



UM turns 50
The chaotic launch
of a new student
management system
in 2009

P2



**"I'd give my life
an 8 out of 10.**
It would be even
higher if I weren't still
dealing with the after-
math of a concussion"

P4



**"Yes, there's some
frustration there"**
Running an
interfaculty
programme isn't easy

P5

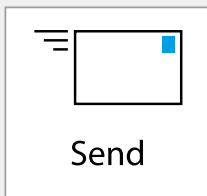
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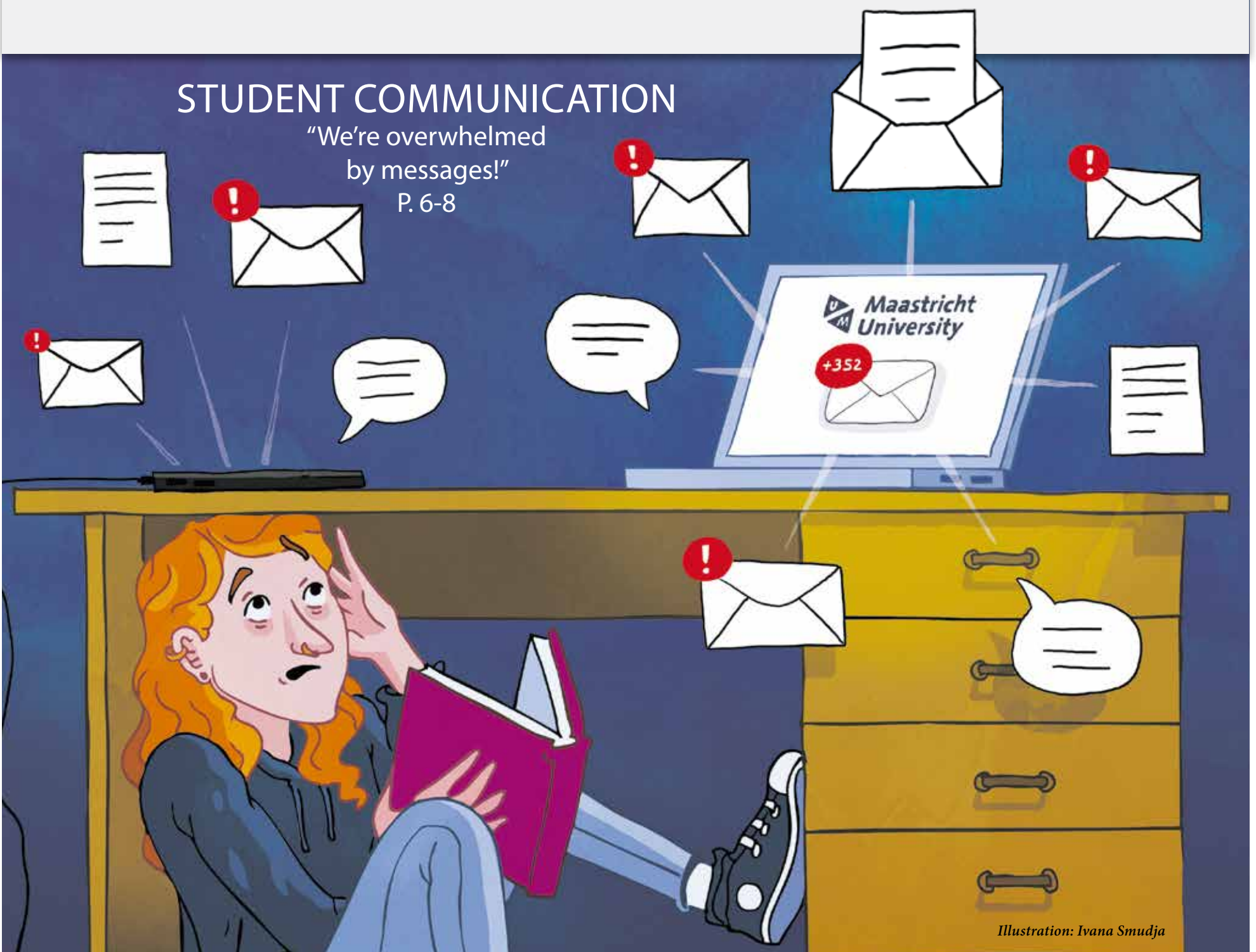
Message



From...	Maastricht University
To...	The student
Subject	You HAVE to read this!

