

observant

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NEW ACADEMIC YEAR,
FIRST ISSUE OBSERVANT

SEX, SEX, AND MORE SEX

What if your friends always want to talk about sex, but you don't? Every week, *Observant* puts a pressing question to UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte. **Page 2**

ABUSES

Child trafficking, corruption, falsified documents: international adoption has its dark sides. Elvira Loibl, Maastricht criminologist and assistant professor at the Law faculty, has been researching them for years. She was awarded the Edmond Hustinx Prize during the Opening of the Academic Year.

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SMALL- MINDED- NESS

The tone has been set. In a fierce speech during the opening of the academic year, UM President Rianne Letschert accused politicians in The Hague of 'intellectual laziness', 'small-mindedness' and lack of long-term vision. Be it about internationalisation, or the announced cuts to higher education. **Page 3**

WHO ARE WE?

This is the first newspaper of *Observant*, the independent magazine and website of Maastricht University, of this academic year. Every Thursday you can find a fresh edition with news, columns and background stories at the entrance of your faculty. Every Wednesday we send a newsletter, and every day we post fresh news on observantonline.nl

Happy reading!



editorial

Putin and a first-year student

This year's introduction week for new students slipped by me a bit. Sadly, I missed the Markt opening show, the sports event and the cultural activities, including a visit to the Bonnefanten Museum. My former colleague and I were too busy teaching our summer school course on Journalism and Effective Writing. It was great fun; all the spots were filled this year, and the participants' enthusiasm was heartwarming as always.

Fortunately, the rest of the team was able to go out during the INKOM to write snapshots of the new arrivals, among other things. What struck me was that most first years had either lost or left their mentor group on the very first day. I did the same thing during the introduction week at my alma mater, Radboud University Nijmegen. It was the eighties, and I had no interest in silly icebreakers; I much preferred to head to the pub with my new (now lifelong) friend.

During our Monday morning meeting, we wondered whether this – mentor groups falling apart – was something worth writing about or just something that happens. After a bit of asking around, we found it was the latter. When registering for the INKOM, first-year students are asked about their interests (culture, socialising or sports) and placed with like-minded peers. But first years are only human. Inevitably, some will drift off to hang out with old school friends, new housemates or other people they already know. In short, there's nothing to worry about.

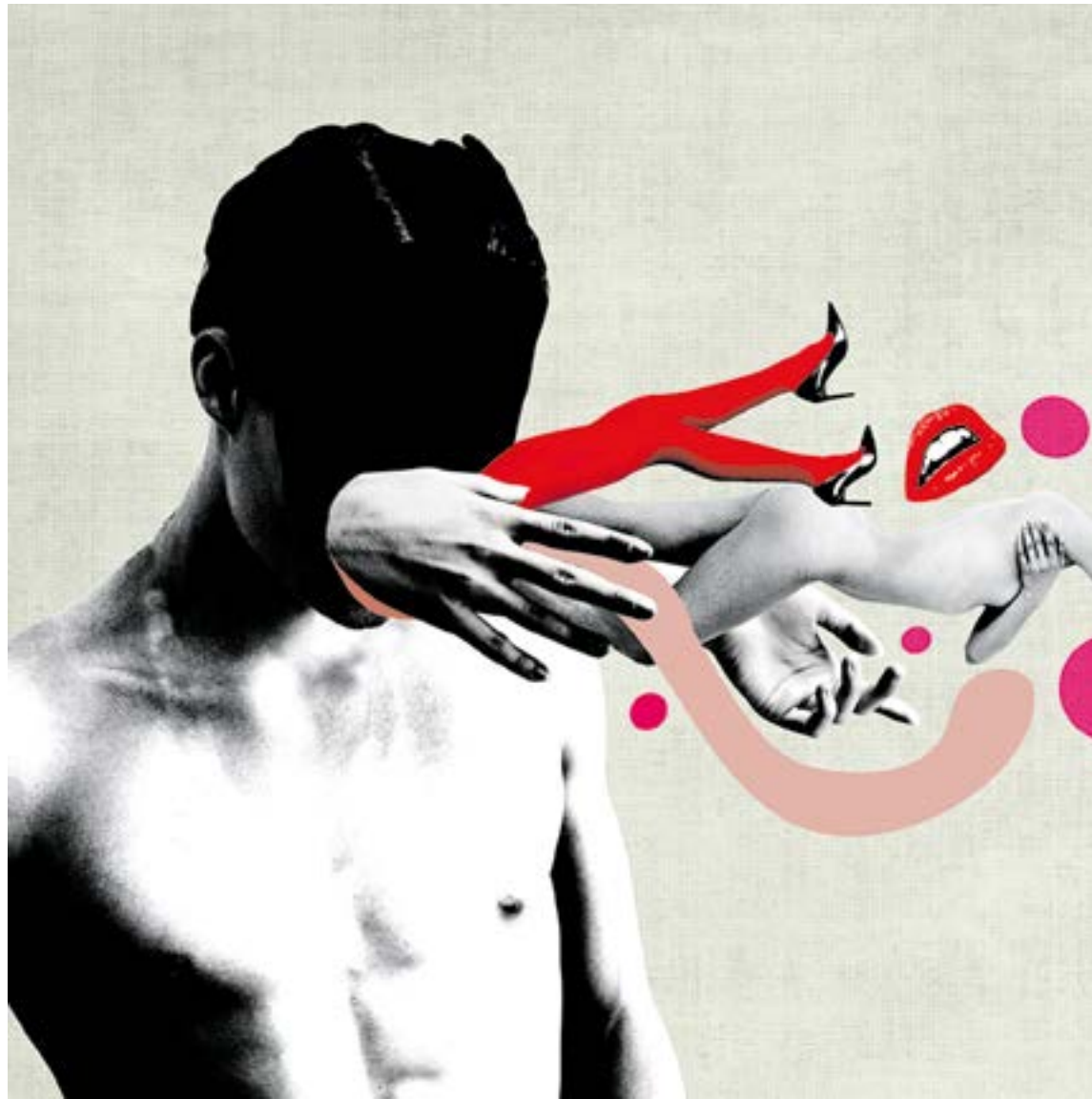
One of the first years we interviewed for our website is from Russia. We didn't ask him any questions about the war in Ukraine (where were you when it broke out? What are your thoughts on the war, on Putin? Are you afraid of being called up for military service? Have you been targeted for being Russian in the Netherlands?), which led to a heated discussion on Monday morning. "We should've asked", one of us insisted. "You can't just ignore the war. You'd ask someone from Ukraine about it. The same goes for people from Israel, Palestine, Sudan – any current conflict areas." But, someone else argued, "we're talking about a brief snapshot of a first-year student: what will you be studying, why did you choose UM, was it easy to find a room... Is it really necessary to confront them with questions about the war and Putin at that moment?" A valid point, most of us agreed. Myself included. But over the course of the discussion, we gradually concluded that we shouldn't leave these matters unaddressed. And what if the interviewee doesn't want to talk about the war? On that, we quickly agreed: you ask them why not and write down the answer.

