

25 Observant

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INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

KEER OM VOOR
NEDERLANDSE
EDITIE

P6-7 Opinion

Disbelief and dismay
after University
Council stays silent
about DDos-attack
Observant

Six hundred new student homes in Randwyck “We will soon have a small village here”



The already existing rooms on the Sorbonne/Salernolaan Photo: Joey Roberts

P5 Student community

Well-being is the focal
point of the new student
organisation UM
community



Due to the many holidays there will be no paper Observant in the coming weeks.

The next issue will be
published on
Thursday 12 May. In the
meantime, check out
(www.observantonline.nl/
English) for the latest news or
subscribe to our newsletter.

Randwyck is going to get another six hundred new 'container homes' next autumn. These will be situated on the waste land on the Oeslingerbaan alongside the already existing 252 student rooms. On Wednesday evening, 30 March, the development company Studenten Huisvesting Maastricht informed the neighbourhood about the plans. "While we were thinking that we would get a beautiful Calatrava campus, we will soon be saddled with almost a thousand student homes and a parking lot full of cars at our front doors."

Safety is one of the most important points of attention that Peter Broekmans, director of Studenten Huisvesting Maastricht (SHM), mentions at the end of the meeting for neighbours. In a communal space in one of the existing 'container blocks' on the Oeslingerbaan, about fifteen neighbours have come together. Broekmans realises all too well, just like Patrick Dillen from Plaza Resident Services (formerly Camelot), responsible for management, that a small village is shooting up. And a project like that must be managed properly. No less than six blocks, each with one hundred self-contained units will be added. The units will be built in the C3Living factory in Limburg and transported as prefab packages to Maastricht. A temporary permit of ten years applies to these homes.

Dire

Neighbours from the surrounding area listen carefully to the plans. Nobody gets angry, but there are worries, about the quality of life, disturbance, et cetera, "eight hundred cyclists in front of my door", "the value of our houses will decrease". Someone else wonders why they to build here again, rather than on the Graanmolen, further along, "where nobody is bothered by it".

Fred Bunk, policy advisor for the city of Maastricht, explains that this is the only location that can be used quickly and without too many problems. The ground is owned by the university and they said: "This can be used". The situation is dire: "We are assuming a doubling of the growth of student numbers next September, and knowing that there are less new complexes becoming available, we need to make haste with new homes."

The building permit has already been applied for. The developer wants to start preparations in April. Completion is planned for August and September, "but then everything has to go according to plan," says Broekmans. "It is an ambitious plan."

Parcel service

Those present have already had two years of experience with more than two hundred studying 'male and female neighbours'. They know all too well what needs to be improved on. The

delivery guys who drive past dozens of times a day to deliver parcels, they drive too fast in a neighbourhood where there is a primary school and crèche. The manager promises that there will be a service for parcels. "Parcels will be stored in a depot and brought to the location once a day. Students will be given their own lockers, so they don't necessarily need to be at home to receive the parcel."

Another source of irritation is the coming and going of meal couriers from Thuisbezorgd, and drug dealers who come to sell their wares, just outside the grounds. When it comes to drugs and alcohol use, we maintain a zero-tolerance policy, Dillen emphasises. "Two warnings after a report of disturbance, or if the caretaker sees it himself, and on the third occasion you can pack your bags. Our caretaker is present 24/7. He does rounds in and around the buildings and is the contact person for students. We see that it works. When there are eight hundred students living here, we will intensify this. Safety is important."

Brighten up

"Is it really quiet at ten o'clock in the evening on the grounds? Also, who says that they won't move to playgrounds or sports fields in the neighbourhood to barbecue during the summer?" was another worry. According to