STUDENT COMMUNICATION

"We're overwhelmed
by messages!"
P. 6-8



OBSERVANT'S EDITORIAL OFFICE WILL BE CLOSED NEXT WEEK. OUR NEXT ISSUE WILL BE PUBLISHED ON 23 OCTOBER



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editorial

Hydra

The late nineties. Armed with a floppy disc (a forerunner of the USB), I walk to the university library – located in what is now the Student Services Centre on Ezelsmarkt. In a small room, there are thirty or so computers on individual desks. Any free PCs? Then you can sign in and sit down. Insert the disc and your email's ready. I'm delighted to discover that I have received two whole emails. I can't remember who from (thesis supervisor?) or what about (version three of chapter two of my thesis?), but the communication with students is incredibly simple and comprehensible. Everything, from grades, to deadlines, to exam dates, can be found on sheets of white A4 hung on a wall of the Faculty of Arts and Social Studies, listed by student number. The Education Office also has a desk dedicated to answering any questions you might have, or you simply track down a lecturer if you run into any problems. The internet is still in its infancy – there's a practical on 'how to surf the world wide web' using Yahoo and Alta Vista. There is no Canvas, no social media, no WhatsApp.

Fellow editor Deborah Blekkenhorst has spent the last year looking into the hydra of student communication. After the latest in a long line of students complaining during a faculty council meeting – I believe it was someone from Arts and Social Sciences who had missed a tuition fee reminder in amongst the barrage of emails and was now in trouble – we decided it was time to dedicate an article to the struggles students face when it comes to communication from UM. Not enough structure in newsletters? Too many event announcements? Deborah started her search with the faculty councils. Unfortunately, there was little response from the student members (we suspect they didn't see our emails). She then contacted the marketing and communication departments, spoke to an external project leader who had recruited UM for a clever plan and a university council member who had expressed frustration about the issue repeatedly, and questioned a sample of students. It took months (in between all her other work, of course) to gather all the facts. Not least because some members of staff simply failed to email her back – maybe they, too, are inundated with emails? For a long time, it was also rather vague what the administration's plans were. Now it's finally done, the article is in the paper. "I never, ever want to write about this again!" she said during last Monday's editorial meeting. Talk about 'drowning in information'.

Meanwhile, there is another hydra waiting in the wings: bureaucracy. Three editors started working on that a year ago, but for now, the first results are gathering dust in a drawer somewhere. Too much, too vague. We'll get back to you. Someday.

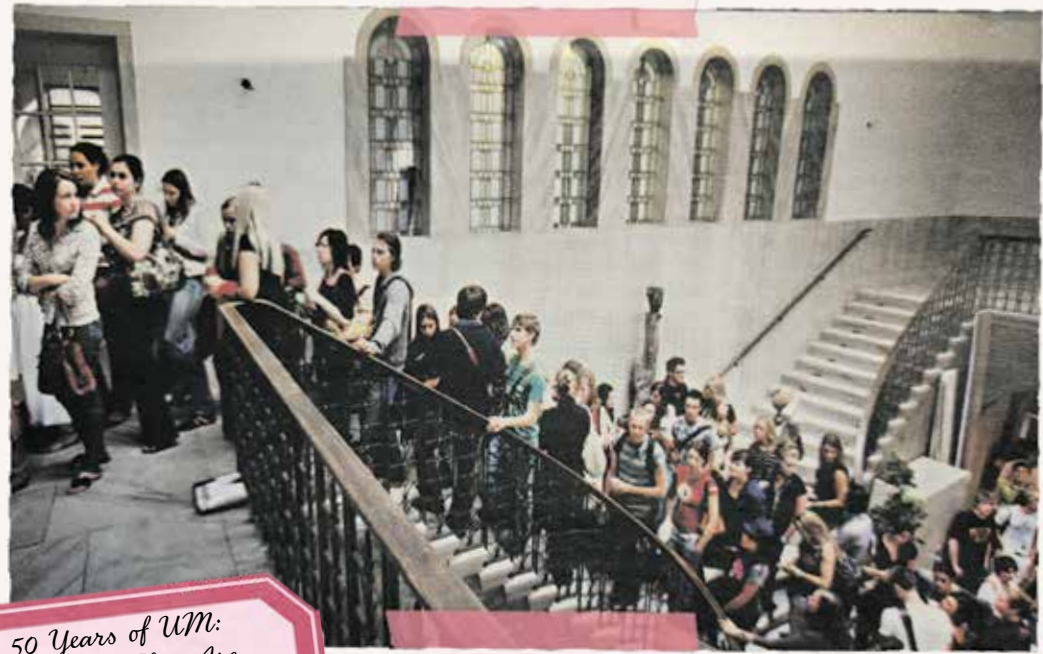
Wendy Degens

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



series the times they are (not) a changin'

The chaotic launch of a new student management system



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

2009

"I've been scheduled for the wrong course." "I've got a tutorial today, but I have no idea where or when." In early September 2009, students at the Faculty of Law queued for hours in the Oud-Gouvernement building to get their timetables. Some missed their first classes; others were double-booked. The culprit? The disastrous launch of a new student management system, MUSL (Maastricht University Student Lifecycle), which achieved the opposite of its intended purpose: to improve student service and make university admin more efficient (read: cheaper).

