

# observant

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Rianne Letschert: “It feels like the ground is being pulled from under us”

## The political noose around UM is tightening

*The Dutch Minister of Education, Bruins, will be making it even harder for universities to offer programmes in English. Institutions like Maastricht University, which believe they should be granted exceptional status due to their location in a shrinking region and their international profile, will need to provide even stronger justification for this claim. This was outlined in a letter Bruins sent to the House of Representatives this week. “It’s another blow”, says President of the Executive Board Rianne Letschert, who describes the situation as “poor governance” and “an attack from the government”.*

Following the previous government’s lead, Minister Bruins intends to limit the intake of international students by allowing fewer English-taught programmes. His plan includes a review of all programmes in the Netherlands, granting exceptions in cases of labour market shortages, locations in shrinking regions and “international uniqueness”. However, Bruins writes that he will be strict, stating that “the exception shouldn’t become the rule”.

### Unrest

“This is yet another blow to us”, says UM President Rianne Letschert. “We’ve been struggling with this issue for three years, and we still don’t know where we stand. A while ago, the government said they would make a number of exceptions for English-taught programmes, stating that regional circumstances would play a significant role. But now the minister wants to limit the number of exceptions. We’ve had discussions with him, and he claims to understand UM’s unique position. But does this mean we won’t be affected? This letter doesn’t answer that question. It doesn’t say, “The combination of being located in a shrinking region and having a unique profile means you can continue to offer programmes in English.” This uncertainty is causing unrest among existing staff, as well as international and Dutch high school students exploring their options, regional mayors, local officials, businesses – you name it.”

### Budget cuts

“It feels like the ground is being pulled from under us. On top of the measures to limit the intake of international students, severe cuts to research funding are planned, which will impact UM significantly. The axing of starter grants will hit us twice as hard because – like the two other young universities, Tilburg and Twente – we received additional grants to make up for a historically lower level of

research funding.” She describes the situation as an “attack from the government”. “I believe the ministry has a responsibility towards us. Almost every page of the coalition agreement mentions innovation, and how important the government deems it to be. Yet what do they do? Deal out blows like this. I understand the need for budget cuts – all sectors will have to contribute – but if these cuts undermine the fundamental tasks of universities, I consider that poor governance.”

### Goodwill

Bruins ultimately aims to save €293 million by reducing the intake of international students, expecting universities to take the initiative through “self-management”. Letschert will need to consult with administrators from other universities to determine who will offer which programme in which language. This will require goodwill and compromise. According to Letschert, these discussions have been ongoing for quite some time. “Each university will have to absorb a hit, but I hope they recognise that we at UM are being impacted in many ways.”

### Danger zone

How many UM programmes are in the danger zone? What does the future hold for a programme like Psychology, which is offered in both Dutch and English in Maastricht? “The Dutch version focuses more on the clinical side, while the English version emphasises the neuroscientific side. They each have a distinct profile. The same goes for Dutch Law and the English-taught European Law School – they’re two completely different programmes.” However, Letschert acknowledges that every university will defend their own programmes in this way, “which only makes sense”.

### Demonstration

What is the next step? Waiting is not in Letschert’s nature. She urges everyone to join the demonstration against education cuts in Utrecht on 14 November. “We as the Executive Board will participate as well. It’s important to involve staff and students in this; we need to collectively show that this is a threat to us.” She is also working on a second plan (yet to be fully developed), the first being the Education Manifesto sent to the government earlier this year by UM and other educational institutions in Limburg, along with the province and core municipalities, calling for tailored regulations.

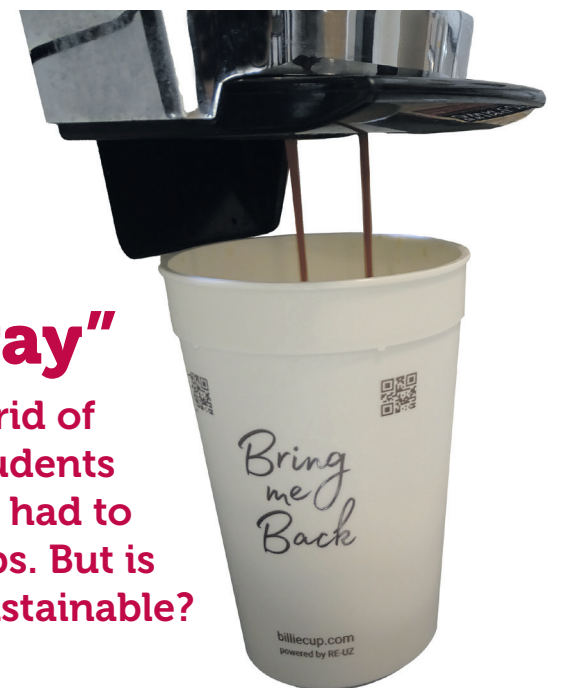
Wendy Degens



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NO NEW ISSUE NEXT WEEK

The next newspaper will be Thursday, 31 October.



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## editorial

## “Is this really national news?”

It's Sunday evening, 9:44 PM. My phone buzzes, and out of the corner of my eye, I see a notification pop up in the *Observant* group chat. Odd. We've long agreed that the chat is off-limits on weekends – unless, of course, the university is on fire, or there's been another cyber-attack. “Sorry, I know it's Sunday evening, but I couldn't resist! The meditation sex space has made national news”, writes colleague WD, attaching a link to *nu.nl*.

