



Photo: Joey Roberts

Attendance disappoints: by far not 2500 strikers as expected

## Strike against higher education cuts on a drizzly Wednesday afternoon: “Don’t do it!”

“Cut back on the future is the most unwise thing we can do,” PvdA/GroenLinks leader Frans Timmermans tells the audience on this rainy Wednesday afternoon. Over seven hundred demonstrators gathered on the Vrijthof Square on 16 April. A lot less than the Limburg organization of the national strike against education cuts had counted on. Many members of the unions FNV and AOb, action group WOinActie and the Maastricht student union MOSA were present, but by no means all of the 2,500 signatories of the letter, in which employees and students of Maastricht University, Zuyd University and the Open University declare their solidarity with the strike, came to the Maastricht city center.

After Timmermans, UM President Rianne Letschert and Rector Pamela Habibović, among others, climbed the stage. Letschert: “The cabinet should realize that if you don’t sow, you also won’t reap.” Habibović: “We care about the future of our children, this country and Europe. And therefore we care about science. But the cabinet does not realize that.” After which it was the turn of a representative of student union MOSA. “*Gaank nao hoes,*” it sounds after his speech in Limburgian. “Bruins, Schoof, this cabinet: go home. The mines couldn’t stay open, but our universities can.”

Although the Senate already approved the education budget last week, the unions and action group WOinActie hope that nego-

tiations can still be held.

In the morning, at several secondary schools in Maastricht, lecturers and professors of UM already gave so-called teach-outs, guest lectures, as part of the strike. At that time, student union MOSA toured the university buildings to call on students to stop their studies for a while and come to the Vrijthof.

After the speeches, everybody leaves the Vrijthof for a march through the city. Actions will follow next week in Eindhoven and Delft.

Cleo Freriks

For an extensive report, go to [observantonline.nl](http://observantonline.nl)

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“Without my illness, I probably would’ve been a less pleasant person to myself and others”

### Page 6

## From timid mouse to Miss Universe Limburg “It’s also about your story”

**There will be no paper issue of *Observant* in the next two weeks. Follow us online for the latest news on [observantonline.nl/english](http://observantonline.nl/english)**



Photo: The Light Portraits



# The milk carton on the windowsill

Some time ago, we said goodbye to our old Senseo coffee machine and traded up for a fancy coffee maker and milk frother. It's been a major step forward in the coffee department. These days, I start my mornings with a proper cappuccino instead of black coffee with some milk powder. But the upgrade did present a bit of a problem: what to do with the half-used carton of milk? Our office kitchenette doesn't have a fridge. We mulled over the options and eventually settled on the simplest solution. Every evening, one of us puts the half-full carton out on the windowsill outside my office, which faces north and stays nice and cool overnight.

But now that spring is finally here, cracks are beginning to show in our makeshift cooling system. Luckily, just this week we got word that our kitchenette – all less than four square metres of it – is getting renovated. And not only will it have a small dishwasher, but it'll also be fitted with a mini fridge.

I'm the building manager (someone's got to do it) of Lenculenstraat 14, which only houses *Observant* on the first floor. Our downstairs neighbours from the Faculty of Law moved out on 1 April. As it's a small building, the job usually requires almost no effort at all. But this month, everything seems to be happening at once. In addition to the kitchenette renovation, we're getting curtains at the back and extra carpeting in a room at the front, which sits above the gateway to the car park and turns into an icebox in winter. It's taken some communication and coordination with Facility Services. Still, that's nothing compared to how busy the building managers are in most of the university's larger buildings.

In a building this small, little goes unnoticed. This morning, I was the first to arrive at just before half past eight. I heard noises coming from the second floor, which has been empty for quite some time. A man came down the stairs and walked straight out to the car park, where he got into a car. Odd. What was he doing here? He was gone before I had a chance to ask. Just to be safe, I jotted down his number plate. I am, after all, the building manager.

*Riki Janssen*

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



*Photo: Ellen Oosterhof*

## "Sometimes you just need to see the water"



Anna La Placa, a master's student in International European Tax Law, shares her favourite spot in Maastricht: **the Marina.**

"The Marina is at the Hoge Weerd, towards Eijsden. On a sunny day, it's a great place to just lie on the grass and relax. There's a small patch of sand too, although it's very dirty. People go there to fish, have barbecues, or even do stand-up paddling – but only on warm days.

