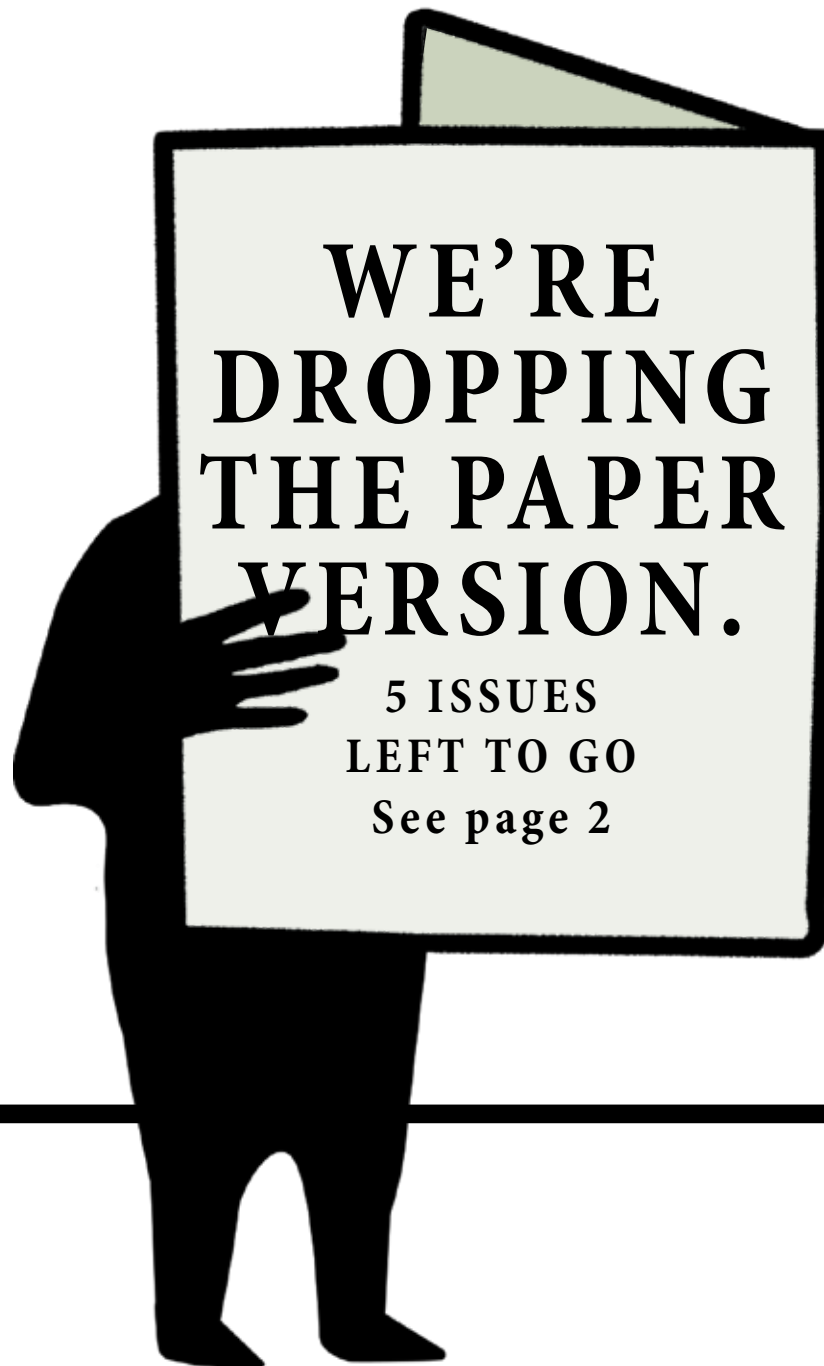


observant

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SUSTAINABILITY: "EVEN THOSE IN CHARGE NEED TO CUT BACK,"

wrote the Public Relations Office in 1981 in a series of tips aimed at reducing energy consumption at Maastricht University. This university has never lacked environmental awareness, but clear policy is another story. However, there is now a glimmer of hope

See pages 6-7

WANTED: 10 THOUSAND EUROS

They organize tournaments and sell homemade cookies. The Maastricht Knights basketball players are doing everything they can to raise 10,000 euros. They need that money to compete this summer in the European University Games—reserved for only the very best—in Salerno, Italy

See page 3



editorial

Stop the presses

“The end of an era.” Might that be a good headline for the front page, suggests a colleague. It is the truth, but we shouldn't give readers the impression that it's the end of *Observant*. We're (just) dropping the paper version.

Five more issues to go, five more papers to produce, five more phone calls to Simone, our graphic designer, shortening texts and designing covers. It feels strange. The first physical copy of *Observant* rolled off the presses on 6 October 1980 – the ‘news and opinion magazine of the State University of Limburg’, printed on A4, in black and white, and made up mostly of text.

