

observant

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HITTING



Photo: Philip Driessen



Photo: Joris Hillerman

THE DANCE FLOOR



Photo: Joris Hillerman

After the formal celebration of the 50th anniversary of Maastricht University during the dies in January, it was now time to hit the dance floor. First, it was the turn of 2,500 staff members to enter the 'festival grounds' at Tapijn last Thursday. On Friday, the students followed, with a 120 of them competing in the Battle of the Faculties, organised by the international student association Kaleido together with sports council MUSST and UnliMited Students, for the title of 'Faculty of the Year'. Among other challenges, they had to complete an obstacle course and perform a 15-minute mini concert with a band. The victory went to the Faculty of Science and Engineering.



Photo: Philip Driessen



Photo: Isabella Ribeiro

WE'RE
DROPPING
THE PAPER
VERSION.
4 issues
left to go



editorial

Indispensable

For Mother's Day, I received an AI-generated postcard. What I saw was our kitchen, but my goodness, it looked like a bomb had exploded. Dirty laundry everywhere, an abandoned school bag, sauce on the floor, sauce on the ceiling, sauce on the drawers, piles of plates, knocked over mugs. Not exactly a familiar sight, let me tell you! The message on the back of the card, obviously tongue-in-cheek (because the boys at home do know I am capable of more than just cooking and cleaning): 'What would we do without you?'

I was talking about it with a colleague at the office recently. Not about mess, but about being indispensable. Actually, the conclusion was quite painful: if I were to suddenly be 'out of action' for a while, things would carry on as normal. Colleagues know what needs doing and that tough decisions sometimes need to be made (do we post this opinion piece or not, do we mention the name of the professor who was found guilty of inappropriate behaviour?) And it doesn't matter whether it's the physical paper or the digital channels.

Now we are dropping the paper version after the summer, we are preparing to switch to the format of a weekly newsletter. We debated whether we should work with a 'quota', agreements about the number and types of articles, as in the paper: three news(ish) items a week, one human interest story (like our 'sing pray' series), two columns, one academic or student article (such as this week, the interview with the chairs of Tragos and Circumflex and the report about how loneliness can strike in student housing complexes), or a substantial piece of investigative journalism.

Not everyone in the office was overjoyed with the idea of a weekly 'production schedule'. With the end of the final editorial process of the physical paper, there will be more time to chase the news, to delve deeper into something – those stories will come, they said optimistically.

For now, I prefer to stick to a 'fixed standard'. We call that checking or coordination in the office – not indispensable, but very useful. At home, it's simply a case of knowing where everything is. "Your housekeys are on the cupboard in the hall", "Your favourite shirt is drying on the rack", "No, we're not out of coffee beans, just look next to the bread basket."

Wendy Degens

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



series the times they are (not) a changin'

When a cyber-attack brought the university to a standstill



Warning at the entrance of the Inner City Library, in early January 2020 Photo: Observant

2019–2020

How does the mind of a criminal hacker work? Apparently quite rationally. The group (either Russian or Ukrainian – it never became clear) behind the spectacular 2019 attack on Maastricht University's computer systems clearly chose its moment carefully. In the early evening of 23 December, just before Christmas, hardly anyone would notice anything unusual happening on their computer. It allowed the virus to spread quietly – a silent night, though certainly not a holy one. That same evening, at 7:35 pm, the university's IT staff noticed that the network was slowing down. Soon after, the university went into crisis mode: it had become the target of a cyber-attack. Vital systems stopped working. To prevent the situation from getting worse, everything was immediately shut down. It was the start of a nightmare that lasted more than a week and had consequences that dragged on far longer. From timetables and emails to research data, nothing could be accessed – until the university paid up. This was ransomware: the hackers said they would provide a digital key to unlock everything once payment was made.

How could this have happened?

Was UM's cybersecurity really that weak? As the university

later admitted, that was indeed the case. Too many systems that should have been separate were interconnected, and too many people had system-wide access. A well-planned attack stood a good chance of success. And it was well planned. Two months earlier, on 15 October, the hackers had sent phishing emails with links to the university – and someone had clicked on one. The next day, someone else did the same. It opened the door to malware that quietly mapped the entire network. As the final blow, UM got a Clop virus for Christmas. A university being brought to a standstill is no small matter. It made national news. But in those first few days, communication with both the university community and the media was poor. The Executive Board's spokesperson was on holiday and saw no need to report to the hastily set-up crisis centre, led by Executive Board member Nick Bos, in the library on Grote Looiersstraat. As a result, his predecessor Fons Elbersen was brought in on 26 December. Another key figure was Bart van den Heuvel,

the university's Chief Information Security Officer. Ten months later, in an interview published online by Géant – a European network including SURF, the IT cooperative of Dutch education and research – Van den Heuvel revealed that he communicated with the hackers via his private email account. He insisted that from the outset, the communication strategy had focused on "transparency (...) everything communicated internally was also shared externally".

