to keep confidential anything they learn in the course of their jobs). But, well, nobody at *UKrant* was actually sent the email directly by the Board; they were just tipped off.

Should readers not expect such journalistic revelations from us, subjects that should be challenged? Journalism, particularly investigative journalism, relies at least partly on confidential information – so long as it isn't stolen (or as in Kerkrade, secretly recorded). *Observant* frequently hears things, by mail, by letter, 'live'. We then check it out and follow up with questions. It's always a toss-up whether anything comes of it: sometimes it's just a rumour, sometimes it's worth publishing. And that should be allowed.

Wendy Degens

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

series the times they are (not) a changin'

From one part-time psychologist "for a quick chat" to comprehensive support

UM's first student psychologist, Ruud van den Berg **Photo: Nelis Tutkey**

1992–present

Fear of failure, difficulty concentrating, conflicts with parents, poor social skills. In the 1980s, more and more students at Maastricht University were struggling with these and other issues, but there was no one at the university they could turn to for help. While there had been plans to hire a student psychologist for years, they never got beyond internal memos and documents.

In 1988, the university hired a student dean with a background in psychology, but this student dean mainly dealt "with regular duties, such as providing social support for students with socio-economic issues", *Observant* wrote a year l ater. It was never entirely clear what exactly that meant, but it probably had something to do with money (troubles).

The dean could refer students to the Regional Institute for Ambulatory Mental Health Care (RIAGG), but its focus was mainly on serious psychological disorders and long-term treatment. Most students didn't need that level of support. Realising this, the Executive Board eventually set aside money for a student psychologist. One was supposed to start on 1 January 1991, "hopefully putting an end to years of plans, good intentions and unsuccessful experiments", wrote *Observant* at the time. We don't know whether the delay was due to difficulty finding the money or finding the right candidate, but according to our archives, it would be at least another year before a psychologist was finally appointed. In 1992, Ruud van den Berg started working at the university on a part-time basis.

In an interview with *Observant*, he said he would be available on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesday mornings for "students who have fallen out with their parents, who are depressed or who are too shy to speak up during tutorials." Initially, things were fairly quiet; in the first few months, he saw only around four students a week on average. And not everyone who came to him received help. Students struggling with problems such as erectile dysfunction would, *Observant* wrote at the time, be referred to sexual health specialists at RIAGG. It's unclear whether anyone actually came forward with this problem, but given the era – before the internet made it easy to find answers to all your questions – it's entirely possible. "Not all seven thousand students are my target group", Van den Berg pointed out. "Most just want to have a quick chat."

Over time, more and more students did. Within two years, the number of support requests had doubled. In 1996, a second psychologist was hired to support the growing student population. Even so, the workload remained high for years. In 2002, *Observant* reported that students were complaining about waiting times of three to five weeks just for an intake appointment. "That's unacceptable, but we simply can't keep up with the demand", said the psychologists at the time. Sometimes they even referred students to colleagues outside the university.

Things never really became quieter after that. As the university grew and attracted more international students, the number of support requests continued to rise. Most concerned issues "such as stress, fear of failure, procrastination and low mood", according to the head of student counselling in 2007. These are the same issues the university's nine student psychologists still deal with today. In 2024, they saw more than nine hundred students during daily walk-in hours, and they now offer workshops, online modules and activities to support students' mental wellbeing. Long waiting times are now largely a thing of the past: "Thanks to additional staff, students can now be seen within a week", *Observant* reported earlier this year. However, there are still some complaints that not all students know where to find the student psychologists, even though information is available online and through lecturers and student advisers. As the head of the UM psychologists told *Observant*, visibility "remains a key focus of attention".

> "Not everyone received help. Students struggling with problems such as erectile dysfunction would be referred to sexual health specialists"

Deborah Blekkenhorst

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

Executive Board only informed Law Faculty Council at very late stage about new dean

“If we cannot make ourselves heard, that hurts”

The Law Faculty Council is unhappy about how they were informed about the appointment of the new dean. The feelings of dissatisfaction about the procedure that was followed and the late timing by the Executive Board when informing the council were voiced in the latest meeting. “I don’t feel like we had any influence over the decision.”

