

# observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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## Cuddling donkeys

**Does it help people with the beginnings of a burn-out to feel better?**

“I saw on my care farm that people were more inclined to open up to animals. Compared to horses, donkeys are calm. They are a little slower, stand still more often.”

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## Fleeing

In 2016, Haroon Rezaie’s escape from Afghanistan ended in Maastricht. Barbed wire, metres high concrete walls – that was Rezaie’s first impression of this city. “They brought us to a former prison, a dull apartment building.”

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## Sexual safety

Where to go if you are confronted with unacceptable behaviour? Do students know where to go to? Not exactly. “To the receptionist?” *Observant* held a random check among about 120 students.

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Riki Janssen

editorial

## “Take the smallest, ugliest office”

“Have you read it yet?” one of my colleagues asked me with a big smile. This was Tuesday last week; we were blissfully unaware of what was to come. No one in the office at that moment anticipated that the man who once tweeted that “Journalists are – with few exceptions – scum” would win the national election.

No, I had not yet read Japke-d. Bouma’s crash course in leadership in that day’s *NRC*. In a full-page article, the columnist called expensive leadership courses a waste of money. To prove her point, she provided 24 tips that were as hilarious as they were accurate and thought-provoking. I’ll mention a few. “Take the smallest, ugliest office.” I have practically the largest office at *Observant*, but there is a valid justification for this, I swear – my office also serves as our meeting room. In addition to my desk, it houses a large conference table, our planning boards and a cupboard stocked with coffee, tea and (last but certainly not least) a box of fun-size Snickers.

“Learn to take criticism well.” Ouch. That’s a hard one,

especially when I’m stressed. That said, I have internalised the quote that was printed on a coffee mug we used to have (may it rest in pieces): “Sometimes a colleague knows better.”

“Go for walks with people instead of sitting around in stuffy rooms. Tough conversations in particular are much easier when you’re not staring at each other from two metres away.” So true. Even if you don’t need to have a tough conversation, it’s refreshing to take a walk together. We made it a habit during the pandemic. Time to dust it off.

“Make decisions. Don’t drag your feet. Your colleagues are looking to you to call the shots so they can get on with their work. Being a leader means getting your hands dirty. Accept that not everyone will like you.” Agreed, no matter how difficult this is for those of us who would prefer to be on friendly terms with everyone.

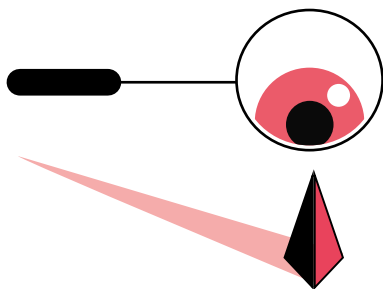
Just one last one, both insightful and amusing: “You’ll never get it right. That’s just the way it is. Be zen.”

A few days later, with these tips in mind, I reported for the

Leadership and Undesirable Behaviour training course, mandatory for all leaders and managers at UM. It was a useful Friday morning where I and colleagues from all over UM practised responding to complaints of misconduct and resolving bullying in the workplace.

Not for the first time, it struck me that I find it hard to switch off my internal frustration meter, which shot up when the person being bullied got stuck in the victim mindset. It got under my skin. How can you resolve conflict effectively if that happens? One of Japke-d.’s tips came in handy here: “Never show who your favourites or headaches are. Keep a poker face.” In other words, having an opinion is human, but don’t let it influence your actions. It’s as Japke-d. says: “Listen to your colleagues. Yes, even the stupid ones. Don’t just hear – LISTEN.”

*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: Lotte van de Loo and Dennis Vaendel



### End of an iron lady

They reckoned that it would last six months, but it ultimately circled the earth for a whopping fifteen years: Delfi-C3. This satellite, which had the size of a packet of milk, was fabricated in 2008 by students from TU Delft who wanted to test a new type of solar panel in space. After completion of the scientific experiment, it appeared that the satellite (christened by the researchers as the ‘iron lady’) was able to withstand the severe conditions outside the atmosphere to such an extent that a new question arose: ‘How long can she hold out?’ The answer came at the beginning of this month. Due to increased solar activity, the satellite slowed down more and

more, to eventually crash back down to earth on 13 November. “Not too far from the place where – 66 million years ago – the meteorite struck that brought an end to the dinosaurs,” Chris Verhoeven, who led the construction of Delfi-C3 in 2008, said to sister newspaper *Delta*. His colleague Stefano Speretta was not sorry about the loss: he prefers a limited lifespan of about three years for ‘student satellites’. That is less expensive and fits in better with the length of a master’s study. He is therefore also looking forward to the launch of Delfi-C3’s successors in 2025. “That will give us something to play with again.”



