

observant

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editorial

"Curious"

We have no shortage of critical readers, I'm pleased to say. Last week, we received an unexpected visit from someone who kindly conveyed his opinions on our front page news, headlines, and other editorial matters. He even offered to help. Another emailed us recently: "All those articles about INKOM are nice, but apparently, there are a lot more to be found on Instagram. I can't read them, as I don't have an account." He concluded that some of our journalistic efforts aren't reaching everybody. "Curious," he noted. He was perturbed that we would choose "a profit-driven company" over our own website. Surely, it can't be that hard to publish everything on our website, he said.

And granted, it isn't hard to publish everything we create, from articles to videos, on *observantonline*, but is that what we want? No.

INKOM is a good example. For years, we wrote short reports, from the market where student organisations promote themselves to the sports event, and then published those on our website. Partway through the introduction week, those would be supplemented with a photo report or pictures of students.

This year, we switched it up – an experiment. Short interviews with first years and an article about INKOM were published on our website, videos and lots of pictures were posted on Instagram. If we want to reach a new audience (first-year students), then we are more likely to find them there, hoping they then click through to our website and read the other articles there.

Admittedly, the Instagram algorithm has a way of getting on our nerves. Over the summer, when the *Observant* offices were closed, we couldn't afford not to post anything. So Cleo Freriks, who is in charge of all that, planned a number of timeless articles, as a way of telling Meta, and our followers, 'yoohoo, we're still here'. It's not how we would like to operate, but sometimes you have to choose the 'lesser' of two evils (the greater being leaving entirely, and we don't want to do that either, yet).

That doesn't mean we don't talk about it often. We said goodbye to X last year. Deliberately. Since Elon Musk's takeover, we were increasingly worried about using a medium where hate and outrage are given so much room to breathe. We've never been active on TikTok. You can certainly show a target audience you exist there, but does it allow room for nuance, can you go into the background of a news item? We seriously doubt it. You could say that's inconsistent, because is that possible on Instagram? You may be right, but we are still not convinced.

'Be informed, be engaged', it said on the posters that we stuck on our windows during INKOM. Those critical readers who make us think have understood the message, at least.

Wendy Degens

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



series the times they are (not) a changin'

Banalitas fraternity hauled before Executive Board over sexist and homophobic posters



Photo: Nelis Tutkey

1995

In the early nineties, the all-male student association Heerenvereniging Banalitas freely admitted they had an image problem. Their clubhouse on Capucijnestraat was located in a former drug den (they later moved to Brussestraat), and the woman living next door had nothing good to say about her student neighbours. "They vomit and urinate in my courtyard", she fumed in *Observant*.

"It's disgusting – they're absolute animals. And the noise! Always making a racket." Sometimes she would storm into the building to give the students a piece of her mind. "But what can you do, one woman against all those lads? They mock you so much you end up feeling like you're the one making a fool of yourself." And the police refused to act, she grumbled. "They're just glad the junkies are gone."

The neighbours weren't the only ones fed up with the behaviour of these "obnoxious loudmouth frat boys", as a former member of the Ritz sorority, part of Tragos, later put it. She knew what she was talking about, having once dated a Banalitas member. In late 1995, the fraternity went too far when they put up sexist recruitment posters ("Deep inside... every woman wants a Banalitas member") and homophobic ones ("Better ten beers down your gullet than ten queers in your bed"). It was the last straw for the university's Executive Board. The Banalitas leadership was summoned for a dressing-down and told in no uncertain terms that their funding would be pulled and the fraternity would be barred from official university events unless they "immediately cease distributing these kinds of posters and refrain from activities that, even

viewed generously, can only be deemed inappropriate". The director of Student Services at the time, Lieve van Copenolle, had already cut ties with the fraternity after "being disgusted and outraged to learn about the posters". Banalitas members would now have to take urgent matters directly to the Executive Board. "I will only reconsider my position if you publish a clear and unequivocal statement in *Observant* renouncing this contemptible form of publicity and offering your apologies." A meeting between the director and the fraternity followed, and a week later Banalitas published a letter in *Observant*: "We very much regret that the slogans used could have led to an interpretation that was in no way our intention." The posters were withdrawn. The letter itself, "too pathetic for words", provoked scornful reactions.

