

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

VOLUME 44 / FEBRUARY 1, 2024 Nr 17

This is a part of the brain

To be precise: part of the occipital lobe, made with optical tissue clearing. This spot in the brain processes information important for vision. With a dissertation on this imaging technique, neuroscientist Sven Hildebrand won the Dissertation Prize.

P. 7

Israeli-Palestinian conflict

“Cancelling the dialogue is much worse than having the dialogue despite the difficulties”, writes a second-year European Law School student, born in Tel Aviv, in an opinion article. During the last meeting, the University Council also discussed the cancellation of the dialogue evening on the conflict between Palestine and Israel.

P. 5-6



Future plans

Psychology student Spoorti Ramesh realized “I was only doing what my parents expected of me, not what I wanted. I was ticking boxes on a list that wasn’t mine.”

P. 4

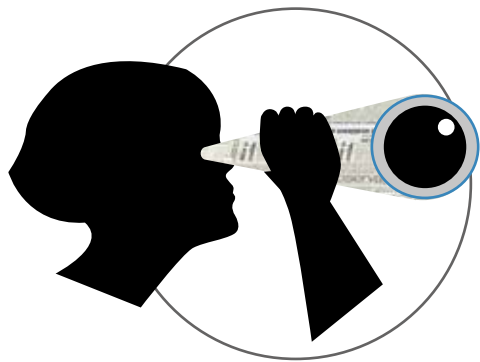


UM is hiring

Rector Pamela Habibović touched on a practical problem in her opening speech during the Dies Natalis: “It is increasingly difficult to fill our vacancies.”

P. 7





Riki Janssen

editorial

It was with a heavy heart that we refused

The other day, I overheard a professor grumble about spending so much time responding to emails that she can barely get anything else done. While it's not quite as bad here at *Observant*, some emails confront us with dilemmas. For example, should we ever work for free? We do say yes when a student club asks us to run a writing workshop for them, provided that one of us has the time, or when a magazine run by UM students seeks input on their editorial formula. But what about when a lecturer asks *Observant* to give a lecture on writing an opinion piece, or a masterclass in journalism? As fun as they are, these kinds of activities require a lot of preparation time and aren't part of our core business. That's why we made the decision a few years ago to stop doing them for free.

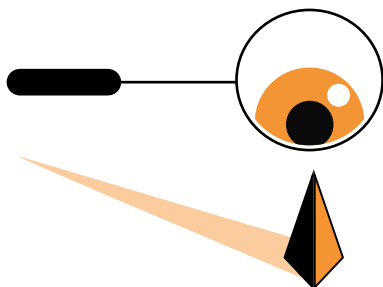
After all, we charge for our annual summer school course on *Journalism and Effective Writing*, just like we did for our writing workshops in the past.

And so it was with a heavy heart that we had to refuse a recent request from a valued colleague, as there was no budget to compensate *Observant* for our contribution to her class.

Last week, we received a very different request from a second-year European Law School student. He had planned to participate in the cancelled Dialogue Table on the war between Hamas and Israel. He'd prepared a text to read aloud at the event and was willing to engage in genuine dialogue, as became clear to us when we invited him to the office the following day. Yoav Bar Ness, a Jewish

student from Tel Aviv, lost three friends on 7 October. But he's still open to talking to people with different views. He asked if *Observant* could serve as a platform for people's thoughts and feelings about the recent war. "I want to contribute. I can send you the text I wrote, and I'm willing to engage in conversations with people who don't share my views." We agreed to his request. Read on to find his contribution, as well as our invitation to students and staff to share their views in a non-aggressive way that encourages open communication.

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, Cleo Freriks

Scrawling too legible

A student from Leiden feels that his own handwriting is so illegible that he wants to do his exams on a laptop, Hoger Onderwijs Persbureau, (Higher Education Press Agency) reported. He has already put his case before the Board of Examiners, the appeals committee for exams at Leiden University, and even the Council of State, but without success. The student claims that writing neatly costs him so much time and stress that he is unable to do well in his exams. But as far as the Council of State is concerned, he is unable to prove that this results in lower grades. They also fail to see the connection between his scrawling and the fact that, as he says himself, "he is from a non-academic environment and a less well-off family".

The Board of Examiners even wondered if the scrawling is really that bad. The committee saw "no remarks by revisers to suggest that they had a problem reading the answers" in his previous exams. "The handwriting is no more illegible than that of the average student," the appeals committee added.