Nobody had even heard of websites and search engines yet. There was news, people wrote letters, but newsletters? For nearly 46 years, there have been thirty or forty issues a year, yes, “*Observant*, that little freebie on the stands”, as we've heard it referred to so often. It's a somewhat sensitive subject, as to us, *Observant* is more than just a free paper. By diminishing it like that, you make it sound like something trivial, something thrown together in an afternoon. To us, it's a *proper* newspaper that we have always worked hard to produce. I can't remember (and neither can colleagues who were around in the early years) that we ever intentionally left a page blank, except when we absolutely had to (see the article on covid on this page). Paper is fantastic. After all, flipping through pages feel very different to scrolling through a digital text – just a shame about those black smudges on your fingers. But for years now, we have seen large stacks of the paper go untouched. Who are we producing those sixteen pages for, we wondered again a few months ago. With the large number of visitors to our website, followers on Instagram and knowing that we are the penultimate(!) university newspaper in the Netherlands that still prints a weekly paper, we have finally made the decision. Utrecht dropped their paper back in 2010, Rotterdam and Amsterdam (UvA) in 2018. Groningen's *UKrant* stopped the previous year. It's often not a voluntary decision: the money from the Executive Board dries up. And now we are very deliberately and completely voluntarily choosing to stop. It feels weird. Student freelancers are still delighted when they hear their article is appearing in print. It gives them something tangible, something they can send to mum and dad.

So, no more paper. I feel I can no longer ask my team to produce a newspaper with excellent articles, while at the same time being visible on the website, on social media, recording a podcast and putting together a newsletter. If I'm being honest, the physical paper has become something of a burden.

Five more issues to frame, the last of which will be a special. After the summer break, we will be back, as a newsletter emailed to *all* students and staff members. The contents won't change, just the direction. This era requires change, exploring new avenues. We assume you'll come along for the ride.

Wendy Degens

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



series the times they are (not) a changin'

Intelligent lockdown: everything online, proctoring software and lots of concerns



Students at UNS 50
Photo: Observant

2020 – 2022

On Thursday 12 March 2020, a new issue of *Observant* rolled off the presses. Since the New Year, the university newspaper's headlines had been largely dominated by the cyber-attack that hit Maastricht University just before Christmas 2019. But the front page that day featured two articles about the coronavirus, which, after China, had begun to claim victims in northern Italy. In one article, UM researchers said that the peak of infections in Europe was yet to come. There was no sense of panic. The other article was about a petition calling on the university to close, which had quickly gathered a thousand signatures. It was launched by three Italian first-year students who were “extremely worried” about “the lack of awareness” in the Netherlands. In their own country, universities had closed until at least 3 April. In Maastricht, lectures, tutorials and exams were still continuing as normal. The Minister of Education had made it clear that educational institutions could only close on the recommendation of regional health authorities or the local mayor.

Christian Hoebe, a professor at UM and head of infectious disease control at the regional health authority GGD Zuid-Limburg, appreciated the Italian students' concerns. “The situation in Italy is a nightmare [with up to six to eight hundred deaths per day], which we hope we won't see in the Netherlands.” It all happened very quickly after that. Just three days later, the government ordered universities to close – initially until 6 April, soon extended to 1 June. On TV, prime minister Rutte referred to it as “an intelligent lockdown”.

Teaching moved online almost overnight. Lecturers worked overtime, Zoom and Teams quickly became part of everyday life, and exams were either postponed or replaced by essays, papers, take-home exams or oral exams via Skype. That same spring, UM began using proctoring software: online exams monitored by cameras. It didn't always run smoothly and caused a lot of complaints. Student representatives on the University Council warned of the risks: “It could lead to ‘weaker’ students [e.g. those who scored poorly on midterms or practicals] being more closely scrutinised. And what if someone wears a hijab or has political posters up on their wall? Would that influence assessment?”

Loneliness became an increasing concern. Students missed their friends, and online tutorials offered far less interaction with peers, *Observant* found.

The *Observant* team began working from home on 16 March and kept putting out articles online. The situation was especially tough on staff members with primary-school-aged children – they suddenly found themselves not only journalists and parents, but also teachers. It was not until a year later, on 2 September 2021, that the university newspaper appeared in print again. “No wave of infections during introduction week” read the headline of the lead front-page story. Above it was a photo of a long queue of students, all wearing face masks, on the footbridge between Universiteitsingel 40 and 50. Concerns about new large-scale outbreaks had eased as vaccines became available and many staff and students had already been vaccinated.

But some concern still lingered, as was clear from an opinion piece in which Bart Verspagen, a professor at UM, argued that anyone taking part in in-person teaching should be vaccinated. Students who refused could follow classes online. Opinions were divided: “You'd not

“The situation in Italy is a nightmare which we hope we won't see in the Netherlands”

only have to admit vaccinated students, but also those who have already had the virus”, responded Christian Hoebe, by then a member of the national Outbreak Management Team (OMT). University Council member Lotte Meerhof said, “I think it's important that students and staff get vaccinated, but it shouldn't play a role in access to education.”

In October, infection rates rose again. University buildings became increasingly empty as teaching moved partly online once more. In early December 2021, *Observant* decided to go fully digital again: “We hope to return to print by mid-January.” That proved too optimistic. It was not until early March 2022 that another issue rolled off the presses. The war in Ukraine had just broken out – overshadowing all other news, as we wrote on 10 March.

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

Cost-cutting measures, but no compulsory redundancies

GP training programme under financial pressure

Maastricht University's GP training programme (HAO) is "under financial pressure", according to Faculty Council meeting minutes from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. The programme has been operating at a deficit since 2023, as funding failed to keep pace with rising costs. Will there be job cuts, in the worst-case scenario? "No", comes the firm reply, "there will be no compulsory redundancies."

The Dutch government provides funding for each junior doctor starting one of the country's seven GP training programmes. The amount of funding is determined by the Dutch Healthcare Authority (NZa). Most of the money goes towards GP trainees' salaries, while a smaller share goes to the programmes themselves. According to Matthijs Limpens, director of the programme in Maastricht, this is where the main problem lies: "The bulk of the costs of a GP training programme are made up of teaching staff salaries, which have risen sharply in recent years. While NZa contributions have also increased slightly, they haven't kept pace with the rising costs."

