

observant

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"Everybody around me speaks English, learning Dutch is really not necessary"



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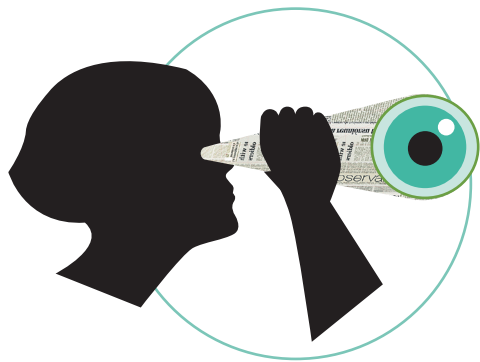


Landbouwbelang community sad and angry

"They may be trying to make the free space disappear, but we certainly won't"

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Riki Janssen

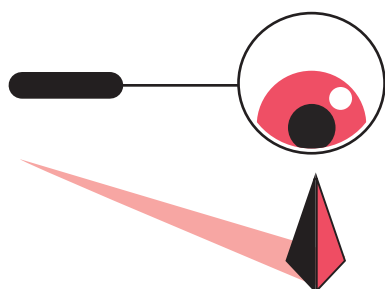
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editorial
The bad stuff sticks
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Interviewees who are taken aback by their own words, and demand we scrap entire passages from an article as a result. Rants in our inbox from people complaining about one thing or another. I keep a list of possible topics to write about here; more than half of them are about problems and grievances. The bad stuff, it seems, sticks in the mind longer. What isn't on the list, I realised after Whit Monday (a few days of cycling can do wonders for mind and body), are the kind messages we get from readers. Like last weekend, when a long-time reader wrote in to compliment us on our article interviewing victims of the professor who was fired for misconduct. That's great, we said to each other this morning, and then proceeded to the business at hand. After all, good

news is no news, as the old journalistic adage goes. The business at hand included our search for a Dutch-language student columnist. We thought we'd found the right person for the job, but she pulled out at the last minute. Was it because of my phone call asking her to check her email a little more often so she wouldn't miss an invitation for a job interview? Was I too hard on her? Who knows. Either way, we are once again asking students with strong writing skills, creative minds, and an active student life to reach out to us. It's a paid position for thirty columns per year, with professional guidance. (riki.janssen@maastrichtuniversity.nl) As several long-time contributors will be leaving us soon, we're also facing a shortage of English-language columnists

in the next academic year. We're looking for UM staff members who can write for a wide audience (so no academic treatises, but smoothly written pieces, preferably with a dash of humour) and feel comfortable sharing their views on hot issues within and outside the university. If you're interested, please don't hesitate to contact us by email. Your column might just be right next to this one in the upcoming year. There's no need to be afraid; we're here to provide you with writing tips and final editing. Eternal glory awaits you! Or at the very least a step in that direction.

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.



Tapestry about student debts

'Eigen Schuld' (having the double meaning of 'your own fault' and 'your debt') is the title of the enormous tapestry that artist Mart Veldhuis recently sold for 45.879,40 euro; the exact amount of his student loan. It is his graduation project and expresses a critical view on the lending system.

The items depicted on the tapestry include blue tax envelopes, price tags, a stressed-out student, smashed piggy banks, and a supermarket that is called 'Always Pain', with a logo that resembles Albert Heijn's.

For centuries, tapestries have been used to criticise "social and political developments and problems", the artist writes on his website. His work follows on from that tradition: it symbolises the life of a student who is burdened by his ever-growing student debt.

The art dealers who bought the work, want to exhibit it in a public space. At the moment, it is on loan to Dordrecht Museum. Veldhuis would like to see it hanging in the House of Parliament, he said to *de Volkskrant*. He hopes that future policymakers "would then think twice" before setting up such a system again.

By the way, Veldhuis can't quite go through life completely free of debts yet, as he had to pay tax on the sale. (HOP)

Picture wall or not?

Every dean from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences received upon his (yes, *his*, not his or her – more on that matter later) departure a place on the wall of the Co Greep hall (Universiteitssingel 60). The men, immortalised in black and white portraits, keep watch during many meetings by boards, faculty councils or department chairs.

A piece of history – it all started in Maastricht with the Faculty of Medicine – but it is a very male history. The present dean, Annemie Schols, is the first female leader of the faculty. Since her appointment, people have regularly complained about it, she says on the phone. "Some people are put off by it – all those men. I can make the picture more diverse, but only when I leave." To dryly add: "I won't be stepping down prematurely just to make that happen."

