

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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RUNNING CRAZE P 6/7

Strategically

to

the

toilet

No more snacking and only a single toilet visit. Students are concerned about the 'new' exam rules. "Maybe we should start handing out diapers"

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Is sharing really caring?

Should you be open about your mental health issues with fellow students or colleagues? Or do you stay silent in order to not seem vulnerable? A new tool helps weigh pros and cons P 8

OPINION IS UM HAVING A MIDLIFE CRISIS?

"A NEW SLOGAN DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY PROVIDE A NEW VISION FOR THE FUTURE" P 5



Cardboard boxes in a back room

Our junior journalist LR recently attended her partner's graduation ceremony, where he received his Medicine degree at St. Janskerk. There were snacks, drinks and a photographer to capture the joyful occasion. The graduates wore caps and gowns, which I heard were a gift from the faculty. In two weeks, LR herself will officially receive her master's degree in Media Culture in the Turnzaal on Grote Gracht – also a special venue, but she'll have to purchase her own cap and gown.

This got us wondering about the various graduation ceremonies taking place around this time. Does UM offer the same type of celebration for every student who has earned the required credits? Our junior journalist is looking into it. First impression: no, there are significant differences. But drinks, it seems, are always provided. That's more than we had in my day. After I passed my oral exam on my philosophy thesis (for which I wore a new outfit bought for the occasion), my family and friends were invited into the nicely furnished room in Nijmegen to hear my final grade and listen to a speech by my supervisor. No drinks were offered, though. Instead, we headed back to my student house to celebrate. But it could've been even more minimal; some fifteen years later, my stepdaughter received her philosophy degree from the University of Amsterdam in a back room with cardboard boxes stacked against the wall. It looked like the cleaner hadn't been there for quite some time, either. Quite disheartening indeed. Thankfully, the celebration afterwards, paid for by the newly minted graduate and her family, was no less enjoyable for it.

On a different note: in our recent Monday meetings, I've been hearing colleagues discuss new trends in student life – running clubs popping up everywhere; improperly parked bikes being flipped upside down; students carrying around oversized drinking cups with straws. Not everything is worth writing about, but the running boom is. LR, an avid runner herself, tagged along with three fast-growing clubs to witness the fun, the selfies and the outfits firsthand. And to hear “how to make running sexy”.

Riki Janssen

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



Collage: Simone Golob

“As long as it doesn't harm anyone, any fantasy is OK”

What one person finds arousing, another might find off-putting. Different strokes for different folks. But what if your erotic fantasies involve violence against women? Is that acceptable? And if we accept it as normal, how can we ever achieve gender equality? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte shares her thoughts.

What if you're a woman who likes to fantasise about rough sex? “Don't judge yourself for it. You're not the only one. Research shows that the most common fantasy among women is BDSM sex [involving bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism, such as being restrained, roleplay, spanking or humiliation].” Again, there's a difference between *thinking* about something and *doing* it. “Only 30 per cent said they

would ever want to act out the fantasy.” Reassuring words, but when should you start worrying? “What are the risk factors to consider? It's not just a specific sexual preference in and of itself, but the combination of a non-normative sexual preference with traits such as high impulsivity, low empathy or antisocial tendencies. That's something to watch out for.”

Cleo Freriks

“It's a fine line”, says Dewitte. “On the one hand, violence must never be normalised. And research does show that boys who watch porn where women are degraded say more misogynistic things.”

On the other hand, she believes it goes too far to call a preference abnormal in and of itself. “There's a vast grey area between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. I think the main rule is that as long as it doesn't harm yourself or others, any fantasy is OK.”

During sex, you can make sure you don't cross any boundaries. But what about pornography? “Don't watch just anything – first, ensure that it was created with the consent of all parties involved. Sometimes, VR or animated porn can be a good alternative.”

But won't this encourage such fantasies, making people more likely to act on them? “I understand why someone might think that, but it can actually be a good way for a person to let off steam in a controlled manner.”

