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P5 OPINION

FPN does *not* only teach in English

P 6-7 ECONOMICS EDUCATION

“There is a good balance between theory and practice in Maastricht”



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Employees who work from home part of the time, should be able to purchase a desk, chair, monitor, keyboard and mouse at the expense of Maastricht University, recommends the working group that looked into hybrid working over the past few months. The plan will be put before Lokaal Overleg and the representative advisory bodies. The Executive Board launched an European invitation to tender for setting up home workspaces to transparent the costs.

“Working from home is neither a right nor a duty,” emphasises Jan Smits, dean of the Faculty of Law and chairman of the working group The Future of Working@UM. It is up to every employee to determine for themselves what feels right. There is a guideline: three days at the UM and two days at home in the case of a full-time appointment. For some positions, that will be difficult (for caretakers, laboratory assistants or receptionists, for example). “It will always be tailored to everybody’s individual situation,” Smits states. Arrangements will be laid down in a so-called Hybrid Working Agreement. “A type of contract” including things like days on which one works from home, working hours, home working compensation, travelling expenses. “This will make everything clear.” Also, it depends on where one lives just how much one can work from home. A considerable number of Dutch employees live in Bel-

Working group wants UM to pay for home offices

gium or Germany. As long as they physically work at the UM, they have social security and are liable to pay tax in the Netherlands, but it becomes more complicated when they work in two countries. “That is why we need to look at each situation separately.”

Autonomy

COVID-19 accelerated working from home, says Smits, “but some units already had an informal policy on working from home for academic staff.” Now there is a plan for *all* employees, “a step in modern employment practice”. It is especially the balance that is important, between on the one hand the autonomy of the employee, that you can to a large extent determine your own working hours, where and how you set your work up”, and on the other hand the interests of the organisation. “The latter must be a priority.”

Voucher

A survey was held among UM staff last spring. Two thousand people answered a variety of questions about the new working situation. According to Smits, the majority’s greatest need was for a decent desk and a laptop for at home, at the expense of the UM. “The university can’t do otherwise because of its duty of care for a *health-and-safety-proof* working space at home. Our proposal is that employees with an appointment for more than 0.4 FTE and who have a contract for longer than a year, should receive a voucher for a maximum amount that they could spend on a desk, chair, monitor, keyboard and mouse.”

Tender

In a UM communication e-mail that was sent last week, the Executive Board wrote that the European invitation to tender for setting up

home workspaces had been launched. That procedure will last until the end of the year. “Only when the costs have been transparently combined with the experiences that we are now gaining with hybrid working, can decisions be made for the future,” said the Board. Because one thing is certain, the executives realise: “Setting up workspaces at home will cost a pretty penny.”

Another question that plays a role here is: Will the office equipment be given on loan or will it become the property of the employee? The working group leans more towards the latter. “Then the UM doesn’t need to think about it after that.”

Furthermore, Smits and the members of the working group argue for a “digital workspace”: laptop, mobile telephone as well as a telephone subscription. Those appliances would be used both at home and at the office. The telephone will have multiple functions and could, for instance, in time replace the UM card.

Losing out

“A theme such as new style of working is comprehensive; it doesn’t just have legal and financial consequences, but also social.” The latter must not be underestimated, Smits thinks. “You don’t want people to feel that they are no longer part of a team or feel like they are losing out,

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

SPLINTERS



What does a scientist do?

A cognitive scientist researches fear of needles, an expert in music cognition wonders if animals are musical, a neuro-psychologist wants to discover why it is so difficult to differentiate between left and right, a literary researcher delves into

what we learn from horror stories, and a surgeon thinks of solutions for colleagues who have to perform an operation that is not carried out very often. It's all science, just like 'men in white coats who carry out experiments' (the standard image that children have). The fact that this group of professionals is much more versatile, doesn't seem to have reached many children. That is why the makers of television programme *Het Klokhuis* are going to award the Science Prize again, with the aim of bringing the young generation in contact with all the things that are 'researched' in the Netherlands. Maastricht University has no fewer than two nominees: Henry Otgaar and Luc van Loon. The former, a forensic psychologist, is an expert in the reliability/unreliability of memories. You can have false memories because of fake messages in the news or on Instagram, or even via TikTok. Nutritionist Luc van Loon links muscle building to eating insects. From 19 October, the public is able to vote on *Het Klokhuis*' website. The winner will be announced on Sunday, 10 November. Who knows, someone from Maastricht may follow in the footsteps of Veerle Melotte, doctor-researcher at the MUMC, who won in 2019 with her research into the 'second brain' in the intestines.

