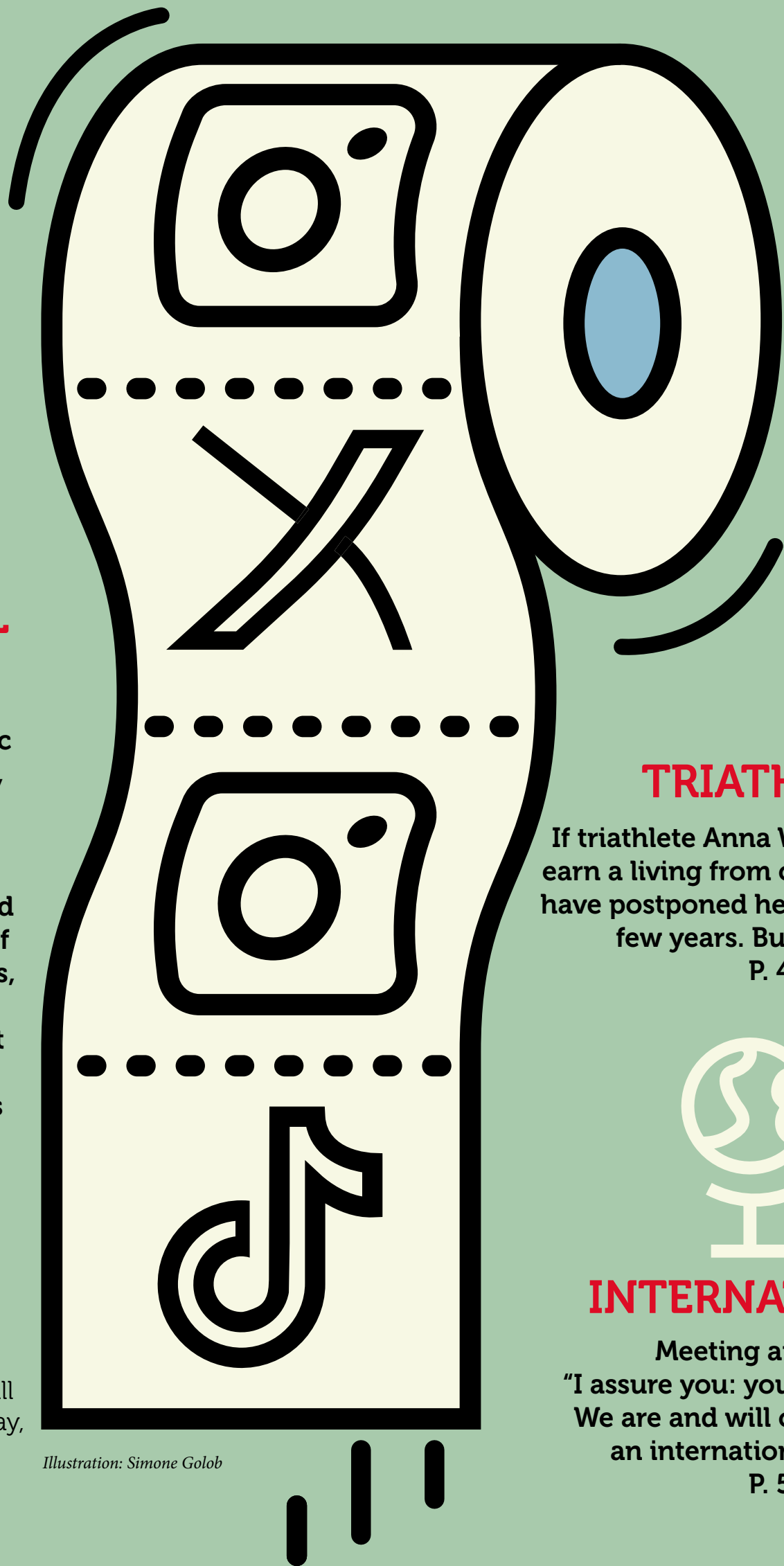


# observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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## MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

It's the research topic of Philippe Verduyn, associate professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. Should we break the habit of consuming messages, photos and videos on social media that present themselves to us like an endless toilet roll?  
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Illustration: Simone Golob





Riki Janssen

editorial

## A dent in Eindhoven's image

Last week, I already knew what this editorial would be about: the blackout protest of *Cursor*, our counterpart at Eindhoven University of Technology. The editorial team blacked out the website as a protest against the university's executive board, which tried to prevent the publication of an article they considered unfavourable – and, while they were at it, suspended the editor-in-chief before anything had even been published. The Eindhoven administrators haven't seemed to place much value on the journalistic freedom of their own university newspaper for quite a few years.

Then the weekend came, war with all its horrors broke out between Israel and Hamas, and Afghanistan was hit by one of the deadliest earthquakes in the past twenty years. Our own problems suddenly seem so utterly trivial. I find myself feeling this way more often lately, with the world seeming less safe in Europe as well.

