

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY / VOLUME 46 / JUNE 4, 2026 / Nr28

Bin there, done that

50 objects representing
50 years of Maastricht University

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How healthy is playing outdoors?

Niels van Best is looking for answers
in baby poo and playground mud

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University expects modest growth

Most of it will be concentrated
in Venlo and Heerlen

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



editorial

We're going to win

Thursday 2 April. A group of pro-Palestinian activists has occupied the university building at Oxfordlaan 55. The Executive Board has ordered them to leave, but that order has been ignored. At about five o'clock, the police sent in a team to end the occupation. Our regular news photographer Joey Roberts captured a group of police officers, armed with batons and shields, walking past a wall. A beautiful and striking facade with giant pictures of squashed faces. It's the editorial team's favourite picture in recent months and we are (almost) unanimous in our decision: this will be our entry to the annual photo prize for higher education media outlets.

More about the prize in a moment, but first let me tell you about that facade. Did you know it is an artwork? Scans by Florentijn Hofman. A few years ago, I spoke to former conservator Mieke Dericks, who was retiring at the time. She chose this wall art, made specially for UM, as one of the three artworks closest to her heart. She told me that there had been a lot of brainstorming beforehand, that it should be something to do with MRI scans, as it is where the scanner facility is housed. It should be placed outside, against the grey concrete facade, because "that would create more openness". Together with a photographer, Hofman created portraits of a number of volunteers, placing their hands and face on a photocopier.

Naturally, we hope to beat the twenty competitors to the top prize in 2026, although we do have to remember that we have never won first prize, not for the journalistic awards either (best background article, best column). For some reason, there is always something at the other universities that the professional judges are drawn to more. *Delta* from Delft always does well; in recent years, they have won prizes for stories about social insecurity, an article about the culture of suppression at a university centre, and multiple articles about ties between TU Delft and the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

Back to the photo prize. The good thing is that, in a week's time, we're organising the Kring conference for higher education media outlets where the winners will be announced. And whoever organises the event is also in charge of the photograph award. All the pictures are currently on our desktop, we then combine them into a document and send them round, so that over a hundred of our colleagues can cast their vote. A sneak peek: there are a lot of protest signs (against a merger between art academies, budget cuts, the right-wing 'Vrijmoedige Studentenpartij'), but also remarkable and amusing student portraits.

I can tell you that I am now utterly convinced of our chances of winning – a little optimism never hurt anyone.

Wendy Degens

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



series the times they are (not) a changin'

Ultimately, the Legal Advice Practice didn't survive



In November 1988, the first academic Legal Advice Practice in the Netherlands opened in Maastricht. The team: lawyers Harry Boogaart and Willem de Roos, and secretary Jacqueline Hendrix
Photo: Observant

50 Years of UM:
The Times They Are
(Not) A Changin'

1988–2014

After a study trip to the United States, where Gerard Mols, then an associate professor, learnt more about American legal aid clinics, he was determined to bring the concept to Maastricht. In 1988, he succeeded. Mols – dean of the Faculty of Law between 1992 and 2004, and later rector – and his colleague Taru Spronken set up what would later become Maastricht University's Legal Advice Practice (APUM): a law practice where students got to conduct intake interviews with real clients, draft documents, negotiate with opposing parties and sometimes even plead in court.

APUM gave students considerable responsibility, which enhanced their learning, Mols told *Observant* in the late 1980s when asked why a university should invest in such an initiative. He argued that practice-based teaching through clinics fit well with Maastricht's Problem-Based Learning approach, where students are used to working on cases. According to Spronken, practical experience was essential; legal education placed "too much emphasis on purely legal aspects. Students need to learn that a strictly legal perspective doesn't always solve the problem." Each year, the clinic offered 46 places for third- and fourth-year students. Over a period of eight weeks, they were supervised by professional lawyers. Interest among students was high; sometimes there were more applicants than places available. Clients paid standard legal fees, which helped cover part of the salaries and overhead costs.

Outside the university, concerns were raised about client confidentiality, given the number of students involved. Spronken responded in 1988: "A typical law firm also has plenty of administrative staff. The fact that we happen to work with students here does not at all mean that we put clients' interests second." And: "Why are people so distrustful of students? Just go and sit in the café opposite the courthouse, where a lot of lawyers go, and listen to

what is said there."

