

# observant

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# UNDERFUNDED

Illustration:  
Simone Golob



## Sports only for the rich?

Rising costs and capacity problems at UM Sports taunt student sports associations

P6

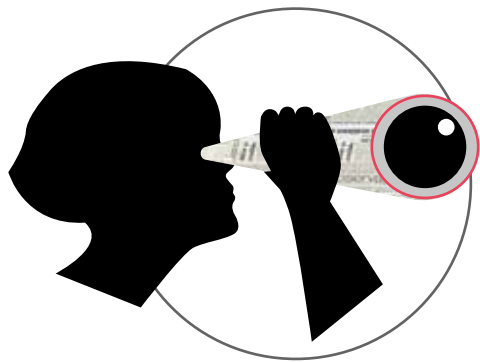
## P5 Budget cuts

With the money UM received from the sector plans, many new people were hired. What will it mean if this money supply partly dries up?

## P3 OPEN LETTER

Staff members ask Executive Board to include their considerations in developing guidelines for collaborations in conflict zones





Riki Janssen

Lately, I've repeatedly been asked the same question: can *Observant* still do its work independently? Are we under pressure from university administrators or other parties trying to stop us from reporting on certain topics? Well, there's always pressure, whether from students keeping the media at arm's length while simultaneously complaining about a lack of media coverage or from people insisting their opinion piece be published in *Observant*. If we don't do what they want, they tend to question whether we are as independent as we claim to be.

But at UM, we don't face the same issues as our counterparts at Eindhoven University of Technology and Delft University of Technology. The executive boards of those universities intimidated journalists from *Cursor* and *Delta*, respectively, in attempts to block publication of unfavourable articles. They likely didn't realise how spectacularly this would back-

fire on them – it got them a lot of media attention. Here in Maastricht, we are free to do our work independently. I'm not saying the executive board likes everything we publish, but as an independent media outlet, we have little or nothing to fear from them. It's as former journalist Fons Elbersen, who will be leaving his role as Director of Marketing & Communication at UM this month, once said: "If you didn't already exist, you would have to be invented." This sentiment was recently echoed in the Dutch House of Representatives by none less than the Minister of Education, who said, "Independent journalism and freedom of the press are a great thing, particularly in academia." And: "I think it's a very positive aspect of our academic culture that we have independent university media outlets."

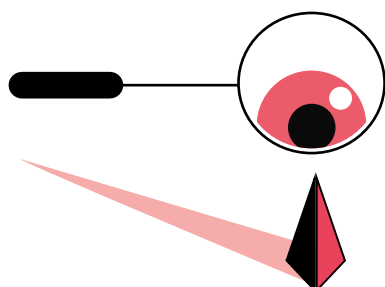
By now, the Eindhoven executive board has been officially reprimanded. While they weren't found to have engaged

in systematic censorship, they did interfere with publications. Moreover, they put the since-fired editor-in-chief in a psychologically unsafe work environment and turned him into "a lame duck". The university has promised to do better. New editorial statutes will be drawn up (it would be wise to remove the part where it says that *Cursor* must consider the "interests" of Eindhoven University of Technology) and the university's executive board has been told to "maintain a professional distance from journalistic work" and be less quick to fly off the handle when *Cursor* reports on a matter they would've preferred to keep under wraps. I've said it before – maybe the Eindhoven administrators should turn to their counterparts in Maastricht for advice.

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

editorial

## "If you didn't already exist, you would have to be invented"



## 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, Dennis Vaendel and Simon Wirtz

### Playing in the University Library

Colouring in a picture, making a puzzle or playing a game of scrabble? No, we are not talking about a crèche, but the University Library in Tilburg. Last week, a proper 'playing room' was set up. During the exam period, it will be open every afternoon from 13:00 until 17:00 hrs. "We want to offer students an area where they can relax for a bit," says Daniëlle Kiens, team leader of the library, to sister newspaper *Univiers*. Also, because students already exceed their 'screen time' outside the relaxation room, laptops are not allowed inside.

Only offline relaxation, but apparently it is still not enough. The list of ideas is quite full: *UNO*, *Cards against Humanity*. And maybe passers-by will soon hear a rather unusual instruction coming from the room: "Left hand on yellow!" Because there is also a need for physical exercise, for example in the form of Twister.