"I like it because it's the closest thing Maastricht has to a beach. And I miss the beach. I grew up in Palermo, Sicily, and being near the water has always been part of my life. If you come from a beach town, you know what I mean – sometimes you just need to see the water, to feel close to home.

"I first discovered the Marina in spring 2022. Some friends from my bachelor's programme and I went there to play volleyball. It was fun – except for the part where I broke my sunglasses. But I have good memories of that day. We even swam, though only for about two seconds before realising how murky the water was. Still, after a long Dutch winter, it felt amazing to just lie in the sun, wearing swimsuits and pretending it was summer.

"I used to only go there once or twice in spring, but now that I have a motorbike, it's easier to go more often. I was

there yesterday and I think I'll go again tomorrow. It's the kind of place where you can bring a book, a notebook, or just sit and relax. I usually go alone, but I also love bringing friends along. Not many people know about it, which makes it feel special. The only catch is that if you want to go with a group,

everyone needs a bike – it's a rather far walk from the city centre.

"Would I want more people to come there? That's a tricky question. On the one hand, I like that it's peaceful and not overcrowded. On the other hand, it's a nice alternative to the better-known spots in Maastricht. Most people meet up at the Stadspark, the stairs by the Maas or other green areas. But the Marina? It gives you a different view of the city. Instead of looking at the river from a bridge, you're right by the water. And sometimes, that small change makes all the difference."

*Line-Marie Eichhorst*

*In this series, Observant asks a student or staff member every week about their favorite spot in Maastricht*

## Joint ‘self governance plan’ for Dutch universities Maastricht doesn’t appear too badly affected

*Starting next academic year, the English-language European Law School will have an intake restriction of 550. The English-language track for Medicine will disappear as of 2026. These measures by Maastricht University are part of a joint self governance plan that all the Dutch universities are presenting this week, and is intended to reduce the intake of international students.*

Politicians in The Hague feel that internationalisation has gone too far, they want fewer English-language study programmes and a greater focus on Dutch. There is a so-called *Toets Anderstalig Onderwijs* [Foreign Language Education Assessment] on the way, intended to assess programmes more strictly – to what extent is it necessary for this degree programme to be taught in English? Why can’t it be in Dutch? Explaining that to the minister would be an enormous administrative exercise. The fourteen universities don’t want to trust their fates to the lap of the gods and so decided to draft a ‘self governance plan’, a slate of measures that will see about two thousand fewer international bachelor’s students enrolling starting next year (compared to academic year 2022-2023), they wrote in a joint press release Wednesday. But there is one important condition: the *Toets Anderstalig Onderwijs* for existing programmes has to be scrapped. The question is whether Minister of Education Eppo Bruins could manage that. After all,

what political clout does he have in a coalition that sees frequent in-fighting, where there is rampant distrust, and where everybody is focused primarily on their own constituents?

### Randstad

Every university will contribute to the ‘self governance plan’, although it will hurt some more than others. For example, the universities in the Randstad, where whole English-language psychology programmes are set to be converted into Dutch. In Maastricht the intake quota for the Dutch and English-language programmes in Psychology will be adjusted to make the Dutch track more attractive. Looking at the number of international students UM is set to ‘lose’ by implementing the measures, the Executive Board at Maastricht can count its blessings. The English-language track for Medicine may disappear, but over the last few years, that attracted ‘only’ about fifty students. Nor will the European Law School (ELS) lose that many students with its new intake quota of 550. Moreover, the Hague’s anti-internationalisation sentiment is not *the* reason for making the above changes. The international track Medicine became far too expensive and in law they saw the workload increase with increasing numbers of ELS students.

UM President Rianne Letschert, about that Maastricht doesn’t appear too badly affected: “At the same time – and I cannot emphasise

this enough – you have to consider that a large proportion of the international students at UM comes from the Euregion. If they start marking us down for that, then this university, this region will be incredibly vulnerable.” Furthermore, “Measures are needed in those areas with the greatest problems [such as housing], and not here, not in these border regions and contracting regions. That is reflected in our self governance plan, and is something we are very happy with.”

### Language lessons

All the universities want to tackle the Dutch language proficiency of international students in an effort to improve the chances they will remain here. Students at UM can already follow a free course in Social Dutch, but at the moment, a working group is investigating what other, potentially less voluntary, options there are. Extra curricular language lessons and specific variants based on the curriculum, focused on jargon, for example. The UM already introduced a language policy for employees in 2018. Staff members are expected to be proficient in both English and Dutch. The expected levels are the fairly simple B1 level for activities outside of education, and the nearly native speaker proficiency of C1 level for those teaching.

