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UM President Letschert:

“IT IS COMPLETELY UNCLEAR WHAT THE MINISTER WANTS UNIVERSITIES TO DO”



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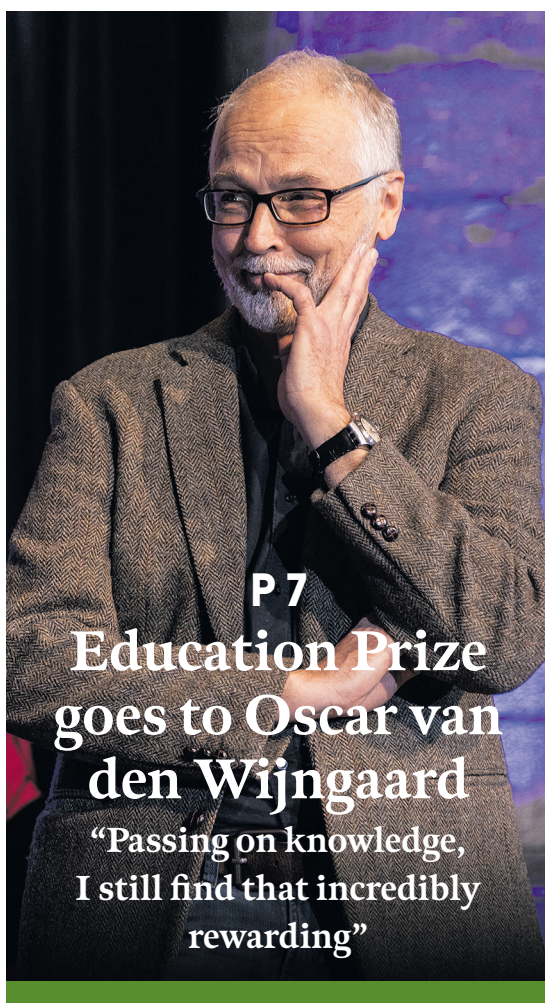
From now on, all ‘professors’ can wear a gown



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ALAAF!

Maastricht’s Prince Carnival holds lecture for UM’ers



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Education Prize goes to Oscar van den Wijngaard

“Passing on knowledge, I still find that incredibly rewarding”

“We hope the university can provide clarity as soon as possible”

Unrest and rumours thanks to misconduct investigation for societies

For weeks now, Maastricht University has been tight-lipped about the investigation into misconduct in student societies. This has led to a lot of unrest, rumours and accusations amongst students, a survey by Observant shows. Chairs of the various student associations hope that things will be clearer soon.

Three weeks ago, UM requested that all independent student societies and student associations that have their own student societies immediately halt all activities for prospective members, after receiving signals that there had been “one or more instances” of misconduct during the so-called ‘A-tijd’. But which student association or society was it? And are the reports related to excessive alcohol consumption, humiliation, or was it something else? The university has remained silent.

The associations are being left in the dark, said Circumflex president Joost Mol. Just like the presidents of the three other large associations (Saurus, Tragos and KoKo) and Onafhankelijk Maastricht, the umbrella organisation that represents independent student societies, he has been in talks with UM for weeks. “It hasn’t cleared up anything. The information the university shares is very limited, and isn’t much more than that a report has been submitted. We don’t know whether or not it’s our association, let alone what exactly happened. UM says that is sensitive information.”

After an initial conversation resulted in “insufficient insights” according to UM, the presidents were given ‘homework’ before a second meeting, which took place last week, namely to talk to their societies about possible misconduct. “We did that, but it

hasn’t produced any new results,” said Mol. “We want to cooperate, but that is hard to do when you aren’t told where the problem lies.” Saurus president Joep Eijkens also said that “nothing new had resulted” from talks with UM or his societies.

The one thing UM’s investigation has resulted in, both presidents said, is unrest and rumours amongst students. “The uncertainty leads people to speculate,” said Eijkens. “Maastricht is a small city and rumours travel fast,” added Mol. “I’ve noticed that the associations and societies are all pointing fingers at each other.”

That was also borne out by conversations *Observant* had with dozens of students in and around university buildings this week. There are many different rumours, both among people who are and are not members of associations and societies – from aspiring members passing out due to exhaustion or excessive alcohol consumption, to students who dropped out of their A-tijd because the humiliation became unbearable. And every time it is a different society to blame. Members often complain they “are being punished for other people’s misconduct”. Students who had just started their A-tijd say they don’t understand why the university called a halt to all activities, “when everything was fine here”.

Mol and Eijkens hope the university will provide clarity soon. “If the complaints don’t concern our association, we want to know as soon as possible,” said Eijkens. “So we can carry on as before.” The UM spokesperson was not available to answer questions from *Observant* before this issue went to print.