There are no games or puzzles in the Maastricht inner city University Library's 'well-being room'. Also, the MindfulNest, a soundproof cabin for meditation, has been removed to make space for "new, innovative ways for mindfulness", says project leader of Innovative Learning Spaces, Meike Kerkhofs-Welkenhuizen. However, good news for those who love to colour: there are colouring pictures.

### VrijtWastehof

Less plastic waste on the streets during carnival. That was the objective of a new system that the city of Maastricht tested at the latest edition. Participants had to pay 50 cents for a disposable plastic cup, but did not need to pay this extra amount if they handed in the used cup at the bar. This is where the plastic refuse was collected in bags, which catering companies could leave behind at fixed collection points (including a few large containers) in the city – ready to be recycled.

But it wasn't as simple as that, as appeared from a recently published evaluation. Although many carnival revellers returned their cups, some caterers simply did not adhere to the agreements. Of the eight thousand waste bags distributed beforehand, only a hundred were eventually collected. One of the containers, on the Oeverwal, was not even accessible – the fences were positioned too close to it. To make matters worse, of the 520 kilo plastic that was collected, zero kilograms was recycled – labelled cups were mixed in, as a result of which the waste disposal company rejected the whole lot.

A complete disaster? Yes. Nevertheless, the city authorities also see a ray of hope: "The attention paid to the problem created understanding among the carnival celebrants." However, the system will be binned: the city council carried a motion, last week, to prohibit the use of disposable cups during large, free events and to replace it with a system of deposit cups made from hard plastic, from next year.



### Considerable drop

Things change, even when it comes to student housing. In 2019, Maastricht was awarded the title of 'best student accommodation city in the Netherlands' by the National Student Union (LSVb); now, the city is dangling in the lower regions of this annual ranking for "most affordable, accessible and sufficient housing". The union draws up this ranking by allocating points for criteria such as rent price, policies and supply of information. In the 2023 ranking, which LSVb published last week, Maastricht – together with Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag and Eindhoven – is one of the five lowest scoring cities. The jury report refers, among other things, to the high pressure on the Maastricht housing market. The average 'housing expense' here is the highest in the entire country: Maastricht students spend an average of 55 per cent of their disposable budget on rent. According to LSVb, this is mainly because of the large number of international students, who generally have less to spend. The average rent price (weighted for rooms, studios and apartments) is 545 euro per month, slightly above the national average. Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague rank high above this, at roughly 615 euro, while students are cheapest off in Wageningen (428 euro) and Enschede (466 euro). But there is also some good news for Maastricht: rent prices rose by 16.50 euro, the smallest increase in all university cities.

# In an open letter, UM scientists argue for “more drastic measures” “Suspend ties with Israeli institutes involved in genocide”



Students during the recent protest at FASoS Photo: Observant



## Bowling Together

“

In 2019, I lived in a community house for a year. Right after high school, I moved from living with my parents and brother in a small town in Germany to living with four men in Cleveland, Ohio, who were in their twenties, thirties, fifties, and seventies. And then, of course, there was the broader community—people from all around the city and neighborhood who would gather in our kitchen for dinner and meetings, bringing food, talking, and washing up the dishes afterwards. It was not only a shelter for the vulnerable, but also a meeting place.

During that year, I met and connected with more people than I ever had in my hometown, especially from different backgrounds and across all age groups. Every evening, I suddenly had two little sitters who lived just down the street, pulling on my sleeve to hurry up with eating and come to play outside. I had neighbors, a couple in their sixties, who took me hiking, to the opera, and sent me medicine and fresh oranges when I was sick. When someone in the community went through tough times, they knew there was a whole table full of people who looked out for them, sending support, thoughts, and prayers.

At home, I hated when my mom told me to set the table or do the dishes. But all of a sudden, I understood that these chores were part of living together, and I was glad to do them. Doing the dishes after a shared meal, we would talk about the latest city council meeting, what was on TV, or what was going on in each other's lives.

I always knew that what I experienced that year was truly special. But I thought about it more deeply when one of my professors mentioned the book *Bowling Alone*, which explores the decline of communal life in American society—something happening everywhere in the West. It made me think how isolated we live from the people around us. Sure, in Maastricht I have my friends, but they are all my age and from very similar backgrounds. In Germany, I have most of my family, but I couldn't tell you the name of anyone else on the street I grew up on.