### From butt sea to butt lake

One year ago, UM joined forces with the national organisation ‘PeukenZee’ (literally ‘Butt Sea’). The objective was to prevent cigarette butts ending up on the ground and thus allowing harmful substances to end up in the environment. Since then, ‘butt pillars’ have been erected at the School of Business and Economics (SBE) and the University Library in the city centre, so-called ‘pocket ashtrays’ were distributed among smokers, and the organisation held four clean-up campaigns to pick up cigarette butts around UM buildings.

Did it help at all? It seems so. A recent evaluation by PeukenZee and UM, during the latest campaign in September, showed that the locations around the pillars had 73 per cent (SBE) and 87 per cent (University Library) fewer cigarette butts than in November last year.

They also widened the ‘clean-up areas’ during the campaigns in May and September to thirteen different UM locations in the city centre and in Randwyck. This yielded a total of almost fifteen kilos, which amounts to roughly 80,000 butts. There too was a decrease: where in May it was more than 10 kilos, in September it had become less than 5 kilos.

According to PeukenZee, this means that UM has been able to save more than 600 thousand litres of water from pollution, because every cigarette contains enough poisonous substances to contaminate 8 litres of water. But have people also been ‘saved’ from this polluting addiction? That was not investigated.



# Students hardly know where to seek help after unacceptable behaviour

*Where to go if you are confronted with unacceptable behaviour? In 2021, more than half of the 2,700 UM students had absolutely no clue, a survey revealed. More than two years later, little seems to have changed.*

Maastricht University recently set up a Team Social Safety for Students that people can turn to; there is a site with several links to “support”. Observant held a random check among about 120 students; almost none of them mentioned this. Yes, some would do a search on the UM website, they might find the team, but the majority hardly know their way around. About twenty of the students interviewed remembered the lecture ‘Are you okay?’ during the faculty introduction which focused on unacceptable sexual behaviour, but also on UM’s policy on this matter. The lecture was part of the programme ‘Sexual Safety’ led by Joyce Grul. “Why is that not available for everyone?” a third-year law student wondered. The team – which was only set up recently – doesn’t have an answer. The lecture is available online for everyone. A number of senior FHML students were sceptical on the timing of the lecture. “You come here to study and are immediately confronted with this. As if UM is well-known for this kind of incidents,” one

of them states. Ivanka Smitsmans, ‘in charge’ of the Students Social Safety Team: “We made a conscious choice for the introduction week, because this is when a lot of this kind of behaviour occurs. Especially because there is alcohol involved. Research shows that about 70% of the incidents take place under the influence of alcohol.”

## Student advisors

One fifth of those interviewed would approach the student advisor; but that is someone who mainly provides advice for study-related problems. Do they in turn know whom to refer to? According to Smitsmans, they often do,” some of them were involved in the introduction lectures”. But she will work on her team becoming more known, she promises.

The fact that a number of participants would approach a receptionist after an incident, surprises them. “We would never have come up with that, but it is actually not such a bad idea. Because a receptionist is always there.” Except that this category has had no training on how to treat such reports, and that is not going to change any time soon, they say.

Lastly: a small section of those interviewed would, in the case of serious unacceptable behaviour, like to file a report with the police.

“I would want to keep the university out of it, because it is my personal problem,” says a second-year student of Psychology.

## Sex education

The recently founded Students Social Safety Team is planning on doing more than just its core task, providing information in cases of unacceptable sexual behaviour. “When is it okay to hug someone? When am I allowed to touch someone? Questions like these are not easy to answer at an international place like UM, with all those cultural sensitivities,” says Grul. So, from the next academic year onwards, the team wants to pay more attention to etiquette. We are also going to deal with discrimination and stalking, subjects that the team will make debatable with workshops, film evenings and games. Something like ‘positive sexuality’ is also on their schedule: “Because in order to know what you don’t want, you first have to know what you like. For example, we could watch *Sex education* on Netflix and then talk about it.”

*Lotte van de Loo, Simon Wirtz*

*More information? Check out [www.maastricht-university.nl/social-safety-team-students](http://www.maastricht-university.nl/social-safety-team-students)*



## An unexpected community

“

How long has it been since your last visit to the municipal swimming pool? After going regularly for a few weeks now, I noticed a pleasant, yet unexpected side effect. When you enter the pool, the slow lane, that is, you immediately become part of a community. You complain about the water or the weather, whichever is colder, you make room for each other and exchange a smile as you pass. You encourage each other no matter your speed. Your name, your profession, your ability do not matter – yet even anonymously, people are caring and supportive. Then once you leave, the community goes on without you, ready to embrace you again anytime.