"They vomit and urinate in my courtyard. It's disgusting – they're absolute animals. And the noise! Always making a racket"

Stories about the fraternity continued to circulate, including tales of hazing rituals involving sheep and goat semen spread on bread. In October 2002, the fraternity admitted they hadn't recruited a single new member for two years. From fifty members at its peak, Banalitas was now dwindling to extinction. According to one of the fifteen remaining members at the time, "First-years these days want to earn their degree in four years and only join big student associations that don't take up too much of their time. As a small fraternity, we've drawn the short straw."

Riki Janssen

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

Plans to revive the Bonbonnière after years of neglect: what role will UM play?

What to do with the Bonbonnière? The former theatre on Achter de Comedie has stood empty for years. In November, the municipal council will be choosing from a number of proposals. Maastricht University is aiming for a “house of culture, knowledge and community”.

When strategic advisor Ingrid Wijk spoke to UM staff as part of a preliminary exploration of plans for the building, she realised that nearly everyone had memories of the Bonbonnière. “A gala, a performance they went to as a child, a carnival session.” During her own walkthrough of the building, she also saw it as a special building. “The former grandeur of the theatre is all around us, even though there isn’t a single seat left in the main auditorium. And when you walk into the old theatre café, it’s like walking into a café from the 1920s.”

Many people in Maastricht feel sad the building hasn’t been in use for years. It is one of the reasons why the council – who officially own the building, although Heineken is still the current lease holder – has asked various organisations, including UM, to propose new plans for the building.

The culmination of Wijk’s conversations, in her role as an adviser on behalf of UM on the supervisory committee for HERMON Heritage, which is looking into the feasibility of plans, is a proposal for a “house of culture, knowledge – specifically more than just science, and more than just UM – and community. The advisors then tried to make this more concrete in conversations with UM staff members involved in events, education, art, and science communication. How do you connect themes such as innovation and culture? It should be a unique place, not just any old conference centre. And aimed at a wider audience. The Bonbonnière belongs to the city and its citizens. For example, visitors could submit research questions,

or watch a researcher at work’.

Investigation over the coming months will determine whether the idea is feasible. After which, the proposal will be presented to the municipal council, which has reserved 30 million euros for reviving the Bonbonnière. While the municipality supports UM’s investigations – they are also represented in the supervisory committee – it does not mean that it’s a fore-

gone conclusion. Wijk: “The council has asked for a number of proposals, and they will be the ones making the final decision.” One thing is already certain: it will not simply be turned into offices. “That would require serious renovations and that isn’t possible. It is listed as a national monument and thus, protected.”

Cleo Freriks



Interior of the former municipal theater Stadsschouwburg. Collection Historisch Centrum Limburg Image: Van Gulpen, P. (1846)

“Students say they’ll come, then change their minds”

European Law School enrolment drops by nearly 50%

The European Law School (ELS), the English-taught bachelor’s programme at the Faculty of Law, has seen a sharp decline in enrolment rates this academic year. As of a month ago, 326 first-year students had enrolled, compared with almost 600 the previous year. These provisional figures were discussed at the most recent Faculty Council meeting. “Should we be worried about our jobs?”

The current total of 326 – which does not include applicants who have yet to pay tuition fees and/or submit their secondary school diplomas – is “not what we had hoped for. And I can’t offer an immediate explanation”, admitted Vice-Dean for Education Sjoerd Claessens. This year, the European Law School introduced an enrolment quota. First-year student numbers had been steadily increasing for years, and last year it seemed entirely possible that intake might reach 650 to 700 first-year students, putting considerable strain on

teaching capacity. To avoid this, the Faculty Board decided to limit first-year admissions to 550. At the time, there was no concern that the lottery system might deter students from enrolling in the programme. The board had confidence in ELS’s distinctive character and appeal.

“There are always students who say they’ll come, but then change their minds. Something seems to be going wrong along the way”, said Claessens. Dean Jan Smits also noted that Maastricht is attracting fewer international students overall. The faculty plans to analyse the data and make a decision as soon as possible, “before the end of this year”, on whether to raise the quota for next year. Academic staff representative Nora Vissers asked what the lower intake might mean for the faculty’s budget “and staffing levels. Will people lose their jobs?” Smits reassured colleagues that this would not be the case, “not based on these figures”, thanks in part to flexi-

ble contracts and natural staff turnover. “Being a bit smaller for a while isn’t necessarily a bad thing – it gives us some breathing space – but obviously it shouldn’t go on for years.”