The Council of State is the highest body to which a student can submit a complaint, the law student will therefore have to continue using pen and paper for his exams.

Who does what?

Dean, vice dean, 'formal' vice dean, university dean, student dean. These are positions at this university, but who does what exactly? It is at times cause for some frowning among the editorial staff.

The reason this time is a vacancy at the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) for a vice dean (if you are interested, you can apply until 29 February). Generally speaking, vice deans are the board members who have education or research in their portfolios.

So, the logical question for the FSE board was: Are you looking for a replacement for the portfolio holder of education, or research? No, was the answer, "there will be an additional formal vice dean". That person will mainly focus on the field of engineering. So, an extra person in the board. FSE dean Thomas Cleij will soon find himself at a table with the formal vice dean, three 'ordinary' vice deans of education, research and internationalisation as well as the director.

But we will make it even more confusing. Last week, a professor referred to himself as university dean (and no, he is not the boss of a faculty). Then, we have the student deans within the Student Services Centre and the deans of the University Colleges in Maastricht and Venlo. The latter are – recently – referred to as programme directors. Fortunately, that are two 'deans' less.



Dance Your PhD

What does it look like when you ask the question 'What is your thesis about?' and it is not answered with a complicated story but with a dance? That is what the *Science* journal has been asking itself for the past sixteen years in the annual *Dance Your PhD* competition organised by the journal.

Social scientist Kim Stienstra from Utrecht is competing for the title this year, independent Utrecht news platform *DUB* reports.

Stienstra graduated mid-January, having studied the influence of the class on a pupil who is lagging behind. A good teacher and a pleasant atmosphere in the class, for example, have a positive effect on school achievements, especially for children with lower-educated parents. What does that look like in dance? In the video that Stienstra sent in, we see her and other dancers from her group LOF Dance Crew leaning on each other and helping each other get up when one of them is on the ground.

As far as *Observant* is aware, Maastricht PhD graduates have never attempted to put their theses to dance, but in Utrecht, Stienstra is not the first one. In 2019, veterinary surgeon Nikae te Moller participated in *Dance Your PhD* and in 2010, neuro scientist Maartje de Jong even won in the category 'Biology'.

Delayed student complex not completed before 2 February

25 students may stay in holiday park for another month

There is still no date for the opening of the Muse Einstein Campus in Randwyck, administrator Nido writes to the municipality of Maastricht in a letter. First, the technical problems will be investigated. Some 25 students are taking up the offer to stay at Dormio Resort holiday park in February as well.

Five hundred students heard in late December that they could not move into the brand-new Muse Einstein Campus any time soon because of water in the concrete slabs, causing leaks and flooding in the building. Most of them have since terminated the contract and found alternative accommodation, the director

of management company Nido Living informed the municipality (in a letter) on 26 January. A group of 51 students have been living in Dormio Resort at Nido's expense for the past few weeks. Of these, half will also stay at the park during the month of February. It is a one-off 'extension action', writes Nido. "We have decided to continue supporting these students." The management company does charge a rental fee, but an amount is not mentioned. But that fee "will fall far short of covering the cost of accommodation at Dormio. Nido will cover the remaining part of the costs out of goodwill."

In the meantime, two companies with expertise have been engaged to scrutinise the technical problems at the campus. They will submit their findings to Nido, after which a plan of action and a completion date should roll out.

Wendy Degens



The goal was daily calls...



Waking up to 4 missed calls, 6 unread messages, and 3 unanswered emails sets the tone for a day filled with digital catch-up. At 8:30 am, I make my way to the dining hall for a quick breakfast before my first class. Mid-waffle, I decide to call my dad, who always complains that I never call him, only to be met with endless rings and no response. Frustrated, I refill my coffee, and as I sit back down, a new message notification pops up, "still at work, call you later." Breakfast finished, and I head to class, listening to voice messages from a friend delivered to me at 3 am. My friend tells me she is on her way to work and that I should call her back between 2 and 3pm. Glancing at the clock, I realize it's already 10 am, and I've missed my opportunity to call her back. Navigating a 6-hour time difference makes staying in touch challenging. By the time my last class ends at 6 pm, it's midnight for my friends and family. Calling my friends in the morning works, but it doesn't quite compare to the joy of unwinding at the end of the day, sharing stories about how our days went, especially when I'm still in the middle of mine. When I envisioned going abroad, the goal was daily calls, but reality scaled it down to twice a week. Group chats on various apps help, but catching up on conversations from 6 hours ago feels a bit like reading yesterday's news—outdated and out of sync.