Naturally, being a social scientist, I’ve been thinking about how we could create such a supportive community when researchers and students struggle and might feel isolated. Here are my lessons learned on creating communities. First, we have a common challenge; we know what it feels like to struggle, and we know that every single one of us is working hard. Second, swimming is not a zero-sum game – my achievements do not affect yours. Encouraging each other and exchanging advice then does not affect either performance negatively, quite the opposite.

So, when we want to create communities for research and teaching, like students in a master’s programme or PhD candidates in a department, we have at least two options. We can create common experiences – so, share your vulnerabilities and challenges, your war stories, and your successes. Role model what support can look like yourself, and don’t forget to have fun together. But more importantly, I think, we should reconsider whether a competitive culture should remain our default. Academics and students will not automatically perform better if we pit them against each other. Decades of studies have actually shown that competition within groups is detrimental to creativity and innovation. Neither research nor teaching are zero-sum games, so let’s create caring communities through shared experiences, for more connection and innovation.

”

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

# Plastics ‘playground’ on Chemelot

*Chemelot in Sittard is to get a Brightlands Circular Space. In the words of Thomas Cleij, dean of the Faculty of Science and Engineering that is involved, it will be a ‘playground’ where research is carried out into the separation, processing, recycling and circular use of plastics.*

The Maastricht Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) already has a bachelor’s of Circular Engineering, as well as a research group in the field of circular plastics led by professor Kim Ragaert. Add to that the global and pressing issue of plastics and sustainability, plus 25 million from the National Growth Fund as well as the commitment of the Dutch Government to a completely circular economy in 2050, so that, according to FSE dean Thomas Cleij there is enough reason for a *Circular Space*. Together with parties such as TNO (organisation for applied research), UM wants to “show what the future of plastics looks like in a circular society,” says Cleij. “As far as we know, such a completely integrated institute like *Circular Space* that is researching the entire plastics chain and carries out testing, does not exist anywhere (certainly not in the Netherlands and surrounding countries). We are developing it in such a way that you can carry out experiments at ‘truckload level’, so not on a ‘lab scale’, but actually with real volumes of collected plastic waste. Many are aware of the fact that we need to be frugal in our use of raw materials and the environment, that circularity is the answer, but there are still no ready-made solutions. There is a great need for fundamental insights. It is great that we can contribute to this.”

Ultimately, a number of new buildings will be



*Photo: Shutterstock*

erected for the *Brightlands Circular Space* at the Chemelot Campus in Sittard. In addition to the 25 million from the National Growth Fund, the partners will invest money in the

project too. The institute should start running in 2026.

*Wendy Degens*



## students about their future

# “The Taliban tried to kidnap me, and now I’m here, my new home”

In 2016, Haroon Rezaie’s escape from Afghanistan ended in Maastricht. Married and just graduated from his bachelor’s, the former refugee now looks optimistically into the future. Hopefully his next stop: policy making in Brussels.



Haroon Rezaie Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

Haroon Rezaie (24) remembers every moment as if it happened yesterday. The deafening sound of the motorbike engines which were chasing him. The terrifying machine guns carried by the motor bikers whose face he couldn’t see. The sweat, the fast heartbeat, the fear for his life.

He, then 16 years old, was on his way to school. All of a sudden, men on motorbikes began chasing him. They were Taliban fighters, who had been threatening his father, a pharmacist, to hand out poisoned medicine to government officials. After his father denied, they were now trying to kidnap him. “It was the early morning, there was no one on the street I could have turned to. Then I saw a hospital. I ran in, the Taliban with their machine guns just metres behind me. I was shaking. When I was inside, past the security, I saw the Taliban taking off, slightly before they reached the entrance. I held my breath, until I couldn’t

anymore. I burst into tears. I was still alive. And I was so happy about it! Then I called my father.”

## Tents for 3000 people

A few months later, Rezaie’s family decided to flee. “A very difficult decision. We left behind everything we built up, the place where we have been living for generations. But what should we do?” They then embarked on a long journey. From Afghanistan to Iran, to Turkey, and further across Europe. “After months, we landed in a refugee camp in Zwolle. Massive tents for more than 3000 people on a former military base. And I was so thankful.” Rezaie and his family were sent across the country, from one camp to another, made friends, and lost them again. Over and over. In early 2016,

they ended up in Maastricht. “Again, I had to leave the people behind who I just met. But fleeing means saying goodbye on a regular basis. And I was looking forward to my new home.”

