

KEER OM VOOR NEDERLANDSE EDITIE

observant

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I'M NOT
GOING ON
A TRIP AND
I'M BRINGING...

LEAVE HOURS

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



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editorial

Coming soon
(or not)

A colleague from HR recently asked if we're going to stop and reflect on the fact that the paper version is stopping and we'll be entirely online after the summer. Are we going to commemorate the moment? Good question, although for now we don't really have time to stop and reflect. We're speeding steadily onwards towards the summer holidays. And honestly – as you will read in our article on annual leave – the work is never finished. For the last nine months, there has been an A3 sheet of white paper on the wall, covered in ideas for articles, some typed, some handwritten. And the rather telling title: 'Coming soon (or not)'.

From poverty among students, the vulnerability of lecturers (think of bad appraisals, accusations of unacceptable behaviour) and unethical theses (a research project for a 'questionable' company) to the downside of winning an ERC grant and the status of cleaners, movers and security at UM. I won't go too much into toxic leadership and issues at specific faculties and services, but they're up there, too. Thankfully, a good number of topics has been crossed off over the course of the year. For example, we have published excellent articles on fifty years of sustainability, student communication, the huge turnover among HR directors, and loneliness among students in large housing complexes.

Recently, a staff member for Marketing and Communication visited the office. He chuckled when he saw the A3. Helpful to prepare the spokespeople for any upcoming 'difficult questions', he joked. He was particularly interested in how an idea develops into an article. And well, that's different every time. Often it involves speaking to a lot of people and choosing a specific area to focus on. But the most important thing is to be patient and diligent, listen to both sides.

Some ideas don't lead to anything. A follow-up question shows it to be a false alarm, such as 'bad lectures in Medicine and Law'. In one of the first faculty council meetings in the autumn, a student of Dutch law had complained about the quality of the lectures (boring), but when we asked for more information, she didn't respond. No examples, no explanation. Then it can be a challenge, because one student might think the lectures are boring, while another really enjoys them. You could ask a large group of students their opinion, in a bid to get a less subjective story, but still... Which lecture do you pick, what subject? Impossible, we decided. Crossed off in thick black ink.

That sheet of A3 will be binned soon. In August, there'll be a fresh sheet of paper with ideas (old ones and new ones), to remind us that our work is never over.

Wendy Degens

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



series the times they are (not) a changin'

A tragedy:
the disappearance of "020 Tanja"

1993–2026

She was wearing blue jeans, a pink T-shirt with the words "020 Tanja", a grey pullover, a dark blue jacket and black shoes with silver-coloured buckles. She was described as fresh-faced and well-groomed, not wearing make-up, with dark brown eyes and dark hair falling past her shoulders, and she had a black Dutch-style bicycle and a green songbook with her. "Anyone with information is asked to contact the local police", wrote *Observant* on 9 September 1993. Just over a week earlier, first-year student Tanja Groen (18) had disappeared without a trace. This May, the police and Public Prosecution Service closed their investigation into the case.

It remains one of the most harrowing stories from Maastricht's student community. After attending a party organised by the student association Circumflex on the night of 31 August, Tanja Groen set off by bicycle for her student room in Gronsveld. She never arrived there. Neither her bicycle nor any personal items belonging to her, including clothing, have ever been found.

It quickly became clear that the police were treating the disappearance as a likely criminal case. Circumflex put up missing person posters around the city but removed them in late October 1993 at the request of her family and the police. According to the latter, the posters had "lost their relevance".

Observant reported in a brief note. The case also featured on the Dutch true-crime television programme *Deadline*. "It prompted ten phone calls, but no concrete leads", *Observant* wrote.

Groen's name did not appear again in *Observant* until 1998. In a feature article exploring what happens on campus after dark, entitled *Maastricht University by Night*, university porter Frank Thijs recalled receiving a phone call from the police, asking whether Tanja Groen had been seen. "As a porter, there's very little you can do. It's not that you feel guilty, but it does affect you when you read in the paper the next day that she's been missing for days."