This summer, I came back to Cleveland and was instantly reminded of how much I had missed this way of living together and truly sharing each other's lives. I think this craving for community is the most important lesson I have learned so far.

”

Line-Marie Eichhorst is a student at the University College Maastricht

Read the open letter on:  
[www.observantonline.nl](http://www.observantonline.nl)



Maastricht University must “immediately” suspend its ties with Israeli institutes and businesses “that are involved in genocide” in the Palestinian areas. A hundred and twenty-one Maastricht scientists have expressed their views in an open letter to the Executive Board.

For them it is “beyond doubt” that the Israeli army is violating human rights in Rafah, which should be “reason enough” for the university to take “more drastic measures”. The Board announced at the end of May that they would ‘freeze’ existing administrative ties with Israeli institutes, but collaborations between individual scientists would be left intact. Furthermore, no new partnerships would be entered into. According to the signatories – the largest group is from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences – this “is not in line with the proportions of this humanitarian crisis”.

They feel that the announced *Human Rights Due Diligence tool*, which UM intends use to determine whether partners in the conflict areas have clean hands or not, “is a step in the right direction” but do have questions about it: will existing collaborations be screened or just new ones? Will the results of such an assessment be binding? Also, will they determine

beforehand whether such a collaboration can stand the test of criticism or only afterwards, when human rights have already been violated? They fear that the instrument will become a paper tiger, a sop to silence critical voices, as “is often the case”. They would also like, in addition to staff members, that experts by experience are given a say, such as the students “who fought so hard to bring this issue to your attention” – i.e., who participated in the various pro-Palestinian demonstrations that took place this academic year in Maastricht as well.

The writers of the open letter are also hoping for an “active dialogue” within UM. This should be about “our role and responsibilities as a higher education institution” and should provide space for the voices of people “who are personally affected by the conflict at hand”.

Peter Doorackers

## Eindhoven board reprimanded: wrongdoing involving Cursor

The editor-in-chief was ‘a deer caught in the headlights’ and the Executive Board allowed problems in the area of social safety to go on for two years: ‘wrongdoing’ involving university magazine *Cursor* has indeed been found at Eindhoven University of Technology.

This is the outcome of an investigation following a conflict on censorship. This conflict led to a host of news items, columns,

actions and political indignation.

The previous editor-in-chief, Han Konings, was put under pressure while carrying out his work and ultimately relieved of his duties by the Executive Board. The editorial staff blacked out the website in protest and one of the editors filed a whistleblower complaint. The Eindhoven university's committee for reporting ‘irregularities’ has completed its investigation into the way things were handled and its report is now public. There was no ‘systematic censorship’, it says, because hundreds and hundreds of articles were published and there was only occasional interference. But there was interference.

What's more, the board still stands by its actions. The editors and former editor-in-chief are claimed to have wrongly assumed

they were entirely independent in publishing their articles in *Cursor*, while their editorial statute dictates they also “keep in mind the mission, objectives and interests of the university”.

What's next? The committee advises giving *Cursor* more independence. “In so doing, the Executive Board keeps a professional distance to the journalistic work, by creating the right preconditions and by providing and leaving professional room for high-quality journalism.”

Furthermore, the board shouldn't be so quick to lose its cool. Or, as the committee puts it: it must show “sensible compassion in case things aren't going so well in any point in the future”.

