

“It’s not about ‘me, me, me’. The president of the Executive Board doesn’t always know best. I like to be right, of course, but I also like to be convinced. If someone else has a better idea, we’ll go for it.” Professor Martin Paul, president of the Executive Board since 2011, will leave Maastricht University to become rector of the Ruhr Universität in Bochum, Germany (RUB). Next week he will deliver his farewell speech at MECC. *Observant* interviewed him one last time in his capacity as president of UM.

Kuifje

We’re sitting in the living room of a beautiful house in the city centre of Maastricht, with coffee and *vlaai*. As usual, the conversation takes place in Dutch. “When I moved from Berlin to Maastricht in 2008 to become dean of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, I knew four words in Dutch: ‘thank you’, ‘Ajax’, ‘Amsterdam’ and ‘*mof* [a slur for Germans].” He chuckles. An intensive language course in Spa, Belgium, and *Kuifje* – the Dutch translations of *The Adventures of Tintin*, whose German version *Tim und Struppi* Paul had devoured as a boy – helped him learn the language very quickly. Newspapers, books and conversations gave him more insight into Dutch culture. “I always want to know where I am and what the world looks like in my new city. I did that in Heidelberg, in San Diego, in Boston and in Maastricht. I need that context to feel comfortable. I have to feel at home in order to do my job properly.”

German

He may have a German passport, but he’s not a typical German, according to people both within and outside the university. He doesn’t conform to the stereotype of a formal, hierarchy-oriented and very serious person. On the contrary, Paul has a sense of humour with a healthy dose of self-deprecation, is approachable, is proficient in the Dutch model of consensus decision-making, and prefers casual to formal wear.

There may also be something American about him, which makes sense: the United States is the country where he did his PhD research, held a

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Farewell MARTIN PAUL

“I developed thicker skin over the years. I let things roll off my back more easily now; I’m more zen”

Illustration: Simone Golob

2 Not high-skilled

Political parties Bij1 and the BoerBurgerBeweging want to ban the terms ‘low-skilled’ and ‘high-skilled’

3 Room shortage

No student housing in the former Overmaze prison in Limmel for the moment

4 First-generation students/academics

PhD student Akudo McGee: “I felt like an actress without a script”

SPLINTERS

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



UM is growing, but not so fast

It was quite a shock for everyone who is already concerned about the shortage of rooms. Last week, *De Limburger* wrote that Maastricht University is expect-

ing 40 thousand students in a few years' time. Things won't be as extreme as that, the UM wrote on Twitter, hoping to rectify what was said in the news article. What will the number of students be then?

"In the most realistic prognosis, we are expecting a growth of 25 to 26 thousand students in the next five years," spokesperson Koen Augustijn informed us in an e-mail. Some of those will not come to Maastricht, but to the study programmes in Venlo.

The past few years, the UM has grown more quickly, partly because it has set up the Faculty of Science and Engineering and new bachelor's programmes. Even though the university wants to keep adding new study programmes, there are no plans for big steps. "That is why we expect the growth to level off", says Augustijn.

He emphasises that the numbers are estimates and not set in stone. The UM has previously noticed that things can go different than expected. While the proposal by the then rector Luc Soete to grow to 25 thousand students was rejected in 2012, the UM is already well on its way towards that figure with an expected 22 thousand students this year.

Not high-skilled, but what then?

Political parties Bij1 and the Boer-BurgerBeweging want to ban the terms 'low-skilled' and 'high-skilled', reports the Higher Education Press Agency. Last

week, the parties submitted a motion to abolish the terms, "so that people with whatever kind of education always feel valued". But what should we say then? Bij1 and BBB suggest 'practice-trained' for intermediate vocational education (MBO), 'theoretically trained' for higher professional education (HBO), and 'academically trained' for universities (WO). But Prime Minister Rutte doesn't agree. "In MBO, there are also theoretically trained people and in HBO, there are people who have had practical training," he said during the debate. "Academic training is very theoretical, except of course when you train to be a doctor. That is very practical."