Groen was never found, despite countless searches over the years. Nineteen years after her disappearance, amateur divers searched the Meuse River south of Maastricht after a dowser claimed her body might be there. A week earlier, a black bicycle had been discovered nearby, but it turned out not to be hers. In 2020, excavations were car-

ried out in a cemetery in Heugem. Soon afterwards, there was speculation that Groen might have fallen victim to the Belgian serial rapist and murderer Marc Dutroux. Belgian investigators had already looked into that theory, without finding any evidence. Hopes that advances in DNA analysis might finally provide answers came to nothing. In 2022, the Public Prosecution Service searched several sites on the Strabrechtse Heide, acting on information from an investigation led by Peter van Koppen (now an emeritus professor of Legal Psychology, who also taught at Maastricht University). But the reported "soil disturbances" in the nature reserve turned out to be nothing more than a rabbit warren.

This April brought a brief moment of hope when a convicted prisoner in Belgium named the person he claimed had abducted, sexually abused, murdered and buried Groen. But the police later stated that "this information is not credible and at least partly incorrect".

The renowned Dutch crime reporter Peter R. de Vries, who was murdered in July 2021, devoted years to the case. Just a month before he was killed, he held a press conference to launch a crowdfunding campaign aimed at raising one million euros in exchange for the tip that might finally lead to the recovery of Tanja's

"It prompted ten phone calls,
but no concrete leads"

remains. "Please, ladies and gentlemen, join us, help us and donate", he said at the press conference, where he appeared alongside her parents. "Show that this does not leave you unmoved. Do it for Corrie and Adrie. Bring Tanja Groen home." The crowdfunding initiative was organised by his foundation, De Gouden Tip ("The Golden Tip"). On 31 August 2021, *Observant* published a photo report of a silent march through Maastricht, organised by Circumflex and De Vries's foundation to draw renewed attention to the disappearance. Hundreds of young people in their twenties participated. But the "golden tip" never came.

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

“Now the dilemma is, also test the boundaries or lose votes”

Student party KAN wants clearer campaign rules due to ‘cheating’ parties

The campaign rules for university elections are not only unclear, they are also badly enforced and the sanctions for breaking them are too mild. That is the view of student party KAN, which believes other parties are taking advantage of the situation. Accusations are mostly aimed at DOPE, which considers them overblown.

During the annual election week, when students elect representatives for both the University and Faculty Councils, candidates must adhere to a code of conduct set down by the university. They are not allowed to send unsolicited online messages to fellow students, campaign in classrooms, or influence students while they are voting on their phone or laptop. However, those rules are too brief and vague, which threatens the integrity of the elections, said Stepan Kunevich, vice president of KAN, when he addressed the University Council last week during the council meeting’s speakers’ quarter. According to him, some parties take advantage of this every year by operating in a grey area, which raises a dilemma for others: do the same or lose votes.

When asked, Kunevich told *Observant* that it is DOPE in particular which tests the boundaries – and sometimes crosses them.

For example, one candidate for the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN) council sent hundreds of fellow students a personal message on WhatsApp right when the polls opened. DOPE members were also said to be pushy when approaching voters outside university buildings. “Many students have told us they felt uncomfortable.”

During a phone call, DOPE chair Jop Smeets said he does not agree with this description. “I do think that, in general, we have more extroverted, direct candidates who actively approach students. That’s part of elections, I feel. It is certainly not the intention to be pushy, but we have heard from some people that they actually appreciate our enthusiasm.” The FPN candidate had indeed made a mistake, he acknowledged, “but once we received complaints about her messages to fellow students, we immediately asked her to delete them. With dozens of candidates, there is every chance that someone will make a mistake – it’s impossible for the board to maintain oversight over everybody.” Yes, the rules could be clearer, said Smeets, “but you can’t cover every eventuality, there has to be room to campaign”.

That view is echoed by Niels Harteman, Secretary to the Central Election Office. “There is

always a grey area. We discuss the code of conduct with the parties every year, and yet, every election, we receive complaints about candidates’ behaviour. It’s an emotional period, parties react to each other’s actions. Enforcement remains a focus area, but it is also difficult. We can’t constantly police the buildings. When we receive a complaint, we immediately speak to the party or candidate in question.”

There have not been any more complaints than usual this year, said Harteman. “We will evaluate them soon and decide whether sanctions are appropriate.” That could be in the form of a reduction in the ‘election budget’ of €1000 that each party receives, although according to Harteman, it would have to be a “severe infringement” to lose the entire amount. Kunevich thinks that punishment is too light, because parties would be able to survive on other income. He called for the U-Council to consider the idea of stricter rules and sanctions. If the council agrees, Harteman sees “no problem discussing adjustments. But I still hope parties will use their common sense. Misconduct might also affect the voters, and the turnout is already low as it is.”

