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KEER OM VOOR  
NEDERLANDSE  
EDITIE



## Opening Academic Year:

Keynote speaker: "If we choose to unsettle ourselves, situations can't unsettle us"

See page 6-7



The cortège on Monday with Jaap van Dissel at the front on the right Photo: Joey Roberts

A short, white beard, a calm voice, clasped hands and an unflappable demeanour: Jaap van Dissel, the director of the Centre for Infectious Disease Control at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), has become a national celebrity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighteen months ago, he was thrust into the public eye. He has been both praised – Maastricht University awarded him an honorary doctorate yesterday – and condemned, particularly because of the face mask debate. "There will always be criticism of people who step up to lead in times of crisis", says Professor Christian Hoebe, Van Dissel's honorary supervisor.

It was less than three months after COVID-19 brought Dutch society to a screeching halt that the Executive Board of Maastricht University approached Christian Hoebe, a professor at UM and the head of the department of infectious diseases at Public Health Service South Limburg, with the idea of offering

Van Dissel (1957) an honorary doctorate. It was quite a bold idea: Van Dissel is not uncontroversial, as he himself knows all too well. When Rector Rianne Letschert called him to tell him about it – as relayed yesterday on Monday 6 September during the opening of the academic year – he said, "Are you sure?

Professor Christian Hoebe  
on honorary doctorate recipient  
Jaap van Dissel

"There will always  
be criticism of  
leaders in times  
of crisis"

What if I get a lot of criticism in the coming months? The reputation of your institute might suffer." Letschert

replied, "That's science." It's not unlikely that there will be a parliamentary inquiry into the Dutch government's

response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the future. Van Dissel's actions will be put under a microscope. But whatever happens, UM is sure of its decision, as illustrated by Letschert's words.

### Captain

Hoebe is full of praise for Van Dissel, describing him as a captain steering a ship through a rough and stormy sea with limited visibility. And Van Dissel has been doing so for months, "steadfast and calm. He has shown leadership in an exceptional situation."

But that isn't the main reason why UM awarded Van Dissel an honorary doctorate. In a press release, Rector

Letschert emphasised the way he, as a scientist, fulfils a role with great social impact. Her words of praise for Van Dissel ("a great honour") already went viral back in December 2020. He was supposed to receive his honorary doctorate during the Dies Natalis last January, but COVID-19 threw a spanner in the works. Yesterday, the opening of the academic year presented another opportunity.

### Live stream

As the chair of the Outbreak Management Team (OMT), Van Dissel regularly met with Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

To be continued on page 6

### P3

A lottery for a spot at a student association, but not in Maastricht



Although the Maastricht associations are also growing; Koko the fastest with 300 new members

### P5

The European university of the Netherlands



Martin Paul: "It's easy to shout something, but you also have to be able to substantiate it. We can."

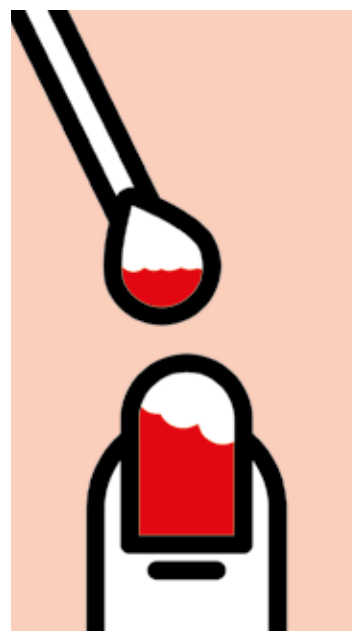
# SPLINTERS

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



## Beer anyone?

Students having a drink with the rector. It has most likely also happened in Maastricht once or twice. But in Tilburg, students drank some very special beers with rector Wim van de Donk and beadles Renata van Leeuwaarde and Astrid van Hemert at the beginning of this month. The threesome opened the first bottles of the three latest beers from the campus pub: the Rector Magnificus (triple), the Beadle (blond) and the Dean (non-alcoholic). “This is very nice indeed,” said Van de Donk to the sister newspaper *Univers*. A reliable judgement? It is a bit like the butcher inspecting his own meat. Fortunately, we can soon have a second opinion from our own Rianne Letschert, because “I will certainly be bringing along a small crate to the next meeting of the Dutch rectors,” her colleague from Tilburg said.



## Smell of gas turns out to be nail polish remover

Students in Groningen had a shock last Friday. One of them smelled gas, so the fire brigade was called and the building was evacuated. While the ten students waited on the street outside, the firemen carried out tests. These showed nothing alarming, because the smell turned out to come from a bag with nail polish remover. It is not the first time that the fire brigade has been called out for something like this. “People often confuse the smell of gas with a similar smell,” says a spokesperson to the Higher Education Press Agency. But they are glad to come. “We would rather come ten times for nothing than be too late once.”