The decline in enrolment at the Faculty of Law is not confined to ELS. The pre-master’s programme in Dutch Law has also seen enrolment rates drop, from 118 last year to 53 this year. According to Claessens, however, this is due to policy changes. “We used to be rather generous in admitting students from a wide range of educational backgrounds, but many struggled to complete the programme. We’ve now tightened the rules. Only graduates of law programmes at universities of applied sciences, along with a number of other specific programmes, are eligible. Others may submit a request for consideration by the Board of Admissions on a case-by-case basis.”

Deborah Blekkenhorst



Venomous snakes

“

Everyone has a different idea of what the perfect holiday should look like: some of us would love to relax only in five-star resorts where there is nothing but beaches, palms, and all-inclusive buffets, and others would rather find themselves on backpack trips, on which you are adventurously left to challenge your survival instincts. So, travelers either seek peace or unpeace.

Nowadays, there is a growing motivational tendency that suggests that if you want to grow and improve your inner self, you should push beyond your boundaries. Many people go for challenging trips to an untamed exotic country in order to see how much they can endure, which in the end comes with a finishing touch in the form of an Instagram post of “how a journey can change a man” with a picture in a Buddhist temple doing yoga (been there, done that, though).

And while there is nothing particularly wrong with the exploration of yourself via exploration of the world, there is no reason to think your happiness will depend on denying yourself comfort. Why? Because it is just not worth it. One time, I met a guy who was much younger than me and had just come back from a solo two-month trip to Asia, where he was sleeping in jungles with venomous snakes. I immediately started to recall times when I was sleeping in hotels with poor soundproofing, and I could not sleep at night.

Surely our pleasure level diverges – and that is okay. But there is no need to force yourself to do something that you deep down do not want to do, only because someone liked it and told you it is the only way to be a traveller and not a tourist. You do not have to sleep on camping sites if you enjoy a private and warm shower after a long day of sightseeing. You do not have to sleep in hostels if unknown people and their habits irritate you. Do not go budget-friendly if you know it will ruin your holidays. Sometimes, the fact that you will try out food that is not particularly fit for your bacterial flora is enough to get you out of your comfort zone – you do not need to change the standard of your hotel bed to make Anthony Bourdain proud.

”

Rita Wiśniewska,
third-year European Law student

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

Amélie Lamers
(Wahlwiller, 2007)

\ First-year student of Law

\ Relationship status:
in a relationship with
Laurent

\ Lives in:
Wahlwiller



Photo: Joey Roberts

“
I always want to do really well,
I'd say I'm a bit of an overachiever,
a perfectionist
”

Once a Limburger, always a Limburger. I love it here and have no plans to move away. I considered enrolling at Radboud University Nijmegen – my brother goes there – but Maastricht appealed to me more. I feel like the transition from secondary school to university is already big enough without adding moving out to the mix. It's not that I'm not open to the idea, though. My parents would have supported it; they both moved away for university themselves, my mother to Tilburg and my father to Leiden. But right now, Maastricht feels like the best fit for me. My boyfriend Laurent still lives at home in Mechelen, just a few kilometres from Wahlwiller, and he also studies in Maastricht. It's nice living so close to each other. And South Limburg is beautiful; I feel at home here. When I went to the open day at the Faculty of Law, I realised just how lovely the city is, with its historic buildings, its charming streets and its old bridge. I'd never really looked at it that way before.

Language is my thing. [Chuckles] Yes, I'm very interested in language. Dutch was one of my strongest subjects – much more so than maths, anyway. I did my final-year project for secondary school with a classmate. We got a perfect score, a 10 out of 10, and even won the national KNAW Education Prize. We knew we wanted to study language change, and after discussing ideas with our Dutch teacher, we decided to investigate the use of the verb *willen* (“to want”). Officially, *jij wilt* (“you want”) and *hij wil* (“he wants”) are correct, but in everyday speech, people often say *jij wil* and *hij wilt*. We collected 288 survey forms from students in our own school. Our

final report was 65 pages long, and our conclusion was that usage really is evolving – young people don't always stick to the official forms.