The issue of confidentiality resurfaced in 1997, when a lecturer from Maastricht University (not from the Faculty of Law itself) complained. As the opposing party in a divorce case, he objected to being "used as a teaching tool". He felt his privacy was violated because students had access to the case file and considered it "not collegial" to be "challenged in court by fellow lecturers". Although the clinic initially refused to give in, it eventually decided to drop its rule that it could choose cases completely freely. From then on, cases involving a university employee as the opposing party were declined. In 2004, the Faculty of Law faced severe budget cuts. The faculty board thought the clinic was too expensive. Practical legal training for regular students was discontinued. In its place came a commercial qualifying master's for law

"Talking about confidentiality. Just go and sit in the café opposite the courthouse and listen to what is said there"

graduates aspiring to a career in the legal profession. It offered five months of teaching, partly through APUM, for six thousand euros. But the programme failed – too few applicants and too much competition from similar but cheaper programmes in Groningen and Utrecht. By 2013, APUM staff told *Observant* they were doing less and less teaching. "The less teaching we do, the less funding the office gets from the faculty. All our income has to come from client fees." It proved unsustainable. A year later, APUM closed its doors for good.

Wendy Degens

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

Student intake and population development up to 2031

University looks beyond Maastricht for future growth

Maastricht University expects to see modest growth over the next five years. UM currently has around 23,000 students, a figure projected to rise to 25,300 by 2031. Most of this growth will be concentrated at its Venlo and Heerlen campuses, in line with the university's strategy of expanding beyond Maastricht as much as possible.

The student number projections were recently shared with the University Council. Growth in bachelor's programmes is expected to come mainly from Dutch students. For bachelor's students from the European Economic Area (EEA) – the EU plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway – a cap of 3,150 is assumed as a consequence of “self-regulation” measures on internationalisation agreed upon by all universities in the Netherlands. No such limit applies to European students enrolling in master's programmes.

Dutch

The projection that more Dutch students will

choose to study in Limburg is surprising, given the decline in the number of secondary school students in pre-university education across the Netherlands. Where did this ambitious idea come from? That was the question raised last week during the University Council meeting at which the policy paper was discussed.

UM believes it may prove to be an exception, pointing to the housing shortages affecting many universities in the western Netherlands as well as “targeted measures at the programme level to increase Dutch enrolment”. One example is Psychology, a programme with restricted intake. From this year onwards, the selection procedure will involve two ranking lists – one for the English-taught track and one for the Dutch-taught track. Previously, both tracks shared a single ranking list.

Communication strategy

Looking ahead, the university's focus is on growth in Venlo and Heerlen. In Heerlen, the

new Urban Sustainability Studies programme – offered by Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE), an alliance of European universities and non-academic organisations – will launch after the summer. In the longer term, the programme is expected to attract around ninety students. The planned interdisciplinary Dutch degree in Governance, Law and Society will likely also be based in Heerlen.

Venlo is expected to take in around 275 students by 2031, mostly in the Sustainable Bioscience programme and a smaller share at University College Venlo.

The memo also briefly addresses the question of what will happen if the number of EEA applicants exceeds the agreed-upon cap of 3,150. The situation will be monitored closely, and adjustments will be made if necessary, for example by enforcing payment deadlines more strictly or adjusting the communication strategy for prospective students.

Wendy Degens



Hit back harder

“

I recently signed up for a free trial at Anytime Fitness. At the intake, the trainer suggested that I try out a group class on Sunday morning. When I showed up, I had no idea that it would be a boxing class. “Oh no,” I thought, “Boxing isn't for me.” To make matters more intimidating, I was paired with the boxing instructor because I was new and there were an uneven number of students. But I wasn't about to run out of the studio. “Time to *really* step outside my comfort zone,” I told myself. During that first class, I explained to the instructor that I had had a difficult year going through divorce, and had lost a significant amount of weight—and energy. He took one look at me and said earnestly, “You could definitely use a lot more on your body. Boxing is going to make you strong. And we can give you nutritional advice, too, to put on weight and feel better.” As a body image researcher, I was taken aback by his comment about my body. Didn't he know that the academic literature says that body talk is *bad*? And yet, his comment stuck with me, in a positive sense. It helped to have someone objectively tell me that my low weight was symptomatic of needing to take care of myself and, importantly, to take that *seriously*. Now, one month later, boxing classes have become a highlight of my week. I have had the pleasure of being paired up with different women, one of whom is Paula. The first time we were paired up, I told her that I was afraid of hurting her, and that it was difficult for me to ‘take up space’ as much as the exercises required. She told me firmly, “Listen. I am over 60 years old, and I have been doing this for a few years now. I am strong. I can take it. Hit me harder, so you'll be strong too.” Stepping outside of our comfort zone can be scary. However, new environments and people can help us to see, experience, and understand ourselves from a fresh perspective. We are all capable of taking up more space than we allow ourselves to. So, the next time life throws you an unexpected curveball—or an unexpected sport—don't run out of the studio. Stay, take a deep breath, and hit back harder.

