

<h2>P4</h2>	<h2>P5</h2>	<h2>P8</h2>
Student room “No matter what is going on in my life, Allah always listens to me”	Statement “Keep the confidential agenda as limited as possible”	Deadline missed Committee advising on distribution of starter grants needs more time

Criticism in University Council about the outcome of the sustainable employability monitor

“I can’t see progress as long as I see colleagues suffer”

“In the report about the sustainable employability monitor, there are words such as ‘alarming’ and ‘disturbing’, which is not a sign that all is well, is it?” said Mark Govers, council member on behalf of the academic staff, during the latest meeting of the University Council. “A large portion of UM employees has burn-out symptoms. How can we change that? By shortening the academic year, okay, but when will that be introduced? When will things get better?”

In October 2018, the Executive Board launched the first sustainable employability monitor, a survey for UM staff that focuses on themes such as social safety, atmosphere and pleasure at work, inclusivity, and workload. In May 2022, it was distributed for the second time, with a lot less response: not even 20 per cent of all staff members (the first one reached 63 per cent) completed the survey. The results of the second monitor were discussed in the University Council last Wednesday. “What conclusions are you drawing?” members asked their ‘guest’ Harald Merckelbach, dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Neurosciences and chairperson of the Taskforce Sustainable Employability, which came up with a plan of action to reduce the workload some time ago. “We had expected a dramatic impact due to Covid, with more burn-out symptoms, work pressure, but the picture stays the same as it was in 2018. Furthermore, overall we see that people rate UM quite good as an organisation. This is an indication that the majority at this institute is satisfied, that they have confidence. I stress this because you cannot say that only the usual suspects – those who always complain – completed the monitor,” says Merckelbach. Lastly, he calls the considerable number of respondents who reported undesirable behaviour “worrying, this requires action”. And what does he think about the burn-out figures? According to the report, 16.1 per cent of administrative and support staff (obp) and 34.5 per cent of the academic staff (wp) are at risk.

Read more on page 3

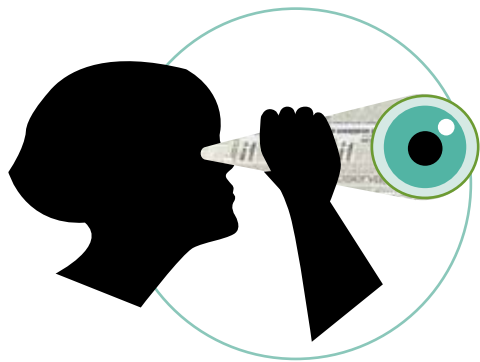


Illustration: Bas van der Schot

P6-7

Workload Report

About 34 percent of WP workers are at (very high) risk of burnout. “These people are heartily tired, it must affect the quality of their work, there’s no way around it. And for cooperation: those who are so exhausted are not always in control of their emotions, think short temper, spontaneous crying, easily offended.”



Riki Janssen

There is trouble in the *Kring van Hoofredacteurs*, the national association of news media in Dutch higher education. One board member has resigned, and two other board members will be boycotting the annual *Kring* conference in Groningen on 13 April. The cause of the trouble: Laurens Buijs, a researcher at the University of Amsterdam and an anti-woke activist, will be on a conference panel discussion on wokeness and cancel culture. He was initially recommended for the panel by the *Kring* board after the publication of his opinion piece in *Folia*, in which he argued that wokeness poses a threat to academic freedom, but he appears to have become radicalised since then. For example, he posted a blog about *the reptilian conspiracy theory* and recently called on the trans community to condemn the mass shooting by a trans person at a Nashville primary school, calling it “*radicalisation within [their] own ranks*”. Oddly enough, he also published an opinion piece on science and gender in *NRC* in mid-March, written in a calm tone, in which his extremist views barely showed through.

To go of not to go

The big question at the office this week was what *Observant* should do. To go or not to go? The hotel had long been booked, the trip already arranged – but everything could

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editorial

A panellist surrounded by controversy

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easily be cancelled, of course. Arguments flew back and forth: should the conference really give a platform to someone who regularly defends conspiracy theorists and likes to rant about women and transgender people on Twitter? Should we, as *Kring* members and conference participants, really contribute to that? And: is there even a point in having a discussion with someone who would go so far as to support a 9/11 and moon-landing denier?

Facts

Let's first get our facts straight, we decided. Our colleague CF compiled a list of articles and statements by Buijs for us to read, so we would know what we were talking about. I myself contacted Rob Siebelink, the editor-in-chief of *Ukrant* (the University of Groningen newspaper) and one of the conference organisers. “It's true that the man has become radicalised over the past months”, he said. “But I believe in academic debate. I'm not a moral crusader, but a journalist. The whole room will be full of journalists. We are all used to asking critical questions, and to letting people speak even if we totally disagree with them. Why would we cancel this if we want to have a discussion on wokeness and cancel culture in academia? It would make no sense at all. If anything, the controversy emphasises the need for that discussion.” And,

finally, “We have an excellent moderator. No one will be spewing filth.”