The Ministry of Education has been wrestling with this matter for some time. In 2019, minister Van Engelshoven told Radio 1 programme *Spraakmakers* that the terms higher and lower education hardly ever appear in policy documents. If it is included, the document will be returned. The minister did not say which alternative terms the civil servants use.



Dining by fluorescent lighting

Would you like to enjoy your food more? Forget fancy dining by candlelight.



According to Maastricht researcher Kimberley van der Heijden, people taste food much better in a well-lit room. "They are more aware of what they eat, they focus more," she told *De Limburger*.

In an experiment in a restaurant, test subjects ate with dimmed lights (13 lux) or brighter lights (300 lux). They thought that they had come to test the chef's latest creations. The first group marked the intensity of the taste with a 4, the

second group with a 6. According to Van der Heijden, that is because people are more alert to the taste, because they are in a bright room and can also see the food better.

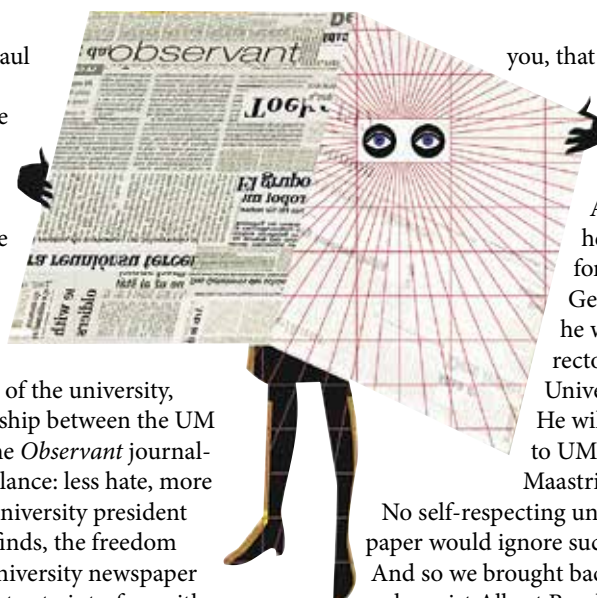
Restaurants should do something with these results, she said in the newspaper. "Chefs want their dishes to be served in the best possible conditions." She herself, at any rate, switches the light on more often when she eats.

letter from the editor

Farewell

We had an exclusive! We were so very proud. It was 2008, and our then senior editor Wammes Bos had just figured out that the new dean of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences was from Berlin. He had even found out the man's name: Martin Paul, the vice president of the Executive Board of the Charité – Universitätsmedizin in Berlin. What's more, he even got to talk to the man on the phone straight away. It was unexpected, a stroke of luck caused by his surname Bos. The name opened doors for him because at the time, Paul was in frequent contact with another Bos: Nick Bos, the current vice president of the Executive Board. Paul's secretary in Berlin must not have heard the first name and

immediately pulled Paul out of a meeting. That was the first time we talked to Paul. When he became president of the Executive Board three years later, we got the scoop. And with his appointment to the highest position in the administration of the university, the love-hate relationship between the UM administrators and the *Observant* journalists regained some balance: less hate, more love. Paul became a university president who found, and still finds, the freedom of the independent university newspaper important, and didn't try to interfere with our articles of association or our role. But mind



you, that doesn't mean he was always happy with the articles we ran. And now he is leaving for Bochum, Germany, where he will become rector of the Ruhr Universität (RUB). He will say goodbye to UM at MECC Maastricht next week.

No self-respecting university newspaper would ignore such an occasion. And so we brought back our retired columnist Albert Bergbroeder to say goodbye to the man he invariably

referred to as "Germanicus" one last time (in a Dutch-language exclusive!). Of course, we also interviewed Paul one last time in his capacity as university president. But not before interviewing many people within and outside UM about him. Armed with 63 pages of notes, I went to Paul's house in the city centre of Maastricht on a Wednesday in September. We had coffee, *vlaai*, and a long conversation. He was open, showed his vulnerable side, and – as is characteristic of him – gave credit where credit was due. Goodbye, Martin. We wish you all the best.