HOP

series students about their future

# “Stepping onto the winners’ podium is addictive”

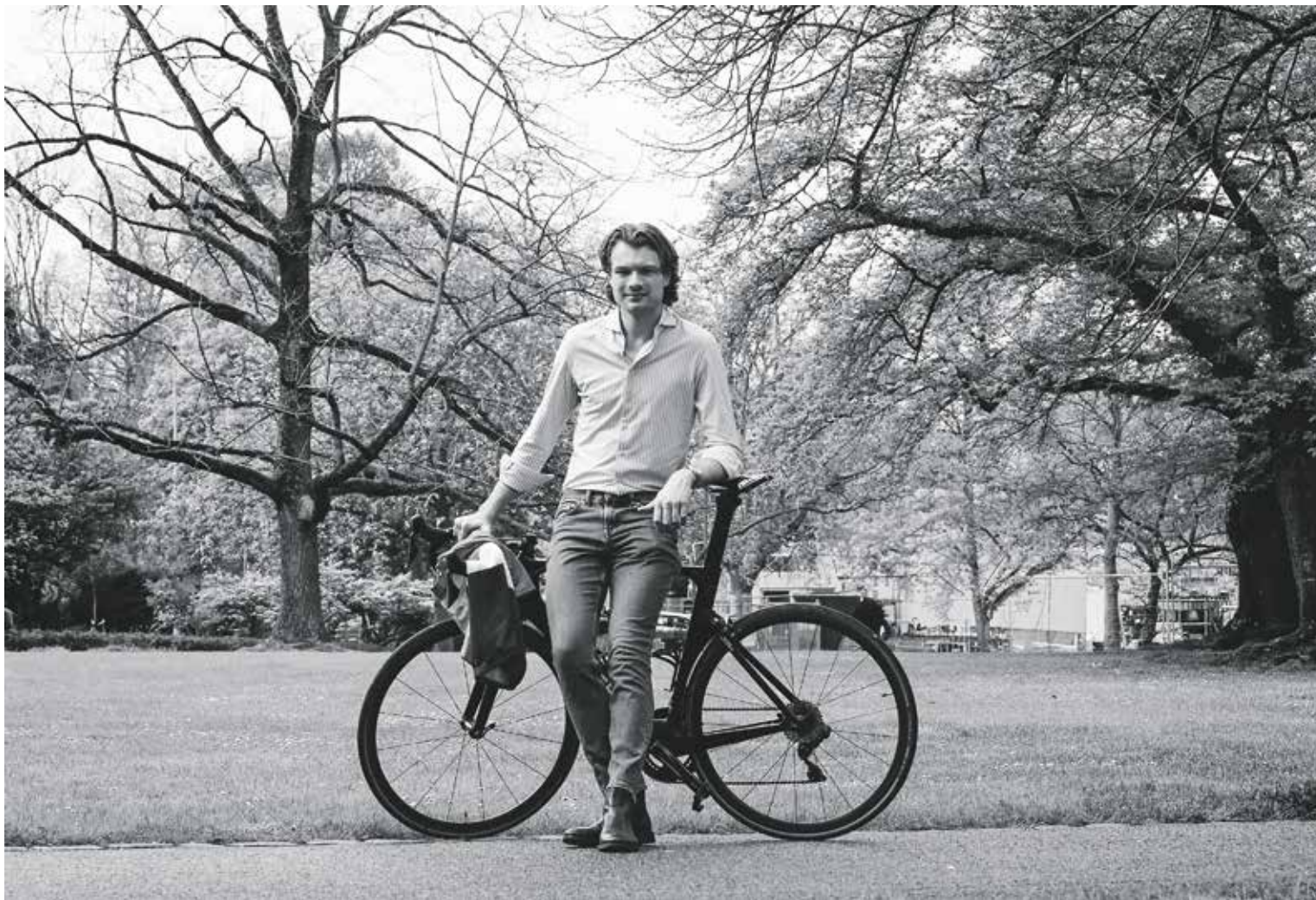


Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

For years, Bas Ottevanger (25) had one major goal – participating in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games this summer. Then, a crash ended his cycling career. He went from elite athlete to student. “But I haven’t lost my competitive spirit. I want to make the most of my time at university.”

You can’t miss it, the framed red, white and blue jersey on the wall of his studio flat. It proves his status as a former Dutch cycling champion. “Having it up on the wall feels like a form of self-punishment sometimes”, laughs Ottevanger. “I should be training for Paris right now. Not a day goes by that it doesn’t cross my mind.”

Ottevanger’s list of results shows that being an Olympian wasn’t just a pipe dream for him. He’s a ten-time Dutch National Track Championships medalist, finished third in a European Championship, broke the national record in the individual pursuit, and claimed sixteen road racing victories – and these are just a few of his achievements as a youth and junior rider. “I started cycling around the age of eleven and was already winning serious races a few years

later. At fifteen, I moved to Papendal, the Dutch centre for elite sports and education. My goal of qualifying for the Olympics was realistic. I was among the best track cyclists, alongside guys who are playing in the big leagues now, like [six-time Tour de France stage winner] Jasper Philipsen and [2021 Olympic silver medallist] Ethan Hayter.”