There were no drastic actions like in Leiden, where employees removed the painting of smoking men – a former university board – from the wall. But when the Co Greep hall was recently renovated – new furniture, the possibility for hybrid meetings – the pictures also disappeared. Schols called upon people to come up with an alternative, both for the wall and the location of the photographs. "We are not going to just put them in a basement somewhere." That was not so easy and pretty soon after the festive opening (a glass of bubbly during the faculty council meeting) it started to gnaw at both Schols

and faculty council chairperson Boy Houben. Was it not a shame to do away with all those photographs? "We stand on the shoulders of our predecessors," says Schols when asked. "You could also see it as a great way to get a conversation started." She suggests putting everything more into context, something that an independent committee in Leiden also advised about the painting there. "Who are those people and what did they do for our faculty? Many current employees and students don't know that. You put it into perspective by doing so. Maybe with a timeline and street art, for example."

Ideas are still welcome, but Schols is hoping to be quickly rid of the bare wall. "It is very large and white at the moment."

The final remnants

You still see them here and there in shops, restaurants as well as the university buildings: a sticker reminding you to wash your hands, telling you the distance you need to keep or in which direction you should walk through the building. The last remnants of a time with Covid. Time to remove even those, felt Facility Services.

They are going to deal with it in the coming weeks. All the stickers on floors, walls and doors that were overlooked during previous cleaning rounds will be removed. A list will also be made of all damages caused due to fanatical labelling. These will be repaired during the summer. That only leaves the colour difference on the floors where the stickers were. More patience will be needed here: that will disappear by itself in time.



University Council committee will look into the low turn-out and voting system

What can the University Council do about the low turn-out at the university elections? Can the voting system be improved? And how can employee and student participation become more a part of the community? An ad-hoc University Council election committee is going to look into these and other questions.

It started in January with a discussion in the University Council about the turn-out and preferential votes. Candidates who want to get a seat in a council on the basis of preferential votes must have 50 per cent of the voting value of a seat (i.e., the number of votes you need for a seat; this fluctuates, depending on the total number of votes cast). A few student members suggested making that 25 per cent. They think that this would make the elections “more dynamic and more democratic”.

This is tricky business, the council soon noticed, so it was decided to set up a committee. “We also want to involve the faculty councils and employees’ councils, speak with an expert, and see how they do things elsewhere in the country: could we copy it?”, says Jonas Lindenaar, student member and chairperson of the election committee.

The committee is also hoping to do something about the low turn-out. The new chairperson Teun Dekker previously said in *Observant*: “We will have to communicate better, we will have to get out there and show the average student and employee what the University Council does.” A view that is shared by education minister Dijkgraaf, who recently made an additional 11.5 million euro available for training, support, communication and compensation for council membership. “We now have to come up with a plan: what are we going to do with the money?”, said Dekker.

To start off, an evaluation of the elections held in May will be carried out – the committee is collecting feedback at the moment. “We will discuss the matter with the Election Office and the rest of the council in June,” says Lindenaar. Possible changes may be on the agenda after the summer.

If an adaptation of the voting system is indeed found to be desirable, then it is not up to the University Council to write a proposal, but the Executive Board, the statutes say. Lindenaar reacted by saying, “but they have already said back in January that they will take our input very seriously”.

CF

University Council committee on unacceptable behaviour Faculty of Law more flexible than FHML? Nonsense, says Letschert



Photo: Loraine Bodewes

Yes, more cases of unacceptable behaviour are coming to the surface at Maastricht University. But that was to be expected, president Rianne Letschert told the University Council's strategy committee recently. “Now that social safety is a priority for us, you automatically receive more complaints and so more disciplinary actions will be taken.”

Recently, it was announced that two professors in Randwijck (MUMC+ and the Faculty of Health Medicine and Life Sciences) had to leave due to misconduct, and that other disciplinary measures (not dismissal) were imposed on two academic staff members at the Faculty of Law. It is not that things are really bad at UM, Letschert emphasises, cases are now coming to light that used to remain unspoken. “And that is good news.”

The committee pointed out that there were rumours that people sometimes have the impression that one faculty (in this case Law) is more lenient than the other (FHML). That is nonsense, says Letschert. “We would do better to gossip less and restrict ourselves to facts. The deans don't decide this by themselves, all disciplinary measures are put before

the Executive Board

She pointed out that the Executive Board in the latest case about the FHML professor for whom a dismissal procedure has been implemented, deliberately refrained from mentioning a name. “As an employer, we see no reason to do so, partly from a personal perspective; such a person also has a wife and children.” The university needs to be careful not to embark on a witch hunt, a council member reacted, “everyone deserves a second chance”. Another mentioned that the male part of the university community at times wrestles with what is allowed and what is absolutely not, and as a precaution is very careful. Letschert acknowledged the dilemma: “There is a huge grey area. You don't want all kinds of behaviour to suddenly be no longer possible.” As an example, she places a hand on her neighbour's shoulder. “I often do this, automatically, some people don't have a problem with it, others do. We need to talk about that. That is why we focus on that in our leadership courses.” But: “When the behaviour is not grey, but black, we need to take action.”

Riki Janssen

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On books

There is a shameful secret shared amongst many academics. It is a taboo topic that can elicit defensive reactions, easily bring into question reasons why some of us are at universities in the first place or instigate an acute bout of nostalgia: these days, we don't read many books.