A flurry of digital excitement follows, along with a bit of confusion (“Is this really national news?”) and a stream of congratulatory emojis (grins, flexed biceps and thumbs up) for editor DV, who wrote the article about the “Mindfulness” at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The meditation cubicle needs be removed because students aren't just using it for its intended purpose – they've been having sex in it, too. A day later, what we considered to be “minor and light-hearted news” has been picked up by half the Dutch press, from *NOS*, *AD*, *Telegraaf*, *L1* and *Hart van Nederland* to *RTL*, *De Limburger* and *De Nieuwe Ster*.

It's not unusual for *Observant* articles to be picked up by other media, but rarely on this scale. It seems sex really does sell.

Is republishing stories from other media outlets allowed? Not without proper credit. Standard journalistic practice is to clearly attribute the original source (not tucked away at the bottom). Every outlet did so, which we appreciate. Those who don't can expect a phone call or email from us. We stick to the same rule when republishing stories from other sources, always giving credit where credit is due. As we constantly remind our students, facts matter. It's all too easy for mistakes to creep into a story without you realising. It happened here as well. Some outlets copied the article almost verbatim, only dropping or adding the odd phrase. Others more or less rewrote it, sometimes (unintentionally?) embellishing it. For example, some journalists wrote that the Mindfulness has already been removed. That's not true – it's still there. It hasn't been replaced by yoga mats, either. And there were no meeting minutes involved, despite what one outlet claimed; DV heard about it during a Faculty Council meeting. As for the claims about “several” or “various” students being involved, no specific numbers were given. We assume there were at least two.

Then there's the photo. You can't just publish a photo without permission from, and sometimes payment to, the photographer. Those who do often find themselves facing legal action, as we've learnt the hard way. Three outlets asked if they could use our photo. Two asked beforehand, as they should, and one after the fact. Some found their own images, while others just used ours without asking. On Monday afternoon, DV shares another link in the group chat. Even the satirical website *De Speld* (the Dutch equivalent of *The Onion*), saw potential in the story, tying it to the proposed budget cuts in higher education with the headline: “Universities taking drastic measures: cutting back on fuck pods.”

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

## “It's perfectly normal for sex not to be fantastic at first”

“There are a lot of myths and expectations surrounding the first time. People commonly believe that, for women, it might hurt a bit at first and then feel fantastic, or that it's just awful and painful. The latter is the message girls often receive: ‘It's uncomfortable; you'll bleed.’ I think that's a self-fulfilling

prophecy. If you go into it feeling anxious and tense, your pelvic floor muscles will tighten, you'll be distracted, and your vagina will remain dry and tight – so it's no wonder that penetration can be painful. The anticipation of pain leads to pain.” It's time to move away from this negative narrative, says Marieke Dewitte. So what should the message be instead? “You may feel nervous, certainly, but it's also a beautiful moment – the beginning of a journey of sexual exploration. Enjoying sex requires you to be relaxed, ready, with the right person in a safe context, and communicate with each other. Plus, you shouldn't think there's something wrong with you if it doesn't feel as passionate as what the media would have you believe.” Try not to make it “too big a deal”, she says, “a ‘wow’ moment with your dream partner that needs to be perfect.” Intimacy is about getting to know each other. “Young people go through what we call a ‘sexual interaction career’ that lasts about two years”, explains Dewitte. “It starts with kissing, then touching, and eventually penetrative sex. It's a gradual process. Skipping steps – as happens in some conservative cultures where couples jump straight from no physical contact to their wedding night – can lead to issues like pain, vaginismus (spasmodic contraction of the pelvic floor muscles and muscles around the vagina, ed.), erectile problems and premature

**What can you expect from your ‘first time’? Will it hurt, or will it be something exciting and wonderful? And how can you prepare for it? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte has the answers.**

ejaculation. It's also crucial to know what you like. Boys often have several years of experience with masturbation, while girls may only start exploring after they've had sex with a partner. As a result, they tend to be more passive during the ‘first time’ and may seem to rely on their partner to show them how to

enjoy sex. This puts pressure on men to perform, as if they have to prove themselves.” One last question: what do we mean by ‘the first time’? “The emphasis tends to be on penetration, but it's about so much more. It includes cuddling and touching; it's really the first time you feel like you're sharing something intimate with someone, whether you're straight, lesbian or gay.” Interestingly, Dewitte notes, young people are having penetrative sex for the first time later (around 18 years old) and having less sex than previous generations. Body insecurity might play a role here, as well as a decline in curiosity about sex. “In the past, you didn't really know what to expect; you didn't read about it, and no one talked about it. But now that there's so much information available online and in magazines, it doesn't seem as exciting anymore.”

Wendy Degens

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



## Student party NovUM suffers FASoS Faculty Council exodus: “I’ve never seen this before”

During the last election, student party NovUM managed to win two seats on the council of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS), but it has not been represented since the start of the academic year. One student switched parties, the other resigned his seat.