Dennis Vaendel



Privacy? Don't make me laugh

At the end of one of our podcast recording sessions (number three is now online), colleague CF asked if she could take a picture of the guests. Of course, she could, was the cheerful response as they walked out. You don't have to ask, one of them assured, we're in a public place, you don't (formally) have to ask for permission – before launching into a short lecture about how, in the Netherlands, we are often unnecessary sticklers about GDPR, the privacy law (General Data Protection Regulation). Not only are we unnecessary sticklers for it, the law is often applied willy-nilly. Sometimes in ignorance. Such as students contacting us, requesting we take their names off the Observant website, citing GDPR, not realising that there are exceptions for the press, the so-called 'journalistic exception', which means publications aren't required to remove a name or a photograph – let alone a whole article!

Last week, one of the faculties tried to fend us off using the privacy argument. I don't know whether this was a case of ignorance, or an attempt to frustrate our journalist. Those attempts are a regular occurrence in our profession. After all, not everybody is keen to answer critical questions. Funnily enough, this wasn't even a critical question. My colleague WD was looking for the names of a few department chairs at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences who were not listed on the UM website. As part of our investigation into – unnecessary – bureaucracy at the university, we wanted to ask a few supervisors about their biggest causes for frustration in that area.

Long story short, the FHML board secretary emailed WD to say that she could send the names, if WD could first explain why she needed them (that doesn't really matter, we don't have to give a reason); nonetheless, reason given, she then responded by saying that the dean and the director said she couldn't provide those names to Observant, for privacy reasons.

Privacy? Don't make me laugh. The names of people who hold an administrative position at the university should, by definition, be known. They are public, should be listed on the website. A university or faculty isn't some sort of secret society, is it?

I have no idea what caused this decree to be issued. Is it to protect department chairs from the press? Or to prevent said chairs from speaking to the press? Who can say?

Riki Janssen

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



Collage: Simone Golob

“Thankfully, we’re moving away from the idea that being single means you’ve failed”

You’ve been single for over ten years. While you have plenty of friends and family around you, you miss physical contact. Could a monthly erotic massage be the solution? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte shares her thoughts.

The number of singles has been growing in recent years, and not just due to an ageing population where older people find themselves alone after losing a partner. More and more young people are choosing to remain single, explains Dewitte. “And thankfully, there’s less stigma attached to it. Being single used to be seen as a temporary state to be ‘fixed’ as soon as possible. It’s a good thing that we’re moving away from the idea that being single means you’ve failed in life and having a partner means you’ve succeeded.”

That said, she distinguishes between those who make a “positive, conscious” choice to remain single and those who are afraid of commitment. “The online dating landscape has changed – there are so many options these days. In the past, you had to look for a partner in your local community. People would just pair up and stay together for life. Today, we’re more mobile in both the real and the virtual world. You can find potential partners anywhere. The flip side is that the sheer number of options can be overwhelming for some people, making them hesitant to commit, out of fear that there is always someone who could be ‘better.’ The result? A ‘situationship’ in which people stay half single and half in a relationship.

Some people also avoid relationships out of fear of physical intimacy. “The question to ask yourself here is: where does that fear come from? Is it linked to self-image – do you feel like you’re not good enough? Often, it’s really a fear of vulnerability.” Being single and being in a relationship may seem like oppo-

sites, but they’re not, says Dewitte. “Single people can have deeply meaningful relationships with friends and family. Connection is a human need. It’s about questions like, ‘Am I special to you?’ ‘Do you make me feel seen and valued?’ ‘Are you there for

me when I need you?’ You don’t have to be in a romantic relationship to experience that.”

For single people who want sex, there are plenty of options, from friends with benefits and one-night stands to erotic massages and visiting sex workers. At the same time, Dewitte points out, not everyone is looking for the physical, genital aspects of sex. “It’s often about tenderness, warmth, physical contact – the desire for physical connection. Positive touch releases oxytocin, our hugging and bonding hormone. You can also get that from platonic relationships with friends or family, as long as it’s consensual and respectful, of course. There are even professional cuddle buddies and cuddle workshops. Or you can find it in activities like dancing, salsa, yoga, massages, or just mindfully connecting with your own body.”

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



Bruins's letter offers little clarity about position of universities in contracting regions

Letschert: “Minister returned the issue without providing a framework”

For a moment, it looked like universities in contracting regions could break out the champagne. In a letter to the Senate, Minister Bruins of Education says they would be allowed to continue accepting international students. However, in the same letter, he emphasises that Dutch would remain the standard language for tuition, also in those regions, and that offering an almost complete English-language education remained “undesirable”.