I felt quite reassured. Also, why would we boycott the conference if the other two panellists – Charlotte Wekker, diversity officer at Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen, and Sahar Meradji, creator of the *PowNed* series *Ik woke van jou* – are still planning to show up, enter into a discussion with this man, and express a very different view?

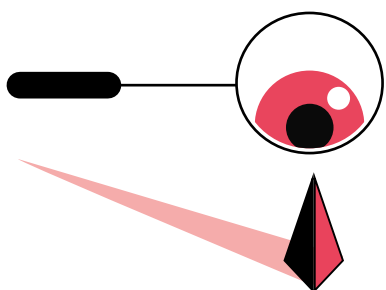
It was the final push we needed. And besides, we hate cancelling plans. We'll be going to the conference.

Latest news

But... this editorial was already at the translator's and on its way to the printer when the latest news arrived. Charlotte Wekker has pulled out of the panel; she doesn't want to be a pawn in the *Kring's* political game. It proved impossible to find a replacement for her at such short notice. Buijs was called off, as the conference organisers felt it wouldn't be a balanced panel without Wekker. Instead, there'll be a discussion of the issues within the *Kring*.

One thing is for sure – it won't be a boring conference.

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



splinters

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



Plastic that re-grows

Broken cars or laptop parts that you never need to repair, parts that repair themselves. Who knows, this may be the future. Wageningen researcher Sybren Schoustra developed plastic that repairs itself and therefore needs to be replaced less often. It is also easy to recycle.

When he started his PhD research, he had a particular idea in mind and “it was a bullseye right from the start,” Schoustra tells sister newspaper *Resource*. The molecular structure of plastic looks like a knotted football net, he explains. In existing plastic, the knots are permanent, but in his plastic they are not. “We can disconnect the crosslinks and reconnect them.” The plastic itself carries out the latter all by itself. He shows *Resource* by cutting through a piece of plastic. Within a couple of minutes, it has reattached. “If you look closely, you can still see the line where I cut,” says Schoustra. That will also have

disappeared by tomorrow.

This very promising research does not mean, however, that the plastic will be available in shops tomorrow. “It looks great in the lab and everything works as we want, but we have to find out whether the material behaves in the same way if we implement it into something else, for example, in cars.”

‘Beer’ not allowed at Erasmus University

According to many students, alcohol is of course an important part of the student experience. In 2018, however, Erasmus University of Rotterdam committed itself to the National Prevention Agreement with the goal of halving the number of students who drink too much by 2040. But what does this mean in practice and how is it going? *Erasmus Magazine* found out.

Since 2018, the university has taken steps to realise their goal. For instance, ensuring that staff who have frequent contact with students are properly educated to recognise risky behaviour from substance abuse. In addition, the university set up agreements with student organisations, with rules like not allowing drunk people to events. Not everyone got the message, though. One international association had never heard of an agreement, they told *Erasmus Magazine*.

More remarkable actions. During the Rotterdam introduction week, for instance, partners are not allowed to use the word ‘beer’ in advertisements. Drinking games and discounts on alcohol are prohibited as well. However, students can still buy alcohol on campus. At only one café though, all other entrepreneurs decided themselves not to sell alcohol anymore in 2014.

Every student equal in Utrecht

The city of Utrecht will be the first in the Netherlands to no longer speak of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ education. This should lead to more recognition and equal treatment of intermediate vocational education students.

“A fundamental change needs to be brought about in society so that intermediate vocational education is regarded as a valuable follow-up study alongside universities of applied sciences and universities,” said Utrecht alderman Dennis de Vries to sister newspaper *DUB*. The city had already made it possible for a small group of intermediate vocational education students to take part in the introduction week and that they can make use of the university's student sports centre at student rates.

Together with the University of Applied Sciences Utrecht and Utrecht University, the city now wants to introduce basic changes to nightlife, association life and student life. Rector Henk Kummeling from Utrecht was still a little reserved during a University Council meeting. He didn't see student associations, with their long traditions, adapting their rules “in no time”. UU is not going to adapt its use of language either. “The Higher Education Act still calls us higher education. We cannot ignore this legal reality,” said the rector. “It is important to highlight the intrinsic value of the various types of education and to emphasise that the various forms are desperately needed.”

“What are students going to notice with a shorter academic year?”