Moreover, she says, fantasising about something doesn't mean you actually want it to happen. “People have ‘bad’ thoughts all the time, like ‘I want to push so-and-so off a bridge’. You don't act on those thoughts, either. Imagination has no morality. As [Belgian poet] Willem Elsschot wrote, ‘Between dream and deed, laws and practical objections remain/and melancholy, which none can explain.’”

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



Shorter exams bring different rules for toilet visits and eating; students complain

“Students should be able to go two hours without food”

From this academic year, all exams at Maastricht University – with a few exceptions – will take two hours rather than three. This is a bit of an adjustment for students who were used to longer exams, such as students at the Faculty of Law. Shorter exams come with different rules regarding toilet visits and eating.

Last year, MECC Maastricht was overcrowded during the first and second exam periods. In December, the situation became so bad that an emergency setup had to be arranged: 150 seats were added to the venue's maximum capacity of 1800 students. It was unmanageable, as central exam coordinator Anja Ronken told Observant at the time. The university consequently decided that all exams would take a maximum of two hours from September 2024 onwards. According to Ronken, this has resulted in “a well-planned timetable at MECC Maastricht, and no more evening exams.”

Although these changes had been planned for

months, they caught some students by surprise, especially at faculties where three-hour exams had been the norm. The topic came up in the recent Faculty Council meeting of the Faculty of Law. Under the 120-minute exam format, students are no longer allowed to bring food and are limited to a single toilet visit (compared to two visits during 180-minute exams). “Students are worried and concerned by the news”, said student representative Ivor Meštrović (NovUM). When asked to elaborate, he added, “I think the majority likes the possibility of, perhaps, having a chocolate bar, banana, or another snack. It can help with concentration. As for toilet visits, students might need to go more than once because the exam hall is a bit cold, they simply have a cold, or they're stressed. Now, they feel additional pressure to make a strategic decision about when to go.” “Maybe we should start handing out diapers”, academic staff representative Mark Kawakami jokingly suggested.

According to Ronken, these rules for two-hour exams have been in place for “at least four years”, but she acknowledges that they may be ‘new’ to some. “The number of toilet visits was getting out of hand. Not only is the constant walking to and from the toilets distracting, but we also know that most exam cheating happens there. As a university, we have a responsibility to minimise opportunities for fraud.” Eating, she adds, can be just as disruptive. “Noise, movement and smells can seriously distract others.” It also leaves laptops and desks dirty. “The chairs of the Boards of Examiners and we as the exam organisation agree that going two hours without food should be doable.” Students with medical conditions can apply for exceptions in advance through disability services in consultation with the Board of Examiners. Drinking is allowed, as long as the bottle or cup can be closed.

Wendy Degens



Between Cheers and Challenges

“

Ahh, the transition between summer and fall. A bittersweet farewell to the warmer months, accompanied by the first autumn winds, cosy sweaters, and golden leaves. In my hometown however, we take a slightly different approach. On October 12th, 1810, Munich celebrated the wedding of Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria and Princess Therese. The joyous occasion marked the beginning of ‘Oktoberfest’, the world’s largest Volksfest and Munich’s event of the year. Oktoberfest, also coined ‘Wiesn’ by locals, has become an international attraction over the years. Visitors come for the rich Bavarian culture, the travelling carnival, and most importantly, the beer.

The traditional drink is served in 1 litre mugs, referred to as a ‘Maß’. For reference, the standard beer bottle has a volume of around 330 millilitres, and an alcohol content of 4-5 percent. At more than three times that volume, and a percentage of 6-6.5, the Maß is truly the titan of toasts. To make matters worse, the Wiesn tends to promote drinking as quickly as possible. Most beer tents have a band that, amongst other hits, plays the song ‘Ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit’ two to three times an hour, encouraging a collective beer chug.

Although I consider beer tents to serve as one of the Oktoberfest’s fundamental pillars, I can’t help but worry about the detrimental outcomes that are seemingly normalised. As a child, hearing about the ‘Kotzhügel’ (directly translated: puke hill) at the outskirts of the Wiesn seemed amusing. Hearing about it now, I can’t help but feel somewhat embarrassed for the people that end up face down on the grassy hill. I experience equal mortification when a comatose visitor gets wheeled past me by a group of paramedics. This year, the first “sleeping beauty” was brought to the nearest hospital just two and a half hours after the Oktoberfest’s initial beer distribution. By the end of the first day, more than six hundred patients had to be treated for severe intoxication and even alcohol poisoning.