The publish or perish mantra has led to a frantic state of production: articles, chapters, edited volumes etc. The more we generate, openly accessible of course, the better. Emphasis is on output.

When it comes to input, actually reading what *others* write, this often gets ordered along the following lines: grading, supervised theses, class readings, peer reviewing, articles required to situate our own writing, colleagues' work for feedback, abstracts of interesting articles that appear in our inbox/socials, then, maybe, and most often on holidays, an actual book (probably bought online late one night in the midst of despair for lack of time to read books).

The problems with these reading habits are manifold. The material is usually within our own discipline/topic/field, which means we often just end up reiterating what we already know, bolstering silos of knowledge production. Most of it is on screens, keeping us close to emails and other distractions fluttering in the periphery. The material is read with purpose and a goal, leaving little space for meandering or surprise. The library is visited online to download a PDF, not to browse shelves for adjacent discoveries. I am starting to lug stacks of actual physical books to class to remind students that they exist in universities too, not just #BookTok.

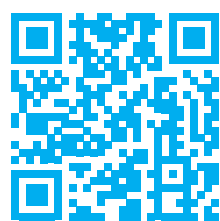
Common responses to this lament: there's no time to read books! What an indulgence! There are emails to write/read, meetings to attend!

In our Faculty (FASoS) we have an open document with a small but evolving list of self-forming academic book clubs. We read and discuss books that De Tribune is happy to order, if not in the library. On June 13th there will be a Book Fair celebrating the work of local colleagues. Down Grote Gracht Limestone Books has just opened, a place that celebrates the sheer beauty of the printed form. The Less-Emails-More-Books movement is growing. Will you join?

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

The latest news on our website



series a room of one's own

“I can't stay alone with my thoughts, they get too loud”



Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

Spyros-Nikitas Tsamichas (24, from Greece), a master's student of Law, lives on Batterijstraat in a 27 m2 studio apartment with its own kitchenette, shower and toilet. His rent is 535 euros per month, not including utilities.

Music is playing in the studio. Before Spyros-Nikitas Tsamichas even gets up in the morning, he connects his phone to his Bluetooth speaker and then goes through his morning routine. The student is always listening to all kinds of music, as “I can't stay alone with my thoughts, they get too loud. They are like a tornado; I can't maintain a coherent train of thought without music.” Sometimes, when he feels a little down, he likes to stay in his bubble of music; it gives him a safe and happy place.

Muay Thai

He loves sports. Especially taking Muay Thai classes at Vivas Gym three to four times per week. Muay Thai is like kickboxing, but “any-

thing is allowed”. You can use all body parts to fight, though some areas - like the genitals and the kidneys - are off limits. This type of exercise is good because it provides a healthy escape from everyday life. It also teaches him how to take hits and defend himself against them, rather than just how to attack. He can always tell which of his fellow fighters have had a rough life by the way they fight. “People who fight harder and train harder have struggled much more” as compared to “people who have always had it easy”.

Kiss Me

Hanging on the wall near the desk by the kitchenette is a newspaper page from *Observant* with scribbling all over it. It's from an

article about a protest at the Minderbroedersberg against sexual violence. “Fancy prisons are still prisons”, Tsamichas has written all over the article in yellow highlighter and black ink. He believes that Western European countries take their privileged way of life for granted and that there aren't enough protests against issues like rape culture. “That was the first time I've seen people here take protest action and get upset about something. People here too often forget what's happening in the outside world.” They live in their own bubble, he says. Next to the newspaper article is a framed quote: “Kiss me right under my moustache.” Tsamichas laughs when the quote is pointed out to him. It was given to him by a friend

who was staying at his apartment while he was in Greece. His friends always leave him gifts when they stay at his apartment. Another quote, “I kiss better than I cook”, is displayed on his shelf.

First place

On the shelf below the quotes sits a trophy: first place in the Student Idea Competition 2023. At the beginning of this year, Tsamichas and a friend of his started a small business called Energon Green Solutions to provide students with easily accessible information on how to reduce their carbon footprint on campus. It earned them first prize in the competition, which focuses on improving student life at UM. He doesn't know if he will pursue another degree after completing his bachelor's. “I'm really lost about what I want to do with my life.” His small start-up is therefore the best way he can think of to find a direction for his future.

Kathryn van den Berg

A series about students and their student room

“Designation does not fit in with programmatic assessment”

FHML wants to abolish cum laude at Medicine

Medical students will no longer be able to gain the designation ‘cum laude’ in the bachelor’s or the master’s programmes. The Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences feels that striving for high marks clashes with the philosophy of programmatic assessment. There was criticism from students in the faculty council: “How can we now distinguish ourselves from others?”

High grades, that is what cum laude is all about. Most study programmes require an average mark of at least eight out of ten and for instance, never having gotten a grade lower than seven. In the case of programmatic assessment (common in the master’s programmes for some time, and since September 2022, at the start of the new curriculum, also introduced in the bachelor’s programmes) a grade is hardly ever given. Students receive feedback on competences and skills and work on the basis of that. All this is recorded in a portfolio. At the end of the year, a committee assesses whether the student has developed sufficiently to proceed to the next year.