Continuation of page 1

“Worrying”, but action is being taken, he said, such as shortening the academic year. “It is a difficult and large project, but a huge step in the right direction.”

“But what will happen in the short term?” Jenny Schell, academic staff council member, wants to know. Merckelbach acknowledges her point that especially assistant professors are experiencing a great deal of pressure. The starter grants that UM – with extra money from the government – is now able to divide among this group annually, should relieve the workload. But things are not moving fast with those grants. The universities are waiting on advice from a national committee, rector Pamela Habibović (who is a member of the committee) explains. That committee has not reached a decision yet. The deadline was 31 March and now it will be 30 June.

Workload

Compared to the first monitor from 2018, the results “have not changed much in four years”, Maarten van Wesel, council member on behalf of obp concludes. The workload has remained high. Nevertheless, Merckelbach thinks that “many things” have been done, referring to the measures taken by the Taskforce. “Let us repeat the monitor in a couple of years’ time, then we will hopefully see the impact.”

Mark Govers (wp member) hears Merckelbach talk about solutions, such as a shorter academic year, adapting the standard hours (for example, how many hours does a lecturer get to correct a thesis) as well as less time-consuming forms of Problem-Based Learning. All that is great, he says, but “when will we start to notice any of that?” Before carnival, in the University Council’s Operational Management committee, where the monitor was also discussed, Govers said: “I have been asking for ten years now to do something about the workload, but I can’t see any progress as long as I see colleagues suffer.”

Time-consuming

Govers wants more attention to be paid to time-consuming ‘administrative tasks’. He expresses his disbelief about the way in which figures have to be entered in Excel spreadsheets. “Typing takes hours and the chances of making a mistake is huge. It is *monnikenwerk*. How is it possible that in the 21st century we haven’t automated a simple task like this?” Many recognise the situation, but administration is required for all kinds of audits, they said. Govers: “But does it have to be done this way?” Lastly, the students in the council: what will we notice with a shorter academic year, Annefleur Bruin wants to know. Rector Habibović puts her mind at rest: “We won’t do anything without you, the students. But we are still in the initial phase, we first want a good framework that gives a clear image of the consequences for students, administrative and support staff, and academic staff.” According to the rector, there are “three, four options” to re-organise such a year. A working group is working out various scenarios. And the workload will certainly be included, she says. Govers hopes that (educational) support staff will be involved in the process at an early stage. “To prevent this group from being confronted with it after the design has been completed.”

Wendy Degens

This investment should enable us to meet our sustainability objectives for 2030

UM sets aside almost 30 million to make buildings more sustainable



Bouillonstraat (Law) will have to become more sustainable Photo: Loraine Bodewes

Until 2030, Maastricht University is going to invest 27.7 million euro in making its buildings more sustainable. In this way, the institute expects to have met its energy objectives for that year. Especially the monumental buildings in the city centre will be taken in hand.

Sixteen million euro had already been reserved in order to make the university buildings more energy-conserving in the coming years. With an extra investment of more than 11 million, to which the University Council agreed last week, UM thinks it can meet its aim for 2030: contributing to the national objectives of a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions of 55 per cent compared to 1990. In addition, it should also lead to lower energy costs, so that the investments can be earned back in time.

In the city centre, the money will be used for measures such as insulating facades, roofs and floors, as well as installing LED lighting. “These are measures that, without large-scale renovations, directly contribute towards a reduction in the use of gas and increase comfort,” says Nick Bos, member of the Executive Board. The recommendations were taken from a report by an external company that looked closely at three buildings in the city centre – Bouillonstraat 1-3 (Law), Tongerestraat 53 (SBE) and Grote Gracht (FASoS). Because these are listed buildings,

certain measures, such as installing double glazing or solar panels, are not (always) permissible. UM has also adopted the proposals for these buildings as a guideline for other buildings in the city centre.

The report states that these proposed adaptations should in 2030 lead to a natural gas reduction of 34 per cent compared to 2019 (UM has no data from 1990). In addition, UM is also looking into sustainability measures for the buildings in Randwyck and installing solar panels on flat roofs of all university buildings as well as – where technically possible – the installation of heat pumps. Together with the use of more green electricity (and reducing its use) this should be sufficient to exceed the objectives for carbon dioxide reduction in 2030.

To meet the objectives for 2050 (zero use of natural gas), large-scale renovations will be necessary, the external report states. Why is that not being dealt with immediately? “For the short term, we have opted for a series of measures that are feasible and affordable,” says Bos. To meet the objectives after 2030, UM is dependent on financial support and legislation for listed buildings from authorities such as the municipality and central government, he explains. “The talks and explorations started many years ago, but will now have to be intensified.”

