

observant

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Illustration: Simone Golob

“WE’VE GOT ENOUGH ON OUR PLATES”

Observant made the rounds in the faculties - how does the workplace feel about the merger plans between Maastricht University and the hospital? P. 7-9



Those who enjoy reading on paper will have to wait until Thursday, January 9th. That’s when a fresh newspaper will be in the racks again. But don’t worry: in the coming weeks, the latest news will be available at observantonline.nl. We wish everyone happy holidays!

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editorial

Passing the torch

This week marks 34 years since my job interview at *Observant*. The interview took place in the Feestzaal on Bouillonstraat. I was nervous, sitting in that grand room with two experienced journalists who didn't hesitate to ask tough questions. But on the train back to Nijmegen, the city where I'd studied, I felt mostly optimistic. That feeling turned out to be justified; a few weeks later, I was proud to call myself an editor at *Observant*. I planned to stay in Maastricht for about five years, thinking that would be a good amount of time, before seeking new opportunities elsewhere. As is so often the case, life had other plans. This week, I'm celebrating my 65th birthday. After about five years as an editor, I became editor-in-chief, a position I've now held for over 28 years. I stayed. For love, for the joy of living in and around Maastricht, and because the job is never dull. Journalists enjoy a lot of freedom here, and there's never a shortage of interesting topics and fascinating people at this university (as at any). Moreover, the *Observant* team has always felt like family to me, a warm and welcoming community. And it still does.

That's not to say everyone has always been pleased with our work. Especially in the past, university administrators were often less than thrilled with our articles. But that's part and parcel of independent journalism. In fact, it's when we receive praise from the administration that we begin to feel suspicious. Are we doing our jobs properly? Are we being critical enough?

This will be a significant year for me. On 1 June 2025, I'll pass on the role of editor-in-chief to my colleague, Wendy Degens. I do so with full conviction. It feels like the right time for me to let someone else take the helm and face the winds, whether gentle spring breezes or severe autumn storms. I'm looking forward to focusing on my own articles again, returning to the core of the craft for a few more years.

I'm stepping down with complete confidence in my successor. WD isn't just a highly experienced journalist who stands her ground, but she also has a vast network, a keen understanding of university politics, and a strong rapport with the team.

On 1 June 2025, we will swap places. It'll be a big change for both of us. I'm determined not to get in her way. And if I ever do momentarily forget my new position, the rest of the *Observant* family will be there to gently bring me back in line.

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

"You might still hear a disapproving voice in your head"

Some parents never talk to their children about sex. They see it as a taboo subject, or as something that is only acceptable within the confines of marriage. Growing up in such an environment leaves its mark, even if you later decide to chart your own course as an adult. So how do you go about developing your own sexuality once you're independent? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte offers some advice.

Discovering your own values is part of growing up, says Dewitte. "This doesn't mean you no longer respect your parents' beliefs and values, but it does mean you don't unquestioningly adopt them yourself. It means you figure out who you want to be based on what matters to you, not what others expect of you." If your new views on sexuality are very different from those you were raised with, you might still hear a disapproving voice in your head from time to time, she explains. "That's the old version of you judging the new one. Acknowledge this voice, but don't let it hold you back. You're allowed to choose your own path in life." And what about your parents? How should you deal with them? "Making different choices doesn't mean you've stopped respecting or caring about them – that's important to remember. There may be things you can't share with them, but that's normal. Most adults don't tell their parents everything." When embarking on a journey of sexual exploration, Dewitte suggests taking small steps at first. "What feels comfortable for you? You might begin by seeking information about sex on websites like rutgers.nl and iedereenisanders.nl." You could also watch series or films like *Sex Education*, a series following the lives of teenagers at a British secondary school as they discover the ups and downs of sex and sexuality, or *Fucking Åmål*, a film telling the story of the budding romance between two girls in Åmål, a small Swedish town. "Or pick up an erotic

novel", she adds. Then there's the physical aspect: have you ever explored your own body before? "If you haven't, skip the genital areas initially. Start by paying attention to how it feels when you slowly lather yourself in the shower, for example. How does that touch affect your body?" You can gradually progress from there. "Begin exploring your genitals. How does it feel when you touch them? What do you enjoy? For inspiration, you

can visit websites like *De Paarse Keizerin*." Other websites, such as sense.nl (available in Dutch and English) and omgyes.com, also offer guidance on sexual techniques.

As a final step, Dewitte says, you can consider involving others in your journey. Again, it's a good idea to take it slow. "Start by talking about sex with close friends, for example. Exchange ideas – how do they think about certain things? Don't begin looking for a partner unless you feel ready to date and explore partnered sex."

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



BBB Motion on hold: Tailored solutions for regional universities

Ensure measures are tailored to border regions and contracting rural areas: that is what it says in the motion submitted last week by governing party BBB about the plans for internationalisation in higher education. Good news for Maastricht University. But on Tuesday afternoon, the motion was put on hold. BBB is apparently waiting for the minister's detailed plans.

The government wants to limit the intake of international students and renew the importance of Dutch in academia. If that happens, UM, with a high proportion of English-language programs and many internationals, may well close quite a few doors. Besides, it would also

affect the entire Limburg region. A study, initiated by UM and others, shows that about 4500 jobs would be lost in the region; the Limburg economy would shrink by about a billion euros. For months, there have been ongoing lobby attempts by higher education institutes (led by President Rianne Letschert), municipalities, the Province and companies in Limburg. They continue to highlight their central request: tailored solutions. An argument in favour has now also reached the House of Representatives in the form of BBB party member Claudia van Zanten. She submitted a motion last week, because limiting the intake of international students would have "a negative impact" on the quality of life, the wider prosperity, and the innovation

and earning capacity of the region, she wrote. The motion, that would be subject to a vote last Tuesday in the House of Representatives, was set on hold. Perhaps the BBB will await the Education minister's detailed plans. It is not just the limited intake of international students that worries UM. There are also fears surrounding the wider proposed cuts to universities of applied sciences, universities and scientific research, totalling 1 billion euros. The parliament is intense negotiating. Opposition parties call the government's plans "unacceptable" and want to block at least some of the cuts in the Senate.

Wendy Degens

Excessive service charges: more clarity expected soon



Photo: Pexels

"We see students with exorbitant service charges and unjustified additional energy costs. And that's not right," says Robin Janssen, project leader for Huurteam Zuid-Limburg. Minister of Housing and Spatial Planning Mona Keijzer will publish a list at the start of 2025 of what can and can't be included under service charges. That will also be important for students.

Think of the costs for shared facilities, such as washing machines, which are sometimes charged in full to only one student. Excessively high charges for written-off furniture is a daily occurrence. Janssen: "Old beds, cupboards and tables are sometimes valued as if they were brand new. Those sorts of inconsistencies lead to frustration." Landlords are also not allowed to make a profit when they charge tenants for the costs of cleaning, garden maintenance or employing a concierge. Yet that is often the case.