Ronald Janse was appointed as the new dean of Law as of 1 March, following on from his predecessor Jan Smits. No disrespect meant to the man himself, the council was quick to emphasise on Thursday, what stings is that the members were only informed of his appointment by the Executive Board at a very late stage. The relevant information, such as Janse’s cv, was only sent an hour before a newly scheduled Teams meeting. “Only then did we know who it was, and everything was also only available in Dutch,” an international student member said in the council meeting.

Very rushed

According to UM council statutes, the Executive Board must meet with the Faculty Board and Faculty Council (the council does not formally have a vote in the matter) behind closed doors to hear from them on the proposed decision. And at “such a time that the meeting can still have a genuine influence on the decision-making”. That’s what hurts, said Nora Vissers (council member representing academic personnel) afterwards. “Not all the members were available to join the meeting, because it was announced so late. I had to cram it in between two teaching groups. It all felt very rushed.”

Letter to board

“There was a lot of pressure,” chair Rick Schumans also concluded during the meeting. “We have a right to be heard, but if we are not able to make ourselves heard, that hurts.” Later adding: “Yes, we were consulted when they drafted the job profile for the new dean, and about who we wanted in the appointment and advisory committee, but after the vacancy was posted, it was all very limited.” There will soon be a letter to the Executive Board with the council’s objections and questions why things were done in this manner.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

University in talks with new company

Coffeelovers to close Student Services Centre branch

Coffeelovers is closing its branch in the Student Services Centre (SSC) on Bonnefantenstraat. The company has decided not to renew its lease with Maastricht University due to a lack of customers.

“Fewer people are coming in than before”, explains manager Michiel Scheijen to *Observant*. “Students are increasingly going to our other cafés in the city. The SSC branch has begun to feel more like a canteen than a Coffeelovers café. We want to focus more on our branches in bigger locations.” The company runs several cafés in Maastricht, including ones in the Dominicanen bookshop and the City Library at Centre Céramique.

It is not yet clear precisely when the SSC branch will close. The lease runs until 1 September, but Coffeelovers may leave earlier. The university is in talks with another company to take over the space and hopes to reach an agreement by 1 May, says Mike van Gerwen, contract manager for food and drink at Facility Services.

Van Gerwen does not want to reveal the potential new tenant, but he says it is a “familiar face”. Other coffee bars on university grounds are run by Bandito Espresso (in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience) and the university caterer Eurest (the Bakery Café at Universiteitssingel 30).

The Coffeelovers café in the SSC employs two permanent staff members and three casual workers. All five employees will be relocated to other branches, says Scheijen.

Peter Doorakkers

Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

column

The power of routine

“

The first month back in Maastricht after nearly half a year away hit harder than I expected. Part of it was practical. My room, which I wrote about in my previous column, needed much more cleaning than I had imagined. But returning to daily life here also felt unfamiliar, with coursework suddenly alien after months away from university and the shift from living with my parents in Japan to doing chores myself and sharing a house again. At the same time, everything outside my personal life also felt overwhelming. I was working on master’s applications, dealing with group assignments, and following the news: ongoing wars, violence rooted in imperialism, and the recent Japanese lower house election, where more than two thirds of parliament ended up in the hands of the ruling party. Watching it from afar felt devastating.

Even so, there are still things I can do as a citizen. I try to stay informed, sign petitions, and sometimes take part in protests. Still, when too many things shift at once, it can feel like losing balance. In moments like that, what helps me most is routine.

My morning routine is simple. When my alarm rings, I drink a glass of water, wash my hands, and put on my contact lenses. I prepare coffee in a small moka pot and leave it on the stove while I take a quick shower. By the time I finish, the coffee is ready. I pour milk into it and take a sip. My night routine is quieter. I light a scented candle, take off my contact lenses, and brush my teeth. While brushing, I often write a few lines in a diary I started this year, a three-year diary. Then I set my alarm and try to read at least one page of a book before sleeping.

Repeating small actions every day gives me a sense of stability. It feels like having an inviolable small ‘castle’ of my own. That, I think, is the power of routine. Even when everything outside feels unstable, it reminds me that I can still hold a small, steady world in my hands.