Dennis Vaendel

New employee code of conduct: what is and is not allowed

How do we ensure that every university employee feels at home and valued? How do you prevent undesirable behaviour, and what happens when someone crosses a line? The new Maastricht University Code of Conduct, which has yet to be approved by the Local Consultative Body, aims to answer these questions.

Mutual respect, integrity and transparency, diversity and inclusion, democratic principles and sustainability – these are UM’s core values, as set out in its Strategic Programme. They form the basis of the university’s new code of conduct for employees. The seven-page document is intended to contribute to a “positive working environment” in which people hold themselves and each other accountable, and to provide “guidance” for employees who have witnessed or experienced undesirable behaviour such as bullying, abuse of power, discrimination, aggression, sexual harassment, conflicts of interest or smoking on university premises. The code also establishes a “preventive duty to report” personal relationships, such as romantic relationships or family ties. This will enable the university to “respond appropriately” in situations where “professional judgement” may be influenced (for example, in relationships involving a power imbalance, such as those between a student and a professor or a PhD candidate and their supervisor). “You only have to report it. You don’t need to disclose the nature of the relationship. We don’t want people to feel forced to come out or reveal a secret affair”, explains Margriet Schreuders, director of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion+ and co-author of the code.

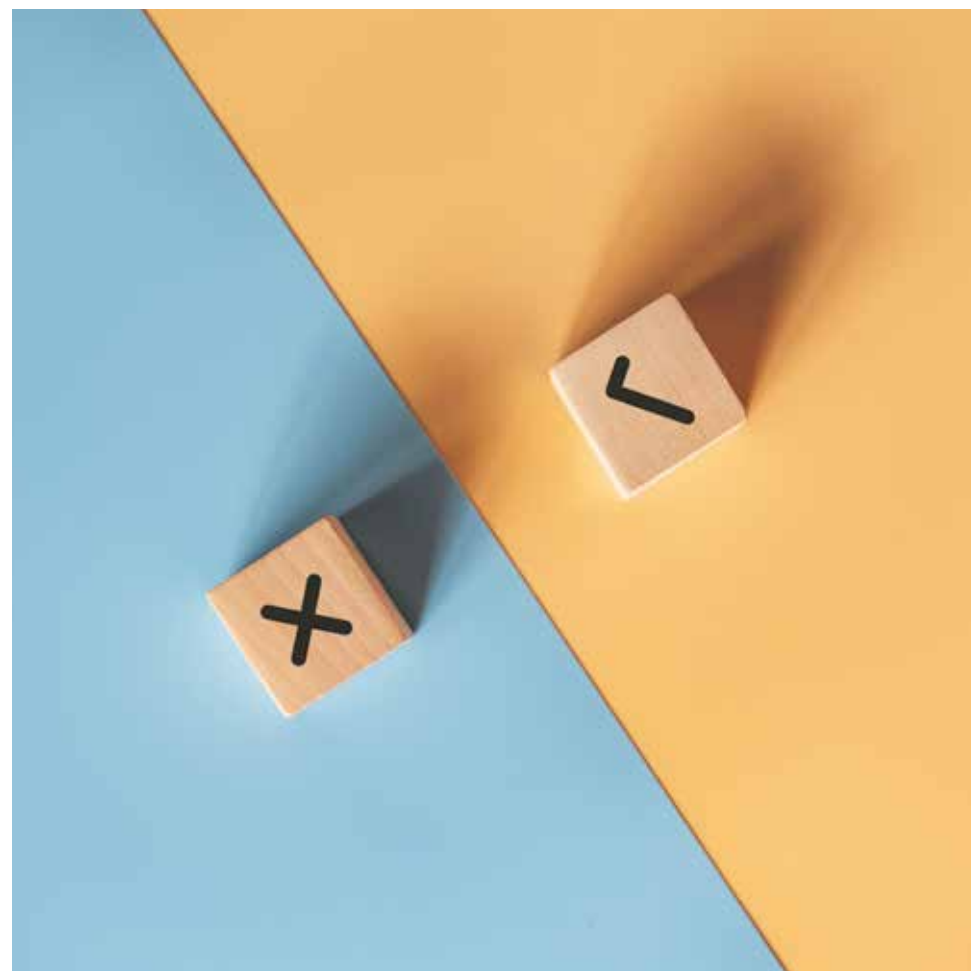


Photo: Shutterstock

The code of conduct for employees – there is already one for students – did not come out of nowhere. Every institution is required to have one under the Collective Labour Agreement

of Dutch Universities, and forthcoming legislation will make codes of conduct mandatory.