While Faculty of Law staff scrambled to fix what they could during that first week of the academic year, University College Maastricht decided to postpone classes by a week. On top of the scheduling chaos, faculties had no way of knowing how many students had enrolled in their bachelor's and master's programmes. Meanwhile, students received automated reminders at random: "You still haven't submitted a passport photo" or "Please sign the direct debit authorisation form for your tuition fees". Others couldn't access their university email, hadn't received a UMcard or weren't properly registered with their faculty at all.

Teething troubles

In short, it was chaos. But during those first weeks of September, the people responsible insisted that postponement was out of the question. They argued that teething troubles were inevitable ("implementing a complex IT project is never without its challenges" and "even a minor technical glitch can have major consequences") and that everyone involved had "worked their socks off", especially staff in the faculty education offices – the very people who had long warned that trouble was coming. No heads would roll, then-rector Gerard Mols told *Observant*.

But when things were still going wrong a full month later, in early October 2009, the tone changed. At a University Council meeting, André Postema – the Executive Board member ultimately responsible for MUSL's implementa-

Photo: Loraine Bodewes (print from *Observant* newspaper)

tion – took the blame before the official evaluation was even in: "The system was insufficiently tested, staff training was inadequate, and too little attention was paid to how everything was interconnected." People questioned his decision earlier that year to leave for a two-month management course in the US. And where was the Chief Information Officer, UM's top IT person, while all this was happening? Shouldn't the CIO have stepped in as the problems piled up, instead of leaving everything to the project leader? Talk started circulating about whether heads might have to roll after all, with Postema and the CIO at the top of the list.

Nonsense

A few months later, two external consultants presented a damning conclusion: the MUSL project had been pushed through far too quickly. As *Observant* put it at the time, it was like a runaway bus, losing more and more passengers along the way and arriving at its final stop empty, having lost all support. According to the consultants, the

MUSL was a runaway bus losing passengers along the way

people directly involved in the faculties had barely been consulted. "They had no idea what was coming at them." UM, they added, suffered from an "unhealthy enthusiasm for IT", trying to bring together all kinds of systems – from SAP to the Syllabus + scheduling software – and various smaller programs. The Executive Board's claim that MUSL would save the university millions was dismissed as nonsense. "In projects like this, that's often just a line to win people over. But the goal should be quality, not efficiency gains."

One year and millions of euros later (the project had originally been budgeted at around five million euros; after the chaotic launch and extra staffing costs, estimates doubled to ten million), the worst seemed to be over. No more queues, no more panicked emails.

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

Court dismisses Law student's claim: no damages for study delay

A third-year bachelor's student of Law received a failing mark of 2.5 (out of 10) on his research proposal, preventing him from starting his thesis. He took the matter to court, seeking nearly €13,000 in damages from Maastricht University for the six-month delay in his studies. The subdistrict court has ruled in favour of the university.

The student argued that he could have completed his thesis in the summer of 2024 if he had been permitted to begin work on it in December 2023. In the first semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, he argued, he could then have completed two outstanding courses – Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure and Foundations of Law – allowing him to start a master's programme in 2025.

UM maintained that there was no causal link between the student's study delay and his not being allowed to begin work on his thesis. The student would not have been able to graduate in December 2025 in any case, as he had already fallen behind earlier in his studies.

The court agreed with the university's reasoning. The judge noted that during the six months the student intended to write his thesis, he would also have needed to resit several second- and third-year courses. Successfully completing these courses as well as his thesis would have amounted to a study load of 65 ECTS in six months. For context, an academic year consists of 60 ECTS, with one ECTS credit equating to 28 hours of study.

The judge considered it unlikely that the student would have been able to complete his thesis successfully within such a short timeframe, as he had already failed to submit an acceptable research proposal on two occasions; on his second attempt, he achieved only half a



Photo: Observant

point more (3 out of 10). In addition, the student has declined all offers from the university to resume work on his proposal and thesis. The court has dismissed the student's claim.

He will not receive any damages and must pay €947 in legal costs within fourteen days.

Riki Janssen

Law Faculty Council discusses adding support staff seat

Should the Faculty Council of Law add another seat for administrative and support staff? That question sparked a discussion at its most recent meeting. "Maybe other faculty councils should consider changing their compositions too."

Raoul Spronken, currently the only support staff representative on the Faculty Council, stated that he has been gaining a lot of new colleagues in recent years. Full-time equivalent staff numbers have increased from 54 in 2004 to 82 last year. He argued that a second seat would better balance representation between support staff and the five academic staff members on the council. "I want to be better represented", said Spronken. He noted that, in his absence, there is no one to

step in to discuss or vote on important issues.