At the time, *Observant* and other media outlets experienced things rather differently. If we managed to get hold of anyone at all, the responses were brief. For example, an external cybersecurity firm had been brought in, but the university refused to disclose which one. It later turned out to be Fox-IT. Spokesperson Elbersen was unflappable: "I keep reading that we are negotiating. I've never used that word."

But negotiations were clearly taking place. Nick Bos later called it an impossible dilemma – pay the ransom or leave the university paralysed for months? – but the Executive Board actually reached its decision within days. Just after Christmas, it was said that teaching would resume

Was UM's cybersecurity really that weak? As the university later admitted, that was indeed the case

on 6 January. "That means they've paid up", cybersecurity experts said. And they were right. On 30 December, internal sources who disagreed with the university's lack of openness on the matter told *Observant* that the criminals had been paid around €200,000 to €300,000 (later confirmed to be 197,000 in bitcoin). At Elbersen's urgent request, publication was delayed until 2 January to avoid interfering with the crisis team.

It was not until 5 February that UM finally gave a full account of what had happened – which was in itself unprecedented.

Wammes Bos

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

Students feel less academic pressure

Fewer students feel that the pressure of studying is too high, according to the National Student Survey (NSE). In addition, three-quarters of them are generally satisfied with their programme.

Around 75 percent of students in higher education are satisfied or very satisfied with their programme. The trend is moving in the right direction: five years ago, during the coronavirus crisis, this figure stood at 71.5 percent. Students are particularly positive about the atmosphere, with around 80 percent expressing

satisfaction. About three-quarters are also happy with the course content. In addition, many students say they feel at home in their programme and safe to be themselves. There is, however, a difference between students at universities of applied sciences (hbo) and universities: the latter tend to be more positive in their assessments. These findings come from the National Student Survey, completed by 248,000 students this spring. One striking outcome is the decline in the number of students experiencing excessive study pressure. In 2021, around 38 percent of students

reported this problem; this year, the figure dropped to 31 percent. Students are generally pleased with their lecturers, although university students are more positive than their peers at universities of applied sciences. Students do see room for improvement in testing and assessment. Fewer than 60 percent are satisfied in this area. Some believe the feedback on assignments and exams could be better. Students also say that the criteria on which they are assessed are not always sufficiently clear.

Higher Education Press Agency

The cities want to lift each other up, not tear each other down “Maastricht and Heerlen rivals? What’s all this about?”



Start of the construction of the Heerlen office of Statistics Netherlands on the site where part of the Oranje-Nassau I coal mine once was. Photo: J.H.M. Wismans - Historisch Centrum Limburg

If popular opinion is to be believed, the cities of Maastricht and Heerlen are locked in a bitter rivalry. But is this true? Perhaps not, judging by a debate organised by Studium Generale and Debatcentrum Sphinx on Wednesday evening at the Royal Theater in Heerlen. Councillors from both cities as well as Pamela Habibović, interim president of Maastricht University, expressed hopes for closer cooperation across South Limburg. “The university was a gift to the region.”

“Do I trust those people in Maastricht?” A woman in the audience hesitated noticeably when moderator Lennart Booij put the question to her. “Yes...” she replied, drawing laughter from the two hundred people in the audience. While the tone of the debate remained friendly throughout, the evening made it clear that old frustrations and perceived differences between the two cities continue to linger. “This feels like couples therapy”, one speaker joked. According to another speaker, Maastricht could show greater awareness of Heerlen’s sense of loss after the coal mine closures of the 1960s. For decades, Heerlen had thrived due to the mining industry. When the mines were closed, attention turned towards Maastricht