Guidelines

Minister of Housing and Spatial Planning Mona Keijzer will publish a list of guidelines in Janu-

ary 2025 for what can and can't be included under service charges. She hopes it will put an end to the practice of charging the cost of fitness centres and cinemas – in the more luxurious properties – to individual tenants. Janssen says that the Huurteam hasn't seen anything as bad as that yet, "but students are incredibly annoyed at the high service charges." "They make up over 16 percent of our cases this year. In almost all the cases, the landlord has charged excessive service charges and that's not allowed."

Scaring landlords

Janssen: "Landlords are often reluctant to cooperate when we contact them about those service charges. If we can't work something out between us, it goes to the Huurcommissie, the Letting Commission. And if the landlord loses there, which is often the case, they have to pay extra. Thankfully, that does seem to scare some of them off."

Letting agencies such as XIOR in Belgium have been investigated before when it comes to their creative ways of making money. For example, NOS op 3 discovered that in the last five years,

more than four hundred complaints had been submitted nationally about the high service charges from XIOR. They were subsequently forced by the Letting Commission to explain the amounts. Tenants across several properties in Maastricht have also contacted the Huurteam because of high energy costs and service charges, resulting in compensation.

Included

Another frequently asked question is whether the service charges should be included in the rent or not. "At the moment, there are cases where the landlords claim that 'including service charges' is easier for the students, but I'm not that will hold legally," says Janssen. Furthermore, the definition of service charges remains vague. For Dutch people, but especially for international students, who are often less aware of the rules. They make up a solid 75 percent of the complainants. "We hope that the ministry's list in January 2025 will clarify things and set proper limits regarding costs."

Lena Reichel



Dull is alright

“

As I prepare to pull the plug on my Twitter account (I never did get used to calling it by a single letter), I'm forced to contemplate my next social media move. Where should we as academics have an online presence? Is the entire idea of trying to connect with strangers on for-profit platforms a cursed enterprise?

I can't claim to have definitive answers yet, but a little corner of the internet has given me a glimmer of hope recently. It's called the "Dull Men's Club", and it seems to have begun life as a website before sprouting offshoots on Instagram, Reddit and especially Facebook. "We do more than watch paint dry", runs one of its mottos.

Scrolling through the posts that lately seem to have exploded on its various Facebook sub-groups, this is patently true: members also discuss the perfect consistency for soft-boiled eggs, compare the order in which they put clothes on in the morning, photograph manhole covers and much, much more. Somewhere along the line, putting a banana somewhere in the picture (for scale) became a running gag, and now this "dad joke" gets repeated seemingly hundreds of times a day.

All of this is surprisingly soothing. Among the Dull Men, it's OK to be ordinary, a bit nerdy, even boring. No-one will try to sell you crypto or AI-generated artwork. You can take a picture of your inadequate parking job and receive friendly commiserations rather than mockery.

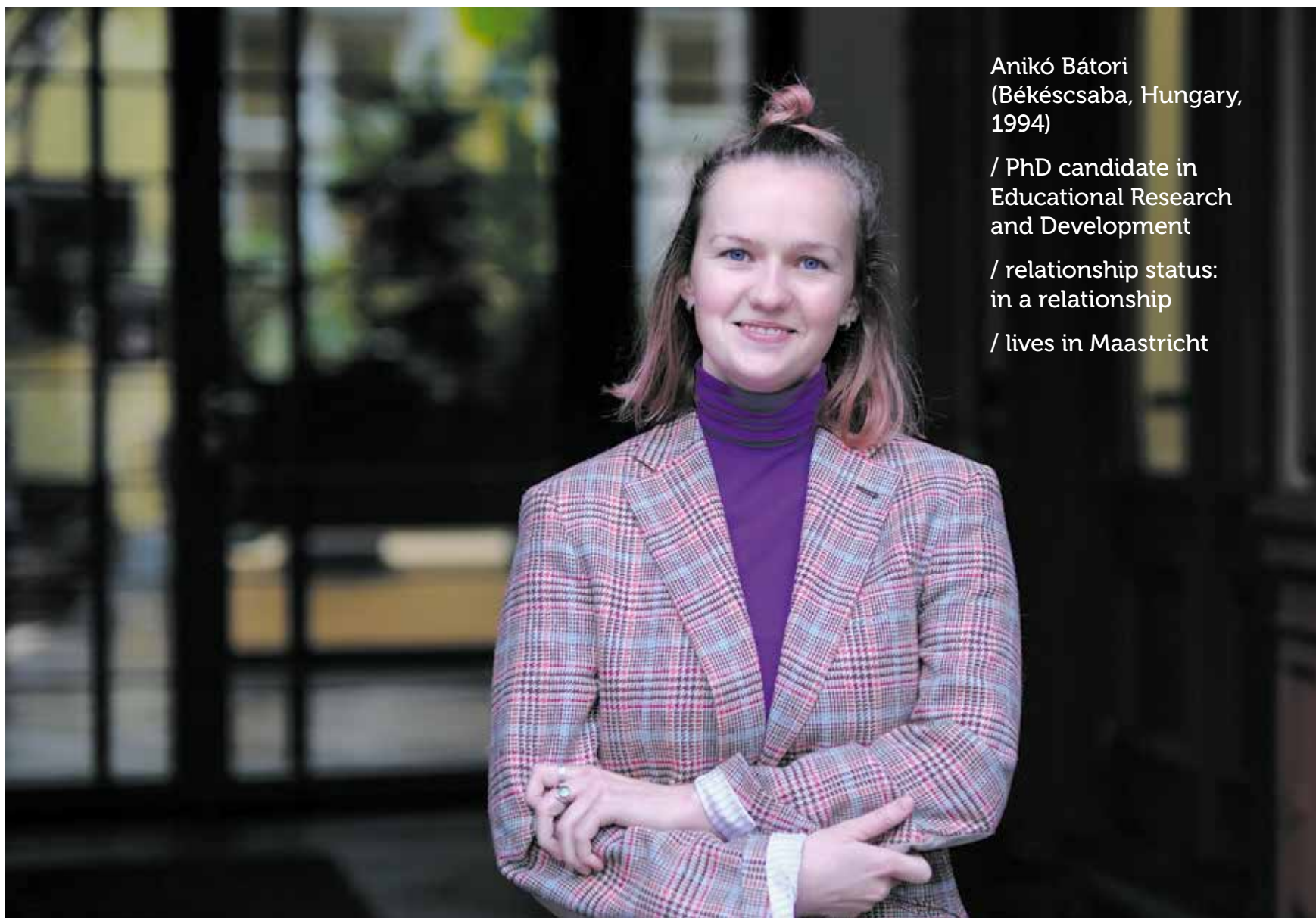
What's especially heartening is the gender dimension: there are many active and proudly Dull Women, but a large majority of posters are male. Male-coded interests such as DIY and car maintenance are very well-represented, but with seemingly none of the toxicity that has come to dominate the "manosphere."