“It is completely unclear what the minister wants universities to do,” says President of Maastricht University Rianne Letschert when asked. Which regions are considered to be contracting, for example? Bruins wants to set that down in a list in the Internationalisation in Balance Bill, so that it is clear which institutions are eligible for exception. However, that list is as yet unavailable.

And what does this exception entail, exactly? For one thing, bachelor's programmes would not be exempt from the language assessment, which requires that universities show English is the best language for the programme. However, they will be allowed to argue that the programme contributes to the labour market or knowledge infrastructure, but even that particular “regional criterion” is something Minister Bruins still needs to work out. He is hoping for self-governance and plans from the sector. Letschert: “The fourteen institutions need to determine which programmes could be taught in Dutch. But then, all those programmes will still need to be assessed according to criteria which are still being worked out. So how can we make decisions? He is returning the issue to the sector without providing a sufficiently detailed framework.”

In terms of the sector's own plans, she is brief: “We already have those: more focus on Dutch language proficiency, more bilingual tracks, and a limit on the number of places for English-language tracks. That increases the accessibility for Dutch students and limits the number of internationals. You don't need a law for that.” There are other issues, too, where Bruins appears to compromise. The desired decrease in the number of international students has almost been achieved. That creates space, he writes. At the same time, he warns: if the target is not reached in one year, then that might lead to a “decrease in the net financing per student



UM President Rianne Letschert (R) with rector Pamela Habibović at the Dies Natalis ceremony
Photo: Philip Driessen

in that year”. He insists on self-governance but also says that “guidance remains desirable, especially considering that Anglicisation of some institutions”, which seems to be a reference to Maastricht University, where 20 of the 25 bachelor's programmes are taught in English and one (Psychology) has both a Dutch and an English track.

Letschert: “He's pretending to give us space,

but at the same time, wants to maintain control. Meanwhile, the question what the purpose and necessity of this law still are becomes more and more relevant. Look at the decline in the inflow of international students, both here and nationally. He should give us a few years to implement the plans we'd already made.”

Cleo Freriks

Final registration figures for universities

Fewer new international students, particularly in Maastricht

Last September, the number of new undergraduate students at Maastricht University dropped by almost 8 per cent compared to 2023 (400 fewer students). Internationals, in particular, stayed away. Their share dropped by 11 per cent. And that has predominantly affected the Faculties of Science and Engineering and Arts and Social Sciences.

It was not only Maastricht who welcomed fewer foreign first years. All the Dutch uni-

versities have seen a drop in international interest: 6 per cent, on average. These are the results shown by the final registration figures published by the university association UNL. In its own press release, the umbrella organisation said it “is worried if programmes can continue to exist and about the departure of international talent”. Of course, reference is made to politicians' “rigorous legislative efforts”. The cabinet wants to use the Internationalisation in Balance Bill to significantly decrease the number of English-language

degree programmes. There are also calls for more Dutch in the programmes. All the Dutch universities had already anticipated this by stopping any new English-language bachelor's programmes for now, and by not advertising for new students abroad. UNL is worried about the next few years, because there are already signs that academic year 2025-2026 won't be a rosy one; they seem to point to an even more significant decrease.

Read more on page 5



Touching grass

“

Sometime around the beginning of 2023, I went through a bit of a rut. Stuck in a constant state of mental and physical exhaustion, I rarely left my room, cancelled plans with friends, and slacked off at university. Like the majority of people my age, I sought advice on the internet. In hindsight, a terrible mistake, because after googling my symptoms, I discovered I was most likely suffering from anaemia, chronic fatigue, or depression- or all three. In search of a second opinion, I called my mother and informed her about my predicament.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then-

What?

“I looked into my symptoms. The constant exhaustion, the mood swings. It all adds up.”

Um Himmels Willen, are you a psychiatrist now?

“No, but-”

No, but what? You typed ‘tired all the time’ into Google and self-diagnosed the most fitting thing?

“Well, when you put it like that...”

Listen, Robin. Google isn't a qualified professional, and neither am I.

She went on to say she'd be more than happy to book an appointment with an actual qualified professional, as long as my current situation wasn't due to neglecting basic healthy habits. To name a few: Getting enough *quality* sleep. Eating nourishing foods. Drinking enough water. Moving my body. Going outside-catching sun, breathing fresh air; *touching some grass*, as the popular idiom goes, urging people (particularly those who are chronically online) to get a grip, and return to reality.

After realising that I wasn't consistently doing any of those things, I decided to take my mother's advice to heart. I started small: setting a bedtime, carrying a water bottle with me, going for short walks. To be sure, I didn't break out of my rut overnight. It took patience, effort, and plenty of trial-and-error, but I began to witness a gradual change. My energy levels began to stabilise, my mood improved, my grades went from abysmal to superb. Turns out I didn't need a complex diagnosis-I needed to go back to the basics. And sometimes, that includes touching some grass.