Recording not-so-good achievements – and the subsequent learning experience – in the portfolio is essential for programmatic assessment and clashes with the idea that a high grade is equal to being the best, says Roger Rennenberg, programme director of Medicine. That is why this discussion has also come

up in other study programmes that use the same assessment system. The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam took the lead last year and dispensed with cum laude in the master’s of Medicine.

But how can good students then distinguish themselves, the student fraction of council wondered. And will Maastricht graduates be at a disadvantage in the selection for a follow-up study programme if they can’t present a cum laude distinction or some other form of commendation?

As far as Rennenberg is concerned, they don’t need to worry about that. “I have discussed this with educators of follow-up study programmes and 99 per cent says it won’t make a difference,” he says on the telephone. “High grades for exams say something about one particular competence: gathering knowledge. In jobs or within the follow-up study programme, we are looking for candidates with a variety of capacities. Moreover, a – admittedly old – thesis on this subject shows that students who graduate cum laude do not get better

positions or make more money later on than those with a lower average.”

Despite this, gaining high grades is important to students, Rennenberg has noticed. “They influence each other. Even within programmatic assessment, we have seen that some stu-

dents go looking for supervisors who are more likely to give a ‘good’. That is not the idea at all, it is more valuable to students to also hear what they didn’t do so well. We are working hard at preventing portfolios with only selectively chosen ‘good’ assessments. Supervisors are given training, there are ‘rubrics’ – forms

– to support uniform grading and we have sessions in which we agree on what we feel qualifies for ‘sufficient’, ‘good’ or ‘very good’. Supervisors who nevertheless only give high marks are called to account. Fortunately, there are not many.”

And what about students who go abroad for a master’s? Are grades not important there as well? “That hasn’t happened in the past ten years, the bachelor’s and master’s of Medicine are one study programme. It is possible that someone wants to do a different master’s abroad with certain admission requirements like a high average grade. In that case, we will take a closer look at the portfolio and add a written explanation in addition to an average grade from just the cognitive tests as is usually asked for abroad. All to help the student as much as possible.”

Some fear that students will try to find something else to compete with each other, as appears from the proposal that is being discussed in the council. Rennenberg: “It’s impossible to completely prevent it. Before another

myth is born, I would like to emphasise that a scientific publication is not a requirement for a place in a study programme to become a specialist. Again, that only says something about one single competence. As far as extracurricular activities are concerned: it’s certainly

not mandatory but I’m not opposed to every student having a side job with social interest like volunteering in health care or having a job in the nursing home, you can learn a lot from that in many different competencies.”

Cleo Freriks

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Exploitation at our doorstep

“Thanks to this side job, I can eat out with my friends, and go on vacation every year”, one young girl is quoted. “Moving in the fresh morning air keeps me going”, is written beside the photo of an older woman. I had many side jobs throughout the years, but making money in the early morning whilst moving as a newspaper delivery person, that’s a first for me. I wanted to give it a try, as it sounds promising, looking at these testimonials on the website advertising for the job. Plus: I really need some money before summer is approaching. The registration on the website was done quickly. Last Monday was my first day on the job: I set my alarm for 5am, and, with my eyes half-closed, went downstairs. When I opened the front door, big packages of newspapers were already waiting for me, and a list with the households that they should be delivered to. I put the 108 newspapers into the pannier bags on my bike, and started to ride towards the first house, slowed down by the heavy load.

“It’s a relaxed job, expect around 45 minutes for the delivery. It doesn’t make you rich, it’s rather a paid workout”, I remembered the words of my manager on the way. On my route I also got to meet some colleagues. They seemed happy to have a new colleague and offered their help. Time passed fast, and after I delivered the last paper, it was already 7:33am: I’ve been biking and running for around two hours (“expect 45 minutes”, right?). My entire body was covered in sweat.

After taking a shower, I sat down to do the maths. Different from what I thought, the job is not paid by the hour, but by delivered paper. That is, 6.3 cent for each paper. My ‘paid two-hour workout’, in the end, came down to 6.80€. And that’s before taxes. Having worked for a local newspaper, I know that times aren’t easy for journalism. Besides the increasing refusal of many people to pay for news (as for most things they can get around paying, which is another story), costs of printers and paper have skyrocketed lately. Everything and everyone, in the end, needs to have a piece of the cake. But the many friendly *krantenbezorgers* that get up at 5am or even earlier to deliver the news six days a week, in sunshine, rain and snow, should get a larger piece. 6.80€ for two hours - if you ask me, that’s not a paid workout. That’s sheer exploitation.

And I know there are many other (student-) jobs that are just like this one. If you’re able to change circumstances like these, or if you will be in the future, please, at least give it a try.