Riki Janssen

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



series everything you want to know about sex



Collage: Simone Golob

"Talking about sex is vulnerable"

On an evening out with friends, the conversation turns to sex. Before you know it, everyone is swapping stories about the latest adventures. But what if you're sexually inexperienced and not quite sure what to say? Or if you feel uncomfortable hearing about your friends' sex lives? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte explains how to handle the situation.

You can set boundaries with your friends, Dewitte points out. "Consent is just as relevant in this context. It's reasonable to expect your friends, just like your sexual partners, to respect your pace and comfort level." You could just simply change the subject, but Dewitte believes there are advantages to communicating your discomfort directly. "If you pay attention, you'll notice that people tend to stick to generalities in these kinds of conversations. It's pub talk – there's a lot of bragging involved. Talking about sex is vulnerable. By sharing your feelings and insecurities about this topic, you encourage others to drop their masks." She recommends first bringing it up with one friend, "so you feel supported when you tell the rest of the group." And what if your discomfort stems from the fact that you're a virgin, while everyone else seems so experienced? "Waiting until you're ready to have sex is a very powerful choice, actually", says Dewitte. "And you're certainly not the only one. The average age of first sexual intercourse has been steadily increasing for years. Statistically speaking, when you start university, half of your peers haven't had sex yet, so this taboo has to go."

Dewitte is referring to the results of the "Sex Under 25" survey, carried out in the Netherlands every five years by the Rutgers Foundation. In 2012, half of all 17-year-old respondents answered yes when asked if they'd ever had sex; in 2017, most had just turned 18 when they had sex for the first time, and

in 2023 most were well into 18 years old (18.7 to be specific). "There are a lot of theories about why this is. It might be that young people are less curious about sex today. It used to be more of a forbidden fruit. Before the internet, it was quite difficult to get porn, for example. Now it's everywhere, so perhaps young people feel less urgency

to find out what sex is like – they think they already know." Another theory is that relationships have changed. "Take 'situationships', informal relationships, or people who only meet online and don't seem to feel the need for physical contact." Finally, it could be that people make too big a deal out of the first time. "It's good to wait for the moment that feels right for you, but make sure you don't get in your own way", says Dewitte. "It's natural to experiment with sex during puberty, precisely because your prefrontal cortex is not yet fully developed. You're more likely to just try something instead of overthinking it. The perfect moment doesn't exist."

Cleo Freriks

Marieke Dewitte is a clinical psychologist and sexologist at Maastricht University. In this weekly series, she answers questions about sex from students. If you have a question, you can submit it anonymously, scan the code



Opening academic year 2024-2025

Letschert takes a swipe at the government

UM President Rianne Letschert took a swipe at the Dutch government during the opening of the academic year last Monday, accusing its politicians of “intellectual laziness”, “small-mindedness” and lack of long-term vision. Her passionate speech introduced a harsher tone to the national debate on internationalisation and budget cuts in Dutch higher education.

“There are trends in politics just like in fashion, and this year’s autumn look is drab and grey”, said Letschert towards the end of her speech, which she notably delivered in Dutch – a departure from the tradition of holding these academic ceremonies exclusively in English. Letschert has said it before: she fears for the future of Maastricht University if drastic measures are taken to curb internationalisation and the use of English in Dutch higher education. Approximately 60 per cent of UM students and 50 per cent of its staff come from other countries.