– the capital of the province. The city developed rapidly, partly thanks to the founding of the university, while Heerlen struggled with unemployment and poverty. This created tensions between the cities. For many in the room, a telling example was the condescending reaction from some Maastricht residents when the chemical giant DSM moved its headquarters from Heerlen to Maastricht in 2021, along the lines of “Of course they prefer it here – we’re modern and international!” The other side of the region hasn’t forgotten about this, as an online poll among audience members showed. But different views were also voiced. Some argued that the idea of an invisible wall between the two municipalities (a graphic of this clearly resonated with the audience) is largely a myth: “The strength of South Limburg is precisely that we don’t all want to be the same.” A young woman added: “What’s all this about, really? It feels like we’re debating a made-up divide. My generation wants to work together.” That must have been exactly what the local politicians present at the debate wanted to hear. According to outgoing Heerlen councillor Jordy Clemens (SP), it is possible to acknowledge Heerlen’s pain “while still seeing the sense of cooperation”. Economic cooperation

in particular is essential, added outgoing Maastricht councillor Frans Bastiaens: individual municipalities in Limburg are too small to keep up with national developments. And Pamela Habibović, president of Maastricht University, emphasised that what was then the State University of Limburg was “a gift to the region” – not just to the city of Maastricht. And it remains a gift, she referred to the university’s planned expansion into Heerlen. Last year, it was announced that UM will invest in bachelor’s and master’s programmes in Heerlen. Within ten years, the university hopes to have around 1,250 students and more than a hundred staff members in Heerlen, many of whom are also expected to live there. “You need a narrative for that”, said Habibović, “a story that explains why students should want to come to Heerlen.” She wasn’t asked what such a narrative might look like, or how to avoid a situation like the one in Venlo (where the University College is struggling to attract new students). In November, a second debate will take place at Centre Céramique in Maastricht.

Peter Doorackers



Why I’m Leaving Maastricht

“

In two weeks, I will be moving to Eindhoven. At that point I will have lived in Maastricht for about six years, and will have wanted to leave Maastricht for about five and a half years. I write this not as a hit piece on Maastricht itself, but more as a reflection on what it is about me that hasn’t fit with the city.

For context, I moved here in July of 2020 from Oxford with my partner who is Dutch, more specifically Limburgs, and the reason I am here (if you know her, you’ll understand that’s a pretty good reason). Oxford is a very multicultural city with close ties to London, meaning you have access to a global variety of food, music and entertainment while being surrounded by an overwhelming number of pubs – basically perfection.

Comparatively, while Maastricht is certainly not a totally isolated hub, I have found it hard living here. The travel connections to the UK are not easy, the presence of the dialect complicates learning Dutch and once a year the city is taken over by the most aggressively awful music ever conceived, in the form of carnaval. I know that last reason will upset some people, but my hatred of carnaval is a hill I will happily die on, especially because death would guarantee that I never have to hear carnivals’ “music” again – unless, of course, hell is real.

Ultimately, I feel less myself living here.

I am a very talkative person (a fact that anyone who has encountered me for more than five minutes can vouch for), which means that at times, not being able to express my ideas and feelings in a second language has shaken my sense of self. Similarly, the more you become defined by your nationality, the less you become defined by the deeper aspects of your character, while in areas of greater diversity your nationality is less relevant.

These compatibility issues have left me with the question *am I not happy living in Maastricht, or am I not happy living in the Netherlands?* So, like a good scientist I have decided to test this question by moving to Eindhoven to see how many of my issues are Limburg exclusives.

Perhaps Eindhoven will be a city I want to stay in, but at the very least, I’ll finally be free from carnaval... oh shit, wait a minute?!

”

*Tom Smejka,
until recently lecturer at the faculty
of Psychology and Neuroscience*

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



Milou Scholten
(Heerhugowaard, 2004)

\ Third-year European Law School student, second-year Dutch Law student and chair of Students for Equality

\ Relationship status: living together with Jochem

\ Lives in: Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“
I’m afraid of life moving too fast
and forgetting to enjoy it
”

I like to study. [Laughs] More than anything, I like to keep busy. That’s why I came to Maastricht; it’s the only place where you can do a dual bachelor’s degree in European Law and Dutch Law. The combination sounds more impressive than it actually is. You start with European Law, and Dutch Law comes in halfway through the second year. It’s incredibly hard work for a while – you practically live in the library and don’t have much of a social life – but after six months, that intense period is over.

Are you closer to your mother or your father? I have a good relationship with both parents. I go home to Helvoirt, where they live now, almost every weekend. I really enjoy it because my sisters are always there too. I’m the oldest of three. One sister studies in Amsterdam and the other still lives at home. We get on very well – we were never the kind of siblings who fought all the time. Sometimes my boyfriend comes along too, and my sister’s partner as well. It’s a lot of fun. Luckily, my parents have plenty of space.