Besides the time difference, there's a whole new life with a new routine, new friends, and responsibilities, making it tough to stay connected with home. But, despite the challenges, there are ways to close the gap. Little ways to remind each other that you are thinking about them, a shared playlist, a postcard, or a locket picture. Even a short 10-minute call with my friends, squeezed in between classes, can brighten the rest of my day and reassure me that, even with a 6-hour time difference, we're still part of each other's lives, just on a slightly different clock for now.



Line-Marie Eichhorst,
student at University College Maastricht

WD



Juraj Sembera, a first-year student at the Maastricht Science Programme, still stays in one of the holiday cottages at Dormio.

Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

Executive Board waiting on government decision about desired language in "official university matters"

Student in FHML's faculty council raises language issue again

You have been appointed as faculty council member at Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, but you don't speak or understand the official language: Dutch. What to do? Last week, Olga Kosjakova from the Czech Republic appealed to the University Council to ask for their help in finding a "workable solution".

"I have never felt that I didn't belong in Maastricht, until I became a council member for my faculty." For as long as can be remembered, the official language for the FHML-council has been Dutch. Also, most documents are provided in Dutch. Apparently, as Olga Kosjakova, a student of Biomedical Sciences states during the University Council's Speaker's Quarter, she is the first non-Dutch speaker in that faculty council. Kosjakova's fellow party members of NovUM

brought up the 'language issue' in the University Council on several occasions last autumn. "Is it not very strange that you are elected by students and subsequently can't carry out your tasks because you don't understand the language? I assume that everyone in that hall speaks English", student member Andrew Scrivener asked vice president Nick Bos of the Executive Board in September. Bos emphasised at the time that UM is bi-lingual and that the council may decide themselves what the official language should be. "At the same time, everyone should be able to understand what is being said." In the FHML council it was decided that Dutch would continue to be the official language, but that Kosjakova could ask her questions in English. Nevertheless, she is not satisfied with how it has been handled. Surely, something else could be done, certainly for

an international university like UM with so many bachelor's and master's programmes in English, she said to the University Council. After Kosjakova's plea, president Rianne Letschert refers to the discussions that are being held in The Hague at the moment, about the influx of foreign students and language policy and with that also prompts the question: Which language should universities use in "official university matters? We want to await that decision before we formalize a proposal in answer to the concerns you're raising. Imagine that the government says: 'All official matters must be dealt with in Dutch from now on.' That would go against our values, but what if that is imposed upon us?" Letschert realises that this doesn't solve anything for Kosjakova, "but that is the way things look at the moment".

series students about their future

"It was the first time I made a decision for me"



Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

When asked how old she is, Spoorti Ramesh flashes a weary smile. "Telling people my age makes me feel so old. Last week, I watched a *Harry Potter* film with some fellow students. When I mentioned seeing it in the cinema when it came out, they just stared at me. They hadn't even been born yet!" However, it's not as if Ramesh only just started university at the age of 29. **She has already completed a master's degree in Germany and a bachelor's degree in her native India.**

Ramesh grew up in Bengaluru, also known as Bangalore, a city in southern India with a population of millions. She lived not only with her parents and sister, but also with her grandparents and her father's brothers' families. "In India, it's common for sons and their families to live with their parents. Most never move out. Daughters, once married, move in with their husband's family. We lived with a total of fifteen people. My grandparents lived in the main house, where we ate together every evening. After dinner, each family went back to their own 'tiny house'. All houses were connected." When Ramesh was ten

years old, she moved with her sister and parents to a self-built house. Why? "Our living situation was very tense, and building your own house carries a certain prestige in India." She's from a middle-class family, neither rich nor poor. Ramesh went to university at eighteen. "Many people in Bengaluru choose to study engineering. It's also known as the Silicon Valley of India, home to lots of tech companies." Although Ramesh also went for this "safe" option, her passion lay elsewhere. "I read all these books where people talked about their feelings – even to others! I wasn't used to that.

When I discovered you could even make a career out of it, I was sold." She didn't tell her parents about her secret interest in psychology, but reluctantly completed her bachelor's degree in biotech engineering.