NovUM managed to win the votes of nearly two hundred FASoS students during the university elections last April, resulting in two seats for candidates Jules Boelens and Pierre Jault. The remaining three seats on the council went to members of the KAN party. But before the first council meeting in September, the balance shifted to one against four seats: over the summer, Jault switched allegiances to KAN, where he also immediately became a member of the party board. “After the election results, I never heard from NovUM again,” he tells Observant. “Disappointing. The party is only active during elections, working to get as many votes as possible. I quickly realised that KAN members also work hard during the rest of the year, doing what they were elected to do: represent students.” He’s not concerned about voters feeling ‘betrayed’. “NovUM and KAN’s manifestoes are practically the same. I’ll just keep fighting for the same things on the council.”

Changing parties like that is allowed, Niels

Harteman, Secretary to the Central Election Office, explains over the phone. “Just like in parliament, members are allowed to split off or change parties. Although I can’t remember that ever happening at UM before.”

### Lack of time

It means NovUM is no longer represented on the FASoS council, because the only remaining member, Jules Boelens, failed to show up to the first council meetings. He also failed to attend any of the weekly meetings of student representatives, says Karlijn Haagsman, chair (and member for academic staff). The reason given is a lack of time. He recently resigned his seat completely, NovUM chair Olga Kosjakova confirmed. Boelens himself was unable to be reached for comment this week.

The question remains whether anyone will succeed him. The two remaining NovUM candidates on the ballot, Niklas Erkes and Beti Ceban, are unlikely to step up. “Niklas has become a member of a Programme Committee in the meantime. Combining the two might lead to a conflict of interest, and take up too much time besides,” says Kosjakova. The party board was unable to reach Ceban. “She also only received one vote, so she was never actively involved.”

### Bad picture

NovUM thought they had found a solution after discussions with KAN: the number four on the KAN ballot could take up the vacated NovUM seat. However, due to doubts about procedure, she was not appointed during the latest council meeting. Rightly so, says Harteman. “The vacant seat can’t go to another party. For now, we’re still trying to contact the other two NovUM candidates. If they turn it down, then the seat will remain vacant for this academic year.”

How is it possible that candidates listed on the NovUM ballot had such a bad picture of the party or of what the position of council member entailed? “Last year, there were some problems, because one council member was suddenly inactive,” says chair Kosjakova. “So we were less able to guide the candidates. We have learned our lesson. A new board was appointed in September, and we are planning to organise workshops about the role of council member and have more regular meetings with our elected council members. Not just show our faces during elections. The situation at FASoS can never be allowed to happen again.”

Dennis Vaendel



## What happens when novels go global?

“

The recent news that Korean author Han Kang has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature made me prick up my ears. Next month, I’ll embark on a research project that looks at how readers around the world respond to four so-called ‘global novels’. These can be regarded as books which achieve widespread critical acclaim and large readerships outside their home countries. Think of the works of Elena Ferrante, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Haruki Murakami. And now, add to the list Han Kang.

These books might be popular, but they’re also often controversial. According to some critics, novels that “go global” lack local specificity: by trying to appeal to readers across the world, they cut down on the kind of rich detail and locally-relevant themes that only readers more familiar with their milieu can appreciate. Or, even worse, they might exoticise this difference, playing up stereotypes for outsiders. Add controversies about translation and the linguistic dominance of English into the mix, and you’ve got a potent combination of concerns.

Han Kang’s best-known novel, *The Vegetarian*, embodies many of these debates. When it won the International Man Booker Prize in 2016, its translator (who was jointly awarded the prize with Kang) was accused of turning its spare, modern prose into language reminiscent of a 19th century Victorian novel.

And there’s another linguistic controversy brewing closer to home, as a Dutch author is shortlisted for the Booker Prize for the first time. To be in the running, Yael van der Wouden had to write *The Safekeep* in English, although it is set in 1960s Overijssel. Van der Wouden has explicitly said that she took “a Dutch story and wrote it for others”. We have a lot of polarising think pieces on the subject, but what we don’t have yet is a systematic grasp of how real readers both inside and outside the countries depicted experience these novels. Are they aware of these controversies? How do they understand places and communities that they might experience only through the pages of a novel? I’m excited to find out...and I have a suspicion that it’s more complicated than we think.

”

Elsje Fourie, Associate Professor of Globalisation & Development

Mindfulness at FASoS needs to go “as quickly as possible”

## Complaints about students having sex in meditation space



Photo: Observant

The so-called Mindfulness at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) was intended to be a place of peace and meditation, but it turns out students also use it for other purposes. “Unhygienic”, say student members of the Faculty Council, who would rather the ‘nest’ be removed as quickly as possible.

The (almost) soundproof cubicle – complete with bench, cushions and a tablet to play meditation exercises or calming music – was installed in the ‘lounge’ where FASoS students can study and relax in the spring of 2022. However, the instruction on the banner next to it to ‘Do whatever feels good’ has been taken rather literally by some, the latest Faculty Council meeting revealed.

While student members initially try to be euphemistic (“sometimes two students emerge together”, “it is not being used for its intended purpose”), eventually they can no longer beat about the bush: “students are having sex in it”. Are we sure, FASoS Director Constance Sommerney wants to know. “Have people been caught, has anything been left behind? [Said with a wink] After all, it is possible to meditate in pairs.” But the students are sure: “It has been confirmed”, is the cryptic response.

Whatever the case may be, they would prefer the cubicle be removed sooner rather than later. “Even the thought is enough to stop students from wanting to use it.” Furthermore, it takes up a lot of space in an already crowded lounge, and “that would be better served by

more study places”.