That being said, I don’t want to take the moral high road. I’m a firm believer of the saying ‘whatever floats your boat’. And as an upstanding Bavarian citizen, I enjoy partaking in Oktoberfest activities, and this includes drinking a Maß or two. Or three. Therefore, I say: prost to responsible revelry, where the only thing we lose is our sense of time, not our dignity!

”

Robin van Wasen, student at UCM



Pro-Palestinian protesters march past UM buildings in city centre

Some sixty Maastricht students and activists took part in the national walk-out on Tuesday, 8 October, organised by the group Scholars for Palestine.

The loud demonstration marched past university buildings in the city centre. Their demand has been known since the demonstrations during the last academic year: Maastricht University must break ties with Israel. The demonstration started off quietly at eleven o’clock, in the sunshine, in front of the UM

administration building on the Minderbroedersberg. There’s poetry, and a minute’s silence for the victims of “ethnic cleansing in Gaza”. Then the chanting starts, including the controversial From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.

When one protester outside the Faculty of Law on Boullionstraat – protestors are not allowed into the university buildings – says that this slogan was not so well received by everybody at the last demonstration, the group chants it again. She is presumably referencing Dean Jan

Smits who, earlier this year, said that the slogan “crossed a line”.

Aside from Smits, UM President Rianne Letschert and Margriet Schreuders, director of the Student Service Centre, are also personally called out. “You can’t hide, we charge you with genocide”, is the message. The protesters haven’t called people out so personally before in public.

Peter Doorakkers

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



Aisling Miller
[Cork, Ireland, 1993]

/ lecturer and
PhD candidate
at the Maastricht
Sustainability Institute

/ relationship status:
single

/ lives in Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“
I would tell my younger self,
‘Dare to be different’
”

I see my family... as a source of inspiration. I was raised in Ireland by a single mother who worked incredibly hard to take care of me and my four older sisters. She left school at 15, so she always encouraged us to continue our education. My eldest sister in particular was a great role model. She was the first of us to go to university, build a career and move abroad. She paved the way for the rest of us. I chose to cut ties with my father. He was never a big part of my life and when I became an adult, I thought, “This relationship adds nothing of value to my life.” My mother always played the role of both mom and dad.

Favourite Irish word? *Feileacháin*. It means butterfly. I love the way it sounds; it fits the meaning perfectly. Back when I lived in Ireland, I taught Irish at a secondary school, but I got totally disenchanted. I wanted to be the fun teacher – I was already a group leader at an Irish language summer camp, and teaching children the basics of the language gave me so much joy and fulfilment – but encountered a rigid and outdated curriculum. The final exam only tests reading and writing skills, but language truly comes alive through speaking. If you focus exclusively on reading and writing, learning a language will never be fun or accessible. This is part of the reason why many Irish people have a complicated relationship with the language; few speak it.

It doesn't help that Irish was banned under British rule – we seem to have that ingrained in our subconscious. But I feel like things are changing. Last year, I organised a get-together at an Irish pub in Maastricht for Irish people who want to practise the language. People really enjoyed it. I'd love to do it more often; it helps me feel connected to my culture and roots.

I pray sometimes. Never to a god, but I do occasionally talk to loved ones who have passed away, like my granny. I know she's watching over me. Sometimes things just go suspiciously smoothly, like how this PhD position fell into my lap – it was offered to me – or how easily I found a nice place to live in Maastricht. There must be somebody up there looking out for me.

Is there anything you've done that you wouldn't let your children do? I don't think I want children – at least not biological ones, though I am open to fostering. I would tell my younger self, “Dare to be different. Dare to be yourself. Don't let society put you in a box.” The school I worked at was rather conservative. We teachers had to follow the same appearance code as students, meaning no unnatural hair colours, no visible piercings or tattoos. It felt like there were two different versions of

me – one at school and one at home. I felt more and more disconnected.