Of course, now that I've written this, I'll probably open my browser tomorrow morning and see that one of the Dull Men have written something horrific. So hurry now and check out the proud coin polishers and snow shovel optimisers of Facebook while you still can. And let's keep fanning the flames of ordinary, boring kindness wherever we find them.

”

Elsje Fourie,
associate professor of Globalisation
& Development

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



Anikó Batori
(Békéscsaba, Hungary,
1994)

/ PhD candidate in
Educational Research
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/ relationship status:
in a relationship

/ lives in Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“
At first, my boyfriend and I clashed
a lot. That’s exactly when you
shouldn’t give up
”

My childhood bedroom window looked out on... our garden, with a large spruce and a small shed at the back. It often had a cat sitting on the windowsill, whether ours or one of the neighbours'. I grew up in a fairly small town, similar in area to Maastricht, but with half the population. Back then, I couldn't wait to leave – I thought it was dull. Now, I can appreciate what a safe and nice place it was to grow up. There were lots of clubs and activities for young people.

When was the last time you did something for the first time? This summer, I climbed a mountain in the Alps for the first time. It was incredible – firstly because I made it to the top. It didn't involve any actual climbing, but the hike up was very steep. And secondly because it was a beautiful day, the high peaks still capped with snow. I love mountains. There weren't any where I grew up, but there are some near Budapest, where I lived for three years.

I don't need to limit my screen time. Actually, I do... My boyfriend often reminds me to spend less time on my phone. It's not that bad, I don't spend eight hours per day on it, but there are days when I'm so tired that scrolling feels like all I can manage. Not that it helps – it just leaves me feeling even more drained. I mostly watch videos of puppies or other cute animals on Instagram and TikTok. I'm easily entertained.

What's the hardest part of love? At first, we clashed a lot. We clicked but didn't always agree. That's exactly when you shouldn't give up, but instead try to see the reasoning behind the other person's perspective. Why does he think that way? That's how you truly get to know and understand each other, but it takes effort to dig deeper.

Cats or dogs? Dogs, for now, but I love cats too. I grew up with both, as well as a few chickens and a pig. It was normal in our town – nearly everyone had several animals. Now I have a border collie, Rosita. We adopted her from a shelter three years ago.

I tell my mother everything. I try to. As a teenager, I didn't tell her anything, but at some point, I realised that if I wanted an adult relationship with her, I needed to share what was going on in my life. We're close now; I call her at least once per week. My father died when I was a teenager, but I'd already had almost no contact with him for a few years. My parents separated when I was eleven, which was mostly a relief. Our family dynamic and their relationship were unhealthy. My father drank and became aggressive. It's taken a lot of therapy, but I now understand better why he was like that, and I've let go of my anger towards him. I don't necessarily miss him, but I do feel the loss of never having really known him.

Pet peeve? Slow people. I'm a fast walker and take a quick, pragmatic approach to most things. If I do something, I give it my all.

The last book I read was... *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. I thought it was brilliant. It's set in a dystopian world where people are completely conditioned to fit into a caste system. It made me think about how we sometimes unconsciously condition ourselves and our children. There's a fine line between nurturing and influencing.

I'm named after... no one, I think. All I know is that my father picked my name, and my mother picked my brother's name. He's four years older than me. Our surname, Batori, is a traditional Hungarian name. There's an old noble family with the same name, but I don't know if I'm related to them.

Favourite music? I stay true to my roots – Hungarian alternative music. My boyfriend and I met five years ago at a concert by the band 30Y. We're going to another one of their concerts this Christmas. I listen to music a lot. Sometimes I don't feel quite right but can't pinpoint why. Music brings certain emotions to the surface, making it easier to understand what I'm feeling.

What are the upsides and downsides of doing a PhD? I'd been trying to get a PhD position for a while – working in academia is my dream. I love getting to immerse myself in my research, on self-study and the role of technology in it, every day. I enjoy discovering new things. The downside is the self-doubt. I give it my all, but is that enough?

In ten years... I'll be working in academia and living on a small farm with my boyfriend and a bunch of rescue dogs, perhaps in the South Limburg hills or the Ardennes. I don't want children. I can see many roles for myself in life, but motherhood isn't one of them. I hope I'll have a good work-life balance and will still be discovering new things through travel and reading.

Cleo Freriks

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

The first European Bachelor's degree is coming, role for UM still unclear

Next September sees the start of the first European Bachelor's programme from YUFE, but the question remains how Maastricht University will contribute. As one of ten partner universities, UM has an added hurdle in the Dutch education system: a national effectiveness test. In other words, is there a demand for this degree programme?