Adding a support staff seat would change the council's current composition of twelve members. If Spronken were joined by a colleague, a corresponding seat would need to be added for the student delegation (currently six members), as the council must have an equal number of students and staff.

"I have reservations about expanding the council", said Dean Jan Smits, and he wasn't alone in this opinion. Smits pointed to the Faculty of Science and Engineering and the School of Business and Economics, whose councils each have two support staff representatives and just four academic staff representatives. Would that be an option for the Faculty of Law?

"Having more people delve even deeper doesn't always help the discussion", said academic staff representative Jasper Korving. "It would be rather odd for us to suddenly have fourteen members, compared with other faculties."

"But nothing has changed for a long time", countered Spronken. "Maybe other faculty councils should consider changing their compositions too." He was backed by academic staff representative Agustin Parise, who argued that expanding the council makes sense given the growth of both the faculty and support staff. However, his proposal to put the matter to an immediate vote was rejected.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

"It is norm hours where things go wrong often"

The subject of workload was raised again as part of last Tuesday's Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences council meeting. Do the norm hours still match the work lecturers are actually doing? The council asked the board for an explanation.

Associate dean of education Pim Teunissen gave a presentation about tackling the workload of lecturers, something that has long been a subject of interest. Education coordinators have been appointed, said Teunissen, lecturers are free to set aside time for personal development, and there are efforts to adjust the academic year. The capacity of AI to alleviate certain tasks is also being investigated. You have to tackle workload from a range of angles, concluded the associate

dean, who admitted "that we have to wait and see what the results of these measures will be".

Boy Houben, council member on behalf of academic staff, asked whether it wasn't also worth looking at the norm hours. "It's a shame that would be postponed yet again, with new activities which *might* solve the problem." Because in practice, it is the norm hours where "things go wrong most often", said Houben. People who, on paper, should spend half their time teaching, often spend much more time, which then means less time for research, or working overtime. Compensating that on paper by taking on fewer education tasks is not possible, "because then your boss will be on your case about that at the end of the year". There is definite interest among staff members for a review of the norm

hours, added Martina Parić. "It is disappointing that that won't happen." She feels it is still necessary. "When you want to recruit mentors, nobody shows any interest" – there are fifteen hours set aside a year for that – "but for eight weeks of tutorials, you get thirty."

Teunissen would be open to a conversation about why staff members "spend so much more time on tasks than has been set aside". But "offering a one-time adjustment to those hours would only offer a one-time remedy. A structured discussion should lead to more long-term results". It begs the question why they are unwilling or unable to adjust things now. Teunissen was unavailable for comment at the time of publication.

Peter Doorakkers



Painting with the neighbour

“

"Weej goan allemoal, oh, oh, oh, allemoal met de neus umhoeg."

If you'd have walked by my house last week, you would have heard these lyrics floating from my attic window. Rowwen Hèze is a Limburg band and a stark contrast from my usual playlist, comprised mainly of Taylor Swift songs. Rowwen Hèze is the favourite band of my neighbour Michel, who spent two days helping me to paint my attic.

I am currently in the midst of divorce, and home renovation has been a coping mechanism – gradually transforming this home into "my" home and focusing on new memories to be made. When my neighbour Michel offered, for the *fifth* time, to help me with my next home project, and when more and more neighbours began expressing concern at how "stretched thin" I was looking, I finally allowed myself to accept help. Despite my initial discomfort at accepting help, we ended up having a wonderful two days together. Not only did I discover his favourite bands (adding a few new songs to my playlist in the process), but I also learned a lot about his family and his childhood. As we painted, he also listened to me pour my heart out about my anxieties and sorrows, and told me assuredly: "Alles komt goed." While he unfortunately could not take all my pain away, I did feel a lot lighter at the end of our project.

There is a wealth of research to support my experience, showing that having good neighbours is related to higher aspects of well-being (like happiness and life satisfaction), to lowers aspects of ill-being (like loneliness and anxiety), and provide an important source of emotional and practical support. Further, if you're someone like me, who has difficulty accepting help, this can be useful to keep in mind: *Having* good neighbours not only benefits you, but *being* a good neighbour does a lot of good for the other person, too, and contributes to the overall well-being of the entire community. I am so happy with the finished product, not only because of how great my guestroom looks, but also because it will always be a reminder of how someone was willing to spend their precious time and energy simply to help make things a little easier for me in these difficult times. And that feels so good.

”

Jessica Alleva,
assistant professor at the Faculty
of Psychology and Neuroscience

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

Dieuwertje van Dijk
(Heerlen, 1998)

\ Education development
officer at the School of
Business and Economics

\ Relationship status:
lives with Jaap

\ Lives in:
Maastricht



Photo: Joey Roberts

“
After a year of travelling, South
Limburg feels more like home
”

Are you closer to your mother or your father?