When was the last time you cried? Sometime in April. I was having a bad day and felt very lonely. Then I dropped my phone, cracking the screen, and it all just came out. I don't cry often; it had been building up for a while. This is my second year in Maastricht and while I've found my place and made friends, sometimes it's just hard living in a different country with a different language. I missed my people – my best friends, my family.

I hate going to the gym. I never go to the gym; I much prefer exercising in nature. I love anything to do with water – swimming, kayaking, or just walking by the river.

Never eat meat again or never fly again? I'm a flexitarian, so I'd give up meat. I've become a more creative cook. Sustainability has always been a part of my life; my mother was always sustainable-minded, and as a secondary school teacher, I taught my students about it and took them on beach clean-ups. When I decided to change my life and quit my job, I applied for a master's in Sustainability Science, Policy and Society here in Maastricht.

I'm a teacher through and through. During the pandemic, I reassessed my life. I was exhausted. I was running myself ragged organising fun classes and activities for my students, while some of my colleagues were only in teaching because of the long holidays. And I was frustrated. I had all these ideas about the curriculum and the education system, but teachers have no control over any of that. If I wanted to make a difference in education policy, I needed to educate myself, so I pursued a master's degree here in Maastricht. I wanted to experience living in another country and try out a different education system. I never want to teach secondary school again, but after my master's, I worked for a Dublin-based youth organisation promoting informal environmental education for teenagers. Now, alongside my PhD research on sustainability education, I'm teaching UM students. I absolutely love it.

Cleo Freriks

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Slogans and color schemes won't really matter, if what's inside the box isn't up to snuff

Maastricht University's Midlife Crisis

Maastricht University: who are we, what makes us special and how do we want to comport ourselves in the future? **Mark Kawakami**, assistant professor at the Faculty of Law, attended an event for the UM's rebranding, where the new motto 'We find real answers together' was workshopped. But is creative communication really what we really need at this moment? He asks (and answers) the question in this opinion article.



Photo: Shutterstock

The great comedian, Mitch Hedberg, used to joke about how Ritz crackers would come in boxes with suggestions about what people could put on their crackers: 'Try it with turkey and cheese. Try it with peanut butter'. Hedberg quipped, 'but I like crackers man, that's why I bought it. You've got no faith in the product itself.'

Branding event

In this current climate of restraining budget cuts, the UM decided to hire Vandejong, a marketing company specializing in creative communication, to spruce up our branding and to come up with a new slogan. During the branding event they hosted last week, they workshopped '*Echte antwoorden vinden we samen*' as our new motto. (It roughly translates into 'We find real answers together', but they are still mulling over the proper translation for it). Vandejong also presented various color schemes and design templates – with the idea of using rocks/pebbles in various shapes and sizes – for our communication materials. Before I start expressing my various concerns, let me first caveat that: 1) people from Vandejong were very lovely folks; and 2) I don't necessarily have issues with updating our visuals every now and then. I think if done right, it can be a wonderful thing. Having said that, here is the question I posed to Vandejong and our Marketing & Communications team present during the event: "Is there a more substantive strategy behind this new marketing strategy?" In other words, what is our vision for the future (more substantively) and what steps are we taking to get there?

Turn fifty

According to our latest strategic program, our current aspiration is to be 'the European university of the Netherlands' and we definitely have the potential to be an extraordinary university. From possibly hosting the Einstein Telescope to animal-component free meat production or our interdisciplinary Global Studies Bachelor's Program, some of our researchers and educators are doing truly amazing things.

The uncomfortable truth, however, is that we are about to turn fifty years old (in 2026). While there is much to celebrate, there are reasons for concern as well, which comes with some sense of urgency to reassess who we are and how we want to comport ourselves in the future. For starters, Maastricht was ranked

10th in the Times Higher Education Young University Rankings in 2024. This is a ranking of the world's best universities that are fifty years old or younger. Once we shed the qualifier of being 'young', we drop down to 138th. For whatever it's worth, I believe that so long as we are continuously growing and have a sense of purpose (that we are doing something good) that is more important than any ranking. We don't have to be Oxford or Harvard, but rather, we want to be uniquely Maastricht.