To be continued on page 5

SPLINTERS

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

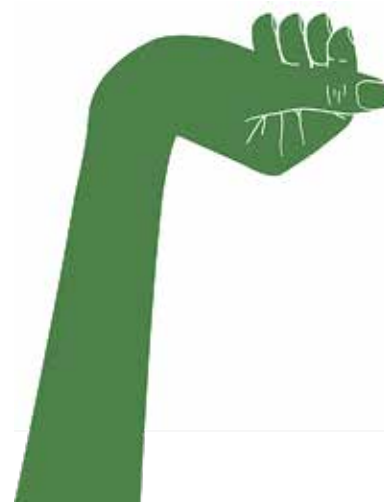
A digital visit to the zoo



Children who are on the children's ward of MUMC+ can from now on go to the zoo every day. Digitally that is, using one of the four virtual reality glasses that the Psylaris company donated to the hospital. Research has shown that animals have a healing effect on people and are important for the well-being and recovery of children, newspaper *De Limburger* writes. Psylaris, a Maastricht company that invents ways to apply virtual reality, particularly in mental health care, made sixteen different short videos in Gaia Zoo. Children can now look around in the giraffe's quarters and visit the meerkats. By the way, the little patients can soon pet real animals again too. The children's farm that came to visit every month before Covid, with guinea pigs and rabbits, is going to resume its activities on the ward. All of this is part of the *Pootjes aan het bed* (Animal feet at the bed) project, in which UM researcher Pim Martens is involved. It looks at the effects of animal-supported activities in health care.



Bye-bye disinfectant columns



Most people will probably walk straight past them by now, but they are still there: the small pumps with disinfectant gel at the entrance of the university buildings. Often complemented by a bin underneath, because those things are prone to leaking or distributing too much in one go. Now that the Cabinet is relaxing the measures even further – from 11 April, large-scale testing will be abolished too – they can be discarded. This week, they will be removed everywhere and stored – ready for the next pandemic. The hygienic cloths, sprays and tissues in meeting halls and classrooms can also be removed and the cleaners don't need to make extra trips anymore.



Marking strike

Lecturers from the University of Amsterdam are not going to mark the final assignments (such as essays) that will be handed in soon, university newspa-

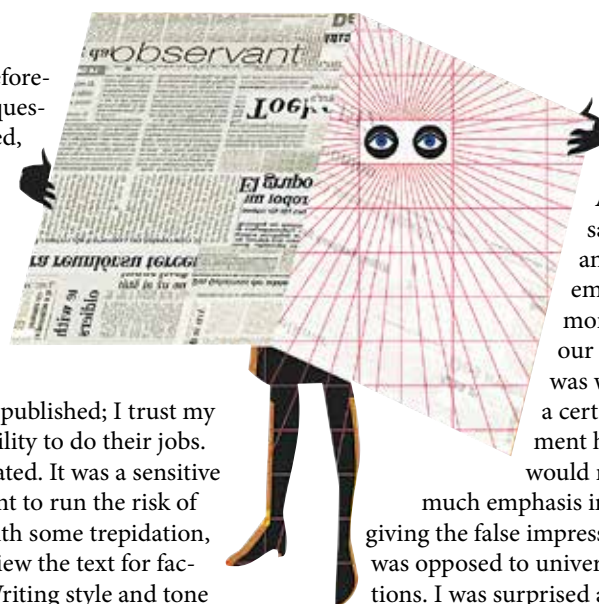
per *Folia* writes. The marking strike is an action by Casual UvA, which wants attention to be paid to employees with temporary contracts. "Systematic overtime and exploitation" need to be dealt with and the working conditions need to be improved, says the action group. "Better personnel policies create happier staff that are better able to carry out their tasks, and at the same time you achieve more depth because people don't keep disappearing," says Njal van Woerden,

member of the Central Works Council, and himself a lecturer with a temporary contract. "After four years, a PhD candidate receives a doctorate, we are given the push. There is something wrong with that, isn't there?" Lecturers from various programmes are going to participate in the action. Exactly how many, is not yet known, neither is it clear who will mark the assignments instead. The Amsterdam Executive Board has not reacted yet.