Everyone should have the opportunity to pursue higher education. Absolutely. It’d be rather contradictory for me, as chair of Students for Equality, to say otherwise. We raise money to pay tuition fees for people who can’t afford to study at UM. Last year we helped students from Limburg; this year we’re focusing on young people from outside the European Union who want to study in Maastricht. Anyone can support us. In turn, we organise events like pub quizzes and games nights. I’m very privileged, as a white Dutch person with two university-educated parents who earn a good

living. I want to give back to people who haven’t had the same opportunities.

What’s hard about love? There will always be little things, but in general I don’t find love all that complicated. Jochem and I are different and live very different lives, but we complement each other well. He’s training to be a primary school teacher in Helmond and is currently doing a placement in the first two years, which he absolutely loves. I spend most of my time on my laptop. We’ve been together since I was thirteen – we met at our badminton club. Over the years you grow alongside each other, and that creates a bond. Things feel very easy between us. With a strong foundation of friendship, the rest follows naturally.

Describe yourself as a child in five words. Oof, five? Well, definitely talkative, cheerful, stubborn. Let me think... what else? According to my parents, I was an easy child. I don’t remember doing anything particularly wild. I never had any reason to be difficult.

I’m a good friend... because I’m there for people. A phrase that has stayed with me is “Everyone wants a village, but no one wants to be a villager.” It means that sometimes you have to push through discomfort to be there for each other. I think it’s important to make that effort instead of always putting yourself first.

Never fly again or never eat meat again? [Thinks] I’m not very good at being a vegetarian, but I’d still

give up meat. There are so many places in the world I still want to see, like Australia and New Zealand. You can only really get there by plane. I wouldn’t want to give up those experiences in advance, although I’d miss my bacon.

What’s your biggest fear? That life moves too fast and I forget to enjoy it. I’m so focused on what’s yet to come that I lose sight of the present sometimes. Every now and then, I need to remember to stop and look around me. Jochem is good at slowing me down – his greatest strength is that he’s very relaxed. My biggest weakness is that I always want better, always want more. I’d hate to die knowing there were things I could’ve enjoyed but didn’t.

I spend most of my money on... books! And rent. If you own five hundred books, you’ve basically got your own library – that’s my dream. I never throw books away. I even have a stamp that says, “This belongs to the library of Milou Scholten.” I’m building my own collection. I’m currently reading *Breasts and Eggs*, about three Japanese women around the age of forty reflecting on their lives and whether they want children. It’s quite heavy reading. I read lighter books as well, but never thrillers.

I dream of having a family of my own. I’m not sure. Jochem really likes children, but I’m very focused on my career. Having a family would affect that; it’d require some adjustment.

When was the last time you cried? After exam week, I cried with relief. All the built-up tension just came pouring out. Crying was never a taboo in our house; it’s always felt very normal to me. I don’t see it as anything particularly significant, or something to dwell on for long. Once it’s out, it’s done.

When I look in the mirror, I see... huge bags under my eyes, and how much concealer I need to cover them up. [Laughs] Apart from that, I see a woman. Sometimes I still expect to see a 15-year-old, but I’m not that age anymore. I forget sometimes, and then I’m surprised to see a grown woman looking back at me.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Tragos and Circumflex have “no idea” whether UM will restore ties

A future without hazing? “It remains an important tradition”

Decreasing membership, a difficult relationship with the university, criticism of the culture... How future-proof are Maastricht’s two traditional student associations? An interview with the chairs of Tragos and Circumflex.



Chairs Jasper Gielen of Circumflex and Veerle Kiefer of Tragos Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

“How can we support something UM is fundamentally opposed to?” Pamela Habibović – at the time, rector, now President of Maastricht University – asked during a University Council meeting in April of last year. The subject at hand was the traditional student associations Tragos and Circumflex. Only days earlier, UM had cut ties with both associations after multiple reports of incidents with new members that crossed the boundaries of “physical safety and personal integrity” during hazing – something the two associations still maintain they know nothing about.

It was not the first time that the *Code of Conduct of the Introduction Period* – which sets out rules relating to alcohol use and sleep, among other things – had been violated, and the university had run out of patience. The codes seemingly don’t work and it is time for a new system for student associations

“more in line with the times”, then director of Student Services Centre Margriet Schreuders said. “Sooner rather than later,” she added.

A year later, that urgency is barely visible. The Executive Board has put off a decision multiple times – although according to spokesperson Koen Augustijn, it looks like it is now “a matter of weeks” until a decision is made. The associations themselves have no idea what that decision will be, said chairs Veerle Kiefer (Tragos) and Jasper Gielen (Cir-

cumflex), who sat down for a conversation with *Observant*. “The university isn’t telling us anything, because the policy will also apply to other associations,” said Gielen.