Dog turd

However, here in lies my concern: Many of us feel that the answer to what makes Maastricht special can't just be our PBL system anymore. The proposed slogan of 'We find real answers together' can also easily be replaced with that of any other Dutch University's slogan like 'Understanding Society' (Tilburg) or 'Master Your Future' (Utrecht). In other words, slogans and color schemes won't really matter, if what's inside the box isn't up to snuff. As another brilliant comedian, John Oliver put it, you can gift wrap a dog turd, but it's still a dog turd. To be clear, I'm not saying we're dog turds, but I do feel like we are currently experiencing a serious midlife crisis and we just bought ourselves a new Porsche (thanks Vandejong!). But there is a corresponding emptiness and a sense of unfulfillment that comes with this. What we now need is a careful introspection and a more substantive reassessment of what we are about.

Crackers

With our international orientation also being put to the test under the new government's policies, it is paramount for us to (re)define ourselves and how we position ourselves in the world. What can potentially help us in this quest is not just to seek guidance from marketing experts, but from firms like the Minerva Project who have a lot of experience helping elite universities all over the world to innovate themselves from within. (Full disclosure, I'm currently trying to recruit Minerva for my Conflict Prevention & Resolution course and may be a bit biased). Regardless of how we approach making Maastricht more uniquely Maastricht, one thing is clear: We need to invest not only in our aesthetics, but also what is underneath it. In short, we need to be better crackers!

Mark Kawakami

Running clubs are popping up everywhere

“OUR GOAL: MAKING RUNNING SEXY”

Running clubs are becoming increasingly popular with students. In Maastricht three have recently been founded: After Friday Night, Social Run Club and Maastricht Girl Run. All are free and open to all fitness levels. It's not about performance, but more about the social aspect. You never run alone, you make new connections.

Text: Lena Reichel **Photos:** Ellen Oosterhof

It's Sunday morning, 9:50 AM. I'm standing on Plein 1992, surrounded by groups of people dressed, like me, in brightly coloured running gear. The crowd is a mix of young men and women, mostly students. I hear a language I don't recognise. Someone cracks a cheesy joke in English. I've just tightened my shoelaces for the second time. This is the reg-

ular morning meet-up of After Friday Night (AFN), one of the many running clubs that have been popping up everywhere recently.

Top of Form

“I had a late night, but I'm still here”, laughs Ziggy Cathalina (28) as he looks around the

square. He's one of AFN's founders, along with his friends Stef Roelings (28) and Teun Prompers (26). Cathalina studied European Studies, Roelings has a creative background and Prompers is training to be a physiotherapist. They've been running AFN since the winter of 2023.

“Time to go!” Cathalina calls to the fifty run-

ners gathered. On Hoge Brug, he splits the group into four, each heading off for different distances. I'll be running five kilometres. And off we go. One of the runners waves his phone in the air and takes a selfie that will later find its way to AFN's Instagram page. It'll sit among photos and reels of students, PhD candidates or Maastricht locals – first running through Maastricht, then relaxing with coffee or pizza, as if the running was just a warm-up for the real fun.

“It wasn't really about running”, explains Cathalina. He and his friends wanted to create something together. “Running just happened to be how we started.” Stef Roelings designed a logo, Cathalina took care of communications, and Teun Prompers pitched in with photography. The question they asked was: “How can we make running sexy?” Since starting last winter, the club has grown rapidly. “We started with about 10 people, and then one day, suddenly, we were 50 strong.”

AFN welcomes both experienced runners and beginners. Everyone can push their limits at their own pace. Running has been surging in popularity recently, and it seems Maastricht is now eager to join the trend. Some participants are training for marathons, while others see running as a way to explore the city on foot, like one first-year student from Australia who arrived in Maastricht only three days ago.

“Running clubs are everywhere back home”, she says, happy to have joined one so quickly. And it's about more than just running: “You get to wear cool workout clothes, maybe a mini bag, a nice pair of sunglasses – it makes it even more fun”, say several people.