## Pestering or pure coincidence?



The fact that foreign students, in their desperate search for a room, find them-

selves facing con artists, is nothing new. But with a remarkable turn of events, this fraud was given an extra dimension this year. The crooks tried-and-tested recipe is: choose a random address, offer a non-existing room for rent online, and have interested students sign a fake contract and pay a deposit without seeing the room. Once the students arrive in Maastricht, it soon becomes clear that fraud has been committed. With a German student, who is studying in Maastricht, however, another surprise

followed, says local newspaper *De Limburger*. Not only did it appear that ‘his’ room didn’t exist, but he found himself at the door of Maastricht D66 council member Richard Wijnands, who deals with rooms shortage in the city. Purely a coincidence, or pre-planned by the con artist? “I am asking myself that same question at the moment,” says Wijnands. “Certainly because I asked some critical questions on this subject recently. But at the moment, I have no evidence that it was done on purpose, so I am assuming that it was a coincidence.”

## Every disadvantage has its advantage

We could put our feet up. But we couldn’t dig in our heels, no matter how revolutionary or novel the proposals were. That was the only way to move forward, we all agreed. It was January 2020. On our annual awayday, far removed from our everyday environment, the *Observant* team took their first steps towards a new strategic plan, to be rolled out in autumn. And a novel proposal was made: why not make the website just as important as – or maybe even more important than – the print version of our newspaper, suggested colleague CF. For some of us, this was a hard pill to

swallow. Print was sacred, wasn’t it? I felt the same way, to be honest. But we squared our shoulders, brainstormed about this and other plans, and agreed to let it all sink in for a bit. We’d revisit the idea on our next awayday in March 2021. And then COVID-19 hit. Awaydays and strategic plans were pushed from our minds. We started working from home, the print version of *Observant* disappeared, and our entire journalistic world moved online. Though we didn’t realise it straight away, we suddenly had a testing ground to see what it would be like to have a website that was much more important than the print version of our newspaper. We practised and learnt, became increasingly annoyed by our



old website – it was so slow, so poorly organised! – and decided it was time for a new one, COVID or not. It’s now eighteen months later. We were reminded of our March 2020 awayday when UM launched its strategic plan last Monday, a bit later than planned due to the pandemic. It’s a thirteen-page document explaining the main points of where UM wants to be in 2026. “It’s a living document. Developments in higher education are rapid and unpredictable. Five years ago, who’d have thought we would set down

quality agreements, or develop the Einstein telescope?”, President of the Executive Board Martin Paul told *Observant*. We still have to write our own strategic plan – it’s planned for the end of this year – but some of what we discussed almost reluctantly in January 2020 has already become reality. We have a new website, and it plays a leading role. In other words, when we finish an article, we will immediately post it online. We will no longer wait for the print newspaper, as we often did before the pandemic. As for the print version itself, it’s now fully bilingual. That’s yet another plan we discussed with reservations and objections on that awayday. Would we be here if it wasn’t for COVID? I doubt it. It’s a cliché, but it’s true: every disadvantage has its advantage.

Riki Janssen

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



# Koko grows fastest for the second year in a row

Various student associations across the country had so many students registering that they had to introduce a membership stop. That was not the case in Maastricht, although many new first-year students registered here too. Most of them opted for Koko: more than three hundred. That association grows faster than any other one, Saurus a lot less: 195, considerably less than last year (274).

"A little meagre," says the (now) former chairman Karel van Melle. "I am convinced that we had a good programme. Maybe the rain prevented us from showing ourselves well as a sports association. With that kind of weather, a pub is probably more interesting." Anyway, this result is not the end of the world, says Van Melle. "It is a pity that we are below the level of last year (274 registrations), but with 195, we

have more than enough people to fill the boats and committees."

Koko outshines the rest by far and is "very proud" of that, says former chairperson Maaïke Hooghiemstra. "Despite the weird Inkom, without the parties that we normally hold, we registered more than three hundred new members." Hooghiemstra thinks that it is because Koko is the most progressive association in Maastricht. "We are the most open. Dutch or international, everyone is welcome." There aren't any exact numbers at the moment, but there are a lot of internationals among those numbers this year too.

According to Hooghiemstra, students of the future are becoming less and less interested in the classic association traditions such as hazing. Koko doesn't have those. A member stop, as is the case with their sister association

in Groningen, wasn't necessary. "We were able to cope with the growth pretty well last year. We will manage this year too."

Circumflex is also "very satisfied," says the new chairman, Simon Hoek. They registered 253 new members. An unprecedented number, says Hoek, certainly because the association couldn't go to its normal lengths because of COVID-19. Still, Hoek thinks that the high number of registrations are partly due to the virus. "Student associations are a good way to meet a lot of people quickly with things the way they are now." Whether the bad weather was an impediment for them during Inkom? "Of course we would prefer to be sitting outside in the sun at our outdoor cafe, but for the association it may not have been such a bad thing. Our clubhouse is in the city centre, maybe first-year students found it easy to just

walk in."

Tragos registered 202 new members. "Slightly fewer than last year, but that is also because there were extra registrations then due to the pandemic," says the new chairman, Robert Roosen. At that time, only members were allowed to make use of the outside terrace because of COVID-19. Inkom participants who signed up at the door for a temporary membership, were allowed to have a drink on the terrace. Many of them remained members. In short: "Very happy with the result. At every event, there was a queue waiting at the table to register." Anyone who registered with the association did so to the loud applause and shouting from people on the terrace, Roosen laughs. "Tragos is more than happy."