”

Jessica Alleva,
Associate Professor at the faculty
of Psychology and Neuroscience

Bank should stop investing billions in fossil fuels

Environmental organisations: “UM, put pressure on ING”



Illustration: Shutterstock

The Maastricht branches of Klimaat Actie Netwerk and Extinction Rebellion want Maastricht University to put pressure on its main bank, ING: it must scale back its billions in investments in new fossil fuel extraction. If it doesn't, UM should look for a new bank, the groups stated in an online petition.

The Executive Board said it “wanted to open a dialogue” with the groups. “We assume the petition will be presented to us at some point. That strikes us as a logical moment to see what we can achieve in this together.” At the time of writing, the petition had been signed by 86 people. The message has also found support from Maastricht professors Harro van Lente, Tsjalling Swierstra and Pim Martens.

Be open about it

Their colleague Rob Bauer (School of Business and Economics), who has been working

on sustainable financing for years, is delighted by the petition. “It forces the Executive Board to explicitly state why we bank with ING, and maybe examine those reasons.” Which does not necessarily have to result in a change of bank: “A university has to have a good bank. Of course, you can move to [green banks such as] ASN or Triodos. But can they provide the same level of service for your organisation? Or do you need a bigger bank? Those are the sort of considerations that the Executive Board should be open about.” Something which, according to Bauer, has been missing up to now.

Talking to ING about financing oil and gas extraction is good, he said. But if you really want to make a difference, “then more universities have to join in, maybe even the whole government”. As far as the bank is concerned, UM is merely one minor customer, threatening to take your business elsewhere would

have no effect, said Bauer. However, UM isn't entirely powerless. Banks are sensitive to reputational damage, he said. If UM is openly critical of ING, as it has been about pension fund ABP, “that might be enough to cause a ripple effect, leading other parties to also raise their concerns, and increase the pressure.”

Under fire

ING has been under fire from climate activists regarding investments in fossil fuels for a while. Last year, climate organisation Milieudefensie sued the bank, stating that it was using its money to thwart efforts to counter the climate crisis. ING said it was in fact trying to help large organisation finance their transition to sustainable energy sources.

Peter Doorakkers

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



Reinier Hoon
(Maastricht, 1994)

\ PhD candidate at the
Faculty of Arts and Social
Sciences and farmer

\ Relationship status:
"Does it matter?"

\ Lives in: Riemst, Belgium

Photo: Joey Roberts

“
You can make your point in words,
but I prefer to communicate
through food
”

Nose in the books or boots in the mud? Both. As a student, I really enjoyed my time at University College Maastricht (UCM) and in Barcelona, where I did a master's in political philosophy. Writing is a wonderfully creative process. But when I was a tutor at UCM, I felt a little out of place. It's an academic bubble, whereas I want to be more involved in society – not just analyse what's going wrong, but actually come up with constructive solutions. You can make your point in words, but I prefer to communicate through food. It's been my language since childhood. I've always worked in hospitality – kitchens, front of house, and now as a supplier. What started with renting a small plot of land has since grown into a full farm with a great team and 6 hectares of farmland. I never imagined I'd end up pursuing a PhD until I came across this opportunity at MERIAN (Maastricht Experimental Research In and Through the Arts Network). It lets me do research through making and doing, part-time, alongside running my business.