Riki Janssen

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

No student housing in former Overmaze prison in the short term

In the short term, no students will be housed in the former Overmaze prison in Limmel, alderman Vivianne Heijnen said to the city council during the council meeting on Tuesday evening, 28 September.

Discussions are taking place with the National Property Agency regarding the long-term use of the vacant building. It is a sensitive dossier and many hurdles will have to be overcome. There is the Limmel Area Network (Buurtnetwerk Limmel), which has already stated in a letter that it is against the temporary housing of students. The neighbourhood has been complaining for years about the trouble caused by students (more

than one in three inhabitants in Limmel is a student). The residents want a permanent solution for the building and suggest a “magic mix of accommodation” for starters, people with temporary admission and senior citizens.

So, no Overmaze (with about 600 units) as an emergency solution for the room's shortage for the time being. Nevertheless, Heijnen said, another fifty rooms will be added to the already promised eleven duo apartments in the Gerlachus residence in Jekerdal. It was city council member Alexander Lurvink (Groep Alexander Lurvink) who put the student housing crisis on the agenda. In a motion, he asked the city council to investigate how soon

Overmaze could be made suitable for students (and starters, people with temporary admission and senior citizens, so that a mix is created). Because his motion was adapted a number of times last Tuesday and the majority of the council wanted more time to prepare (as well as the end of the meeting being night), it was held over until the council meeting on 19 October. Lurvink is not the only one looking at Overmaze. Maurice Evers, head of Maastricht Housing, also regards the former prison as an ideal “overflow location”, a building where students can be housed when the need is great. During the last University Council meeting, on Wednesday 22 September, Evers empha-

sised that the building had been mentioned by Maastricht University several times in the past years, but that the city is unresponsive. After Overmaze was closed as a penitentiary institute, it was used to accommodate refugees for years. Since 1 April, homeless people have been housed there by the Salvation Army, because the COVID-19 regulations could not be adhered to in their building on the Statensingel. As the COVID-19 regulations have been cancelled, the daytime and night-time homeless shelter can be reopened at the Statensingel from November.

Wendy Degens

Students and residents come together during Neighbours' Day

If you know each other, you won't call the police immediately”

Inhabitants of the Brusselsepoort neighbourhood took the opportunity last Saturday on Neighbours' Day to get to know each other. They organised a street brunch, to which they made a point of also inviting students.

Jeroen Vegter, one of the initiators of the brunch, looks upon the whole event with satisfaction. These past few weeks, he and his neighbours went from door to door informing the students living in the area of Orleansplein about the Neighbours' Day. This seems to have worked. He thinks that the mix of people is a good representation of the composition of the neighbourhood: half of them are students and the other half families, expats and elderly people.

Although the atmosphere today is good, it certainly hasn't always been like that the past year. “During the pandemic, many people were at home every evening,” says Vegter. “As the gardens are adjoined, it doesn't take much to cause noise disturbance. This led to rather a bit



Photo: Joey Roberts

of tension. But then I realised: the order is all wrong here. We go around to the students to complain, but we have never welcomed them.” Keeping good contact with each other became the plan of action.

At a table a little further along, German student Anne-Sophie Oppor is involved in an excited conversation. She likes meeting her neighbours, something that wasn't always easy during COVID-19. “I consciously chose to study abroad, because I wanted to get to know

another culture. But if you spend all your time at the university, mixing with the international students, you won't get very far.”

She has noticed that relations with the neighbours have improved. “Of course, there will still be some disturbance at times. But when you know each other, you will go around to them more easily, instead of immediately calling the police. Or you pop around to apologise for having caused a disturbance.” Vegter, at any rate, would like to organise more of these

accessible activities. “Maybe around Christmastime. It is no luxury, because the turnover is considerable here. Before you know it, new students have moved in.”