But life in Maastricht goes on, despite the suffering elsewhere in the world. So let's talk about *Cursor* and the independence of university news media. The *Observant* editorial team has

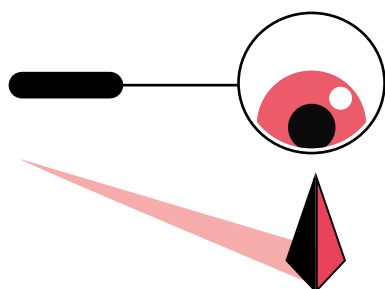
been free to do its work for years now, after a lengthy hiatus during the tenure of UM President Jo Ritzen. It's been a long time since our foundation board (which stands between our editorial team and the university's executive board in our legal structure, meaning the executive board can't directly intervene in our editorial policy, let alone fire one of our members) got a rap on the knuckles from the executive board. During those years, the accusation was almost always the same: our independent reporting allegedly harmed the university.

*Cursor's* editorial statutes – good statutes are important in times like these – state that the editorial team must not harm the university's interests. A potential death sentence for independent journalism. After all, what are those interests? Opinions may differ widely. And who decides what is harmful? The executive board? Students and staff? The *Cursor* editorial team? The university council? Also, what exactly is harmful? The facts coming to light as much as possible? Both sides of a contentious issue being heard, allowing the reader

(an academic audience) to form their own opinion? Everyone being able to see that Eindhoven is a university like any other, where a lot of things go right and sometimes things go wrong? The publication of critical articles, rather than PR stories that insult the reader's intelligence?

The actions of the Eindhoven executive board have done no favours to the university's image, which they were so desperate to protect. There has been some sharp criticism in the press, a multi-page article in the national newspaper *de Volkskrant*, much scorn and derision on X (Twitter). Hopefully, the university administrators will reconsider their actions – perhaps they could consult with their counterparts in Maastricht, or for example Groningen – so that the *Cursor* editorial team can go back to work, with good statutes, an editor-in-chief and a truly independent editorial board (the old one was appointed by the executive board!).

*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. Contributions: Wendy Degens, Lotte van de Loo, HOP

### A gown for everyone

It has become more difficult at PhD graduation ceremonies at Utrecht University (UU) to recognise the professors. Every member of the PhD committee is now allowed to wear a gown. This dress code was previously reserved for professors. According to UU, the decision fits in well with the Recognition and Rewards policy, in which equality of employees is of paramount importance. "In this way, we want to make it clear that every question put to the PhD candidate carries equal weight," said rector Henk Kummeling to sister newspaper *DUB*. The university will provide gowns for non-professors. This, by the way, is only for PhD graduations: in other academic ceremonies, the professors will maintain their gown monopoly.

This makes UU a 'trendsetter' in terms of academic fashion. Will Maastricht University follow the example? No, not for the time being, rector Pamela Habibović stated. "We regularly have experts in the committee who are not connected to a university, and for them it would be illogical to wear a gown." But, she adds, "the Board of Deans is keeping a close eye on developments and will regularly discuss the implications for UM."

### Leak damage

E-mail addresses, Citizen Service Numbers, notes on political preferences: a selection of the data of 530 thousand people seized by a hacker from the Universities of Applied Sciences in Arnhem and Nijmegen (HAN) in 2021. The institutes refused to pay a ransom, after which the data was put online. Reason enough for a former student to hold HAN responsible for the damages suffered: the fact that his medical information was made public is eating away at him to such an extent that he is now less inclined to share information with relief workers. His trust has been damaged, because the university of applied sciences insured him that his data was in safe hands. HAN has not responded to the claim.

The local court, however, ruled last week that the former student should receive compensation of 300 euro.

That is less than the thousand euro that he demanded, because the consequences were limited; the disclosure of his medical files did have consequences, but the disclosure of his "general personal data" did not, for the time being.

By the way, the hack resulted in the medical data of 2,087 students with a functional impairment being disclosed. If they also receive compensation, that will cost the institutes more than six hundred thousand euro.



### Be old-fashioned, read your e-mail

Should the Law Student Messages be embellished? Or would a switch to Instagram be a better plan? Or should students simply not whine and just read their e-mails? In the law faculty council meeting last week, it was all about student communication. The problem was the newsletter, Law Student Messages (LSM), which is not being read well for quite some time. So, what can be done about this? After all, the messages are said to be important.

Sjoerd Claessens, vice dean of education: "You also have to learn how to gather information as a student, without emotions at the source," referring to the e-mails that many students consider to be old-fashioned. They mainly use WhatsApp to communicate. According to Otto Heijboer, student advisor of the board, thoughts on a new "communication platform" for students are underway at Executive Board level. He doesn't know about the finer details, but it will most likely be "a kind of Umployee". Mark Kawakami, council member for academic staff, leaves no room for speculation: "LSM may be an old-fashioned medium, but it is better than a student Umployee." If they don't read LSM and miss out on information, then that is just too bad for them, he concludes.