However, moving it isn’t an option, says Sommerney. “Dismantling and re-installing it is too expensive.” The end of the Mindfulness was imminent anyway: it was paid for using NPO funds, intended to soften the consequences of the Covid pandemic. “But that money is no longer available. The decision had already been made to remove the cubicle in March 2025.” Considering the complaints, Sommerney will contact the company behind the Mindfulness to ask if it can be “removed as quickly as possible”.

Dennis Vaendel

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



Thom Vogel  
[Gorinchem, Nederland, 2003]

/ second-year student of  
International Business, member  
of Stoked Maastricht, the student  
boardsports association

/ relationship status: single

/ lives in Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“  
I can talk to my mother about  
anything, but I don't tell her  
everything  
”

**I couldn't live** without snowboarding. It's a huge part of my life. I got my first snowboard when I was eight, and I loved it immediately. I've been freestyle riding since I was ten – doing tricks in the air, jumping, sliding rails. When I'm on my board, I forget everything else and feel free. There's also the thrill of doing tricks. You're always trying new things, and getting them right feels amazing. You just keep wanting more. I go snowboarding about three times per week at the indoor ski centre SnowWorld in Landgraaf. I also coach two teams – one from Landgraaf, one from Amsterdam – and I'm taking a course to become a certified snowboard instructor.

**I'm doing everything I can** to be the best. I'm in the top five in the Netherlands, I was indoor champion of Belgium and the Netherlands last year, and I'll be competing in the World University Games in Turin in January 2025. Competitions aren't really my thing, though. I find competition days boring – there's a lot of waiting around, doing the same tricks over and over – and I'll never become a world-class snowboarder anyway. I prefer snowboarding with friends, doing tricks and making videos. And my studies are very important to me, as is my social life. I want to be able to go out and have fun, too – not that I go out every week, but still. I also want to have time for surfing. It's more zen, more relaxing. Snowboarding is all about adrenaline.

**Who doesn't like you?** [Thinks] There must be people who don't like me, but I couldn't say who. I generally get on well in groups, adapt pretty easily and treat people with respect. I'm usually self-assured, although sometimes I

come across as confident when I'm not. Around new people, for example. Showing insecurity doesn't help me; I'd rather convey through my body language – chest out, shoulders back – that I'm looking forward to meeting them. That kind of positive attitude creates a good mood, benefiting both you and the other person. It can come across as arrogant, but that's not my intention. That's not who I am.

**I tell my mother everything.** No. I can talk to her about anything, but I don't tell her everything. For example, I'll mention that I went out, but not that we were hungover the next morning. I have to live my own life; I don't live at home anymore. She understands that, but sometimes it's hard to let go. My little sister has moved out too, so the nest is empty.

**When we were younger,** my sister and I were always at each other's throats. We actually get on well and share a flat in Maastricht. We argue every now and then, but we always make up quickly – something we learnt from our parents. We're quite different; I'm very open and find it easy to connect with people, whereas my sister is more introverted. She's a second-year Medicine student. It's great to see her making friends here and studying with her classmates.

**If you could be a fly on the wall anywhere,** where would it be? At a CEO meeting of a large company like BMW or Tesla. I'd like to see what strategies they use. Do they listen to the quieter voices in the room?

Who's really in charge? After graduating, I'd like to work in the transport or automotive industry. After that, I want to open my own hotel. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time. I've been going to a hotel in Austria since I was young, and they make you feel so at home there. I worked there for two summers, waiting tables. That's not exactly what I want to do in the future, but it's great to be able to give people a wonderful and relaxing week. Hotel school seemed a bit too practical for me, and maybe too easy. I wanted to explore more broadly first, which is why I decided to go to university.

**What's the best trip you've ever been on?**

When I was ten, we went to South Africa as a family. I vividly remember the atmosphere on safari, that sense of being so close to nature. But Lapland was incredible too. The landscape was white with snow. It felt so peaceful. And it's bizarre that you can still feel cold wearing five layers of clothing, walking across a frozen lake – it's like being on a different planet.

What's the first thing you do when you get home? Eat. I eat all day long – lots of proteins and carbs, vegetables, fruit. I work out every day. Besides snowboarding two or three times per week, I go to the gym for strength training and on Fridays I go kickboxing.

**What's on your bedside table?** [Chuckles] I

don't have one. But on my bed, there's my phone, which I use as an alarm, and a novel, *The Rosie Result*. It's the third book in a series where the main character is autistic. It's super funny and interesting. In the first book, he wants a girlfriend, and makes a list of criteria she has to meet. He ends up falling for someone who doesn't meet his criteria. He learns that you can't control your feelings with a checklist.

Riki Janssen

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

## The Executive Board feels that these young researchers need more financial support

# UM not accepting new Chinese scholarship PhD students for now

Maastricht University will not be accepting any new Chinese scholarship PhD students for the time being. The Executive Board wants the China Scholarship Council (CSC) to provide these young researchers with more financial support than the €1350 per month they currently receive. Rector Pamela Habibović: “Although they are not university employees, we consider them part of our staff, and we have a duty of care towards them.”

UM has collaborated with the CSC for five years. The CSC, a body under the Chinese Ministry of Education, offers scholarships to graduates for full-time PhD programmes abroad. Each year, around fifty to seventy CSC-funded researchers begin their PhDs in Maastricht. Last September saw the arrival of the latest and, for now, last group of 23 researchers.