Yuri Meesen

## Cultural scientists thrilled with the collection of objects in the library

A fire engine, a portable gas cooker, an electrical telegraph, lenses from the beginning of the 20th century. There are about 1,700 scientific instruments, technical appliances and tools stored in the basement of Centre Céramique. From Thursday onwards, a selection of those will be displayed on the second floor.

But what are these objects doing in the library? That is what Karin Bijsterveld, UM professor of Modern and Contemporary History, also wondered when she happened to come across the catalogue on Centre Céramique's website. The items appear to originate from Nutsbedrijven Maastricht (Maastricht utility companies), secondary school laboratories, contractors and private parties.

A true kid in a sweetshop moment for Maastricht cultural scientists who specialise in science, technology and society. They elaborately described 23 objects in the bilingual booklet *Uitgepakt/Unboxed*. In it, they detail the social significance of the items.

Have you ever heard of a heliostat? That is an 18th century 'lamp', in which sunlight is captured and passed on using a mirror. The 'stationary sun', as would be the literal transla-

tion, served as a source of light in laboratories. The exceptional thing, author Veerle Spronck writes, is that the instrument is still used, but now in a very different way. In the Maankwartier in Heerlen, daylight is collected for additional lighting in the depths of the parking garage.

Then there is the pinewood telephone, which was made around 1880, with a separate mouth and ear piece. What gesture would you have used back then to indicate in company that you had to make a phone call, Thomas Frissen wonders in the book. Every period has its own gesture. Before the arrival of the mobile phone, it was a fist with a protruding thumb and little finger, now it is a flat hand with the finger tips against your ear and the flat of your hand in the direction of your mouth.

It makes you think that at the end of the 19th century, two fists were used: one at the mouth and one against the ear.

Maurice Timmermans

The exhibition 'Unboxed: instruments for science and technology' starts next Thursday in Centre Céramique; the book can be downloaded or ordered, for more information, see [www.maastrichtsts.nl/unboxed-launch](http://www.maastrichtsts.nl/unboxed-launch)



### Art and science under a clear blue sky

After a year of absence, the Pleasure, Art & Science (PAS) Festival of Studium Generale took place again from September 3-5. Hundreds of visitors enjoyed music, theater and lectures on the Tapijn-kazerne grounds. The turnout was slightly less than expected – some people who had reserved a place did not show up – but otherwise the festival went well. Photo: Joey Roberts

column

## Wedding ring gone

My left hand felt unbearably, unusually light. I looked. My wedding ring was gone. Maybe you've seen me wearing it. It's thin with rounded edges, dark gray, semi-shiny. As jewelry, it's unremarkable; as a symbol, it's the anchor of my life. Yet even a symbol shouldn't necessarily hurt if it hits you, hence a ring made of a light metal, titanium. In a month my wife and I will celebrate our 15th wedding anniversary, my first without



a ring to wear, because I've lost it. It's somewhere in our rented garden plot at the Amby volkstuin. I'm certain it came off my finger while I was re-planting dahlia bulbs back in May.

What does it mean to live in a place? We commonly think a place is made from what we take of it, both the tangible (the food, the weather, the landscape) and the intangible (the mood, the resonances of history). Yet places also take from us. Small things, mostly. A coin, a sock. Sometimes just time, sometimes blood. A place will take your innocence. Sometimes it tries to eat your symbols.

That day I had caught the volkstuin soil trying to take my ring - in fact, I had already rescued the ring from the bottom of one dahlia bulb

hole. "How odd", I thought, "it's never slipped off like that before". I should have put it in my pocket, because another hole succeeded.

Get a metal detector, you might suggest. A neighbor tried that - nothing. Titanium has low magnetism, which makes it difficult to detect. How very Greek tragedy of my ring, for its essential character to be both asset and flaw.