”

Yuki Nakamura, third year bachelor student Arts and Culture

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

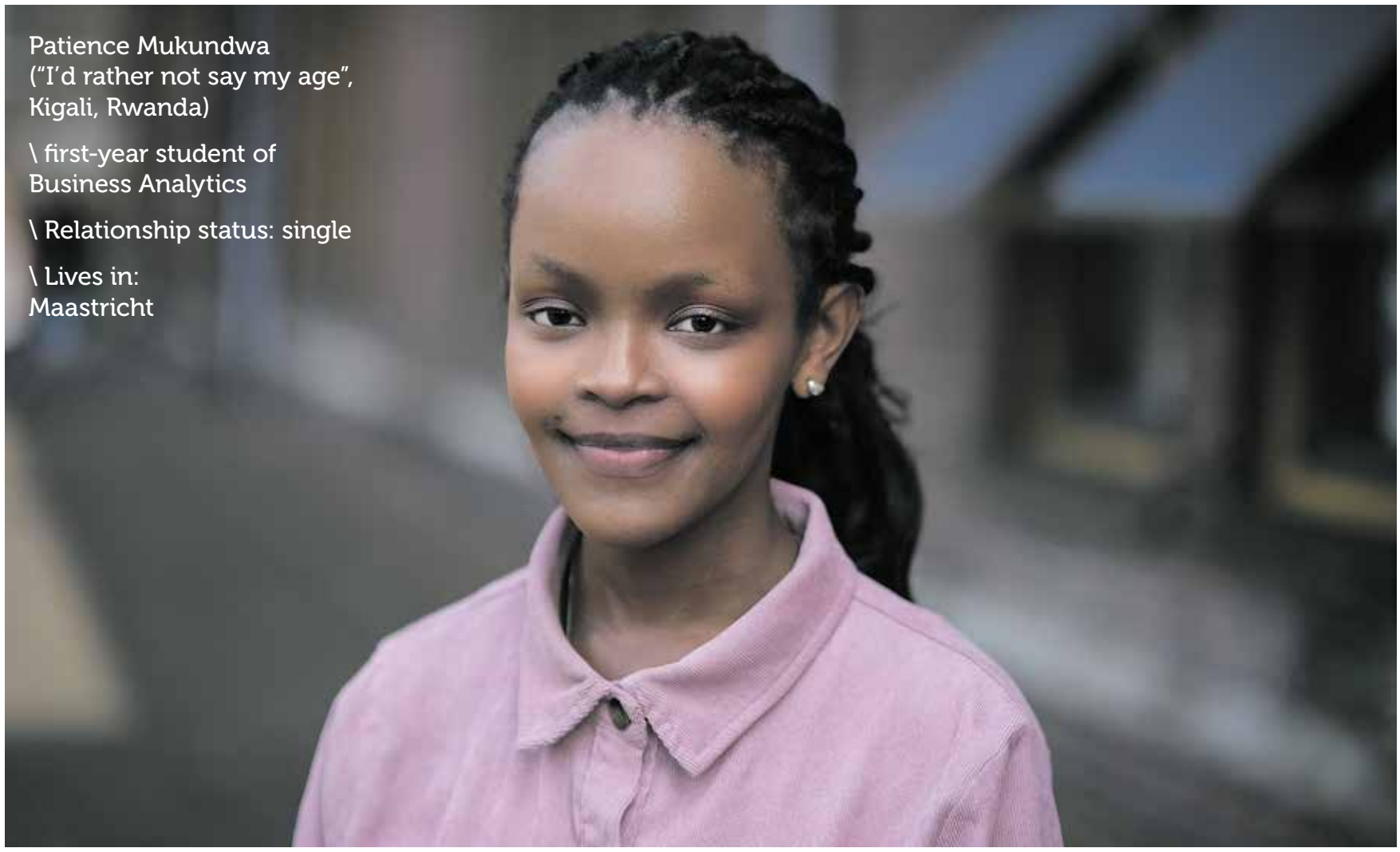


Photo: Joey Roberts

> If you can’t tell your friends when they’re wrong, you’re not really their friend

What do you miss most about home? The food, especially isombe – cassava leaves mashed and cooked into a stew with peanut butter and other vegetables. My family: two brothers, a sister, cousins I think of as sisters. And, of course, my friends from secondary school. We’re spread all over the world now, not just in different countries but even on different continents.

What do you enjoy most about living on your own? Being independent. Back home in Rwanda, my mother kept a close eye on me. She’s very strict – I always had to be home by six! No, that’s not normal in Rwanda; my friends could stay out late. She also wants us to eat really healthily. I do, but I allow myself the occasional cheat meal.