Both. My mother and I are very close. I have three brothers, so I was the only girl at home. She and I even got matching tattoos: an abstract sketch of two people, symbolising that we're never alone. But I'm close to my father, too. He wasn't a fan of the tattoo – he doesn't like them at all and didn't even want to look at it – but when I had my ear pierced as a teenager, he was delighted. Otherwise, I was a pretty calm, well-behaved teenager. My parents weren't strict; they trusted us a lot. We could stay out as late as we liked, as long as we were open and honest with them. It worked well for me, though I can imagine it might not work for every teenager.

Education is my thing. Yes and no. My mother started out as a nursery teacher, worked her way up to school principal and later set up her own educational consultancy, so education has always been part of my world. These days, my main interest is coaching, which is what I do at the faculty. I'm interested in learning what helps people grow and develop.

Describe yourself in five words. Curious, eager to learn, empathetic, cheerful and adventurous.

What's on your bedside table? At the moment, mainly books about plants. And *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Native American author Robin Wall Kimmerer, about indigenous cultures in the United States and their relationship with nature.

I'm taking a course in herbalism. I started it after my boyfriend and I spent a year travelling along the European coast in a self-converted camper van, from Portugal to Greece. We both worked online one or two days per week and spent the rest of our time outdoors. I'm a curious person who loves being outside. Since starting the course, I've been noticing so much more around me. Just yesterday, I realised that wild rocket grows along the path where I always walk our dog. I must've passed it countless times without seeing it.

What do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning? A cheerful, gentle person, grateful for what she has and the life she leads. I'd give my life an 8 out of 10. It would be even higher if I weren't still dealing with the aftermath of a concussion. I get tired quickly and can't work as much as I did before. I hit my head badly while walking the dog last October.

When I lie awake, I worry about... unfinished tasks or conversations I still need to have at work. I can be quite perfectionistic about the things I'm passionate about, like the coaching sessions I conduct here at SBE or my herbalism course. I have to compile a herbarium, which has grown into this huge creative project – I'm making the paper myself and plan to bind the book by hand.

What's your greatest weakness? Taking on too much. I'm always on the lookout for new challenges to help

me grow. During my studies, I was the first to sign up for exchanges and the honours programme. I spent four months in Lisbon, lived in England for a while, and have done a lot of travelling. Alongside the herbalism course, I've recently resumed the yoga course I started before my concussion. And last week, I had my first mindfulness training session. It's hard on my boyfriend sometimes – he notices much sooner than I do when I'm stretching myself too thin, but I can be difficult to slow down. He's always calm. In that sense, we make a very good team.

Never fly again or never eat meat again? I could give up either. I've been a vegetarian before, and I don't fly much. But my parents live in Spain part of the year, so I'd go with never eat meat again. Flying is just too convenient.

When was the last time you cried? A while ago, when my godmother passed away. And I've shed a tear or two over my concussion. I'm energetic and outgoing, but now I have to think carefully about what I can handle. It's difficult, but on the upside, it has taught me to say no.

Home sweet home. I was born in Heerlen and grew up in Voerendaal. My boyfriend is from a village called Reijmerstok. After the year we spent travelling, we started seeing South Limburg with fresh eyes. It feels more like home than before. We've found peace here and no longer feel the urge to live abroad for a while. We talk a lot about the future. We'd love to buy an old farmhouse, a timber-framed fixer-upper, and renovate it ourselves. I can picture it perfectly – a bed and breakfast, a workshop space, a vegetable garden...

Cats or dogs? I like cats, but I'd have to say dogs. Nothing is more relaxing than taking the dog for a walk. We found ours in Portugal, just lying somewhere with a wound in his neck. The shelter was full, so we took him to the vet ourselves. He wasn't chipped, so they just let us keep him. Appa travelled with us in the camper van for six months. It was quite a challenge – he's big and has a loud bark. I had to learn to project that I'm the one in charge, even though I'm actually quite an accommodating person.

Peter Doorakkers

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Running interfaculty programmes isn't that easy

"Yes, you can sense the frustration"



Illustrations: Simone Golob

Different systems for administration, overlapping timetables, unclear responsibilities: running an interfaculty programme is not easy. And sometimes, that's frustrating, say the heads of three interfaculty bachelor's programmes at Maastricht. They emphasise that it is not a lack of willing, "but really, every faculty is its own little fiefdom".

There are three interfaculty bachelor's programmes at Maastricht. The newest one, Brain Science, a collaboration between FPN, FHML and FSE, started last academic year. In the case of the oldest one, Global Studies, all six of UM's faculties have been working together since 2020. And Business Engineering, the union between SBE and FSE, also started in 2020. It was recently reported that a fourth one is on the way, governance, law and society (*Bestuur, Recht en Samenleving*). The Faculty of Law will be taking the lead, although SBE and FASoS are also involved.