## Constantly in panic

Barbed wire, metres high concrete walls – that was Rezaie’s first impression of Maastricht. “They brought us to a former prison, a dull apartment building.” Having no place in school and nothing to do in the first weeks, Rezaie was bored. After a while, he and his siblings were offered a place in the ISK, a school class for foreigners where learning Dutch is central in all lessons. “I was grateful. But being an ambitious person, I needed more than just language classes. It really

frustrated me after a while.” Then, an unexpected chance came along. The United World College (UWC) joined an open day at the refugee centre. “I knew directly that I want to go to the UWC as I read their information and heard about it from my friends who attended this school. ‘But it’s not that easy’, they told me.” After all, Rezaie still had no residence permit. And it was far from clear that he and his family would get one. Any day they could be sent back to Afghanistan. “I was constantly in panic. What should I do, other than praying?” Praying helped, he thinks. After months had passed, Haroon could join the UWC via a scholarship, and in the end also the residence permit was given. “I started to feel at home. Made friends in school and in the Refugee Project, whose volunteers came to the refugee centre often and organized activities.”

## New chapter

After two years at UWC, a new chapter began: university. “I chose European Studies here at UM, because it’s a broad degree that prepares me for my future. I enjoyed it a lot.” After class, Rezaie kept himself busy with volunteering, namely organizing activities for other refugees and translating. “It’s nice to be able to give back.” Over the years, he made friends, many friends, but he doesn’t see most of them anymore. “That’s Maastricht: you always meet new people, but when you start embracing them with your heart, they go again.” But overall, he doesn’t complain. “I have a good life here. Sure, Dutch directness can be difficult. And all the Duo-paperwork! I have three big folders full of letters telling me that a decision about something will be taken soon”, he laughs, shaking his head. Then, all of a sudden, he gets silent. “What I am most grateful for is my wife, actually. I met her here in Maastricht, when I volunteered. She’s German, but despite the cultural differences it just clicked”, says the 24 year-old. Yes, it’s unusual to marry at this young age, he admits. “But it was the right thing for us. Now we can grow with each other, having a long-lasting bond.” Thinking about the future, the master student European Studies has his mind set on Brussels. “I will finish my studies next summer, so I’m starting to look for a traineeship in Brussels or Luxembourg. There, I can learn more about the EU on a practical level and really have an impact. But at the same time, I don’t want to leave Maastricht. My family and I found our new home here. So I see myself commuting every day.” Besides that, Rezaie needs a EU-citizenship for the traineeship he wants so dearly, as for all other traineeships with the EU. “I’m applying for a Dutch one, but that’s easier said than done. There are many conditions to fulfil, like passing several exams to prove your knowledge of the culture and the language. It’s a long and complicated process.” Many obstacles to overcome. But for Rezaie, that’s nothing new.

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.



Pro-Palestinian students speak during University Council meeting

# “The Executive Board’s neutral position creates an unsafe space”

That the four students (“we are not here on behalf of Free Palestine Maastricht”) wanted to share their stories, was not – as they should have done – announced to the University Council beforehand. But nobody felt that this was a problem. University Council chairman Teun Dekker did say that there are rules. One of them is that there will not be a discussion.

## Classroom

The Executive Board recently issued a statement regarding the conflict in the Middle East. It condemns “all acts leading to civilian casualties”. Why will the Executive Board not choose one side, the foursome ask during the public round, why will UM not take a clear stance against Israel, against genocide? “That is the role of the university, isn’t it? The Executive Board’s neutral position creates an unsafe space in the classroom.” Palestinians and Arabs are feeling all alone at UM, ‘left out in the cold’, one student says. She is worried about their well-being.

## Debate

“I know that you are not satisfied with it [the statement, ed.] and I have previously tried to explain why we issued it the way we did”, says president Rianne Letschert. In the statement, the Executive

“Why does UM not speak out against genocide?” Four pro-Palestinian students, who spoke during the public round in the University Council meeting last week, are worried about the safety of students and staff at the university. President Letschert emphasised that it is not the role of a university to take sides. Its role is, however, to facilitate academic debate.