What makes you angry? Everything that’s going on in the world – all the conflicts in places like Palestine, DR Congo, Sudan, Iran. It feels like things are only getting worse, as if all the progress we’ve made on human rights, women’s rights and minority rights is being undone.

I take after… my father, in terms of looks. People sometimes joke and ask if I’m sure my mother is really my mother, because we don’t look alike at all. Personality-wise, I take after both of them, but mostly after my father. I’m a bit introverted like him. He also has an extroverted side, but those genes skipped me and went straight to my sister.

What kind of friend are you? I naturally gravitate towards other women, maybe because I went to an all-girls boarding school, but also because I grew up surrounded by women. You can come to me with your problems, and I’ll try to help you solve them. But if I think you’re in the wrong, I’ll tell you. If you can’t do that, you’re not really a friend, just an acquaintance. If your friends won’t tell you to apologise, who will?

Little habit. Watching YouTube videos when I’m bored, while cooking, or just before bed to unwind from the day. I enjoy video essays on topics like overconsumption, but also lighter ones, like someone commenting on the reality show *Love Island*. I always watch something while eating. I like films with strong female leads. I sometimes watch African films, but they’re often in Nigerian Pidgin, which I don’t understand very well. I’m improving, though, because my best friend from Nigeria speaks it.

I was named after… no one. My mother and her brother both liked the name Patience, and they agreed that the first one to have a daughter would get to use it. My mother won. My father chose my surname. In Rwanda, children don’t have to take the family name. He wanted me to be my own person. “Mukundwa” comes from a Rwandan song he likes; it means “beloved”.

How do you deal with setbacks? I take a step back and give myself a day before looking for a solution. I also talk things over others – I have a sort of hierarchy for that. [Laughs] With minor problems, I turn to friends. With trickier ones, I turn to my cousin; she’s great at playing devil’s advocate. And if it’s really serious, I call my mother.

If you could magically fix one form of injustice, what would it be? Inequality. I think a lot of other problems stem from that. Fix inequality, and many other things would fall into place. And it affects so many people – there’s gender inequality, racial inequality, economic inequality, you name it. They say “treat others as you want to be treated”, but that’s very subjective. How I want to be treated might be different from someone else. So I’d say: treat everyone the way you believe human beings should be treated – you know, with love.

When was the last time you cried? I cry really easily during films or series. Oh, yes – the last time I cried was during a sad scene in the latest season of *Bridgerton*.

Always in my suitcase. A book and sunscreen. I like biographies or essay collections by women in business, for inspiration and to learn how to make a difference. I also enjoy books on human psychology and history.

What do you still need to learn? I still need to get to know myself better – my strengths and weaknesses. I think that would also help me understand others better. I do a lot of self-reflection using a journal with exercises like “do something that brings out your inner child”. I’ve already noticed a change: I’m coming out of my shell, becoming less introverted. I’ve also been learning how to be alone here. In boarding school or in my busy family, I was rarely alone.

Is there anything you’ve done that you wouldn’t let your future children do? I don’t think I’ve ever done anything terribly naughty – my strict mother simply wouldn’t have allowed it. What I would tell them is: live your life, grab every opportunity, speak up when it matters, and don’t be afraid.

Cleo Freriks

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Taste, smell, sight, sound, touch: how sensory education enriches the learning process

“I make students sing at half past eight in the morning”

What do studying in the garden, playing in the sand, and planting seeds have to do with a university education? Everything, says Emilie Sitzia, art and literature historian and associate professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS). She spent three years researching the role of the senses in the learning process. The results were an elective course and now a book. “Singing in class, that is guaranteed to stick.”

It all started with chocolate, a cup of tea and a good discussion with some friends (also colleagues) about why the senses are barely trained in university education, according to the foreword of the nearly 200-page book Come to Your Senses: a senses-based learning guide. Students look, sure, but what about tasting, smelling, listening and touching? Those are barely touched upon after primary school. A missed opportunity, say Sitzia and co., “because integrating them into education leads to contextual, interdisciplinary and higher-quality learning”. In other words, the more you use your senses, the more you pick up and remember things.

“For example,” says Sitzia, once again busy making cups of tea – the chocolate remains in the drawer. “I give a lecture on polyvocality in museums – i.e., different perspectives on a historical event or subject – at half past eight in the morning. Normally that means lecturing a group of zombies, barely present or awake. And then I tell them we’re going to sing. Not the same song all together, but everyone singing their own song. I count to three and then they begin.”