As a result, the programme has been operating at a loss since 2023. In 2025, it recorded a €400,000 deficit on a €6 million budget. Various cost-cutting measures have already been taken: "We now hire fewer external lecturers and guest speakers, and we make less use of external venues for staff and training days. And instead of immediately replacing staff members on long-term sick leave, we first see if we can cover it internally." Has the programme suffered as a result? "Not so far. We meet all quality standards. But inevitably, you're paring back teaching."

Limpens says they've done all they can in terms of spending cuts, "but staff costs may still decrease through natural turnover. Several employees will be leaving in the near future. There will be no compulsory redundancies, but we may need to offer some people alternative positions elsewhere within the department or faculty. We're already increasingly sharing staff with the specialty training programme in geriatric medicine and the Living Lab Family Medicine."

A complicating factor is the steady increase in the number of training places since 2023, through which the Dutch government and doctors' organisations aim to address the national

shortage of GPs. The number of training places in Maastricht increased from 96 to 112. Programmes prepared for the increase, but most have struggled to fill the additional places. Across the Netherlands, around seven hundred junior doctors start GP training each year, with eighty to 85 in Maastricht. Despite recruitment campaigns, those numbers have remained more or less stable for years. "If we were to have ninety trainees next year, the problem for that year would be solved. But the programmes have little influence on the number of applicants." According to Limpens, Maastricht isn't the only programme struggling. "Only Leiden and Utrecht manage to fill all places and break even each year."

He sees no easy solution. "You'd have to increase the intake of students in the medicine programme, or lure junior doctors away from other specialties." The first option, he acknowledges, wouldn't bring short-term relief. "We wouldn't see the effect for another 6 to 8 years. As for the second option, we'd have to ask ourselves if that's what we want."

Peter Doorakkers



Poles and Brazilians

“

I recently came across an article in a Polish newspaper based on an interview with a national Internet personality who argued that Poles are much more similar to Latinos than to their neighbours with whom they share a border on the map. His argument was based on his experience of living in both worlds – South America and Western European countries like the Netherlands or Belgium (which, although not bordering on Poland, are definitely closer to it than, for example, Peru). And even though I have never visited Latin America, my views are very much the same. Lately, it seems as though fate has wanted me to cross paths with Brazilians and Brazilians only. I am genuinely surprised by how many character traits and mindset elements we have in common. Everyone thinks that Slavs are quite cold and do not like to show emotion. And while the "Slavic stare" is real, Polish people are far warmer than the Dutch and Germans – something that can be seen in our ability to be good hosts. Our culture of celebrating with enormous amounts of food is extremely important. The attitude dynamics might differ a bit, as Poles initially wear a kind of mask that can make them seem unwelcoming and extremely judgemental, but once we become a bit more confident, we can fully open our hearts to someone. The mask comes off and we unlock the same level of openness that Latinos inherently possess. Obviously, religion is a fundamental part of both cultures. Almost everything we do, and much of the vocabulary we use, is connected in some way to God, which shapes and guides our behaviour. Speaking of vocabulary, I have also realised that Portuguese, despite being a Roman language, is very similar to Polish, mainly because of the way both languages are pronounced. This makes it easy for Brazilians to pronounce Polish words without a strong foreign accent, as we share a lot of vowel sounds.

And the last thing worth mentioning is the ability to think in a street-smart way, which I sometimes miss when communicating with Western Europeans. When a German says that something cannot be done, a Brazilian and a Pole have already figured out a way to do it. And have already done it. Twice.

”

*Rita Wiśniewska,
a third-year European Law student*

Maastricht Knights basketball team raising money for European Universities Games

Baking cookies, working overtime in the hope of raising 10.000 euros



Members of basketball team of the Maastricht Knights Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

The date on the calendar is circled in red, the team selection is ready, the kits have been ordered. Nothing stands in the way of women's basketball team the Maastricht Knights' road to the European Universities Games. Well, almost nothing. They still need a bit of money before they can travel to Italy with peace of mind. They're trying to raise those funds by organising events and baking cookies. "If we didn't love this sport so much, we'd have given up a long time ago."

Of course, they're proud to represent Maastricht University. It's hard to imagine a higher goal. But that it would cost this much time, energy and money was something they weren't expecting. "We're talking about 10,000 euros,"

says Marlow Baines, chair of the student basketball association. Almost half that amount (4000 euros) is earmarked for the deposit teams have to pay to guarantee a place at the Games. There are also other compulsory costs for accommodation and meals – teams have to remain for the whole tournament. And then there are the entry fees the organisation charges: 50 euros per person. "We've got ten players, two coaches and a referee. You work it out," says Baines, pointing at her team mates who were also present for the interview. "And then we still have to pay the travel costs."