Continued on page 5



Happy Pride Month

“

June is Pride Month. I must admit that it feels somewhat strange, because queer people always exist regardless of the month. Yet I still see it as an important moment of the year, rooted in honouring the Stonewall Uprising on 28 June 1969, a turning point in the LGBTQAI+ rights movement. It reminds us that the rights of queer people cannot be taken for granted and have always been in a constant state of struggle against the status quo. Pride was, and still is, a protest for a world where everyone can live authentically and safely.

For instance, in my home country, Japan, same sex marriage is not legalised. This reflects a broader structural inequality, where queer relationships are still denied the same legal recognition and protection as heterosexual ones. There is also no option to register as a gender other than male or female on official documents, unlike in countries like Canada. But these issues are not only legal. They appear in everyday life, in the assumption that everyone is straight, in questions like “Do you have a boyfriend?”, and in the way trans identities are misunderstood or questioned. More broadly, society remains shaped by cis-heteronormative assumptions about what is considered ‘normal’.

On a more personal level, being in a relationship with a woman has taught me a lot about myself, and it has been deeply meaningful, forcing me to reflect on things I had long pushed aside. My very first crush, during my school years, was on a girl one year older than me. I could not tell anyone, nor did I confess. I just buried it. I only learned about LGBTQAI+ identities later, in high school. Since beginning to accept this part of myself, it has become much easier to breathe. Looking back, it makes sense that I was always only drawn to female idol groups and had many crushes on female fictional characters. It feels like I have finally allowed myself to step off the track I was expected to follow.

So my friendly reminder is: do not assume someone’s sexuality, gender identity, or opinions. You never really know what someone is carrying, what they have buried, or what they are still trying to understand about themselves. Happy Pride Month to all queer people. I hope you all have a wonderful month.

”

Yuki Nakamura,
third year bachelor student Arts and Culture

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

Jadwiga Wolek
(Warsaw, Poland, 2002)

\ Second-year European
Studies student, President
of UMPride

\ Relationship status:
in a relationship with
Magdalena

\ Lives in:
Vroenhoven (B)



Photo: Joey Roberts

“

I now try to stay ambitious without
being too hard on myself

”

I was named after... Jadwiga of Poland, a queen in the late Middle Ages. As there was no male heir to the throne, she was crowned ruler of Poland at a time when female monarchs were unusual. She died young but was later canonised. My parents also named my brother and sister after Eastern European saints: Witold and Agnieszka. While I don't necessarily see Jadwiga as a role model, my name feels quite special because of the connection to her.

I'm a good friend because... I'm very loyal. I'm good at keeping secrets and I take trust seriously. If I think someone is in the wrong, I tell them, but always respectfully and without damaging the relationship. That's how I stay true to my own moral compass.

This news story makes me angry. What makes me angry is the way major geopolitical issues are framed and handled. Scrolling through the news and reading about Donald Trump threatening to destroy Iran [this interview took place in April] makes me feel powerless and upset. It's alarming how casually he says such serious things. I also find it hard to accept that one person has so much power to fuel and escalate conflicts, especially since there's not much ordinary people can do about it.

Always in my suitcase. I never travel without my analogue camera. For me, the appeal of traditional photography isn't just the look of the pictures, but also the limitations of the medium. You only get one chance with each shot, so

you have to think carefully before pressing the shutter. And it's exciting that you don't know exactly what's on the film until it's been developed. You occasionally end up with unexpected effects, like overlapping images, that are visually fascinating.

What's hard about love? I've been with my girlfriend for two and a half years. I didn't have a big coming-out moment. I told my friends and that was it. It's a little more complicated with my parents. They know I have a girlfriend, but they don't know her. We never really talk about my sexuality, but they do show me that they love me, which feels like an indirect form of acceptance. Ideally, I'd love to take them to a Pride event one day. But I try not to pressure them – it would only cause tension. That doesn't mean it never hurts, though. I wish we could be more open about it as a family.

What are you proud of? My role as president of UMPride [Maastricht University's LGBTQIA+ network]. I see it as a form of "small-scale activism" – not anything huge and high-profile, but something local and concrete. That isn't to say large-scale systemic change isn't necessary; quite the opposite, I believe we need it just as much. But politics can often feel distant, whereas I see value in behind-the-scenes initiatives that directly affect people's daily lives. I can't legalise same-sex marriage in Poland on my own, but I can contribute to a safe and accessible queer community in Maastricht.