In ten years... I hope to have bred at least one or two new varieties of cabbage. Many farmers used to breed their own vegetables, resulting in a wide range of local varieties and strains of crops like carrots and cabbage, each slightly different in sweetness, smell, growth rate and disease resistance. Much of that variety has now disappeared. Large companies focus on a small number of varieties that can be sold on a large scale, which is worrying. It gives them power over our food supply, and a smaller gene pool reduces our options for the future – for example when developing resistance to new diseases. I don't think the answer lies only in preserving varieties in seed banks. More importantly, we need to promote the culture that creates diversity. Through my research, I hope to develop new intermediate varieties myself and inspire everyone in the chain

– from consumers and chefs to farmers and food specialists – by showing that there is still room for creativity.

I'm the one who cooks at home. Yes, but I don't spend enough time in the kitchen these days. You can't do everything at once, and I like to focus on one thing at a time. I barely have time for a life outside of work. But my work brings together everything that makes me me – who I am and what I want to stand for.

I wish I had the time to... travel more. As a farmer, you can't just leave everything behind. I sometimes miss the inspiration you get from visiting other places and meeting fellow nerds in the field. But there aren't a lot of breeders and growers nearby. Luckily, my PhD gives me the chance to visit more of those places. My next trip is to the Veneto region of Italy, where one of my supervisors is working on crops like radicchio, cabbage and pumpkins. I'd also love to visit North Holland, where more than half of the world's vegetable varieties are bred in a few small villages, and the coasts of northern Germany and southern England, where you can still find wild cabbage.

Wine or beer? Wine. I grew up in and around my parents' wine shop in Maastricht. For a long time, I thought I might follow that path. Wine is fascinating – no other branch of agriculture pays that much attention to flavour, origin and varieties. At UCM I was in a wine-tasting club that included Teun Dekker [a professor and former UCM interim dean]. Thanks to him, I was able to take two courses on grape-growing and winemaking in California. But for all its beauty, the wine world can also be exhausting – especially when it stops being about the product and turns into showing off how

much you know or what you drink. The vegetable world could definitely pay more attention to flavour, but I like that it's more down-to-earth.

I take after... I hope I inherited my father's interest in food and people, and my mother's fire. She has a strong sense of justice, always wants to do the right thing and is deeply affected by injustice. What kind of injustice? Just turn on the TV or leaf through a newspaper. There's so much going on in the world that makes you feel powerless.

Dutch or Belgian? [Sighs] I think that's a meaningless distinction. I feel like a citizen of the Jeker Valley; I'm just from here. I feel at home moving between the Netherlands, Flanders and Wallonia. That's not to say I don't notice the differences. The Walloon food culture is healthier, more flavourful, more diverse and more focused on eating together. The Netherlands and Flanders could learn from that. In the city centre of Liège alone, there are nearly twenty organic food shops selling local produce. In Maastricht and Tongeren, there are hardly any. Wallonia has captured my heart. I sell at the weekly market in Visé, which is incredibly important to me. If Wallonia wasn't so close, I wouldn't have stayed here.

Favourite music? I like classical music. But I can't stand the bombastic Romantic repertoire that dominates concert programmes in this city – Beethoven with a brick on the piano pedal, so to speak. It lacks the elegant freshness of Baroque and Renaissance music. I especially like the latter, which is even freer and more playful. I also enjoy Dutch and French hip-hop – the energy, the boldness, the grit and spirit.

Do you ever pray? Yes. [Pauses] I grew up here, so I was shaped in part by the Judeo-Christian tradition, even though I'm disgusted by its excesses. At the same time, I believe humans can't live without a sense of meaning and purpose. Everyone ultimately commits to a certain system of values and finds their own way in it. Farming has taught me that doing good means creating the conditions for life to flourish, and then resisting the urge to control everything. A good farmer isn't a helicopter parent. I don't pray in the hope of divine intervention. As far as I'm concerned, God has already done His part. When I pray, it's more a way of organising my own intentions and clarifying my task.

Dennis Vaendel

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Research on the role of soil microbes in preventing allergies

What are the health benefits of outdoor play? Freezers full of baby poo may hold the answer

Do young children who spend more time playing in nature grow up with a lower risk of developing asthma and eczema? Using baby poo and playground soil, microbiologist **Niels van Best** from Maastricht University is trying to find out.