Letschert advocated for a tailored approach:

“Once again, equality is being confused with equity. There is no one-size-fits-all internationalisation policy that suits all universities in the Netherlands. Any measures at UM should be tailored to our particular setup.”

Budget cuts

The government has also announced budget cuts in higher education, which are another major concern. While the exact details are not yet known, funding may be slashed by as much as 1 billion euros. The opening of the academic year at Theater aan het Vrijthof began with a video message from Universities of the Netherlands, which was shown at universities across the country, calling for the government to stop the budget cuts. “The negative impact of cutting funding for research and education won’t become apparent immediately”, warned Letschert. The government seems oblivious to this, she says. “They are too focused on the present.”

Fortunately, Letschert said, “we *do* look ahead.

We have ambitions in so many areas.” She was referring, among other things, to the Einstein Telescope. In his keynote speech, Han Dols, head of Business Development at CERN (of particle accelerator fame) in Geneva, explained how this major project is not only of interest to physicists and astronomers.

“CERN is about fundamental science, but its innovations extend far beyond”, said Dols. He described how CERN collaborates with external partners, striving to balance developing its own technology with solving real-world problems. “For example, there’s a project where economists are applying a physics model to financial market data to detect fraud. And we’re working with a major energy provider to speed up the transmission of electricity from offshore wind farms to the mainland.”

Dols gave the floor to Gideon Koekoek, associate professor of Theoretical Physics, who delivered an entertaining and highly accessible explanation of how the Einstein Telescope works.

UnLimited Students

After the speeches, the annual Edward Huxtin Prize for outstanding research (see page 7) and the Student Prize were awarded. The latter went to UnliMited Students, an organisation founded by and for students with disabilities. An October 2023 survey on disability support showed that the initiative is highly appreciated by its target group.

“All my life I’ve had to justify myself and explain why I can’t do certain things. It’s exhausting. Here, I can take a break from all that”, Maud Langen told *Observant* at the time. The third-year Arts and Culture student lives with chronic pain and fatigue caused by a connective tissue disorder.

Cleo Freriks

Read more about the budget cuts on page 6



UM President Rianne Letschert at the left, behind keynote speaker Han Dols Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

column



Our inbox problem

“Confronting your email inbox after the summer holidays has never been anyone’s favourite part of the job. It’s always meant hacking your way through weeks of undergrowth, armed only with a few weapons: caffeine, hope, and the ‘delete’ button. Here an advertisement for Japanese kitchen knives – delete! Take another sip of coffee. There an invitation for you, a sociologist, to submit your work to a journal of mechanical engineering. “Take that!”, you cry, clicking it through to your junk mail folder.

This year, though, I’ve noticed a difference. Not only is there vastly more outright spam, but there are also more emails that fall somewhere between legit and junk. An entire ecosystem of semi-predatory journals, conferences and

services has sprung up not outside academia, but on its periphery. Think about the open-access publisher that sends you urgent weekly invitations to review articles that are marginally related to your work, but so badly written they should not have passed a desk review. Or the private academy that offers expensive trainings on how to write EU applications (the one you don’t remember giving your email address to). Or the social media company that promises to bring an old article to new audiences by turning it into a slick animated video. It’s a problem of academia’s growing marketisation: as global competition builds and public budgets shrink, metrics and shallow “engagement” seem to matter more than quality. And to an extent you can understand the reason-

ing. If peer review matters so much, why not buy it? If EU funding can make or break a career, why not pay someone to help you get your hands on it?

The ‘problem’, however, is that quality *does* still matter. These emails might require a bit more reading—you have to at least glance at their content. But the really helpful emails—the ones that teach you something, bring genuine opportunities and put you in touch with interesting people—still rise above the clamour and the noise. And so, at least for now, I will continue clearing my path through the weeds, my trusty delete button by my side.

Elsje Fourie is associate professor of Globalisation & Development Studies

series sing, fight, cry, pray, laugh, work and admire



Demi Janssen
[Venlo, 2003]

/ third-year
**University
College
Maastricht
student**

/ relationship
status: **single**

/ lives in
Maasbree

Photo: Joey Roberts

“ one time, I was in the shower when the NOS called ”

I've been making my voice heard from a young age.

Last academic year, I was chair of the Dutch National Student Association (ISO), which looks after student interests. Before that, I served on the University Council, and in secondary school I established the local youth council in Venlo. I have a bit of an activist streak, but I also believe in dialogue. That's more ISO's role anyway. We work closely with the LSVb, the advocacy organisation for students in the Netherlands. They organise large-scale demonstrations, we make ourselves heard in other ways. You need both – people who are willing to engage in dialogue and people who are ready to make some noise. As chair, I enjoyed the art of convincing the person on the other side of the table of our point. It was a fun year, but also very intense. I was in charge of the media phone, so I always had to be ready to speak to the press. One time, I was in the shower when the Dutch Broadcasting Association (NOS) called.

Do you have any regrets? I don't regret doing all those extracurricular activities, but I do regret the way I went about it at times. I get very enthusiastic and tend to dive in head first, which means I end up seeing too little of my friends and family, who are always there for me. This year, I plan to take things easier and prioritise them.