Sustainable cow dung

Cows are not just affable-looking animals grazing contently in the fields. With their faeces rich in ammonia, they play a major role in the nitrogen crisis. Until now, the only solution seemed to be cutting back on livestock, but ten students



from Groningen have thought up something else. A dietary supplement that reduces the production of ammonia. The basis for this is a type of baker's yeast, writes sister newspaper *UKrant* in Groningen. The students manipulated the yeast's DNA, so that the cow digests food more efficiently. The substance is assumed to also improve milk production. Can it get any better? Yes, if you place a particular type of filter in pig sties and chicken coops to collect ammonia, you can use that to feed the yeast cells and so make more dietary supplements. Still, not every cow in the Netherlands will be given the yeast cell diet from today or tomorrow. This yeast is not a natural product, it is a genetically modified organism. Anyone who wants to work with it, will have to meet strict guidelines. The students are going to travel with their idea. They will represent Rijksuniversiteit Groningen at the International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) Competition, the largest international student competition for genetic manipulation in the world.

Humans are the weakest link



More attention should be paid to the digital resilience of employees instead of complex protocols, says Mark Govers, University Council member on behalf of

the academic staff. He said this during an operations committee meeting in September. Maastricht University's information security policy was on the agenda. A change in the document required the University Council's approval. Not a major change this time, just a few sentences (to be added) by way of clarification. Nevertheless, these changes were reason enough for Govers to make his remarks. He feels that the focus lies very much on complex protocols. "Proper tomes almost," he explains. "Who actually reads these from beginning to end?" Having

a document with all kinds of detailed rules is great, says Govers. "But the user is forgotten. It is about humans and they are always the weakest link. We need to look into how we can improve the digital security awareness of employees." We are working on that, answers security officer Bart van den Heuvel. There will be an awareness programme and the website will be updated as soon as the policy has been approved. What can we expect? For example, the e-mail that everyone received from ICTS this week to warn against fraudulent e-mails.

Dutch and British students benefit the least from the international classroom



Photo: Pixabay

The more international the tutorial group, the more the students gain from the education programme. That is a mantra used by universities time and again, but is it true? Not always, a study held among more than eight hundred Maastricht first-year students shows. Students achieve less when there are too many different nationalities in a group.

That students in an international classroom can lose their way is nothing new. Researchers have previously shown that various cultural backgrounds in education can go hand in hand with different expectations and a variety of communication, writing and studying styles. At the same time, other studies showed that students with different nationalities can work well together and also learn from each other. One of the outcomes was they appear to be better able to reflect. But what would the ideal tutorial group look like? What does that mean for the study results? And how important is physical presence? Patrick Bijsmans (UM) and Arjan Schakel (University of Bergen, Norway), together with two former FASoS students, have described this in a scientific article that was recently published in the *European Journal of Higher Education*. The authors investigated four cohorts of first-year students of the bachelor's of European

Studies in the period from 2012 to 2016. Of these 836 students, Germans formed the largest group (40 per cent), followed by the Dutch (14), Belgians (12), Italians (7) British (6) and other nationalities (21). Of all these first-year students, they mapped how well they did in exams, how often they were physically present, and how many different nationalities there were in the tutorial group. The outcome: students do best in tutorial groups with three to six nationalities. The optimal number is four nationalities, which in a tutorial group of twelve for example, comes down to three students per country. Students then score on average a grade that is 0.5 to 0.8 points higher. With only two nationalities, it can be more difficult to work together, says Bijsmans via Zoom. "You quickly get two groups doing their own thing. With seven or more nationalities, there is a risk of things getting lost in translation. You then have too many perspectives that need to be brought together. It means that you also have a lot of loners in the tutorial group. This could be a single Korean or Finnish person, who cannot check an English expression with a fellow countryman, for example." Bijsmans advises faculties to pay more attention to the composition of the tutorial groups. Something that could also be included in