Photo: Shutterstock

As a father of three young children, Van Best knows all too well that babies put everything in their mouths. Let them play in nature and they are likely to ingest a fair amount of soil through their hands and toys. “One study suggests it’s up to 60 milligrams per day, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s more”, he says with a laugh. “As a parent, you sometimes feel the urge to step in, but I usually just let it happen. From an evolutionary perspective, there must be a reason why young children do this.”

When it comes to young children, it’s very much a case of “the dirtier the better”, explains Van Best, an assistant professor at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML). Early exposure to bacteria plays a key role in shaping the gut microbiome, which in turn can influence health later in life,

including the development of allergies. “A more diverse gut microbiome is generally better.”

Van Best has spent years studying which factors influence this diversity. “The mode of delivery – natural birth or C-section – plays a role, and whether the baby is breast-fed or formula-fed. But environment matters too. Are siblings or pets bringing bacteria into the house? Does the child go to daycare? Or come into contact with soil microbes by playing in nature?”

Too simplistic

Unsurprisingly, researchers suspect that modern lifestyles – with children spending much of their time indoors – may be linked to the increase in conditions such as food allergies, dust mite allergies, eczema, hay fever and asthma. But

Van Best says it is still too early to conclude that outdoor play prevents allergies. “Last year, there was a lot of media attention for a report from Lung Foundation Netherlands (Longfonds) on a Finnish study suggesting that children who spend more time playing in nature are less likely to develop asthma. But that’s too simplistic; you can’t draw such firm conclusions from those findings alone. There’s still so much we don’t know – which microbes children pick up, where

and at what age, and what their precise effects are. We’re now working to study this properly.” As it turns out, baby poo may hold the answer. Since 2018, Van Best and colleagues have been following babies in South Limburg

“A more diverse gut microbiome is generally better”

during their first year of life as part of the LucKi study, which now includes around 150 babies. Parents periodically send in stool samples from nappies to Randwyck (“We now have several large freezers full of poo”) and complete questionnaires about diet, illness and time spent outdoors. “In the lab, we analyse which microbes are present in the gut and what function they have.”

Ideal setting

To determine the precise effects of soil microbes, Van Best compares the bacteria found in baby poo with microbes from soil samples taken from playgrounds. “That allows us to see which environmental microbes are actually picked up by children during play, and at what age. We’re starting to build a clear picture of that.” The next step in the study, for which Van Best received a Veni grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO) last year, is to examine how immune cells in the lab respond to these bacteria – and, therefore, what role they may play in preventing allergies.

This knowledge could help inform practical interventions, says Van Best. “Think of daycares taking children to play in the forest every week, or greener playgrounds that bring nature closer. It would help to know the age at which this has the greatest effect, or which types of soil or vegetation are most beneficial.”

He hopes that South Limburg will one day serve as a living lab for testing such interventions. “It’s an ideal setting. In the former mining region, for example, asthma rates are higher. That’s partly due to historically poorer air quality – asthma can be passed on genetically – but also environmental factors: neighbourhoods with lower socioeconomic status and lots of high-rise housing without gardens for children to play in. It would be interesting to compare this with other regions. The proximity of Germany and Belgium is also useful. In the Netherlands, children start daycare quite young – often within a few months – whereas in neighbouring countries it’s usually after a year. That may also make a difference, and needs to be taken into account when developing interventions.”

THE COVID EFFECT

The pandemic highlighted the role of environment in shaping the gut microbiome in early life. “In our LucKi study, we saw that the gut microbiomes of babies born during lockdowns were, after one year, clearly different compared with cohorts born before and after the pandemic”, says Van Best. He and his colleagues recently published these findings in the medical journal *Genome Medicine*. “This doesn’t tell us anything about health outcomes yet; it’s still too early to measure that. Take asthma – although it likely begins to develop in the first year of life, it can only be diagnosed from around the age of six.” The findings also do not allow conclusions about outdoor play. Pandemic restrictions such as daycare closures also played a major role, and families may in fact have spent more time outdoors with their children during lockdowns.



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What do covid tape, an egg with a poem painted on it, and a mask of former French President Jacques Chirac have in common? They are all, in their own way, part of the history of Maastricht University. Academic heritage conservator Bart Zwegers took a trip down memory lane and produced a book of the history told in fifty objects. One for every year of the university's existence.