Identity crisis

"As a woman in India, you can't just do what you want. I longed to. Many young people move to places with more job opportunities." Ramesh left for Europe. "Tuition fees here are affordable, unlike in Australia and the US. In Germany, you can even study for free." Germany it was. Her parents, despite their concerns

("They called me every day"), were proud of her for being accepted into a foreign university. In 2017, at 24 years old, Ramesh started her master's degree in bioinformatics in Saarbrücken. "So, I ended up doing what I'd been trying to avoid all those years – computer science", she laughs. What happened to her passion for psychology? "It had waned a bit. I'd never really looked into it. Bioinformatics seemed the logical choice." After completing her degree, she secured a job in the field. Everything was going according to plan, but Ramesh wasn't happy. "I realised I was only doing what my parents expected of me, not what I wanted. I was ticking boxes on a list that wasn't mine." She found herself caught in an identity crisis. She didn't enjoy sitting at a computer all day and missed interacting with people.

Her social life also suffered. "I was the only non-European at work. My colleagues didn't understand me, and they didn't try. I was all alone in a foreign country." She became so depressed that she sought therapy.

Her therapist reignited Ramesh's passion for psychology with enthusiastic stories about studying in Maastricht. By this time, Ramesh had been working for three years, paid off her loan for living expenses and looked into the field. She was certain: psychology was right for her. The question was whether to stay in Germany. "German universities required impossibly high grades for admission. Plus, UM offered the programme in English." She decided to move to Maastricht. "It was the first time I made a decision for me." And she's still happy she did. "It's a whole new world. I have so many options now." After completing her studies, does she want to pursue a career in research or practice? "Both, actually. I want to help people as a therapist, but I might pursue a PhD first." She doesn't know where yet; to be a therapist in the Netherlands, she would need to learn the language. "That won't be easy", she says with a smile.

Marriage

Ramesh lives in Maastricht with her fiancé, whom she met at work in Germany. She'd never introduced previous boyfriends to her parents, but this was different. "For the first time, someone saw me", she says, smiling. "I was very upfront with him about the fact that I only date with the intention of marriage. That's how it is in my culture." In fact, she explains, dating isn't really a thing in India. Most people have arranged marriages, like Ramesh's parents. "When I told my parents about him, my father asked, 'When are you getting married?' They wanted to meet his family right away." The couple got engaged in April and will get married next August, "in India, of course. You don't think my parents would approve of the wedding taking place anywhere else, do you?" How do her parents feel about her study and life choices? "They didn't quite understand at first, but now that they know I'm getting married and someone is taking care of me, it doesn't matter anymore. There's this Indian saying: 'Do whatever you want, but only after marriage.'"

Lotte van de Loo

In this biweekly series, students are interviewed about their future plans; their expectations, dilemmas and fears.

Cancellation of Palestine-Israel 'dialogue table' discussed in U-council

"How do you guarantee that nobody's feelings will be hurt?"



Illustration: Simone Golob

How can you guarantee that Maastricht University's new dialogue centre is a "safe space" to share your opinion? Also, why has the first meeting, about the situation in Palestine and Israel, been cancelled? The University Council discussed the matter last week. "It is not okay if threats make further dialogue impossible."

OmniUM, the working name of the new dialogue centre, offers a space for all kinds of (sensitive) subjects, states the memo for the University Council. "It is important to offer an open and safe space to come together for honest dialogue and to share opinions." And no, UM will not be getting a new building for this dialogue meetings. They will take place at Tapijn Z, student community Kaleido's 'living room'.

Before the details of OmniUM could be discussed, the Executive Board and (fellow) organiser Rob van Duijn from Studium Generale dwelled upon the cancellation of the first 'dialogue table' on 18 January, about the situation in Israel and Palestine. President Rianne Letschert and Van Duijn spoke cryptically about "signs from the community, some people thought differently about the set-up of such an evening". Van Duijn had previously spoken in this newspaper about "possible actions", there are whispers about demonstrations and protests. On top of all that, moderator of the 'dialogue table' Evanne Nowak (a freelancer, not connected to UM) received a "disturbing e-mail from Students for Palestine" the evening before, she said to *Observant*, "in which they strongly advised me to step down". It was decided after that to cancel the programme, Van Duijn concludes in the University Council meeting. According to Letschert, the Executive Board is thinking about an "appropriate reaction to this behaviour", referring to the tone of the e-mail to the moderator. "This is worrisome."

