

# 13 observant

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KEER OM VOOR  
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EDITIE



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## CARIBBEAN CONCERNS

Observant will **not appear in print** in the next weeks because the faculty buildings are increasingly empty now that classes are partly online and hybrid again. We hope to appear in print again from mid-January onwards. Until then, you can find the latest news on [www.observantonline.nl](http://www.observantonline.nl)

*Language barriers, loneliness, financial stress. Caribbean students often have a hard time, according to research. Observant spoke to five of them about their experiences at UM.*



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## MULTI-HEADED MONSTER

*The work pressure remains high. Less fragmentation of tasks and more trust in staff is part of the solution, according to Maastricht workload expert Prof. Angelique de Rijk.*

All types of education occur at the UM these days

## Hybrid, online, on campus: flexibility is the motto

*Hybrid, only online, or on campus. These days, all types of education can be found at Maastricht University, we concluded after a tour around by Observant. The law faculty, for instance, has education on campus as much as possible, while most tutorial groups at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences are hybrid. Flexibility is the motto everywhere.*

Education at Maastricht University will be online "when necessary", was *Observant's* heading last Thursday. It now appears that this 'when necessary' applies mainly to the tutorial groups that are faced with students who have tested positive, or tutors who have to stay at home because their children cannot attend school or crèche. Exactly how many groups this concerns? That remains unclear. This is about mutual agreements between tutors and students.

### Law

Point of departure for the Faculty of Law remains: education on campus, the form preferred by many students, Sjoerd Claessens, vice dean of education, has heard. But exceptions are possible: "We are pragmatic on the level of the tutorial group." If we can't manage, for example, if lecturers are at home with children because primary schools and crèches are closed, we will look for a replacement or another "suitable solution", says the latest *Faculty Journal*. Lecturers who do not feel at ease on campus, may report to those in charge. They will either be given a larger hall, or the lecturer can teach from home while the students are present at the faculty.

### FSE

Most of the tutorial groups and practicals at the Faculty of Science and Engineering take place on

campus, says dean Thomas Cleij. "We value our intensive education system with small groups on campus." We do have tailor-made solutions for students or lecturers who cannot be physically present because of COVID-19, "it differs slightly per programme". For example, there are hybrid options. "However, we will not switch completely to online, unless it just isn't possible, because we have learned from the last lockdown. The negative impact of such a switch on our students is too great."

### Psychology

The tutorial groups are, in principle, hybrid, says Petra Hurks, vice dean of education. Anyone who wishes to come to the campus will be given the opportunity, but anyone who is sick or scared of becoming infected, can join in online.

As far as the practicals are concerned: the faculty will look at each component and decide on the best option for a specific practical. The lectures are all online. Hurks: "So, students can come to the faculty relatively often, as long as they don't have symptoms."

### FASoS

At the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, most of the tutorial groups are hybrid. This means that at least one student (who for example, has COVID-19-related symptoms, is in quarantine, or has tested positive) is participating online, explains Giselle Bosse, vice dean of education. For the past two weeks, a number of groups have been working completely online: lecturers were housebound because their children were at home or because they themselves had to quarantine.

Tutors can, in close consultation with the programme co-ordinator and the programme director, hold the tutorial group meeting online for one week if one or more students test positive. This happened over the past two weeks with about ten to fifteen tutorial groups, says Bosse. She points out that the situation is not easy at the moment, with both members of

*To be continued on page 9*

# SPLINTERS

A funny incident, a striking piece of news, something interesting that happened elsewhere in the country: it is in this column.

## UvN instead of VSNU

Dear reader, do you still know what we are talking about? The abbreviation VSNU undoubtedly rings a bell. It is the



abbreviation for the association of universities headed by Pieter Duisenberg: Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten (or Association of Collaborating Dutch Universities). But now we also have UvN: Universiteiten van Nederland, (Universities of the Netherlands). Yes, there is a new name, writes the Hoger Onderwijs Persbureau (HOP, or Higher Education Press Agency). Duisenberg thinks that the new name fits in with a new development. The past few years, networks have developed around more and more themes, in which scientists from different universities meet, is the explanation. Universities want to facilitate those networks “in a contemporary manner”. “Our new name and logo underline this practice.” According to spokesperson Ruben Puylaert, practical considerations were the deciding factor, HOP reports. “We noticed that a lot of people didn’t immediately realise that the name VSNU refers to universities. In addition, we often heard people say VNSU. We wanted to make things clear.” Let’s hope that people won’t say UNV or VUN.