The programmes aim to teach students to examine problems from different perspectives, across disciplines. But how does that work behind the scenes? Do the faculties also step out of their comfort zones to ensure the programme runs smoothly? Yes, but not without effort, conversations with the three programme coordinators have shown. They are faced with all sorts of practical issues. According to the 'quartermaster' for Business Engineering (and former SBE dean) Philip

Vergauwen, these are mostly the result of "the different faculty administrations not being aligned with each other". Michaela Vanore (Global Studies) and Gunter Kenis (Brain Science) agree. Planning timetables, student administration, assigning classrooms, scheduling lecturers – it's all the responsibility of one of the participating faculties. But that doesn't mean it's all plain sailing. "Every faculty is its own little fiefdom," says Vanore. "For example, even for something as simple as scheduling lecturers, each one has a different system", and it is not always clear what is happening at the other faculties. The predictable results are double bookings – lecturers who are expected to teach at both Global Studies and their own faculty at the same time. "Or take my own position: I have been seconded from SBE to coordinate a team of five people here. But officially, they are part of FASoS, so as far as HR is concerned, I have no say over them."

Working hours

Or take recruiting tutors. For Kenis, that is "still an issue, because all three of the participating faculties do that differently". They recruit at different times of year, for example. Kenis is working on "concrete agreements between the three faculties. Next academic year will be a lot smoother". Another serious problem is the number of working hours (*normuren*), the time a staff member can spend doing certain tasks. Those may differ per faculty, which might cause a problem if you set up a course with people from different faculties. For both Global Studies and Brain Science, the solution was to determine their own specific number of hours. A workable compromise, says Kenis. However, adds Vanore, it has the unintended consequence of creating competition between the programme and the participating faculties. "One particular faculty has told us that their people would rather not work for us, because there aren't enough hours. Whereas staff at another faculty are eager, because they get double the time here." All three are keen not to point fingers. "This isn't a question of willing on the side of the people at the different faculties, they're just used to working a certain way," says Vanore. "And when we do come to them with a problem, they try their best to help solve it. But that does mean that there is a problem to start with, and that we are dependent on any good will we manage to cultivate. It's a hell of a job."

Institute

A job that takes time – too much time, if you ask Vergauwen. "I'm supposed to make sure we set up a master's programme, too, and start working together more with the Brightlands campuses. But that keeps being put on the back burner because I have to put out all these little fires here. Yes, you can sense the frustration. And not just mine. The current structure more or less forces people to consider their own faculty's needs first."

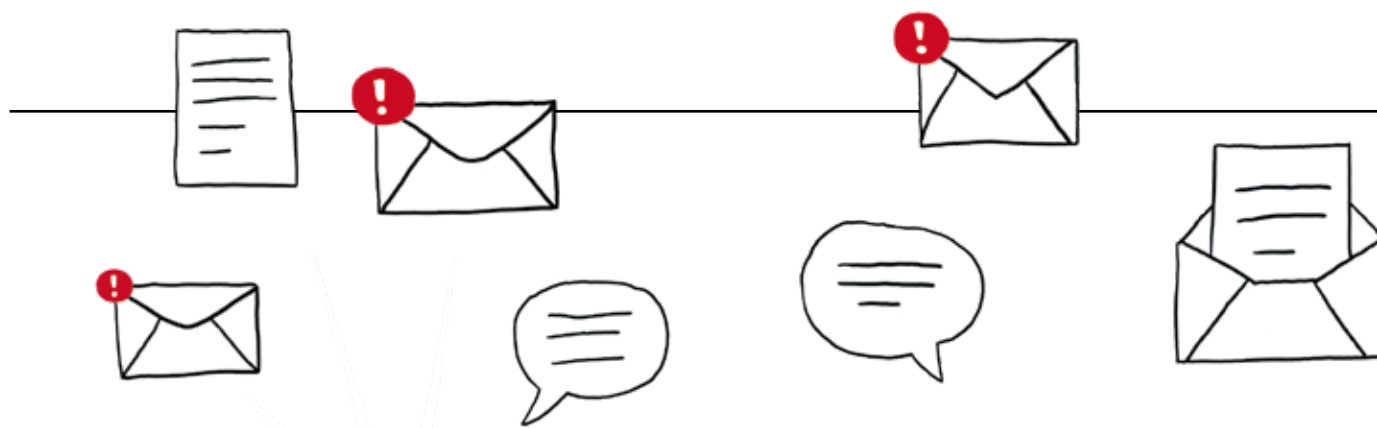
How could that be improved? The former dean hopes to start a discussion about the structure of Maastricht's interfaculty programmes. "It's high time, if we want to have more of these in the future. Why not turn Business Engineering into a sort of college, with its own budget, its own people, its own dean? Just like UCM, which is also dependent on a faculty, but has its own clear structure."