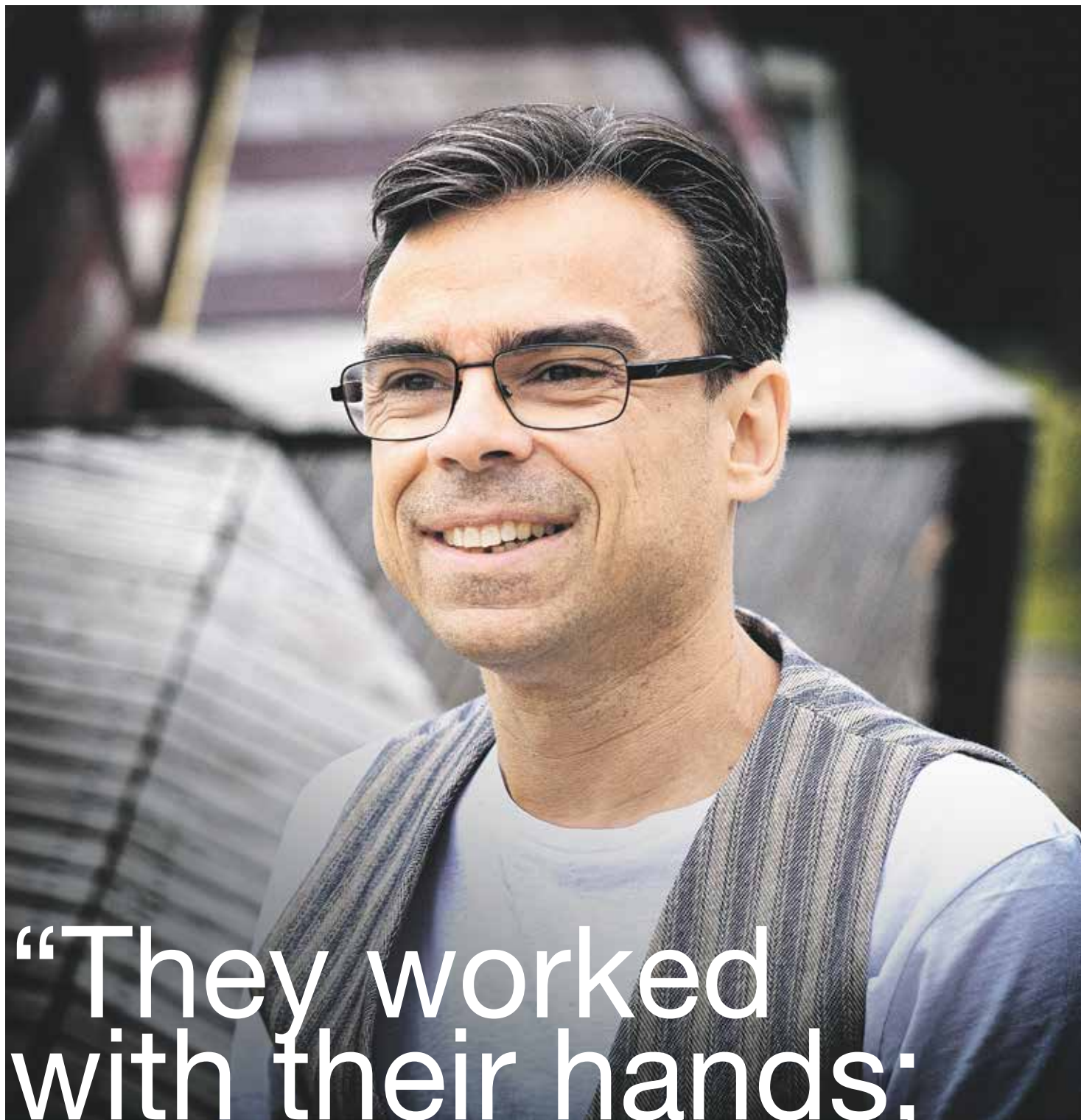
For now, the ring is lost. But it's titanium - I can shine it up nicely, once I wrest it back from the Limburgian earth.

Michael Erard, Funding Advisor, Faculty of Law

This column reflects the personal views of the author



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



“They worked with their hands: I work with my mind”

Photo: Joey Roberts

“**ON** Saturday afternoon, I was already thinking about having to go back to work on Monday. It made me feel depressed.” Paulo Rodrigues can laugh about it now, but when he was in his early twenties, he had a full-time, nine-to-five job as a bank clerk in his hometown of Darmstadt, a city near Frankfurt in southwest Germany. He had made the decision to go straight into work from school. “The German term for it is *Ausbildung*. It’s like an apprenticeship, allowing you to earn money while you learn. I really didn’t know what to study at university. If I had to pick something, I probably would’ve studied philosophy or history.” Neither discipline is anything like the one he would end up falling in love with: econometrics.

### Stock exchange

He stayed in his job at the bank for three

- Paulo Rodrigues, age 45
- Assistant professor at the School of Business and Economics, Finance
- Went to Goethe University Frankfurt in 1998 to study Business Administration
- Born and raised in Germany with his parents and sister

years. “Quite a long time, considering I hated it,” he laughs. The one part he did enjoy was stock exchange. Rodrigues decided to enrol in the Business Administration programme at Goethe University Frankfurt. “Why did I choose that particular programme? I don’t know. It seemed interesting enough. The university was close to home, so I wouldn’t have to move out. It just seemed convenient to me.”

Looking back, Rodrigues feels like it may be typical of first-generation students: the lack of knowledge about study programmes, universities (“which university is best for me?”), not having any people around you who can help you with that. “My parents had no idea. I figured it all out myself.”

He never did an exchange abroad, which he considers a missed opportunity. “Here in Maastricht, SBE arranges all that for its students. When I was a student, I had to do it

myself. The thought didn’t cross my mind, so I didn’t go on exchange.”