Student member Lea Bilić also wonders why the dialogue has halted because of this. "It is not okay if a letter [e-mail, ed.] prevents all further dialogue." Van Duijn explains that "the

"Some people thought differently about the set-up of such an evening"

set-up of the evening, where people would share and listen, was too vulnerable. We couldn't guarantee that it wouldn't be disturbed." He is hoping for a second chance, "but we have taken a step back for now".

Regarding the set-up of OmniUM – for and by students, is the idea – there were also a few critical questions. Because, what about the promised open and safe space? Various perspectives can be presented during such a dialogue, people may give their opinions without being scared or discriminated against. "How do you guarantee that nobody's feelings will be hurt?", student member Andrew Scrivener wants to know. Donna Yates, member on behalf of the academic personnel, is not convinced with the guarantee that such a meeting would be safe. You don't know if somebody is secretly filming and then puts it on social media, she says. Also, can you force others to respect boundaries of the others? Van Duijn cannot give any guarantees, but would like to give "a number of guidelines about how to behave with one another" during such a dialogue evening.

Letschert: "If we don't make an attempt to have an open and safe dialogue, I will lose faith. So yes, we do need good guidelines. And if that doesn't work, we will have to have a different discussion at this university, namely, how we raise young people." In other words: Has it come so far that they can't and don't want to listen to each other anymore?

Wendy Degens

Read the opinion article of student Yoav Bar Ness about the conflict in Palestine and Israel on page 6

An Israeli student calls on UM students and staff for dialogue

“Cancelling the dialogue is much worse than having the dialogue despite the difficulties”

A few days after the cancellation of the Dialogue Table on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, we received an email from Yoav Bar Ness. A second-year student in the European Law School programme, he had intended to participate in the event. “It is essential that the two sides talk to each other”, he wrote, “especially in internationally acclaimed settings such as the UM. Cancelling the dialogue (or simply not allowing for honest discussion) is much worse than having the dialogue despite the difficulties.” He proposed that *Observant* could be an “ideal forum” for students and staff to share their views and feelings in a “non-confrontational, non-aggressive way”. Yoav Bar Ness is Jewish, from Tel Aviv. Having lost three friends on 7 October, he knows better than most that anyone affected by the war feels “overwhelmed, to say the least”. But if we stop talking to each other, he says, how do we ever get to a possible solution?

Below is the story he planned to read aloud at the Dialogue Table.

We warmly invite any students and staff interested in writing about their views and feelings in a non-aggressive way to follow Yoav Bar Ness’s example. This includes those who had already prepared for the Dialogue Table and also explicitly includes people with different views.

A personal story of football and a complex reality

From early childhood, football has always been present in my life. I was born in Thailand, where my parents lived for a few years. When we returned to Israel I was still in

kindergarten. My dad, being a loyal follower of the football club “Hapoel Tel Aviv”, did not wait long before he took me to a home match. My early love for the game made players like Saleem Toama and Waleed Badir, Israeli-Arabs (or Israeli-Palestinians), my childhood idols. Hapoel always had dominant Arab players in the squad. As the Israeli-Palestinian MP Ahmad Tibi often says “No Arabs, no goals”. I agree.

Our stadium, “Bloomfield”, is located in Jaffa. It is a city with a predominantly Arab history, today in southern Tel Aviv. Visitors to the stadium will see Arab and Jewish fans supporting the team

shoulder to shoulder. Arabic is spoken widely, and anti-racism banners in both Hebrew and Arabic are very common. None of this is a surprise, considering that Arabs make up about 20% of Israeli citizens.

I wish I could say that this is a microcosm of Israeli society, however, this is not the case. Israeli society is far from being perfect. The

gaps between its different segments are widening, populist ideologies are on the rise, and racism has been infecting society in different forms. And of course, one cannot overlook the lack of leadership, manifested in incompetency to make difficult decisions on the future of Palestinians in the West Bank. It would be, at best, a clear lack of understanding to say these flaws are unrelated to 07/10 and the ongoing war in the region. However, I find it extremely difficult to grasp how people who claim to have a versatile, fluid ideology, tend to think in such a black-and-white manner when it comes to Israel.