## Crash

An unfortunate crash during a race in 2018 put an end to his dreams. Ottevanger broke his nose and contracted an infection during the operation. “I developed painful back inflammation, which made riding my bike difficult. My team terminated my contract. When I was finally ready to compete again in 2020, races were cancelled due to Covid. I thought I would never get back to

my former level and decided to cut my losses.”

His decision was also motivated by his disillusionment with the world of elite sport. “It’s a precarious existence. When they keep telling you ‘You’ll get there’ and mentioning you in the same breath as big talents, you start believing in yourself. But if the results don’t come, they discard you like a piece of rubbish. I felt used. In retrospect, I can put it into perspective – as an elite athlete, you’re a product. There are dozens like you out there.”

## Motivation

Ottevanger initially struggled to switch gears, he says. “I couldn’t watch cycling races anymore. I just kept thinking, ‘That could’ve been me.’” But his bitterness has since subsided. “I enjoy watching cycling

on TV again and I love going for a ride myself in the Dutch Hills, albeit ten kilometres per hour slower than before.” The framed jersey on his wall no longer just feels like self-punishment. “It also motivates me when I’m struggling. It’s a reminder of what I’ve achieved.” His shift in mindset was sparked by a fresh challenge. “I was determined to find something else I was good at.” He embarked on a new chapter in life – university. In 2020, Ottevanger started studying Health Sciences, specialising in policy and management. “It’s what I was interested in. As a cyclist, you’re very focused on health, and I spent a lot of time in hospital because of the infection.”

## Own company

He still has his competitive spirit, although it doesn’t necessarily manifest in wanting to get good grades, explains Ottevanger. “I mainly want to make the most of my time at university and gain a lot of work experience, to later become the best at what I do.” He has represented the student party DOPE on the University Council and is an active member of the independent fraternity Lucifer. “When I organise an event, it has to be better than previous editions.” Ottevanger also has two businesses. He supplies wine to companies and consumers and, earlier this year, started BLITZ Drinks to produce alcoholic beverages (“similar to Aperol Spritz”) with two fellow students. They’ve already released two different drinks. Is that where his ambitions now lie? “It’s more like a hobby that gets me valuable work experience.”

The experience will come in handy, as his dream is to run his own healthcare business. “I’m not sure exactly what yet. Maybe in the pharmaceutical industry or in healthcare services, like a GP practice. I want to make an impact. I see it as a moral duty to use your talents to help society.” He has a long-term goal along the same vein: “I want to get into national politics later in life, for the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). I’m already a member of their youth wing, JOVD.” In both careers, he’ll be in the spotlight. “Maybe that’s part of it, because of my past”, admits Ottevanger. “I like to be seen. Stepping onto the winners’ podium is addictive.”

At the same time, he knows all too well that the future is unpredictable. “You never know how things will turn out – I found that out the hard way. As long as I can ride my bike and drink my wine, I’m happy enough.”

Dennis Vaendel

*This is the last installment in this bimonthly series in which Observant interviews students about their plans for the future – their hopes, fears and uncertainties.*

Cuts in the sector plans, what does that mean for Maastricht?

## "Can a new cabinet simply obliterate an agreement like that? Is that legally admissible?"



Illustration: Shutterstock

All Maastricht University faculties participate in the so-called sector plans and by doing so receive extra research money from the government. Most of that has been invested in personnel, in an attempt to alleviate the workload. Research groups were expanded, collaborative frameworks with other universities have been set up. But now there is an outline agreement for the upcoming cabinet and that is not looking good. What can UM expect?

*"I can't fathom that such resolute cuts are being made"*

A financial analysis of the outline agreement by the four intended coalition parties PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB shows that the sector plans will be "rationalised" (i.e. cut down) for an amount of 200 million euros annually. Not immediately, but from 2026 onwards. The plans cover a very broad range of research themes: from the human factor in new technologies, psychological disorders, sustainable food systems to globalisation.