The result? Chaos. There are people singing different songs. There are people who refuse to sing. And then there are those who are just in shock, laughs Sitzia. “And then I start my lecture. For example, we might talk about how I’m abusing my power by forcing my students to sing. Or we might conclude that nobody sings the same thing. And so we come to heart of the matter: what does and doesn’t work with polyvocality in museums, and what happens when you don’t listen to each other and everybody just does their own thing. I promise you students won’t forget that lecture.”

Sitzia was awarded the Comenius Leadership Fellowship in 2021, a grant worth €500,000, for her research on sensory learning. She and her team at FASoS did a literature review, and then she and some colleagues from other Maastricht faculties spoke to a number of experts such as dancers, chefs and sommeliers, people who use their senses as part of their jobs. This led to the development of some practical exercises, course material, and even an elective course, Sharpening Your Senses, for medical students (“they have to observe all the time”) and students at her own faculty.

Page from Sitzias book ‘Come to your senses’, illustrated by Tânia Alexandra Cardoso

“Go and study in the garden for a change, listen to nature, smell things. It will change your perspective”

That doesn’t mean that sensory learning is of no use to other people, everybody could benefit from an expanded worldview, emphasises Sitzia. Take, for instance, the time when students were told to mould a self-portrait in clay, blindfolded. In an effort to stimulate creativity and solution-based thinking, but feelings of frustration soon won out. “They were far too perfectionist, they couldn’t surrender themselves. Someone made some toadstools. The clay was moist, smelled like earth. Those toadstools ended up being a perfect example of how a sensory experience can lead to out-of-the-box thinking. That can come in handy when you have to write a thesis, on whatever subject.”

Sitzia published her findings and course material online, then the book followed “to even more effectively show the value of sensory learning”, also to non-academics. In an almost comic book-like fashion, with colourful collages and speech balloons, the reader is shown how to do the exercises step by step, in a book made by teachers and students who followed the elective course and joined other classes within the project.

“What has stayed with me is that the learning process is deeply personal, it’s not just about what you know or what you’re studying, but also about how you feel, how you observe things, how you experience them. That goes beyond just writing a paper or listening to a lecturer,” says Lena Orlandini, a FASoS alum and now studying in Paris for a master’s. She is responsible for the exercise ‘Planting the Seeds’ in the book, about the importance of a diverse ecosystem (by sowing a variety of plant species) and the parallel with the universe, which should have enough space to accommodate different points of view and discussion. “Maastricht has always had a different approach to studying, thanks in part to problem-based learning,” adds Johanna Firley, another graduate of FASoS, who has since moved to Vienna. “Learning doesn’t have to happen only in a classroom, it can be beneficial to find other places to do it. Sometimes using your senses can make dry textbooks easier to understand. Go and study in the garden for a change, listen to nature, smell things. It will change your perspective.”

One of the things Sitzia remembers from her research is the students’ answers to the question, what does research smell like? “Like overheated computers and musty libraries, they said. That depressed me a little. It became my mission to convince them that you could learn from a visit to a museum, or by playing with sound. If the university is ready to try it, we could implement sensory learning in a flash, everything we’d need is ready to go.”