Dennis Vaendel

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Scrolling Towards Doomsday

He’s back, baby! The gift that keeps on giving or the curse that just won’t go away? As we find ourselves once again sucked into the never-ending cycle of Trump-related news, it’s hard not to wonder: are we addicted to the chaos?

Doomscrolling refers to the habit of endlessly scrolling through news feeds and social media timelines to catch up on the latest global catastrophes and has become all too familiar in the pandemic era. And let’s face it, nothing gets us scrolling quite like a Trump headline. Whether it’s his latest tweet, rally, or the news of his recent indictment, it’s hard to look away from the spectacle.

But why are we so drawn to the Trump news cycle? Is it fear? A sense of morbid curiosity? After all, Trump certainly knows how to keep things interesting. And now that he’s back in the news, it’s hard not to feel a little bit excited for all the drama to come, like it is a bad reality show you just can’t turn off and not the future of America’s democracy.

Of course, it’s not just the excitement that keeps us scrolling. The nature of the information also plays a role. Social media algorithms are designed to show us content that will keep us engaged, and unfortunately, bad news is often the most engaging. Just think about how many times you started a sentence with the words “Did you see what Trump tweeted?” over the past years? But it is more than a great topic to avoid awkward silence at dinner, our brains are hardwired to pay more attention to negative information than positive. It is a survival mechanism that helped our ancestors stay away from danger. However, in the modern age, this natural inclination can do more harm than good not only for our mental health but also by keeping Trump in the news cycle and therefore unintentionally spreading his message.

As we navigate this new era of Trump news, it’s important to remember that we have agency over our media consumption habits. We can choose to take a step back and set boundaries. But let’s be real, a bit of *schadenfreude* by seeing Trump all small and quiet in a courtroom finally facing some consequences can only be good for our mental health.

Line-Marie Eichhorst,
student at University College Maastricht

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series a room of one's own

“The person with the most selfies at dawn prayers gets a prize”



Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

Chaymae Affani (21, German/Moroccan), a third-year student of Digital Society, lives in a 15 m² room on Capucijnenstraat. She spends 485 euros per month on rent.

It's the first thing you notice when you enter Chaymae Affani's room. The rug, the throw blanket on the bed, the curtains, the small table, the MacBook, the keyboard and the mouse – they're all pink. Affani is even wearing a pink dress today. She looks around. “I hadn't really noticed it until now”, she laughs. Why pink? “No particular reason, I just think it's a pretty colour.”

Ethical hacking

The stereotype of a tech-savvy person is a man with unkempt hair, small glasses, wrinkled clothes, and a room filled with empty

pizza boxes and other rubbish. In other words, the exact opposite of Affani, who is wearing a headscarf and a wide dress that falls to her ankles. But looks can be deceiving. She wants to become an ethical hacker, someone who tries to break in to the digital environment of companies and organisations to help them improve their security. “In many ways, the internet is still unexplored territory. There are so many ways to steal data. Large companies are exploiting us in broad daylight. We deserve personal data protection. That's why ethical hacking is so important. I'm currently watching a TV show about a hacker, *Mr. Robot*. It's about someone who

works as a cyber security expert by day and hacks corrupt, powerful people by night.” Her degree programme, Digital Society, mainly focuses on the ethical and philosophical aspects of the digital world, but she also likes to learn about the more technical side. “I'm considering getting a bachelor's degree in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence after this.” A second degree comes with a hefty price tag, but it's worth it to her. “I'll work hard for it. I've always been interested in the internet and artificial intelligence.” She voluntarily does the digital security at MSA Nour, an association for Muslim students in Maastricht. She is also serving as its secretary

this year. “I'm taking an online course for ethical hacking.”

Muslim student association

Her religion is also displayed in her room; there's a prayer rug on the floor, and several books about Islam on the windowsill. “Religion is the most important thing in my life.” Affani prays five times per day, reads the Qur'an “about five times per week”, only eats halal meat, doesn't drink and is “constantly seeking Islamic knowledge”. This means she looks for the meaning behind Islamic texts and practices in books, on the internet or in conversations with others. “It's my way of rediscovering the religion my parents passed on to me.”

She has those conversations with other MSA Nour members, for example. They motivate each other, says Affani. “We have a group chat where we send pictures of ourselves at dawn prayers to show each other that we got out of bed for them. The person with the most selfies at the end of the month gets a prize.”

Prayer is very important to her. “Allah asks us to pray, and His will is what matters most. Prayer makes me grateful for small, taken-for-granted things. The fact that I can breathe, for example – I'm so grateful He gave me that.” She sees praying as a conversation with Allah, she says. “No matter what's going on in my life, He always listens to me.”