”

Robin van Wasen,
student at UCM

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



Photo: Joey Roberts

/ Maciej Rzepka
(Warsaw, Poland, 2003)

/Third-year student
of Economics and Business
Economics

/ Lives in:
Maastricht

/ Relationship status:
single

“My parents taught me not to be afraid of leaving everything behind”

As a child, I was... loud, spontaneous, impatient, always trying new things. And I was a very picky eater – I refused to eat most vegetables. Was I a difficult child? Maybe a little, but I had, and still have, a good relationship with my parents. The same goes for my little sister, who’s three years younger than me and also wants to study in the Netherlands. I recently went on an exchange to Hong Kong, followed by travelling around Southeast Asia. I was away for almost six months – the longest I’ve ever been away from home. Normally, I go back to Warsaw quite often, but this time, I couldn’t be there for Christmas Eve dinner with my whole family. I joined online, but it wasn’t the same.

Do you have any regrets? Not studying harder during the first Covid lockdown, when I was still in secondary school. There were so many distractions... My friends and I would play chess during online classes, or chat about video games on [social platform] Discord. I was a bit of a nerd back then, and I love games that require a lot of thinking. If I’d paid more attention in maths class, I’d have chosen a more mathematical degree. I went for economics because of its versatility. Luckily, I’m finding it more interesting now that I’ve started specialising in Finance.

What do your friends find annoying about you? I can be indecisive about small things, like where to go for dinner – I keep changing my mind. It annoys me, too; I find it immature. What else annoys me? People who talk in the library. And I don’t feel comfortable in crowds – they slow me down, and I get impatient. The same goes for group work. It bothers me when others hold up progress. I usually bring it up with them and offer to help.

The best advice I ever received... was to study abroad. My parents encouraged me, even though it was hard for them to see me leave home. At the time, I wasn’t sure if it was the right move and struggled with the decision – I could’ve gone to university in Warsaw, where I was born and raised – but my parents taught me not to be afraid of leaving everything behind. They never had the chance to study abroad themselves, having grown up in communist Poland. I’m glad I took the leap. It’s nice to be part of an international community here in Maastricht, and the city is small enough that you’ll always bump into someone you know.

When was the last time you cried? I, uh... [Pauses] Two years ago, a friend’s sister took her own life. It

was completely unexpected. I knew her quite well, and it was really difficult. Can we talk about something else? I still struggle with it – it’s hard to understand why someone would do that.

In ten years... I hope to be married and raising a family. I plan to move back to Poland when I’m around 30 to be close to my family. Until then, I’d like to travel, see the world and live in different places. What do I look for in a future wife? A best friend. I prefer relationships that grow from friendships. But for that to happen, I first need to be more settled and live a less hectic life. That’s difficult here in Maastricht. Sure, I meet nice women, but I don’t know where I’ll end up after my bachelor’s, and often neither do they. The chances of our paths aligning tend to be pretty slim. That’s why I haven’t been in a relationship for a while.

I have fond memories of... my childhood. The freedom and carefreeness of spending whole afternoons playing football with friends after school. Do I have worries now? Definitely more than I did back then. I need to figure out what to do after my bachelor’s. A master’s in Finance, or work for a year first... It’s not an easy decision.

I feel Polish when... I see a Polish shop! A new one just opened near the station – I was surprised at how big it is. I didn’t realise so many Polish people lived in Maastricht. I’ve also been hearing Polish more often on the streets. What does it mean to feel Polish? We’re... I wouldn’t say “nationalistic” – that’s a strong word with extreme connotations in Poland. But we are proud of our flag and our country.

Peter Doorackers

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Costs of language courses and admissions procedure too high

English-language Medicine track to be discontinued

The Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) has decided to discontinue the English-language track of its bachelor's programme in Medicine. From the 2026-2027 academic year onwards, only students who meet the Dutch language requirement will be eligible for admission to the programme.

The decision was driven by the high costs associated with the International Track in Medicine, which was officially renamed "Bachelor of Medicine" in 2022. Students take Dutch language courses throughout the bachelor's programme – a requirement for admission to the Dutch-taught master's programme, the English equivalent of which was previously discontinued. "The substantial costs of these language courses and other expenses, such as having teaching materials translated, are covered by the education budget", explains Sylvia Heeneman, programme coordinator for the bachelor's programme in Medicine.