### Domestic worker

Rodrigues’s parents are from Portugal. They moved to Germany in the early 1970s. “My father became a blue-collar worker at Merck, a chemical and pharmaceutical company. He worked with machines there.” Portugal was a fascist dictatorship for decades. Rodrigues’s mother and father had pinned their hopes on a better life in Germany, where economic growth had led to plenty of job opportunities. Paulo Rodrigues was born in Germany in 1976. His sister was born not long after him. “It became more and more difficult for my parents to go back to Portugal. Germany was where they worked and lived. My sister and I went to school there, made friends there.” Both of his parents came from a working-class background. “In Portugal, my mother was a domestic worker for rich families. My father worked in a small supermarket. You must understand that going to university was not an option for them. Four years of secondary school and that was it, unless you had a lot of money. They never said that they were sad or sorry about it. It just was the way it was.” His parents taught him how to take responsibility for his life and a strong work ethic. “I feel like many students today don’t have that. They’ll claim that an exam was ‘too difficult’, but if they’d studied all the material, they would’ve known all the answers. So how could it have been too difficult? Maybe you don’t understand all the material, but if that’s the case, ask for help. Don’t point the finger at your teacher and blame everything on them.”

### Chance

“My parents were always working. They would work into the late afternoon at one job and then work as a cleaner into the evening hours. They worked with their hands; I work with my mind.” He never discussed his university courses or his career with his parents, let alone ask them for advice. “I didn’t bring it up and my parents didn’t ask about it. It was fine, though. I had plenty of friends I could talk about those kinds of things with.”

Rodrigues and his parents had one common interest: football. Both he and his late father were big fans of Benfica, a football club based in Lisbon. “We used to watch matches on TV together, or go to the stadium if we were in Portugal.”

Rodrigues explains that he didn’t have a clear career path in mind. “I was just making it up as I went along, really. It all happened by chance.” Going to university was the right thing for him: “From the moment I walked in, I felt at home.” He ended up earning a PhD in Econometrics. “After that, I wanted to continue to pursue an academic career in Finance.”

And it just so happened that Rodrigues took the same train to Frankfurt as a Professor of Finance. “I commuted from Darmstadt, he commuted from Heidelberg. He recognised me and we got talking one day.” The coincidental meeting resulted in Rodrigues working as a postdoctoral researcher in the Finance department.

If it had been up to Rodrigues, he would have stayed in Frankfurt his whole life. “I enjoyed it there.” Even so, he came to Maastricht ten years ago, following the advice of a now former lecturer at SBE whom he had met at a seminar. “He thought it was time for me to go somewhere else.”