didactic training for lecturers (BKO or CPD). "What, for example, would you do with that Korean or Finn? How can you ensure that they connect with the rest?" Remarkably, Dutch and British students seem to benefit the least from the international classroom. "Maybe that is because of the language head start, the British and the Dutch have a better command of English than the other nationalities. Moreover, the Dutch are used to independent learning, which is already encouraged at secondary schools." A condition for 'the ideal tutorial group' is that students are present at least 80 per cent of the time. The difference between 70 and 100 per cent attendance appears to be a full point. "Although we didn't look at the way in which students are present. Some shut themselves off completely, others do pay attention but don't say much, and others interact completely." This will be dealt with in the follow-up survey, in which most Maastricht faculties will participate. "That study, which I will do together with Carla Haerlemans from SBE, will also have a qualitative component, in which we ask students and lecturers about their experiences."

Maurice Timmermans

One Rubicon grant for Maastricht

Research financier the Dutch Research Council has awarded a Rubicon grant to 24 recently graduated PhD students, who will gain research experience abroad for a period of one to two years. In Maastricht only Glenn Franken, researcher at institute Mhens, came out as a winner. He leaves for King's College in London to learn more about chronic (neuropathic) pain. In total the Dutch Research Council (NWO) received 76 applications for the grant, 31.6% of which were approved. NWO believes work experience abroad is an important step in the careers of young scientists. Even more so because it is a step towards winning the highly coveted Veni, Vidi and Vici research grants. The coronavirus crisis may still cause delays for travel abroad. The researchers who receive Rubicon funding will not leave the Netherlands "until the situation is safe for them", writes the Dutch Research Council. NWO plans to hold two more Rubicon rounds, funding a total of sixty researchers. A total of seven million euros is annually distributed among young researchers. The level of funding they will receive depends on the duration of their stay and their destination.

HOP/MT

No right to a personal workspace

Continued from page 1

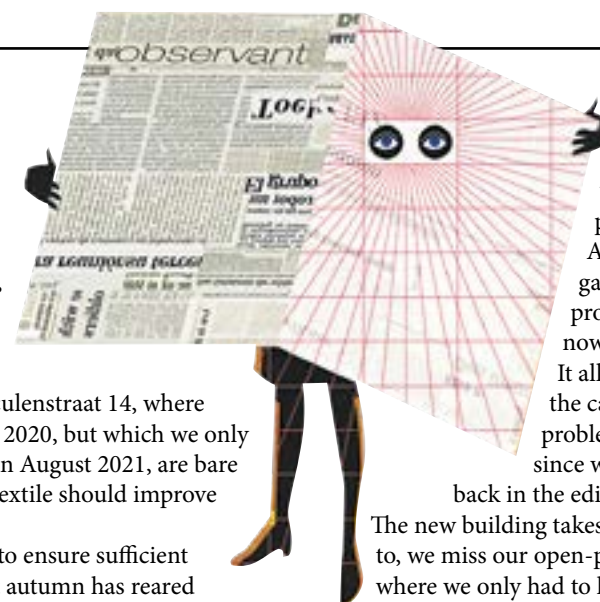
because they are not at the faculty. It is all about personal contact." There is an important role here for 'the boss'. "He or she must ensure that everybody feels involved. That is easier when people meet physically than at a distance via Zoom or Teams." As far as Smits is concerned, management should have more faith and feel less need to check up. "Over the past eighteen months, we have realised that this way works." A Leadership Development working group is currently investigating the new qualities that managers should have and compulsory training that goes with that. A last, "rather sensitive" subject is the use of university buildings. "Some people claim that they have a right to a personal workspace, but that right doesn't exist. In addition, there is generally less need for this, our survey showed. We need to look at how we use the space more efficiently, for example by creating more places to hold meetings or just get together." The working group suggests therefore that every faculty and unit should develop a new housing plan.