A worried email

When the doctor becomes the patient... You hear stories about how enlightening it can ultimately be for the former to be on the other side of the desk for once. It often makes them a different – better – doctor, more understanding of their patients' fears and concerns. Does this also apply to journalists? A while back, I was on the other side of the table myself: I was interviewed a few times. I found

myself wondering beforehand what kinds of questions I would be asked, already preparing some answers in my mind, and hoping that they would be written down with all my caveats and disclaimers. Now, I never ask to see an article before it is published; I trust my fellow journalists' ability to do their jobs. But this time, I hesitated. It was a sensitive issue and I didn't want to run the risk of being misquoted. With some trepidation, I asked if I could review the text for factual inaccuracies. (Writing style and tone are the author's own; they're not up for discussion.) The author said yes. I spotted two



slight errors, which were immediately corrected. Around that same time, an interviewee emailed me the morning after our interview. He was worried that a certain comment he had made would receive too much emphasis in the article, giving the false impression that he was opposed to university regulations. I was surprised at first; for me, the comment had been just one of many things we had talked about. And I had

Letter from the editor

definitely not been under the impression that I was sitting across from some kind of rebel. I replied as much. I finished the article a week later. I ended up not using the comment in question, as it didn't add much to the story. The interviewee was pleased. He felt well represented by the article and didn't mention his first email again. I don't know if I would have reacted differently if I hadn't recently been interviewed myself. But it did remind me of the concerns, well founded or not, that an interviewee may have. And that's a useful reminder from time to time.

Riki Janssen

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

First edition of *Night of Science* with Maastricht researchers Science among book shelves and bar stools



Researcher Tim Wolfs speaks to the audience Photo: Joey Roberts

“Maybe sometimes we appear to be a small provincial university, but this research ranks among the best in the world,” moderator professor Tilman Hackeng emphasised again to his audience in the Dominicanen church, where the first edition of *Night of Science* takes place this Tuesday evening. Three Maastricht scientists talk about what they do on a daily basis.

The audience and the speakers are not sitting in a stuffy lecture hall this evening, but among book shelves in the church that was transformed into a book store. The theme of the

talks is all about ‘The fascinating world under the microscope’, or how donor cells are used to heal or prevent diseases and conditions.

Tim Wolfs talks about his research into stem cell therapy in children who have had “a poor start in life”, for example due to complications at birth. Rogier Veltrop explains how he converts blood cells into beating heart cells, and Lotte Wieten talks about the role that so-called killer cells can play in cancer treatment.

At the same time, a little further along, in Grand Café Maastricht Soiron on the Vrijthof, three other researchers speak about the theme of ‘Gender and Health’, among others about

the question why women suffer from dementia more often than men. After the lectures, the audience from the Dominicanen church join those in the pub for a final drink, where they can continue to cross-examine the researchers while enjoying their drinks.

With this event, the five funds of Health Foundation Limburg - the organisation of this *Night of Science* - hope “to give a glimpse behind the scenes” of the research that they support. The idea is that this becomes a recurring event, which will also take place in other cities in Limburg.

Dennis Vaendel

“When I call the police in cases of disturbance, they say that they have no time”

Continued from page 1

Dillen, the police and enforcers will also have to take responsibility. “We have asked the police to make space available for such large student numbers.” One person present is sceptical: “The same thing was said to me two years

ago. But in cases of disturbance, when I call the police, they say that they have no time.”

Maurice Evers, head of Maastricht University’s Student Housing, offers up a plan that is still “in the orientation phase”: a pavilion for communal activities, where students, but also neighbours, can meet each other. The univer-

sity will also free up some “financial means” to freshen up the area surrounding the blocks. “We want to brighten up the place, with things like benches and plants. We are appealing to the neighbourhood to join in.”

Wendy Degens

Saurus scores historical third place in Varsity’s top event

On Sunday, the four men from Saurus who participated in the main event, the Old Four of the Varsity – by far the most important national student rowing competition on the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal near Houten – came in third in the finals. A unique result, never before had the Maastricht student rowing association ever reached the finals.

“Magical,” says Karel van Melle, who was bowman during the race, about their third place. Just after the preliminary competition – the race that determines whether a boat is allowed participate in the finals – the four men and their helms woman were greeted as heroes on the berthing raft. Van Melle said they were every bit as good as the other teams last week, but “I thought after the places were drawn that a place in the finals would be difficult”. We managed by the skin of our teeth to beat, among others, a team from Leiden with no less than an Olympian in the boat, he says with pride.

So, pressure was kind of off in the finals. Even in the hours between the preliminary competition and the finals, the atmosphere in the team was “very jovial. We could only win even more,” says Van Melle. Soon after the starting shot, two of the seven boats made an error, as a result of which they briefly came to a halt.