## Drawing lots

The CARIM research school is led by a seven-member board. But what if we add two new members who are annu-

ally selected by drawing lots? Director Tilman Hackeng came up with the idea while on holiday in Florence. There, during the Renaissance, every two months the city council was drawn by drawing lots for all guild members over 30 years of age and of impeccable conduct. At CARIM it is a one-year position. Last week, at the annual symposium of CARIM, names were drawn from bags, three men and three women. All 79 scientific and 34 supportive staff members with a permanent contract competed – in principle they are all suitable for the position. These people are now offered the position in order of the draw. If all six refuse, there will be a new round. Hackeng hopes that by adding two rotating members, the board will become a better reflection of the organization, with more diversity and inclusivity.

## Cameragate

Leiden University has brought the anger of students upon them. The reason is the installation of smart cameras at all the entrances to buildings and lecture halls

during lockdown. The objective was to count people. However, university magazine *Mare* sketched a more alarming picture earlier this month. It claimed that the system was unsafe. Moreover, the camera sensors were fitted with artificial intelligence that can constantly analyse the images, on age, length, sex and even

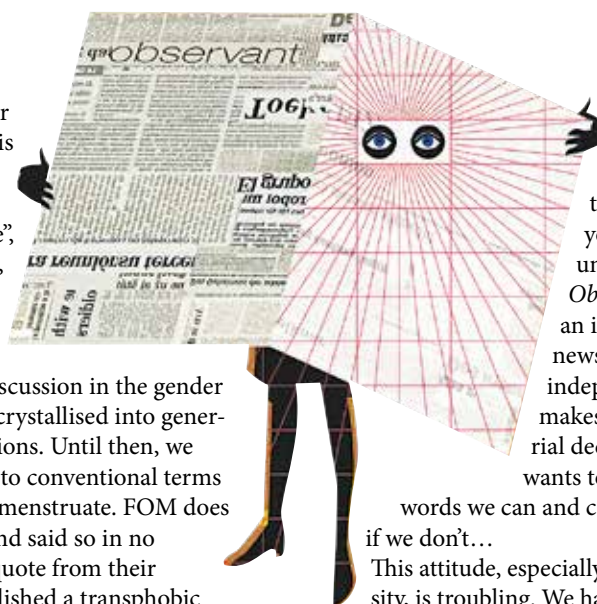
mood. The emphasis is on ‘can’, because the university says it does not do that at all. Students are now preparing all kinds of protests. An online petition has already been signed almost 1,700 times. There is also an appeal to block the entrances to the university buildings for an hour

on 7 December. “To imitate the hostile surroundings that the university has created,” it says on the Facebook page of *Unsee Us*. The university has promised “an accelerated external audit” to remove any concerns about the system. In ‘reputation terms’ this is called damage control.

## Change the article, or else...

I wasn’t sure whether I should write about this. The world, big and small, is complicated enough right now. But I would still like to tell you about an email I received last Monday from Feminists of Maastricht (FOM). They objected to our reporting about the free tampons and pads that can now be found in almost all faculty buildings. This is a one-year trial, funded by FOM – a group of UM students – with the Diversity and Inclusivity Grant they won this year. It’s a great initiative. We wrote that the products are intended for women who lack the financial resources to purchase them (menstruation poverty) or

unexpectedly get their period. The problem is the word “women”. FOM wants us to change it into “people”, because, they explain, “women aren’t the only ones who menstruate”. This is a fairly new discussion in the gender field that has not yet crystallised into generally accepted conclusions. Until then, we have decided to stick to conventional terms and notions: women menstruate. FOM does not agree with this, and said so in no uncertain terms. To quote from their email, “You have published a transphobic article and FOM expects that you change this immediately or we will mobilise our community against this. We would also suggest that you contact the D&I office to, perhaps, have a workshop regarding inclusion, because for now you are greatly failing at this.” We clearly disagree, which is fine. But using



aggressive language and threats to make your point is unacceptable. *Observant* is an independent newspaper that independently makes its editorial decisions. FOM wants to dictate which words we can and cannot use. And if we don’t... This attitude, especially at a university, is troubling. We have invited FOM to write down their objections in a letter, which we will publish. They have not yet responded to our invitation. And then there’s something else: last week, a Jewish UM student criticised Maastricht University on the website [www.israelnieuws.nl](http://www.israelnieuws.nl). The interview links UM to anti-Semitism and

## letter from the editor

anti-Israel sentiment and alleges that Jewish students feel unsafe here. This has already caused parliamentary questions to be asked by the political parties PVV and VVD, ChristenUnie and SGP. The article does not substantiate the accusations in the slightest, nor does it contain a response from UM itself. Last Monday, we asked the editors of *israelnieuws.nl* for the factual substantiation of the accusations and for UM’s response. After all, any self-respecting journalist knows that the subject of an accusation must always be afforded a right of reply *before* publication. We have since learnt that UM was not asked for a comment – a journalistic sin. We have not yet received a reply.