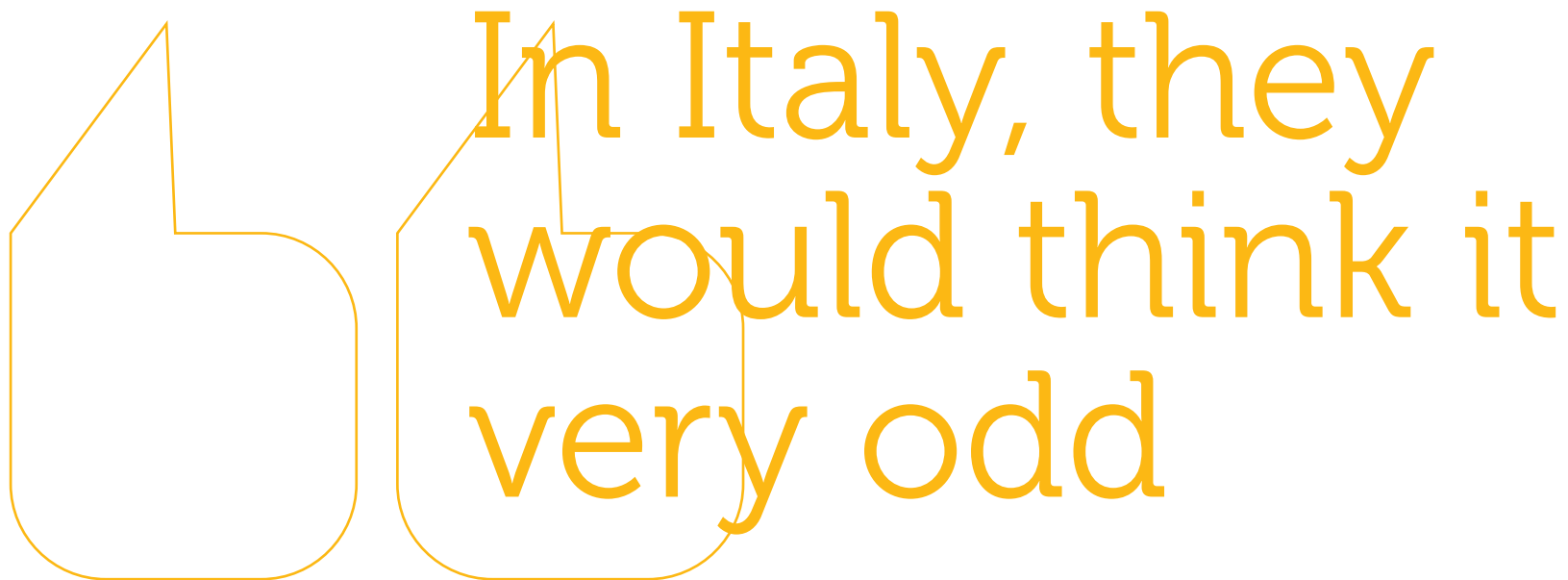
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Simon Wirtz,
master’s student at FASoS



Illustration: Shutterstock

What do UM students think about mandatory Dutch courses?



International students in Maastricht absolutely against compulsory Dutch courses. That was the heading of a recent article on the online news forum *ScienceGuide*. It caused quite a stir on social media. According to UM president Rianne Letschert, there are more sides to it. Is that true?

Text: Maurice Timmermans and Dennis Vaendel **Photo:** Joey Roberts

The article in *ScienceGuide* was based on the UM election debate at the beginning of May. During the debate, a candidate of student party NovUM, which obtained most seats in the University Council, said that his party is “completely against” any obligation to learn the Dutch language and “needs to protect the English speaking tradition of the university as hard as possible.” A candidate for List Lex, another Maastricht student party, did not want to have any compulsory Dutch courses either. He felt that UM had invested much in study programmes, such as European Studies, that are aimed at an international environment. “They speak English there, not Dutch.” The statements were a reaction to the plans by education minister Robbert Dijkgraaf, who wants to compel universities to give the Dutch language a more prominent role in education. Whether this will be in the form of Dutch language courses, is not entirely clear yet. Dijkgraaf wants to meet the long-cherished wish of Parliament to curb the influx of foreign students.

The reluctant attitude of the Maastricht students has not remained unnoticed. On Twitter, Lotte Jensen, professor of Dutch Literature and Cultural History in Nijmegen, made mincemeat of it: “So much for the inquisitive, cosmopolitan attitude of the students in Maastricht.” Jensen’s tweet was watched more than

370 thousand times and retweeted almost 250 times. UM president Rianne Letschert could not let that pass. “The article in *ScienceGuide* does not represent the views of all students in Maastricht,” she replied to Jensen’s tweet.

Is this true? What do UM students think about mandatory Dutch language courses? And what are the official stances of the student parties? For NovUM, the position is different than the election debate may suggest, chairperson **Rose Cooper** states. “We are by no means against Dutch language courses for international students. On the contrary, we feel it’s a good thing that should be encouraged. The courses provide a great way to immerse yourself in Dutch culture and they increase your chances of finding a job here later. That is also the reason why our members in various councils argue for more free Dutch language courses.”