The higher costs of the international track have been felt even more strongly since the Ministry of Education imposed a reduction in the *numerus fixus* enrolment quota. As a result, seven fewer students can now enrol in the bachelor's programme in Medicine each year. The total annual intake of the English and Dutch tracks taken together is just over three hundred students. "While this may not sound like a significant reduction, it has a major impact on the faculty budget", says Heeneman. "This is a highly subsidised, six-year programme, so losing even a single student results in a considerable financial shortfall."

More applications

On top of that, the University of Groningen discontinued the English-language track of its bachelor's programme in medicine. Like Maastricht, Groningen originally launched the track to educate students funded by the Saudi Arabia King Abdullah Scholarship Programme



Photo: Loraine Bodewes

in The Netherlands. "Since Groningen's decision, we've seen a sharp rise in applications for our track, which means more people undergoing the admissions and selection procedure. At the same time, we can no longer work together with Groningen on certain aspects of the programme. All of this means more work and expense."

These factors led the FHML Institute of Education's Board of Directors, which includes FHML programme directors, to request the Faculty Board to stop admitting these "expensive" English-speaking students, also in light of the anticipated budget cuts in Dutch higher education. The Faculty Board agreed. "The earliest we can discontinue the track is September 2026, as the selection procedure for the upcoming academic year is already underway", explains Heeneman. Current students and

those who start next academic year will still be able to complete their bachelor's in English.

Internationalisation debate

The discontinuation of the track, which admits around fifty students per year, means that all 309 available places will be allocated to the Dutch-language bachelor's programme from the 2026-2027 academic year onwards. FHML's decision could be seen as a response to the national debate on the internationalisation of Dutch higher education. Last year, the coalition government announced plans to limit the intake of international students. According to Heeneman, however, the decision is unrelated. "The bachelor's programme will still be open to international students, but they will need to meet the minimum language requirement – B2 level Dutch – before enrolling."

Heeneman adds that she is "very sad to see the English-language track go. It has also given us so much. It has made our student body more diverse, which has been a valuable learning experience for both staff and students. It has also helped us build international connections. All our teaching materials are available in English, which makes it easier to exchange information, and we regularly host institutions interested in educational innovation." The track was also the only English-taught programme at UM where students received intensive Dutch language training and prepared them for a Dutch-taught master's – something some coalition parties have actually been advocating for. "In that sense, our track actually set a good example."

Dennis Vaendel

The worst affected is FSE

To be continued on page 3

While the intake for bachelor's programmes in Maastricht may be down, the student population as a whole still seems to be growing. There are now 22,178 students at UM; according to UNL figures, last year, there were 21,842. The largest share of that is still from abroad: 61 per cent.

Incredible drop

The detailed figures for UM show that the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) has the largest share of international students (82 per cent), followed by Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS, 80 per cent), and the School of Business and Engineering (SBE, 79 per cent). But even for the faculties of Law and Psychology it is (well) over half. The worst affected,

considering the incredible drop in international first years, rather fittingly, is the most 'international': FSE. And not just their bachelor's programmes (-17 per cent) but also their master's programme (-20 per cent).

Dutch secondary school pupils

Finally, regarding the Dutch secondary school pupils and higher vocational students who came to Maastricht for a university degree, they seemed far less interested in economics and business degrees. Dutch prospective students were also not interested in FASoS and FSE. Meanwhile, the bachelor's programme at the psychology faculty was incredibly popular among Dutch pupils (up by a third).

Wendy Degens

Why are the figures for the UNL and UM different?

This article uses the registration figures of the umbrella organisation UNL; these are verifiable, as they are published online. *Observant* also received an Excel file from UM on request. These figures differed from those of UNL. That is due to other 'definitions'. UNL counts a pre-master's programme as a bachelor's programme, UM doesn't. And the UNL doesn't take into account 'switchers' who changed from Amsterdam to Maastricht, or changed from Law to Psychology. For their intake figures, the UNL is only interested in the number of students who are 'entering' a university for the first time.

That means UM has a total of 11 per cent fewer new bachelor's students, whereas UNL has a final total of 8 per cent for Maastricht. And if we look only at international students, then the bachelor's intake drops by 13 per cent according to UM, but 11 per cent according to the UNL.

FROM NOW ON ALL 'PROFESSORS' CAN WEAR A GOWN

From now on all 'professors' can wear a gown at Maastricht University PhD defence ceremonies. A decision made by the rector together with the deans. They further emphasise the fact that assistant professors can also serve as PhD supervisors, something that was already part of the regulations but rarely happens in practice.