“Objectively looking at the other teams, you knew that your opportunity to win was not great, but when you pass two fast boats who are in trouble, the golden ‘opportunity’ (first place, ed.) briefly flashes through your head.” In the end they came third.

Even the commentators (also students) of the event were impressed, says Van Melle. An achievement that puts the small association from the south on the map. “The tears on the cheeks of some Saurus members, all the applause, the numerous people who came to cheer us on and the many hugs that we received when we moored: fantastic. I even heard someone say that this was ‘his greatest Saurus moment ever’. The association will be rejuvenated by this.” The five took their places on the bar in Saurus’s pub for a tribute last Monday.

YM

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The Beach

One recent weekend, I was meant to be at the beach, but instead I was reading about it. Some friends had arranged a getaway during our time in Melbourne, and we’d dreamed of a long lazy catch-up in salty sea air.

But Covid-19 had other plans. Our family’s staggered isolation dates meant this period was extended, but also that my husband and I got separate periods of time in our in-house quarantine station: the attic.

In my solitude, instead of diving into crashing waves, I dived into novels. I had previously



been combing the shelves of my local bookstores and had accumulated an unrealistically

high stack of books to read.

I started with *The Weekend* by Charlotte Wood; a beautifully crafted story of friendship, ageing and grief. And yes, the characters spend time at the beach. The final scene, filled with the revitalizing force of rolling walls of water, left me breathless.

As isolation progressed, I wondered why I wasn’t making more time for books. I was a voracious reader yet by the end of last year I was struggling to finish a novel within a month. 4 Ps had crept in and interfered: parenthood, pandemic, paperwork and the phone. The same can be said for ‘work’ books. One of the sad realities of academia seems to be that as the pressure to publish books mounts, the less time we seem to have for actually reading them.

Swimming in novels again, I felt refreshed. I remembered what it felt like to lose track of time. To concentrate. To be immersed in, and imagine, the lives of others.

One of the first things I did out of isolation was to visit the bookstore again and make that unrealistic stack even higher. Next up, Nevil Shute’s 1957 novel *On the Beach*. If you don’t know the plot it’s about a group of people in Melbourne, waiting for a nuclear fallout from World War III in the northern hemisphere. No idyllic Australian beach story, but luckily, it’s all just fiction – right?

Anna Harris, associate professor department of Society Studies; Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

This column reflects the personal views of the author

series leadership styles



Photo: Joey Roberts

Jacques Beursgens,
director of ICT Services

“Don’t put on
an act, stay true
to yourself”

“I’m not the kind of manager who just keeps an eye on things and builds on what is already there. I see myself as a leader who is constantly looking for ways to improve. And I do so together with my people, while trying to shield them from the heat as much as possible to allow them to do their jobs. A leader who inspires enthusiasm in his employees, motivates them and gives them the opportunity to get the best out of themselves.”

Jacques Beursgens, who has been director of the ICT Service Centre (ICTS) since 2016 and is responsible for its central IT services as Chief Technology Officer (CTO), is sitting back in his chair in his office on Looiersgracht. He is 61 years old, studied electrical engineering with a specialisation in computer technology, and was conscripted into the Royal Netherlands Navy in Den Helder, where he taught STEM subjects after completing an accelerated junior officer training programme. On weekends, he was an officer of the watch, responsible for more than 1100 men in training and about 150 non-commissioned officers.

“I was young. I knew nothing”, he says now. But he did know one thing: “I’m not the kind of IT guy who likes to be alone. I’m a people person who enjoys working with others.”

Introvert

ICTS is working hard to get the best out of their employees (about 110 in total), Beursgens says. “We’re engaging in much deeper conversations with employees than before. We have two power women in HR who focus exclusively on people management. We’re looking for ways to empower our people. That’s the most important thing. If you succeed in that, everything will be easier.” What exactly does that mean? “Sometimes people don’t quite come into their own. If so, we see if they are a better fit for another position, not necessarily one at ICTS. You don’t play a striker in defence. Similarly, you don’t put an introvert in a position where they have to talk to customers all day long. There are a lot of introverted people on my team, engineers who enjoy doing system maintenance or development activities.”