Abolishing

Kiefer is “curious” what new etiquette they will have come up with. She understands that “the university wants things to change, no longer go from incident to incident”, but how is that supposed to work without a code of conduct? “Other university cities use them, too. Only there, they are often created together with the student associations, so that they are more on board with the end product. So, the process could certainly be more efficient, but I can’t think of a solution without a code of conduct.”

Last year, Habibović said it was still a question whether UM would continue to provide [financial] support at all, “if associations insist that hazing is necessary”. What happens if abolishing hazing is a prerequisite for restoring ties? Would Tragos and Circumflex agree to that? Both chairs say they would be willing to have conversations about what hazing would entail, but abolishing it entirely? “It remains an important tradition for our association,” said Gielen. Furthermore, added Kiefer, “we feel that we can organise it properly, and we will continue to do that, even if the ties with the university are permanently cut.”

On their own two feet

Say the latter were to happen, would that signal the end for the associations? Neither chair thinks it would be, despite the continued loss of administrative months – financial compensation for the delay incurred by student association board members, up to a maximum of €30,000 a year per association. “We have been able to partly compensate for that loss through a fund – funded in part by the association and in part by alumni,” said Gielen. Tragos has a similar solution, said Kiefer, although she admits “the money isn’t endless. But there are other options, without necessarily becoming more commercial, should the administrative months not be restored. Stricter rules made

it harder to receive financial compensation anyway, the last few years.”

The associations also learnt to stand on their own two feet more last year.

They solved the issue

“We understand that the university wants things to change, no longer go from incident to incident”

of being denied access to the INKOM introduction week by together organising *Maasweek* independently, an alternative that could definitely continue, they said. “And we now organise other business that was usually sorted through the university, such as first aid courses and fire inspections, ourselves,” said Kiefer.

Less members

The two chairs are very aware that the university may choose to permanently cut ties, but they emphasise that they would prefer a future with UM. “Neither side would prefer there to be no contact, so I don’t think that’s the university’s approach,” said Gielen. Kiefer maintains it wouldn’t make sense. “After all, our members are still UM students.”

But are students still interested in traditional associations? Haven’t chairs been complaining about decreasing membership for a while now? After a spike in membership during covid, Tragos and Circumflex each only welcomed about a

Saurus temporarily closed

Finding new board members is not just a challenge for Tragos and Circumflex. Rowing club Saurus—Maastricht’s largest student association—closed its doors for a weekend earlier this month, after receiving insufficient applications from members to fill the board positions for the coming academic year. “The closure was a statement, a call to members: think about it again”, said chair Mijke Kapsenberg when asked. “Among other things, a number of training sessions had to be cancelled.”

Such a measure is not unheard of among student associations, but for Saurus it is a first, says Kapsenberg. “And hopefully it will remain a one-off. It’s a real shame that this was necessary.” It did, however, have an effect. “After the closure, we did receive enough applications. We hope to present a new board soon.”