And what about Instagram then? That is popular among students; is that not an alternative for the intern communication, student council member Nandika Singh suggests. Claessens: "Don't forget that we have certain values as a university. Do we want to share our internal information on Instagram? Let us not just blindly 'surrender' to big tech businesses that are behind social media." There will be a follow-up to this discussion. For the time being, the message will remain: be old-fashioned, open your mailbox.

## Dutch as the language of instruction at universities

*In an interview on talk show Op1 last Friday, Pieter Omtzigt said that Dutch should become the language of instruction at universities within three to four years. "That way, fewer international students will come to the Netherlands."*

Some programmes are almost exclusively attended by international students, said Omtzigt, who is contesting the forthcoming parliamentary elections with his 'Nieuw Sociaal Contract' party. "There are even universities that have more international students than Dutch students, Maastricht University being one of them." He also concedes that universities could continue teaching in English "on an occasional basis." "It's not a forbidden language. But the standard language of instruction should be your own national language."

Omtzigt is also critical of student financing being available to international students now that the basic student grant has been re-introduced. "And we pay this to all EU students", he stated. It should be noted that this is not entirely correct, given that there are conditions attached to this form of student financing.

Omtzigt also wants to curb labour migration. He believes it is unfair that foreign employees should pay less tax than their Dutch colleagues at the next desk. Highly skilled migrants receive up to 30 percent of their salary tax-free for a period of five years. The idea is to attract these workers to the Netherlands. Omtzigt maintains that this creates problems in the housing market, among other things, as these expats can afford higher rents. **HOP**

## Dutch students recalled from Israel

*As far as is known, one Maastricht student is currently in Israel. There is contact with this student, partly with a view to his departure as soon as possible, the UM-spokesman announced. Also, emails have been sent to part of the university community in Maastricht asking if one needs help.*

Other universities and colleges are also recalling their students now that the country is once again at war. Hundreds have already died, including foreign students. Some of the universities have students in Israel, although the numbers are not large. Leiden University, for example, has five students in Israel. "They are doing well," the university announces. "They are being counseled and helped, for example with the return trip to the Netherlands." Utrecht University speaks of a few students, just as Wageningen. Maastricht of one.

Twenty students and three teachers from the Christelijke Hogeschool Ede are trapped in an Arab neighborhood of Jerusalem, reports the *Nederlands Dagblad*. Rockets are also striking that city. "We are protected by meter-thick monastery walls," says one of the teachers. Although, of course, they are worried.

The ministry of Foreign Affairs warns, "Don't go to the border region near Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. Whatever your situation: don't go there." Code red applies there. For the rest of Israel, code orange applies: travel only if necessary.

Horror stories about the massacres and violence are appearing in the media, with occasional reports of victims from outside Israel. Students have been killed, missing or kidnapped from Tanzania, Nepal and Thailand. **HOP**

# UM's mensa among the cheapest in the Netherlands



*The mensa in Randwyck Photo: Joey Roberts*

*A survey into prices at Dutch university restaurants shows that those from Maastricht University are among the cheapest. Compared to Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) and Utrecht University (UU), which have the same catering service, the Maastricht mensa is in most cases the cheapest too.*

A hefty price increase at the University of Groningen (RUG) prompted the Groningen university newspaper *Ukrant* to compare prices of 'common' products at various university restaurants. *Observant* was asked to make an inventory of prices for items such as soup, milk, sandwiches and fruit at UM. Compared to other institutes, the customers here do well: as a rule, they paid the lowest prices. This came as a pleasant surprise for UM caterer Eurest, says branch manager René Kersten: "We are always regarded as expensive."

However, they are not making a profit at the moment: "Because of inflation, the cost of ingredients has gone up, but we don't pass all of that on to our customers; students are very critical about that, as surveys have been showing for years. Our advantage is that we are an international concern and we supply a variety of large institutes, such as prisons and businesses, which means that we can buy in bulk. We just don't get left with much." In addition, Eurest is trying to reduce costs by decreasing the number of suppliers as well as what is

on offer; providing one type of salad instead of three different ones, for example. Kersten: "This is not only a financial advantage, but it is also more sustainable because we produce less waste."

How does Kersten explain the fact that soup at VU costs €1.30, in Utrecht it is €1.50 and at UM €0.85, while it is provided by the same caterer? "This depends on the type of contract that you have with your contract partner. At UM, we have to contribute a certain percentage of our turnover to the university. Maybe this is arranged in a different way at VU." A second possible explanation is the time in which the annual price increase is recalculated, the so-called indexation. "UM only introduces these in January, but maybe this was done at the beginning of the academic year at other universities. Comparing prices at this moment would then give a distorted image, Kersten suggests.

*Lotte van de Lo*



## Acceptance and Commitment

“

Many academics not only make new year's resolutions on December 31<sup>st</sup>, but also on August 31<sup>st</sup>. You might have promised yourself to say 'no' more often, to block time for answering email, or to limit the time you spend on admin. If Forbes' statistics on new year's resolutions apply to academic resolutions as well, then only 11-19 per cent of you are still going strong six weeks into the academic year. Research on why resolutions fail shows that people find it difficult to maintaining change efforts when one's environment stays the same.