The current bilateral cooperation agreement expired in September 2024 and has not been renewed, explain Rector Pamela Habibović and Professor of Legal Psychology Henry Otgaar, coordinator of these scholarships on behalf of UM. “We are open to discussing a new agreement, but only if financial support is increased. Yes, international cooperation is very important to us”, says the rector, “and their work contributes to the quality of our research. But over the past two years, we’ve seen that some Chinese PhD candidates struggle to live on €1350 per month. It’s well below the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) standard of €1613, and we see it as our responsibility to address this.”

### Tax inspectors

UM has what is known as a “hospitality agreement” with these Chinese researchers, rather than an employment relationship. And without an employment relationship, the university cannot supplement the scholarship from its own funds, the rector explains. Helping with housing costs in the first year, as UM does, is already a grey area. However, some universities, like the University of Groningen, do supplement these scholarships. Habibović: “It seems to depend heavily on individual tax

inspectors.” UM and Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the umbrella organisation of Dutch universities, are currently discussing the matter with the Dutch Ministry of Education, among others.

Dutch universities receive a government bonus of around €80,000 for each external PhD candidate, whether from the Netherlands or abroad, who successfully completes their PhD. This makes externally funded researchers attractive. Nevertheless, UM is sticking to its position, in line with a UNL guideline stating that the IND minimum standard should apply to all new scholarship PhD students from 1 January 2025. Habibović: “We also have a smaller number of scholarship researchers from other continents, and they too sometimes have to get by on less.”

### Second-class staff

However, salary isn’t the only source of frustration for Chinese researchers in Maastricht. Previous interviews by *Observant* revealed that some feel they are treated as ‘second-class staff’.



Image: Shutterstock

Since they are not formally employees, UM is not obliged to provide them with Christmas gifts, home office equipment, internet allowances or conference grants. According to Habibović, “There are definitely areas for improvement. Moreover, the information they receive before coming to Maastricht is inadequate. Many don’t fully understand what they’re signing up for and are unaware of the differences between them and ‘internal’ PhD candidates. And PhD supervision comes with certain obligations.

It’s important to provide them with the resources to attend conferences or do lab work; this can only improve the quality of the research.” Otgaar adds, “That’s why the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience has created a document with guidelines, which has been shared across the university.”

### Knowledge security

Finally, is knowledge security a factor? After all, Dutch politicians are concerned that Chinese researchers might pass sensitive information to their government. “UM has developed a framework for assessing knowledge security”, says the rector. “If necessary, we can evaluate a candidate or project – which university they’re from, the nature of the project, etc. It’s a solid framework. We also want more transparency about the agreements these candidates enter into with the CSC. What do these agreements say, and are they acceptable to us? That’s something to pay attention to.”

## background



Mensa Tongersestraat in the early nineties Photo: archive Observant

## “Anything was possible. Internships? Just make a few calls and everyone had a placement”

Forty years ago, the then State University of Limburg established its Faculty of Economics at Tongersestraat 53. The School of Business and Economics is still located there today, but that’s about where the similarities end. Students from the first cohort remember it as being occasionally chaotic yet small-scale and informal, with ample room for personal initiative. “Doubts? Not until we found out there wasn’t even a second-year curriculum yet.”

A brand-new faculty with a teaching method never before used in economics education in the Netherlands – all in all, studying Economics in Maastricht in the 1980s was “quite an adventure”, says Folkert Jager (58). One he eagerly embarked upon in September 1984. “I had already visited Tilburg and Utrecht, but Problem-Based Learning (PBL) won me over. Two tutorials per week and independent study suited me perfectly.”

Harry Hol (60) also considered other options first. “I wanted to study business economics in Rotterdam until I came across a newspaper job advertisement for a professor at the new faculty in Maastricht. The small-scale setup described in the advert caught my interest. In Rotterdam, I’d be one of 1,700 first-year students; in Maastricht, one of only a hundred. Instead of overcrowded lectures, we’d have small PBL groups. That appealed to me, so I took the leap. Doubts? [Laughs] Not until later that first year, when we found out there wasn’t even a second-year curriculum yet. Or when six-week courses wrapped up in just three weeks, while others could’ve done with twelve.”

### Adapt

Both staff and students had to adapt, Jager recalls. “That first year was all about experimentation. We kept having to explain to tutors that they weren’t supposed to give lectures during tutorials... They knew how it worked in theory, but in practice, everyone was still finding their way. I remember two students who hadn’t realised we wouldn’t have any lectures at all and showed up unprepared for the first tutorial. We were pioneers.” But the small scale and occasional chaos also offered opportunities, they explain. “If you wanted, you could get involved in developing new course modules”, says Hol. “In the fourth year, Professor of Finance Paul van Loon took us to ABN Bank to discuss financial markets with a board member there. That was only possible because we were such a small group. And everything was very informal. We were on much more familiar terms with our professors than was common at the time.”

### Good students

“Anything was possible”, laughs Jager. “Internships at local companies like DSM? Just make

a few calls and everyone had a placement.”

Jager himself spent a year at the prestigious London School of Economics. Speaking of informal, “We got in because one of our professors called LSE and said, ‘I’ve got some good students for you.’ It never would’ve happened otherwise.”