I visit my grandmother... I've actually just returned from visiting my grandmother on my mother's side. She's my only living grandparent – I only ever knew one of my grandfathers, who passed away when I was in primary school. She lives in Poland, a ten-hour train journey away. We're very close. When I was little, my parents ran their own business, which took up a lot of their time. My grandmother helped raise me. She has since moved back to her home country. We speak Polish together; I speak it well.

What do you look for in a partner? Someone who is passionate about life on all levels: their work, their studies, their friends, me. Someone who takes initiative. Someone who is empathetic, that's important to me, and not afraid to be themselves. I'm not actively looking for a relationship – I need some time to myself, which I didn't have much of last year – but I'm open to the idea.

I'm proud of... the fact that, after a lengthy process, we at ISO managed to establish national guidelines for compensating student council members. There were huge disparities, with some students practically working full-time and earning just 300 euros per month. This discourages students who rely on part-time jobs to make ends meet, yet you want your student council to reflect the diversity of your student body. We've

also made good progress towards mandatory paid internships. Interns in sectors such as education and health care rarely get paid, even though these sectors are short of workers.

What disappointed you last year? The new government's coalition agreement, which includes plans to introduce a penalty for students who take too long to complete their degree, cut education spending and increase VAT on books, including textbooks. The previous government collapsed just as I became ISO chair last year. In the months leading up to the election, we spoke to politicians from almost all parties and presented them with manifestos. It was then frustrating to see that the plans in the coalition agreement will hit the people in vulnerable positions the hardest.

Describe yourself as a child in five words. I was ambitious and enterprising, always aiming high – the best grades, extracurricular activities... I was also empathetic, a bit shy and almost too polite. But not if someone was being bullied, then I supported the person and said something about it, even though I found it scary.

I'm the cook at home. No, my dad went to culinary school, so he often cooks. My mum is also a good cook, especially when it comes to Polish dishes. I've moved back in with my parents and almost 12-year-old brother. Last year, I mainly had to be in Utrecht and The Hague for ISO, so I gave up my room in Maastricht. I found housing just outside Utrecht. I figured I might as well travel from my parents' house. That way, I could just relax when I was at home. I'll be staying with them for now, so I can spend more time with my little brother and save money. After the hectic year I've had, I want to avoid having to take on a part-time job.

In ten years... I'll be working. I plan to do a master's degree, perhaps in something related to cognitive science or business administration. I will also continue to advocate for accessible education and public participation. I think it's very important that people not only have a say, but have a real influence on decisions that affect their lives. Education has such a huge impact on people's development and therefore on society as a whole. I might also have a partner by then. I'm not sure I want children; if I do have them, I'll wait until my career is established. I'd also like to tick a few items off my bucket list – interrailing through Europe, skydiving (if I can work up the courage) and trying out new hobbies. That's what I'll be doing this coming year. My list currently includes climbing, something to do with dancing and something creative. We'll see what sticks.

Farewell interview with Harald Merckelbach, departing dean of FPN

“Anyone who wants to dictate the language I teach in is infringing on my academic freedom”



Harald Merckelbach asking a question to Lotte Jensen at a debate about language *Photo: Eric Bleize*

Professor Harald Merckelbach is stepping down as dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN). He reflects on four tumultuous years, marked by the Covid pandemic, faculty budget cuts and the increasingly heated debate on the internationalisation of Dutch higher education. “Staying in a leadership position for too long can make you arrogant.”

“The university should once again be an institution where calm prevails, with time for reflection”, Harald Merckelbach, professor of Psychology and Law, told *Observant* when he became dean four years ago. The interview took place in February 2020; just one month later, everyone was in lockdown due to Covid-19. No, he laughs now, calm never quite returned.

Disinformation

In the same 2020 interview, he voiced his concerns about the debate on the internationalisation of Dutch higher education. These concerns have only grown. The new government aims to reduce the influx of international students and give the Dutch language a more prominent place in higher education. Critics of the increased use of English at universities in the Netherlands have repeatedly cited FPN as an example of how not to do things. “Armed with disinformation, they claim we teach exclusively in English, which is not true; our bachelor’s programme has a Dutch-taught track. They also claim that future clinical

psychologists won’t be able to speak with their clients in Dutch because they’re taught in English. This is incorrect – the programme is available in Dutch as well. But these stories keep circulating. It seems a lot of politicians are impervious to factual corrections.” Merckelbach is particularly critical of academic supporters of these politicians, such as UM philosopher René Gabriëls and Lotte Jensen, professor of Dutch Cultural and Literary History at Radboud University Nijmegen. “I think it’s their role to explain this isn’t a black-and-white issue, but they don’t. Worse still, they join in the grandstanding.”

Common language

Merckelbach emphasises that research has repeatedly shown “that education benefits from a highly diverse student body. The term ‘international classroom’ is not just a buzzword. The concept of ‘doux commerce’, which

suggests that commerce and networking civilise people and make us less likely to turn on each other, dates back to the Renaissance. And networking requires a common language – English. But this doesn’t mean we have an English monoculture. Just look at the Tunas [student music groups playing Spanish and Portuguese music], where different cultures come together.”