The best advice you ever received. Don't put too much pressure on yourself. I struggle with this, especially

in my studies. I tend to keep revising for exams until the last minute, and I feel like I'm doing something wrong when I take a day off. If I get a 7/10 or a 7.5/10, my first thought is that I could've done better. At first, I get upset and angry, but then I become kinder to myself: it's okay as it is. I now try to stay ambitious without being too hard on myself.

What's your biggest fear? Having no money, no food or no roof over my head. It's quite strange, actually, as I've never been in financial trouble. Yet I feel like my situation could take a turn for the worse at any moment. It's probably because of the way I was raised – my parents were always very careful with money, made sensible decisions and spent very little. It taught me to be frugal in life. I still find it difficult to buy anything non-essential.

Who's the last person you texted? My girlfriend, Magdalena. She's currently applying to university and asked me a question about her English exam, but I didn't know the answer off the top of my head. I told her I'd reply later. Magdalena lives far away, in a small town near Kraków. We text a lot, but we also try to video call regularly and visit each other when we can. We feel freer in the Netherlands than in Poland. People in her neighbourhood stare at us when we're walking the dog together. It feels uncomfortable and unsafe.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? That's a difficult question. I struggle with the way I look. My weight in particular is something I've struggled with since I was bullied in primary school, even though there's actually nothing wrong with it. I also see someone who is brave. I've taken some big steps, like moving to the Netherlands. Sometimes it feels like I'm living in two different worlds. I'm also proud to be in therapy, working on my insecurities and my tendency to keep raising the bar for myself. Sometimes I hope there will be a moment when all my problems are solved, but realistically, it's about accepting them and learning to deal with them.

Karlijn van Oosterhout

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

“Universities aren’t here to improve the world”

Opinion: “UM, get back to the heart of research and teaching”

In this opinion piece, associate professor **Ewout Meijer** asks what the university’s mission is. Improving the world is not its primary purpose. Following the lead of a committee of experts at Yale University in the US, he proposes a return to basics under the motto: ‘Maastricht University. We research, we teach.’



Gate to a Yale building Photo: Pexels/Aneesh Prodduturu

In the United States, confidence in higher education is currently under considerable strain. This is particularly the case among Republican voters. In 2025, only 26 per cent of them said they had a great deal of confidence in higher education, and only 19 per cent trusted

leading American universities to provide politically neutral education.. By the way, nearly 40 per cent of Democratic voters also lacked much confidence in higher education, and 70 per cent of all voters felt that higher education was heading in the wrong direction.

This prompted Yale University to take action. After all, trust is essential to serving the public interest. A multidisciplinary committee of ten experts spent a year examining how this trust could be restored. The committee organised countless meetings, conducted hundreds of interviews and discussions with students and staff, and carried out an extensive review of the relevant literature. A few weeks ago, it presented its report, which included twenty recommendations. These relate, for example, to freedom of expression and academic freedom. But they also address curbing bureaucracy. And how to deal with mobile phones and social media in education.

Understanding yet brutally frank

But as far as I’m concerned, the most compelling recommendation concerns the mission. In the more than three hundred years that Yale has existed, that mission has remained largely the same. Until ten years ago. Then Yale moved away from

its emphasis on creating and disseminating knowledge, and expanded its mission to include matters such as ‘improving the world today’, educating ‘aspiring leaders worldwide’, and ‘fostering an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community’. The committee’s assessment of this expansion is both sympathetic and scathing; whilst these are certainly worthy goals, they are not part of what makes a university a university. To gain trust, a university must demonstrate what it does well. And that

requires a focused, university-wide mission. The committee therefore recommended a return to the core: “Yale University’s mission is to create, disseminate, and preserve knowledge through research and teaching.” Yale’s board did not need to think long about this recommendation; it is already stated as such on the website.

“Of course, it is important that we ensure that everyone feels welcome at the university. But ‘first and foremost?’”

To turn back halfway

Anyone visiting Maastricht University’s website will see on the homepage: “Here, we work together towards a better future.” Two clicks in, it reads: “We see ourselves first and foremost as an open and inclusive academic community that strives for a social, safe and sustainable learning and working environment.” Of course, it is important that we all make an effort to ensure that everyone feels welcome at the university. But “first and foremost”? You don’t have to be against diversity and inclusivity to disagree with that.