After a good two hours, the square starts to slowly empty. One student and an older neighbour continue their talk. The student ends the conversation with, “I may pop in to see you soon.”

Dennis Vaendel

Starving for Future

On August 30, weeks before the German federal elections, six young climate activists started a hunger strike in front of the Berlin Reichstag.

The group, which calls itself the last generation, demanded a public meeting with the chancellor candidates Laschet (CDU), Scholz (SPD) and Baerbock (Greens), before September 23, to have an open and honest conversation about their climate policy. After more than 3 weeks without food, most participants broke off their strike after none of the politicians initially agreed to meet them. As a response two activists took their protest even



further and also stopped drinking fluids. A day before the election candidate Olaf Scholz promised to meet the group, this ended the strike.

Hunger strikes have a long tradition with famous examples like Ghandi or the Suf-

fragettes and are mostly used by those who have no other form of protest available. The German activists stated, that they see this as the only way to send a signal against the current climate policy. According to them, other actions and resistance have not yet led to any meaningful results. But is this true, do we have no other options and is a hunger strike an effective tool to change our politics?

In the past years environmental protests have been getting bigger and more radical, peaceful marches with millions of supporters, road blocking, lawsuits and countless other forms of activism, but nothing seems to be enough to get politicians to take the radical steps that are necessary to save our planet and time is running out.

Regardless, I don't think a hunger strike is our last option or even an effective one. Risking our health and possibly our life, is not a good way to convince anyone, except like-minded

people, which we don't have to convince any more. And to make change happen we need the majority of people to get on board with the issue. The strike was successful in means of reaching their demand of a meeting with the politicians. But its highly unlikely that this meeting will change policy or lead to more genuine political approaches.

And what good does it do the people who already suffering and dying from starvation because of crop failures, if privileged people in Germany voluntarily don't eat?

We all have to live with the existential threat of climate change on a daily basis and the frustration and hopelessness of the activist is understandable. But I think we are better off with healthy activist than with starving ones.

Line-Marie Eichhorst, European Law student

This column reflects the personal views of the author

series the first of the family to go to university



Photo: Joey Roberts

“I felt like an actress without a script”

Akudo McGee's story begins with a crime. In the 1980s, her mother was taken to the United States under false pretences. Having grown up in southern Nigeria after a civil war, she hoped to start a new life in the US. But once she got there, she was held captive as a nanny by a Nigerian family in Philadelphia.

“She escaped and met my father, who worked in security”, says McGee, a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. “They divorced a few years later, and my mother found work as a cleaner. I barely knew my father. My older brother and I grew up in Philadelphia. We were poor, didn't always have enough money for food or bills, so sometimes we'd have to make do without electricity, water or gas.”

Despite – or perhaps because of – their poor living conditions, McGee's mother always encouraged her children to learn. “There was no money for toys, but there was money for books”, says McGee. “I had a thirst for knowledge. She bought me *Shakespeare for Kids* and other literary classics. We'd be at home all summer. I would read one book after another.” Her brother Daniel sometimes made fun of her. “He was the cool guy. He called me a nerd, but always with a smile. He was very protective and proud of me. Just like my mother, who paraded me around like a trophy

- Akudo McGee, age 29
- PhD candidate at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
- Born and raised in Philadelphia, USA, with her mother and brother

to relatives, co-workers and neighbours. I found it embarrassing as a child, but hey, I was accomplishing the things that my mother had longed for all her life. She later learnt English and, partly because of that, now works as a technician in a cancer centre.”

Out of place

After completing secondary school with top grades, McGee went to university. She applied to the University of Pittsburgh, a five-hour drive away, to study German language and culture. “I had to figure everything out myself – applying for a scholarship, registering as a student, you name it. It was very frustrating. Once on campus, I felt like an actress without a script. Everyone seemed to find their way easily. A lot of my fellow students had university-educated parents, but I felt

completely lost. How do you get an access pass to the campus café? How do you manage your money? How do you study for an exam? I knew nothing.”