Wendy Degens

A heavy cardigan against the cold

My keyboard is acting up. The W only appears when I bang it hard. The E and A have faded and I touched them up with a marker. Colleague WD (damn, the W failed again) is having similar problems. New keyboards have been ordered, they will be here soon, we have been assured. We also need a couple of new desk chairs.

We have a shortage now that a number of them are in colleagues' home offices. Furthermore, curtains have been ordered because the spaces in our new building on the Lenculenstraat 14, where we moved in in June 2020, but which we only really started to use in August 2021, are bare sound boxes. Some textile should improve things. What we have to do to ensure sufficient ventilation, now that autumn has reared its head, is still up for discussion. Until now, the windows have been open during meetings with more than two people. But last Monday, we were all freezing cold, except for the two



The new building takes getting used to, we miss our open-plan office where we only had to look up to see the others. Finding the right mix between working from home and at the office is still a puzzle. Who is where and when? We thought about signs

letter from the editor

with name plates in slots. Who is in, who is out? But also: when should everyone be in the editorial office? Monday morning, at any rate, for the weekly editorial meeting. Maybe on Wednesday as well, when we have the 12:00hrs. deadline and the paper version needs to be with the printer by 17:00hrs. That is by far the most stressful day. We don't know yet, we are giving ourselves the time until Christmas to test things out. If the curtains are up by then, the new keyboards are no longer so new, and the heavy cardigan has become part of the standard gear of every editor, we will make a couple of decisions.

Riki Janssen

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

A Post-Covid Renaissance

Saturday September 25th 2021, the Dutch government relaxes social distancing and working from home mandates. After 560 days of working from home, teaching online, and collaborating without face-to-face contact, all of us finally return to campus. The last eighteen months gave us a unique opportunity to reflect on the purpose of our work and on how we spend our time. I wonder whether scholars in the fall of 1350 were also worrying about grade administration or their next grant proposal when the Black Death started retreating from Europe.



670 years ago, Europe lost at least a third of its population, existing social and economic

structures disintegrated, and people reeled from indescribable trauma. At that time, people did not simply 'return to normal' - instead, many deeply held beliefs, unchallenged for centuries, toppled. Social structures had rigidly placed nobles above serfs, church above state, and beliefs above science. And yet, the end of the plague rang in an age of humanism in which attention shifted from the heavenly to the mundane. Painters like Jan van Eyck depicted living humans instead of saints, scientists like Nicolaus Copernicus showed that the earth revolves around the sun, and Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. No pressure. Starting today, on day 573 of this pandemic, let's consider which deeply held beliefs we are ready to let go of. The belief that competition

and aspirational performance criteria are the best ways to motivate students and academics? Or that multiple-choice questions and impact factors are valid assessments of learning and value? Let's have an open conversation about what our 'next normal' should look like. The Rewards & Recognition debate is one of many ways of ensuring that our efforts and knowledge are accessible and relevant outside of our classes and publications, and for creating an environment that fosters our drive to learn and excel through intrinsic motivation. Personally, I can't wait to get started! *Therese Grohnert, assistant professor at SBE*

This column reflects the personal views of the author

series the first of the family to go to university

“My mum has no idea what I do, but she’s very proud of me”



Photo: Joey Roberts

Ines Mouchaers spent eight months working on her master’s thesis in Biomedical Sciences at KU Leuven, conducting research under the supervision of a PhD student. During those eight months, it never once occurred to her that she – the daughter of a mother who had left school at sixteen to work in a factory, and a father who became an officer in the Belgian army – was also capable of writing a PhD thesis. “It was so far removed from my own experience. I didn’t have an inferiority complex, but I just never saw myself in her shoes. I admired her a lot, but I felt like getting a PhD was something for other people.” She only later realised that an important reason for this was the type of research they were doing. “We were in a bubble. We were testing things that had been invented by someone at a desk: in a perfect situation, with perfect participants. It was way too academic, too ivory tower. I now know that I want to do socially relevant research. I don’t want my work to end up in the bin after four years.” She doesn’t have to worry about that: her research into a home care programme that aims to help older people stay in their own homes for as long as possible and reduce the number of avoidable transitions to nursing homes is directly relevant to practice.