Text: Deborah Blekkenhorst

History captured
in anniversary book

How a bin in the attic can make the past come to life

He dug them out of every nook and cranny imaginable: from a poster (to recruit students) to a trowel (used to place the first stone of the scanner building at Oxfordlaan 55) and a baton belonging to the conductor of the university choir. Some objects had been lost out of sight, out of mind, gathering dust in the attics and dark basements of the faculties. For example, the table where, in 1976, Queen Juliana signed the founding charter of what was then the State University of Limburg. It has only been on display in a place of honour in the Law Faculty for a decade or so, before that it stood in a forgotten corner somewhere. It should be noted that the table didn't make the cut for the book; the chair the sovereign sat on did.

Tangible

And Zwegers was forced to make more choices like that over the two years he spent compiling the book in honour of the university's golden jubilee. The result is *Vijftig* [Fifty] – 120 pages, a wine red cover, filled with large photographs of all sorts of objects and their stories. It's something a bit different, acknowl-

edges Zwegers. "Objects are a very good way to tell stories and to make history more tangible, it makes it recognisable for people," he says, explaining his choice for the form and content.

"Ten years ago, during the 40th anniversary, the history of UM was already set down using conversations with pioneers, the people who made it all possible in the beginning. That was also the result of a slight sense of urgency, as this might be the last chance to speak to them and record this immaterial heritage. I didn't think it would be suitable to do it again."

Manageable

His idea may not be original, Zwegers knows, but it is engaging. Admit it, if you flick through a book and land on a picture of a bin, you'd be curious. It's blue, stamped with the words 'Rijksuniversiteit Limburg', a perfect hook to tell the story of the start of the academic history (and that of the corporate identity that some people hated). As with all the other objects, Zwegers trawled through the paper archives to tell that story. He turned seemingly endless historical record into man-



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“Objects
make history
recognisable
for people”



Bart Zwegers with a model of the Palmzaal, the lecture theatre at the School of Business and Economics designed by architect Jo Coenen Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

ageable stories.

Don't expect the book to be a neat chronological record of the development of the preeminent academic institute in Limburg's capital, the conservator is quick to add. Nor has he tried to find a special object for each year, either. "It was once written in a book on capitalism that the average person in Western Europe owns 10,000 objects. So, just imagine what that means for a university with over 20,000 students and 5000 members of staff. You're talking about millions of objects." It also means that selecting the objects was sometimes a matter of personal opinion. "There is a certain amount of personal preference."

One odd duck

Zwegers did not work on the book entirely alone. He consulted with colleagues, former colleagues, alumni, and building managers to get as complete a picture as possible of the university's history and everyone and everything that played a part. So there is a picture of a front cover of university magazine *Maffius*, the forerunner to *Observant*,

of the chain worn by the Rector, and of one of the oars used by student rowing association Saurus, used as a hook to expound on the history of student sports at Maastricht. A tape with the UM logo, used for covid protective measures, is also included, as a reminder of the way a global pandemic brought everyday life to a standstill, only a few short years ago. As is a bust of Arie Pais, the Minister of Education who, in 1978, ordered an investigation into whether the university should be disbanded – he had doubts about the scientific level in Maastricht.

But among the objects included in the book is one decidedly odd duck – object number 44: the mask of Jacques Chirac, President of France from 1995 to 2007. What was his connection to Maastricht? "It is the weirdest object I found," laughs Zwegers. It was used in the so-called 'bar lab' at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, a lab made to look like a typical pub, used for experiments involving alcohol consumption or social interaction. As part of research into dissociative amnesia, the phenomenon where people claim to have no memory of particular details after a traumatic incident, participants were told to knock down a murderer. "With a pool cue. The murderer was a life-sized mannequin wearing a mask of Chirac, don't ask me why."