Riki Janssen

Every week, the editor-in-chief writes about what has been happening at the *Observant* office

FASoS student accuses UM in an online interview

## Questions in Parliament over alleged “toxic antisemitic climate” at UM

*Questions were asked in the House of Parliament last week about threats and an unsafe situation for Jewish students at Maastricht University. At least, that is what Ethan Gabriel Bergman, a student at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, says in the online medium Israël Nieuws. According to him, Jewish students do not feel at ease and hide their identity for fear of being stigmatised.*

Political party PVV wants to know what minister Van Engelshoven of Education is prepared to do about “the toxic antisemitic climate” at the UM. The VVD, ChristenUnie and SGP submitted similar questions to minister Grap-

perhaus of Justice.

In a question-and-answer article on *Israël Nieuws.nl*, Ethan Gabriel Bergman, student and active within the European Jewish Association, describes the alleged anti-Jewish climate at the UM. “With the growing disinformation about Israel, Jewish students only feel more unsafe on campus. Whatever outburst of emotions are released against Israel, European Jews are invariably the victims as co-offenders.” According to Bergman, the UM has about 150 to 175 Jewish students; that group “is disgusted by the facilitation of purely one-sided anti-Israel events within the university,” the article says. What springs out, is his report of Jewish stu-

dents who are being “threatened by fellow students. Ultimately, a Jewish student complained to the dean. ‘She had asked for it,’ is what she was fobbed off with.”

Exactly which faculty or dean this concerns, is unclear. The UM was not asked for a reaction. Christine Neuhold, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, where Bergman studies, at any rate doesn’t know the case, she says. Bergman has not reacted yet to the invitation for an interview with *Observant*.

Koen Augustijn, spokesperson for the Executive Board, states that they have not received any formal complaints. “Colleagues from the Diversity & Inclusivity Office did hold discus-

sions with students about antisemitism.” He emphasises that Maastricht University strives for “an inclusive culture. As a university with a very international community, we are aware of the fact that our power lies in our diversity and inclusivity.” The Executive Board therefore appeals in a written statement to everyone “who has experienced or seen any form of discrimination or intimidation” to report this, possibly even in confidence. This makes it easier to distinguish between “rumours and facts”.

Wendy Degens

Petition and letter to Examination Board

## Law students sign petition against exams at Mecc

*About three hundred law students want the upcoming exams in the Mecc to be cancelled. They find it unsafe, in view of the current number of people infected, and do not want to run the risk that the Christmas holidays will be ruined due to a COVID-19 infection and quarantine.*

The Dutch government announced last week that higher education will remain ‘open’ for the time being, regardless of the high number of COVID-19 infections (about 22 thousand per day). The second exam period, starting 13 December, can also take place in the Mecc. “It can be done safely,” said rector/President Rianne Letschert to the University Council last week. Although Maastricht University guarantees a distance of one and a half metres in the exam hall, students of the European Law School (ELS) and the Master’s in Globalization and Law are not reassured. More than two hundred ELS students have now signed a petition. Nearly eighty from the Master’s programme jointly sent a letter to the Examination Board. Core of their message: having a large group of students together is not safe at the moment. Second-year ELS student Gabriella Liebenberg started the petition with two fellow students. They have been worried about the meeting in



the Mecc for some time, but last week’s stricter government measures gave them the final push. The fact that precautions are being taken in the Mecc – extra hygiene measures, mandatory face masks – doesn’t reassure them. Liebenberg: “The thought of having to sit exams in the Mecc with hundreds of students in the same room for three hours and no possibility to keep the recommended distance in front of the building and the exam hall, frightens us.” Last weekend, they sent out a survey to their respondents to

*Exams in Mecc, last October Photo: Joey Roberts* find out more about why they signed. “We now know that 84 per cent will meet someone in the risk group over the Christmas break, and it is ludicrous to have exams in person in this situation, putting your own family at risk.” Within the Globalization and Law master’s programme, a single joint letter has been written to the Examination Board. The Portuguese Francisco Almeida, who also signed, is concerned about the new Omicron variant. In addition, he is not convinced that all sick students will stay

at home during the exam week. And he understands to some extent. “If you have COVID-19 you will still have two opportunities to do the exam, but they will be later, when you are already dealing with new courses. That’s against the principle of equality.”

According to the students, an online or take-home exam could be a solution. But about proctoring (online surveillance while the student takes the exam on the computer at home) Rianne Letschert was very clear during the University Council meeting last week: “We don’t want that anymore.” Postponing is not an option either, she said then. That would cause a lot of stress.