A kind word or a smile

Affani is not just the secretary of the association, but also the head of its charity committee. “I spend about eight to twenty hours per week on association work, depending on the week.” They currently have 92 members. The vast majority – “about eighty” – are UM students, but other students (*HBO* and *MBO*) are very welcome to join.

One of the activities MSA Nour is currently planning is to “hand out motivational notes” from stands at university library entrances, says Affani. “In Islam, saying a kind word or giving someone a smile is seen as a form of charity.” What will the notes say? “Things like ‘Don't give up’ or ‘With hardship comes ease.’” They are also about to launch a fundraising campaign together with other Muslim student associations across the Netherlands. “We'll raise money for education in Somalia, for children who have no money to buy books, for example.”

Company logo

On the pink table sits a pink crate with balls of yarn. Crocheting is one of her favourite hobbies. Purses are her favourite to make. She takes an almost finished one out of the crate; she just needs to finish the handles. “I crochet in the evenings when I'm watching a film or series. Or during breaks. I'm in the process of starting my own craft business.” She already has stickers with her company logo; she shows them off proudly. She's not just doing it to earn some extra money, but also because it's sustainable, she says. “That's important to me. I buy most of my clothes from vintage shops. Sneakers, too.” She gets to her feet and goes to her shoe collection, pulling out two pairs of brightly coloured Nike Dunks. “I'm not a real sneakerhead, but I do love it when I get my hands on shoes like these.”

Yuri Meesen

A series about students and their student room
Want to be interviewed? Mail to:
d.vaendel@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Proposition:

Transparency is a great democratic good.
Councils should restrict confidential meetings to a minimum.

In the run-up to the university elections on 8-11 May, *Observant* will put a proposition before members of staff and students every week. This week: Transparency is a great democratic good. Councils should restrict confidential meetings to a minimum.

Michael Capalbo, chairperson of the faculty council at Psychology and Neurosciences, thinks that you should keep the confidential agenda as limited as possible. “Sometimes, the board insists that something is put on the confidential agenda, but then they have to have a good story.” That ‘as few confidential discussions as possible’ also means: sharing plans that have not been fully worked out. According to Capalbo, managing is “being able to deal with ‘difficult’ opinions. There is nothing wrong with discussion. It is okay if people don’t agree with your ideas; a board actually benefits from it. As council members, it is also good to hear what your colleagues or fellow students think. On the other hand, people also have to realise that – although they are being listened to – their opinion will not always lead to change or that everyone gets what they want.”

To guarantee that transparency, the chairperson of the council will sometimes have to enter into discussion with the board. “That can of course be tough, confronting the big boss. But I think that every dean can make a proper distinction between you as a chairperson and you as an employee. In our faculty, it never leads to conflicts.” This is not just hot air: of the seven FPN council meetings this academic year, three did not have a confidential agenda. “I am proud of that.” Transparency, Capalbo feels, is also about how the council actually functions. The fact that the University Council does not want to say anything about the report on social safety within that same council (an external integrity agency carried out an investigation commissioned by the Executive Board, after the Board had received signs of ‘unsafe circumstances’), “gives the impression that a lot is happening behind closed doors. It is partly inevitable that something like this remains confidential, because it concerns people, but if nobody has any kind of idea about what went on – and you most likely will never find out – you create a certain atmosphere.”

Concerning persons

Transparency in the representative advisory bodies is very important, says **Jan Smits**, dean of the Faculty of Law. “Rather a noncommittal answer,” he laughs. “It is all about how you go about it. What I try to do in the faculty coun-

cil, is to put as many subjects on the public agenda as possible. We hardly discuss anything in private anymore. Really only the nomination of new professors, for which the faculty council has advisory power. We discuss these nominations in private, because it concerns a person. As far as I am concerned, that is the only good reason for confidentiality.” That could also sometimes be the case with policy memos, says Smits, in which names of employees are mentioned. “Or when subjects can be traced back to an individual. Imagine that things aren’t running smoothly somewhere in the faculty. Then you wouldn’t want those people to be exposed. But where it concerns HR, strategy, to mention but a few topics, we always discuss everything in public.” In the hope that the discussion doesn’t remain limited to just the council, but that it seeps through to other sections of the faculty, says Smits. “The council is only one part of university democracy, and often an island too. That



Illustration: Simone Golob

“Nothing wrong with discussion. It is okay if people don’t agree with your ideas; a board actually benefits from it”

sounds unkind, but the council feels that way too. That is why we sometimes set up townhall meetings, about Recognition and Rewards, for example. We discuss other issues with

the department chairpersons.” Because he values transparency so much, Smits feels that it is a pity that the University Council has kept the shutters closed the past few months. “If the report about an unsafe working environment mentions individuals by name, I understand that it was not made public. But you could always give a summary of what has happened, without harming individuals.” That way, you would prevent the council from continuing to be subject of discussion. “I think that is so awkward. Certainly, when they turn into persistent rumours. That is not fun for anyone, including the council members.”