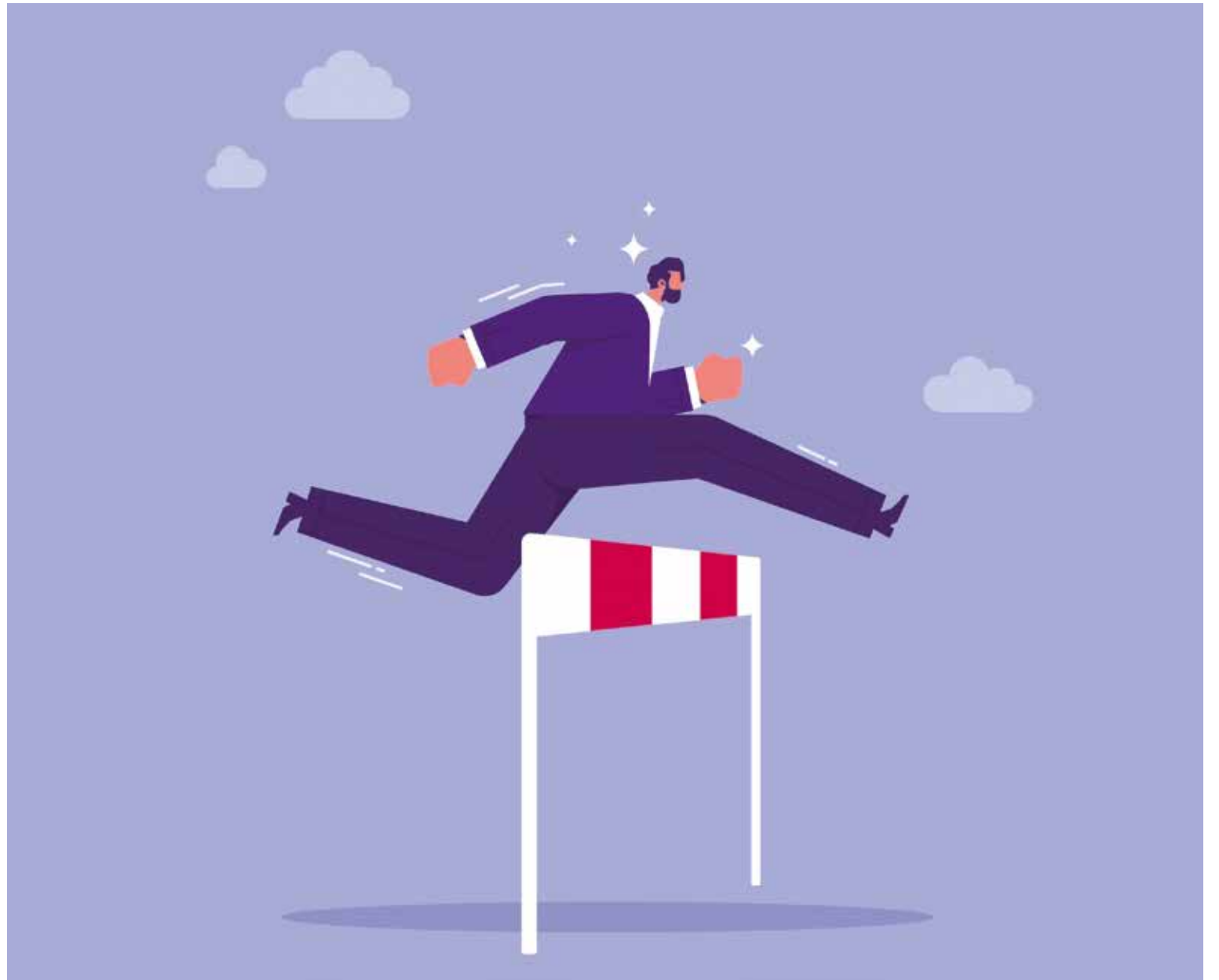


Illustration: Shutterstock

YUFE (Young Universities for the Future of Europe) is a joint venture between ten universities and two non-academic organisations. At Maastricht, the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) is a 'guest faculty'. "As a university, we have committed ourselves to YUFE, so it is up to one of the faculties to take up the challenge and develop a programme," says FSE director Bakir Bulić. And no, his faculty isn't jumping at the chance. They're very busy developing other study programmes. "Ultimately, it does suit us, we're willing to experiment, take risks."

A pilot for YUFE was launched back in 2020, in which students could take classes from different European institutions. The end goal was, and still is, to create a three-year European Bachelor's degree in Urban Sustainability Studies.

Hurdle

The YUFE alliance expects to start with 120 to 150 students in September 2025, assuming the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) approves. The application was submitted by the University of Antwerp through a so-called European Approach. The result is expected in the next two months, say Veronique Eurlings and Ebru Işgüzarer-Önder of the Maastricht YUFE organisation.

"It's important that the degree is given high funding. However, we have no idea which way it will go, especially in these politically turbulent times"

However – and here's where it gets complicated – as the universities who want to issue diplomas (and not just be mobility partners where students can attend classes) have the approval of the NVAO, they can start the degree programme in their respective countries. Except the Netherlands. There is an extra hurdle that must be cleared here. The Higher Education Act states that all new degree programmes are first subject to a macro effectiveness test. The commission responsible, the CDHO, must first explore whether the degree programme is warranted. Is there a demand for it on the labour market? Are there no other programmes that already cover this? Then, the choice must be made for high or low funding. "It is a small-scale, interdisciplinary study programme, a bit University College-y," says FSE director Bulić. "So for us, it's important that the degree is given high funding. However, we have no idea which way it will go, especially in these politically turbulent times."

Exception

Is the English-language study programme even still permitted in the Netherlands? In February 2024, all the Dutch universities collectively chose to stop offering new English-language Bachelor's programmes, in a bid to get ahead of any possible consequences of the Internationalisation in Balance

Act. According to Işgüzarer-Önder the current political situation has no bearing yet on the YUFE degree. "There is an exception for programmes from European University alliances."

Point

Assuming the worst-case scenario: what if the Dutch CDHO doesn't see the point of this European Bachelor's programme, or if the funding is not as high as they hoped? Bulić: "Then we'll have to keep looking." According to Eurlings and Işgüzarer-Önder, UM can always decide to contribute to the YUFE programme in a different way. Not as an institution which issues diplomas, but as a mobility partner. Another option is submitting a new application to the CDHO and hoping that they approve it next year. And should the choice for funding be low, then FSE will have to decide if it is financially feasible to participate.

Heerlen

Although the outcome is unclear, FSE has already started thinking about a suitable location; Heerlen is an option. It fits with UM's ambition to grow in other locations than the province capital. Not to mention that the university has other programmes it wants to start in Heerlen. There are ideas for a new Bachelor's programme in sustainability and transformation, a possible collaboration between FSE and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS). Bulić: "We are currently exploring options."

background

Posthumous book by Europe Professor Mathieu Segers

“He worked on it with Death snapping at his heels”

What do an archive about European integration and a book presentation have in common? Professor of European History Mathieu Segers, who died age 47 at the end of 2023. Last Thursday, the eponymous Europa Archive Mathieu Segers was opened in the Centre Céramique and his last book was presented.



Marèl Segers in front of a picture of her husband, professor Mathieu Segers, who died at the end of 2023 Photo: Joey Roberts

Mathieu Segers was born in Maastricht in 1976. He studied politics at Nijmegen, where he obtained his doctorate in 2006. After lecturing at Radboud University Nijmegen and Utrecht University, he returned to Maastricht in 2016. Segers was dean of the University College Maastricht until 2020, and professor of Contemporary European History and European Integration from 2016 until his death. He was also the scientific director of Studio Europa Maastricht, member of the *Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*, and columnist for *Het Financieele Dagblad*, *De Groene Amsterdammer* and NPO Radio 1. Mathieu died of cancer on 16 December 2023.

“An extraordinary gathering for an extraordinary person,” are the opening words of Wim Hupperetz, director of the Centre Céramique. Or more accurately, a memorial, one with an emotional edge. Because as several of the speakers note, they would much rather not be here remembering their friend and colleague, who died much too soon. “It was a terrible time for all of us,” says one of them, summarising the last year. There is silence as Segers’s widow Marèl reads a letter to her late husband: “I’m writing to you, Mathieu, in the hope of getting a reply.” His portrait is present on stage. At this point, she has already played an excerpt from *Café Europa*, the podcast on European issues co-hosted by Segers. Already weakening but still noticeably passionate about his favourite topic: the history of European integration, which was given

a massive boost in 1992 with the Treaty of Maastricht. It is no coincidence that the memorial is being held here, on the fourth floor of the Centre Céramique. Aside from its stunning panorama of the skyline of Maastricht, it now also houses the Europa Archive named after Mathieu Segers, which was opened today. According to Bart Stol of Studio Europa Maastricht, it was Segers’s wish that it would be housed here, “near the house where he was born, a stone’s throw away from the Government building [where the treaty was signed, ed.]” and near the hotels where the European leaders stayed at the time. The anecdote of a fifteen-year-old Segers trying hard to catch a glimpse of them is well known. Nor is it a coincidence that Segers’s podcast contributions are played. This afternoon