Over the last twenty months, I got some first-hand experience in persisting in the face of things that cannot be changed while working on my recovery from Covid. During my revalidation, two concepts helped me to go on through exhaustion and uncertainty: acceptance, and commitment. Acceptance means allowing yourself to feel negative emotions about things you cannot change, without getting hung up on asking why (me) or how (long). Commitment means focusing on your values and goals within the limits of what you can control. Making small but consistent steps towards these meaningful goals offers efficacy and purpose.

So, how can acceptance and commitment help to make more effective academic new year's resolutions? Step 1: allow yourself to feel upset by elements of the academic world you cannot control and that challenge you, like unrealistic norm hours and publication expectations. But then, take the next step: remind yourself of why teaching matters to you, what drives your passion for research, and why it matters to you to work in academia.

Once you know your why's, take step 3: Formulate goals that align with your why's within the bounds of your control. Whatever you do may seem small, like no longer sending emails outside of work hours, keeping evenings work-free, asking why before accepting a new responsibility. But imagine what talking about our values, questioning our patterns, and setting meaningful goals could do, for ourselves, but especially for each other? Especially as a leader, you can do more than most to create a safe and healthy work environment by acting on your values.

”

*Therese Grohnert,  
assistant professor at  
the School of Business and Economics*

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[observantonline.nl](http://observantonline.nl)

## New series: students about their future

# "I've reached the highest national level, but I won't make it internationally"



Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

A few steps down the corridor, on the right, is a small room with three racing bikes. Two of them are mounted on the wall. Medals hang along the entire length of the heating pipe, too many to count. "Some are from competitive swimming, and the rest are from triathlon competitions." Anna Witteveen is a triathlete. There are medals on the opposite wall as well, but notably fewer. "Those are my boyfriend's. He's relatively new to the sport", she laughs.

Witteveen's days are packed. She trains every morning and evening on weekdays, for a total of 20 hours per week. She swims, cycles, runs or goes to the gym, either alone or in a small group with a personal coach. She's also completing an unpaid internship three days per week – the last part of her master's degree in Biomedical Sciences. To earn money, she works at the supermarket every Sunday. "And then there are the weekend competitions. They're the reason why I have Mondays and Fridays off from my internship. If I have to travel abroad for a race, like I did to France last weekend, I often leave early to get some rest before the race. And when I get back, I have time to unpack my suitcase and do my laundry."

### Swim, bike, run

She got involved in competitive swimming at an early age, following in the footsteps of her older sister and two brothers. But spending whole days at the swimming pool lost its appeal after a while. Her older sister introduced her to triathlon, a combination of swimming, cycling and running, in 2015. She quickly rose through the ranks of the sport, together with her identi-

cal twin sister, Tessa. An explosive athlete, Witteveen competes in sprint distance triathlons, consisting of a 750m swim, a 20km bike and a 5k run. Which of the three disciplines is her favourite? "I used to enjoy swimming the most, but this season I preferred running. The run is often where the race is decided. During the bike, you tend to stick together in a small group."

In this biweekly series, students are interviewed about their future plans; their expectations, dilemmas and fears. To what extent does their past play a role, and what about the major worldwide problems, think of climate change, war, political instability, growing poverty, and so on.

### Maastricht

In 2017, her stepfather passed away. Their house was inherited and sold by his children from a previous marriage. The twins had just finished secondary school and were deciding what to study next. Tessa wanted to become a midwife; Anna was interested in biology. The human body has always fascinated her. "I initially considered studying Bio-Pharmaceutical Sciences in Leiden. But then my sister and I found a personal triathlon coach in Maastricht, which has a Biomedical Sciences programme. It was an easy choice." Their mother bought a house, where the three of them lived with one other student.

### Flip the switch

Witteveen likes how doing research gives her the freedom to let her curiosity run free. After graduating, she wants to go on to pursue a PhD, preferably in immunology – the field her internship is in. But combining a PhD with her rigorous training programme will be a challenge. "I've made it to the highest level of national competition, but I won't be able to compete with the best of the best internationally. So, what's my next goal?" If she could earn a living from competing, she'd have postponed her PhD plans for a few years. But she can't, so she's decided it's time to flip the switch. She's going to cut back on training and focus more on doing what she genuinely enjoys, without constant athletic commitments.