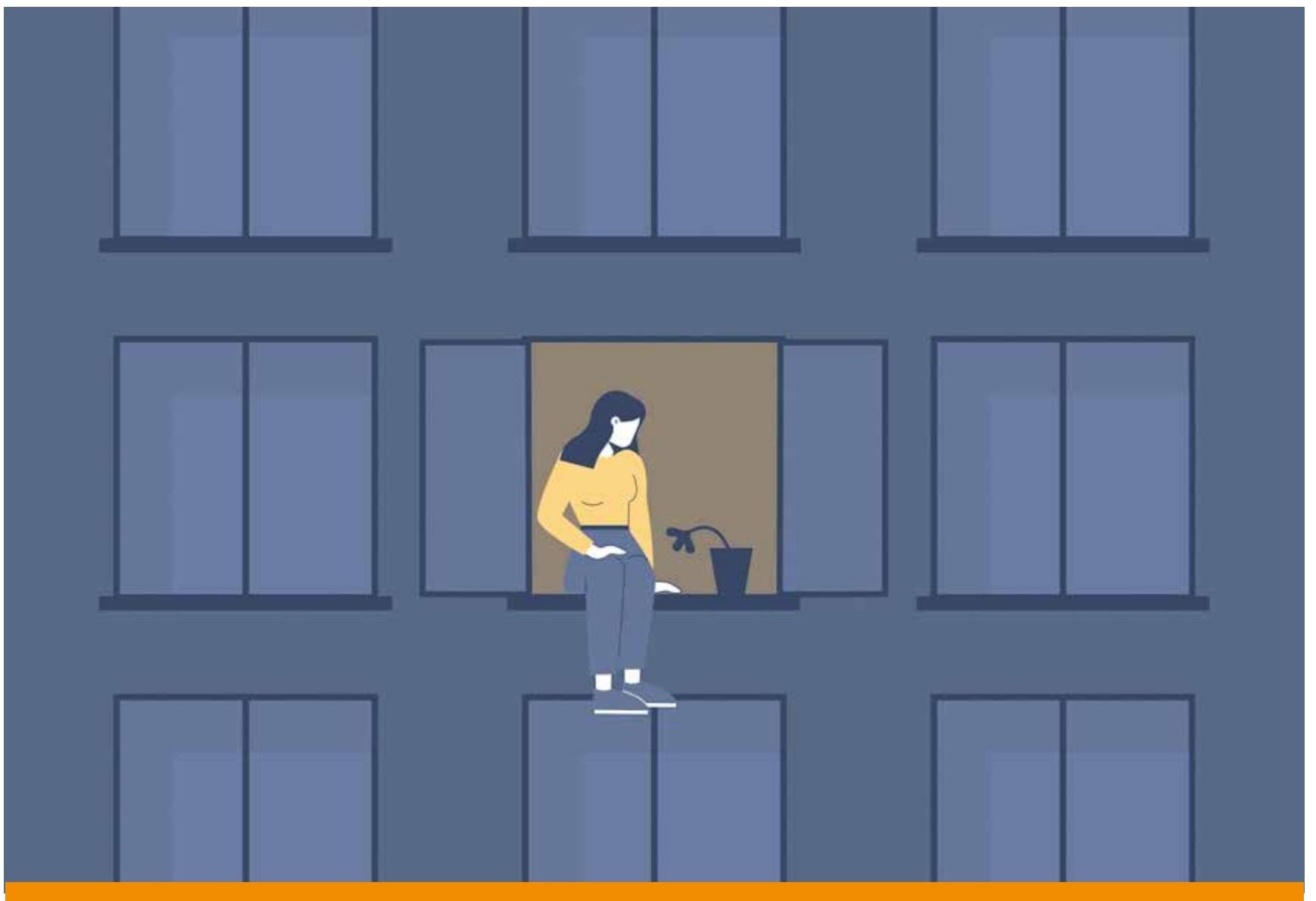
To be continued on page 8

background

Behind closed doors; student loneliness in Maastricht

“Quitting smoking basically means giving up on socialising”

Five o'clock in December and it's already dark. Veronica (21, Italian) has just finished an intense gym session at UM Sports. These days, it's where you will find her most of the time, away from her studio as much as possible. She lives at The Plaza, in one of the relatively new containers behind UM Sports. Now in her third year of Regenerative Medicine and Technology, she recalls a very lonely first year in Maastricht. “If I had known how hard it would be, I might have stayed in Italy.”



Text: Nora Grolig

Illustration: Shutterstock

Six out of ten students in higher education in the Netherlands regularly feel lonely, with one in four experiencing severe loneliness, according to a 2025 survey by the Dutch Trimbos Institute for Mental Health. Annual research from the InHolland University of Applied Sciences reveals that students living away from home are more likely to suffer from anxiety, loneliness, and symptoms of depression — and this is particularly true of students who live alone,

without housemates. They often find it harder to build a connection with their new surroundings. Public health authorities are sounding the alarm about this growing loneliness “epidemic” and its impacts on young people. Among students, it can often result in study delays and dropout. How is loneliness impacting Maastricht students? *Observant* spoke with eighteen of them, across four Maastricht housing complexes. In her second year, Veronica packed her schedule

The residences

full of social activities to ward off isolation: community dinners at Kaleido, Sunday roasts with the Christian Students' Association, joint study sessions at the library. "I just couldn't bear being alone anymore," she explains. "I was so desperate for connection." Indeed, the layout of The Plaza complex prioritises privacy and efficiency over communal areas: everyone has their own kitchen and bathroom. Only the laundry is done in a common area. There, you might bump into a neighbour, but even then, it rarely goes beyond small talk. One day, a girl whose name Veronica didn't recognise asked for an egg on the residence WhatsApp group, a chat set up by the managers at the start of the year to connect students with each other, but which rarely gets used. When Veronica offered to help the girl, she realised she lived right next door. "We had never even seen each other in the whole year we'd been there."