### Look back

Both men look back fondly on their time in Maastricht and have gone on to have successful careers in business, working for large companies and as consultants. Did the teaching method at UM prepare them for working life? “In my early working years, I really benefited from PBL”, says Hol. “Colleagues who’d studied elsewhere had more immediate knowledge, but they tended to focus on one area when it came to solving problems. Business economics problems have many facets, and PBL taught me to recognise and address them all.”



Folkert Jager Photo: archive FJ



Harry Hol Photo: archive HH

Peter Doorackers

# One year without disposable cups: is it more sustainable?

## “The reusable cups are also just thrown away”

*Over a year ago, Maastricht University got rid of disposable cups. Students and staff have since had to rely on reusable cups or their own cups. However, doubts persist as to whether this system is more sustainable.*

From 1 July 2023, the university said goodbye to disposable cups, bringing UM in line with the European Union's Directive on single-use plastics (SUPs). The advice since has been to bring your own cup or mug from home or – for members of staff – from the department kitchenettes. In addition, caterer Eurest Campus and operators Bandito Espresso (two locations, on Oxfordlaan in Randwyck and at FASoS) and Coffeelovers in the SSC all offer their own reusable deposit cups for a euro each, which can be exchanged for a clean cup, a token, or a euro off your next purchase.

A year after implementation, a poll among students at various university buildings shows that few of them are enthusiastic about using their own cups. “It makes a mess in your bag” and “I often forget it” are common responses. The deposit system is more popular, but returning cups is a problem. For example, not every Eurest location accepts returns (because not everywhere has a suitable dishwasher) and walking back to the cafeteria or coffee bar is often “too far”. The result: lots of students have a hoard of deposit cups in their kitchen cupboards at home. “At a certain point, you just stop buying them.” Frequently mentioned alternatives are not drinking coffee at all, or buying coffee away from the university, where they do still give you a disposable cup.

### Less coffee

That effect can be seen, says Stephanie Bex, assistant location manager for Eurest, who runs the university restaurants. “Over

the last year, coffee sales from our unstaffed coffee machines have dropped by about 60 percent.” On the other hand, sales from coffee machines provided by MAAS have remained “more or less stable”, says Mike van Gerwen, contract manager ‘food and drink’ at UM. The difference? Eurest machines are only found in public areas where there are many students and visitors, whereas MAAS machines are usually in or near staff kitchenettes that often have ceramic mugs and a dishwasher. So the question is, is the new system more sustainable? Neither Bex nor Van Gerwen would swear to it. No, the rubbish bins are no longer full of disposable cups. “But we do see that the use of paper towels has increased, for example, presumably because people are using them to dry their cups,” says Van Gerwen. “And all the reusable cups have to go in the dishwasher, which means higher water and energy usage.” Caterer Eurest also notes that the number of car trips has gone up. “People now often choose to have reusable or ceramic cups provided at meetings and lunches. Those then have to be delivered and returned.”

### Hoarding

Bex also notes that staff members still often throw those reusable, hard plastic cups into the waste paper bin. Jeroen Brouwers, co-owner of Bandito Espresso, sees the same thing happen to ‘his’ reusable cups. “Sometimes it’s like people simply don’t care about that extra euro or sustainability. Then add the many students who take the cups home and staff members ‘hoarding’ them at the office just because they can’t be bothered to walk a short distance. Meaning I still have to buy an extra five hundred cups a month.” Eurest also regularly has to stock up on extra reusable cups, says Bex. “We have ordered about 30

thousand cups in total over the last year.” In other words, still extra plastic.

Not to mention the extra costs associated with the new system. “The plastic cups are really light, so they fly through the dishwasher, meaning all sorts of modifications or an expensive new machine,” sighs Brouwers. Not to mention that the plastic cups, unlike the ceramic ones, “all need to be dried by hand when they come out of the dishwasher”, says Bex. “And after meetings they need to be counted and returned. All extra work. We can’t and don’t want to make the coffee much more expensive, so we do notice the impact on the company.” Brouwers: “The new rules are a prime example of something that was decided by a bureaucrat with no thought given to the practical implications.”

### Culture shift

‘Side-effects’ like this are common with new regulations, says Rabbe Dormans, environment and sustainability adviser at UM. “Besides, the European SUP Directive is intended to reduce the amount of plastic in the environment, not necessarily to improve sustainability. But that can make the problem worse or increase the costs elsewhere.” And as long as the regulations don’t change, there is little UM can do. “Rijkswaterstaat says we can’t add a surcharge for a disposable cup, which ‘normal’ shops can do for to-go products.” But in the end it’s all about a culture shift, says Dormans. “Everyone should be a little more conscious about sustainability. Teaching people to bring their own reusable cup is just the first step.”

Dennis Vaendel



## Half a million cups donated

When the new system was implemented, there were still about half a million disposable cups printed with the UM logo in the cupboards. What happened to them? “They were all donated to the MUMC+,” says Mike van Gerwen, contract manager at Facility Services. “For hygiene reasons, different regulations apply to hospital patients, which means they are still permitted to use disposable cups. So the UM cups were sent to a good home.”