No incentive

But what about making such courses compulsory, something her fellow party member lashed out at and was “completely against”? According to Cooper, the latter is not the party line. “It is up to him to say so, but as a party we have not yet taken a stance on the issue of compulsory courses. We’re not per se against, but you need to look carefully into how this

can be fitted into the already busy study programmes.”

Andrew William Scrivener, the NovUM member who made the statements during the election debate, claims that he endorses the party’s views. Why did he react so strongly then? “I interpreted the question differently. Namely: whether you should be required to speak Dutch in order to be admitted to the university. I am strongly against that, because that would make it more difficult for foreign students to come and study here. Doing a course during your studies is a different matter. I certainly see the value of that.”

Other party members are also not unsympathetic towards a compulsory course in Dutch. **Zuzanna Węsierska**, student council member at the law faculty, stated in the council meeting last March that even German students, for whom Dutch would not be too difficult, are not learning the language. “It is because they don’t have to, there is no obligation, no incentive. Are you surprised that foreign students come to study here and then go back? They can’t integrate.”

How does this go together with ‘protecting the English speaking tradition’? “With that, we mean that we want to keep English as the main language at this university, because it facilitates internationalism and diversity”, NovUM-chairperson Cooper says. “As far as we are concerned, this goes together with learning Dutch and that is not a particularly controversial view within UM.”

Local dialect

Student party DOPE, the second-largest party after NovUM in the university elections last month, appears to be more critical. Chairman **Cédric vanden Bergh**e wonders what the point is of making Dutch language courses compulsory. “If it is meant as a deterrent for foreign students, it will almost certainly fail. Internationals will still come to the Netherlands, where university study programmes are very good and affordable.”

Language Centre: Dutch courses *Are there waiting lists or not?*

Just before the university elections, last May, a student (candidate council member for List Lex) said during an election debate that UM offers too few Dutch language courses. He claimed that at that moment there was “no capacity”. The argument ‘I want to learn Dutch, but the university’s courses are full’ – *Observant* has heard before. So, what is the score? “It is a nuisance that students keep saying that,” replies Katja Verbruggen, who is the coordinator of the Dutch Team of the UM Language centre. “We have had no waiting lists

at all lately. There were problems in the past, but not anymore. We have 85 groups (12 to 14 students per group) of Social Dutch annually.” At the moment, UM offers two modules of Social Dutch free of charge to all first-year and second-year bachelor’s and master’s students. The level of this course is really basic, so mainly listening, talking a lot, but hardly any reading and writing, says Verbruggen. She has noticed that the course has a considerable number of drop-outs: approximately 30 per cent. “They drop out because they find

it too much in combination with their study programmes.”

If education minister Robbert Dijkgraaf decides that *all* students must learn Dutch, UM could integrate the language lessons into the curriculum. This already happens at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. Medical students who are taking the English international track are continuously offered a course in Dutch throughout the bachelor’s programme: the first two years ‘normal Dutch’ (up to B2 level) and in the third year Medi-

cal Dutch. Verbruggen: “They do not receive ECTS, but may only do the master’s if they have two certificates: one for Dutch (B2) and one for Medical Dutch. After that, they have to do three consultations with a doctor and a simulation patient. They cannot do the consultations without the certificates.”

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences has also included mandatory lessons in the bachelor European Studies and Global Studies. Students can choose Dutch or another language. They do receive ECTS. **WD**



Students learning Dutch at UM-Language centre

In addition, learning Dutch is a disaster, says Vanden Berghe, especially for students from India or China. “And why would you, if English is so dominant in education and science? I study Dutch law, and even then, I need to read a lot of literature in English.” Whether knowledge of the Dutch language provides access to the culture and promotes integration, remains to be seen, he thinks. “Internationals get such access also through English, because the baker on the corner speaks that language too. Of all countries in which English is not the official language, The Netherlands has the highest percentage of people speaking English. In Italy, it is a different story. If I were to study there, I would try hard to learn Italian.” According to **Laetitia Teta**, chairperson of Kaleido (the Maastricht student association for internationals), it is not true that knowledge of Dutch promotes integration. She also points to the fact that “everybody can speak English in Maastricht. And if

locals start to speak Dutch, they sometimes speak the local dialect. In that case, having completed a Dutch course is not going to help you.” The usefulness of a compulsory language course depends on the situation, Teta thinks. “I believe such a course may be a good idea for foreign student of Medicine or Law, who may stay in the Netherlands and would therefore benefit from a greater fluency in Dutch.” For those who only come to Maastricht to study and then leave again, she sees no benefit. “Those students would be deterred by a compulsory language course. Maastricht University especially advertises its English-language study programmes and learning environment.”