From solo to social

In April 2024, Lucas Muijtens had had enough of running alone. The 24-year-old student, who's always been into exercise and



Social Run Club's warming up in the Stadspark



Maastricht Girl Run running by the Maas

The trend: social over performance

After Friday Night, Social Run Club and Maastricht Girl Run. All three are free and open to all fitness levels. It's not about performance, but more about the social aspect. You never run alone, and you make new connections.

It all started during the pandemic, when there wasn't much else to do but run. And the atmosphere is casual: "Sometimes we don't see someone for weeks, but they usually come back", says Ziggy Cathalina of AFN.

The question that arises is: does this trend affect UROS, the Maastricht Student Athletics Association?

"We love the surge of interest in running, but we offer more than these clubs do", explains UROS secretary Oliver Castro Konings (19). "If you want more professional coaching, you can join us for running and other athletics disciplines."

However, membership isn't free. And first-year students in particular may be hesitant to commit, already juggling full schedules. But UROS believes there's a misunderstanding: "A lot of students think they have to attend every time, but that's not true. If you do come regularly, you might be able to compete in athletics events. And we're not just about competition – it's fun here, too!"

nutrition, admits, "It just gets boring after a while." This is hardly surprising, considering that he trains every day for IRONMAN triathlons and other races. While pursuing his second master's in Biomedical Sciences, he decided to start his Social Run Club.

It's a crisp Saturday morning, perfect for a run. I meet Muijtjens on the grass by the city wall. You can tell from his posture that he's the kind of person who can't sit still, and his enthusiasm is contagious. The group quickly forms; the vibe is relaxed. What started as a small private group has since grown into a community of nearly a thousand members. They don't all show up every time, though. Muijtjens, who comes up with a new route each week, is clearly proud of this large group of like-minded people. "Lots of new faces today! We'll stop at Servaasbrug after five kilometres. If you're up for it, you can join me for an extra kilometre afterwards. Ready?" It seems that today's participants are mostly ready to make new connections, buzzing as they are with curiosity and conversation. Many are first-year international students. "This is so much better than the boring introduction day", says one as we jump up and down to warm up.

The group is large. Muijtjens leads the way. It feels a bit like a marathon, but without the pressure to be the fastest. We even get applause as we cross the bridge over the Meuse River. You can feel the workout vibe, connecting you with the fifty people around you. Muijtjens manages all this on his own. "The group stays together at one pace, which actually gives you more energy", he explains later, as we gather at Coffeelovers for drinks. But the club has grown so much since the academic year started. Has it been a challenge, even for someone with his experience? "Yes,

but luckily, I have friends helping out now." Despite the club's popularity, he has no plans to make any money from it. On the contrary, participants actually get discounts on nutrition and physiotherapy through partnerships.

Safe space for girls

The next day, same time and place, nearly eighty young women gather on the grass for Maastricht Girl Run. They form small groups; few seem to have come alone. The atmosphere is calm, voices mingling as others soak up the morning sun. The club, founded this past August, already has 600 members. How did it grow so fast? Founder Leila Nickel (27), a second-year Psychology student: "I kept seeing a lot of guys in AFN's Instagram photos. If you've never run before, that can be intimidating. So I thought, why not start my own club? Girl Run was up and running the next day." It was an instant success, with a hundred women showing up for the first run. Many could use some help getting started. "Do you eat before or after?" "Which shoes are best?" The pace is relaxed, leaving plenty of breath for chatting. Nickel has tailored the group to meet participants' needs in terms of distance, pace and running days. Above all, she wanted to create "a safe space, an environment where everyone feels comfortable". As a girl, I completely understand. It's hard to explain; the other groups are fun, but with just girls, it's more laid-back and you can talk more openly. That's what makes Girl Run feel like a safe space. One participant puts it this way: "If I want to push myself, I go to AFN. Girl Run is more beginner friendly. But most importantly, there's no competition." I'd say Social Run Club is somewhere in between.

background



Illustration: Shutterstock

New tool helps weigh pros and cons of being open about your mental health

Imagine you have autism or suffer from depression. Should you share this with your fellow students or colleagues? And if so, when is the right time? Researchers have developed a tool to support students and staff with mental health conditions in making this decision.