Wendy Degens

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

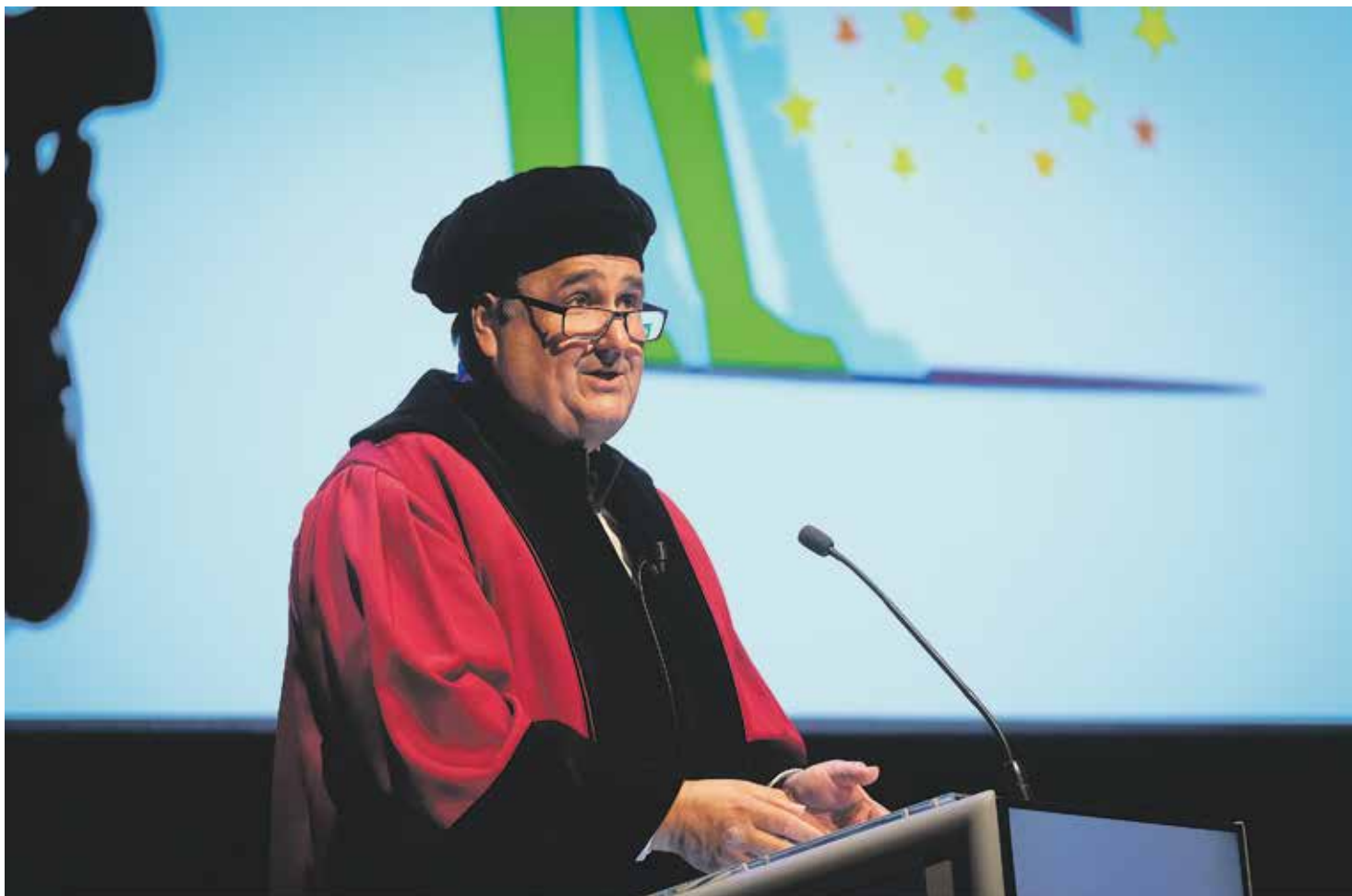


## opening academic year

### Strategic plan 2022-2026:

expansion of the sciences and research theme Sustainability and Circularity

# “As a university in the Netherlands, you have to show who you are”



Maastricht University – the European university of the Netherlands. This is both the title and the recurring theme of Maastricht University’s strategic plan. The plan was launched during the official opening of the academic year.

Tekst: Riki Janssen Photo: Joey Roberts

They took their time with this, President Martin Paul explains. “We pondered long on this statement: the European university of the Netherlands. It is easy to shout something, but you have to be able to substantiate it. We can: we have European education programmes, 90 per cent of our foreign students and 40

per cent of our researchers are from Europe. We do a lot of European research, we have a campus in Brussels, we are the initiators and chair of the European university *Yufe* (Young Universities for the Future of Europe) and we have the *Maastricht, working on Europe* programme.”

Rewards, a memo on internationalisation, and Sustainable UM 2030. Others are still being drawn up. If necessary, these will be adapted to the current state of affairs in the coming years. Paul: “It is a living document. Developments in higher education take place at a high pace and are unpredictable. Who would have thought five years ago that there would be quality agreements, or the Einstein telescope?”

#### Resilient

What is striking in the strategic plan is the importance attached to well-being, security, involvement and careers of employees and students. They form a community that has recently shown – first with the cyber-crisis and subsequently with the COVID-19 pandemic – that it is “resilient, involved and professional. “We must make the effort to keep it that way,” says Paul. To achieve this an open, safe culture in which people treat each other with respect, is a must. At the same time, employees and students – from all corners of the world and highly diverse – must be given the chance to develop academically and professionally as well as personally. Examples include the *Recognition and Rewards* project (employees), but also the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills that contribute towards students developing into “active, globally oriented citizens”.

#### PBL and technology

The UM continues to embrace problem-based learning. That constitutes the basis, the plan states, but this will be, more so than before, enhanced with all kinds of technologies. The first steps towards this were made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Science+

The expansion of the sciences (Faculty of Science and Engineering) will take priority in the coming years. But always in combination and balanced with other UM disciplines and faculties and with due respect for social issues: the so-called Science+. As befits a network university, Maastricht scientists will collaborate on this with national and international parties.

#### Four research themes

Until now, three research themes were focal points in Maastricht: Quality of Life, Learning and Innovation in Europe, and a Globalising World. A fourth has been added now: Sustainability and Circularity. “Circularity focuses on the cycles of raw materials, while sustainability has a broader bearing on people, environment and prosperity. The theme fits in seamlessly with our social responsibility towards our community and the planet by promoting sustainable development and wider prosperity,” says the plan. The study programme and research in the field of Circular Engineering is a first example of this.

#### Farewell

The new strategic plan 2022-2026 is a kind of farewell gift from President Martin Paul, who is to become rector/chairman of the Ruhr Universität in Bochum as of 1 November. “We worked on this with a lot of people, the input came from across the UM and from external experts. I mainly had the role of a kind of moderator.” He is happy with the result: “You have to show who you are in the context of the Dutch university system, this is important, certainly when you look at the national discussion on internationalisation and the language used in higher education.”

#### Network university

The UM may be calling itself the European network university, but that doesn’t mean that it doesn’t do business with the rest of the world. Students and researchers from other parts of the world are very welcome and there is collaboration with partners from the Global South, for example; this includes parts of Asia, the Middle East, Central America, Africa. “A European university with a global orientation,” says the strategic plan. “The UM is a unique hub, a living lab, and an expertise centre for Europe around the question: what does Europe mean to the world, and what does the world mean to Europe?” At the same time, the focus on the Euroregion remains important.

#### All of thirteen pages

The thirteen-page document states where the UM wants to be in 2026. The details will follow in separate memos. Some have already been completed: Recognition and

## opening academic year

Keynote speech:  
prof. Mamokgethi  
Phakeng

*“Every unknown has the potential to unsettle us, but if we choose to unsettle ourselves, that is a different matter.” This is how professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town and the keynote speaker during the opening ceremony of the academic year in the Vrijthof Theatre on Monday, started her plea for disruption.*

# “If we don’t disrupt ourselves, we will be disrupted”

According to Phakeng, the world is ready for change, ready for a transformation. Only then can great problems such as climate change, the stream of refugees and poverty be solved. She believes that universities must recognise that this transformation is necessary and inevitable. “Then we are exercising our power to make disruptive choices. And a university environment is the perfect place to develop our disruptive potential, because universities are places of ideas and innovation.”