is not only about celebrating his academic achievements, it is also about the way he involved himself in the public debate about Europe. “Mathieu was the Europe expert the Netherlands didn’t actually deserve,” says Amsterdam law philosopher Tamar de Waal. Rianne Letschert, President of Maastricht University, remembers how it pained him “that in the press and in The Hague, there was so little attention paid to what was going on in Brussels”. Attention is also given to his newest and final book, *Europa en het idee uit de toekomst* [Europe and the idea from the future]. It should have been a Dutch version of an earlier English book about the roots of European integration, says publisher Mai Spijkers. “But somewhere along the way, Mathieu decided to add a ‘chapter zero’”, about how the idea of European cooperation arose out

of the ashes of World War One. “He worked on it with Death snapping at his heels,” says Spijkers. “It was tense; Mathieu knew the end was nigh, he wanted to tell this story, but wondered whether he would get it done in time.” He managed to broadly map out what he wanted to write; his brother and an editor finished the work. Marèl Segers remembers the day the manuscript was sent. “On [daughter] Sofia’s birthday, exactly eighteen years after the proofs for your doctoral thesis landed on the mat. You are now a part of the history of the ideas; something that is a fact, albeit far too soon.”

Peter Doorackers

Mathieu Seegers, Europa en het idee uit de toekomst. Oorsprong en ontstaansgeschiedenis van ons Europa, 1913-1951 | Uitgeverij Prometheus | € 34,99

How do staff feel about the proposed merger between hospital and university?

“We’ve got enough on our plates”

A year and a half ago, plans were made public to merge Maastricht University and the hospital (MUMC+). Little information has been provided since, and it remains unclear how staff at both organisations feel about the project. *Observant* spoke to seventy employees about what could become the largest administrative and organisational undertaking since UM was founded nearly fifty years ago.

Text: Wendy Degens, Riki Janssen, Dennis Vaendel **Illustrations:** Simone Golob

Poor communication

All interviewees were asked the same opening question: “What do you know about the merger?” No one questioned the use of the word “merger”; they didn’t correct *Observant* to say “administrative integration”, the term preferred by the Executive Board. Many interviewees recalled having read something about the merger on the intranet or in *Observant*, but none seemed to know any specifics. “I do get the feeling that the merger is inevitable, in the sense that it will go through no matter what”, says a professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS). “At least, that’s the impression you get from the university’s official communications. It seems to be a question of ‘when’ rather than ‘if’.” The general perception is that the decision is being discussed by those in charge, with rank-and-file employees being left out. “I’d like to provide input, but that doesn’t seem to be an option.” Another adds, “We feel quite removed from the matter. It’s something that’s mostly happening ‘on the Berg’. We rarely talk about it here [at the School of Business and Economics].”

Others refer to it as “a Randwyck affair”.

A specialist at the hospital, who is also a professor at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life sciences (FHML), jokingly compares the situation to a spinal cord injury:

“What happens in the brain doesn’t always reach the feet.”

Management overestimates the extent to which information filters down to the lower levels

“What happens in the brain doesn’t always reach the feet”

of the organisation.”

A lecturer at the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) is more sharply critical, describing the poor communication as “rather shocking, given that the merger could have significant consequences for the entire community”. One of his colleagues wonders if there’s more going on, “something we’re not allowed to know. It also sends the message that they don’t take their employees seriously, that they think we wouldn’t understand.” If the plan is to succeed, more information would be “desirable and necessary”, argues a professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN), echoing a sentiment shared by many.

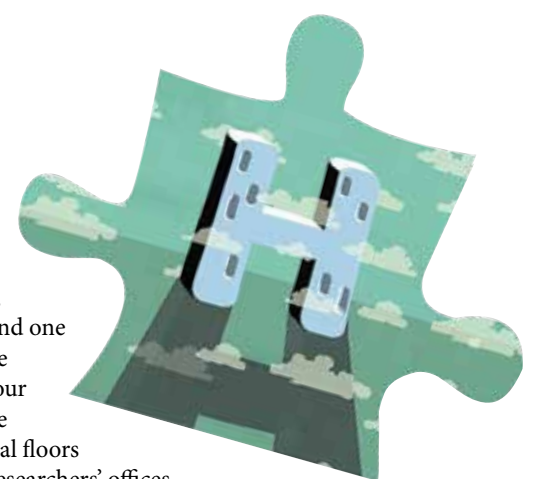
Eleven interviewees were not aware of the proposed merger at all. It didn’t ring a bell for several randomly approached non-UM-affiliated specialists and medical interns at MUMC+. “People aren’t talking about it at all. At most, it’s seen as ‘just another plan we’ll wait and see about.’” It seems communication at the hospital is even more limited than at UM.

Benefits and opportunities

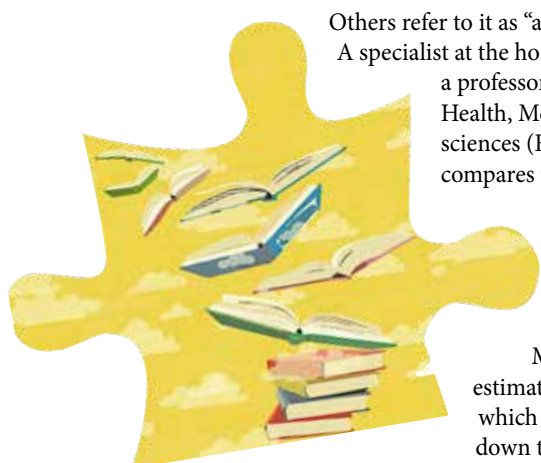
Although many interviewees hesitate to give an opinion on a matter they know so little about, they do see various potential benefits. It is rather a shame to go from two Christmas gifts (one from the hospital, one from the university) to one, joke several FHML professors who also work as medical specialists at the hospital,