Sjoerd Claessens, vice dean of education at the Faculty of Law, who spoke to the initiators on Tuesday, explains that online “is not an option,” because in-person education (and examination) is simply still permitted by the government. “We will not only ensure that people adhere to the one-and-a-half-metre regulation in the exam halls, but also in the corridors and in the waiting rooms.” Along with that, of course, we are appealing to the students to be responsible, he emphasises.

Wendy Degens/ Simon Wirtz

## Is UM supporting neurodiverse students during the pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all of us, changes in our everyday life and routines to help prevent the spread of Covid have been stressful for everyone. Students, especially those who are living away from home, have been experiencing significant disruptions in their daily lives and additionally lost a big part of their social support and the structure given by academic and extracurricular obligations. But there is one group that these new conditions have particularly affected. Neurodiverse students struggle with the same problems as other students, but more severely. Even before the pandemic, many studies have shown that students with conditions such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia and other invisible



disabilities were already at a higher risk of depression and anxiety. The irritating changes to daily life and the uncertainty about when normal life will return could certainly increase numbers of depression and anxiety among these students.

From my experience as a neurodiverse student, especially since the beginning of the

pandemic, I can say that the online learning environment for me caused less accountability and provided a less interactive study environment. I chose Maastricht University for the PBL method and its hands-on learning approach. For me, the impersonal nature of distance learning and the endless hours of sitting alone in front of a screen, trying to pay attention to a pre-recorded lecture, resulted in dropping out of my classes and taking a break from university, because I just couldn’t force myself to learn in this way.

I especially struggled with online learning, because it requires students to be self-guided, manage their time and motivation, and complete assignments and tasks on a day-to-day basis without the usual structure or guidance given by the university system and fellow students. This can be especially challenging for neurodiverse students and I think it’s safe to say that online learning is worsening the already-uneven educational experience for former learners.

Neurodiverse students are already under-

represented in our higher education system and the past academic year has been a testing ground for the future of our education system. The experienced lack of social and institutional support makes me worry that pursuing a higher education is going to be even more challenging for neurodiverse students.

Distance learning is the best option we have at the moment, and I do not want to ignore the efforts made by universities as they continue have to adapt to the new COVID-19 requirements. But I think there are a lot more options to offer education under the corona measures and at the same time acknowledge different learning needs and provide more support and compassion. Neurodiverse students need different assistance and guidance, especially as we navigate a system that is not prepared, or willing, to take our needs into account.

Line-Marie Eichhorst  
is a European Law student

This column reflects the personal views of the author

column

## series the first of the family to go to university



Photo: Joey Roberts

- Alexander Louwes (1986)
- Education policy officer at the School of Business and Economics
- Went to University of Twente in 2004 to study Advanced Technology
- Born and raised in Emmen, Drenthe, together with his parents and older sister

Alexander Louwes came close to staying on in his part-time job at the zoo in Emmen after secondary school. His entire family worked there. His father worked in HR and his mother sold ice cream “near the sea lions”. Louwes himself was a food service worker at the park. “I enjoyed the work a lot and my colleagues were great. I was taking the pre-university level of secondary school, but I wasn’t all that ambitious. I thought about staying there for quite a while.”

With his interest in food service, Louwes considered applying to hospitality school. But when he began to explore his options in earnest, he came across many other interesting study programmes: education, artificial intelligence, mechanical engineering, psychology and so on. “I’ve always been a voracious reader with a lot of interests. Legend has it that I chose my programme by pinning various options to a dartboard and throwing a dart at it”, he says mysteriously. He doesn’t reveal whether this really happened.

Either way, Louwes started studying Advanced Technology at the University of Twente in Enschede in September 2004. He felt right at home in university. Gone was the bullying he had been regularly subjected to in secondary school. “My mother is from Thailand. They made slanted-eye gestures and mocked Chinese sounds.” Sometimes he was forced to

react to his bullies with violence, he says. “I once threw someone against a window. That immediately put an end to it. I never had to do that at university”, he laughs. “I found myself in a world of like-minded people.”

Louwes couldn’t really discuss his studies with his parents, although they were very interested and supportive. University was too far removed from their own experiences. His father studied a little more after leaving secondary school, but started working at the zoo soon after. His mother, who was born and raised in a fishing village near Bangkok, left primary school at a very young age to earn money for her family. “She still proudly tells the tale of how she cut her hair short and became a Muay Thai fighter when she was ten years old, fighting boys for money. She wanted to make money fishing, but only the men were

allowed to fish. She’s a very sweet woman with a lot of spirit.”