Academic freedom

Opponents of internationalisation refuse to acknowledge its benefits, says Merckelbach. “I’m disappointed in them. I sometimes find their reasoning dubious or just plain petty, like when Lotte Jensen tweeted that UM students aren’t eager to learn because they wouldn’t want Dutch to be a compulsory subject. That’s completely unfair to the students; most are genuinely interested. Her disdain bothers me.” He sees this kind of “grandstanding” as a threat

to how things are done at FPN. “They want to dictate how I teach my students, infringing on my academic freedom.”

Budget cuts

Although the opposition to internationalisation concerns him the most (“If the government does decide to take radical action, it’ll change the whole mentality and atmosphere of the university”), it wasn’t the only challenge he faced in the past four years. Teaching had to be adapted during Covid – “[Vice-Dean of Education] Petra Hurks put an incredible amount of time and effort into this” – and the faculty faced significant budget cuts. “We had deficits, not due to mismanagement, but because we’re funded as though we’re a sociology department, despite having expensive infrastructure with MRI scanners, an EEG machine and labs. Our then director Pascal Stevens came up with the idea of setting up working groups within the faculty to find ways to cut costs together. It worked – we are now financially healthy – but we’ve had to tighten our belts. No one could purchase new furniture or computers, for example.”

And new cuts are looming. If the new government’s plans go ahead, the entire higher education sector will need to reduce spending by 1 billion euros. What this would mean for UM is still unclear. It’ll be a stressful time, admits Merckelbach, but he’s “cautiously optimistic. Our minister of Education has always emphasised the importance of research in society. Let’s hope he sticks to his word.”

Calm

On one front, at least, calm has been achieved. “Under Carolien Martijn’s leadership, we’ve made great strides when it comes to Recognition and Rewards. It’s now much clearer how an academic career is structured and that it can take different forms. Everyone knows where they stand, which has greatly improved the atmosphere.”

He has also noticed changes compared to his first term as dean, from 2005 to 2009. “Back then, we were just emerging from the pioneering phase. Much was still taking shape. There were conflicts between professors and departments. That’s no longer the case. The faculty now has a clear identity; people feel more like part of a collective.”

Blasé

“We’ll see”, he said back in 2020 when asked if he planned to serve one or two terms. He ended up serving just one. Why? “I actually think it’s good to bring in a fresh perspective. Staying in a leadership position for too long can make you arrogant; it has a negative impact on your character. I greatly admire people like [Chair of the Dutch Research Council] Marcel Levi, who has continued to work as an internal medicine physician alongside his administrative role, but this combination isn’t feasible for most of us mere mortals. I think it’s important for deans to stay connected to education and research, but the longer you stay in administration, the harder it gets. Besides, there will always be recurring problems, and you risk becoming blasé about them. I’m also not under the illusion that I’m the only one who can solve them.”

So, what’s next for Merckelbach? “I’ve never really been one for career planning, but I do have a few book ideas. I’d like to write about symptom validity – whether a patient is exaggerating their symptoms. And I’m interested in the intersection between psychology and art. What defines ‘good’ art? How do we find meaning in art? What about people who can’t picture things in their minds?”

news

Pilot Student Mobility Card

Discounted public transport in Limburg for international students



Photo: Observant

International students who aren't eligible for a student travel product can now benefit from discounted travel thanks to the Student Mobility Card, which is being piloted in Limburg this academic year.

For years, international students studying in Maastricht and living in nearby towns like Sittard or Heerlen have complained about the high cost of transportation. Non-EU nationals and students who work less than 32 hours per month in the Netherlands aren't eligible for student finance, and therefore not eligible for free and discounted student travel through a student travel product. But the cost of commuting between Maastricht and Sittard – approximately €11 per round trip – can quickly add up.

In the new pilot, these students can obtain a Student Mobility Card. The card is valid on Arriva buses and trains within Limburg (not on NS Intercity trains). It offers a 40 per cent discount on train tickets during off-peak hours: before 6.30 AM or after 9 AM in the morning. Students who need to be at Maastricht University three times per week or have early morning classes (and don't want to travel at 6 AM) may instead prefer to get a season ticket, which is valid during peak hours. During a press briefing at City Hall last Tuesday afternoon, city

councillor Johan Pas described the card as “a brilliant idea” and “a very generous offer from Arriva” that will help distribute students across the region.

The Student Mobility Card is a collaborative initiative between the municipalities of Maastricht, Sittard-Geleen and Heerlen, as well as public transport company Arriva and Student Mobility, an organisation dedicated to improving student mobility in the Netherlands. Students can request the card via their website.

These three municipalities have previously joined forces to address student concerns. Last spring, they signed a Student Housing Pact, committing to creating about 3500 new student housing units, 700 of which will be outside Maastricht, by 2030. The initiative is intended to relieve pressure on the student housing market in Maastricht.

Wendy Degens

What do you get?

- Off-peak discounts in Limburg: 20 per cent discount on bus journeys and 40 per cent discount on train journeys during off-peak hours
- 20 per cent discount on specific routes (season ticket), valid all day, including peak hours

Where and when?