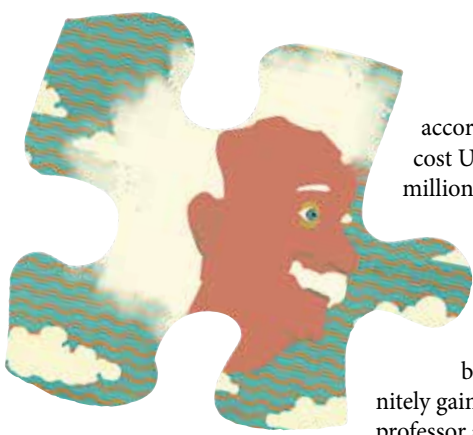
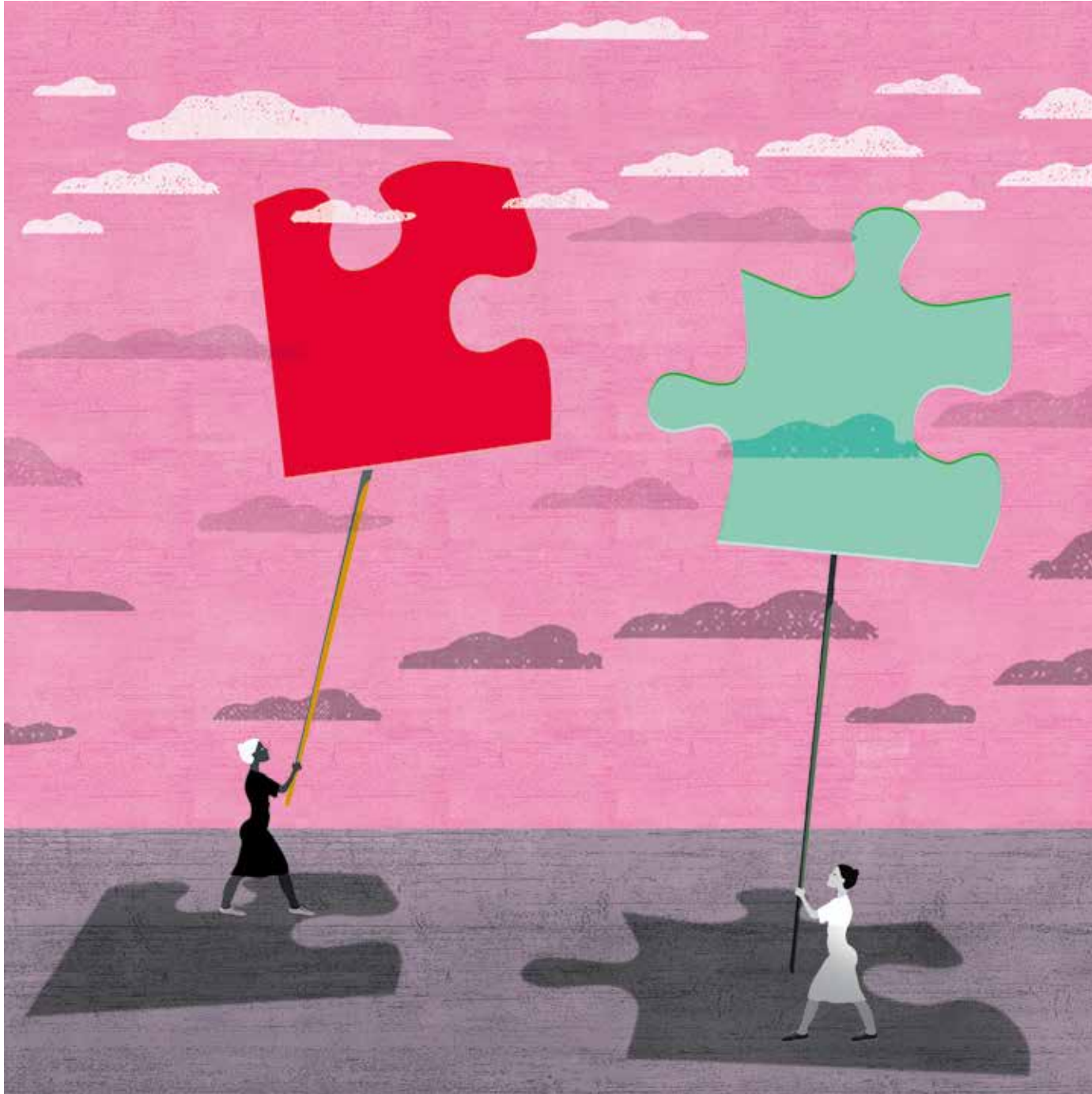
but they’re willing to overlook that for the practical benefits – having just one access pass, one email address and one login system. “In the current situation, your UMcard doesn’t give you access to hospital floors where your fellow researchers’ offices are, you can’t use the MUMC+ bicycle storage and you don’t share the same email domain”, explains an FPN professor involved in patient research. The problem of UM emails ending up in MUMC+ spam folders would become a thing of the past. Various interviewees at FHML, FPN and FSE expect that the merger will make collaboration among researchers more efficient and streamlined, cutting some of the red tape surrounding research proposals. Proposals involving both UM and MUMC+, classified as “multicentre research”, are currently subject to the approval processes of both institutions, requiring separate presentations, ethics reviews and legal contract assessments.

“It’s a nightmare. There are so many rules to follow, which just means more work”, sighs one researcher. “Hiring staff across both institutions is such a hassle when it comes to things like payroll”, explains another interviewee. “It’ll be so much easier once we’re all under the same Collective Labour Agreement (CAO).” However, it’s not at all certain that this will be the case. The hospital offers more generous terms which,



“Hiring staff across both institutions is such a hassle”





according to insiders, will cost UM an additional €20 million annually.

Some believe the merger will also lead to easier access to labs as well as patients. Maastricht-based research will definitely gain more visibility, says a professor at FPN. A professor at FASoS is unsure whether a merger would make much difference, but she hopes that it will make researchers at the hospital and the university more aware of each other's work.

already working closely with the hospital – the people who stand to benefit most from the merger, according to others. “We already work together. I don’t see how this would make much difference.” When it comes to teaching, “we’re practically already merged”, according to two

“Currently, hospital researchers in Randwyck often find our research by chance. They often seem surprised to learn that we are working on topics relevant to them and that there is valuable expertise available right here in the city centre. The hospital can learn from us, and we can learn from the hospital.” Examples include research on medical anthropology and medical recycling.

Concerns and drawbacks

While some see opportunities for closer collaboration across all kinds of disciplines (“It will benefit research”), others suspect that little will change. Most of the latter are clinicians

“In our field, we say, ‘If you have four rats in a cage and add a fifth on Friday, you’ll have one left by Monday. The strongest survives, the hospital will be the dominant force’”

they can “assist in selecting suitable experts” and “support employees in managing expectations and agreements with the press”. *Observant* strongly prefers direct and unfiltered access to interviewees, particularly for a story of this nature, which was not possible under these conditions.

How *Observant* approached this story

Over the past few weeks, *Observant* randomly approached UM employees – both academic and non-academic, on both sides of the river – in offices, corridors and break areas. We also reached out via email. A total of seventy people responded to the question, “Are you aware of the merger and, if so, what do you think about

it?” No names were included in the article, as many interviewees preferred to remain anonymous and to improve readability. We managed to interview only a small number of MUMC+ employees, including an internist, a lab technician and a nurse. Reaching hospital staff proved difficult, not just because UMcards

don’t provide access to hospital floors where offices are, but also – and more importantly – because they are discouraged from speaking to the press without the involvement of the MUMC+ communications department. As they explain via email, this policy isn’t intended to “thwart journalists” but exists so

they can “assist in selecting suitable experts” and “support employees in managing expectations and agreements with the press”. *Observant* strongly prefers direct and unfiltered access to interviewees, particularly for a story of this nature, which was not possible under these conditions.