Board calls for dialogue “to ensure that this tragic situation does not divide us”. That is, she now repeats, the role of the university in “this kind of situation. We, as an institute, will not take one side. We will facilitate academic debate.” Such a meeting, to enter into a dialogue, is being set up. When it will take place and what the programme will look like, is not clear, but UM spokesperson Koen Augustijn previously said that it should include “all voices” being heard, as long as there is no appeal for hatred, violence, antisemitism or discrimination.

## Instagram

This is certainly not the first time for management to have pro-Palestinian students voice their worries. “UM is [has been, ed.] talking to various groups that are expressing themselves about the conflict,” the spokesperson reacted when asked. This is “almost always” about the extent to which the feelings of others are being considered, because “words and images can have so much ‘connotation’”. For example, there will be a talk with student organisation Free Palestine Maastricht (FPM) about their Insta-

gram message on the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October, Augustijn confirms. This attack is described in the message as “a staggering answer by the Palestinian resistance to the continuous violence by Zionism and the Israeli settlement”. FPM has since then removed this statement, initiated by Students for Justice in Palestine Netherlands (SJP, a coalition of pro-Palestinian student organisations), from its own Instagram page “due to lack of understanding, accusations and decontextualization with which we as a group and the movement as a whole were confronted,” they said to *Observant*. “We do not praise the death of civilians, wherever that may happen, nor do we extenuate it.” The statement, however, is still on the SJP page, including a hashtag with the controversial slogan *‘From the river to the sea’*.

## Damages

Back to the University Council meeting on Wednesday 22 November. The speakers want to know why UM “censors” certain meetings. “Nothing has been censored,” Letschert answers, “but we must ensure that it is safe for everybody in the community.” What she was not happy about, by the way, was the graffiti on walls of UM buildings, besmirching of walls in toilets, and damaging classrooms. “Well, damaging, that might be a bit harsh, but it no longer looked like a decent classroom. This cannot be tolerated.”

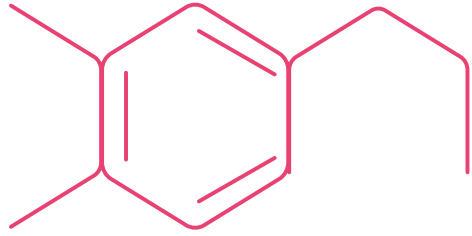
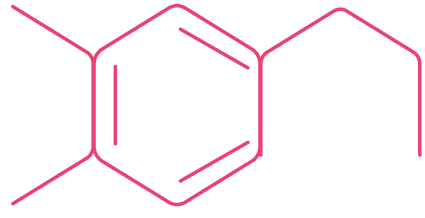
## Dilemma

Sharon Anyango (University Council member on behalf of the academic staff) would like to say something, “I received a pro-Palestinian petition in my mailbox, but I don’t know what to do with it”. She is struggling with the various roles that she plays. What if she were to sign it? Is she doing that as a ‘private person’, Sharon Anyango, as a University Council member, or as a lecturer? “You are free to sign it,” University Council chairman Teun Dekker emphasises. President Letschert agrees, who also recognises the dilemma: “I have a different role now as president than I had when I was (just) a professor of International Law; back then, I was much more outspoken. Now I am more reluctant.”



About 60 pro-Palestinian students demonstrated in front of the UM administration building on the Minderbroedersberg last Wednesday. Among other things, they demanded that the university openly speaks out against the Israeli military action in Gaza. By not doing so, according to the students, it makes itself “complicit in genocide”. Photo: Ellen Oosterhof