Looking back, she feels both proud and sad. “I was a lonely student, isolated and out of place. I was ashamed of growing up poor. I was terrified that the other students would find out about it. The fact that Black students were in the minority at Upitt didn't help either. Sometimes I could feel racial tensions on campus, but it didn't really affect me personally.”

A fighter

She received her bachelor's degree in 2017, after which she ended up in Amsterdam. “I was looking for a master's degree in migration. One of my lecturers recommended European Studies at UvA. He said it was the best

programme in the field in Europe. I still love Amsterdam. It's a city that made me feel very welcome.”

Since last year she has held a PhD position at UM, doing research on norm contestation in the EU with Poland as a case study. By now, she feels a lot more comfortable at university. “Especially in the Netherlands, where hierarchy is much less important than in the US and where you don't get punished for making mistakes. But still, even now I occasionally feel like an imposter, like I could be exposed at any moment as someone who doesn't belong at university.”

She is a lot less ashamed of the poverty she grew up in. “It shaped me in a positive way. I'm a fighter; I don't give up. I'm hungry, eager to learn. It has also benefited me as a researcher. I'm observant, a good listener, and I recognise recurring patterns quickly.”

The fact that she has overcome her shame is perhaps most evident from her openness during this interview, isn't it? She nods, and smiles.

Maurice Timmermans

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

Seminar on passive smoking, fathers and the menopause

Female smokers enter into the menopause sooner

It is more difficult for women to quit smoking than for men. At the same time, women's health suffers more because of it. And if they themselves don't smoke, it appears that they are often passive smokers.

More than one third of men in the world smoke, compared to a mere 6 per cent of women. Compared to other European countries, the number of female smokers in the Netherlands is high: 18 per cent, compared to 23 per cent of males. The gap between the sexes is narrowing, also because women are less quick to stop smoking. They make just as many attempts to stop as men,

says researcher Hedwig Vos from Leiden. She was one of the speakers during an online seminar last week on sex, gender and smoking, set up by research institute Caphri. "Nevertheless, the success rate among women is 31 per cent lower. This is mainly caused by mental issues such as stress, a negative self-image and mood complaints. Consider the fact that women deal with domestic violence more often."

In the meantime, the damage to health in women is more serious. Vos: "The risk of lung cancer is greater for them, they appear to be more sensitive for carcinogenic substances. But breast cancer is also more prevalent, as are cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis and infertility."

Menopause

Smoking also affects the menopause; women who smoke go through the menopause on

average two years earlier. American research by McKenzie Peltier, one of the speakers who works at Yale University, showed, moreover, that there is a connection between the hormonal regulation and smoking behaviour.

Peltier observed 1,397 female smokers for years and this showed that women smoke less during the menopause when they have more oestradiol, a female hormone from the oestrogen group. This, while more testosterone is linked to a greater chance of relapse. According to Peltier, these are important points to be considered for an anti-smoking programme, although more hormone research is necessary.

Fathers

If women themselves don't smoke, they are often victims of passive smoking. Half of all deaths worldwide as a result of passive smoking, are female, one quarter are children

(younger than five years). It may be less damaging than smoking, but it can cause the same diseases. According to the Trimbos Institute, 10 per cent of the Dutch are passive smokers on a regular basis and 5 per cent on a daily basis.

Rachel O'Donnell, connected to the University of Stirling in Scotland, carried out research into smoke-free homes. How can you encourage men and women not to smoke indoors? "What is noticeable, is that most studies focus on the mothers. But what do fathers actually think about a smoke-free home? And what are their experiences? After all, they smoke the most."

During the interviews that O'Donnell held with smoking fathers, she noticed that they had sufficient knowledge about passive smoking and its damaging effects. At the same time, many fathers felt guilty and thought that they could do more to protect their children (and wife). Sometimes, psychiatric problems get in the way. One father reckoned: 'If I feel bad, I don't want to confront the neighbours with that, so I smoke in the kitchen.'