Wendy Degens



So long,  
and thanks  
for all the  
reads

“

What I’ve always liked most about writing this column is the opportunity it gives me to take a step back from the mundane day-to-day. Every two months, I’m forced to ask myself: “What message do I have for my wider scholarly community—a group of colleagues and students who care nothing about the committees I sit in or the finer points of debate in my field? What bite-sized morsel of insight can I share with them that they don’t already know?” As I step back from this role due to time constraints, you’ll be a better judge of whether I have succeeded in this.

So now today I ask myself this question for the last time. It feels like an especially tricky one these days, when so many of our certainties are unsettled and even our most trusted institutions seem to be built on sand. Every now and then someone who has known me since I was an idealistic student asks me whether I still believe the world is becoming a better place. It surprises them to hear that my answer to that is still yes—although I might not proclaim or even believe it quite as confidently as before. It might be a cliché, but now it’s the energy and passion of my students that keeps me believing that. It’s also the enthusiastic book club readers I study, and the young Ethiopian interviewees who take up gruelling jobs behind sewing machines so that they can attend evening classes.

I could be wrong, of course. The problems I’ve discussed in these pages over the years—Trump and his cronies, GenAI and the decline of reading, the avalanche of make-work and economic competition in academia, the precarity of workers in the global South—could just be getting started. Either way, whether it’s to stem one tide or to help another along, my course of action will be the same: to support my union this week, to continue researching what I care about, and to keep talking to my students. And to keep writing, even if (for now) not in these pages.

”

Elsje Fourie,  
associate professor of Globalisation &  
Development Studies

## A dog brings peace of mind Students walk away stress during Well-being Week

*Offline for a bit, head out into nature, and a dose of dog hugs – that’s the recipe for the Walk With Dogs on Tuesday during the well-being week.*

The UM psychologists Wendy Geijen, Fraukje Kolle and Greet Kellens, how organized it, have brought their own dogs: little Coco and the slightly bigger Mira. “We know them well and know how they react. That makes for a calm atmosphere, also for the students,” says Geijen. They’re expecting about 35 students, in the end, about half that number turn up.

On the walk, the students take turns walking either of the two dogs. The walk begins and ends at Tapijnkazerne; there is a short lunch break by the watermill on Sint Pieter. “I sit inside a lot and just binge Netflix. This was exactly what I needed,” says one of the participants.

Geijen: “The whole initiative helps lower the barrier to getting to know other students, it’s relaxing, and the fact that you are out in nature together makes a huge difference. And the dogs? They set the right mood immediately.” Many participants miss their own dogs – some, because those dogs are far away, and others, because they’re no longer with us. “I had a dog, but he died two years ago. His picture is still on my fridge.” Another says, “In Bangladesh, having a dog is very expensive. Birds are a much more common pet there. It was really special for me to be able to walk a dog today.” In the future, Geijen and Kolle think they might even like to bring their dogs to the office. “That could seriously lower the barrier to seeing a psychologist. Of course, we do have to bear in mind students who are allergic or scared of dogs.”