Fun fair

A random enquiry among students in the inner-city University Library also produces critical comments. **Thomas** and **Leonie**, who only want their first names in the paper,

don't think much of compulsory courses. Leonie, who is from Switzerland, definitely sees the point of having a command of Dutch, she says. “It is nice in the supermarket to speak the local language, but it is not a good idea to make such courses compulsory.” That is also Thomas' view, third-year student of International Business, whose roots are in Belgium and Switzerland. “I studied in Sweden for a while, where both compulsory and voluntary courses were offered. The voluntary courses were so popular that not everybody was able to partake, while there was hardly any motivation for the compulsory courses. That is because students do not always have time for language courses. IB students in Maastricht have an extremely busy programme, the dropout rate is high.” He might not have registered for a programme at UM if he had heard beforehand that he would be compelled to learn Dutch. That is more or less true for Leonie too: “It

would discourage me from choosing Maastricht.” For **Meo**, from the Walloon city of Verviers, this is not a breaking point. The first-year student of IB would have come to Maastricht, but would have taken the compulsory course with reluctance. At secondary school, he did Dutch for two years, but he doesn't remember much of it, other than ‘Ik spreek geen Nederlands,’ he says. “Everybody around me speaks English, learning Dutch is really not necessary. When people from Maastricht speak to me, as happened at the fun fair, I have no idea what they mean. But I don't really mind. I don't know if I would integrate better if I spoke Dutch. This is my first experience living abroad.”

Unfair

The two Italian students **Yasmina** (European Law) and **Arianna** (International Relations) – no surnames either, please – on the other hand, are in favour of the obligation to learn Dutch. “A very reasonable proposal. Of course, within our ‘student bubble’, it is no problem that we don't speak Dutch. But outside the bubble, it just increases the gap between us and the rest of society. The other day, a mechanic came around for our washing machine and we could only communicate in English. Quite unfair really that he couldn't speak his mother tongue in his own country. In Italy, they would think it very odd if foreign students didn't speak a word of Italian.”

Moreover, being fluent in the language increases the bond with a country, they say. “We are not currently planning to look for a job here after graduation, but perhaps that would have been different if we had spoken Dutch.” A compulsory Dutch language course would therefore not deter the two master's students. “At least, if the outcome did not weigh too much in the study programme. A ‘pass or fail’ course outside the curriculum, for example, would be fine. A large course that counts towards your average grade would be a different story.”

Rianne Letschert: “Determine on basis of content for whom a course is necessary”

“Indeed, it is more nuanced than that,” said UM president **Rianne Letschert**, when asked for her reaction to the opinions collected by *Observant*. According to her, they are similar to the image that she herself has garnered from the talks that the university has had with students. This includes the point that not every student sees the benefit of learning Dutch. What is Letschert's view on that? “I understand it from their perspective. Just like – depending on how tough the language requirements will be – I also understand the point of view by some political parties that knowledge of Dutch is important.” Although she does emphasise that there is also another group: “The (voluntary) basic courses of Social Dutch, which we have been offering for years, are quite popular.”

But what if ‘objectors’ no longer choose Maastricht in the future? According to Letschert, it is especially important that the objectives of the language measures are clear. “That is what we are also emphasising in The Hague at the moment. Is the objective to improve the knowledge of the Dutch language and culture, as an important value in itself, or to scare away as many students as possible from coming to the Netherlands? We think that it would be wrong to achieve the latter through a language policy. It goes against the ideals that make up the foundation of the European Union, and also against the position that UM has in the region.”

Is she herself an advocate of compulsory Dutch lessons? “In general, no I'm not, I prefer not to have generic measures. I hope that we can determine on the basis of content for which students and programmes it would be useful. Some of our international students will remain here to work and so an attractive living and housing climate are important. Some knowledge of the Dutch language complements that. It is up to us to find the right balance in all of this.”

if foreign students didn't speak a word of Italian

news

New purpose for Landbouwbelang, cultural free space disappears

“The free space might go away, but we certainly won’t”

Student housing, restaurants and art education. That is the future of the Landbouwbelang (LBB). There is no place left for the current ‘cultural free space’ at this location. Within the LBB community, there is a lot of ‘pain, anger and sadness’.

For years, the municipality has had plans to give the former grain warehouse next to the Maas a new function. Last week, alderman Frans Bastiaens (Urban Development) announced that the tender procedure for the site had been completed. In 2025, a consortium of Maastricht developer RO Group, Belgian developer Vestio and Group Machiels will start the conversion of the Landbouwbelang, to be completed two years later.

The winning plan will retain more than half of the monumental building, which will house Zuyd University of Applied Sciences’ Toneelschool (Drama Academy) and Conservatory of Music. In addition, three new towers will appear on the site. These are intended for housing, ranging from student accommodation to spacious owner-occupied flats. There is also space for restaurants, sports facilities and green spaces.