What will the consequences be? Will the people who were appointed by UM on the basis of the sector plan lose their jobs? How much will be left to invest? For many deans from the Maastricht faculties it is a case of

reading tea-leaves. The outline agreement does not excel in clarity. But there are concerns and indignation too. "I can't fathom that such resolute cuts are being made," replies dean Annemie Schols from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML).

### Manpower

Millions have been invested by universities (so also by Maastricht) in manpower – academic and support staff have been appointed, temporary contracts have been converted into permanent contracts and assistant profes-

sors have been promoted to associate professors. The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS), for example, has thirteen

new assistant professors. FHML reports of a growth of 40 FTE in the budget of 2023 – vacancies have been filled to a large extent by researchers who were already working there on temporary contracts.

### Law

The legal sector – part of the social sciences and humanities – were the first in the Netherlands to initiate sector plans in 2019.

At the Maastricht Faculty of Law, a Law & Tech Lab was set up, as well as a research group around the topic of globalisation. The amount that the law faculty may count on annually in the framework of this sector plan is about six hundred thousand euro. And although the period will come to an end this year, universities always worked on the basis that the investment was structural. Dean Jan Smits: "In case of a positive evaluation, the sector plan funds would be included in the regular budget." As this will happen before 2026 for the Faculty of Law, Smits is hoping that his faculty will not be hit by the cuts. But that doesn't mean that he is not worried. "In the time to come, we will all lobby hard for the preservation of all sector plans." Adding: "Those plans are based on administrative agreements between the Ministry of Education and the educational institutes. Can a new cabinet simply obliterate an agreement like that? Is that legally admissible? That is an interesting matter too."

### Effort

Smits' message is shared by FASoS dean Christine Neuhold: "We will have to make a joint effort to keep the funds structural, as planned." Scientists at her faculty are working on 'Forward Together', a combination of sector plans within the social sciences and humanities which started in 2022. FASoS is already working with various themes. Two examples: 'The human factor in new technologies' and 'Social inequality and diversity'. The Faculty of Psychology and Neurosciences (FPN) is also participating in the latter theme. In addition, great investments are being made into research into psychological disorders, such as anxiety disorders, depression, PTSS with a focus on microdosing. The School of Business and Economics and the Faculty of Law have a (modest) share in the broad theme of 'Education, citizenship and democracy'.

### Optimistic

How worried is the science section? "The outline agreement certainly contains things that are going to hurt us, but we will have to wait on the effect." Dean Thomas Cleij from the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) feels that it is therefore "too soon to have any opinion about it". His faculty participates in the Science sector plan, with a focus on information science, biology (the largest part) and earth and environmental sciences (which relates to the developments in Venlo in the field of sustainable food systems and planetary health). So, what if the coalition agreement turns out to be negative after all? "I am optimistic that there will also be new policies that will be advantageous for the science sector. So, we are paying close attention, making alternative plans, but are certainly not panicking."

### Drain

For FSE, this concerns amounts of roughly 1.4 million euro per year. That is less than, for example, for Psychology (about 1.8 million), FASoS (2.3 million euro), and FHML together with the hospital (5 million). For the latter, the cuts would constitute a huge drain. "It will hit us hard," says FHML dean Annemie Schols. Initiatives have been taken within the framework of 'Acceleration on Health' in Maastricht, which she feels "fit in seamlessly with the strategic objectives of MUMC+". Investments are being made in three themes: prevention, data-driven innovation, and 'from basic research to clinic and practice'. Schols takes a firm stand: "We are determined to guarantee continuity, even if funding from the sector plan is withheld." Where the money will then come from, is not clear yet.

Wendy Degens, in co-operation with Peter Doorackers, Dennis Vaendel and Cleo Freriks

## “IS PRACTISING SPORTS SOON ONLY GOING TO BE FOR WEALTHY STUDENTS?”

# WAITING LISTS AND RISING CONTRIBUTIONS: STUDENT SPORTS ASSOCIATIONS ARE SOUNDING THE ALARM

Will sports continue to be accessible for students? Maastricht student associations are concerned: rising costs and capacity problems at UM Sports lead to higher contributions for members, waiting lists and shorter lessons. They have asked the university to take action.