Policies may be necessary, but they have their limits where it comes to change, says Phakeng.

“To achieve it, you need people. An example: our university (Cape Town, ed.) provides financial assistance for students with a lower socio-economic status. That is important, but not enough to bring about a transformation. The university environment treats them as if they have been done a favour. And hence they should be grateful, assimilate to the environment, graduate and leave. During protests in 2016, I asked students: ‘What do you want, you have everything already’. And they said: ‘Don’t try and silence us by paying our tuition fees. We don’t want to be enveloped in the existing

culture of the university, we want to change the culture.”

On the opposite side, you always have people who don’t want change; those who are content with how things are now. Phakeng: “People feel good in their comfort zone. Instead of striving for the best solution, we make our decisions on the basis of what is acceptable. The present situation is always acceptable, otherwise we wouldn’t be in it. Maybe it is not effective or successful, but it is acceptable. People fear what life would be like if we did things differently.” It seems as if transformation is only possible when a big event such as the covid pandemic swings us out of our comfort zone. But what, says Phakeng, if we create some chaos, some disruption? “Then we can end up in the *discomfort zone*, without us being in a crisis. It is challenging and exciting there, without it becoming overwhelming. That is where we could grow as a university.” So, she concludes: “Listen to people, listen to those who do not agree with you, who make you feel uneasy. Invite these people to sit at your board table, because otherwise you will hear their voices in protests.”

Cleo Freriks

# “They wanted black and white answers”

Continued from page 1

He also gave “public lectures”, as Hoebe calls them, during press conferences and briefings in the House of Representatives, “which were live-streamed to the whole country”.

Prime Minister Rutte and his colleagues had a lot of questions about a virus they were still unfamiliar with. And they had decisions to make. Should they close schools and bars, restaurants and cafes? Should they impose a nation-wide lockdown? How about a night-time curfew? Mandatory face masks? Each time, they looked to the OMT for answers. “Jaap had to explain an unprecedented pandemic from a scientific point of view”, says Hoebe, who is also part of the OMT as a medical expert. “In my view, he did so calmly, clearly and comprehensively. I think his demeanour inspires confidence. He looks like, well, like a real professor. He knows what he’s talking about.”

## Face masks

The government relied heavily on the OMT. “They followed our advice ninety per cent of the time.” But as its chair, Van Dissel received a fair amount of criticism as well. Many countries enforced mandatory mask wearing last year. The Netherlands took quite a while to get to that point. Van Dissel maintained that face masks were not necessary if people adhered to the existing restrictions, including social distancing. If anything, he claimed, face masks create a false sense of security. Prime Minister Rutte and Minister of Health De Jonge eventually decided otherwise. At the end of 2020, face masks were enforced in public places like shops, museums, and schools and universities in the Netherlands. The Dutch people didn’t quite know what to make of all this. Was it just a political issue, or was Van Dissel actually wrong? Criticism came not just from ordinary citizens, but also from politicians, fellow scientists, and even his famous American counterpart Dr Anthony Fauci,



Jaap van Dissel receives the kappa from his daughter Photo: Joey Roberts

Trump’s chief medical adviser at the time. On Dutch national television, Fauci advised Van Dissel “to look at the rapidly increasing amount of data on the importance and effectiveness of masks”.

“The Netherlands had a special position compared to other countries”, says Hoebe. “People wondered why Belgium was enforcing mask wearing when we weren’t. But, as I’ve explained plenty of times myself, the evidence for face masks is contradictory.” Did he think Van Dissel was too firm on this point? Hoebe finds it difficult to respond to this question. “As his honorary supervisor, I’m here to praise him. Let me put it this way: the way his words were written down was definitely too firm.” Hoebe emphasises that there’s nothing wrong with criticism, “it’s part of science”, but it must be civil, he says. “And criticise the actions, not the person. But when you’re at the helm during a crisis, you will inevitably antagonize people.”

## Talk show

Hoebe finds it admirable that Van Dissel never abandoned ship as the director of the Centre for Infectious Disease Control. He says the

past months were a “roller coaster, especially for Jaap. Don’t underestimate the political dimension, either: it was election time.” Many political parties were competing for votes, which, Hoebe says, “definitely influenced” the way MPs treated Van Dissel during debates. “They often wanted black-and-white answers. But science is all about nuance: it’s this and that, pros and cons. The pandemic also brought a lot of uncertainty; sometimes we just didn’t know. We tried to explain that.”

Last July, Van Dissel told *Villamedia*, a website about journalism, that conversations with journalists were most valuable “when I felt like we’d had an in-depth conversation about the complexity of the pandemic.” He rarely participated in talk shows. He would lose too much time, as he explained in the same *Villamedia* interview. But another reason, Hoebe knows, is the talk-show format. “They’re usually about entertainment. They don’t really lend themselves to the kind of nuance that Jaap and I want to communicate.”