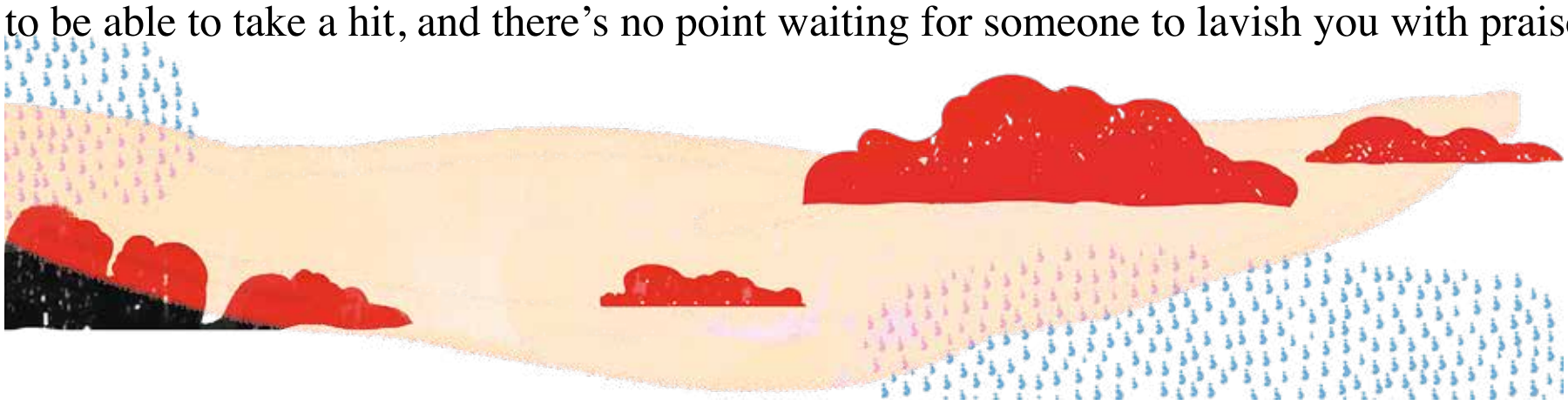
Deborah Blekkenhorst

Come to Your Senses: a senses-based learning guide can be downloaded from the university library as an e-book: library.maastrichtuniversity.nl. Physical copies can also be ordered there

Significant turnover of HR directors at UM: “You’re always walking a tightrope”

“A university is a sort of hotel for researchers”

The rate of turnover among HR directors at UM is significant, as it is at a number of other universities throughout the country. It’s a very difficult position, according to insiders. You need to be able to take a hit, and there’s no point waiting for someone to lavish you with praise.



Text: Riki Janssen lllustration: Simone Golob

It is impossible to say for sure whether it will go exactly as described, but the anecdote is relayed a number of times: every newbie who joins the network of HR directors at the UNL (Universities of the Netherlands) is welcomed into the fold warmly, but is also told not to get too attached to their colleagues. They’ll be gone soon, after all.
Last December, the new HR director at Maastricht University – known here as the director of People and Development (P&D) – left after just nine months. It is not the first time someone has left the post in Maastricht early. And UM is not unique in this. Elsewhere, the turnover is also significant (although no exact numbers are known), said three (former) directors from within and outside UM. Nieke Guillory, who was head of the UM HR department from 2021 to 2025 and is now university secretary: “I remember during one of my first national meetings, we discussed why so many people change jobs within five years. There was no clear explanation, the reasons were diverse, as they are at UM. One might leave after a short while because it’s not a good match – and it’s not a bad thing to say ‘this isn’t working’ after nine months. Another might go on sick leave, yet another might leave because of the atmosphere. I left because I was offered another very nice job.” Her predecessor had to leave ahead of time after 3.5 years due to dissatisfaction about his leadership and people feeling unsafe in the department.

“Of the eight HR directors I’ve seen, six left ahead of time”

Difficult job

Is the Executive Board’s hiring policy not working? Or is just hard to find the right person for the job? The six HR experts who were interviewed for this article (see below) all agree that it is a difficult job. And not just in the academic world, but also in healthcare, for example, said P&D team leader Jolande Martens. Before she moved to UM in April 2025, she had a long career in care for the disabled and the elderly. “Over the last 16 years in my time in care for the disabled, I had eight HR directors, and for 1.5 years, there was no director at all.”
What makes the job so difficult at a university? The HR director always has to walk the tightrope between the Executive Board on the one hand, and the faculties and services on the other. “You’re find yourself in an arena of different forces. Things are discussed and agreed centrally that may not work when decentralised. Meanwhile, you need to have broad support, from the Executive Board, the deans, board members and also the staff,” says Pierre Schröder, who has been an HR adviser at UM for 35 years. In that time, he has seen 13 directors come and go, five of whom were temporary (interim), and eight who took on the job fulltime. “Six of those eight HR directors left ahead of time.”