A strategy to get fathers to give up smoking would have to link up to two issues that men consider important. O'Donnell: "They really want to be good fathers and part of that is protecting their children. Also, they want to set a good example, to be a positive role model."

Maurice Timmermans



Photo: Pexels

"A lot of racism is not as black and white as the 'n' word"

A more diverse and inclusive organisation, 'decolonisation' of the curriculum and an infrastructure for the BIPOC community (Black, Indigenous and People of Color). These are the main points of Actions Against Racism (AAR), the action plan of Maastricht University's Diversity & Inclusivity Office.

This month, Constance Sommerey, director of the Diversity & Inclusivity Office, presented the plan to the University Council, who took note of it.

The Executive Board felt that such an action plan was urgently needed and asked Sommerey in June of last year to draw it up. To determine what it should contain, various focus groups

with BIPOC students and employees came together in the following month. In one of those meetings, the term 'BIPOC' was chosen. There is a main role for 'decolonisation' of the curriculum. Exactly what that will look like, will be "a search within each discipline", says Sommerey when asked. "At any rate, decolonising does not mean, for example, that we can no longer read the work of white male philosophers. It does mean that we will add other philosophers and provide a context for ideas."

An infrastructure must also be set up for the BIPOC group. They often don't know where to go with complaints and where they can look for help, the plan states. Another idea concerns a peer-to-peer system. The UM must also do its

best to appoint and retain BIPOC staff.

But the most important of all is to create an atmosphere in which these types of sensitive issues can be discussed, says Sommerey. "How do you start such a talk?" This applies to major issues, such as a curriculum, but also for what she refers to as 'micro-aggressions'. "For example, if it is really hot and you say to an Asian student that he can probably handle it because he is used to it, that may not go down well. It confirms that someone is from elsewhere."

Such a remark is undoubtedly not meant to be racist, says Sommerey. "But a lot of racism is not as black and white as the 'n' word. Everyone at the UM has probably at one time or other said something that was unintentionally hurt-

ful. It is important to be able to talk about this without someone immediately being labelled a 'racist' or a 'victim'. Preventing polarisation is crucial."

Together with EDLAB, the UM's institute for educational innovation, Sommerey is looking into the best way to make the subject discussible. "For tutors, for example, it could be embedded in their training. This is already done at some faculties, on the basis of examples from practical experience."

Yuru Meesen



“There can only be one Mick Jagger in the Rolling Stones”

Continued from page 1

job, and met his American wife. Or maybe he is first and foremost a European citizen, always emphasising the importance of a united Europe even when the political winds are blowing against him. He's the reason why UM adopted the European anthem, Beethoven's *Ode an die Freude*, as its university anthem.

Impatient

In fact, Paul may have been more aware of his German roots than the people around him when he first came here in 2008. “The world I came from was different. I was surprised, for example, when UM staff said, ‘These are the agreements I made with your predecessor.’ ‘Are they written down anywhere?’ I'd ask, and they'd go, ‘Well, no.’ I introduced the rule that all agreements have to put in writing.” He also had to get used to the typically Dutch style of communication: small talk first, followed by an introduction to the subject, after which you can finally get down to business. “I struggled with that kind of politeness. I'd move too fast. Sometimes I still do.” He freely admits that he can be impatient and his attention span can be short. “It also depends on the subject. Sometimes I think, ‘Come on, get to the point.’ I'm not an arrogant man, but I can often tell where something is going; I can analyse and contextualise information quickly. That's why a complex job like this is a good fit for me. I just need to remember to bring others along with me in that process.” He smiles broadly when he hears that some people considerably shorten their presentations for him, and others try to hold his attention through well-timed jokes.

Achievements

Paul has raised the international profile of UM, as acknowledged by friend and foe alike (although he has very few enemies, “I personally can't think of any”). His latest achievement is Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE), a network of ten universities and other partners that intends to establish the first European University. Described as a born connector and networker by many, he also strengthened the relationships between UM and the city, the region and the province of Limburg. And that's not all. His university presidency also saw the further development of the Brightlands

campuses, the introduction of the position of distinguished university professor at UM, and the establishment of the Faculty of Science and Engineering. With this faculty, UM finally has a strong and visible STEM presence – and it's only the beginning, according to t1 launched in early September 2021.