Photo: Observant

## background



Booklet with tips Photo: Observant

As well as working at the university, she was training to become an occupational therapist. Until she couldn't cope anymore. "In 2018, I was just done. I couldn't do it any longer." For a long time, Cobelens's burn-out was thought to have been the result of the amount of work she was doing, but after an investigation by an expert, it turns out that the real cause was the noise at her workstation. Cobelens eventually turns to HR adviser Pierre Schröder, who wants to help her, but is unsure how to tackle the situation. "I wasn't always aware of the problems she was facing." He gives the intercom as an example, which visitors use to announce themselves but Cobelens can't use. Eventually, Cobelens was unable to continue working at the university. "That was not fun," she admits. "There's a lot of pain, although I do have a pretty good sense of humour. I want to tell my story to pave the way for the people with a disability – particularly hearing impairment – who will come after me at the university." This is something she now uses her new job to do: she is the only occupational therapist specialised in working with people with a hearing impairment.

UM staff attend workshop to experience what it's like to be deaf

## "A disability doesn't mean people are stupid, but we do treat them that way"

*How do you deal with employees with a disability? It's a question Maastricht University regularly has to grapple with. Occupational therapist and former UM staff member Hanneke Cobelens, who is deaf, explains the issue in a specially organised workshop. "People don't listen, and all too often they fail to see the person behind the disability."*

It was enough to drive her mad when she worked at the Biobank. In the laboratory at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life sciences (FMHL), there was a fridge emitting a constant hum. For Cobelens, who wears hearing

aids, the hum was unbearable. "You can't filter the noise with hearing aids. It's all transmitted," she told participants at the workshop last Monday, including HR advisers, members of the Health and Safety services, and the Diversity Office.

Headphones playing a constant chatter are passed round so that the participants can experience what it's like to wear a hearing aid. Like being at a party with people talking on all sides, but you're not exactly sure who's actually speaking to you. Exhausting, as it turns out after a few minutes. And what is it like to hear (almost) nothing? Cobelens hands

out earbuds, the noise is instantly muted and it's hard to follow what is being said. People immediately start to talk more softly. "It's like you turn inward and don't count anymore", is the reaction.

### Exhausted

Cobelens felt the same. She spoke to her supervisor about it more than once, but felt unheard. "I thought I was alone," she says. "I kept working harder to prove myself. That led to me turning more and more inward." She gave her all to show that she was a valuable member of the team, in spite of her disability.

### Independent

"There is so much ignorance," acknowledges Schröder, "people are often afraid to discuss it with their supervisor or with HR. The barrier is too high, so how do we make sure that is lowered?" Fewer rules, simplified protocols, don't worry about what it costs is the consensus amongst the participants. "And don't make people too dependent," adds Cobelens. "A disability doesn't mean people are stupid, but they are often treated that way." Cobelens's lesson has been a valuable one for UM. A policy is being developed for people with a disability, says Netty Bekkers on behalf of the Diversity & Inclusivity Office. "We're on the cusp of a giant leap forward in the participation of people with a disability, the university should be a place where you feel welcome." Or as Schröder puts it: "It's not a question of 'at what cost', but 'for whose benefit'."

Deborah Blekkenhorst

## Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

10-10, 10.00h	Eline Berends	23-10, 16.00h	Alina Shirshikova
10-10, 13.00h	April C.E. van Gennip	24-10, 13.00h	Li Yang
10-10, 16.00h	Inge T.H. Römgens	25-10, 13.00h	Maarten H.P. Butink
11-10, 10.00h	Jelle L. Faessen	25-10, 16.00h	Thomas Jacobus de Geus
11-10, 13.00h	Anne C.M. Cuijpers	28-10, 10.00h	Christian A.M.R. van Slagmaat
11-10, 16.30h	Dr. Gijs H. Goossens inauguratie	28-10, 16.00h	Dennis Bontempi
14-10, 10.00h	Guanguao Zhang Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Dalian University of Technology	29-10, 10.00h	Stijn S.Horck
14-10, 13.00h	Jeroen B. van der Linden	29-10, 13.00h	Kelly M.C. Jardon
15-10, 10.00h	Max M. Meertens	29-10, 16.00h	Nina M. Possemis
15-10, 13.00h	Khalid M. Alameer	30-10, 10.00h	Magdalena Johanna Schellenberg
15-10, 16.00h	Maarten Van Herck Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Hasselt University	30-10, 16.00h	Shenlun Chen
18-10, 10.00h	Anne G.R. Visser	31-10, 10.00h	Yanchao Zhang
18-10, 13.00h	Tom J.H. van Mulken	01-11, 10.00h	Britt Bente Schuurman
18-10, 16.30h	Dr. Jessica Mesman inauguratie	01-11, 13.00h	Shaiv Amit Parikh
21-10, 10.00h	Ting Xu	01-11, 16.00h	Prof. dr. Wouter D. van Marken Lichtenbelt afscheidscollege
21-10, 13.00h	Sneha Mithun	04-11, 10.00h	Kiki Waeijen-Smit
21-10, 16.00h	Michelle Gonzalez Amador	04-11, 13.00h	Johannes Tobias Reckweg
22-10, 10.00h	Ine Nieste Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University and Hasselt University	04-11, 16.00h	Maria Martha Suverein
22-10, 16.00h	Julie E. Oomens	05-11, 10.00h	Susan Buhrs
23-10, 10.00h	Laura A. Kirsch	05-11, 16.00h	Martina Coli Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - University of Florence
23-10, 13.00h	Lieve van Veggel Double Doctorate degree Maastricht University - Hasselt University/tUL	06-11, 10.00h	Gabriele Addario
		06-11, 13.00h	Tuğçe Schmitt
		07-11, 10.00h	Kailiang Zheng
		07-11, 16.00h	Thales Felipe Costa Bertaglia
		08-11, 10.00h	Chaira Serrarens