Mindfulness with donkeys  
for people suffering  
with burn-out issues

# More than just cuddling donkeys



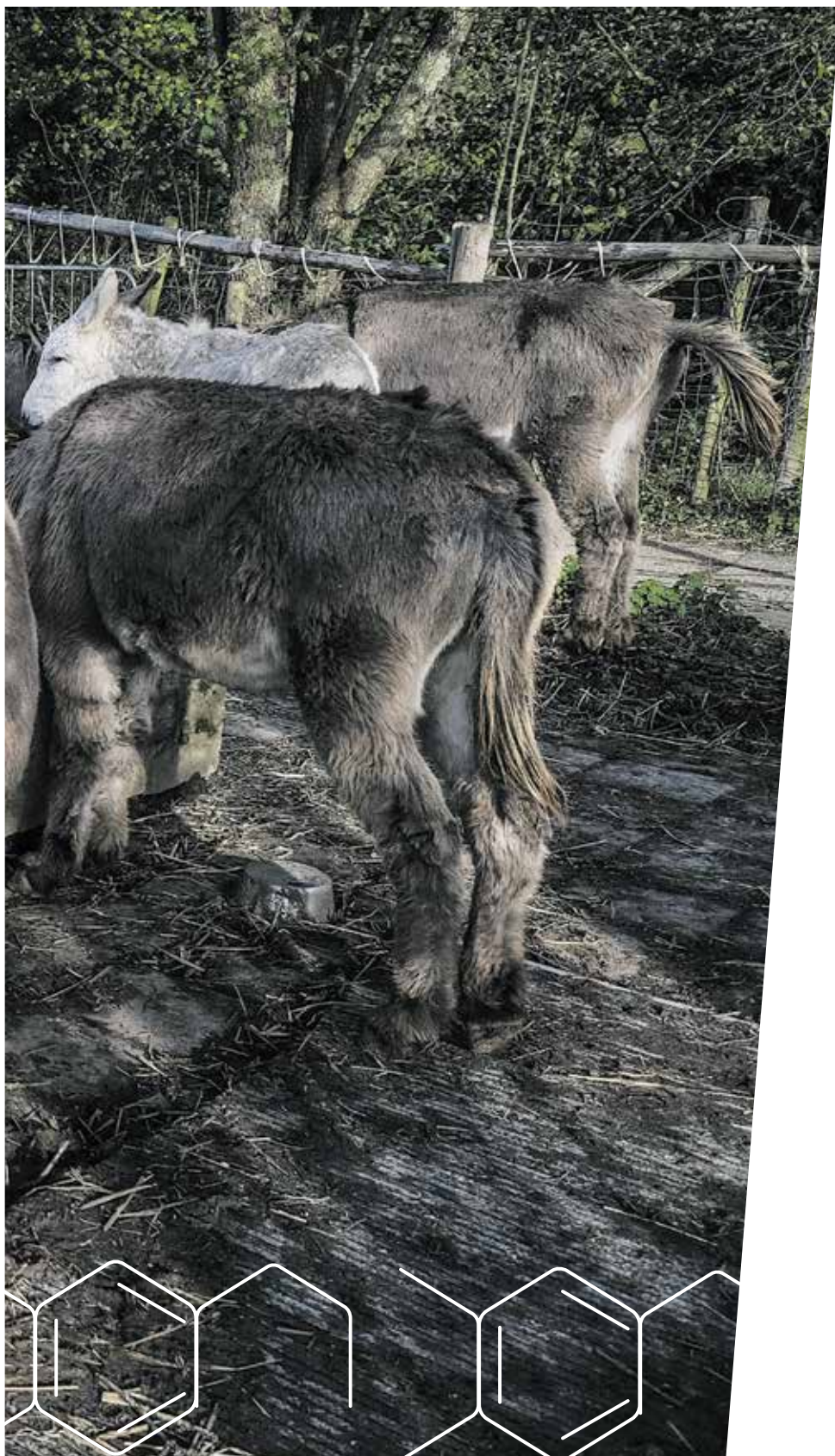
Researcher Brigitte Wijnen with her donkeys





Everyone has heard of mindfulness by now, but mindfulness with animals? Brigitte Wijnen, PhD student at UM, is doing research into the effectiveness for people with the beginnings of a burn-out. A hairy four-footed animal plays an important role. No, not a dog, but a donkey.

**Text** Lotte van de Loo **Photo** Joey Roberts **Illustration** Simone Golob



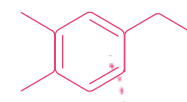
She was one of the first batch of students to do Health Sciences in Maastricht and graduated in 1984. After that, Brigitte Wijnen (63) worked as a management consultant for years, both in the Netherlands and abroad. After a time, this no longer satisfied her. She wanted to “do something that had a direct effect” and so she started a care farm with daytime activities for people with a mental disability, in 2008. The only animals there were donkeys. Why donkeys? Well, she just finds them to be pleasant animals, so pleasant in fact that when she lived in Germany, she had a couple of donkeys walking around on her property, as a hobby.

### Research

In 2011, Wijnen did a mindfulness training, after which she presented a remarkable idea to her trainer: why not mindfulness with donkeys? “I saw on my care farm that people were more inclined to open up to animals. Compared to horses, donkeys are calm. They are a little slower, stand still more often.” Could that help people suffering from a burn-out? And might it be a good subject to do a PhD on? Wijnen approached UM with her idea and she even found a supervisor, professor Pim Martens. She is now going to carry out research into whether the motivation (motivation is a key word in this research: being in the mood to undertake things, zest for living) of people with the first signs of a burn-out changes during the training. “The effect can easily be measured in these persons because their motivation is already low. And it is impossible for those suffering from a full-scale burn-out, because they cannot even get out of bed.”