He also couldn’t turn to his parents for help in secondary school. “I’m sorry, I don’t know, my father would say. I often had to figure everything out on my own.” But he did well. “I never felt lonely because of it.” His mother was taking Dutch classes at the time. “After finishing my own homework, I helped her with hers.”

Louwes’s face lights up when he talks about his student days. “My best friends also went to Enschede. I was excited to move out. We were the first cohort of students in our programme. It was a great group of people.” He had a lot of friends and engaged in a lot of activities outside the programme as well. “I could often be found in the pub, but I also sat on the boards of various study associations and sports societies.” It took him six years to complete his bachelor’s degree.

He completed his master’s degree in Sustainable Energy Technology within the prescribed time, despite the death of his father. “Pancreatic cancer, an awful disease. It was diagnosed very late. My father was a quiet man. He never said it out loud, but I’m sure that he was proud of me. It was a terribly sad time in my life, but I received a lot of support from my girlfriend, who is now my wife. She helped me come to terms with the loss.”

The two were already living together before they became a couple. They were roommates in Twente and got together after six months. “She was a psychology student from Germany, one of the many Germans who were already coming to Enschede to study there at the time. The programmes were taught in Dutch, so we’ve always communicated in Dutch. She’s fluent now.” After completing their degrees, they both became PhD students. “Unlike my family, my wife was very familiar with the kind of life I led.”

Louwes moved from Enschede to Maastricht for her. “We’ve always said that we would relocate together if one of us found a good job far away, whether in Australia or Maastricht.” She works as an assistant professor in the School of Business and Economics. After working as a researcher in Belgium for a year, Louwes landed his current job at SBE. “My mother would have preferred that I became a judge, a doctor or – especially – a pilot”, he laughs, “so that I could’ve arranged cheap flights to Thailand for her.”

Yuri Meesen

*This is a weekly series of interviews with students or employees who were the first in their families to go to university*

Maastricht expert on dealing with work pressure

# Less fragmentation of work, more faith in staff

The complaints about work pressure at Maastricht University persist. In spite of the fact that everyone admits that the problems exist, extra money has been reserved, and additional staff has been hired. How is that possible? It is a many-headed monster, says professor Angelique de Rijk, one of the work pressure experts at Maastricht University, although she also doesn't have the ultimate solution either.

Angelique de Rijk, professor of Work and Health, specifically labour reintegration, and an Italian colleague are currently preparing a symposium – part of the conference for the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology in Glasgow – about the quality of work at universities. “We concluded that we know a lot about work and health, but how healthy are we ourselves as a university? We see mutual competition growing everywhere in Europe, the desire to control increasing, and the freedom of employees decreasing. All factors that increase work pressure.”

In January 2022, De Rijk will present the research on work satisfaction and work pressure that she completed together with others in 2019. This was carried out at the request of the education institute at the Faculty of Health Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML). It was a ‘forerunner’ of the UM-wide Sustainable Employability Monitor in which more than 2,800 employees participated at the end of 2018. The results are almost the same.

## Production work

What she found, was that employees take pleasure in their work and have their hearts in education, but they are under tremendous pressure. They feel like they have to keep the production running and are drowning in regulations. The standard hours (how much time does a lecturer receive for example for supervising a thesis, or preparing a lecture?) “are almost never sufficient. Lecturers have to do overtime to complete their tasks.” A complaint that, to date, can be heard throughout the university. An important cause is fragmentation: “The FHML teaching staff ran from one thing to the other, from bachelor, master, from health sciences to medicine. Everywhere has their own rules. This takes an awful lot of time.”

## Proper summer holidays

How can we solve this? It sounds simple: fewer tasks. Or, hire new people who can take on some of the work. Something that is not so easy, as recently appeared during a meeting of the University Council. There is scarcity on the labour market, there are lots of vacancies that still have not been filled, were some of the arguments. “The people can't be found,” was De Rijk's reaction. “Potentially there is enough. Think about all those who have recently graduated, but also the 300 thousand disabled people waiting on the side-lines. You have to recruit in a different way. The problem may be that they only want PhD graduates.”

Shorter block periods and a proper summer holiday are also weapons against extreme work pressure. De Rijk: “You must take time to rest, there isn't enough of that at the university. There is hardly any possibility to recover. Everyone is continually working at their utmost ability.” The result is that as soon as a child falls ill, or a parent needs volunteer aid, or a colleague is trying to cope with the consequences of flooding, the construction starts to fall apart.