Let’s go back to football. Omer Hermesh, a legendary Hapoel fan, symbolised the spirit of the club like no other. In one article from a few years back, his iconic words capture the essence of the club: “We might be provocative fans (...) with a sharp and sometimes merciless tongue... But we are not racist”. Unfortunately, Omer has not been with us since 07/10. He was slaughtered in his house in Kibbutz Kfar Aza during Hamas’s attacks on southern Israel. It took nearly two weeks to identify his body. At his funeral, Arabs and Jews stood together, chanting ‘You’ll never walk alone’.

This war is not a binary exercise. It is a story of multiple narratives, all of which have certain truths. Instead of ‘choosing sides’ I wish for people to truly learn and reflect on the complexities of the situation. But above all, I wish for a peaceful solution, for the return of all hostages, and a just and prosperous future for the Palestinians.

Yoav Bar Ness

We warmly invite any students and staff interested in writing about their views and feelings in a non-aggressive way to follow Yoav Bar Ness’s example. This includes those who had already prepared for the Dialogue Table and also explicitly includes people with different views.

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UM rector at Dies Natalis celebration

“It is increasingly difficult to fill our vacancies”

“We’re hiring”, quips Rector Pamela Habibović at the annual Dies Natalis celebration on Friday 26 January. Although she brings it up in a light-hearted way, the knowing chuckles from the audience in the Sint-Janskerk indicate that people are well aware of the issue – and just how serious it is.

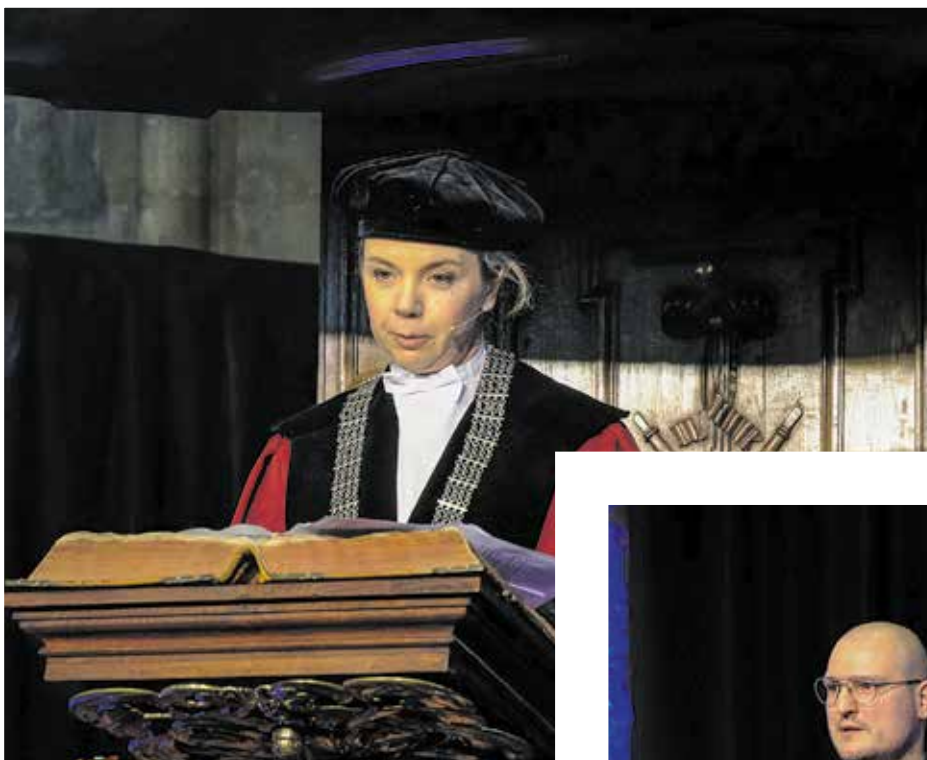
It’s getting more and more difficult for UM to fill its vacancies, says Habibović. So, she adds, if there happen to be any potential managing directors for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, corporate information security officers or IT officers in the audience, they should feel free to approach her after the event.

According to the rector, there are currently 25,000 unfilled vacancies in the province of Limburg alone. “We’re facing the biggest labour shortage in fifty years”, she says. To help tackle the problem, Habibović believes we must revise our concept of workforce talent. Employers still tend to have preconceived

notions about what the “ideal job candidate” looks like. But, she asks, “Are factors such as gender, age, accent and ethnicity actually relevant to the job? Or are they just cultural defaults that we should never have cared about in the first place?” Even apart from human considerations, “market pragmatism” demands it. “There are more vacancies than ‘ideal’ candidates”, she points out. “If we don’t question our ideas around talent, we will have an economic downturn. We will be poorer in every sense of the word.”