The tender also marks the definitive end of the cultural free space on this site, which came



Photo: Joey Roberts

into being after a group of squatters moved in twenty years ago. People still live here, and it is home to initiatives such as the ‘Foodbank’ and ‘Maastricht goes Vegan’ and many alter-

native festivals, which are also popular among students. “With the people behind those initiatives we are in talks to look at alternative places,” alderman Bastiaens noted.

Within the LBB community, there is a lot of “pain, anger and sadness” about the decision, says Kali Benton, a third-year student at University College Maastricht. She is part of a group of fifteen people - “about half of whom are students” - who recently started a petition and organised a demonstration against the demise of the free space. According to the group, the LBB is a unique and indispensable breeding ground for culture and self-expression; closure would have a devastating impact on the local and international community.

That the new plans also include room for culture - for instance, there will be a public passage that will also be used as a “forum for Zuyd’s performing arts” - does not offer a solution, according to Benton. “The point of the free space is that everyone is welcome here, not just people who pay tuition fees. Many students from the Toneelschool and Conservatory come here to get new ideas and inspiration. Some of them experience it as a slap in their face that their own institution, of all things, participates in destroying this place.”

In addition, within the community there is little confidence in the municipality’s search for alternative venues, Benton argues. “Many people who run cultural activities at the LBB have either not been contacted by the municipality yet, or only have been offered expensive and therefore unrealistic proposals.” The group plans to organise new actions. “To make it clear to the municipality that we are dissatisfied, but also to find local allies. They may be trying to make the free space disappear, but we certainly won’t.”

Dennis Vaendel

Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

01-06, 10.00 h Rachele T.L. Meisters
01-06, 13.00 h Adrianus Jan van Veelen
01-06, 16.00 h Alexandra Petrainia
02-06, 10.00 h Jamilla L.M. Wederfoort
02-06, 13.00 h Emmelie M. Hazelzet
02-06, 16.30 h Dr. ir. Gerard van Rooij
inauguratie
05-06, 10.00 h Ming Li
05-06, 13.00 h Yue Zhang
06-06, 10.00 h Hannah Jane Gillespie
06-06, 13.00 h Assia Tiana Double Doctoral
Degree Universiteit Maastricht
- Universiteit Hasselt/TUL
06-06, 16.00 h Alessandra Sala
07-06, 10.00 h Lidwien E.B. Sol
07-06, 13.00 h Wei Luo
07-06, 16.00 h Joost A.G.N. Wolfs
08-06, 10.00 h Nino Bogveradze
08-06, 13.00 h Adam Jake Sellers
08-06, 16.00 h Prof. dr. Fred R.A. Zijlstra
afscheidscollege
09-06, 10.00 h Inka Eberhardt
09-06, 13.00 h Vincent M. Meyer
09-06, 16.30 h Dr. ir. Joost Lumens
12-06, 13.00 h Frank E.C.Sina
12-06, 16.00 h Madeleine Clare Sumption
13-06, 10.00 h Imke M.A. Reinders
13-06, 13.00 h Alexander Michael Koch
14-06, 13.00 h Sumit Kumar Double Doctoral
Degree Maastricht University -
Hasselt University
15-06, 10.00h Marta Poyo Solanas
15-06, 13.00 h Charlotte Mueller
15-06, 16.00 h Esther Adriana Boudewijns

16-06, 10.00 h Sara Souto-Miranda Double
Doctoral Degree Maastricht
University – Universidade de
Aveiro, Portugal
16-06, 13.00 h Lucas J.M. Heijns
19-06, 13.00 h Mathew Francis
19-06, 16.00 h Delia Irene Fernández de
la Fuente Double Doctoral
Degree Maastricht University
- Universidade of Santiago de
Compostela
20-06, 10.00 h Henrique Jerônimo Bezerra
Marcos Double Doctoral
Degree Maastricht University -
Universidade de São Paulo
20-06, 16.00 h Jules Stouten
21-06, 10.00 h Frauke Anna Stehr
21-06, 13.00 h Rodolfo de la Vega Amador
21-06, 16.00 h Lucia Leontiev Double
Doctoral Degree Maastricht
University and the Scuola
Superiore Sant’Anna
22-06, 10.00 h Lena Pieper
22-06, 13.00 h Sheetal Chaudhuri
22-06, 16.00 h Michiel A.G.E. Bannier
23-06, 13.00 h Karin Catharina van den Berg
23-06, 16.30 h Dr. Marjolein L. Smidt
inauguratie
26-06, 16.00 h Jackson Tyler Boonstra
27-06, 10.00 h Maurice Sopacua
27-06, 13.00 h Milena Agata Ślęczkowska
27-06, 16.00 h Prof. dr. Saskia Klosse
afscheidscollege
28-06, 10.00 h Sanghamitra Pati
28-06, 16.00 h Yawen Wang
29-06, 16.00 h Tuğçe Varol
30-06, 10.00 h Giuseppe Zaccaria
30-06, 13.00 h Anne Marjan Daniels
30-06, 16.00 h Maarten van Heinsbergen



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