It is of the greatest importance that bosses realise this. “We need involved and responsible leaders who intervene before it is too late and a member of staff needs to be sent home

with a burn-out.” For some time, the block co-ordinators at FHML have been attending a leadership course where they learn how to pay attention to the main lines, to use the qualities that people have, to communicate well and – when necessary – say that a plan is not feasible. “Those courses are successful, they work. By the way, we must rid ourselves of the idea that a leader is a super hero. You are the boss, but you do it together with your team.”

## Fragmentation

Obviously, the UM should also do something about the extreme fragmentation of tasks. “Work with a fixed group of lecturers who together take on a whole year of a study programme. You can see this at other universities too. It makes the work more organised, after all, you experience the entire cycle, it creates solidarity (‘we run the year’), increases the pleasure in work, and such an organised approach often also leads to a better quality of education.”

In addition, De Rijk also argues for a pool of tutors who are at the ready in case someone drops out. “That way, your colleague – who most likely also has too much on his plate – doesn't need to take care of things.” In the case of long-term absence, the department should be able to appeal to a social fund. “At the

moment, they often have to pay for replacements from their own pocket.” Another crucial thing is to exchange part of the regulations for more faith in staff. “Allow people to decide for themselves instead of checking everything. We are dealing with professionals. The greater someone's autonomy, the greater the pleasure in work.” She also feels that “labelled time” for professional development (things like visiting congresses or training) are necessary.

De Rijk points out that the work pressure derived from research – she only investigated the teaching side – runs through this for the researchers. “The demands are getting higher, the chances of succeeding in bringing in a subsidy, are small. This is bad, because it takes a lot of time and effort, and the stress of dejection contributes towards work pressure. Apart from that, members of staff also have to deal with students who are also becoming overburdened. They receive too little rest too and have to meet high demands (whether self-imposed or not). We are in a treadmill and we are running after each other. We should give lecturers the space to talk to students themselves instead of referring them to someone else.”