Don’t put on an act

After his military service, Beursgens first worked in IT at the UM Department of Anatomy and Embryology, was subsequently self-employed for six years, returned to UM to establish the Faculty of Psychology under the direction of Louis Boon, was chair of the Faculty Council for more than five years and chair of the University Council for two, then served as deputy director of the Faculty of Psychology, and finally became director of ICT Services. He has taken quite a few management courses throughout his career: Krauthammer, Steep Face, Oxygen. The most important lesson he learnt: “Don’t put on an act. Stay true to yourself. It’s OK to feel and show emotion. If one of my employees is struck by a personal tragedy, I sympathise with them. It doesn’t leave me unaffected.” At the same time, a good leader isn’t someone who is overly upbeat and happy all the time. “You must be firm and fair. You will sometimes need to deliver difficult messages, although you must be able to explain them. If you can’t, things will usually go wrong at a later time. Never

allow a problem to fester. The employee may hate me at that moment, but in my experience, people are often grateful afterwards.”

Turbulent years

It’s been a turbulent few years for his team, marked by two successive crises: first the December 2019 cyberattack, then the Covid-19 pandemic (having to facilitate working from home and online teaching), both of which pushed ICTS staff to their limits. “We are two years behind on schedule. We’re trying to catch up, but the pressure is still high. We’ve created a road map to let the university know what they can expect from us, which has taken some of that pressure off. The IT ambitions are sky-high, but how quickly we can achieve them depends on our capacity. It’s my job to shield my people from the heat. I don’t want them to fall into a negative spiral.”

Impatient

Of course he makes mistakes, he says. “Leaders are not infallible. It’s OK to make mistakes, as long as you learn from them. I used to react too quickly, too emotionally. I’ve learnt how to let things rest for a while. Sometimes I write an email I end up deleting. Leadership is also about sitting on your hands, holding your horses, waiting. You become a better leader by trial and error, by learning from those experiences.” And then there’s character, which can get in the way. He chuckles. “I can be very impatient, but I know how important patience is. Character doesn’t disappear, though. You just learn to parcel it out better.”

Riki Janssen

This is a weekly series in which we interview people in leadership positions at UM about their leadership style. In January 2022, Maastricht University launched the Leadership Academy as part of the Recognition & Rewards programme, which aims to create more diversity in academic career paths and foster quality academic leadership.

New UM community for students

“I help others and that makes me feel better”

For students who sometimes feel lonely, who need to feel ‘they belong somewhere’, there has been the UM community since this academic year. Run by students, for students. Well-being is the focal point, “that you do fun things together and support each other when times are difficult”.

She knows all about that, about how bad you can feel on your own in a new city. No family nearby, no housemates or fellow students with whom you hit it off well, not wanting to become a member of a student association or a sport's association with all kinds of obligations. Third-year psychology student Amber Morley, involved with the UM community, arrived in Maastricht in the autumn of 2018. “I only made a definite choice of study programme in the summer, and apparently it was too late to find a decent room (I wasn't aware that there was such a shortage).” So, for weeks she travelled up and down, from Brussels to Maastricht and vice versa. Tiring and stressful. “I was constantly afraid that the train would be delayed and I would not achieve my compulsory attendance. It was a poor start.”

Gapyear

She found a studio in October, but loneliness struck. She suspended her studies and returned to her parents. “Mainly because of my health, I suffer from epilepsy.” The gap year was good for her, she says. Morley picked up her studies again a year later. “I found a room with super nice housemates. Despite the pandemic I no longer felt alone. I finally felt like I ‘belonged somewhere’. You want everyone to have that. With the UM community we are trying to realise that.”

Annadal

“We set up the UM community last September,” says Véronique Vancauwenbergh, project manager of Student Wellbeing at the UM. “It is a student community in which it is all about well-being; doing fun things together.” In the N building at Annadal on the Brouwersweg they have their own space, a hub. You can paint there, talk, get a drink, watch a film. Since recently, there are also study spaces (at fixed times and days), “to get away from your own room for a while”, says Morley.