Financial support

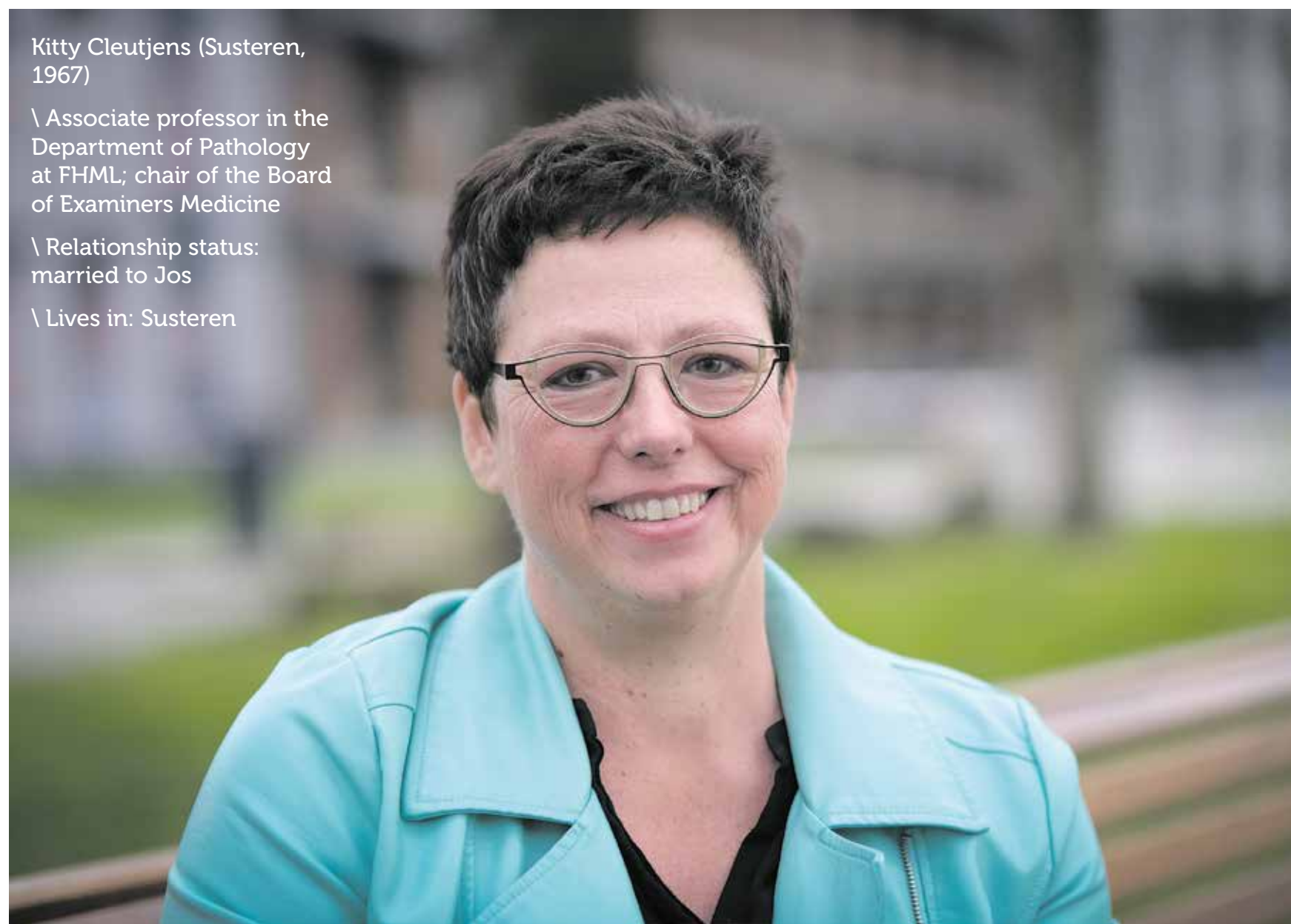
On 18 July, the bi-annual sports event for students at European universities will kick off in

the southern Italian city Salerno. Hundreds of athletes will take part in thirteen sports, including badminton, football, handball, tennis, volleyball and, of course, basketball. Representing Maastricht University, the Maastricht Knights – who were crowned champions in their division last Saturday – were the only team here to qualify; in the history of the event, the number of Dutch university basketball teams to qualify can be counted on one hand. "We qualified second this year," says Baines. "Because the first team couldn't go, we were invited to come. You don't turn down something like that."

As a result of this unique result, the team

To be continued on page 8

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



Kitty Cleutjens (Susteren, 1967)

\ Associate professor in the Department of Pathology at FHML; chair of the Board of Examiners Medicine

\ Relationship status: married to Jos

\ Lives in: Susteren

Photo: Joey Roberts

“

Dishonesty makes me break out in red blotches – literally!

”

If you google me... you'll get a lot of results related to my research. And if you know my husband's surname, you'll also get links to my hobbies – music and, in the past, wheelchair tennis. I play the transverse flute and piccolo in a concert band. I'd wanted to join since I was twelve, just like my sister. At the time, I played the saxophone: they already had enough transverse flute players, so I was handed a sax they happened to have lying around. When I went to study in Utrecht, I switched to the flute. It's easier to slip into your bag when you're catching the train.

I'm a grateful person. I am! When I was 32, 26 years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. The treatment damaged my spinal cord, and I've used a wheelchair since. It was a difficult transition; it took me quite some time to accept it. But I've never been angry about it. At first I didn't even know if I'd survive, which put things into perspective. I'm mostly just glad and grateful to be alive. And it helped that I already had a partner and a career I could continue. I no longer work in the lab [where you spend a lot of time on your feet], but I still do research. I can honestly say that I'm a happy person.

People should listen to... the Fifth Symphony by Alfred Reed, an American composer who composed a lot of concert band music. The melodies are beautifully interwoven. I listened to it a lot during my illness; it comforted me and made me feel calm.

My friends appreciate... that I'm caring and always there for them. And that I'm honest. Friendships can withstand a bit of friction every now and then. The same applies the other way around – I appreciate it when people hold up a mirror to me.