Vanore would love such a discussion. "There is much still to learn. I would love to see an interdisciplinary, interfaculty institute, that would be the best solution. But setting something like that up is hard, especially considering the budget cuts in higher education."

UM seeks to improve student communication, appointing coordinators to bring order to the chaos

Students overwhelmed by messages:





too much noise, too little use

Too much, too vague, overly detailed or simply irrelevant: *Observant* found that students at Maastricht University feel overwhelmed by the flood of information coming at them from the university and its faculties, ranging from newsletters and Canvas announcements to social media posts and noticeboard messages. The university acknowledges the issue and has begun to take steps to address it. But it works both ways, says Tom Nobbe, programme manager for modern digital communication at UM. “Students have to want to stay informed – that’s their responsibility.”

Text: Deborah Blekkenhorst **Illustrations:** Ivana Smudja

“I get email notifications on my phone, sometimes as many as twenty in one day”, sighs a second-year student. And yes, she reads them all, afraid of missing something. “But is it really necessary? The senders think everything is equally important, but most of the time I wonder: why do I need to know this? Especially when it has nothing to do with my own programme.” A third-year student agrees: “Sometimes I can’t see the wood for the trees. I only really pay attention if I’m waiting for a grade or have a deadline coming up.”

Complaints

This article stems from years of student

complaints about the way the university communicates. *Observant* has repeatedly heard the issue raised in Faculty Council meetings and discussions with student representatives. The same frustration came up in conversations with around sixty students for this piece. Their main gripe is the sheer volume – not just the number of messages and announcements, but also the multitude of communication channels they come through: from email, Canvas and digital noticeboards to poster campaigns, social media and WhatsApp. Students say they feel “overwhelmed” by messages and, what’s more, “we often don’t even know why we’re getting them”. A first-

year student says she receives emails about assignments for third-year students. Others can’t always see the point of certain messages: “They’re about everything from general university announcements to obituaries.” And: “Why can’t everything just be in one place? That would make things so much clearer.”

Tuition fees

Most of the students interviewed say they only skim messages, which means they risk missing something. One student has created separate folders in her email inbox “to categorise everything first and read it later”, but the system doesn’t always work. A few months ago, she lost track of several important emails, including ones about paying tuition fees. “I couldn’t find them again in the haystack. I may have accidentally deleted them.”

“Here, have a look”, says a second-year student, opening her inbox. A long list of emails appears, many of them forwarded from Canvas. This online learning platform is used to share information not just about modules students are enrolled in, but also about assignment and application deadlines, updates about electives, exam dates, tutor messages and rescheduling notices. All those notifications end up in students’ inboxes. “It’s so chaotic. You have to actively filter them”, complains a third-year student. He knows he could turn off notifications, but he doesn’t want to miss anything important. “We even get a notification when a tutor posts something like ‘Looking forward to seeing you all tomorrow’”, says a first-year student. “Seriously? Please teach professors how to communicate through Canvas. Not everything is important – it just creates noise.”

Programme manager Tom Nobbe, in charge of improving student communication at UM, isn’t surprised by these examples. Yes, students receive a lot of information, he says, and their complaints have reached the Executive Board as well. Plans for improvement have been in the works for some time. Or, as Nobbe puts it: “In late 2023, early 2024, the Executive Board and the deans adopted a new vision for student communication.” But before they could start discussing practical ideas, such as IT changes, the threat of government budget cuts put a spanner in the works. “We then had to look at what we could still do under the current circumstances”, says Nobbe.

For Bram van den Berkmortel, a student and University Council member (LEX-Motus), student communication has been a concern for some time. He has found that there are considerable differences between faculties. When he was studying at the Faculty of Law, he received far more emails than he does now as an FHML student. “Law has a weekly digital newsletter, *Law Student Messages*, with everything from general announcements to deadline information. The faculty had a student assessor investigate how many students actually read the newsletter. It turned out that almost half of them read it only occasionally or not at all. I myself only realised after four years that *Law Student Messages* is the faculty’s main communication platform.”

In 2023, *Observant* already reported that many students at the Faculty of Law seemed unaware of the digital newsletter’s existence. At a Faculty Council meeting last year, some suggested simply sending more emails to get information across instead. In a recent response, the faculty’s Education Office stated, “*Law Student Messages* is our main channel for sharing education-related and other important information with students. The platform is generally appreciated.” “At FHML, we get course-specific messages, making it easy to spot the important ones”, says Van den Berkmortel. In a response to *Observant*, FHML explained, “In our experience, most people don’t read emails carefully, especially if they get a lot of them. That’s why we only use email in exceptional cases.”