I'd rather be in a courtroom. Er, I can't see myself pleading a case in a courtroom just yet. I'm not very good at talking in front of people. I hope to become a much better, more confident and persuasive public speaker. I considered studying Dutch, but then I thought: what would I do with that? Maastricht doesn't offer a Dutch language degree, so I chose law instead – it's interesting and still involves language. It's mainly the idea of helping people that appeals to me, but if you ask me what I want to do with it, or whether I can see myself as a lawyer, I'd say I have no idea yet.

What book is on your bedside table? *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins – a mix of fantasy and thriller. I've always loved reading; as a child, I devoured books. I think it's one of the reasons why Dutch was one of my strongest subjects. A book I'd recommend? *The Lord of the Rings* – a trilogy that's not always an easy read, with its long sentences and detailed descriptions, but definitely worth it. Yes, the books have been made into films, but I prefer reading to watching TV. And my older brother has his Xbox hooked up to the television, so it's often in use anyway. He even has a racing chair, so the living room sometimes feels more like a man cave. It isn't the most stylish addition to our home – my mother only allows it at weekends, not during the week.

When was the last time you cried? Two weeks ago, when saying goodbye to my boyfriend in New Zealand. He's on exchange at the University of Waikato. He really wanted to go and worked hard to get the marks to get selected. I spent nearly four weeks there this summer. It was my first time flying solo, which was quite an adventure – sixteen hours on a plane with a stopover in Dubai. I've travelled abroad with school before, even to the US, but I rarely travel alone. I've visited my brother in Nijmegen, which went well despite my bad experience with trains. When I was fourteen, I went to Toverland with friends. We took the train to Sevenum but didn't realise that you have to press a button to open the doors. We were stuck in the carriage, wondering what had gone wrong. Let's call it a learning experience.

What's the hardest part of love? We've been together for nearly a year, and this is my first serious relationship. Being apart from him for so long [he'll be back in December] is really difficult. I've known Laurent a long time; he's friends with one of my brothers. He's spontaneous, very sweet and adventurous, which encourages me to try new things. In New Zealand, for example, we went rafting together. I wasn't very keen on it at first – we had to go through a huge waterfall – but looking back, I'm really glad I did it.

What was your favourite childhood activity? Horseback riding. My mother and her sister bought a horse, Blossom, for me and my cousins. It was a dream come true. As a child, I was always reading about horses, collecting all things horses, dreaming about horses... I still go to the riding school two or three days per week, still learning new things, even though I've been riding since I was six.

How do you deal with setbacks? I hate getting low marks – I always want to do really well. Yes, I'd say I'm a bit of an overachiever, a perfectionist, even in group projects. That's something I'm trying to work on. I like to stay in control. I'm not a leader, not at all, but if others don't put in as much effort, I end up taking over and doing most of the work.

Wendy Degens

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Social Safety Annual Report 2024: no cause for complacency

Managers often implicated in socially unsafe situations

In 2024, the number of UM employees reporting socially unsafe situations dropped slightly to 139. But this modest decline is no reason for complacency, according to the **Social Safety Annual Report 2024**, which was recently discussed by both the Local Consultative Body (LO) and the University Council Strategy Committee.

the ombuds officer, improving the chances of resolving issues. The longer an undesirable situation drags on, the harder it often becomes to address.

But it isn't necessarily good news that 2024 saw fewer reports, UM President Rianne Letschert pointed out to the Strategy Committee last week. After all, this does not automatically mean there have been fewer incidents; it might equally reflect a work environment where staff feel reluctant to raise issues with confidential advisers. As CCP coordinator Esther Goethart explained, these figures fluctuate, and UM has only been collecting them for a number of years. It's still too early to draw conclusions. "We've actually seen an increase in the first half of this year."

The role of managers

Most reports concern workplace intimidation, collaboration issues or labour disputes. Notably, managers play a negative role – directly or indirectly – in 60 per cent of cases. While 80 per cent of UM managers have now completed the mandatory Leadership and Unwanted Behaviour training course, and the report highlights their "active and open attitude" in these sessions, management behaviour remains a key issue. The Strategy Committee questioned whether training alone is sufficient. "It's a good start, but it's not enough to equip managers to handle the full range of social safety issues they may encounter", said Goethart.