Me, me, me

He repeats it several times during the interview: all these achievements are the result of teamwork and a first-among-equals approach to leadership. “It's not about ‘me, me, me.’” A university president must be a driving force, a catalyst encouraging people to think outside the box and “go the extra mile. That's my approach”, says Paul. He sees himself as an opera director, as he said in his inaugural lecture over twelve years ago. An opera director must have a vision, possess good listening skills, be transparent, and be able to communicate effectively with his singers. Together, they put on a performance. And the director stays in the wings, already thinking about the next opera, while his stars are in the spotlight.

Not a general

It's not about power, explains Paul. “It's about trying to convince people. That's the only way for me. I will take the same approach at RUB, although I will have more formal power there than I did at UM. I don't want to use my hierarchically higher position; I'm not a general, and a university is not an army. I don't want to test the limits of my power. If that's what you need, you're not a good administrator.”

6 out of 10

Not everything went well in those ten years. After the failed merger of the academic hospital with the FHML and the notoriously bad relations between Paul's predecessor Ritzen and Peeters, the then president of the academic hospital, Paul attempted to negotiate an *administrative* merger between the hospital and the university as a whole (“It would've been better for UM”). “We didn't succeed. We still kind of exist side by side. If I were to give myself a mark out of 10 for that, it'd be a 5.7. Well, OK, a 6.” He's interested to hear what Peeters's successor, Marja van Dieijen, had to say about this: “We made the most of it. We did what we could at the time. We were each protecting our own interests – which makes sense, it's

what you do as an administrator – while trying to work it out together. Sometimes you lose, sometimes you compromise. We had our squabbles, but we always cleared them up on the phone or over dinner. It was all done in good faith.” Paul says, “That's a good way to put it: we did what we could. Although I still think it's essential to work together more closely in order to improve research and teaching in medicine and health sciences, patient care, and the connection with the university as a whole. That will be a task for my successor.”

Masochist

He chuckles, as he does several times during the interview. “You must be a bit of a masochist to be an administrator. There will always be criticism, whether it comes from Albert Bergbroeder [a former *Observant* columnist who liked to mock the Executive Board and consistently referred to Paul as “Germanicus”], the University Council, the deans, students, or the local or national press. You can't let it get to you too much. I found it difficult at first, but I developed thicker skin over the years. I let things roll off my back more easily now; I'm more zen. But I would never go into politics. Politicians have to say things they don't agree with. That makes you vulnerable. Here, I've always been able to speak freely.” He laughs out loud. “Not to journalists, though.” At the same time, he shows his vulnerable side much more than he did ten years ago and is quicker to apologise if something has gone wrong. “I'm a more approachable leader than I used to be. I really show people that I'm human too. I developed that here.”

The darkest day

The conversation turns to the darkest day of his university presidency. He answers without hesitation: 24 December 2019. He was tired from the past year, it was Christmas Eve, he had family from the US over, and then the phone rang: UM had been hacked by cyber criminals, who were demanding ransom. “It was a real shock. I found it difficult. In a crisis, I always want to understand the context and think carefully about how to deal with the situation. I like to step back and mull it over, sometimes for two or three days. But we didn't have time for that. We had to act immediately. And that's the power of first-among-equals leadership. No one can excel in everything all the time. It's so valuable to be able to tell your colleague, [Vice



“It’s not about power, it’s about trying to convince people”

President] Nick [Bos] in this case, ‘You do it, you’re better at this.’ I’m still very grateful that Nick took that situation on himself. I was very closely involved with it, of course; we were in constant contact. An Executive Board position is a 24/7 job. People don’t always realise that.”