Stuck in the middle

Cees van der Zwan, who is often hired as a (team)coach by UM and other universities, calls it a “difficult playing field. You often hear people say they know best what is right for their people. Creating a uniform policy is impossible; one group after another will inevitably adjust the rules to suit themselves.” He lists the implementation of Recognition and Reward (R&R: more reward for education and support alongside research, and more recognition of team science) as an example in Maastricht. “UM is a leader in terms of implementing R&R. The Executive Board expressed a number of ambitions, they want HR to implement it broadly, but then you see that every faculty has its own take on the idea and carves its own path. Leaving the HR directors stuck in the middle.”
Added to that is the fact that although the head of HR is responsible for implementing new policy, their formal power is limited. In fact, the deans outrank them hierarchically. Van der Zwan: “Those are systemic tensions you have to be aware of, and they can make things difficult.”

Collection of companies

Martin Lammers, HR director at UM from January 2011 to January 2015: “Before I moved to the university, I worked at Vodafone. Working in HR there was powerful. If you didn’t want to hire someone, it didn’t happen. And if someone wasn’t performing well, then you spoke to them about it. It’s your expertise: attracting good people, making sure they stay and feel good when they leave.” What a different world to here: “The university is actually a collection of small companies who are not interested in external policy and direction.” He points to the survey into the work experience that was carried out during his tenure at the university: “I knew exactly where the problems were, but

no steps were ever undertaken. People wouldn't call out unacceptable behaviour much in my time. If a professor was able to bring in a lot of money, then they were held to different standards to those who couldn't. Budgets were the driving force: if you brought in money, you had power. That can be a good thing, as it does make sure researchers feel attached to their work: Nobody ever washes a rental car."
In the end, Lammers left early to take on a different job. He is not keen to comment on it: "It worked out well for my supervisor Nick Bos and me when a position opened up at the business school. Working with clients again, developing programmes and organising training courses with an enthusiastic and motivated team. I still enjoy working there on call."
Martijn Scheen has been HR director at Wageningen University for seven years now (he is the exception which proves the rule) and is a member of the UNL network, which he calls "very close. New people, even interim appointments, are integrated quickly." He recognises the situation Lammers sketches: "The university is a sort of hotel for researchers. The Executive Board doesn't have the power to determine the direction from the top. It takes a lot of discussion to get any leadership project or wellness pact pushed through. You have to talk to a lot of people, build trust, and not be in a rush. It takes a long time to get results." More than one says that the university is a "tanker, traditional, not interested in novelties".

Chore

Furthermore, continues Scheen, you are in an academic environment, "where academic freedom is essential. Professors have a lot of autonomy, and the old guard, in particular, are wary of anything sent down from 'on high'. They are very focused on content; essentially, they know all about photosynthesis or biochemistry, and are then also forced to be a manager." Emphasis on *forced*. At Wageningen, it's seen as a chore, an extra task that is thrust upon them. "Before coming here, I worked for NS, where people had ambitions to rise to the position of manager. The care for people and their well-being has not always been fully developed. So it can be very difficult to get attention for HR topics. You have to be able to engage people in your story and then keep repeating it until you have convinced even the greatest sceptic. It's what makes my job fun, because it works."
Jolande Martens: "There is indeed a huge difference between someone who chooses to become a supervisor and someone who has that aspect added to their job. Of course, there is a leadership academy at UM, but a course like that is a tool. Someone first has to understand the importance of a good human resources policy. That's hard to do when the priority is on research projects."

Know what's happening

Nieke Guillory, who was in charge at UM for four years, knows better than anyone that nothing changes without the cooperation of the deans and faculty directors. "If you want a lot of power, then don't choose this job, you're a glorified policy director. Actual implementation is up to the faculties and the service centres. I had a lot of support, my expertise was appreciated. If you want to change something, you have to have a good working relationship. You have to build trust, listen to others, know what you're talking about. As far as I'm concerned that isn't just true for HR, but also for marketing and communication, and other services."
Connection is important, says team coach Van der Zwan, but it isn't enough. "You also have to be visible and nearby. You have to speak the language of the faculty, know the 'local colour', the etiquette, and in broad strokes, what the main issues are. And be honest in your position: you are there to support management so that they, in turn, can focus on their employees."
"It's an almost impossible task," he says, "especially if you're not from that world. You have to invest a lot of time into getting to know the faculties. Obviously, you're not doing it alone, the whole management team serves as the eyes and ears of the organisation." Guillory: "The HR team is also spread out through the faculties, we gauge what the needs are. There are different cultures within UM, you have to create a framework that allows room for bespoke solutions."
Adding: "Those who come from a commercial background have to get used to it, as their role there is different. We have an informal culture, which has a positive side: cooperation, love for the job, passion – the downside is that we can find it hard to give feedback, and in recent years, to receive it too. As soon as something is less than positive, people are more likely to play the 'feeling unsafe' card."