I'm addicted to... reading. I read everything I can get my hands on – medical thrillers, biographies, you name it. My most recent read was *All the Blue in the Sky*, about a young man who is diagnosed with Alzheimer's and sets off on a campervan trip. It beautifully describes how he eventually comes to terms with his fate. Not romanticised, but realistic. If I was ever in a situation like that, I hope I'd deal with it in the same way, but I'm not sure I could. Unlike the main character, I have a partner and a lot of family and friends. I couldn't just leave them behind. They're very important to me.

What would you change about yourself? My habit of working right up to deadlines. And my habit of going "I can fit something else in" if there's even the smallest gap in my schedule. My husband is the same, so we've agreed that if one of us is asked to take something on, the answer is, "I'll get back to you tomorrow." If we don't keep each other to that, we say "yes" far too quickly.

As a child, I was... very curious, active, energetic and a bit shy. I wasn't a girly girl – I liked football, cars and build-

ing huts. That toughness was there even then. I'd walk home covered in mud, and the workmen in the village would ask if my mother would be cross to see me like that. I had a good relationship with her, but with interests like mine, I was more of a daddy's girl.

Do you ever pray? Occasionally. For me, prayer is a moment to reflect on my life and express my gratitude. I was raised Catholic, and I feel drawn to Mary – her warm, caring and forgiving nature. I like to light a candle in the Lady Chapel when I go into a church.

The last compliment I received. Apart from "You're a quirky one"? A friend recently told me she appreciates that I'm there for her. I actually find it quite hard to accept compliments; I tend to downplay them. I don't know why. Maybe I've subconsciously picked up a self-effacing attitude from my parents.

Would you rather be rich or famous? If I had to choose one, I'd rather be rich, but I don't really want that either. I wouldn't even know what to do with the money. We're already in a position where we can afford everything we want. I feel rich in my relationships with other people – that's what matters to me.

I can't stand... dishonesty. It literally makes me break out in red blotches. The Board of Examiners Medicine very occasionally has to deal with students who have committed fraud. I have a great deal of sympathy for the pressure students are under, and how that can lead them astray. But don't deny it – just admit it and take responsibility for your actions. Your work will still be declared invalid, but we may be able to help you.

I'm fascinated by... how children develop. Because of my illness, we unfortunately were unable to have children, but I have a lot of nieces and nephews, and some of them now have young children of their own. I love seeing how open and unguarded they are. They remind you to look at the world with wonder.

Peter Doorackers

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

“Controversial and unpopular ideas are welcome, but it is also important to be clear about what the university stands for as an institution”

Freedom of speech at the university comes with responsibility

The university must place the highest possible priority on freedom of speech. But standards exist for those who make their voice heard on campus extracurricularly, writes rector Jan Smits in this opinion article.



Pro-Palestinian demonstrators outside UM-building in May 2024 Photo: Observant

The university is a community of values. To me, by far the most important of these is academic freedom. The sun revolves around the earth. Colonialism is good. Smoking is healthy. Without the unrestricted freedom to criticise these once-widely held views, learning and progress are impossible and the university will lose its *raison d'être*. The reason why I myself will never leave the university is precisely this: it is the place where curiosity is cultivated and debate takes place on the basis of facts and arguments – in particular when scientifically acquired knowledge clashes with what we previously thought. Could it be that colonialism also had positive aspects? Could encouraging smoking also have benefits? Probably not, but who knows: all knowledge is merely provisional. Conveying and passing on this core academic value to future generations – we learn only by questioning previously acquired knowledge – is what makes the university. We find tomorrow's answers together, but even more important is asking the right questions.

Increasing polarisation

Alongside academic freedom – which affords staff and students maximum scope, whilst simultaneously binding them

to the strict standards of their specific academic discipline – there is freedom of speech. This applies to everyone, including members of our academic community when they express views on subjects outside of their own expertise. At a time of increasing polarisation, our students and staff are doing this more and more often. This can only be welcomed. It fits two other core values of the university: the promotion of critical thinking and of civic responsibility, including where the university's own policies are concerned. The noisy but peaceful protests over the past two years against UM's ties with Israeli institutions demonstrate the deep emotional commitment of a part of our community to what is happening elsewhere in the world, and how UM relates to it. When free speech manifests itself in the form of such legitimate peaceful protests, it obliges everyone to listen and weigh up arguments even more carefully. The fact that this weighing up does not necessarily turn out as protesters would like is part of the decision-making process within the university.

Persistent misconception

As a community of knowledge and learning, the university

must place the highest possible priority on freedom of speech. But exercising free speech on campus also comes with responsibility. It is a persistent misconception that *laissez-faire* or *anything goes* prevails for those who take the floor: just as incompetence in academic discourse is usually punished without much leniency, so too standards exist for those who make their voice heard on campus extracurricularly. Every member of our community is bound by academic values such as mutual respect, inclusion and allowing space for debate, *precisely* to safeguard these academic values for others as well. Statements may cause discomfort and may hurt, but always on the basis of arguments and with ample opportunity to respond: shouting down those who disagree is never permissible. The best response to uncomfortable speech is more speech.

Unpopular ideas

Freedom of speech is thus shaped by the university setting, where the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge is best served by an open and democratic environment in which intellectual standards outside of tutorial, laboratory and study space are just as desirable as within. In addition, there is no room for those who call for the exclusion of certain groups, cheer on genocide or propagate discrimination. How could all this be otherwise at a publicly funded university such as ours, devoted to ensuring a learning and working environment that is safe for everyone? As I said before, controversial and unpopular ideas are welcome (I am not fond of trigger warnings and safe spaces), but it is also important to be clear about what the university stands for as an institution.