TEXT: WENDY DEGENS

ILLUSTRATION: SIMONE GOLOB

Professor, associate professor, assistant professor, lecturer, PhD researcher: the academic world is a smorgasbord of titles. In the Netherlands, only a 'full' professor may use the title 'professor' and wear a gown at academic ceremonies, but is that hierarchy still desirable? Why isn't everybody professor? It was the Young Academy, a society of young researchers, associated with the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, among others, who started the ball rolling at UM. They have argued for a revision of the rights around PhD tracks. It would mean that associate and assistant professors, who now often take on the role of second supervisor, would automatically be granted *ius promovendi* (the right to act as the supervisor), be allowed to wear a gown during the ceremony, and call themselves 'professor'.

Equality

In terms of the gown, things at UM are going to change. Rector Pamela Habibović said that from now on, all members of the PhD supervision team and the Defence Committee may wear a gown. "The ceremonies are very familial, celebratory, and it's nice for the PhD candidate if everybody wears a gown. Moreover, we want to emphasise the equality within the Defence Committee." The Eindhoven University of Technology has taken it one step further: associate and assistant professors will also be allowed to wear a gown at other academic ceremonies, such as the Dies or the opening of the academic year. "We won't be doing that. After all, we all have different positions, so there are differences."

Title

What about the Young Academy's other request, the title of 'professor'? In the Netherlands, only 'full' professors are permitted to call themselves that. That is set down in the law and that is what UM will follow. But, "when the context 'requires' it", explained Habibović, associate and assistant professors may also call themselves professor, for example, in an international setting in which everyone does. It's perfectly normal in places like Belgium or the United States. "Then it would be weird if you're the only one who doesn't. It would be a matter of trust, though. We expect that researchers will be careful about using their title."

And what about during a defence ceremony, can an associate or assistant professor in that 'atmosphere of equality' use the title 'professor', or be referred to as such? "There are no objections should the chair say: 'I now invite such and such... professor... to speak' when referring to an assistant professor, but it won't be explicitly set out in our regulations."

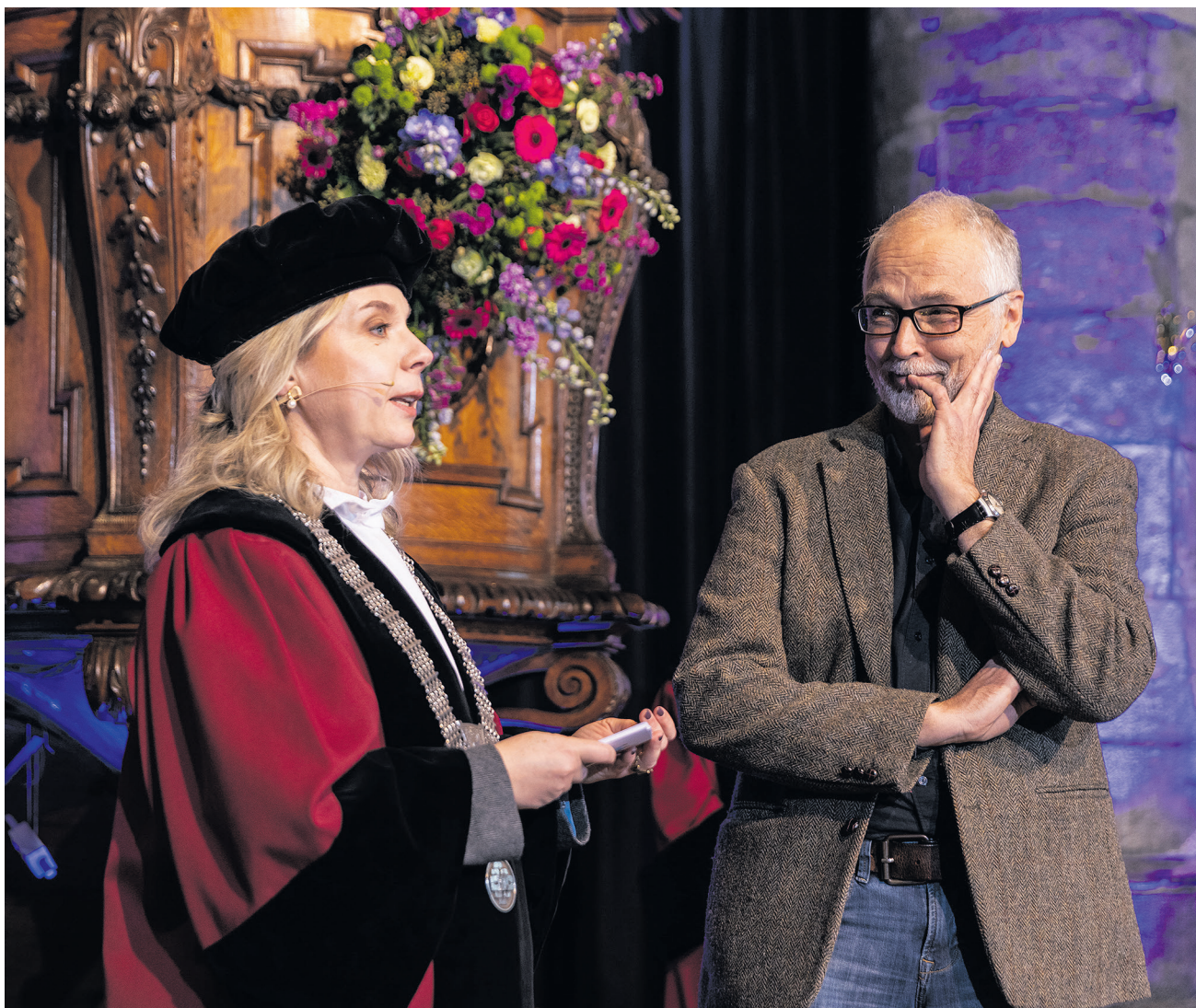
And finally, what about the *ius promovendi*? In Maastricht, "anybody who holds a PhD" – including assistant professors – can serve as a supervisor, explained Habibović. "That was already in our regulations." She admits that it is still uncommon in practice. But if an assistant professor has enough experience, then they might say: 'I deserve to be a primary supervisor'. It is examined on a case-by-case basis, said Habibović. So it would not be an automatic right, such as the Young Academy would like. A request from an assistant professor to serve as supervisor must first be approved by the dean. Professors and associate professors don't have to take that extra step.