The good news is that the decline in trust in the Netherlands does not seem to be as bad as it is elsewhere. In 2025, the Rathenau Institute reported that trust in science was relatively high. But trust takes years to build, seconds to destroy, and forever to repair. In its letter of recommendation, the Yale committee expresses the hope that its recommendations will also be of use to others. Let’s not wait ten years until we find ourselves in the same predicament as Yale. Let us take them to heart now and turn back while we are only halfway there: ‘Maastricht University. We research, we teach.’

Ewout Meijer is an associate professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience

“It has to be a fair system”

Continued from page 3

The code serves as an overarching framework that encompasses existing regulations, such as the university’s general house rules, the procedure for reporting inappropriate behaviour and the complaints procedure for research integrity.

The code did not come about without difficulty. Around two years ago, an earlier draft failed to

obtain the approval of the Local Consultative Body (LO), where trade union representatives meet with the university’s Executive Board. “It was too black and white”, explains FNV Overheid representative Wilma Klinkhamer. “It was worded in such a way that anyone could be held accountable. For example, it stated that witnesses could be punished for not speaking up. But a lot of people, especially those in dependent positions, often don’t feel able to

raise the alarm. You can’t put that on them. The LO isn’t opposed to a code of conduct, but we feel strongly that it must work for everyone – both reporters and those being reported. It has to be a fair system.”

This means that anyone who violates the code should be treated the same way, as was said at the most recent LO meeting last week. AC/FBZ representative Mark Govers argued that consequences are not set out clearly enough in the

current draft, creating “a risk of arbitrariness”. One employee might get away with certain behaviour, while another could face a warning, suspension, transfer or – in extreme cases – dismissal. The vice-chair of UM’s Executive Board and Schreuders promised to revise the document and resubmit it to the LO before the summer.

Riki Janssen

UM EMPLOYEES NEVER USE ALL THEIR ANNUAL LEAVE

“THE WORK IS NEVER DONE”

‘Fresh air at the beach? What about a holiday?’ Those words can be found on posters in some UM buildings at the moment. Unfortunately, they frequently fall on deaf ears, as do the emails sent by HR and the requests during annual appraisals to use up the allocated holidays. It barely makes a difference, the number of unused hours of leave is still unusually high. “If you take a week off in the middle of the season, you shoot yourself in the foot. There’ll be a mountain of work waiting for you when you get back.”

Text Riki Janssen Illustration Bas van der Schot

About a decade ago, she used to track her overtime – she was a Master’s coordinator at the time. But it was so depressing that Jascha de Nooijer, now Professor of Interprofessional Teaching and Learning, eventually stopped tracking. “You can’t do the work without overtime,” she concluded. “I am very happy with the freedom I have as an academic, and with our generous salary, but if you don’t work in the evenings and weekends, then you fall behind. I supervise PhD students, do research and have to request grants, the latter always comes on top of your own work.” Working fifty hours a week is normal. Nobody would be surprised to discover she doesn’t use up all her annual leave. And she is not alone. For years, Maastricht University has

been battling a ‘leave reservoir’, which at the end of December 2025, had risen to 634,368 hours, an average of 112 per UM employee: 128 for academic staff and 91 for support staff (see box).

THE SCIENTIFIC STAFF

Of the ten academic staff members *Observant* interviewed, seven were unable to use up all their annual leave, and the three who did manage occasionally had to get creative. They exchanged their hours for a new bike, a gym membership, to save up for a sabbatical, had it paid out (up to 38 hours per year), or just finished what they were working on while their holiday had already started. PhD student Juul Hennissen of the School of Health Professions

Education is the exception. “The department insists that annual leave must be taken. I often go away for a long trip in the summer, it’s quieter then.”