### Uncertainty

Would she like to stay in Maastricht for her PhD? Actually, she would prefer to go somewhere else. Her sister and mother have already moved out of the city, and Witteveen would like to live closer to them again. After six years, she feels she's seen enough of UM. "I want to experience what it's like at a different university." She and her boyfriend – they met as colleagues at the supermarket – moved in together a year ago. He's from Maastricht, but Witteveen jokes that he's not a "real" *Maastrichtenaar*, as he is willing to relocate to another part of the country with her. She's not one to be easily deterred, anyway. Does she see herself becoming a postdoctoral researcher after her PhD? "No, it comes with too much uncertainty", Witteveen says. "You constantly have to apply for research funding, and you have to spend half your time teaching. I just want to do research. That's why I've set my sights on the pharmaceutical industry." She seems confident about her career plans, but how does she feel about the future in this world plagued by climate change, armed conflicts and natural disasters? Witteveen feels optimistic enough about her own future. She admits she doesn't really keep up with the news, "It would just make me sad." She hopes to help make the world a better place by researching therapies for patients, for example. But you won't find her blocking a highway to protest fossil fuel subsidies. "I just look at that and think, 'Oh wow, how odd.'"

Meeting for FASoS staff about internationalisation

# “No worries: we are and will continue to be an international faculty”

The bill presented by education minister Dijkgraaf this summer could have drastic consequences for FASoS. At the moment, all study programmes are completely in English and three quarters of the students are from abroad. The bill sets stricter requirements for the language used in programmes. Two thirds of every bachelor's programme must be in Dutch, unless the minister gives permission for it to be in a different language. In addition, foreign students will be compelled to have some knowledge of the Dutch language.

This brought forth “lively discussions” on FASoS's employee intranet, said dean Christine Neuhold at the beginning of the meeting. “There are a lot of concerns among staff and students. But I assure you: everyone is welcome here, your jobs are safe. We are and will continue to be an international faculty; at the moment, we have no intention to adapt our education system.”

So there will be no changes? There is still a lot of unclarity about that, board member Patrick Bijsmans emphasised. “We don't know what is going to happen with the bill. Moreover, there are a lot of possible exceptions within the present proposal for the continued existence of ‘different language’ bachelor's programmes.” But what if the latter doesn't happen and the programmes have to largely become Dutch language programmes? This question was not answered.

## Multilingualism

Those present were able to give their opinions on certain propositions using their smartphones. Is internationalisation possible without Englishisation? Of the approximately sixty employees who voted (the majority of those present), two thirds disagreed to some extent or very much. On the other hand, roughly 80 per cent felt that some knowledge of Dutch was required to function properly at FASoS. The proposition that there should be more Dutch language education in the bachelor's was not very popular: more than one third disagreed somewhat or very much, about 40 per cent remaining neutral. “Many students come to Maastricht especially because they want to study in English and not in Dutch,” one employee said. A large majority (roughly 80 per



At the entrance of FASoS at the Grote Gracht Photo: Joey Roberts

Is my job safe? Will I still be welcome as a foreigner? Due to the Internationalisation Bill, these are frequently expressed worries at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS), according to the faculty board. Last Friday, there was a meeting for employees about the future of the self-proclaimed ‘most international faculty’ of Maastricht University.

cent) was an advocate of more room for multilingualism within the education programme. That means also German or French literature, or publishing research – when relevant to the subject – in Dutch, Hungarian or Spanish. That should be a choice, not an obligation, the audience felt.

## Burnout

Some wondered whether this would not generate more bureaucracy; and would it not become more difficult to check assignments? “The workload is already a huge problem; how can we ensure that this does not escalate further and cause more burnouts?”

A discussion about the Dutch language playing a greater role, the content of the bill, to a large extent didn't happen. Although an employee did complain about the fact that a number of propositions were in Dutch today. “In the beginning, it was stated that everyone should feel welcome here, but I don't speak Dutch, so this does not feel inclusive.”

## Farce

Philosopher René Gabriëls, who showed himself to be a fervent opponent of the “over-Englishisation” of

higher education in articles in national media and in a reaction to Dijkgraaf's bill, kept himself to himself during the meeting. “I felt it was a farce,” he said by telephone afterwards. “This was by no means an academic discussion. For that, you need to hear different opinions, also from outside the faculty, such as a member of the Executive Board and a politician. And also from scientists who are experts in these subjects, some of whom we even have within the faculty.” Instead, this was just an attempt by the board to reassure the staff, Gabriëls reckons. “While they should be saying what the obstacles are. For example, that there is a perverse system in which the faculty is financially dependent on foreign students. Also, which scenarios are there if the bachelor's programmes do have to become partly in Dutch? The board has no vision about this, but only aims for an exceptional position. In addition, nobody spoke about the responsibility we carry as scientists for Dutch society and culture.” Another reason for Gabriëls not to speak out is the “prevailing ‘frame’. If you criticise over-Englishisation, you are wrongly put into a corner with people who are against internationalisation. Then you are said to be a nationalist or populist. That is certainly not the case.”

## Beginning

Another strong opponent of Englishisation (who also publicly reacted to the bill), professor Lies Wesseling, also did not get involved in the discussion. She did not even join the meeting. She didn't expect an open debate, she told *Observant* by e-mail beforehand. “The board seemed to see it as chairing their own informative afternoon. I don't need that information. As our foreign colleagues, according to the institute's policy of 2018, are supposed to be fluent in Dutch at C1 level, they should be capable of independently following the debate about the language of instruction at Dutch universities in the Dutch media, with the exception of recently appointed colleagues.” Wesseling also refers to the confusion between internationalisation and Englishisation. “These are two things that you have to keep separate.”