Living alone

Veronica is not the only one who struggled with feeling isolated in a small studio. Nine of the eighteen students *Observant* spoke with experienced loneliness. They all have one thing in common: living alone and barely knowing their neighbours. In the middle of the afternoon, Mila (21, Bulgarian) is heading to the laundry room to collect her clean clothes. As always, it's empty. She rarely runs into anyone here. For her, the loneliness only came after the excitement of living on her own had worn off. After sharing a room with her siblings her whole life, she was ecstatic to finally have her own space in Maastricht. "At first, it felt like freedom. Then it got very quiet, and I started craving having people around." She has since made very good friends from outside The Plaza through her computer science classes, and now has a thriving social life.

Smokers' bench

Whereas you can easily spend a year at The Plaza without so much as a conversation with the person next door, the atmosphere at StuNest (opposite the MECC) and The Social Hub (in the Sphinx neighbourhood) is completely different. The common areas — game rooms, a gym, and a study room — are always packed there, and you're guaranteed to bump into someone when you come home. On a cold winter's day, three girls sit chatting on a bench outside StuNest. They are on their cigarette break, undisturbed by the biting windchill. The smoker's bench, as they call it, is where European Law student Emma (20, Hungarian) first met her friends Tina (19) and Sima (19), two Palestinian students now in their second year of Business Analytics. "Quitting smoking feels impossible," they explain. "It basically means giving up on socialising." For Emma, moving to StuNest was a relief after a difficult first year, when she couldn't find housing on time and ended up living across the Belgian border, in Veldwezelt. "It was a horrible experience. The house and the landlord were a disgrace." But she and her flatmates bonded over it, and in their second year, the three of them all moved

into neighbouring studios at StuNest. That is also when she met Tina and Sima. Tina, who lived at The Plaza in her first year, relates to Veronica's experience. It's a much lonelier place. The problem lies mostly in having just one shared space for eight buildings: for students in the other seven, going there is simply too inconvenient to bother. Raegan (21, German) joins the others on the smoker's bench. When the topic comes up, Raegan snorts. "Loneliness? How much time do you have?" After three years of living alone in Belgium, the isolation had worn the student down. "One day it hit me: I can't go on like this. I'm the only one who can change things around." Moving to StuNest a few months ago helped a lot. As did recently joining a Spanish band, despite not speaking the language or playing any instrument.

In the same boat

Particularly the international students that *Observant* spoke with were hit hard by loneliness, especially at first. They recalled the struggles of living alone for the first time, in a foreign country where they do not yet know the language and cannot go home at the weekend when the stress gets overwhelming. But Angel (18, European Law), who moved from Spain to Maastricht in September and lives at The Social Hub, sees it differently. For him, feeling homesick is what made him seek out friendships even more. "We all have the same need to socialise, so we're in the same boat." He notices a big difference with the Belgian or French students, who can — and usually do — go back home at weekends. Because of this, they tend to integrate less well with others at The Social Hub.

Privacy and cleanliness

If living alone makes it harder to meet friends, why do so many students choose to live in studios? For many, it is a question of privacy and cleanliness. Ariana (21, Bulgarian) would have happily shared an apartment with other students when she first came to Maastricht, but having her own bathroom was non-negotiable. September came around and her classes were about to start, but she still hadn't found a room in the city. So, when the son of an acquaintance recommended the studios in one of the XIOR student residences, she didn't think twice. Looking back today, she would choose to live with roommates instead, the isolation she felt wasn't worth the extra privacy. The same goes for Lhiva (18, French). She pays €1,800 a month for her studio at The Social Hub, complete with a private kitchen and bathroom. For a lower fee (€1,200-€1,500), you can still get your own bathroom, but you'll have to share a kitchen with ten other students. Before starting her Global Studies bachelor, Lhiva travelled to Maastricht to visit The Social Hub. At the time, she was so put off by the mould in the shared kitchens that she chose a pricier private studio. Very soon, she realised what she'd missed — those who shared a kitchen clearly socialised much more. The shared floors are livelier, with near-daily kitchen parties, communal meals, and a mix

of nationalities. "You can still find your community," she says, "but it takes more effort and patience if you live alone."