Maurice Timmermans and Cleo Freriks

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Shorter academic year? Yes, please!

The academic year in the Netherlands is up to nine weeks longer than elsewhere, reports *Observant* online. The Young Academy, a society of relatively young top scientists, now wants to change this under the name ‘smarter academic year’. And UM is taking part in the experiment.

Without knowing where this all will go (like most people I guess), I’m very happy about this initiative. Not for me anymore, as I will finish my studies this summer, but for all who follow. Especially those who have been struggling like me during their studies. I should explain that I studied for (much) longer than most people. I didn’t take the ‘normal path’ of three years bachelor’s plus master’s straight after, and you’re done at 23. I’m turning 28 this summer. “You must see your studies as a fulltime job, 9 to 5”, the study advisor told me when I asked for tips just after I started studying. It’s good advice, and I’m sure it works for many people, but then there’s reality. My reality. The money-problem is part of it, despite *studiefinanciering*, which is great, but for non-Dutch citizens only available if you work more than 56 hours per month or have lived here for longer than five years (I understand the rationale of the government, but still). So, whatever you do, not working is not an option, unless you have parents that sponsor you.

And then there are the smaller and bigger issues of life besides the money issue, which I endured enough of (and which have mostly caused my delay). Long story short: 9 to 5-studying only works for a certain group of people. Not for me, and not for many others I know. And for exactly that reason I welcome the experiment very much. In my opinion, it’s time to make studying more flexible, and yes, that should also include less tuition. It might be naive, but I believe that during my many years of studying I’ve learned far more than a 9 to 5-student. I saw people come and go, worked various jobs, partied and cried, failed and stood up again. It did something with me. And it’s an experience that nobody can take away from me.

Simon Wirtz,
master’s student at FASoS

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Two workload experts about the results of the **'sustainable employability monitor'**

"These people are really tired; the system is failing"

The workload at Maastricht University has remained unceasingly high over the past four years, despite all kinds of measures taken. About 34 per cent of academic staff runs a very high risk of experiencing a burnout. "Very serious" and "extremely worrying", is the reaction from two Maastricht workload experts, professors Angelique de Rijk and Mark Levels, who took a close look at the latest sustainable employability monitor results for *Observant*.

Text: Riki Janssen Illustration: Bas van der Schot

What about the workload? Do you feel safe at work? Do you feel like you belong? Do you start work on Monday feeling rested? In 2022, eight hundred and eighty-five employees (18.6 per cent) completed the questionnaire for the second 'sustainable employability monitor'. A low response rate. For the first survey in 2018 (both have been commissioned by the Executive Board), 63 per cent of all employees participated.

The results can therefore not be compared one-to-one with each other, the researchers write, but if one compares the two monitors on "a higher level", one will see that very little has changed in the last four years. A considerable number of employees run a "very high risk of experiencing a burnout". Also, "It is alarming to see that a substantial number of UM employees are still in dire need of recovery and experiences a workload that is high or too high."

Short fuse

According to **Angelique de Rijk**, professor of Labour and Health at (FHML), the summary of the

results on UMPLOYEE (intranet) does not do justice to the seriousness of the situation. A politically tinted summary, she feels. She read the more than two-hundred-page report in detail, considering the number of Post-it notes, underlining and comments in the margins. "The burn-out percentages are not mentioned, for example: 16.1 per cent of administrative and support staff (obp) and 34.5 per cent of academic staff (wp) is at a high to very high risk." She also points out the percentage of people (46.6 per cent) that has a lot of trouble with "emotional distress", one of the characteristics of a burnout. "We score almost twice as high as the average in the Netherlands. Or take exhaustion, another indicator: 22 per cent of UM staff has a very high risk of that. Of all Dutch employees, only 6 per cent scores that high. The researchers formulated all their results in extremely neutral wording in the report, but even they speak of 'worrying figures.'" What does this mean for employees, she wonders aloud. "These people are extremely tired, which must affect the quality of their work, it just has to. The same goes

for co-operation: people who are that exhausted, do not always have their emotions in check, they may have a short fuse, spontaneously burst into tears, or quickly take offence."

Looking for the impossible

A large portion of this overburdened group (almost 60 per cent) has taken steps to reduce the workload, the report states, but in a lot of cases this has not always been successful. De Rijk: "You see that this problem is too great for any individual, this is about the system failing. Especially the group that combines research with teaching, like the assistant professors, are getting into trouble. They exhibit the lowest labour satisfaction rates and the greatest risk of experiencing a burnout. This just proves that when you look for the impossible, you won't find anything. There is a large group at our university that is merely trying to keep their heads above water. That threatens UM's power of innovation. How can you come up with new ideas if you are constantly tired?"