### Cuddle hormone

The training course consists of eight weekly meetings where participants do exercises and meditation together with the donkey. One of the exercises is the body scan, in which every part of the body is consciously ‘scanned’. “Normally, one would do this to one’s own body, but in this case it is done to the donkey. You use all your senses; you touch the animal, you listen, you look. Both parties enjoy it. “This happens because a substance is released upon touch: oxytocin, also known as the cuddle hormone. It is all about giving exclusive attention to a living being. Animals make sure that you remain attentive. When you stop petting, your cat notices that, right?” Having your own animal in your home is a must for participation in the research. You have to actually practice mindfulness, at home as well. “That is why we have recorded instructions for the exercises



for people who have a dog or a cat.” Wijnen is going to carry out different tests at various moments on each participant. “Before the training starts, there will be a baseline measurement. This is used to compare to the other test results.” Why is there no control group? One who undergoes mindfulness, but without donkeys? That would be possible, she says, but that would answer a different research question. “I want to see if the motivation changes in one person.”

### Tears

But how can you measure that? “A substance is produced in your brain when it is rewarded, dopamine. This makes you feel good, so you want more. The motivation to carry on becomes stronger. We expect that this will also be the case for the participants.” The dopamine levels in tears are measured using soft paper strips. Brain activity is measured with a small wireless headband, an EEG (electroencephalogram) test. “There are brainwaves that say something about your state of mind and hence about the effectiveness of your meditation. You could compare it to a kind of smart-watch, but then around your head.” Lastly, the participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire about their intrinsic motivation, “the motivation coming from themselves, without external influences, such as a telephone call from a friend.” She expects that it will all work better if the animal is also enjoying it. How can you measure that? Tears will also be extracted from the donkeys. They will not be wearing a headband for an EEG as yet. They are maybe a bit stubborn after all? There is another reason for that: there is no portable EEG appliance for horses or donkeys available yet. And because donkeys can’t answer questions, they will not be given a questionnaire, but Wijnen will film the animals. Donkey specialists in England will subsequently analyse their behaviour.

### Cherry on the cake

The research itself still has to start but there are some hurdles. As an ‘external PhD candidate’, Wijnen has to pay for everything herself. That is why she and a number of FHML students have set up a crowdfunding project. “A single headband costs €400. I need thirteen of those. And the tear analyses take place in the laboratory for which we need to buy analysis kits.” By offering workshops with the donkeys in exchange for a donation, she is hoping to collect enough money. At the moment, Wijnen is still waiting for approval from the Medical Ethics Committee; the Animal Testing Committee has already given its approval. After that, she can start looking for participants.

When she completes all this, she will have reached the age of retirement. “For most people, doing a PhD is at the beginning of their career, for me it is the cherry on the cake.”

Like to participate? Send an e-mail to [bmt.wijnen@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:bmt.wijnen@maastrichtuniversity.nl)



## background

# How is recruitment going? UM wants to know: ‘Why are you working here?’

*Actively approaching people with job vacancies: it was a new addition to Maastricht University's recruitment strategy. After almost a year, it turns out to be necessary less often than was thought.*

The number of unfilled vacancies at UM last Monday afternoon stood at 48, to be exact, half of which were for administrative and support personnel, the other half for academic staff. Joëll Augustin is able to state the number accurately by using the *Applicant Tracking System (ATS)*, a new system that centrally tracks all vacancies, interviewees and who got the job.

Augustin has headed the new UM Connect & Recruit office since the beginning of this year. The office helps managers find new employees by applying a new recruitment strategy. Setting up such a system is part of this strategy, he said in *Observant* at the beginning of this year – just like a group on Umployee that also lists vacancies.

#### Better choices

Another new element is sourcing, which means that UM is actively approaching



people to ask them to apply for a position. It turned out to be less necessary than originally thought, says Augustin. So far, 600 available positions were filled in 2023 – “about as many as in the same period in 2022”. Active recruitment only appeared to be necessary for UM in 5 per cent of those cases. How can that be? We make “better choices” about which job vacancies are best suited for which online platform,

such as LinkedIn, Banenrijk Limburg, and Academic Transfer. The result: “More suitable candidates for the same position and less need to post the vacancy again.”

This doesn't mean to say that everything is hosianna. Finding administrative and support staff for finance and IT continues to be difficult, says Augustin, and ageing of the population doesn't help. He doesn't rule out that the election results will have consequences either. Parties that are critical of the internationalisation of education, won. “So, we have to show what internationalisation brings us.”