“Will they still take me seriously?” “Will I ever get promoted?” “Will I still fit in?” These are common concerns for people with mental health conditions. Every time they consider being open about their mental health with a supervisor, tutor, colleague or fellow student, they have to weigh the pros and cons of the decision. Sharing may help you gain access to support and accommodations, but it can also make you feel vulnerable and expose you to potential negative reactions.

Difficult

Health science researchers Yil Severijns and Thomas Gültzow understood how difficult this decision can be. With funding from the Diversity & Inclusivity Office, they collaborated with Sanne Brouwers, Véronique Vancauwenbergh, Daniëlle Zijlstra and Femke den Uil to develop a decision-making tool that helps people weigh the pros and cons.

“We started by interviewing students and staff members

who had been in this situation”, explains Severijns, who, like Gültzow, now works at the Open Universiteit. “We then used a program to describe the pros and cons of disclosing a mental health condition and create a list of statements focused on what matters to the user. For example, ‘I want to talk about my mental health issues at UM to help make it easier for others to share theirs.’”

Helpful

“The tool is designed to help users clarify what they want. It doesn’t steer you towards a particular decision”, says Gültzow. “Whether you disclose your mental health condition or not, either is perfectly fine.” The tool provides users with a personalised summary of their answers rather than concrete advice, helping them come to their own conclusion.

Users also receive an overview of available mental health resources at UM, which the researchers found to be an

important part of the tool. “There’s a lot of support available, and plenty of information, but people just don’t seem to know about it”, says Gültzow. “For example, we discovered that UM has a buddy system where students support each other. We had no idea it existed, even though we’d been working on the topic for a while. Our student assistants didn’t know about it either, and almost none of the students we spoke to did.” Severijns adds, “If you’re struggling with your mental health, you simply may not have the energy to comb through the entire UM website. That’s why the overview is so helpful.”

The researchers are currently in talks with various university departments to make the tool available to UM students and staff.

Cleo Freriks

Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

10- 10, 10.00h	Eline Berends
10- 10, 13.00h	April C.E. van Gennip
10- 10, 16.00h	Inge T.H. Römgens
11- 10, 10.00h	Jelle L. Faessen
11- 10, 13.00h	Anne C.M. Cuijpers
11- 10, 16.30h	Dr. Gijs H. Goossens inauguratie
14- 10, 10.00h	Guanguao Zhang Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Dalian University of Technology
14- 10, 13.00h	Jeroen B. van der Linden
15- 10, 10.00h	Max M. Meertens
15- 10, 13.00h	Khalid M. Alameer
15- 10, 16.00h	Maarten Van Herck Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Hasselt University
18- 10, 10.00h	Anne G.R. Visser
18- 10, 13.00h	Tom J.H. van Mulken
18- 10, 16.30h	Dr. Jessica Mesman inauguratie
21- 10, 13.00h	Sneha Mithun
22- 10, 10.00h	Ine Nieste Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University and Hasselt University
22- 10, 16.00h	Julie E. Oomens



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www.maastrichtuniversity.nl

achtergrond



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Open zijn over je mentale gezondheid? Nieuwe tool helpt voor- en nadelen af te wegen

Stel – je hebt autisme of je kampt met een depressie. Vertel je dat aan je medestudenten of collega's? En zo ja, welk moment is daarvoor geschikt? Een nieuwe keuzehulp moet studenten en medewerkers met mentale gezondheidsproblemen helpen bij het maken van deze beslissing.

'Gaan ze me nog voor vol aanzien?' 'Krijg ik ooit nog een promotie?' 'Hoor ik er straks nog wel bij?' Dit soort gedachtes zullen mensen met mentale gezondheidsproblemen mogelijk bekend voorkomen. Iedere keer wanneer ze overwegen om hun leidinggevende, een tutor, een collega of een medestudent te vertellen wat er speelt, moeten ze een afweging maken. Open zijn betekent dat je hulp kunt krijgen, maar je stelt je ook kwetsbaar op, met eventueel negatieve reacties als gevolg.