Current status of the “administrative integration”

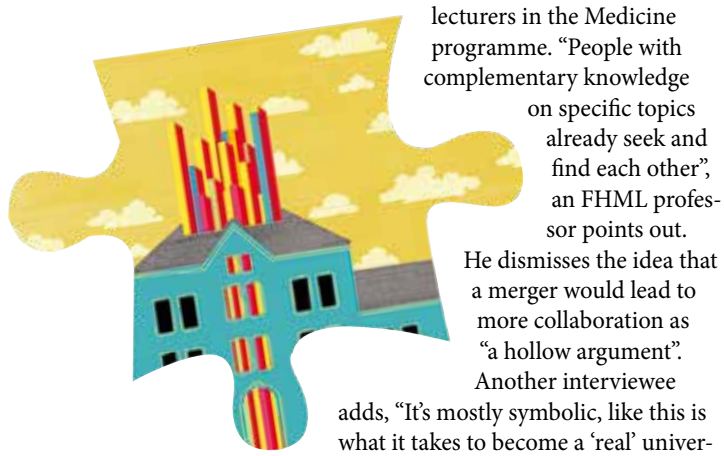
Much remains unclear about the proposed merger between MUMC+ and UM. No one is more acutely aware of this than Rianne Letschert, chair of the Executive Board, she says when asked. But she remains tight-lipped about the details while negotiations between the parties are ongoing and their participatory bodies have yet to deliberate on the matter.

First, a clarification: it's not about a merger between the hospital and the university but about an “administrative integration”, emphasises Letschert. The hospital and the university will remain separate legal entities, maintaining control over their own finances and decision making. However, Letschert explains, they aim to combine their strengths to “form an integrated knowledge organisation capable of managing risks – both institutions are facing government budget cuts – and seizing opportunities. Consider the current challenges in the healthcare sector, which demand insights not only from medicine and health sciences, but also from faculties like Psychology and Neuroscience, Science and Engineering, and Arts and Social Sciences. Our integration of the hospital with the entire university is truly unique in the Netherlands.”

Over recent months, the boards of UM and MUMC+ have met weekly to discuss current issues, explains Letschert. “We felt this was necessary to determine where issues belong – with the faculties, the university, or the hospital? It has given us a clearer picture of the responsibilities of a joint governing board.” A framework agreement has been drafted, outlining key themes for research, education and social impact. “It explains why we want to work much more closely together”, says Letschert, though she is withholding specifics about the themes until all participatory bodies have given their input. That said, two themes have been prioritised from the outset: “a healthy society” (including prevention, healthy nutrition and data-driven healthcare) and “new medical technologies”.

The deans have already approved the strategic framework, and UM expects the Supervisory Board to review it before Christmas. In the new year, the participatory bodies of both institutions will have their say. This will result in an initial decision to approve or reject the proposed administrative integration. Next spring, the last point will be discussed: governance. “How are we going to do this? What will the governance structure look like? Who will be responsible for what? Where will the money go? How will we safeguard each institution's identity and necessary autonomy, even as both make concessions?” This, too, will require approval from the participatory bodies. Letschert anticipates a final decision before summer.

“No further integration between UM and MUMC+/azM” is listed as one of seven major risks in the university budget for 2025, which is on the University Council's agenda this month.



lecturers in the Medicine programme. “People with complementary knowledge on specific topics already seek and find each other”, an FHML professor points out.

He dismisses the idea that a merger would lead to more collaboration as “a hollow argument”. Another interviewee

adds, “It's mostly symbolic, like this is what it takes to become a ‘real’ university medical centre.”

Would the merger lead to more collaboration with faculties in the city centre? Take health law, for example. “This field is important enough for both faculties – FHML and Law – to maintain, even without a merger”, says an interviewee at the Faculty of Law.

Some doubt whether a merger would actually reduce bureaucracy or improve efficiency. “Becoming a huge organisation tends not to speed things up, especially in the first years after a merger”, remarks a clinical researcher. Several administrative and support staff members fear the merger will just create a “bureaucratic construct”. As they point out, “Complex issues like data management won't become any less complex just because we become one organisation on paper.”

Various interviewees question whether the potential benefits of a merger outweigh the drawbacks of the process. It will cost “a lot of money, effort, time and energy”, they point out. “You need to have a very strong justification for an undertaking of this kind, otherwise it's too great an investment”, says a Law lecturer. “I'd rather see those funds allocated to unforeseen circumstances”, adds an FHML professor. There are a lot of concerns about what will change when UM and MUMC+ integrate administratively, from issues such as fund allocation to strategic direction. After all, a university and a hospital can have significantly different interests. Who will hold the most power? “In our field, we say, ‘If you have four rats in a cage and add a fifth on Friday, you'll have one left by Monday. The strongest survives”, says a professor at FHML. Many fear that the hospital will come out on top, with its higher headcount and revenues.

“They will be the dominant force.”

And what about academic freedom? Health encompasses so much more than just medical care, say many interviewees from non-clinical departments focused on topics such as prevention, healthy living and out-of-hospital care. “There is a genuine fear here that our broader

focus on health will be reduced to a medical focus”, says a Health Sciences professor. Besides, another interviewee says, “We're currently free to be critical of MUMC+. Will that still be the case? Will the outside world still view us as independent researchers? Will our existing collaborations with other health institutions survive the merger?”

University employees at other faculties also wonder if they'll end up working “in service of” medical care. “As far as I know, hospitals are funded very differently from universities”, says a researcher at the School of Business and Economics (SBE). “Will a health insurance company like CZ end up having a say in how SBE is funded?” A colleague adds, “And what if the hospital runs into financial trouble? What would that mean for UM?” There is also a concern that politicians will view the merged organisation as “MUMC++, with two plus signs” or “a hospital with a university attached”, making the university an easy target in times of budget cuts. Chair of the Executive Board Rianne Letschert has repeatedly emphasised that UM won't

“Will a health insurance company like CZ end up having a say in how SBE is funded?”

become a health university, but not everyone feels reassured by her words. “We shouldn't want to be a university with a one-sided focus”, warns a lecturer at FSE. A colleague at FASoS, who worked in the US for years, saw many American liberal arts colleges be transformed into polytechnic universities. “As a result, many disciplines became subordinate to STEM research, leading to a loss of freedom and relevance. The context here is different, but we must be careful not to let anything similar happen in Maastricht.”

Still, the majority of interviewees aren't losing any sleep over the merger plans at this point. They'll need more information first. “Besides, we've got enough on our plates”, is a common refrain. For many, the planned budget cuts in higher education and political pushback against internationalisation seem far more urgent and threatening. As a researcher at SBE puts it, “In a time of great uncertainty, why create an even more complex situation with even more uncertainty?”



What role does the University Council play?