One hundred per cent

She grew up in Zutendaal, Belgium with her father, mother and older brother. Her parents divorced when she was eleven. Her mother later started a laundry business with her new husband. When it burnt down five years later, they weren’t discouraged. “My mum and her partner started a bed and breakfast. If she wants something, she goes and gets it. I got that from her.” From an early age, Mouchaers was a good

► Ines Mouchaers, age 26

► Went to Hasselt University in 2013 to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Biomedical Sciences, followed by a master’s degree in Biomedical Sciences at KU Leuven

► PhD candidate at the Living Lab in Ageing and Long-Term Care Limburg (AWO-L)

► Born in Genk, Belgium and raised in Zutendaal with her parents and older brother; now lives in Bilzen, Belgium with her partner

learner. She liked learning and soon knew – partly because of positive experiences in secondary school – that she wanted to go to university. “My parents have always supported me one hundred per cent. My mum always said, ‘Do what makes you happy’. My dad thought studying was important; he himself attended the military academy. He saw what I was capable of and came with me to university open days. It was new to both of us; we didn’t know what to pay attention to.”

Far removed

After long considering physiotherapy (which is a university course in Belgium), she ultimately decided to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Biomedical Sciences at Hasselt University,

followed by a master’s degree at KU Leuven. She often felt like she had to defend her decisions, especially to her mother’s side of the family. They said things like, “Ines, you’re already 22 years old and you have not yet contributed to society” or “We work hard while you sit at a computer all day.” She doesn’t let those comments get to her anymore. “I used to defend myself, but that didn’t get me anywhere. It’s too far removed from their own experiences. I’m the odd one out, which can be difficult. But the people closest to me believe in me, and that’s what matters. My mum has no idea what I do, but she is very proud of me. My brother never complimented me much [laughing] – it’s not something we did as siblings. But during my bachelor’s

graduation ceremony, he said, ‘I’m so proud of you.’ He tried three different university courses, but didn’t complete any of them. Looking back, he wishes he had. He works in a supermarket, lives with his partner and has a son.”

Children

She has chosen a different life from her parents. “They married young and had children early. I live together with my boyfriend, who works in the arts and culture sector. I’ve always known I don’t want children. I want to travel, go to shows, go out to dinner, go on city trips. I can’t picture a child in that life. My boyfriend is totally with me on this. My family understands it, but they say, ‘Oh, you’re still so young. You’ll change your mind.’”

Weight off her shoulders

She looks like a strong and strong-willed person. Sometimes, she says, her confidence falters. She knows this is partly because it comes with the territory of being a young researcher. But earlier this year, she came to understand through conversations with her PhD supervisor Professor Hilde Verbeek – who was also one of the first in her family to go to university and get a PhD – that it’s also partly because of the fact that she is a first-generation student (“I’d never realised that”). “It was a weight off my shoulders, realising that it’s not just ‘me’ when I feel uncertain or insecure.”

Riki Janssen

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



Opinion piece by professor Harald Merckelbach

Does anyone know Ad?

Psychologist and dean of FPN, Harald Merckelbach, would like to enter into debate with cultural philosopher and leader of Better Education the Netherlands, (*Beter Onderwijs Nederland*, BON), Ad Verbrugge, who recently threw a few falsehoods into the world about the Maastricht Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. He can’t get hold of him, Merckelbach writes in this article. But he would gladly invite him to visit his faculty as well as the point where the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany meet.



Photo: ThomasHawk/flickr

Does anyone know Ad Verbrugge, who works for the *Vrije Universiteit* as a cultural philosopher and leader of *Beter Onderwijs Nederland* (BON)? I called him, but he doesn’t answer the phone. Sent him an e-mail, but he

doesn’t reply. Unfortunate. I would really like to talk to him about what he said in the radio programme *Dr. Kelder en co* and the affiliated *Jortcast* recently (11 September). Verbrugge had been invited to shed light on foreign

students. There are too many, he said. This is because of the anglicisation, Verbrugge added. By way of example, he referred to my faculty. It was said to offer all its education programmes in English and 90% of the students

were therefore from abroad. Both claims are evidently incorrect and he could have known that.