OSCAR VAN DEN WIJNGAARD WINS WYNAND WIJNEN EDUCATION PRIZE

"DISCOVERING WHAT YOU'RE GOOD AT GIVES YOU A FOUNDATION FOR LIFE"

What am I good at? What do I enjoy? Why did I choose this degree again? Thanks in part to Oscar van den Wijngaard, senior education development officer at EDLAB, Maastricht University helps students more and more to find answers to these kinds of questions. It's just one of the many reasons why he was awarded the Wynand Wijnen Education Prize at the Dies Natalis ceremony.



Oscar van den Wijngaard during the award ceremony with rector Pamela Habibović

TEXT: CLEO FRERIKS **PHOTO:** PHILIP DRIESSEN

The plan had been in place since primary school: attend grammar school, study history, then do "something with teaching" like his father and grandfather before him, Van den Wijngaard told *Observant* ten years ago. Even after 22 years at UM – first at University College Maastricht (UCM) and later at EDLAB, the Maastricht University Centre for Teaching & Learning – his passion for education is as strong as ever. "Passing on knowledge, playing a role in the learning process – I still

find that incredibly rewarding. There's nothing like seeing the moment it clicks for your students, or even better: that they start to find it interesting."

Important choices

UCM was in its founding year when Van den Wijngaard came to Maastricht in 2003. Rather than a traditional Dutch degree programme, it was an American-style liberal arts college where

students could design their own curriculum. "If you're giving students the freedom to make such important choices, you also need to guide them through the process. What do they find interesting? What are they good at? What skills and knowledge do they need to take certain courses?" And so, academic advising was born.

Van den Wijngaard soon realised that these kinds of conversations would benefit all students, not just those at UCM. "Taking a step back to reflect is part of the learning process. A personal moment between teacher and student, asking 'How are my studies going? How am I doing as a student?', also helps students feel like more than just a number."

Today, most UM students will have a few consultations during their studies, whether one-on-one or in a group setting. "That's definitely not just down to me, of course; it was a combination of factors. A lot of students feel overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them. Starting a conversation about their studies as an academic advisor, by simply asking what they're good at, but also what interests them, helps them regain a sense of control. Realising 'this is my thing' gives you a lifelong foundation to fall back on, no matter how fast the world changes. It gives you a sense of ownership. The conversation doesn't always have to focus on mental health [which is getting a lot of attention these days, from a growing number of student psychologists and resilience training to 'Are you okay?' stickers on toilet doors]."

And an academic mentor is something entirely different from a student psychologist, explains Van den Wijngaard. "I think it's a role many lecturers feel more comfortable with: advising as teaching. It plays to their strengths. And because of that, students also feel safe enough to open up and say things like, 'To be honest, I'm really struggling because my parents are getting divorced.'"

"UM's greatest strength"

The jury report also praised Van den Wijngaard for his role in improving communication around Problem-Based Learning (PBL). "PBL is this university's greatest strength, but we realised that when we tried to explain it to people, we often got caught up in technical jargon. That's not much help to a 17-year-old choosing a degree. We wanted to make it a more tangible story."