Dutch student houses

A good remedy for loneliness is the traditional student house. Many Dutch students live in one, Sara is one of them. She is 21, a fourth-year medical student, and lives with ten other students in a large house in Wyck. Living alone was never an option; as a self-described social butterfly, she knows the solitude would get to her. Her house is a far cry from The Plaza's empty common room, always alive with cosy brunches, group sports sessions, and parties. The only downside? "Sometimes the atmosphere gets too social and you just want to shut down." And despite their best intentions, the cleaning rota is still a work in progress. Yet for Sara, the joy of living with her best friends far outweighs the occasional chaos and untidiness.

Keija, a 27-year-old exchange student from China, also rarely feels lonely but for different reasons. She lives alone in a quiet corridor of the 'Bondefantencollege' on Tongerseweg, one of the three residences in Maastricht managed by XIOR Student Housing. The building feels eerily quiet, and it's hard to imagine that it houses hundreds of students. But Keija likes the peaceful atmosphere and wouldn't trade it for a more social one. "I spend a lot of time by myself, but I don't mind it." Quite the opposite: she would find it awkward to interact with her neighbours. "I'd find it strange if someone came knocking at my door. Maybe it's because Chinese people are more introverted."

Combat

How to combat loneliness? The students all emphasise it: keep going out of your comfort zone. Don't underestimate the importance of your first year in making friends: those first months when everyone is new are the best time to try new things because you have nothing to lose. "People won't remember the awkward moments and if they do, you'll just laugh about them later." And after those first encounters, first-year student Jimena (Spanish, European Law) urges students to stay open-minded and not close themselves off to meeting new people. For months, she struggled to make friends through her course, something she partly blames on Maastricht's PBL (problem-based learning) system, where constantly changing tutorial groups leaves you little time to get to know your classmates. Until one day, she made a new friend in the study room at the Social Hub, and then another — reaching out became a chain effect, and eventually a habit. Another student from XIOR shares a different piece of advice: not to obsess over grades. She started her degree studying European Law but was feeling so stressed about the binding study advice that she spent all her time studying. "I didn't prioritise socialising and I didn't make any friends." Looking back, she wishes she had been more relaxed and set aside at least one or two days a week just for going out and meeting people. "Your social well-being matters just as much as the rest."



The Plaza refers to the "containercomplex" behind UM Sports: here, studios are equipped with their own kitchen and bathroom and residents only share laundry facilities and one common room.



XIOR Student Housing has three student residences across Maastricht. For this interview, *Observant* visited their 'Bondefantencollege', an old monastery that was refurbished into 257 independent student studios.



The Social Hub in Maastricht's Sphinx Quartier is part of an international chain of upscale hotels and student accommodations.



StuNest, formerly the Nido, is a newly renovated residence located just across the MECC in Maastricht Randwyck. It is especially popular with international students.

background

“We’ll be around for a while yet”

Continued from page 5

hundred new members a year, out of a possible five thousand bachelor students at UM. But the main reason for the decrease is actually that students graduate faster nowadays, say Kiefer and Gielen. “That’s good news, of course, but it also means they aren’t members as long, and participate in fewer extracurriculars,” said Kiefer. “You hardly see active seventh years like you used to.” Does the image problem not play a part, too? Frequent criticism is that the closed culture is ‘old-fashioned or outdated’, incidents – both at Tragos and Circumflex, and at associations elsewhere around the country – are guaranteed to lead to negative coverage by the media. Yet the two chairs say they haven’t noticed that much difference. “I didn’t get the impression during the introduction week that students looked at us any differently than before,” said Kiefer. She points to the fact that her student association “puts a lot of effort into creating a safe environment. There is more of a focus on confidential advisors and we are also working on a new policy regarding sexual harassment, so that we can handle reports more specifically.”

Merger

Whatever the reason may be, the lower membership figures are a cause for concern. “It’s getting harder to find people willing to join the board or other committees,” said Gielen. “That is also a problem faced by other associations, in Maastricht and beyond.” Despite that, he is not too worried yet. “If the numbers continue to drop, then it might become a problem. But I feel the numbers are stabilising again.”



Tragos stand during INKOM 2024, for now the last edition the association participated
Photo: Observant

There are frequent rumours that the two associations are considering a merger, because they are so similar and are essentially fishing for members in the same pond. But “that is not on the table at the moment, there are no talks”, both chairs asserted. “I can understand the thought, but there are also differences between Tragos and Circumflex, we both have our own vibes,” said Kiefer. At the same time, neither is willing to entirely

rule out a merger in the future. Although it is hard to look too far forward, says Kiefer. “You are always faced with new challenges. What will we look like in ten years? No idea, that’s still so far away.” But, assures Gielen, “we have often shown how resilient we are. We’ll be around for a while yet.”

Dennis Vaendel

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