Lena Reichel

Photo: Joey Roberts

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

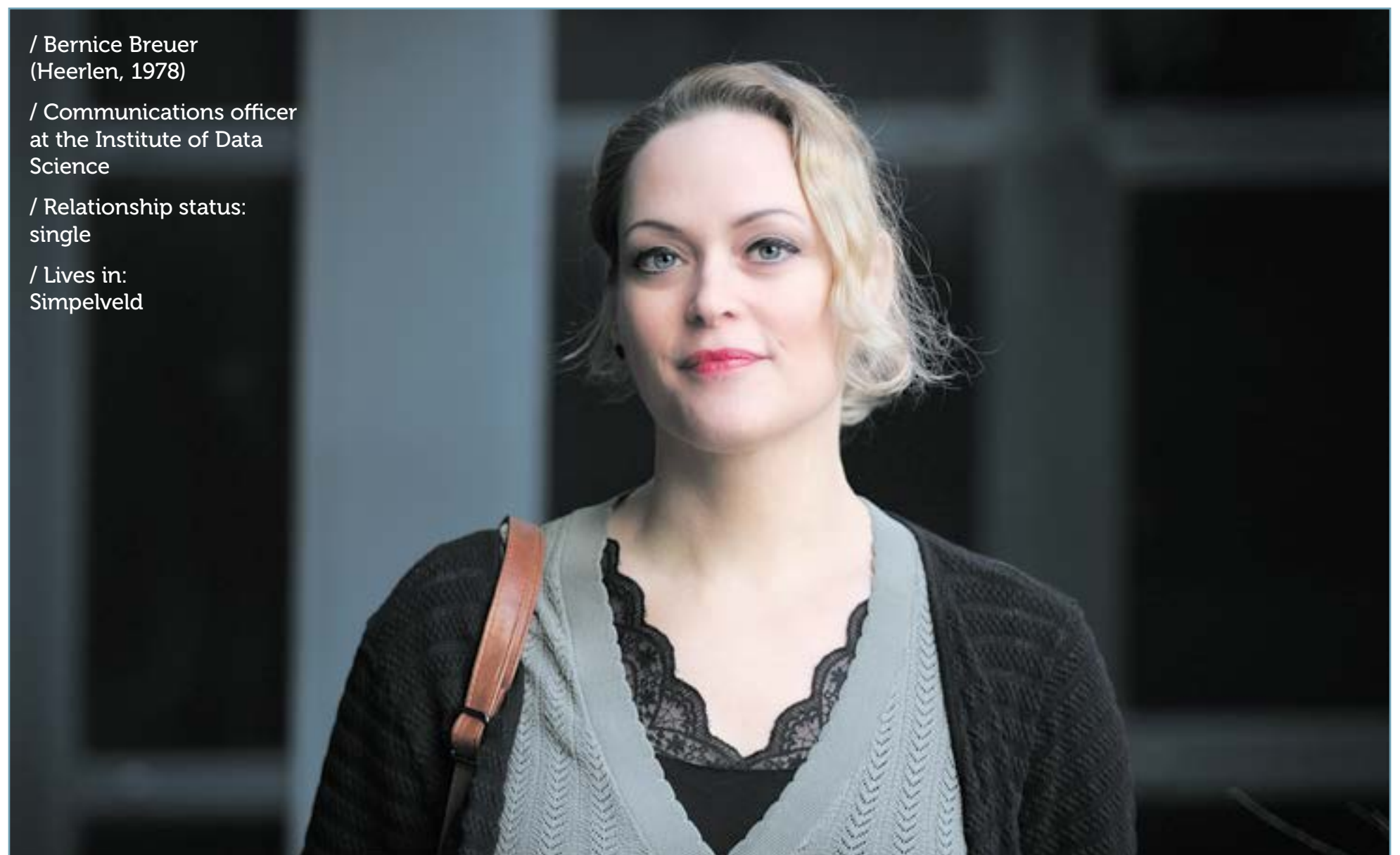


Photo: Joey Roberts

/ Bernice Breuer  
(Heerlen, 1978)

/ Communications officer  
at the Institute of Data  
Science

/ Relationship status:  
single

/ Lives in:  
Simpelveld

“

It's not rocket science,  
but I'm glad I can help others

”

**I was a difficult teenager.** Yes, I was a total rebel. I wore alternative clothes and talked back to teachers. This one time, I even told a teacher who had it in for me that I'd set my father on him. [Laughs] My father is a very mild-mannered and religious man, but of course the teacher didn't know that. A lot of it was bravado, but part of my behaviour stemmed from insecurity. And an aversion to authority, which I think I got from my maternal grandfather. Unlike my father, he wanted nothing to do with the Church. He used to live next door to the parish priest and saw the hypocrisy firsthand. The man happily ate meat on Fridays, for example.

**I'm fascinated by...** the question of why people choose to do evil, to harm others. I always have been. I was occasionally bullied as a child, but retaliating always made me feel awful. While studying philosophy in Nijmegen, I became even more fascinated by it. Before that, I'd already completed a degree in Health Sciences in Maastricht. I had to work with lab animals during an internship, and I thought, "I don't want to do this." I originally planned to focus on bioethics in Nijmegen, but I soon became captivated by philosophers like Friedrich Schelling and Immanuel Kant and their views on free will and moral evil. They argue that free will is the ability to choose evil.

**This is how I used to imagine my future:** doing research, teaching, speaking at conferences, travelling the world. I could've gone on to do a PhD in Nijmegen, but my doctor advised against it. During my studies, I devel-

oped chronic inflammation of the colon caused by colitis, an autoimmune disease. I didn't respond well to medication and eventually, in 2012, my colon had to be removed. It's had a major impact on my life. I can't travel far because I always need to be near a toilet, get tired easily and need lots of rest. I've been declared 80 to 100 per cent unfit for work. But after completing two degrees, I wasn't just going to sit at home. I was thrilled when, in 2020, my alma mater UM gave me the opportunity to return for a part-time job of 12 hours per week. And through my work – communicating news and events through the institute's website and social media – I stay up to date with academia. What I do isn't rocket science, but I'm glad to be supporting researchers.