TOO MANY TASKS, NOT ENOUGH HOURS

What is one of the most important reasons for the reservoir? A structural excess of tasks for the available hours, the scientists conclude unanimously. Like Bram Fleuren, Assistant Professor for the Work and Organisational Psychology department. He “enjoys” his work, he explains, doesn’t consider the teaching “a burden”, and talks about his “own business” at the university. And that business is seldom closed: “It is the nature of your work as a researcher: you’re never really finished, there’s

always something you could do. Grant requests take the most time, you aren’t obligated to, but you do want to be able to realise your ideas. You can’t do that without money.” He has “saved up a few hundred hours” by now, he’s not sure of the exact number, and happily calls himself one of the “worst offenders” in his department. Although he has just returned from a three-week break. “That was good, I feel all refreshed now.” He expects that his hours of leave will reduce significantly more quickly once the “new family member” arrives. Besides that: “I supervise PhD students and have to set a good example, the last thing you want is to have to pay them large sums of extra money at the end of their contract [that applies to all employees who leave, their remaining hours are paid out], as that affects the budget of the whole department.” That is probably the reason that one PhD student at the School of Business and Economics, who wishes to remain anonymous, was inundated with emails from HR. The end of her contract was coming up, so she had to use up her annual leave. “I told my supervisors that the messages were driving me mad. They were very nice and said, don’t take it personally. Surely my primary responsibility is making sure my PhD research is completed on time? That didn’t happen. I would have preferred fewer days off and finishing my thesis on time.”

NO REPLACEMENT

Another thing that makes it harder to use up all of the – in everyone’s eyes, very generous – annual leave: it is almost impossible to find a temporary replacement. And that has nothing to do with a lack of willing on the part of other colleagues. Because those colleagues are also drowning in work, and there are many tasks – grant requests, research – they simply can’t take over. The result is only planning holidays at Christmas or over the summer. And the latter is no easy task for staff members who have a lot of teaching tasks. “I spend my time until the middle of July checking theses, then I go away on holiday, and then it all starts up again by mid-August,” says Thomas Frissen, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and programme coordinator for the bachelor Digital Society. And taking a week off during the academic year? “If you take a week off in the middle of the season, you shoot yourself in the foot. Nobody can

JUSTIFICATION

For this article, *Observant* spoke to five support staff, three of whom have a supervisory position, and ten academic staff: two PhD researchers, one lecturer, two professors and five assistant or associate professors.

The numbers

A full-time appointment (38 hours) grants an employee about six weeks of leave a year. Part of that (the so-called legal annual leave, twenty days) expires after 18 months, the rest (eighty hours of so-called supplementary annual leave) can be saved for up to five years for a holiday, or earmarked immedi-

ately, for example to save up for a sabbatical or for early retirement. If you choose to work 40 hours, instead of the official 38 hours, you earn an extra two hours of leave a week, resulting in even more time off. Like its sister institutions, Maastricht University has been battling a ‘leave reservoir’ for years, which at the end of December 2025, had risen to 634,368 hours, an average of 112 per UM employee: 128 for academic staff and 91 for support staff. Striking is that assistant, associate and full professors are far above the average (between 172 and 195 hours of unused leave). All that annual leave results in a large reserve on the university’s budget: in 2025, well over 27 million euros. Money that the university

can’t use for anything else. Or, as Director of FSE, Bakir Bulić, calls it: “It’s dead money that you would like to use to hire people to relieve the workloads.” But he also acknowledges that it isn’t easy to turn the tide. So far, appeals by email, at faculty days, on posters and in annual appraisals have only had a temporary effect at FSE. Which is why there are once again posters around the Paul Henri Spaaklaan, asking: ‘Fresh air at the beach? What about a holiday?’ The association of universities UNL and the unions have recently sent out a questionnaire in an attempt to determine why annual leave so often goes unused. Eventually, this should lead to better agreements in the Collective Labour Agreement.



“You work yourself to the bone to get everything finished before you leave and when you get back, there are a bajillion emails waiting in your inbox”

take over for you.” Rick Schumans, Academic Teacher at the Law Faculty, has experience there. He once decided to take a week off in September. Before he left, he had to arrange a replacement tutor, an alternative for the lecture, and a contact for the students. All of it more stressful than his holiday was restful. “I am never doing

that again.” All Carijn Beumer, Assistant Professor at the Faculty Health, Medicine and Life Sciences and coordinator of a number of modules, can do is nod in agreement. “The structure of the academic year is such that there is very little time between periods. That’s the problem.” She takes four weeks off in July, during at least

part of her son’s school holidays. “You work yourself to the bone to get everything finished before you leave and when you get back, there are a bajillion emails waiting in your inbox. And then the catchup starts. Awful. In my out-of-office message, I tell people: ‘I’m not going to read your message, please email me when I return.’” Only her thesis students have an ‘emergency button’ should they need to reach her in those four weeks. “They have to

be able to carry on, so I keep a lookout for any messages from them.”