“We represent the interests of the entire university”, emphasises Teun Dekker, chair of the University Council, UM's main participatory body. The council will ultimately approve or reject the merger. “We haven't taken a stance yet; all the pieces of the puzzle need to fall into place first.” An ad hoc committee of the University Council is currently deliberating on the plans behind

closed doors, awaiting an “official advice request” from the Executive Board. The University Council regulations require such a request for “intensive collaborations with third parties”. The council can subsequently respond with a yes or a no and put forward any questions or concerns. The next step involves the council's right to consent regarding changes to the university

governance model, including changes involving the Executive Board, Supervisory Board or deans' mandates, which will certainly come into play here. The council will also be allowed to say its piece on a new strategic plan, investments and labour matters, together with the Local Consultative Body (LO), which includes trade union representatives.

background

Neuroscientist Franziska Emmerling to give lecture at FPN

“Populism and conspiracy theories are as old as time. And that’s good news”

Populism and conspiracy theories can be found everywhere, in governments in every corner of the globe. What characterises these phenomena and is there anything that can be done against them?

Franziska Emmerling will explore that topic in a lecture on 9 December at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. “Sometimes you have to say, no, you are going too far!”



When she held a lecture on populism and conspiracy theories years ago, Franziska Emmerling thought that would be the only one. She couldn't have been more wrong, sighs the German neuroscientist, who is interested in politics and philosophy, in a Zoom call: it's a more relevant topic than ever and she has to turn down invitations. But not one from her former employer, Maastricht University's Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, where she obtained her doctorate in 2015 and where she will return on 9 December.

She will tackle the two very different topics in one fell swoop. “Because people are constantly asking me about that combination,” she explains. “These are the things that occupy them, that make them angry. And while they're not the same, they are compatible: populists sometimes use conspiracy theories, conspiracy theorists sometimes employ populist rhetoric.”

It quickly reveals a common thread, says Emmerling: fear, a topic she researched.

“Who is most attracted to conspiracy theories? Simply put, people who are scared for whatever reason. And those theories often strengthen that fear, leading people into a vicious cycle.”

Something similar applies to populism. “That feeds the fear for someone or something else. It's always black and white, ‘us’ versus ‘them’ – whoever they may be, because populism isn't tied specifically to any one ideology. You can be a left-wing, right-wing, or religious populist, or a populist animal rights advocate.” What all those populists do have in common, though, is how they justify their words and actions: an appeal to ‘the will of the people’. “That sounds very democratic, ‘the majority wants this’, but that isn't necessarily the case,” says Emmerling. According to her, whoever says they can determine ‘the will of the people’ outside of the democratic or scientific process, “implicitly says who does and does not belong to that people. Which can exclude parts – sometimes large parts – of society.” And it's not a new thing either, emphasises the neuroscientist, who is interested in philosophy and politics. Populism and conspiracy theories “are as old as time; centuries

ago, Greek and Roman philosophers wrote that whoever can scare people, can exert power over them. That's good news: we can learn from that past to understand these phenomena and to understand the people who hold those views.”

But how far should that understanding stretch? Should you always be willing to listen patiently, even when they say the worst possible things? Not necessarily, says Emmerling: “If a conversation is mentally or physically harmful, you can stop.” And if you don't want to? Her research and her experience – she works for a council in the south of Germany and frequently has to deal with angry citizens – have taught her to distinguish between the two. “If someone is uncertain – ‘Populists sometimes say things that are true, I do feel threatened!’ – then listen. Try to understand that person and help them change their perspective. With provocateurs – ‘Finally somebody who says how things really stand!’ – you have to be more assertive and ask critical questions. And if people say truly inhumane and reprehensible things – ‘Death to the

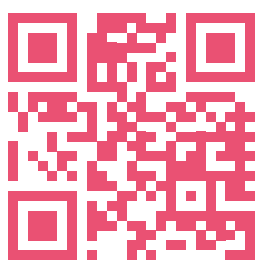
Israelis or the Palestinians!’ – or argue against the law, human rights, or democracy, then you have to say, ‘stop, you're going too far’. If you don't, then very slowly and subconsciously, your own values will start to shift, too. Moreover, the group that is being attacked has to know that they will be protected and bystanders have to see that someone is willing to stand up for fundamental matters, that certain opinions are not true.”

Peter Doorackers

The lecture “Populism and conspiracies” will take place Monday, 9 December, from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. in the Jo Ritzen Room at 55 Oxfordlaan. It is open to anyone who would like to join

colofon

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Agenda academic ceremonies Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

- | | |
|--|---|
| 05-12, 10.00h Johanna Rutten | 12-12, 10.00h Raquel Tebaldi |
| 05-12, 13.00h Vivian de Gier | 12-12, 12.45h Shengshi Huang |
| 05-12, 16.00h David James Mark Barnett | 12-12, 13.00h Selena Nassif Odeh Odeh |
| 06-12, 10.00h Renee Jolenta Catharina van den Broek | 12-12, 16.00h Borek Foldyna |
| 06-12, 13.00h Elisabeth Reinilids Maria van Haaren | 13-12, 10.00h Hanna Sophie Honcamp |
| 06-12, 16.00h Sophie Ilse Julia van Bakel | 13-12, 12.45h Mengying Li |
| 09-12, 13.00h Michael Brunner | 13-12, 13.00h Deepak Balamurali |
| 09-12, 15.45h Jian Liu | 13-12, 16.00h Wesley Joseph Hendrikus Hermans |
| 09-12, 16.00h Ute Linnenkamp | 16-12, 10.00h Roderick Hubertus Maria Josephina Stassen |
| Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University -Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf | 16-12, 15.45h Yan Sun |
| 10-12, 10.00h Carlotta Micaela Jarach | 16-12, 16.00h Tianyu Zhang |
| 10-12, 12.45h Musa Ahmed Idris | 17-12, 10.00h Armen Torchyan |
| 10-12, 13.00h Veja Widdershoven | 17-12, 13.00h Cas van Cruchten |
| 10-12, 15.45h Francesca Perin | 17-12, 16.00h Ankita Das |
| Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University - University of Trento | 18-12, 10.00h Martine Janine Verwoerd |
| 10-12, 16.00h Jeremy Miguel Basset Sagarminaga | 18-12, 12.45h Fang Wang |
| 11-12, 10.00h Ben Rombaut | 18-12, 13.00h Johannes Beyers Louw |
| Double Doctoral Degree Universiteit Hasselt/tUL en Universiteit Maastricht | 18-12, 16.00h Ikuo Shimizu |
| 11-12, 13.00h Monique Engel | 19-12, 09.45h Abdulmohsen Hamdan Alzalabani |
| 11-12, 16.00h Sander Puts | 19-12, 10.00h Rawan Alnazer |
| | 19-12, 13.00h Gregory Patrick Veldhuizen |
| | 19-12, 16.00h Prof. dr. Peter Steijlen afscheidcollege |
| | 20-12, 10.00h Erdem Onan |
| | 20-12, 13.00h Alfonso Raúl Aranda Hernández |
| | 20-12, 16.00h Danique Heuvelings |

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