As one of the fifteen peer supporters within the UM community [in addition, there is also a university-wide peer support project, ed.], Morley offers a listening ear. When it is needed, she can make her fellow students aware of the ‘help network’ of psychological counsellors and student advisors. “As a first-year student, I didn't even know student advisors existed.”

Lack of help

Loneliness is prevalent among many (especially foreign) students, the Polish Mateusz Kubow, third-year student at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, head of the UM community, has noticed. “We saw that students like being together. Unfortunately, we



Photo: archive UM community

have not been able to organise as much as we wanted due to COVID-19 measures, but you see that there is an interest. Sometimes, thirty people show up, sometimes ten. It still has to grow.”

Student organisation LSVb and ISO already warned in February that international students could find themselves in a fix due to loneliness, Covid pandemic and strict regulations (for example, the agreement that European students have to work 56 hours a month to be eligible for student financing). “International students bring knowledge, experience and culture to the Netherlands, but they get a lot of loneliness, high work pressure and lack

of help in return,” Lisanne de Roos from The Dutch National Student Association, stated.

Train journeys

Kubow can say plenty about it too. He came to Maastricht in 2019. “I felt alone. I mainly met a lot of German and Dutch students who seemed to get together in their own groups. I was also in doubt whether I was good enough for this study programme and didn't feel strong mentally.” In addition, I also had to earn money, “I have experience in catering, but I didn't manage to find anything.” He ended up in Roermond, as a sales person in the Designer Outlet. “I hated it. I found it to

be an unfriendly environment and I worked long days.” Moreover, he lived in Heerlen, “because I couldn't find anything in Maastricht”. He also had to pay for train journeys. “I find it unbelievable that foreign students don't receive some form of compensation, whereas the Dutch can travel for free.” He took the train to Maastricht in off-peak hours, so in the early hours, so that he could get some kind of reduction. “It was exhausting.” Now that he is working for the UM community, it is a win-win situation. He is there for others and “I feel better myself for doing so”.



Cultural war at the UM

We find ourselves in a state of cultural confusion, says the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in an extensive interview in *NRC* on 1 April. He detests the cancel hype that is especially prevalent on American student campuses where you can no longer disagree with each other and when you voice objections, left-wing radical students make you out to be a racist who must be punished, and preferably eliminated. Unfortunately, this is comparable to the present cultural war being waged at the UM since *Observant* refused to 'rectify' *menstruating women into menstruating people*.

I am now – personally a former University Council member on behalf of the scientific staff – extremely shocked that during the latest University Council meeting people refused to respond to the request made by council member Maarten van Wesel on behalf of administrative and support staff. A request to defend the fundamental right to be able to express different opinions and to condemn the attacks on the *Observant*. Fortunately, president Rianne Letschert stated that at least the Executive Board emphatically condemned this attack on freedom of the press and freedom of opinion.

The silent majority. I was embarrassed to read in Jonathan Haidt's piece that at least eighty per cent of the people can live with diversity, but allow themselves to be intimidated by ideological extremists. However, giving into them is bad for an – already worldwide wavering – democracy and mental health. He states that universities may be the only place to turn disagreement into truth. Council members, especially academic staff, don't be afraid of being cancelled and open your mouths. Fight for free speech and put Van Wesel's motion on the agenda for the next University Council meeting.

Machteld Roede, former UM employee (scientific staff) and former member of the university council



Duma on the Maas?

I was shocked when I recently read about how a DDoS attack had paralysed the website of fellow university newspaper *Observant*. That feeling immediately made way, last week, for dismay due to the reaction by the Maastricht University Council to the attack. Or, more accurately, the lack of a clear reaction, writes the editor-in-chief of the *UKrant* Groningen, **Rob Siebelink**.

'My' *UKrant* (formerly *Universiteitskrant Groningen*, aka the *UK*) and *Observant* have a lot in common. That is not a coincidence. As 'older and bigger brother', we were once a model, in the sense of an independent journalistic anchor in the academic society. *Observant*/Maastricht and *UKrant*/Groningen have, let me say, the same DNA.

A University Council and the academic media, in turn, also have the same chromosomes. Both check, of course each in their own way, the power; i.e., the Executive Board and the "others who are placed above us" (as a *UKrant* columnist beautifully worded it recently).