- On Arriva buses and trains within Limburg
- On Arriva Limburg bus line 83 (Venlo-Nijmegen route)
- On buses Monday to Friday before 6.30 AM and after 9.00 AM
- On trains Monday to Friday before 6.30 AM, between 9.00 AM and 4.00 PM and after 6.30 PM
- All day on buses and trains on weekends and national holidays

How much money UM loses, is still unclear

Government still intent on higher education cuts

On the third Tuesday of September, the new government will present its budget for the coming year. The four ruling parties (PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB) have already agreed to make substantial cuts that will impact students and higher education institutions - to almost a billion euros.

It is hardly surprising that the plans have met with fierce criticism from the universities and the rest of the sector. They calculate that up to 5,000 jobs are at risk, including the positions of 1,200 young researchers.

As for Maastricht University, the issue came up at the University Council meeting just before the summer holiday. Mark Govers, council member on behalf of the academic staff was uncomfort-

able with the fact that the Executive Board was keeping quiet, as if they do not realise the seriousness of the situation. But according to the Board, everyone is “aware of it”. The whole sector has to cut 1 billion, “we have no idea yet how much that means for UM”, they replied. For 2025, it will be a smaller amount, but “for 2026, 2027 and 2028 we have to prepare for bigger cuts”. More will become clear in late September, including which scenarios UM is considering.

Education Minister Eppo Bruins is still planning to go ahead with the budget cuts, but he replied to recent parliamentary questions on the issue by the opposition that he understands “the concerns raised by these cuts”.

The government wants to scrap the funding of ‘sector plans’

on which universities collaborate at national level: a cut-back in excess of 200 million euros. “I am aware of the value of sector plans and I too hear the signals from the field about their relevance and necessity”, Bruins writes. “But at the same time, financial choices have to be made to meet the budgetary requirements in the outline for our coalition agreement.”

The cuts will first be set out in the government's programme and then in Bruins' own policy agenda, due to be announced on Budget Day. “That's where I will present my plans and how the cuts will fall.”

HOP/WD



Elvira Loibl awarded Hustinx Prize for research into illegal adoption

“Preventing adoption abuses is almost impossible”

Child trafficking, corruption, falsified documents: international adoption has its dark sides. Elvira Loibl, Maastricht criminologist and assistant professor at the law faculty, has been researching them for years. She was awarded the Edmond Hustinx Prize during the Opening of the Academic Year.

Text: Dennis Vaendel

Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

“The ultimate humanitarian act.” That was the image Austrian Elvira Loibl had of adoption before she came to Maastricht for her PhD track in 2014. “Just like so many people, I saw it as a purely positive thing: you’re saving the life of a child on the streets and offering them a life in a prosperous country. But this turns out mostly to be a romanticised, Western perspective. It is often paired with serious malpractice. In many countries, there are human traffickers who actively pursue adoption as a way to earn money. They kidnap children, or buy them off poor families, to then offer them up as ‘orphans’ to adoption agencies. Furthermore, the procedures are often corrupt.” It’s an interesting topic for a criminologist. “But I did frequently ask myself, who am I doing this for? The number of adoptions has been falling steadily for years, thanks in part to IVF and surrogacy. I assumed that my dissertation would disappear straight into an archive forever after my promotion.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The subject is now firmly in the spotlight, especially since the Joustra commission concluded in 2021 that the Dutch government had ignored serious abuses in intercountry adoptions between the 1960s and the 1990s. As an immediate result, the cabinet chose to call a temporary halt to international adoption. A permanent ban followed in May of this year.

A Trojan horse

According to Loibl, the timing is a coincidence. “The Joustra commission started a few days before I obtained my doctorate in 2019, so my dissertation was not the trigger. My focus also lay on a later period: from the 1990s to the present.” The

dividing line between these two periods is the Hague Adoption Convention, which was signed by both the countries that ‘send’ and ‘receive’ adopted children. It is full of agreements and procedures to prevent illegal adoption. But it has failed to stop abuse, says Loibl. In fact, in her dissertation she described the convention as a Trojan horse. “Many sending countries don’t have the resources for or the intention of abiding by the convention. Meanwhile receiving countries often blindly assume that it is being followed.” There are no exact figures on the number of illegal adoptions. “It’s hard to check if the child was legally placed in the adoption process in their home country. Documents can be falsified to ‘launder’ adoptions. The abuses often only come to light when the adopted children start looking into their roots as adults.”

Ideological

This is why Loibl predominantly focused on the Netherlands in her research: where are the pitfalls here? During her research, she spoke to adoption agencies. In addition to the unwarranted trust in the adoption convention, Loibl discovered a few more weaknesses. “These agencies are often financially dependent on the number of adoptions. They don’t receive subsidies and so have to keep generating an income. They’re also often very ideologically driven, convinced they’re ‘saving’ these children. This means that thorough checks are often skipped or a blind eye is turned to malpractice. It’s why the Dutch government had been working on a revised system since 2021, where all adoptions would be processed through a public institution.” But that system was never realised. A motion supported by a

parliamentary majority forced a change of course: a full ban. Was it a wise decision? Hard to say, says Loibl. “On the one hand, as a criminologist, I’m not in favour of bans. They drive things ‘underground’ and you lose control. You also block cases where everything *was* done correctly. On the other hand, there have been multiple attempts at revision and yet abuses are ongoing. It’s almost impossible to prevent them entirely. I’m stuck on those two schools of thought. There’s a reason I had to rewrite the conclusion of my dissertation five times.”