Knocks and bruises

Van der Zwan has two more points: "This job also asks a lot of a person. You need someone who has survived a few knocks and bruises and has built up some resilience. Experience is important. It's not a job that lavishes you in praise, and you need to be able to cope with that."
And the fact that UM is so far down south brings with it its own cultural aspects – something Van der Zwan, who comes from further north, can attest. "It's different here than in the west, which is more business-like, more pragmatic, people here are very keen on 'together'." For example: "I was supervising a department at Maastricht, and the leadership found it hard to take charge, even though the group wanted them to. The head of the department wanted to do it together. In the north, you would just get on with it, after all, the group has given its consent. That incisiveness, a willingness to make decisions, is not as prevalent here. No judgement, things are just different here. An HR director needs to know what the local customs are. And then there is the unwritten rule at UM: a decision is not the final destination but a jumping-off point. Maybe people should be more willing to call each other out on that: This is what it is, this is what we're doing!"

"People wouldn't call out unacceptable behaviour much. If a professor was able to bring in a lot of money, then they were held to different standards"

For this article, *Observant* spoke to three current and former HR directors from within and outside UM, an HR adviser who has been at UM for a long time, a relatively new P&D team manager with a lot of experience as an HR adviser in healthcare, and a team coach who has worked with departments, university management teams and individuals, both at UM and elsewhere around the country.

news

Faculty Council wary of FHML's position being weakened

"Core academic tasks are insufficiently protected in integration plans"

The weaker position of its own dean, the lack of clarity regarding the role of representative bodies, the hospital president's dual role: in a letter sent on Monday to the Faculty Board and the university's Executive Board, the Faculty Council of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) explained why it unanimously voted against the proposed integration of the faculty and the hospital last week.

Photo: Loraine Bodewes

To be clear, the council was not voting on the proposed integration of the hospital and the university as a whole, but specifically on the integration of FHML and MUMC+. The Faculty Council does not support these integration plans, as the one-and-a-half-page-long letter makes clear. It lists six main objections, arguing that "the position of FHML and its core academic tasks – teaching and research – are insufficiently explained or protected" in the plans. In other words, the council fears the faculty will be overshadowed following the integration.

A key concern is the role assigned to the FHML dean. Under the current plans, the dean would become vice-chair of the new five-member MUMC board, while the hospital president would become chair. This is unacceptable, Faculty Council chair Iwan de Jong told *Observant* last week: "The two should be given equal roles."

According to the letter, the council is also concerned that placing the dean's legal powers and duties regarding teaching and research under the new board would weaken the dean's position. Furthermore, the council is unhappy with the proposed Education and Training Committee in the new MUMC+, as the plans do not specify what exactly this body entails or how much of a say it will have. "This is inadequate for a body responsible for protecting FHML's core academic tasks."

The council also questions how disagreements within the new MUMC board will be resolved. According to the plans, the Executive Council of the university and hospital would step in, but the hospital president is also on that board. This "raises questions about the independence of the decision-making process".

Finally, the council again criticises the lack of clarity regarding staff and student representation. According to the letter, the plans do not mention the FHML Council at all, and input from students, academic staff and support staff "is insufficiently guaranteed".

Like other representative bodies in the hospital and university, the FHML Council is not fundamentally opposed to close collaboration between hospital and university, or between faculty and hospital. On the contrary, it recognises the importance of such cooperation "for research, teaching and patient care". The Faculty Council does not rule out administrative integration of the university and the hospital – just not in the form currently proposed.

One lingering question is why the democratically elected council made its decision behind closed doors. Neither the public nor the press were allowed to attend the meeting, nor even the Faculty Board. Various council members, both staff and student representatives, stress to *Observant* that this was not due to safety concerns; they simply wanted to reach a collective decision freely and calmly. However, this seems to conflict with the core democratic principle of transparency. Should voters not know what their chosen representatives contributed to the discussion?

According to council chair Iwan de Jong, there's no need to read too much into it. "We originally wanted to meet outside the council meeting, but that proved too difficult to schedule. As the agenda for the meeting was light, this was just convenient. Besides, this letter is our way of communicating with our constituents."

Peter Doorakkers