Overtime

On average, employees are appointed for almost 35 hours per week, but the actual number of hours worked is structurally five hours per week higher. Again, this is an average of all personnel, academic as well as support staff, so there are people who do less overtime, but also some who do much more. De Rijk: "It is harrowing to even have to say it and it has not been researched yet, but I hear all too often that a professor becomes seriously ill around the age of retirement. So, you worked really hard all those years and now you can't even enjoy retirement."

E-mails during the weekend

Mark Levels, professor of Health, Education and Work at the School of Business and Economics and programme director at the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA), walks into his study on the Tongersestraat with a freshly submitted thesis in his hand. "Always a wonderful moment when it has been printed," he says visibly pleased. To immediately follow with: "This PhD graduate was the first to ask if I could not send any more e-mails during the weekend. My initial reaction was: 'I work a lot, also at the weekend. If you don't check your e-mail, we won't have a problem. But that wasn't the lesson. The lesson was that I myself shouldn't work



during the weekend. Was it not Gandhi who said: 'Be the change you want to see in the world'?"

Killing

He was shocked at the results of the monitor, "this is a point of concern, to put it mildly". Levels sees how hard colleagues work and how involved they are. "A researcher does not have an easy job. You have to be really good at something that is complicated, you are continually confronted with criticism, and at the same time – this especially applies to junior researchers – deal with the 'impostor syndrome'. Aside from that, expectations are high and the competition is killing. You have to excel, so you automatically run fast."

How can we prevent people from being forced over edge? He sees an important role here for the leaders within UM. "Education and research are important tasks; we must do them well. But we, as employers, must create a socially safe atmosphere where it is perfectly okay for people to say: no, this deadline won't work for me, not at the moment because a family member is sick, or I have just had a baby and that takes some getting used to. It would be a good thing if we no longer saw this as failing."

A boss who is also struggling

That is why it is important that those in charge consider the private situation when career planning is on the agenda, Levels emphasises. "The greatest bottlenecks – as appears from this report too – are in the group of employees who are without a permanent contract and the assistant professors. They often combine their work

with a young family. They have to juggle a lot of balls: teaching as well as doing research and bringing in subsidies. If you really take 'Recognition and Rewards' serious, you look at the strengths of these people and what is realistic at this moment in their lives. You would be doing them a tremendous pleasure by not putting extra pressure on them with a tight deadline." But it also helps if the boss shows that he or she is also having problems with the workload. "This is about a cultural change and you can only make that change by giving the example." What if this means that a publication, or a thesis or a project is finished later than planned? Or if a possible promotion takes place later than expected? So be it, Levels says cheerfully, it is not such a disaster. "We have to earn our own money here at ROA, all money comes in through subsidies and we expect our people to bring in their own funding. But with each job we are being offered, we ask ourselves: will it fit? Do we have the people and can we do it on time? If not, we will talk to the customer. And if that person can't rearrange, then we don't take on the work. I used to get up at 4:30 to work, I also worked during weekends, I no longer do that."

Shorter academic year

A shorter academic year, one of the points of action that came out of the first sustainable employability monitor, and with which we are now going to experiment, would "help tremendously," Levels expects. "I worked in Oxford for a while, where they have three terms of eight weeks, they did have some elective courses in between, but staff did have the opportunity in the meantime to do research. At ROA, my team tries to plan one week a

month that is 'free': no appointments with PhD students, no meetings about projects. Teaching still continues, but a relatively empty week like that gives you the time to drop in on a colleague, read articles and to write."

De Rijk is more critical. "A shorter academic year is a good idea if you also reduce the number of blocks, and especially the number of contact hours per block, and in doing so also the demands made on students. But will the accreditation committees agree with this. Will we still meet the criteria?" Students must spend 1,680 hours on their study per year (an academic year consists of 60 ECTS, each credit stands for 28 hours). "You can't just shop around in those points of action, everything is connected."

Standard hours

De Rijk: "If I ask around what the biggest obstacle is, the thing I hear most is: the number of standard hours (how many hours a lecturer receives for supervising a thesis, putting an exam together, etc) is not realistic. That has to change, we should receive more time for the tasks. At the moment, I get 1.5 times the number of contact hours for a tutorial group meeting. Look: you have to go to the classroom, you have to manage I don't know how many systems, you have to take the time for students who want to talk to you after the tutorial, with questions about content, personal problems, and even if you are an old hand at it like me, I still have to go through the material beforehand every time." De Rijk knows that doing less than your best, is not the solution. "People have high work commitment; they don't want to dial it down and work less hard for half of the time. You want to do good work."