Compensation

While it is hard to substantiate, Loibl’s research will have played a role in the cabinet’s decision-making. “I’m the only one in the Netherlands who is researching illegal adoption from a criminological standpoint. My research has been mentioned in letters from the ministry. That’s a satisfying feeling.”

What is she focusing on now that international adoption has been banned? Loibl points to the apology that the Dutch state – in the guise of then State Secretary for Legal Protection Dekker – made to the victims in 2021, for turning a blind eye and not intervening. “The next step is compensation, but the silence on that front is deafening. I’m currently investigating what form this could take, for example, financial compensation for people who were illegally adopted, and help from the state in finding biological parents or family in their countries of birth.” The 15 thousand euros of the Hustinx Prize can help with researching compensation. “I’m thinking about using it to organise a conference for adoptees, where they can voice exactly what it is they are looking for.”

Hustinx Prize

The Edmond Hustinx Prize for science – a prize worth 15,000 euros, awarded annually by the Edmond Hustinx Foundation during the Opening of the Academic Year – is intended to “underscore the meaning of science in practice” and “to accentuate” the importance of Maastricht University to Limburg. The faculties take turns awarding the prize; this year is the turn of the Faculty of Law.

'Keuringsarts? Ik heb de pest aan dat woord!'

Chirurg Arthur Bloemen werd specialist arbeid en gezondheid bij UWV Sociaal-medische zaken



Chirurg Arthur Bloemen werkt inmiddels vier jaar bij UWV, hij heeft als zij-instromer de medische vervolgopleiding versneld doorlopen en is sinds 1,5 jaar specialist arbeid en gezondheid. 'Je slijpt hier elke dag je vaardigheden.'

Natuurlijk was het slikken toen Arthur Bloemen zijn opleiding tot chirurg niet kon verzilveren in een vaste aanstelling. 'Het was mijn gedroomde specialisatie', zegt hij. 'Ik houd van daadkracht, van werken met mijn handen. En ja, chirurgie heeft iets heroïsch. Het voetstuk waar mensen je op zetten, daar is niemand ongevoelig voor. Maar vooral de adrenaline die door je aderen giert als je razendsnel een beslissing dient te nemen of een complexe ingreep moet verrichten.'

De harde realiteit was evenwel dat Arthur geen baan kon bemachtigen. Een bittere pil, maar voor de gepromoveerde arts binnen de maag-darmchirurgie geen reden om mokkend af te wachten wanneer zich ergens een vacature zou aandienen.

'Ik oriënteerde me van meet af aan op alternatieven en kwam toen bij UWV Sociaal-medische zaken terecht. Ik vulde het formulier in en niet veel later hing er een recruiter aan de telefoon. Na een dag meelopen stond mijn besluit vast: het werd arts arbeid en gezondheid. Ik was meteen enthousiast: een mooi en veelzijdig vak, vond ik.'

Specialist arbeid en gezondheid, die titel dekt volgens Arthur ook veel meer de lading dan verzekeringsarts ('Alsof je de hele dag met polissen in de weer bent') of keuringsarts ('Een slager keurt'). Nu is hij er alweer vier jaar op zijn plek. Zijn baan biedt hem de rustgevende stabiliteit van een geregeld gezinsleven - met zijn collega's deelt hij de gemeenschapszin die bij UWV Sociaal-medische zaken heerst.

Arthur: 'Chirurgen staan bekend om hun teamspirit. Diezelfde sfeer trof ik bij UWV aan. En wat het

dagelijkse werk betreft: specialisten in ziekenhuizen ontwikkelen niet zelden een kokerblik. Ik merkte dat ik soms oogkleppen op had. Een wondcontrole en hup, op naar de volgende patiënt. Geen idee hoe het iemand verder vergaat. Maar ho, ik val mijn snijdende vakbroeders niet af hoor. Ik heb destijds een geweldige tijd gehad. Bij UWV leerde ik al snel dat je een open mind en een brede kennis van zaken moet bezitten. En heel de mens moet zien.'

Hij kwam er ook achter dat alle vooroordelen over zijn beroep niet stroken met de werkelijkheid van alledag. 'Daarom heb ik zo de pest aan dat woord keuringsarts', vertelt hij. 'Alsof je bij elke cliënt die tegenover je zit je je duim omhoog steekt of omlaag houdt. Zoals in het Romeinse Colosseum: Jij aan het werk, jij een uitkering...'

Misschien, zegt Arthur, stond 'de keuringsarts' in een ver verleden bekend als een stoffig type dat ervoor zorgde dat de dossiers die maandag links op het bureau lagen vrijdag naar de rechterkant waren verhuisd. 'Dit vak is veel dynamischer dan dat. Chirurgie is echt manueel werk, je hanteert tenslotte het operatiemes. Als specialist arbeid en gezondheid bedien je je van het gesprek, dat is jouw instrument. Het heet niet voor niets spreekuur hè?'

'Je praat intensief met de cliënt, kent zijn beperkingen en behoeften. Samen met hem of haar kun je daar op inspelen. En je doet dat ook nog eens in teamverband met tal van andere specialisten.'