Fragmentation

The above illustrates the fragmentation of student communication at UM, says Nobbe – not just in terms of channels, but also in terms of who communicates what. “With the best intentions, multiple people send out information on their own initiative. Sometimes it’s the Education Office, other times the Marketing and Communication department. People often forget to look at the bigger picture and consider how students experience it. That needs to change.” As a first step towards improvement,

Continue reading on page 8

SBE already has a communication linchpin

To the School of Business and Economics, the role of student communication coordinator is not entirely new. For several years, Loes Pustjens has kept a close eye on who communicates what, where and how at SBE. She advises internal – and occasionally external – parties and keeps in touch with contacts such as student and career advisers and the Education Institute. “If someone wants to get a message out, they come to me”, she explained to *Observant* in a written response. “We then identify the target audience and I draw up a communication plan.”

SBE students receive information through various channels, including social media, digital screens and email – one of the main communication platforms. “Where we post something depends on the topic. We try to distinguish between need-to-know and nice-to-know. It’s not always easy – what’s vital to one person might be completely irrelevant to another”, explains Pustjens. Certain information, however, must be communicated by the faculty. “Take the course registration deadline. If we don’t communicate it, our timetable coordinators run into trouble. For informa-

tion like that, we send a targeted email.” “We only use Canvas in exceptional cases, such as emergencies, but we prefer not to. Course-specific information shouldn’t get lost amid announcements by the faculty. Canvas isn’t designed for student communication.” Nice-to-know information – such as student job vacancies – is shared via the monthly newsletter, on the screens and through social media. According to Pustjens, the emails and monthly newsletter are generally well read. “But we’ve also heard from students that they receive a lot of information, sometimes

so much that messages get overlooked. I understand that. Every student has different information needs, and our systems aren’t set up to accommodate that. It would be nice if we could find a different way to communicate with students.

I think ideally there would be a kind of app where students can choose which topics matter to them – vacancies, mental health – while still allowing the faculty to ‘push’ important messages, such as information about exams, registrations or emergencies.”

DB

background

Continuation of page 7

the university has decided to appoint “student communication coordinators”. “Each faculty will have one, as will the library, the Student Services Centre (SSC) and the Maastricht University Office (MUO).”

After all, in addition to information sent out by individual faculties, students receive general university updates via a weekly UM newsletter. “The SSC also sends messages at our request – infrequently, a few per month at most – about topics such as the university elections, national strikes, or last year’s education budget cuts and internationalisation debates”, explains UM spokesperson Koen Augustijn.

Most of the students interviewed by *Observant* admit they “don’t really read” the university newsletter. They’re simply not interested: “The information isn’t specifically for me. It’s not about my own programme or faculty.” A few, however, say they appreciate the university-wide updates. “I think it’s good to know UM’s position on major developments, like the situ-

ation in Gaza or protests against budget cuts”, says a master’s student.

Coordinators

To avoid days when twenty messages go out at once, the student communication coordinators – “Hopefully they’ll start before the end of the year” – will need to consult with each other on a regular basis, says Nobbe. “We’ll also need to think more carefully about the right channel and audience for each message. Should it be sent by email, posted on noticeboards or included in a newsletter?”

The faculties, library, SSC and MUO will first have to decide internally how to shape the new role of student communication coordinator within their own organisations. “While they’re free to do this as they see fit, the idea is that someone will be asking the question ‘How do we communicate with students?’ on

a daily basis. It isn’t just an extra task – proper resources will need to be allocated to it”, says Nobbe. He adds that there will be no additional funding for the role: “Effective communication is a core activity.”

The IT side is also being reviewed for possible improvements. “We want to make the information channels we currently use more accessible.” Details are still being worked out, including what form this might take. “The aim is to have as much information as possible in one place, where students can access it as needed.” It’s still too early to tell whether something like a platform or dedicated app will be introduced, says Nobbe. “It doesn’t need to be a long and complicated project, but we felt it was more important to first overhaul the organisational side.”

Finally, he points out that the responsibility for effective communication does not rest

solely with the university. “Ultimately, it also depends on students being willing to read what we send. They have a responsibility to make an effort to stay informed. It works both ways: if we communicate more deliberately, students are more likely to pay attention. But if they don’t, no amount of communication will make a difference.”

About this article

For this article, *Observant* spoke to around sixty students at all faculties in the city centre and Randwyck. These informal interviews were held over several days at random times during the past spring. Students were asked what kind of information they receive, how they experience the way the university communicates and – if relevant – what could be improved. *Observant* also contacted the Faculty of Law about *Law Student Messages*, as well as the communications departments of UM, the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML), the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) and the School of Business and Economics (SBE) to ask how they communicate with students.

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**ADDITION**

In the printed edition of *Observant* dated 2 October 2025, we forgot to include the correct image source above the article about the Calatrava Campus (page 2). The image used is a photograph of a scale model that was exhibited during *Unvollendete. Nooit gebouwd Maastricht* (an exhibition by Bureau Europa, held from 15 December 2017 to 15 April 2018)/ Kleon 3 / Wikimedia Commons.

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