**Text:** Dennis Vaendel and Peter Doorakkers **Photo:** Joey Roberts

“**E**veryone should be able to practise sports, but there is a threat that in the future this will only be accessible for rich students,” says Alexandru Donea, chairperson of sports council MUSST (the umbrella organisation for all Maastricht student sports associations), at the end of his fiery plea during the speakers round of the University Council’s meeting last month. His message was that more and more associations are experiencing financial difficulties. “For the past ten years, we have received the same amount from the university, but in the meantime we have had to deal with rising costs due to inflation. This means that our associations receive relatively less and less money.” Moreover, as the number of students playing sports has increased, associations have to make do with a smaller amount per member. Board members of student rowing association Saurus illustrated – also during the speakers round – their situation with the purchase of a new boat: “In 2018, this cost 31 thousand euro, now we pay almost 44 thousand euro. A 40 per cent increase, while the budget from UM has not risen.” This year, the association had a deficit of 50 thousand euro, roughly a tenth of the total budget. “We have raised the members’ contributions and the prices of drinks in our bar to help compensate for the shortages. We cannot keep doing this, because it makes a membership increasingly unappealing and too expensive for students.”

### Waiting lists

There are a lot more examples like this, Donea explains to *Observant* afterwards by telephone. “It is not just becoming more expensive for members, but it is often also at the expense of the sport itself. Associations, for example, buy less new materials, or buy cheaper but poorer quality items. And they participate in fewer competitions, sign up fewer teams for a competition, or can hire fields less often or not as long as they would like.” Those limitations not only result in existing members exercising less often, but also that sometimes fewer new members are admitted, says Donea. About one third of the 31 associations represented by MUSST have a waiting list, he esti-



*Student sports associations, like Ultimaas, more and more often have a waitinglist*

mates. Jorg de Vette, head of UM Sports, confirms the existence of waiting lists, but doesn’t know exactly how many students this concerns. “Someone who is rejected, may take up a sport elsewhere. But with regard to the first choice: I think two to three hundred students may not be doing what they really want.”

### Overcrowded halls

For the associations that practise sports in the UM Sports halls, there is another problem: a lack of space due to the increasing number of students and employees with a membership. “The capacity problem is nothing new, but it is worsening,” says De Vette. “Take the gym, for example. It used to be that for a couple of days a week from five to eight in the evening it was busy, now every day between 14:00 and 22:00 hrs we are always full. The associations also face problems: the dancing association has to cope with overcrowded lessons, the badminton association has less playing time per person, the volleyball association has a waiting list...”

### Extra money

What needs to be done? MUSST chairperson Donea is very clear about that: the budget that the sports council receives from UM – and subsequently divides over its associations – “must be adapted to the inflation of

the past five to ten years,” he states. “And maybe more needs to be added. If nothing happens, some associations – which are now coping with shortages – may no longer exist in a few years’ time. It really is an alarming situation, which has been going on for years.”

Whether there will be extra money, is still unclear. That is a matter for the university budget for next year, which will be discussed in the University Council after the summer, said chairman Teun Dekker after the speeches during the speakers round. The Executive Board made no promises, although rector Pamela Habibović said: “We have heard your request.” And the capacity problem at UM Sports? Something can definitely be done about that, De Vette thinks. “If it was up to me and I had a bag load of money, UM Sports would have a second sports hall.” More seriously: “We are negotiating with the city authorities. The sports hall in the Heeg area (bordering on Randwyck, ed.) is going to be demolished and will be replaced by one or two new halls. We are currently awaiting the outcome of an internal survey by the city. We have clearly indicated: should there be two halls, could one be here in Randwyck?” And what if that doesn’t happen? “Then there won’t be much extra capacity. We did look into whether we could rent a space elsewhere, but the peak hours for our teams are also the peak hours for civilian sports associations. Maastricht has reached its limits.”

## THREE ALUMNI ON HOW THEIR INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES HAVE SHAPED THEIR LIVES

**“IT’S SO ENRICHING TO WORK WITH PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES, I WOULDN’T HAVE IT ANY OTHER WAY”**



Students who studied or did traineeships abroad through the Erasmus+ programme continue to benefit from their international experiences for years to come, according to research by Nuffic, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation of education. Does this hold true for our own graduates as well? *Observant* interviewed three UM alumni to find out.