Inscrutable

Sometimes he takes “a mini vacation, put my phone on silent” in order to keep it up. “I believe I know my own boundaries. When I’m about to cross them, I stop and withdraw to protect myself. That’s why people sometimes feel like I’m distant or inscrutable. I deliberately keep my work and home life separate. We once went on an educational trip to Rome with the entire management team [the deans and the Executive Board]. I had a lovely time, but by 10 PM I’d call it a night and go read a book or listen to music. I need that to recharge for the next day.”

A nose for talent

Many say that Paul has a nose for young talent. “It’s an instinct. I’ve always had it. They stand out to me with their intelligent comments and broad interests. They often know a lot about politics. I always click with them. You have to support young, talented people and help them grow.”

Having faith in people, giving them freedom, showing them appreciation – that’s what it’s all about, says Paul. “Over the past few months, I’ve spoken to all twenty deans of RUB. I asked them, ‘What do you expect from me, other than money?’ The answer was unanimous: ‘Appreciation.’”

He often forms lifelong friendships with “his” talents. “I’m a networker. The daughter of my first postdoc in Heidelberg is currently staying with us. She studies in Maastricht. Her mother is now a professor in Spain. We’ve always kept in touch.”

But he also has the ability to make tough calls if someone’s performance is below standard. “If a person isn’t the right fit for the position, I’ll say so and help them find another job. That’s the consequence of giving people a lot of freedom: you can’t be sure it’ll work out.” Still, he admits, there were times when he waited too long, holding on to poorly performing employees. “I’m not a universal genius. Sometimes I make mistakes. It’s good

that I work in a team and a colleague can step up to put an end to the situation.”

Young rector

One person he gave a lot of freedom was Rianne Letschert, who became rector of UM in 2016. “I was young and inexperienced”, says Letschert. “I was a risk, but Martin was willing to take that risk. He had faith in me.” That’s right, says Paul. He recognised the risk involved for both UM and himself. But more than that, he recognised that Letschert was a “power woman” who could become very important for UM. “She was what I, a man in my fifties, am not: an example in terms of gender, age and diversity. I knew that I had to take the risk for the sake of the university.” Letschert got off to a flying start. She attracted a lot of publicity from the beginning and was even referred to as “the boss” of the university at times. Suddenly, she was the one in the spotlight, whereas in previous years the president of the Executive Board had received a lot of attention. “If I’d wanted to be alone in the spotlight, we should never have appointed Rianne rector. It’s important to be able to share. It helped that I’d been on the front line in other boards. We talked about it in the Executive Board and gave each other feedback, which helped. We’re a good team.”

Mick Jagger

“Look, there can only be one Mick Jagger in the Rolling Stones, and the same went for us. It was sometimes difficult, I had to get used to it, but it’s important to be happy for others’ success – *gunnen können*, as they say in Cologne. That’s also part of being a good administrator.”

And that’s “very commendable” of him, says Rector Letschert.

Text: Riki Janssen

Photos: archive Observant, Loraine Bodewes, Joey Roberts, archive UM

Martin Paul will deliver his farewell speech at MECC Maastricht on Thursday 7 October at 3.30 PM. You can watch the event via live stream.

Short CV

Martin Paul (1958, Sankt Ingbert, Saarland, Germany)

- ⇒ Studied Medicine in Heidelberg
- ⇒ Did his PhD research in the US, where he wrote about 300 academic articles
- ⇒ Held positions such as dean of the Medical Faculty of the Freie Universität Berlin and vice president of the Executive Board of the Charité – Universitätsmedizin in Berlin
- ⇒ Became dean of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences of Maastricht University in 2008
- ⇒ Was appointed president of the Executive Board of Maastricht University in 2011
- ⇒ On 1 November, he will become rector of the Ruhr Universität in Bochum, Germany
- ⇒ Martin Paul is married and has a daughter and a son

Sources

Prior to this interview with President of the Executive Board Martin Paul, *Observant* spoke with current and former students, deans, support staff, and administrators both within and outside Maastricht University. Their comments were included in the interview and incorporated into this article.