This doesn't mean that the council and the editors always have to agree about everything. On the contrary. I would be lying if I was to claim that there has never been friction between the *UKrant* editors and (individual members of) the University Council in Groningen. That is not a bad thing either, it is part of the game that the press and politics play. Everyone does agree, however, on the fact that council and editors serve the same interest; together they form the heart of university democracy. Something like that is not noncommittal. If 'those in power' mess with the power of the University Council, the academic press has to jump into action. And if those same people in power curtail the academic freedom of press, the University Council must defend that freedom with all its might. That is the way it has always been in Groningen. What in heaven's name is happening in Maastricht?

It is actually the world turned upside

down: the Executive Board condemns ("emphatically") that *Observant* is silenced, the University Council does not and cowardly hides behind procedures and protocols ("we were surprised, it wasn't on the agenda") or does woke prevail over freedom of press ("the newspaper didn't create a safe space").

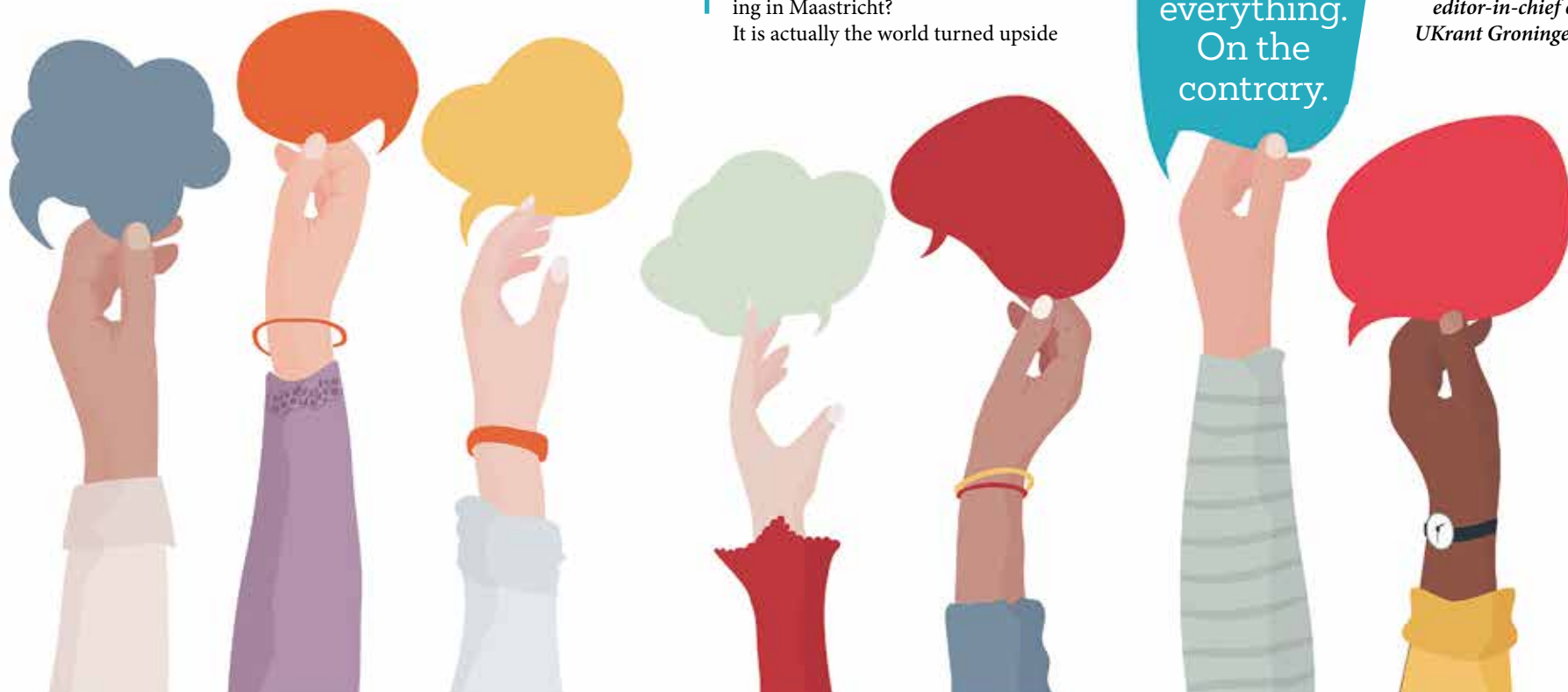
Do petty little private opinions, magnified by the cancel culture in Maastricht, outweigh basic democratic principles? Is it allowed alongside the river Maas to explain away crimes, on the pretext that it was your own fault? Have all political and social signals 'keep your hands off relief workers and journalists' (including the demands for heavier sentencing by the counsel for the prosecution) not reached the southern university?