The rector also argues for maintaining an international perspective, without explicitly mentioning the national political debate on the internationalisation of Dutch higher education. “Impeding the free movement of talent here hurts the talent, but it also hurts our region.” And while it’s understandable that countries would prefer to retain their own young talent, “it’s less understandable why we would want to refuse that talent”.

Peter Doorackers



Dissertation Prize for Sven Hildebrand

Faster, more comprehensive and more precise

How many cells are in the human brain? Does the structure of blood vessels vary between brain regions? A novel imaging technique allows the brain to be mapped in much greater detail than ever before. Neuroscientist Sven Hildebrand’s dissertation on the subject earned him the UM Dissertation Prize during the annual Dies Natalis celebration.

Sven Hildebrand can’t quite explain why, but images of the human brain have a strong aesthetic appeal to him. He can spend hours staring at cross sections of the brain. He recently gifted his brother a framed microscope photograph of a brain region, which is now displayed on his brother’s living room wall. “I might follow his example. I have some brain pictures on my desk, but not above the TV yet.”

Hildebrand (33) was born in Zeitz near Leipzig, Germany. Last week, he received the 2023 Dissertation Prize for his PhD research on a novel imaging technique known as optical tissue clearing. This technique allows scientists to render tissues and organs transparent using a chemical approach, enabling them to be viewed in 3D through a specialised microscope.

More complete image

While it all sounds – and is – very high-tech, the concept was invented more than a century ago.

Around 1900, the German anatomist Werner Spalteholz already conducted experiments with rendering veins in the human hand transparent. “His approach was simple but aggressive, resulting in significant tissue

damage”, says Hildebrand. “In 2007, the University of Vienna breathed new life into tissue clearing by using a specialised light-sheet microscope. In 2013, the technique made the cover of the scientific journal *Nature*, sparking international interest.”

Scientists traditionally visualise organs and other tissues by cutting them into very thin 2D slices, which are then used to create a 3D reconstruction. A German research team managed to map the entire brain this way in 2013, but it took years. “With this new technique, it should theoretically take a matter of months. And rather than an entire research institute, it should take just a handful of researchers.”

The technique can also provide a more comprehensive view of the tissue. “If you can only examine a few slices, you run the risk of overlooking something.”

Neocortex

Hildebrand used optical tissue clearing to map the brain more accurately than ever before. “Cells and blood vessels are organised differently in each brain region. This technique shows the boundaries between some of those regions very clearly. It allows you to create a more reliable map of the brain. And knowing where you are is as important to a neuroscientist as it is to a hiker.” Much of Hildebrand’s research focuses on the structure of the neocortex. “Simply put, the neocortex is the brain region just below the skull. We use it for thinking, but also for self-control, planning, and so on. There’s still a lot we don’t know about the structure of the neocortex.”

A matter of counting

Hildebrand hopes that the novel technique will also bring us closer to answering some fundamental questions, such as how many cells are in the human brain. “People throw around numbers like 80 or 100 billion, but these are estimates based on traditional 2D data. Optical tissue clearing allows you to visualise the entire brain and determine the exact number. It’s a matter of counting.”



Rector Pamela Habibović and Sven Hildebrand Photos: Joey Roberts

Maurice Timmermans

Prizes Dies

The Dissertation Prize “for an excellent thesis” is awarded annually during the Foundation Day celebrations. The winner receives an amount of money, € 3,500 and a work of art. Furthermore the Bachelor’s and Master’s theses awards were presented last Friday.

The Wynand Wijnen Education Prize went to the Teenz College, an English-language programme for talented high school students, led by prof. Bert Smeets. Observant will be joining one of the meetings soon.

news

Why do wrongful convictions occur?

New database wants to raise awareness about judicial errors in Europe

What are the reasons for wrongful convictions and how could they be prevented? Researchers are hoping to gain more insight into that with the arrival of a new database: EUREX. The aim is to collect information on judicial errors in Europe.

Such a database has existed in the United States for years, says Associate Professor of Legal Psychology at UCM Jenny Schell-Leugers, one of the initiators of the *European Registry of Exonerations* (EUREX). When she and co-founders Linda Geven (Leiden University) and Teresa Schneider (Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Art and Philipps-Universität Marburg) were still students, they wondered why the same didn't apply to Europe. "This means that you can only base yourself on American figures. In court, the counter-argument is often that this says nothing about the situation here. There is also the unjustified idea that judicial errors hardly ever occur in Europe, that it is an American problem."