## Threats

Eighteen months ago, Van Dissel could never have imagined that he would be assigned personal security after receiving threats. There were even several lawsuits over the last few months. For example, a 48-year-old man from The Hague was sentenced to four months in prison. “The OMT sometimes discussed threats, and how some of us were getting a lot of them”, says Hoebe. “But we didn’t spend hours talking about it. We couldn’t; we simply didn’t have time for that. I’m sure Jaap was affected by it, but he always kept going. He just put it from his mind and focused on his task. “The virus has challenged us. It was and remains complicated, what with the new variants appearing. We won’t know if we got it right until it’s over.”

Wendy Degens

“I’m sure Jaap was affected by the threats, but he always kept going”



## Hustinx Prize 2021 for computer ethicist Katleen Gabriels

Gabriels heard last July that she would receive the prize. It was a welcome surprise after a tough COVID-19 year, says the Flemish philosopher. “It is great to receive a sign of appreciation from my faculty, because it was the faculty that nominated me. Although it does feel a little double: there are a lot of researchers at FASoS who work very hard. So, you do need to have some luck on your side.” The jury emphasised, among others, the “important social impact” of Gabriels’ research. This impact consists to a large extent of raising awareness. In a world where we are increasingly surrounded by computers and artificial intelligence, Gabriels sees that there are still many misconceptions regarding technology. “Many people think that computers are objective, but that is certainly not always the case. The standards and values of the people who develop the technology can – consciously or not – be incorporated in the design. A painful example is the Dutch subsidy debacle.” In this case, in which thousands of parents were unjustly classified by the tax office as frauds, an algorithm determined whether someone who had applied for a subsidy constituted a risk. “This algorithm appeared to be more alert where it concerned people with dual nationality or a name that sounded exotic.”

### Parish priest

This philosopher reckons that discussions concerning computer ethics should not be held within the walls of academia. She regularly appears in the media and has written two books for a wider audience: “To provide resistance to the rhetoric of technology companies or politicians who are badly informed or uncritical.”

Not that she minds doing that. On the contrary, Gabriels actually wanted to become a journalist. The fact that she ultimately ended up in research, is pure coincidence. “When I did my master’s of Moral Philosophy, the online environment *Second Life* was very popular. People ventured there as avatars in a virtual world in which they could be who they wanted to be. So, for me the question

# “My trap is that I find too many things interesting”

Can you teach a robot standards and values? And, will artificial intelligence help us in the future to make ethical choices? These are questions that moral philosopher Katleen Gabriels (1983) deals with on a daily basis. During the opening ceremony of the academic year, she received the Edmond Hustinx Prize 2021, which also includes an amount of fifteen thousand euro, for her research.

arose: who do you become then? What determines the standards and values of such a world? It intrigued me so much that I decided to write my master’s thesis on the subject.” When some time later a PhD position became available at the Vrije Universiteit

Brussel on the exact same subject, the unexpected opportunity won from the ambitions of becoming a journalist. “Maybe that is the nicest: when you roll into something without any expectations, everything is a surprise.” In addition to taking part in the public

debate, Gabriels also believes that it is important to teach ethics to technology developers. One of the reasons for her to move to Maastricht University in 2019, was because programmes at Dutch universities paid more attention to technology ethics than the Flemish universities. “Of course, when I am standing there pontificating as an ethicist, future engineers will at times think: ‘There goes our parish priest again’. But fortunately, there are a lot of designers who themselves see the importance of teaching ethics.”

### Revenge pornography

As an example, she mentions Tony Fadell, one of the designers of the iPhone, who is arguing for a type of Hippocratic oath for developers, in which they swear to cause no damage to society. “I am especially charmed by the fact that developers came up with this themselves,” says Gabriels. “That makes my work somewhat easier. But just an oath is not enough. We also need adequate policies from government, and unfortunately that is where there are still a lot of obstacles.”

She doesn’t know yet what she is going to do with the prize money of fifteen thousand euro. “But it will definitely go into research.” Which in her case doesn’t say very much, because she is busy with many subjects at the same time. For example, she has just submitted an article about the “purely future-oriented” question whether artificial intelligence can become a moral mentor for humans, she recently completed a report on the effects of revenge pornography, as well as research into how current technology influences the bond between children and parents. “We have never lived in a society that has been so governed by technology. And wherever morality and technology meet, new questions arise. I find practically all of them fascinating. Although that could also be my trap: maybe, I find too many things interesting. I never have enough hours.”

Dennis Vaendel



Winner Katleen Gabriels (on the right) with rector Rianne Letschert Photo: Joey Roberts

## The Edmond Hustinx Prize

for research is intended to “underscore the meaning of science for society” and to accentuate the importance of Maastricht University for Limburg. The prize – 15,000 euro – goes to a different faculty every year. The winner of last year’s Hustinx Prize – statistician Laure Wynants – was honoured as well during the Opening Academic Year. She received the prize for her research on prediction models for COVID-19. The ceremony was however postponed due to – indeed – the COVID-19 measures at the time.