The board regards the meeting primarily as a beginning to the discussion, they said on Friday afternoon. In the time to come, they will visit the various departments to continue the discussion about internationalisation.



The influence  
of social media  
on mental health

# What do you do all day long on TikTok?

**(Almost) everyone uses it and almost everyone has an opinion on it: social media. Philippe Verduyn, assistant professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, has been doing research into emotions and the role of Facebook, X, Instagram, et cetera, for years. How do people feel after hanging around on these platforms? Happy, cheerful or actually unsure?**

Text: **Wendy Degens**  
Illustration: **Simone Golob**  
Photo: **archive Philippe Verduyn**

Let's get straight down to it. The use of social media is by no means very good or very bad for your well-being. "But adding everything together," the coin flips more towards the negative, says Philippe Verduyn. Hundreds of studies have been carried out on the relationship between mental health and the amount of time people spend scrolling, posting and watching video clips. "The results often contradict each other, but a meta-analysis shows a small negative effect. This is also confirmed by experimental studies." In these, test subjects may be allowed to spend less time on social media for a whole week, or have to undergo a complete detox. What does that do to their feelings? "We then look at the presence of well-being and the absence of ill-being." When the loss of social media feels very uncomfortable, there is a kind of addiction, says Verduyn. "This is problematic. You need to control your use."

## Cat videos

Together with Verduyn, we will go through the list of social media: Facebook (one of the oldest, mainly popular with the older generation in the Netherlands), Instagram (a hit among youths),

just like TikTok and Snapchat. Then there are, of course, YouTube and X (Twitter). WhatsApp and Wikipedia are also part of the list. According to the researcher, social media can be defined in very general terms as platforms upon which content can be created and shared. "There has been a tremendous revolution in the world of digital media the past decade. We did, to be true, have Internet in the nineteen-nineties, but there wasn't much to do on it; yes, you could read stuff. With the emergence of social network sites, it became more and more interactive. You create a profile that you can then link to those of others; it is really intended to 'connect'. Where in the beginning you could only send a message to a 'friend', now there is the possibility to upload short videos and photographs." Another example of what social network sites were originally not used for that often, was buying and selling items. On Facebook, for example, there are all kinds of active 'bulletin boards'. The role of influencers has also gradually increased, says Verduyn. The algorithms – the formulas that the tech businesses use to 'calculate' what you really want to see – have also changed. "The content is

adapted to your personal behaviour." So, if you like cats, you will most likely be dished up all kinds of cat videos.

## Landscape

Taking everything together, is it not all that negative? "There is quite a lot of discussion about that in science. Some indeed say: 'The effect is so minimal, we shouldn't worry, other behaviour is much more problematic.' Others say: 'The result does have significance, because if we spend so much time on social media, that small negative effect will in time become greater.' To illustrate this, they highlight certain subgroups, such as young women who develop a negative self-image because of all the 'perfect images.'" The third school – of which Verduyn is a 'follower' – gives a more detailed perspective. "I compare it to a landscape of high mountains and deep lakes. If you look at the average height of the landscape, that says nothing about what the landscape looks like, about how deep those lakes are. That is why I want us to look more specifically at our behaviour on social media, what kind of users are we? Active or passive users? Also, what you like, someone else may not like."

## Consumer

According to Verduyn, 'active' means "that you show that you are present," by liking, posting reactions, or creating your own posts. A passive user, on the other hand, is a 'scroller', a consumer. Initially we thought that the first one is generally better for your well-being than the second one, because "an active user has the potential to connect, seeking a connection with someone else." But there are also comments to make here, he continues. Yes, someone who really likes to post messages and receive reactions, most likely feels happy, but what if that person is pestered and insulted online and also receives hate speech? Another point that the psychologist picks up on is the so-called "reciprocity. Imagine that you post photographs, but get no reaction whatsoever, that is not exactly something to get happy about. So, what counts is positive interaction." What is then still true of the idea that passive users would tend to feel worse because they "potentially" do not make a connection with others, but merely consume? This doesn't seem so black and white either. Constantly looking at perfect pictures can be harmful,

but you can become very happy from an influx of 'heart-warming' or funny videos, Verduyn agrees.