Geen gemakkelijke beslissing, vonden gezondheidswetenschappers Yil Severijns en Thomas Gültzow. Ze vroegen geld aan bij het Diversity&Inclusivity Office en ontwikkelden samen met Sanne Brouwers, Véronique Vancauwenbergh, Daniëlle Zijlstra en Femke den Uil een keuzehulp die helpt de voor- en nadelen op een rij te zetten.

"We hebben eerst studenten en medewerkers die in deze situatie zaten geïnterviewd", vertelt Severijns, die net als

Gültzow inmiddels bij de Open Universiteit werkt. "Vervolgens hebben we in een programma de voor- en nadelen beschreven (van het wel of niet delen van je problemen) en een lijst gemaakt met stellingen. Die gaan over waar je waarde aan hecht. Bijvoorbeeld: 'Ik wil over mijn mentale problemen praten binnen de UM zodat het mogelijk voor anderen ook makkelijker wordt om over hun mentale problemen te praten.'"

"Het gaat er om dat je meer inzicht krijgt in wat jij wil. We willen niemand in een bepaalde richting duwen", zegt Gültzow. "Wel of niet vertellen – het is allebei prima." Wie de keuzehulp heeft doorlopen, krijgt dan ook geen kant-en-klaar advies, maar een persoonlijke samenvatting van de eerder ingevulde vragen en stellingen. Daar kun je zelf een conclusie uit trekken.

Ook krijgt iedereen een overzicht van waar je voor hulp terecht kunt binnen de UM. Een zeer noodzakelijke toevoe-

ging, merkten de makers. "Er is heel veel en er bestaat ook al veel informatie over, maar toch weten mensen het op de een of andere manier niet", zegt Gültzow. "We kwamen er bijvoorbeeld achter dat er een buddy-systeem bestaat, waarbij studenten andere studenten helpen. Dat wisten wij niet, terwijl we toch al een tijd met het onderwerp bezig waren, dat wisten onze student-assistenten niet en ook vrijwel alle studenten die we hebben gesproken niet." Daarbij, zegt Severijns, "als je niet lekker in je vel zit, dan heb je misschien gewoon niet de energie om de hele UM-website door te spitten. Ook daarom is een overzicht prettig." De makers zijn op dit moment in gesprek met verschillende afdelingen binnen de UM om ervoor te zorgen dat de keuzehulp beschikbaar komt voor studenten en medewerkers.

Cleo Freriks

colofon

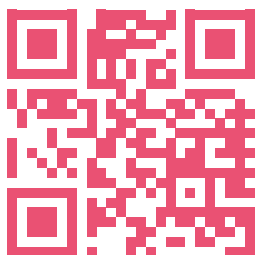
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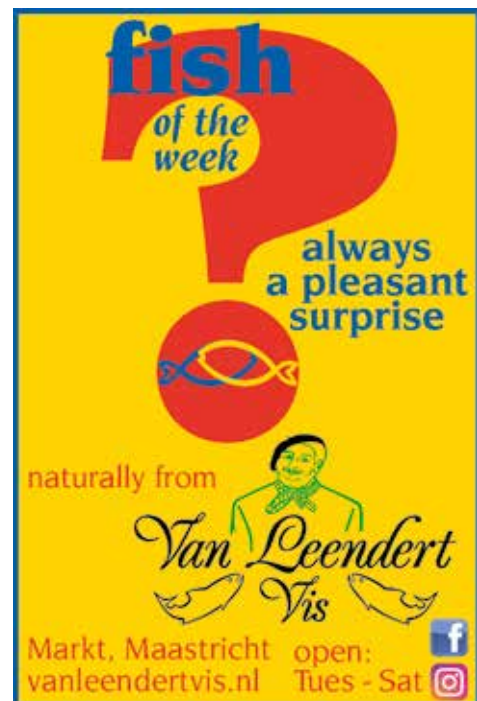
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