Tragedy

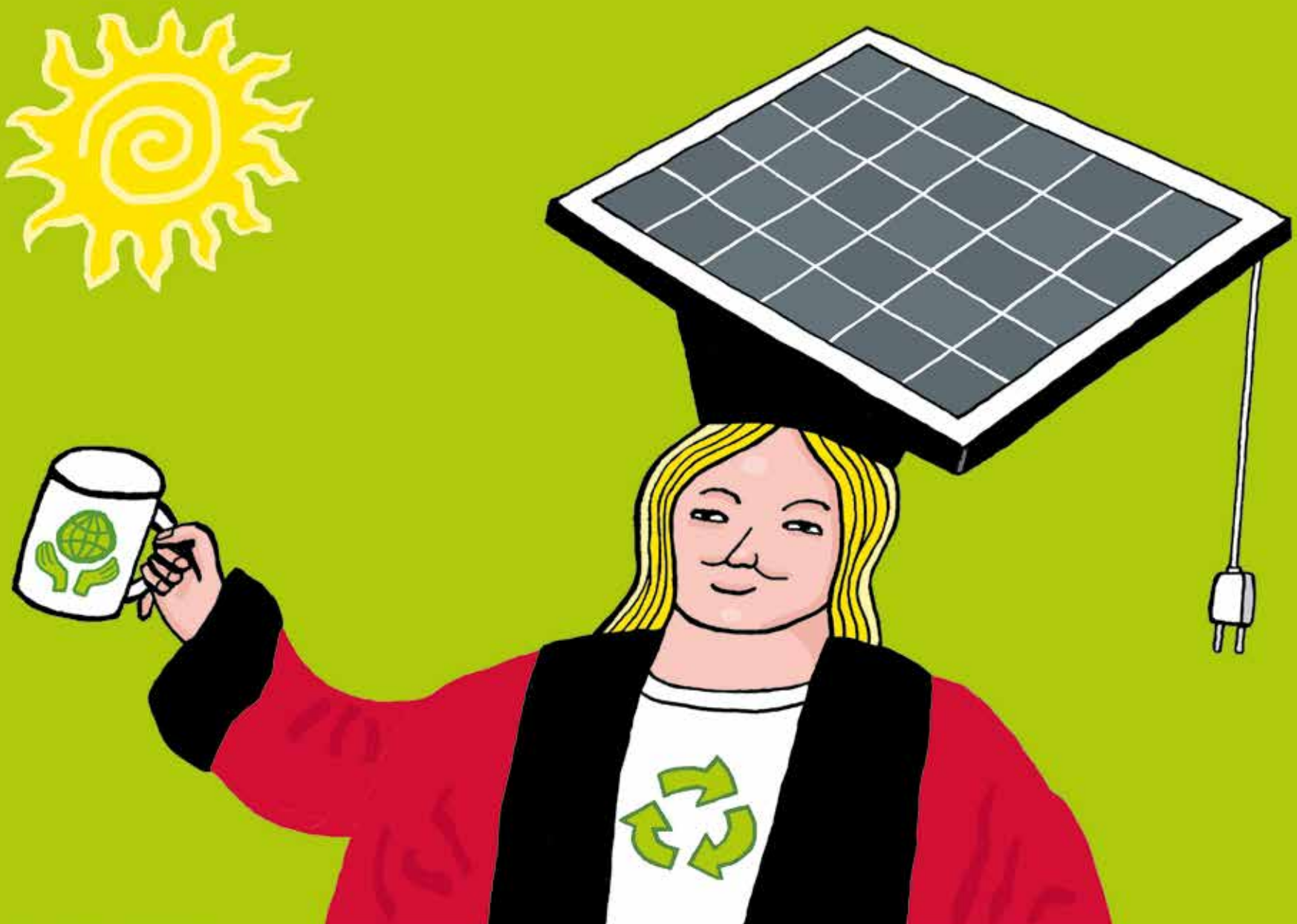
The enormous importance of free speech makes it a tragedy when its exercise must be restricted. This happened recently when the occupation of the ScanNexus building on Oxfordlaan was necessarily ended by the police. In such cases, everything described in the above fails: the university stands for debate, not for the use of force. The occupiers' demands deserved a substantive response. But here too, freedom comes with responsibility: I will always vigorously defend the right to protest, but occupying a building in use for teaching and research in violation of that right is not the way to achieve a meaningful dialogue. The first commandment for anyone in a position of power is to serve its community. Anything that can contribute to a meaningful dialogue about university policies – in whatever field – is therefore most welcome. Let us have that conversation in many different places, hear concerns and foster an environment in which we can productively disagree. It is crucial to the university.

Jan Smits,
Rector Magnificus a.i.

“There is no room for those who call for the exclusion of certain groups, cheer on genocide or propagate discrimination”

50 YEARS OF SUSTAINABILITY AT UM

**AFTER YEARS OF STOP-
START POLICY, THINGS
SEEM TO BE MOVING
FORWARD**



“Everyone must do their part”, the communications department wrote in 1981 in a series of tips for reducing energy consumption at Maastricht University. UM has always been environmentally conscious, but despite all the good intentions, it has proved remarkably difficult to develop and implement a consistent and effective sustainability policy. Why is that? And what does the university want to do differently in the future?