“That mask is
the weirdest
object
I found”

1 The Jacques Chirac mask used in the 'bar lab' at the faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience

2 The bin bearing the name 'Rijksuniversiteit Limburg', as UM was originally known. In 1992, a standardised corporate identity was introduced and the name appeared on stationery, cups and, yes, bins. Much to the annoyance of former dean Louis Boon, among others, who spoke of the 'corporate identity police'

3 Seitz filter, used to purify blood. Coen Hemker, one of the founders of the University of Maastricht, discovered that it could also be used as a tool in research into blood clotting

4 The egg by the Maastricht poet Pierre Kemp, whose collection of letters and manuscripts is housed in the university library. He gave this egg, with a poem on it, to his muse, a young lawyer. Her heirs donated it to Maastricht University

5 A planning map of Randwyck, where there were initially plans for a university campus Photos: Philip Driessen



Vijftig, een 'objectieve' geschiedenis van de Universiteit Maastricht [Fifty, an 'objective' history of Maastricht University], Bart Zwegers, available at Tribune and Dominicanen, €22,50

news

FPN Faculty Council: Are mentors objective enough?

Mentors play a role in deciding whether students progress to the next year of their studies. But are their recommendations objective enough? Nearly two years after the introduction of a new assessment system in the bachelor's programme in Psychology, concerns continue to be raised within the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN).

“What grade did you get on that exam?” is a question that Psychology students at Maastricht University no longer have to worry about since 2024. Instead, they now build up a portfolio throughout the year, documenting their progress. Instead of grades, it contains feedback they have received and reflections on what they have done to improve.

At the end of the academic year, a committee decides whether a student has made sufficient progress to move on to the next year. This decision is partly based on the recommendation of the student's mentor or coach. Even before this system of “programmatic assessment” was implemented, concerns were raised about the mentor's role. Academic staff representatives on the Faculty Council raised the question of whether there was an inherent conflict of interest: “You try to help someone, but you also have to assess them. If you develop a personal relationship, it becomes harder to tell someone ‘this isn't good enough.’”

Concerns about this potential subjectivity have not entirely disappeared, as became clear at last Thursday's Faculty Council meeting. On the agenda was the Cumulative Competency Score (CCS). As Psychology students no longer receive grades, they also don't have a grade

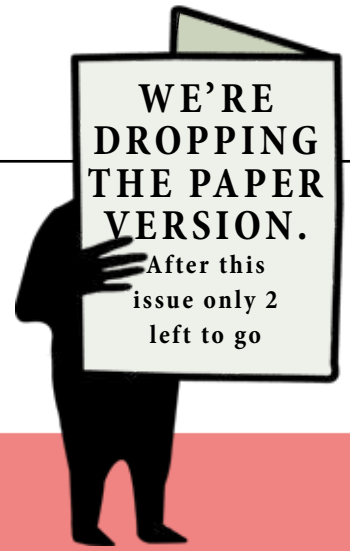
average. This can become an issue when applying for competitive master's programmes where grade averages play a role in admissions. The CCS translates an abstract assessment such as “on track” into a numerical score. The council welcomed the idea, but raised several points. In addition to concerns that assessment may carry a degree of subjectivity, they asked whether it is precise enough, given that students can receive only two passing scores for a component: “on track” and “fast on track”,

corresponding to a 7 (out of 10) and a 10 (out of 10) respectively. Dean André Aleman suggested bringing in an expert to continue the discussion. “They can explain why this system gathers more data on students and is therefore in some ways both more objective and more precise than traditional assessment.” The council agreed to the proposal.

Cleo Freriks



Illustration: Mohamed Hassan/Pixabay



We're dropping the paper version! From the new academic year on, we will be completely online, as a newsletter emailed to all students and staff members and on Instagram and LinkedIn.



 An illustration of a hand in a pink glove writing on a notepad labeled 'observant'. Above the notepad are several dark blue speech bubbles of varying sizes.

OBSERVANT IS LOOKING FOR STUDENT COLUMNISTS.

MORE INFORMATION:

THE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY, FACULTIES, SERVICE CENTRES AND STUDENT ORGANISATIONS CAN BE FOUND ON

WWW.OBSERVANTONLINE.NL

Agenda academic ceremonies

Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

SCAN THE CODE

Maastricht University

Vacatures

Werken voor de meest internationale universiteit van Nederland? Scan de QR-code voor ons actuele vacature overzicht*.

Voor meer informatie over werken bij de Universiteit Maastricht, ga naar <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/nl/werken-bij-de-um>

*Medewerkers van UM kunnen een volledig overzicht van interne- en externe vacatures vinden door in te loggen op SuccessFactors via Umployeee.

www.maastrichtuniversity.nl