Because a few years ago, Verbrugge took our university to court on behalf of BON and put forward the same non-facts. Verbrugge and his BON’s objective was to stop us teaching in the manner that we see fit. The judge ruled against Verbrugge, concluding that his arguments were flimsy. Verbrugge could have learned his lesson from that.

That lawsuit, by the way, cost BON a handsome sum. With that money one could have helped a young researcher to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of “anglicisation”. That would have resulted in a nice thesis; as far as I’m concerned, it could have been in Dutch. My point is that *Beter Onderwijs Nederland* sounds very innocent – something like the *Alliance against Swearing* – but taking someone to court and spewing twaddle in a popular radio programme comes close to bickering.

By the way, not everything that Verbrugge said during that radio broadcast was nonsensical. He emphasised, for example, that universities have a certain responsibility towards their surroundings. I agree. But those surroundings in Maastricht look different from those in Buitenveldert, the place where Verbrugge lectures on Heidegger. The Flemish student from Tongeren (B), the German-speaking students from Laurensberg (D) and Moresnet (B), and the Walloon student from Visé (B) who come to our faculty by bicycle are formally foreigners, but in actual fact are our neighbours from one and the same Euroregion. As soon as they speak with each other, they often revert to English. It is a European reality that Verbrugge obviously has difficulty imagining.

A few years ago, Verbrugge was appointed as visiting professor at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. He himself announced at the time that this appointment was “great news” for his Dutch students. Because it would make shorter or longer exchanges abroad – in South Africa – possible. Funny when you think about it.

Anyway, if anyone knows Ad Verbrugge from Buitenveldert or Bloemfontein, give him my regards and tell him he is most welcome to come and visit the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience in Maastricht. Then I can show him our Dutch bachelor’s of Psychology. Should it ever come to it, we could also add a bicycle tour to the place where the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany meet. During the ride, we could exchange thoughts on the essence of science: changing your opinion on the basis of facts. Or has Verbrugge other ideas on this matter?

Harald Merckelbach,
dean of Psychology and Neuroscience

Economics programmes under attack by NRC

“If you want to dance, you first need to learn how to walk”

“A missed opportunity for the NRC,” says Wilko Letterie, responsible for education and research at the School of Business and Economics. He is not

Economics programmes at Dutch universities cling too rigidly to the neo-classical theory, pay hardly any attention to the ‘real’ problems in society, and have little eye for qualitative research methods such as interviews. One of the main Dutch newspapers, NRC, published a very critical overview last month. But Maastricht University is not even mentioned in the article.

Text: Yuri Meesen

Photo: ThisIsEngineering/Pexels

too put out about it: “Fortunately, students are able to find our programmes.” In Maastricht, they are used to the fact that journalists don’t think about them, says Jona Linde, assistant professor at the department of Micro-economics and Public Economics. “Groningen was not mentioned either. Randstad arrogance?” Professor of Macroeconomics and International Monetary Economics Clemens Kool confirms that image: “It has led to hardly any kind of fuss or agitation within SBE.”

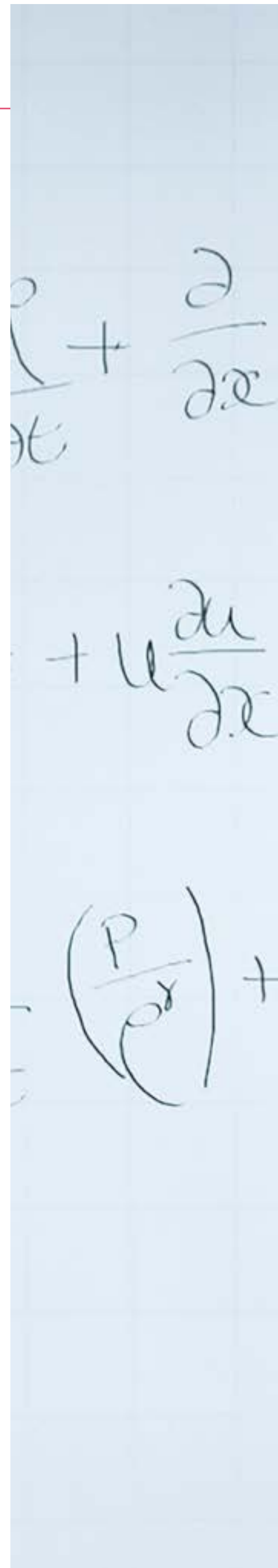
So, it appears that the Maastricht economists are not losing sleep over the issue, but do they agree with the NRC article? What doesn’t apply to SBE, at any rate, each and every one said, is that Economics education does not pay attention to ‘real’ social problems such as the climate crisis. “It is inevitable, because of Problem-Based Learning,” says Linde. “If we don’t talk about it, the students will!” And students don’t just talk about practice, they are firmly rooted in reality, says Kool. As an example, he mentions a project in the master’s programme, in which students carry out an