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## achtergrond



Uitvouwboekje met tips Foto: Observant

Medewerkers UM ervaren in workshop hoe het is om doof te zijn

## “Een beperking betekent niet dat mensen dom zijn, maar zo behandelen we ze wel”

*Hoe ga je om met werknemers met een beperking? Het is een vraag waar ook de Universiteit Maastricht regelmatig mee worstelt. Ergotherapeute en voormalig UM-medewerkster Hanneke Cobelens - zelf doof - legt in een speciaal georganiseerde workshop de vinger op de zere plek. “Er wordt niet geluisterd en te vaak wordt de mens achter de beperking niet gezien.”*

Gek werd ze ervan, op haar werkplek bij de Biobank. In het laboratorium van de faculteit Health, Medicine and Life sciences (FMHL) stond voortdurend een koelkast te brommen. Cobelens, die een gehoorapparaat draagt,

ervoer de brom als een ondraaglijk iets. “Je kan het geluid niet filteren als je zo’n apparaat draagt. Alles komt binnen”, vertelt ze afgelopen maandag aan de deelnemers van de workshop, onder wie HR-adviseurs, medewerkers van de arbo-dienst van de universiteit en het Diversity Office. Om hen te laten ervaren hoe het is om een gehoorapparaat te dragen, gaat een koptelefoon rond waaruit een voortdurend gekwetter klinkt. Alsof je op een feestje van alle kanten wordt aangesproken maar niet weet wie er nu eigenlijk tegen je praat. Vermoeiend, zo blijkt al na enkele minuten. En hoe het is om weinig tot niets te horen? Cobelens deelt oordopjes

uit, het geluid verstomt direct en het is moeilijk te volgen wat er wordt gezegd. Mensen gaan direct zachter praten. “Het is alsof je naar binnen keert en niet meer meetelt”, klinkt het.

### Uitgeput

Ook Cobelens kreeg dat gevoel. Ze meldde zich hiermee meer dan eens bij haar baas, maar voelde zich niet gehoord. “Ik dacht echt dat ik er alleen voor stond”, vertelt ze. “Ik ging steeds harder werken om mezelf maar te bewijzen. Dat leidde ertoe dat ik steeds meer in mezelf keerde.” Ze zet alles op alles om toch vooral te laten zien dat ze meetelt op de

werkvloer, ondanks haar beperking. Naast haar werk op de universiteit, volgt ze ook een opleiding tot ergotherapeut. Tot ze het niet meer volhoudt. “In 2018 ging bij mij het licht uit. Ik kon niet meer.”

Lang wordt gedacht dat Cobelens’ burn-out te maken heeft met de hoeveelheid werk die ze verzet, maar na onderzoek van een arbeidsdeskundige blijkt het geluid op haar werkplek de boosdoener. Cobelens komt uiteindelijk terecht bij HR-adviseur Pierre Schröder die haar graag wil helpen, maar ook worstelt hoe met de situatie om te gaan. “Ik realiseerde me niet altijd waar zij tegenaan liep.” Hij geeft het voorbeeld van een intercom waar mensen zich kunnen melden maar waar Cobelens niks aan heeft.

Uiteindelijk kan ze niet verder bij de universiteit. “Dat was geen pretje”, erkent ze. “Er zit veel pijn, al beschik ik over een flinke dosis humor. Door mijn verhaal te vertellen wil ik de weg plaveien voor mensen na mij met een beperking, en met name een auditieve, binnen de universiteit.” Dat doet ze vanuit haar nieuwe vakgebied: ze is de enige in Nederland die zich heeft gespecialiseerd in ergotherapie voor mensen met een auditieve beperking.

### Onafhankelijk

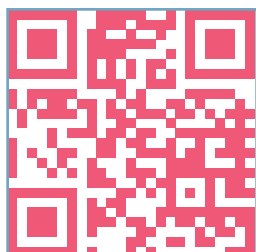
“Er is veel onwetendheid”, erkent Schröder, “mensen durven het vaak niet te bespreken met hun baas of met personeelszaken. De drempel is hoog, hoe zorgen we ervoor dat die naar beneden gaat?” Maak minder regels, vergemakkelijk de protocollen, en vraag niet direct wat het kost, klinkt het eensgezind onder de aanwezigen. “En maak mensen niet afhankelijk”, voegt Cobelens eraan toe. “Een beperking betekent niet dat mensen dom zijn, maar zo worden ze vaak wel behandeld.” Binnen de UM is de les van Cobelens een waardevolle geweest. Er is beleid in de maak voor mensen met een functiebeperking, vertelt Netty Bekkers namens het Diversity & Inclusivity Office. “We staan aan de vooravond van een grote sprong om mensen met een beperking meer te betrekken, de universiteit moet een plek zijn waar je welkom bent.” Of zoals Schröder het zegt: “Het gaat niet om de vraag: ten laste van wie, maar ten gunste van wie.”

Deborah Blekkenhorst

## colofon

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