Together with others, Van den Wijngaard asked lecturers to describe PBL without using terms like "seven jumps" or "pre-discussion". Instead, words like "exploration", "meaningful" and "together" came up. "From there, we created a narrative to help students understand what to expect. For example, they play a central role in their own learning, but that doesn't mean lecturers don't share knowledge – it just doesn't happen through traditional lectures."

Finally, there's Van den Wijngaard's most well-known contribution to the university: the UCM anthem *Sweet UCM*, played at every graduation ceremony. He laughs. "One day when I was driving, a song came on the radio, and the lyrics just wrote themselves. UCM is housed in a former monastery on Zwingelput, with a defunct bell in the courtyard. The song is about how, if that bell ever rang again, we'd all flock back to UCM right away."

Group identity, community building – it matters, he says. "It's always better when you can rely on each other and work towards something together, moving beyond individual interests towards shared passion. I see the same thing happen at our Education Days, where people from different faculties exchange ideas about teaching. Everyone leaves feeling energised and inspired."

background

Maastricht's Prince Carnival holds lecture *Vastelaovend* for beginners

And for a moment, Maastricht University wasn't bilingual but tri-lingual. During a veritable College Tour about carnival last Friday, you could hear Dutch, English and the unmistakable sound of Mestreechs. Not that odd, really: in a colourfully decorated Maastrichtzaal at UNS 40, members of the largest carnival society in the city, the 'Tempeleers', held a lecture on the festival. For those UMers, they explained at the start, "who might not be familiar with it".

An hour of carnival – excuse me, *Vastelaovend* – for beginners, in other words. Some sixty people, including a handful of international students and University President Rianne Letschert, fill the front section of the lecture room. First thing's first: getting their tongues round the carnival's official song for this year, the *Vastelaovendsleedsje*. "In the Maastricht dialect, try to follow along," one Tempeleer instructs the audience, clearly enjoying himself. They respond with a grin and a valiant attempt at singing along – some clearly manage better than others.

The lecture takes on a more serious tone when the former prince of the city Stefan is invited to answer some questions. What were the most special moments as the head of the city? Meeting a boy with autism who wanted to get to know the prince, is his response: "His mother said that he had never been this happy before. It still gives me shivers down my spine." And visiting two people who were terminally ill: "They burst into tears when I entered the room, it was the last time they would ever see the prince." Both died shortly thereafter.

However, the atmosphere is mostly light-hearted. Especially when one female student inquires whether everybody could become a prince. "You need to be very clever and handsome, that is all," responds the newly arrived prince of the city *Carlo d'n Ierste* with a deadpan expression, much to the audience's delight. Before following that with a more serious answer. Above all, an aspiring prince must possess the *Mestreechter Geis* – know the spirit of the city and its citizens –, love carnival and speak Maastrichts. Whether



Prince of the city Carlo d'n Ierste Photo: Joey Roberts

women are also eligible is never mentioned. But while the linguistic requirement might exclude some of those present from attaining the position, the prince emphasises that it would not exclude them from the festivities. "*Vastelaovend* is something you celebrate

together, and that includes the students and staff at UM. I hope that after today you will all be certified celebrators of carnival."

Peter Doorakkers

UM carnival party *Vriedag Veur Vastelaovend*

Five euro tickets should reduce number of no-shows

Paying to celebrate carnival with your UM colleagues? This year is the first time there will be a small entrance fee (€5) to get into the *Vriedag Veur Vastelaovend*. Was there a hole in the budget? No, said Alan Reiters of the organising committee, the idea is that buying a ticket will encourage people to actually turn up.

That was the problem last year: all 1550 tickets for the event were issued, but some 350 people failed to turn up, no reason given. Meanwhile, there was a long waiting list of UMers who would have gladly taken their places. "In an effort to prevent those no-shows, we've upped the barrier to entry a little; registering for the event is no longer entirely without obligation. We also think that €5 is a very reasonable price."

Which is not, he is keen to emphasise that point, necessary to cover a hole in the budget. He is unwilling to say how much the event will cost, although he does add that the costs are covered by the faculties and service centres. So what happens to the money? "We want to give that back to the city and the community" and spend it on "integrating students". That will be done together with the largest carnival society in the city, the Tempeleers, who could use it to cover the costs of events such as the College Tour about carnival, held last Friday in UNS 40 in Randwyck. "They also organise activities and events for low-income households around the city."

At the time of printing, there are still tickets for *Vriedag Veur Vastelaovend*. All UM staff members have already received an email with instructions on how to order a ticket.

PD

THE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY, FACULTIES, SERVICE CENTRES AND STUDENT ORGANISATIONS CAN BE FOUND ON WWW.OBSERVANTONLINE.NL

Agenda academic ceremonies

Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6



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