Riki Janssen

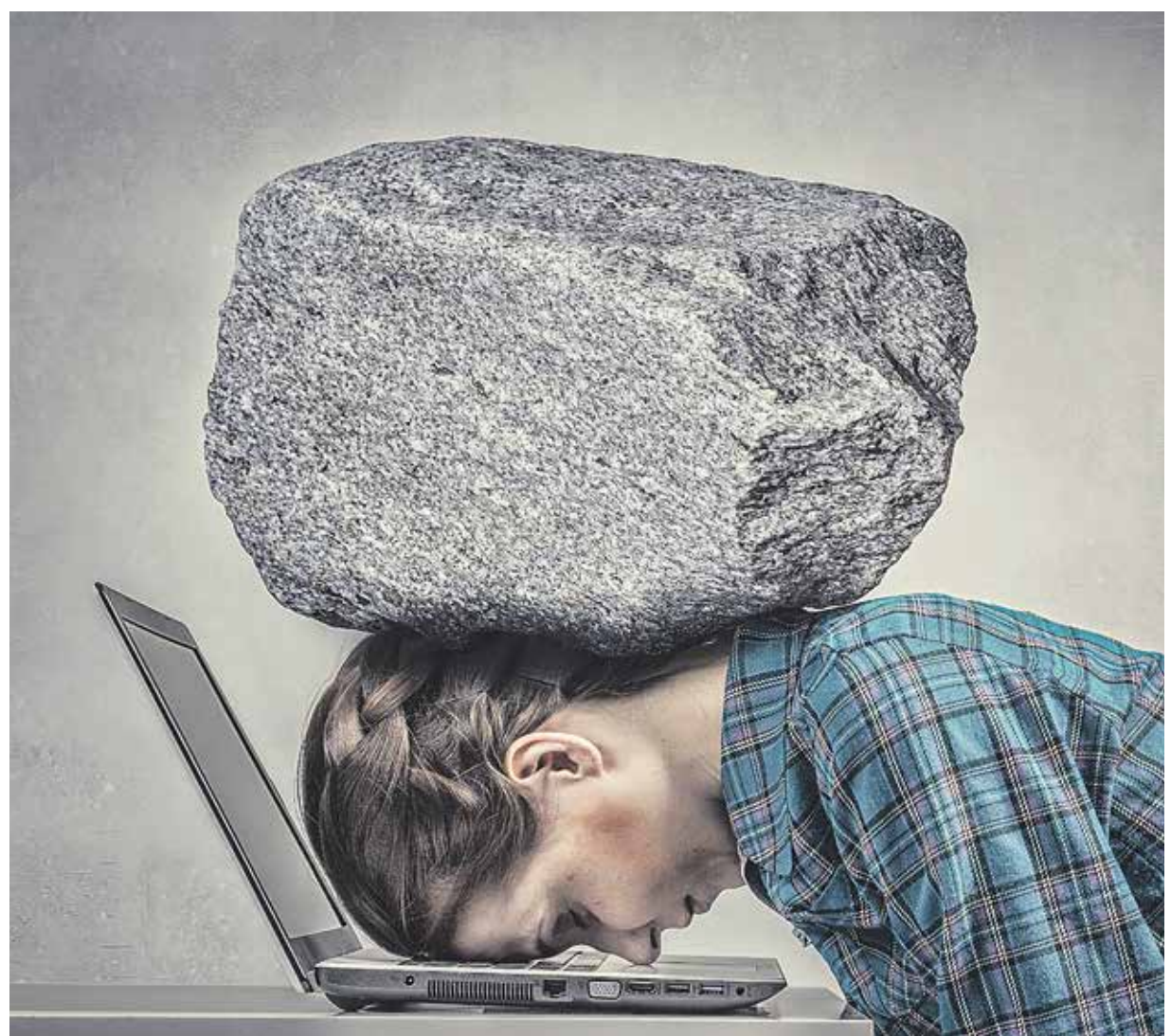


Photo: Sergey Nivens/Shutterstock

# Concerns of Caribbean students:



Jaycey Kelly and Warren Lasten

Financial stress, loneliness, the language barrier: recent research has shown that students from the Dutch Caribbean encounter a lot of problems in the Netherlands, often affecting their academic performance. Observant spoke to five Caribbean students at UM about their experiences in Maastricht. “I feel more at home here than in the Randstad.”

**Text:** Dennis Vaendel **Photo's:** Joey Roberts

Having to ask your roommates how the central heating system works, because you've never had to use one before. Not knowing that you have to push a button to open the train doors, because you've never travelled by train before. Suddenly realising in early autumn that you still have to buy a coat and warm clothes, because you don't have any. And taking the bus everywhere, because you never learnt how to ride a bike. If you've lived all your life on a small tropical island in the Caribbean, you may find yourself in some awkward situations as a student in the cold, densely populated Netherlands.

Though some of these situations may seem amusing or harmless, they often point to larger problems. Every year, several hundred young people leave behind the Dutch Caribbean – the constituent countries of Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten, as well as the special municipalities of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius – to pursue a university degree in the European Netherlands. At the end of last year, the National Ombudsman called attention to the fact that these students are more likely to experience mental health problems, fall behind in their studies or even drop out altogether. The challenges they face range from bureaucratic hurdles – for example, they don't have a Citizen Service Number (BSN) and DigiD log-in code to open a bank account or take out health insurance upon arrival – to the language barrier, financial stress, cultural differences, unmet expectations and feelings of loneliness. Some of these challenges are not unique to students from the Dutch Caribbean. But it's important to acknowledge the difference between these students and international students from countries like the US or Italy, who choose to study abroad. “Going to university in the Netherlands is essentially our only

option”, explains Jaycey Kelly, a master's student of Epidemiology from Aruba. “The islands themselves offer limited opportunities for higher education. And very few people can afford to study in, say, the US or Canada. In the Netherlands, we can study under the same conditions as our Dutch peers, including student loans and grants from DUO.”

## Maximum student loan

But then you're on the other side of the ocean, a ten-hour flight away from your friends and family. “It's sometimes difficult. Feeling homesick can affect your motivation”, says Lianne Girigori, a Biomedical Sciences student from Curaçao. “When I see my fellow students walking to the train station with their suitcases on Friday, I think, ‘Gosh, I wish I could go home for the weekend’. The weather and culture here are very different as well. It can be hard, but I try not to let it stop me.” On top of that, the cost of living is much higher in the Netherlands, says bachelor's student Samantha Cijntje, who is also from Curaçao. “My parents give me some money, but their salaries are simply not worth as much in the Netherlands.” She doesn't have time to work while studying: she is enrolled in two programmes, Digital Society and Data Science and Artificial Intelligence. “I have to be careful with money. I've selected the cheapest internet plan and I don't go out as often as others, which means I get to know fewer people. I often couldn't join my fellow students when they went out to have fun together in the first year.” “The vast majority of students from the Caribbean, including myself, take out the maximum student loan available”, adds Kelly. “It's the only option for us, but it

also means we accumulate huge debts. We often have to spend more than other students, too. We can't just go stay with our parents and not spend any money for a couple of days. And if we do fly home for Christmas or the summer, it's during peak season when tickets are ridiculously expensive.”