Because, all things considered, there is no difference between threatening a journalist with clenched fists (or worse) and shutting down a website. In both cases, words are smothered and anyone who has been

chosen as a representative and has no opinion on this, is not worth a snap of one's fingers. In that case, you can no longer speak of a university parliament, but you have become a Duma on the Maas.

This doesn't mean that the council and the editors always have to agree about everything. On the contrary.

Rob Siebelink, editor-in-chief of UKrant Groningen



What kind of university do we want to be?

“Incredible,” wrote **Jan Smits**, dean of the Faculty of Law, last week in a tweet prompted by the deafening silence in the University Council in response to the cyber-attack on *Observant*. According to him, this is not an isolated incident, “this is about the values of our university. The academic and open culture is under threat.”

I became Dean in 2017. At that time, I stopped writing my column for *Observant*: as an administrator, you must above all be open to criticism yourself and I found that incompatible with the role of columnist. But recently things have happened that I, as a member of the UM community, cannot keep quiet about. I mention three of them. First: in its last meeting, the University Council refused to condemn the cowardly (and criminally punishable) DDoS attack on *Observant*, which brought the journal's site down for three days. Second: I hear that some UM colleagues no longer wish to speak with *Observant* because they experience the journal as ‘transphobic’ and hateful. By this they refer to the refusal of the editors to write about “menstruating people” instead of “women who menstruate” in an article about the deposit of free sanitary towels in the UM toilets. Third: last year a meeting was held at UM about the phenomenon of *Zwarte Piet*, at which all white attendees were asked to leave the room.

Self-censorship

This is not the university I stand for. Contrary to what the University Council seems to think, the issue surrounding the DDoS attack is not about *Observant*. It is, as in the other two examples, about

the values of our university. My university is one in which everyone feels free to say what they want and in which this can be refuted by others without hindrance. This is the core of the academic and open climate we must stand for. This climate is under threat. Not by restricting freedom of speech, but by self-censorship. Who dares to speak out against woke statements if you are immediately labelled a racist or a transphobe? Let us avoid a situation in which we no longer know how to disagree with each other, a situation that is already occurring at many American universities – only read Haidt and Lukianoff's *The Coddling of the American Mind*. To be clear: I do believe the critical attitude of wokism

is fantastic. The constant questioning of others – and certainly of the establishment – about how inclusive and fair their language or views are, is very welcome. I myself studied at a time – the 1980s – when that happened far too little. But this does not mean that anyone who has a different view should not also feel free to express it.

Safe space

Perhaps I should be more explicit on one point. Cancelling language or dissenting opinions does not – contrary to what some people think – contribute to creating a safe environment or ‘safe space’. Especially at university you need to hear opinions you disagree with. Not in order to offend others, but to initiate discussion. Is that not also the core of ‘global citizenship education’? Those opinions may then be contested with all the arguments you have, but you cannot order the other person to stop expressing them. The only real safe space is the space where we can disagree with each other. The university's task is to create the conditions for that space – both literally and physically. This is not done by excluding people, but by listening and giving space, also to what some people experience as ‘dangerous’ opinions or ‘dangerous’ words. And of course: everyone is free to also criticise my view on this – I am after all a white middle-aged man who scores dangerously high on the seven ticks list. In its next meeting, the University Council has a new opportunity to condemn the (again: criminally punishable) DDoS attack against *Observant* – and thus against UM. I assume that this will happen. But it is not enough. Let us have a broader debate within our university about how we deal with other people's opinions.

Jan Smits,
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Who dares to speak out against woke statements if you are immediately labelled a racist or a transphobe?