PhD candidates

Sixteen per cent of reports come from PhD candidates. The university has 19 faculty-level PhD confidential advisers. Most young researchers report problems with their supervisors – a serious concern, given the power imbalance. "This remains a vulnerable group", Letschert told the Strategy Committee. "It's unacceptable. How can we turn this around?" The report draws particular attention to PhD candidates on China Scholarship Council (CSC) scholarships. Their funding, visas and academic futures all hinge on completing their dissertations, leaving them highly vulnerable and unlikely to report issues. Supervisors and coordinators are urged to be extra vigilant. In October 2024, UM decided to stop accepting new CSC-funded PhD candidates until their monthly allowance – currently €1350, not enough to live on – is increased.

Most young researchers report problems with their supervisors – a serious concern, given the power imbalance

Troubling student behaviour

There has also been a rise in troubling student behaviour, such as threatening or disturbed behaviour, extreme stress and signs of mental health problems. There were nine such reports in 2024, compared with just two in 2023. This not only raises concerns about student wellbeing but also contributes to staff feeling unsafe, the report notes.

Another concern is the inappropriate use of the term "social safety", for example when students challenge exam results or employees disagree with their performance reviews. A clear definition of the term will be introduced to prevent misuse. Finally, the report identifies improving support for victims as a top priority.

First, some key facts. Staff can raise concerns about issues such as sexual harassment, intimidation, bullying, aggression, discrimination or conflicts of interest with UM's confidential advisers. Workplace conflicts may be reported to the ombuds officer. Anyone unsure where to raise a complaint, concern or question can approach the Concerns & Complaints Point

(CCP), the university's central point of contact for issues related to social safety.

Good news

The good news, according to the annual report, is that staff have become quicker to reach out to confidential advisers and

Illustration: Simone Golob

Why occupations are doomed to fail

“When will Putin and Netanyahu stop? Only when it really costs them too much”

If history has taught us anything, it is that military occupations “almost always end in failure”, says Maastricht historian Camilo Erlichman. He sees the same thing happening in Ukraine and Gaza. “This is untenable in the long term.”

Text: Dennis Vaendel



Gaza, 9 September 2025: Residents flee Gaza City due to intensified aerial bombing of residential buildings by the Israeli army, in the run-up to the large-scale ground invasion of the city that Israel began this week Photo: Eyad Baba/AFP

It wasn't brought on by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, nor the war in Gaza, no. In fact, neither of those had even started yet, when in 2021, Erlichman joined together with a colleague at King's College London to found the Occupation Studies Research Network. The goal was to bring together academics researching military occupations.

It's something they have managed quite well, as thanks in part to the interest in the two conflicts dominating the news, the network now has more than two hundred members around the globe. An excellent opportunity to study the subject more systematically, says Erlichman. "That has hardly ever happened until now, even though the knowledge is very useful."

Why do those in power occupy a territory, what drives them?

"First of all, they never use the word 'occupy', because if they acknowledge it that could be legally disadvantageous. Instead, they often speak of 'liberating' an area, or a 'regime change', or in Putin's case, a 'special military operation'. Or they claim it is to protect their own state, as the Israeli government is doing. "It is an attractive option; leaders think they will achieve their goal quickly: get in and get out. That's what the Americans thought about Iraq and Afghanistan, too. Putin believed he could 'quickly' install a puppet government in Kyiv. But it almost always drags on longer than planned."

Are there 'successful' examples?

"Politicians often point to the occupation of West Germany and Japan by the Allies after World War Two in response to that question. They'll say, 'Those went on to become prosperous democracies'. And that is true, but the circumstances were favourable. In Germany, the aim was to drive out Nazi ideology and establish a stable form of democracy. A large portion of the population was not opposed to this, as the previous system had failed: the end of the war was catastrophic, with heavy losses and massive material destruction, and even an atomic bomb in Japan. In addition, the Germans also felt threatened by a third party, the Soviets, who they feared more than the Western Allies.