## A lot of freedom

Their ever-increasing debts put even more pressure on these students, as do their parents' expectations. “As a Caribbean student, you got on a plane to achieve something that your parents might not have had the opportunity to achieve”, says Warren Lasten from Curaçao, who studies Medicine. “This can make it more difficult to tell them that you're struggling with your studies, which only adds to your stress and problems.” And potential problems are everywhere. “A lot of people in the Caribbean have a very protected childhood. For example, we never go anywhere by bus; our parents drive us everywhere until we're eighteen years old. In the Netherlands, we suddenly have a lot of freedom. Some people don't handle it well.” His observations are confirmed by a study that was published earlier this year, conducted by ResearchNed on behalf of the Dutch government. Only 45 per cent of Caribbean students at Dutch universities obtain their bachelor's degree within four years, compared to 58 per cent of students with a non-Western migration background and 61 per cent of students from the European Netherlands and students with a Western migration background. These percentages are even lower for Caribbean students at universities of applied sciences.

## Friendlier

Although they recognise the struggles, the five UM students haven't seen a significant number of people in their immediate circles fall behind in their studies. Devagni Pourier from Bonaire has noticed that many of her Caribbean friends switch programmes after the first year, though, which is also confirmed by the ResearchNed study. "From the islands, it's difficult to get a good sense of what a degree programme will be like", she explains. "We can't just hop over to go to a university open day."

What about choosing a city? All five students made a conscious decision to study in Maastricht, not least because of the environment and culture in Limburg. "Bonaire has 20 thousand inhabitants", says Pourier. "The Randstad feels suffocating to me. Limburg is less densely populated and the people are friendlier, which makes me feel safer." Cijntje enjoys the small-town vibe, which reminds her of the islands. "When you go to a shop for the second time, the staff will recognise you and say hello. You don't get that in Amsterdam. I like this better. I feel at home here."

Lasten agrees. "I decided to go to Maastricht because it's quieter, so that I could focus on my studies. A lot of young people want to go to a city with a large Caribbean community, like The Hague or Rotterdam. Just about everyone has family and friends there, and you'll find lots of activities and Caribbean parties. There are a lot of distractions."

## Bubble

The international character of UM also appealed to the students. "There are people from all over the world in my tutorial groups", says Kelly. "It makes you stand out less; you're not just 'the Antillean girl' all the time." It also helps that many UM programmes are

"We learn about the Netherlands all our lives, but all Dutch people say to me in return is, **'You have beautiful beaches'**"

taught in English. "We learn Dutch at school, but we usually speak Papiamentu or English on the islands. It's sometimes difficult to participate in a Dutch-language tutorial because you can't always find the right words fast enough."

But the international environment comes with some disadvantages as well. "I would like to get a job in the Netherlands after completing my degree", says Cijntje. "I would like to practise my Dutch, but I don't get the chance." Tax Law student Pourier has actually noticed that she's struggling more with her Dutch, even though her bachelor's programme is taught in Dutch. "I only speak Dutch in class. Outside the classroom, we always speak English."

There is also the risk of ending up in a "Caribbean bubble", the students say. "It can be tempting to look for a safe and familiar environment, especially when you're going through a tough time", says Lasten. "There aren't that many students from the islands here, so you quickly become a small, tight-knit group. This can get you out of trouble, but it can also cause you to fall even further behind. If you don't stay in touch with your fellow students, you'll miss out on a lot of information and tips about your study programme and student life."

## Safety net

He therefore advises new students from the Caribbean

to make Dutch friends, although he admits that cultural differences can make this more difficult. Girigori concurs. "The differences may be subtle, but they do complicate things. I often don't understand puns or fixed expressions, for example. And going to a party tends to be all about getting drunk for Dutch students, whereas on Curaçao it's always about being in the present moment and having a good time together. I feel obligated to socialise with them, but it takes a lot of effort."

"Dutch students are unaware of these differences, because we adapt to their culture", adds Cijntje. "It's a strange realisation, actually. From an early age, we are raised with the idea that we will go to the Netherlands one day. But people in the Netherlands learn very little about our culture. When we're talking about Curaçao, they often say, 'You have beautiful beaches.' But the Caribbean is so much more than that! I think Dutch schools should pay a little more attention to the Antilles."

UM can also do more to help Caribbean students, says Lasten. "In my fourth year of secondary school, we went on a school trip to the Dutch universities. UM was the only university that had put up a banner with the name of our school on it to welcome us. It really made me feel like they didn't treat people like a number here. But now, looking back, I'm disappointed by the lack of personal support I received. Caribbean students encounter a lot of obstacles, but people often wait to ask for help until it's too late. UM doesn't have a safety net in place. You don't even get an email if you don't go to class for a year, even though the educational system is set up in a way that your absence should be noticed. It would be nice to have a university staff member who knows the problems we face and actively asks us how we are doing."

# the many obstacles to studying in the Netherlands



Lianne Girigori