He is less worried about the proposed economizing of the ‘thirty-percent scheme’, the tax advantage for foreign employees. Until now, they did not pay tax over a maximum of thirty per cent of their salary for five years. In the economized regulation, this 30-percent scheme would apply for up to 20 months, followed by 20 months of a ‘20-percent scheme’ and 20 months of a 10-percent scheme.

“A knowledge migrant who is considering coming to Maastricht, looks at much more than a tax scheme,” says Augustin. “When we recruit, we focus especially on things that the UM can influence, such as a good balance

between work and private life and good career perspectives.”

#### Employer's promise

Another important aspect is employer branding, or the way in which UM presents itself as an employer on the market, both internally and externally. “This summer, Randstad Consultancy took a look at UM's external visibility; in January, we will conduct an internal survey, in which we ask people why they are working here.” All Augustin wants to say about the Randstad research for now, is that it had “very diverse” outcomes. The results of both inquiries should lead to an “employer's promise,” comparable to a mission statement about what kind of employer UM wants to be. Eventually, that should also attract new people.

And what about the bonus of 500 euro that UM employees receive if they successfully find someone for a job? “This recommendation scheme has existed since June 2022. So far, 85 people have been put forward, 41 of whom were hired.”

Peter Doorakkers



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#### Vacatures

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\*Medewerkers van UM kunnen een volledig overzicht van interne- en externe vacatures vinden door in te loggen op SuccessFactors via Umployee.



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## Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

30-11, 16.00h Madhura Ramchandra Rao	5-12, 16.00h, Rosa Ricarda Leni Charlotte Thielmann	Degree Maastricht University - RWTH Aachen University	18-12, 13.00h, Cenay Aliye Elisa Akin
30-11, 10.00h Hidde Pieter van Steenwijk	6-12, 10.00h, Elena Caporali	12-12, 13.00h, Mohamed Kassem	18-12, 16.00h, Zoë Louise Miller
30-11, 13.00h Hannah Bernhard	6-12, 16.00h, Doke J.M. Buurman	12-12, 16.00h, Anouk A.F. Stoffels	19-12, 10.00h, Meena Putturaj
30-11, 16.00h Christine Kawa	7-12, 10.00h, Michel R.A. van Hooren	13-12, 10.00h, Xiaodi Zhang	19-12, 13.00h, Ilishkina Daria Igorevna
1-12, 10.00h, Carmen F.M. van Hooijdonk	7-12, 13.00h, Lianne M. Loosveld	13-12, 13.00h, Maartje Massen	19-12, 16.00h, Estera Wiczorek, Joint Doctoral Degree Maastricht University - Jagiellonian University
1-12, 13.00h, Marla T.H. Hahnraaths	8-12, 10.00h, Joey Tang	13-12, 16.00h, Jan-Frieder Harmsen	20-12, 10.00h, Cassandra Barber
1-12, 16.30h, Dr. Roland Pierik inauguratie	8-12, 13.00h, Sander Paul Martijn Kramer	14-12, 10.00h, Sung Yoon Yang	20-12, 13.00h, Alessandro Cianfoni
4-12, 10.00h, Francesco Giancaterini	8-12, 16.30h, Dr. Simon Beusaert inauguratie	14-12, 13.00h, Heike E.F. Becker	20-12, 16.00h, Joey Nicholson
4-12, 13.00h, Irdanto Saputra Lase, Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University -Ghent University	11-12, 10.00h, Agorastos Agorastos	14-12, 16.00h, Gemma M.C. van Ruitenbeek	21-12, 10.00h, Nikki C.C. Werkman
4-12, 16.00h, Priscilla Yeye Adumoah Attafuah	11-12, 13.00h, Shuhe Zhang	15-12, 10.00h, Anne-Marije Hulshof	22-12, 10.00h, Izabiliza Liliane Mpabanzi
5-12, 10.00h, Sergey Primakov	11-12, 16.00h, John Boniface Nakutta	15-12, 13.00h, Lieke Bakker	22-12, 13.00h, Melissa J.J. Voorn
5-12, 13.00h, Styliani- Dialechti Voulgaropoulou	12-12, 10.00h, Eva Helena Harlacher (née Straußfeld) Double Doctoral	15-12, 16.30h, Dr. Alessandro Bertolini inauguratie	22-12, 16.00h, Ozan Yazar
		18-12, 10.00h, Jennifer Monereo-Sánchez	