The three got to work on EUREX two years ago. "The toughest part was setting up a definition of which cases to include," says Schell-Leugers. "We decided to only include cases where someone was convicted of a crime by final judgment - that is to say, they exhausted all means of appeal that are available to someone in that country - and is officially cleared in a post-conviction re-examination. By that we mean they are released after the case was reopened when new evidence - for instance DNA - came to light."

The three researchers, as legal psychologists, do not have legal backgrounds. "But many of the underlying factors in the case of judicial errors, such as false confessions - into which we have all three done research - are within our field. To collect cases for our database,



Illustration: Shutterstock

we called upon the help of experts and a legal research assistant."

At the moment, EUREX contains 115 cases from seventeen European countries. Fourteen cases are Dutch, including the Petten murder case in which a report by UM forensic psychologist Melanie Sauerland contributed to the exoneration of the convicted person. "So far, we have only looked at countries of which one of us spoke the language," says Schell-Leugers. "We are appealing to people to send

us cases that are not yet in the database, so that we can continue to expand."

The researchers are hoping that the database will raise awareness about wrongful convictions and plan to conduct research into the factors that play a role in these judicial errors. The current data, for example, shows that in 30 percent of the cases a false confession was given.

"In the United States, research has led to it being against the law to lie to an underage suspect during a police interrogation," says Schell-

Leugers. "This is prohibited here anyway, but because we do not have sufficient evidence of how and where things go wrong here, we also don't know how to better train our lawyers and police officers.

Lastly, they hope that it becomes easier to reopen cases in the future. "That is something we heard from experts from all countries: the threshold is extremely high."

Cleo Freriks



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Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

01-02, 10.00 h Lieve van Brakel
01-02, 16.00 h Tim A.M. van Loon
02-02, 10.00 h Renée J.H.A. Tillie
02-02, 13.00 h Claudia A.J. van der Heijden
02-02, 16.30 h Dr. A Iamnitshi
inauguratie
05-02, 13.00 h Alexander Trofimov
05-02, 16.00 h María del Carmen
Torrejón Guirado,
Double Degree Maastricht
University and University
of Seville
06-02, 16.00 h Daniela Fuchs
07-02, 13.00 h Jiska Jonas-van Dijk
07-02, 16.00 h María Antonieta Collazos Ortiz
08-02, 10.00 h Anita Bhandari
08-02, 16.00 h Janine Ziemons
19-02, 13.00 h Martine Else Bol
20-02, 10.00 h Mirella J.J. Haartmans

21-02, 13.00 h Shivesh Anand
22-02, 13.00 h Job Stoks
Double Doctoral Degree
Maastricht University
and University of Hasselt
22-02, 16.00 h Katinka E. Pani-Harreman
23-02, 10.00 h Ilaria Amodeo
23-02, 13.00 h Maurice J.L. Huizing
23-02, 16.00 h Prof. dr. Bela Kubat
Afscheidscollege
26-02, 16.00 h Esther Karen Pijl
27-02, 16.00 h Elisabeth Jorinde Marie
De Neubourg
28-02, 13.00 h Xingzhen Zhang
29-02, 13.00 h Marie Rickert
Double degree Maastricht
University and University
of Münster
29-02, 16.00 h Anouk Rijken

colofon

Redactie Riki Janssen (hoofdredacteur), Wendy Degens, Peter Doorackers, Cleo Freriks, Marion Janssens (redactie-assistent), Lotte van de Loo, Maurice Timmermans, Dennis Vaendel, Simon Wirtz **Telefoon** 043 3885390 **E-mail** observant@maastrichtuniversity.nl **Website** www.observantonline.nl **Aan dit nummer werkten mee** Wammes Bos, Line-Marie Eichhorst, Wim Groot, Yoav Bar Ness **Ontwerp en illustraties** Simone Golob **Vertalingen** o.a. B. Wall & P. Nekeman, Maud Bovelander **Druk** Janssen/Pers Gennep **Abonnementen** Observant wordt gratis verspreid op de universiteit en diverse locaties in Maastricht, belangstellenden kunnen de krant thuisgestuurd krijgen voor € 45 per academisch jaar **Paartjes / advertenties** Zie alle info onder het kopje 'service' op onze site.



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