### Mobile phone ban

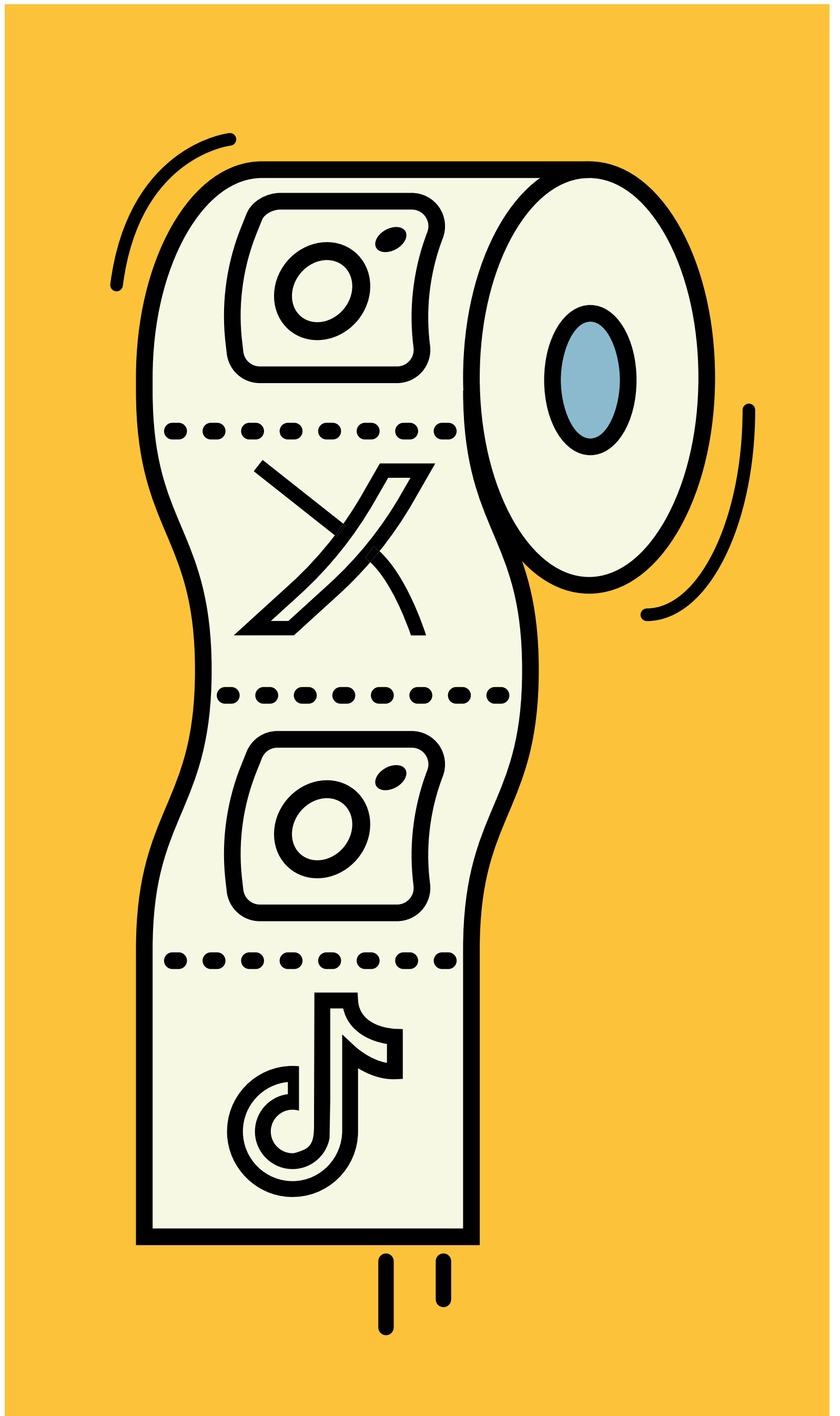
Let us zoom in on a special group: youths. They have grown up in a digital era with a lot of social media. They have, on average, six accounts, says Verduyn. For them, the division between the online and offline world is "always vague, everything is interwoven with each other". Does he feel that the mobile phone ban that is to be introduced in secondary schools in the Netherlands, is a good plan? "From my own experience, I know that social media can be a tremendous distraction, but also for example e-mail. If I have to concentrate on my work, I often switch that off and put my mobile phone aside. So yes, I understand that such a ban can lead to more concentration in the classroom," but, he warns, "we shouldn't act as if social media doesn't exist, that there are suddenly two worlds: one without (during school) and one with (after the last lesson). I believe that it is especially important to teach youths how they should handle it, let it be a subject of discussion in the classroom."

### Tricks

Last week, *De Volkskrant* dedicated an article to the proposal by a GroenLinks member of the European parliament about the addictive design of apps. It discussed "the tricks used by tech companies," such as notifications that show how many unread messages there are, algorithms that determine what you get to see, the automatic starting of videos (*De Volkskrant* spoke of messages that were an "endless roll of toilet paper"). "Europe is trying to tackle this problem through new legislation such as the digital services act, but it is still the question how it will all work out. With this intervention, the user would have more control by switching the algorithm on or off, but who is interested in a stream of messages that really don't interest you? Of course, addiction is an important issue, but I don't think that people will switch off the button themselves. So, what is the effect?"