TEXT Cleo Freriks ILLUSTRATION Bas van der Schot

In 1994, UM staff were disgruntled. A bunch of troublemakers – later revealed to be the student branch of the Safety & Environment Department, the University Environmental Platform – had gone around after hours, sticking reminders on office doors urging people to switch off the lights when leaving the room. In a letter to *Observant*, staff complained about being lectured in such an “environmentally unfriendly way” about something that was “obvious anyway”. They promptly peeled the stickers off the doors.

Were they right? Judging by the repeated appeals over the following decades, asking people to please switch off the lights, it wasn’t as obvious as the disgruntled letter writers believed. It wasn’t until 2022, when the university decided to install motion sensors in all its buildings, that the issue was finally solved: from then on, lights would switch off automatically in empty rooms. Then there was the reusable coffee cup. As early as 1992, coffee mugs were handed out in the fight against “environmentally harmful disposable cups”. Various schemes and initiatives followed, until the university banned disposable cups outright in 2023. Problem solved? Not quite. A year later, *Observant* found that students had simply started buying coffee elsewhere, and many deposit-return cups still ended up in the bin.

LOW-HANGING FRUIT

Professor of Planetary Health Pim Martens is familiar with the story. “I’ve got three of those mugs at home myself. The oldest one still says State University of Limburg”, he laughs via Teams from Pollenzo, Italy, where he is currently a visiting professor. And these are just two examples. Over the years, UM has repeatedly tried to make its catering, commuting, business travel, printing and waste separation more sustainable – with mixed results.

It’s frustrating, Martens agrees. But in his view, the bigger problem is that these are not the issues the university should be focusing on in the first place. “It’s low-hanging fruit. Of course it helps, but if you want to lead the way – which is what I’d like to see from a university – you have to go much deeper and look at every aspect of the organisation. Why are we still carrying out animal testing? Why does our pension fund still invest in fossil fuels? Maastricht has always been behind the curve in these areas.” According to Martens, the main reason is this: “There’s a lack of long-term vision at the top. We’ve had very few leaders – deans, executive board members – who really went all in on sustainability.”

“ENVIRONMENT” DISAPPEARED

Over the years, the university repeatedly declared that the time had come for major change – “for real this time”. But when push came to shove, this often amounted to little more than lip service. Take 1989, when the Executive Board said that setting up an environmental health research institute was a “top priority”. Two years later, the plan was dropped, with the research instead being folded into the yet-to-be-established Institute for Nutrition and Environment (today’s NUTRIM). When the first steps towards the institute were taken in 1992, the word “environment” had disappeared from the name, and six of the seven research areas focused on nutrition. In 1998, an advisory report was published on how environmental protection and sustainable

development could be put into practice at the university. A committee had spent five years working on it. The report “was merely noted”, according to committee chair Jos Kleinjans in *Observant*, then professor of Environmental Health Science. He was “astonished. It’s like everything just sinks into a swamp.”

At the start of this century, sustainability featured neither in the university’s annual report nor in its strategic plan, despite repeated calls from the Safety & Environment Department. And when – after years of delay – a sustainability agenda was finally introduced in 2008, it mainly focused on the sorts of things Martens would describe as low-hanging fruit: saving energy, offering more organic food and making double-sided printing compulsory.

BOTTOM-UP

That isn’t to say nothing has happened. UM has been nominated for and won various environmental awards; it has twice been named the most energy-efficient university in the Netherlands; a master’s programme and a minor in the subject were introduced; university buildings are being made more sustainable, with the redevelopment of the main building on Tapijnkazerne – which now has minimal environmental impact – as the standout example; and in 2010, UM students set up the world’s first **Green Office**. Beyond that, various environmental (student) initiatives were set up over the years. In 2019, several of these joined forces to form the Climate Action Network – now the student party KAN. Their climate marches drew thousands of participants. But many of these initiatives, says Martens, share one key feature: “They come from students or from the bottom up. As a result, no one has the full picture, and there’s no real coordination.”

INDIVIDUAL FACULTIES

What makes it even harder, he says, is this: “These are problems you can’t solve within individual faculties, but collaboration between faculties is incredibly difficult to get off the ground.” As a result, people are often unaware that others within the university are working on the same thing. Take the new Climate Health Institute of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. As dean Annemie Schols told *Observant*, “UM researchers with promising ideas on climate change and its health impacts can meet like-minded colleagues here”. But Martens – one of the world’s first professors of planetary health, who has been publishing on the relationship between global warming and human health since 1993 – only found out about the institute by reading about it in the newspaper.

He gives another example of the lack of coordination between different parts of the university: “An external agency was brought in to introduce separate waste bins, even though the expertise on getting people to sort waste properly already exists in-house within the psychology department.”

MOVING QUICKLY

For a long time, the university’s sustainability policy was “diffuse”, admits Jeroen Warnier, who became director of the Sustainability Office last year. “I became a sustainability office in 2022, partly as a policy advisor and partly as a project manager for the SUM2030 programme [which aims to make the university fully sustainable by 2030]. My job was to implement sustainability

policy, but it was unclear what exactly that policy was and where it needed to be implemented.”

A new working group was set up. Martens agreed to join: “That was the last time, though. I’ve already sat on about twenty of those committees.” Warnier adds, “I told Pim ‘if it comes to nothing again, I might as well step down.’” In 2024, the resulting Roadmap 2030 was approved. It sets out four main ambitions: by 2035, the university must be climate-neutral and circular [producing little to no waste], sustainability must be embedded in all its decision-making, and its campus must be green and healthy.