"That context is completely absent in Ukraine and Gaza. There was no mass destruction caused by the indigenous government before the current occupation, and in the eyes of most civilians, there is no greater threat imaginable at the moment than the occupier. You have to be very careful when referring to 'good' examples, as they are rare. It's much more common for occupations to end in failure, the goals aren't met and all the while, countries are destroyed."

Why is it generally a recipe for failure?

"Occupations face several fundamental problems, for instance when it comes to legitimacy. The inhabitants of the area often see their new ruler as an outside force that has no claim to legitimate rule, and which will ultimately depart again. Violence, or the threat of violence, is often the only way to suppress the inhabitants. And that can be very costly for the occupier: it takes tremendous resources – money, equipment, soldiers – and you have to be constantly on guard. "You also find yourself in something of a dilemma; you have to convince people on three fronts that what you are doing is

justified. You want to show the occupied population that they will also benefit. At the same time, you have to justify the cost of the efforts to your own population. And finally, it is important to convince the international community that your invasion is justified, so that you do not become isolated. These three audiences have often very different interests and expectations.

"That makes it untenable in the long term. Just look at how the Americans suddenly withdrew from Afghanistan, after two decades of expending tax payers' money and human lives. They were unable to convince both their own population and the Afghans."

And is a country such as Israel unaware of this?

"Of course, they are aware. They have occupied territories such as Gaza before and partly withdrawn again because it proved too costly and impossible to establish a form of stable rule. Almost two years after the brutal Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, however, it is unclear which political objective the Israeli government is pursuing with the suffering and destruction it is causing in Gaza. Its policies have become increasingly radicalised, and the new goal seems to be complete occupation, against all better judgement.

"And now you can see it failing on all three fronts. The Israeli population is increasingly fed up with the war situation and the fact that the central political objective of freeing the hostages has still not been achieved; the Palestinians will never accept the takeover of power, meanwhile, Israel is increasingly becoming an international pariah. The Israeli government has manoeuvred itself into an untenable situation. The question is, when will the pressure on Netanyahu become too high."



Ukraine, 19 February 2024: Russian soldiers inspect vehicles at a checkpoint in the part of the eastern Ukrainian oblast of Zaporizhzhia that has been occupied by Russia since 2022 Photo: Shutterstock

Is Putin in a similar situation?

"In a way, yes. He promised his people results. Many Russians have seen their sons killed, the money spend on the war machine could have been spent elsewhere, while the international sanctions imposed on Russia are very disruptive. How long can he continue to delay a peace treaty? When does it become too costly, politically and economically?"

Does the current situation move Netanyahu and Putin closer to their goal?

"The paradox of occupations is that, in the long term, they often have the opposite result to the one the occupier had in mind. The traumas suffered by the inhabitants of the occupied territory can have a decades-long influence on society.

Just think of feelings of hate or resentment.

The Israeli government claims its actions serve to protect the Israeli state, but how on earth could this situation lead to a safer environment for the Israeli population? How could they ever live peacefully along-

side Palestinians if feelings of resentment are only fuelled further?

"History also shows us that nationalism often increases in occupied territories, fuelled by tales of an evil enemy and the heroic resistance of the native population. Political parties who focus on security, the restoration of the nation state and 'normalcy' are often popular after the end of the occupation. I expect something similar to happen in Ukraine, whereas Putin was seeking to increase his influence."

Do these conflicts also yield new insights?

"There are different ways to approach this as a researcher. From a legal point of view – what an occupier can or can't do according to international law – or politically, how people rule over occupied territories. As a historian, I am most interested in social and political interactions between occupiers and occupied, including how populations deal with the presence of an occupier and the many privations they face, as well as with the reality of violence.

"For historical situations, it is sometimes difficult to capture the daily lives of 'ordinary' people under occupation because of the paucity of sources. But now, you can study it almost in real time. I recently attended a lecture by a Ukrainian researcher, Svitlana Makhovska, who had interviewed hundreds of people

“Occupations face several fundamental problems. That makes them untenable in the long term”

in villages where the Russians had just been driven out. That was very moving. These people have been scarred for life, some have seen their daughters raped by Russian soldiers. And yet, they have found ways to survive, to carry on with their lives.

"It is important to understand how this works, what the consequences are. Because however painful the idea may be, these are absolutely not the last military occupations we will ever witness."

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Agenda academic ceremonies

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