assignment in groups with an external organisation. “There is a good balance between theory and practice in Maastricht.”

Love for neoclassical theory

The main reproach in the NRC article is that the bachelor’s programmes are too one-sided, mathematical and theoretical. To this is added that the dominant theory in Economics – the neoclassical model that suggests that people act in their own interest, make ‘optimum’ choices and that markets stabilise themselves – is too far from reality. Even after a critical report by the economists network *Rethinking Economics* three years ago, hardly any changes have been implemented. This group of economists feels that Nijmegen, Utrecht

and the Vrije Universiteit are making steps in the right direction, but the three big ones – Tilburg, Rotterdam and the University of Amsterdam – fail to do so. Behavioural or



experimental Economics, or the body of ideas by economists such as Thomas Piketty and Kate Raworth, are hardly even touched upon, according to the NRC.

Maastricht economists can explain the love for the neoclassical theory. “If you want to dance, you first need to learn how to walk,” says Martin Strobel, associate professor of Micro-

economics and Public Economics: “The neoclassical theory explains the driving power in markets very well. This basis is something that all Economics students must learn in their first

year before they get on to the more complicated (and more realistic) theories and trends in their second and third years. But there is no economist who actually believes that all movements in the market can be explained purely on the basis of striving towards personal gain.” Strobel recognises the shortcomings of the neoclassical model, but he hasn’t seen a better alternative yet. “It falls short, for example, if you want refer to points in time. Economists were able to predict in 2008 that things couldn’t go on like they did forever, but to predict exactly when the crash would be? That is impossible with this model.”

Neuro-economics

So, start off with as simple a model possible and then expand on that, says Clemens Kool in his office. His bookcase is bursting at the seams, Piketty’s well-known book with its red edging being one of them. “In the second and third year, other trends are given a much more dominant role. There are subjects on Standards and Values, Trust, situations in which one party has more information than the other.” Later on, Strobel adds: “Or subjects on Behaviour, Psychology, History of Economic Ideas, and even a subject such as Neuroeconomics, in which a closer look is taken at the biological processes in the brain. Then you are very far removed from the neoclassical model.” Then we have the focus on quantitative research methods and the disregard for the qualitative approach. Why, for example, are there not more interviews in Economics? “That is a good way to get acquainted with businesses or individuals,” says professor Kool. “But you can’t get away from mathematics. That is part and parcel of general Economics.” According to Linde, there is nothing wrong with the prominent role of quantitative research methods. “Students are going to join businesses as economists or they will do empirical research for the government, or interpret the work of others. Data analysis is becoming more and more important, also in the education programme.”

Positive v normative

Still, there isn’t just discontent about the gist of the NRC article. Hannes Rusch, assistant professor at the department of Micro-economics and Public Economics, disagrees with many points made by the author, but feels that discussion about the curriculum is good. One of the most important points is given a mere two sentences by the NRC journalist, says Rusch: the difference between positive and normative science. “An example: Imagine I am teaching about economic measures to limit greenhouse gas emissions. If that is your objective, then you have measures a, b, and c in order to carry this out in a cost-effective way. This is from a positive scientific perspective. Of course, students need to know this, but I think that the normative perspective is as least as interesting: Do we want such a reduction? And what is then the relationship between the reduction of emissions and the growth of prosperity? I agree that there should be more room for discussions on standards and values in Economics. Although, because of PBL, there is already a lot of room for this discussion in Maastricht.”