### Values

As far as follow-up research is concerned, Verduyn wants to unravel "subtypes within passive and active users" and to look at the most vulnerable groups and certain topics, such as self-image and body positivity. He is also intrigued by values – how you behave on a social medium – because how do they come about? Verduyn: "We, the users, create a certain 'ecosystem'. When is it the responsibility of the platform, and when is it the individual who creates an anonymous account and speaks out aggressively? I think it is a combination. In the past, if you were angry, you would vent your anger to a friend or a parent. Today, you cast out an angry tweet in the heat of the moment. Half the world can read it."



## review

## UM associate professor Frank Nellen publishes second novel

# A much-needed story of a bygone era



Photo: Melanie Marsman

In the Dutch novel *'De onzichtbaren'* (*The Invisibles*), tax law expert Frank Nellen brings the bygone era of the Soviet Union back to life. It's an impressive novel that gives voice to both big and small stories from history.

"If this novel gets torn to shreds, I'll quit writing immediately", Frank Nellen told *Observant* in 2019 after the publication of his debut novel, *Land van dadels en prinsen*. It didn't get torn to shreds, and he didn't quit – and it's a good thing he didn't, we can say after reading his sophomore novel, *De onzichtbaren*. Where the first one received a cautiously positive reception, the reviews of his second book are glowing. And, spoiler alert, rightly so. Nellen, an associate professor of VAT and Customs Law at UM and tax consultant at Baker Tilly, has proved himself a born storyteller. He tells us the story of Dani, who grows up in a Ukrainian village in the Soviet Union in



the late 1960s and early 1970s. It's the kind of village where things are the way they are because that's just the way it is – until one day a new boy arrives. Pavel is different, he stands out, and not just because he has only one eye. No, Pavel stands out because he reads books, openly resists their tyrannical schoolteacher and likes to tell his friends stories. Despite

his young age, he possesses "the ability to transport you to other times and worlds with a handful of words. His voice breathed life into the people you met there. He pulled their souls from oblivion and let you look them in the eye. You truly found yourself in a coal mine, or a snowy plain strewn with corpses and snow-covered cannons – far from the

clutches of our everyday existence".

While Pavel soon moves on to boarding school and university, the village boys are condemned to a bleak life of mind-numbing work in a run-down light bulb factory. Nellen vividly portrays the dreary tedium of everyday life under Soviet rule, as well as Dani and his friends' desperate attempts to escape its meaninglessness through alcohol, affairs and cynicism – routes that all prove equally cheap and futile.

But the novel is about more than just the small stories of the "invisibles". Beyond the lives of factory worker Dani and intellectual Pavel looms the larger narrative of real-world communism as it loses its enchanting effect on people, unravels and eventually crumbles. This becomes tangible in the scene where a bust of Lenin, dropped by Pavel, shatters on the library floor. "It turned out to be made of plaster – not marble or alabaster, and not concrete, that primordial substance of socialism. There it was, the invincibility of the father of the Union reduced to a fable, a lie from a bygone era – emphasised by the cheap material from which he had been cast."

As noted in other reviews, *De onzichtbaren* is pregnant with relevance. Vladimir Putin's nostalgia for the era of the larger Soviet Union that included Ukraine is well known. But perhaps even more so, the book is pregnant with a past that deserves retelling regardless of Putin. It says a lot that the author and publisher felt the need to explain who Josef Stalin was in the book's list of names and terms. In this way, Frank Nellen's latest novel is both well timed and timeless. Let yourself be told this story; you won't regret it.

Peter Doorakkers

Frank Nellen, *De onzichtbaren*.  
Hollands Diep publishers, 254 pages,  
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## Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

12-10, 16.00 h Simon Andreas Keek	25-10, 16.00 h Lonne Heijmans
13-10, 10.00 h Sara Zwier Kuiper	26-10, 10.00 h Fatma Bashir Abulgasem Mokhtar
13-10, 13.00 h Saartje Straetemans	26-10, 13.00 h Luuk I.B. Heckman
13-10, 16.00 h Prof. dr. Edwin C.M. Mariman, afscheidscollege	26-10, 16.00 h Aline Mirella Elias Caldeira Dantas
16-10, 13.00 h Cecilia Tetta	27-10, 10.00 h Bart Johannes Hendrikus van Sloun
16-10, 16.00 h Radulfus J.S. van Mechelen	27-10, 13.00 h Jules Robin Olsthoorn
17-10, 10.00 h Anjusha Mathew	27-10, 16.30 h Dr. Federico De Martino, inauguratie
19-10, 13.00 h Ioannis G. Lempesis, Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University and University of Birmingham	30-10, 10.00 h George-Mihai Irimescu, Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University and Nicolae Titulescu University of Bucharest
20-10, 13.00 h Martijn Randolph Mons	30-10, 13.00 h Michelle Roanne Baggerman
20-10, 16.00 h Prof. dr. Richard P. Koopmans, afscheidscollege	30-10, 16.00 h Irene Moll
23-10, 16.00 h Isis B.T. Joosten	31-10, 13.00 h Adele Veronika Ruder
24-10, 13.00 h Steffi Kohl	31-10, 16.00 h Ruud F.W. Franssen
24-10, 16.00 h Miriam F. L. Fichtner	



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