OWN CHOICE

Speaking of replacements: Esther Heuts, Programme Director for Medicine and oncological surgeon at MUMC+, only leaves “if it isn’t a problem for my colleagues at the clinic and if I can finish up my teaching work”. Sometimes she cancels a planned holiday if she can see

background

“I feel comfortable logging off for three or four weeks over the summer”

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that there are not enough people scheduled at the treatment centre, which would mean that patients with suspected breast cancer would not all get their results within the timeframe. The same applies for any teaching issues that can't wait. If that means she doesn't use up all her annual leave, then that is her own choice, she says. “I enjoy my work, both the patient care and the teaching.”

SOLUTION?

Is there a solution? Professor De Nooijer is not optimistic. “This is not something you can easily fix, we've tried many things in the past. I think we just have to accept it.” Assistant Professor Beumer is also not very hopeful. “I will obviously have to try to use up my hours, I just don't see how. The norm hours also have to be fairer; for years, we have had too little time for a whole range of tasks. That's up to UM to sort out. We also need a different [read, shorter] academic year.”

Assistant Professor Fleuren does see opportunities: “Recruit PhD candidates using the unused leave pot. That would ease the pressure. That way I don't have to keep requesting grants – you're often asking for money to fund a young researcher to carry out your idea.” Assistant Professor Frissen is critical: “There aren't enough colleagues who would benefit, even though everyone would lose hours.”

SUPPORT STAFF

It appears to be slightly easier for support staff to use up their annual leave, as they often have replacements more readily available. Take Eric Bleize, schedule planner and responsible for Canvas and Eleum at FASoS. He does this work together with a colleague. “So I can go away. The workload isn't extreme, although there are busy periods. Six times a year, we have to publish everything online on



Posters encouraging employees to use up their leave hours Photo: Joey Roberts

time, so that requires some extra work.” He normally manages to use all his leave – holidays, odd jobs around the house, or by buying a bike. The overtime he accrued working during an extremely busy year is still on his overview, “I'm retiring in four years, they'll be finished before then”.

Most of his colleagues manage to use up all their leave by the end of the year, says Bleize. Like Birgitte Hendrickx, deputy head of the Student Service Centre. “Time off is much too important. It's good to take some time away and switch off. I encourage people to use their annual leave, so I have to set a good example. I feel comfortable logging off for three or four weeks over the summer. I also hire people who are responsible enough and can make decisions. They can solve anything that

arises. You have to make yourself a little less essential; that's good for you and for everyone. I don't think there can be any reason someone should think they can't take a few weeks off over the summer. If the workload is too high, then as an employer, we are doing something wrong.” That's one of the reasons she wants to move away from only having one person in the organisation with the necessary expertise. “You see that a lot in IT. It makes for a vulnerable organisation and leads to high workloads. If something goes wrong, then you have to call that person in the evening or at the weekend. You shouldn't want that.” The two support staff members interviewed who were unable to use up their annual leave had various reasons why. Lots of work, nobody to take over. But also, making sure to

have a sufficient buffer so that you never run into problems, for example as a carer. Werner Teeling, information manager at FPN's education desk: “I used to work for an occupational health and safety service provider, and it was precisely there that I received no support when I needed care leave. The helplessness and pain I felt back then run deep. I don't want to go through something like that again, which is why I've been saving up leave for several years now.”

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND SUPPORT STAFF

One more thing: academic staff have much more freedom and don't need to justify their absence if they are away for half a day or more, whereas support staff have to account for all their hours. Sometimes that stings a little, especially when offices are half empty and you “could set off a cannon in the building. You just have to take it as read that they're working from home.” Leo Köhler, Professor of Clinical Anatomy and head of the Anatomy and Embryology Department, recognises the sentiment. “Sometimes the support staff feel that the academic staff can just do what they like – I suspect that's a bit of jealousy speaking. Don't get me wrong: I am very satisfied with our people. But I think they don't always know what academic staff do.”

Do academic staff abuse their level of freedom? The Director of the Faculty of Science and Engineering, Bakir Bulić, is adamant. “I don't believe that at all. Of course, sometimes someone might cut corners, but when I see how much work is produced, whether that's research or teaching, then you know how hard they work. Some of that is self-imposed.” Professor De Nooijer can confirm that: “We do have a lot of freedom, but I think we actually work extra hard not to abuse that trust.”

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