In addition to being more ambitious, the new policy differs from previous efforts in several key ways, explains Warnier. “I now genuinely feel real support from the Executive Board. Firstly, we

As a side note, if you’re thinking that “a student organisation promoting sustainability at the university” sounds suspiciously similar to the University Environmental Platform (UMP) mentioned earlier, you would be correct. The UMP quietly disappeared after 2007 and, three years later, had apparently faded so completely from collective memory that the Green Office was welcomed as an entirely new initiative.

asked for more staff – not just part-timers who, like I did at first, have to split their time between this and other responsibilities. They started last year, and you can already see that things are moving quickly. Secondly, we expanded our advisory board to include at least one representative from each faculty. They advise us on what needs to be on the agenda. And thirdly, since 2022 we structurally receive €300,000 in research funding every year.”

CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC

These changes are already starting to pay off. For example, the university’s new catering partner offers mostly plant-based food, and there are plans for Duboisdomein 30 to receive a massive solar façade. But realistically, not everything will move that quickly, Warnier says. “Some of these projects are major undertakings. We can’t just make all university buildings fully sustainable overnight – some of those plans might not be finished for another ten years. And to become fully climate-neutral, we’ll have to offset part of our CO2 emissions; it’s impossible to bring them down to zero with the current technologies. But what we can do is look at where we are now and how to make the most of it. At least we’re aware of it now. Before, we had no insight whatsoever into what we were doing.”

Martens is also “cautiously optimistic. For the first time, I feel like things are actually happening. I’m too cynical to believe it will all work out, but it’s clear there’s momentum now and opportunities are being given to the people working on this.”

science

UM legal researchers argue for a clear definition

Judges rarely call femicide by its name

Femicide cases are not always recognised or treated as such in Dutch courtrooms. That is the conclusion of legal researchers at Maastricht University, who analysed 282 judicial decisions. They argue that a clear definition of femicide is needed in order to raise awareness.

The dictionary defines femicide as the killing of a woman because she is a woman. But how do you actually establish that? “You’re in very subjective territory”, says Laurie Ritzen, a researcher at the Faculty of Law. “Take a case where a man stabs a woman in the street and gives no explanation. You can’t know whether he acted simply because a woman happened to walk by at that moment. Would he have stabbed a man as well? The motive isn’t always clear.” The United Nations uses stricter criteria. Any killing or attempted killing of a woman by her partner or a family member is classified as femicide. If the perpetrator is someone else known to the victim – such as a neighbour or an acquaintance – or a stranger, there must also be a gender-related characteristic such as a history of psychological or sexual abuse of the victim, exploitation or captivity.

Varied answers

To many people, this may seem clear-cut. But it’s not quite so straightforward in Dutch legal practice, as Ritzen and her fellow researchers found in their research, which was commissioned by the national knowledge institute Research and Data Centre (WODC). “In our interviews with experts such as judges



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and public prosecutors, they often described femicide as the killing or attempted killing of a woman because she is a woman. But when we asked which cases they would classify as femicide cases, their answers varied.” Judges do recognise gender-related characteristics such as domestic abuse or misogynistic motives, and these can influence sentencing, but the term “femicide” is rarely used explicitly

in court decisions. Ritzen and her colleagues analysed 282 court decisions for the study. All met the researchers’ working definition of femicide, but fewer than five explicitly mentioned femicide. Ritzen does not have a definitive explanation for this. “It may be that the Public Prosecution Service presents a case as femicide while the judge ultimately sees it differently, or that the

term is simply left out of the decision for one reason or another.” She emphasises that the study only looked at written court decisions, not at what was said in court.

Penalties

According to Ritzen, a clear definition of femicide would enable a more consistent approach to these cases. This would also make it more obvious that many killings of women are preceded by existing patterns of violence, stalking or earlier abuse, allowing police and prosecutors to intervene sooner. Should the law be changed to include femicide as a separate offence carrying heavier penalties, as countries such as Cyprus and Italy have done? Ritzen does not think this is necessary. “In the Netherlands, these cases are classified as murder or manslaughter. Whether or not a judge calls it femicide, the sentences are already severe. Besides, we still need to see how those laws work in practice abroad.” She warns against rushing into legislative changes in response to public demand. “Some judges may well look at these cases differently today. The cases we studied are from some time ago, and developments in this area are moving quickly.” The researchers are keen to stress that they are not trying to tell judges or lawmakers what to do. They believe it is up to politicians to draw up a definition of femicide. “It’s important not just because it helps identify the phenomenon, but also for victims’ families.”

Deborah Blekkenhorst

“It’s a shame that it’s such hard work”

Continued from page 3

had been hoping for financial support from UM. A vain hope, as it turned out. They also approached the national basketball association, without success. And so the club offered to lend the team the money, all 10,000 euros. That needs to be paid back now. It’s a heavy responsibility, says Baines, who is not only chair of the club, but also captain of the team. “We tried to find sponsors, we’ve only managed one so far. We’re also organising tournaments, for which teams have to pay an entry fee. We’re selling homemade cookies to the spectators. But those are not vast sums of money. We are all working overtime to raise the money.”

Hobby

They still need two thousand euros, and in a

bid to bring that number down faster, there was a brainstorm session to come up with fundraising ideas. They have also set up a GoFundMe page. Because not going is not an option: the deposit has been paid and won’t be refunded, whether the Knights play or not. “It’s a shame that it’s such hard work. There is hardly any interest in university sports in the Netherlands. The outside world sees us as a bunch of amateurs with a hobby, but we’re really good, we’re competing at an international level. It feels like a missed opportunity for the university and for Maastricht. If we didn’t love this sport so much, we’d have given up a long time ago.”

Deborah Blekkenhorst

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