'Ik merk in mijn omgeving steeds vaker dat het specialisme arbeid en gezondheid de waardering

krijgt die het verdient. Veel jonge collega-artsen zitten in hetzelfde schuitje als ik destijds: wordt mijn contract verlengd, is er straks wel werk binnen mijn specialisme?'

'Deze nieuwe generatie kiest niet meer automatisch voor de ratrace in het ziekenhuis. Jonge artsen neigen bovendien ook naar een werkring waarin de verhouding werk-privé in evenwicht is. Ik heb twee kinderen, die wil ik graag zien opgroeien. In mijn tijd als chirurg was het behoorlijk schipperen. Ik zag hen 's ochtends 5 minuten en 's avonds lagen ze al in bed als ik thuiskwam.'

Hij mist de chirurgie niet, want er is, zegt hij, zoveel voor in de plaats gekomen. 'Dagelijks slijp ik hier nog mijn vaardigheden in een omgeving waarin je geheel zelfstandig functioneert. En waarin een mens veel meer is dan een medische anamnese. Sterker: dan begint het pas. En je hebt gelukkig ook ruimschoots de tijd om degene tegenover jou te doorgronden en zo nog beter te helpen.'

'We maken echt het verschil en dat zit soms in heel kleine dingen. Ik zie veel cliënten in het kader van de WIA en de Wajong, jong volwassenen ook met ontwikkelingsstoornissen als autisme en adhd. Vaak onbegrepen in hun jeugd, het gezin, op school door docenten die niet wisten om te gaan met hun beperkingen.'

'Als we nou iemand kunnen regelen die jou een steuntje in de rug geeft', zeg ik vaak. Een jobcoach bijvoorbeeld, of iemand binnen het bedrijf die zich over jou ontfermt. Dan zie je de ogen van de cliënt echt oplichten. Overal hebben ze het deksel op hun neus gekregen - nu is er eindelijk iemand die hen vertrouwt, bij wie ze hun verhaal kwijt kunnen, die hen geruststelt. Dat is zulk dankbaar werk.'

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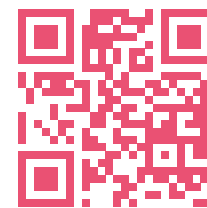
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Agenda academic ceremonies
Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

05-09, 13.00h	Peter Hein Bles	18-09, 10.00h	Romina Willi
05-09, 16.00h	Mitch J. F. G. Ramaekers	18-09, 13.00h	Mohammed Ali Ghossein
06-09, 10.00h	Fury Maulina	18-09, 16.00h	Max Brüning
06-09, 13.00h	Merel Anje Spiekerman van Weezenburg	19-09, 10.00h	Cheng Gong
06-09, 16.00h	Prof. dr. Roy F.P.M. Kruitwagen, afscheidscollege	19-09, 13.00h	Jeroen R.J.H. Gruiskens
09-09, 13.00h	Alexander Kroner	19-09, 16.00h	Ian Jens Dieter Hillebrand Pohl
09-09, 16.00h	Zohaib Salahuddin	20-09, 13.00h	Aurora C.M.-J. Delvenne
10-09, 10.00h	Khouwaga Morsal Yusoufzai	20-09, 16.30h	Dr. Alard F. Roebroek, inauguratie
10-09, 13.00h	Iva Halilaj	23-09, 10.00h	Nivine Hanach
10-09, 16.00h	Emma Martina van Doornik	23-09, 13.00h	Francesco Schianchi
11-09, 13.00h	Rosine L.J. Rutten	23-09, 16.00h	Khava Im Elievna Ibragimova
11-09, 16.00h	Ivo A.O. Beeren	24-09, 10.00h	Sophie Vervullens, Double Doctorate Degree Maastricht University 0 University of Antwerp
12-09, 10.00h	Lukas Andreas Duffner	24-09, 13.00h	Gerjanne Vennegoor
12-09, 13.00h	Famke Houben	24-09, 16.00h	Katherine Marie Wisener
12-09, 16.00h	Deepa Ravi	25-09, 10.00h	Valérie N.E. Schuermans
13-09, 10.00h	Ines Mouchaers, Double Doctorate Degree Maastricht University – KU Leuven	25-09, 13.00h	Hajar Hasannejadasl
13-09, 13.00h	Linsey Jeannette Francine Peters, Double Doctorate Degree Maastricht University – RWTH Aachen University	25-09, 16.30h	Prof. Dr. Gijsbrecht Vonk, inauguratie
13-09, 16.30h	Dr. Anique Hommels, inauguratie	26-09, 13.00h	Yara Quirine Wingelaar-Jagt
16-09, 10.00h	Akhil Antony Konkoth	26-09, 16.00h	Maud P.M. Tijssen
16-09, 13.00h	Stefi Nordkamp	27-09, 10.00h	Janna Josephus Anna Oda Schoenmaekers
17-09, 10.00h	Francesco Maletto	27-09, 16.00h	Prof. Dr. Clemens G.M. Rommers, afscheidscollege
17-09, 13.00h	Lars Oliver Wittrock	30-09, 10.00h	Bhathika Perera
17-09, 16.00h	Georgina Kotsau	30-09, 13.00h	Maike-Elisa Ostheller
		30-09, 16.00h	Leanne Lily Gerda Christina Ackermans

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