Vicious circle

In short: more money is needed for education, De Rijk concludes. "Otherwise, we will never free ourselves from this vicious circle." Yes, she knows that there are now starter grants and encouragement grants for assistant professors, but will they actually reduce the workload, or will it be more of the same? "In the future, assistant professors can buy themselves out of teaching. Who is going to do it then?"

What definitely needs to be done, according to De Rijk: "Organising our affairs better, let us divide up the tasks and differentiate more: should an assistant professor do so much teaching and research? Maybe you should teach more at the beginning of your career, after all you have already proven yourself as a researcher, you have your PhD. Then later on, less teaching and more research and going after subsidies."

“
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Committee full of critics misses deadline for advice on starter grants

Minister Dijkgraaf of Education will have to wait a little longer for advice on how to distribute 300 million euros in starter and stimulation grants. A committee has requested a postponement of the deadline. On behalf of Maastricht University, rector Pamela Habibović and Ceren Pekdemir, associate professor of Sustainable Development, are members.

More 'peace and quiet' is needed in academia, Minister Dijkgraaf believes. Partly due to the ongoing competition for research money at research funding body NWO, many researchers suffer from work pressure. Last year, he unveiled his plan. There will be starter grants of 300 thousand euros for all assistant professors with a new permanent contract. In addition, universities themselves may start distributing stimulation grants of varying amounts. It involves 300 million euros a year. It should make researchers less dependent on NWO.

Criticism was soon heard. This could unintentionally lead to a new competition, thought, among others, the Young Academy; not with research funding NWO, but within the walls of one's own institution.



Illustration: Simone Golob

WO in Actie-activists suggested simply dividing the money among all assistant, associate and full professors. That would amount to

about 25 thousand euros per person.

Universities also had objections. Perhaps it would be better to give the money to teams

rather than individual researchers, was one idea. And why does everyone get the same amount? In one field, the costs are higher than in another.

A special committee is going to advise Minister Dijkgraaf on how to 'work out' the plans for these grants. That committee includes a remarkable number of critics of Dijkgraaf's plans. And now that committee has not come to a conclusion yet. The deadline was 31 March and will now be 30 June.

Chairman Bert Weckhuysen has asked the minister for a postponement because the committee wants to do a "broad consultation with potential recipients of the grants, administrators, members of university councils and other stakeholders".

Weckhuysen previously wrote an opinion article on such grants (then called rolling grants) for science society KNAW. His committee includes members of WO in Actie and The Young Academy, as well as the rector of Maastricht University and a member of the AOb trade union, who led a demonstration at the opening of the academic year.

HOP

 Maastricht University



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8-11 May
University and Faculty Council

More info:
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Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

- 06-4, 13.00 h Gregory van der Kroft
- 11-4, 13.00 h Charlotte Anraad
- 11-4, 16.00 h Murat Sumer
- 12-4, 10.00 h Laura Visser
- 13-4, 13.00 h Martijn van Hooff
- 13-4, 16.00 h Kelly Offermans
- 14-4, 10.00 h Renée M.L. Miséré
- 14-4, 13.00 h Colin Tissen
- 14-4, 16.30 h Dr. Anita C.E. Vreugdenhil
inauguratie
- 17-4, 10.00 h Boudewijn Visscher
- 17-4, 13.00 h Alexander Dicks
- 17-4, 16.00 h Sanita Rugina
- 18-4, 13.00 h Yvonne M.J. Goërtz
- 18-4, 16.00 h Samvel Mkhitarian
- 19-4, 10.00 h Matthias Leute
- 19-4, 13.00 h Miriam Weijers
- 19-4, 16.00 h Tom P.M.M. Vluggen
- 20-4, 10.00 h Niccolò Galli Joint doctoral degree Universität Augsburg and Maastricht University
- 20-4, 13.00 h Alicia Veninga
- 20-4, 16.00 h Christy B.M.Tulen
- 21-4, 13.00 h Tobias Meßmer
- 21-4, 16.30 h Dr. Pim Martens inauguratie
- 24-4, 10.00 h Adriana Solovei
- 24-4, 13.00 h Ilknur Sanli
- 24-4, 16.00 h Jeannette Tas
- 25-4, 10.00 h Dennis J.N.J. Soemers
- 25-4, 13.00 h Stefano Navarro double doctoral degree Maastricht University and University of Würzburg
- 26-4, 13.00 h Ilaria De Simone double doctoral degree Maastricht University - University of Reading
- 26-4, 16.00 h Prof. dr. G. Wesseling afscheidscollège

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