**Text:** Lotte van de Loo **Illustration:** Simone Golob

**F**or the past 8 years, Miriam van Ingen-Pinckaers (39), née Pinckaers, has been living and working in Switzerland with her husband and four-year-old son. She is a senior organisational change manager at Roche, an international pharmaceutical company. “My work is all about cultural differences. To implement a change, you must understand the behaviour and underlying beliefs of others. For example, we used to sell only diagnostic products, but we’ll be introducing digital products. I’m in charge of managing this internal change.”

Cultural differences were extensively covered in her International Business (IB) programme, but it was during her exchange to Budapest in 2006 that Van Ingen-Pinckaers – who is from a village called Gulpen in Limburg – truly learnt what they meant. “In Hungary, people live to work. In the Netherlands, it’s the other way around.” Today, she has colleagues from Budapest. “We immediately connected, talking about

their hometown.” And she doesn’t just have colleagues from Hungary; Van Ingen-Pinckaers works with people all over the world, starting her workdays in calls with colleagues in Asia and ending them in calls with the United States and Latin America. “I’m reminded of [the late UM professor] Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions every day. He developed a model describing global cross-cultural differences. The Dutch are individualistic, whereas Asian cultures are collectivist. When they throw a party, they don’t single out one person – it’s a team effort. With Dutch people, you can always tell who the party is for. We know how to claim the spotlight!”

### Chameleon

Fellow IB alum Ties Peters (24) encounters these same cultural differences in his work. He is currently doing an internship at Amazon in Luxembourg. His team consists of five people, each of a different nationality. “Southern Euro-

peans talk a lot about their feelings and prefer more physical contact. The other day, they all sent me “We’ll miss you!” messages when I was off work for a little while because they know it annoys me”, he laughs. He used to find this kind of behaviour “odd”, but he has learnt to “adapt like a chameleon. If they want to talk more about their feelings, I do the same.” Peters hasn’t completely abandoned his Dutch identity in the workplace, though. “The Dutch are direct and less hierarchical. I have no problem approaching someone in a higher position if I have a question, to the surprise of some of my colleagues.”

### Implicit assumptions

During his time at Queen’s University in Canada in 2022, Peters also became more aware of his own “implicit assumptions”, he says. “When Dutch people agree on something, it’s set in stone. That’s not the case for everyone.”

“In Asian cultures, ‘yes’ doesn’t always mean ‘yes’”, remarks Van Ingen-Pinckaers. “Some people don’t know this, which can cause delays. Sometimes I use my network [e.g. a European colleague who works in Asia] to find out if a ‘yes’ was really a ‘yes’. Achieving goals quickly is crucial for us at Roche – patients are waiting for medication or a diagnosis.”

### Positive work environment

While studying at a university of applied sciences, Pepijn Saraber (25) from Maastricht completed several internships abroad. “I built up a good CV. My experience working in a research lab in Vancouver led to a similar position in Leuven, which paved the way to Oxford.” He went there for his research internship as part of his master’s degree in Biomedical Sciences in 2021. At the time, working in a “highly regarded lab” was important to him. “It helped me secure my PhD position at Maastricht University.” But his priorities have since shifted. “A positive work environment is much more important to me now.”

### Personal growth

All three alumni say that the time they spent abroad has contributed to their personal growth. “I’ve become much more independent”, explains Saraber. “I was given a lot of freedom in the labs abroad, more than my fellow students in the Netherlands at the time. I now have the same freedom during my PhD. Many of my colleagues struggle with this and need more guidance. I don’t.” Peters says he matured emotionally. “Before, I never quite realised when I wasn’t in a good place emotionally. Others would notice before I did. I’d dismiss it as ‘just having a bad day’. I’ve learnt to be comfortable getting in touch with my emotions.” He attributes this to his time in Canada. “I was on the other side of the world, with only myself to rely on.” “That’s true”, says Van Ingen-Pinckaers, “but you also make new connections easily. Wherever you go in the world, you’ll always find people you like.”

Have all three of them caught the bug for living and working abroad? Peters says yes, while Saraber is currently content in Maastricht: “I have plenty of international colleagues and attend conferences abroad.” As for Van Ingen-Pinckaers, she’s happy where she is in the Swiss Alps for the foreseeable future. “It’s so enriching to work with people from different cultures. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”