**What's your favourite music?** Metal and classical music. It might sound like a strange combination, but apparently, it's not that unusual. I love the harmony of classical music, and you find that in old-school metal from the 1970s and 1980s, too. There's none of that over-the-top satanic screaming, though – that's not my thing at all. The genre is influenced by the Renaissance and Baroque, which really speaks to me. Same with art; Raphael's *The School of Athens* is one of my favourite works.

**Do you have any pets?** I found my cat, Lizzie, on the street in 2019. She was very small and not chipped. The vet estimated that she was around four months old. Since then, I've become even more aware of animals' will to survive, even in a spider or beetle in the garden. All living beings matter.

I think factory farming is evil – it deliberately inflicts suffering on animals. That's why I've been a vegetarian since I was fifteen.

**I dream of having a family.** I used to imagine getting married and having children, but physically, that's no longer an option for me. I've also had bad luck in love – I fell for the wrong person more than once, going for looks rather than compatibility. I haven't had a partner in years, and I'm quite content this way. There's no one to disappoint, either. If I ever meet someone I click with, I'm open to giving it another try, but I'm not actively looking. No dating apps for me.

**Is there life after death?** I don't believe in eternal damnation in Hell. I'm against organised religion – it's caused more harm than good. I am interested in the idea of reincarnation, though. Not the woo-woo stuff or *Ghost Hunters*, I can't stand that. But the concept of consciousness beyond the body, which is actually being studied. It's not that I'm convinced reincarnation is real, but I find it a comforting thought.

**I'm happy.** Yes, I am. Of course, my illness hasn't been easy – I've done plenty of crying over it. You have to watch what you eat and often have to make do with dry biscuits. Long-distance holidays are off the table. And you find out who your real friends are. Some people can't deal with the fact that you mostly meet at your home and don't go out much, or that you often have to cancel plans at the last minute. That's very difficult. But it's also made the friendships I still have even stronger. I've come to terms with it and can talk about it openly now. It is what it is. I try to make the most of the things I *can* control, and that's enough. And you have to count your blessings – I have a nice job, my cat, both my parents are still alive, I don't need a wheelchair. I have a rich inner life, I love to read and I'm never bored. Without my illness, I probably would've been a less pleasant person to myself and others – more impatient, more arrogant, less empathetic. I see that sometimes in students whose lives have been smooth sailing so far, who take everything for granted. I used to be like that, too.

Dennis Vaendel

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

First-year dropout rates at UM differ per programme

# Not every 18-year-old gets it right first time

In 2012, Maastricht University and the Ministry of Education made an agreement on performance: keep the dropout rate for first years below 15 per cent. After the end of the performance agreements in 2016, that requirement was dropped, but the measures to prevent dropouts, such as mentors, remained, and were in some cases even expanded. So what does that figure look like now?



Illustration: Shutterstock

First, UM only considers dropouts those students who no longer attend the university. Someone merely switching degree programmes at UM is not included in these figures. Second, at the time, the metric was only concerned with the average per institution, so a low dropout rate for one programme compensated a higher dropout rate for another. Those differences of the past still exist in the present. A programme like Medicine traditionally has a low dropout rate, and the 2022 and 2023 cohorts are no different: only 1.3 and 1.9 per cent dropped out. Other programmes that require students to pass a selection also typically have low dropout rates. University College Maastricht, for example, saw a rate of only 7.7 (2022) and 8 per cent (2023) respectively.

## Stumbling blocks

STEM subjects, on the other hand, always see a high dropout rate, the Faculty of Science and Engineering (then still known as the Department of Data Science and Knowledge Engineering) noted back in 2016, when UM presented a plan to tackle drop out rates. The difference between STEM and other subjects is still visible today. In 2022, 22 per cent of first years studying Data Science and Artificial Intelligence dropped out, and in 2023, it was almost 20 per cent. The bachelor programme Computer Science, which started in 2023, also sees 24.5 per cent of first years throw in the towel. The School of Business has noticed a similar pattern with their more STEM-based programmes. Economics and Business Economics had a dropout rate in 2023 of over 19 per cent, while International Business was over 13 per cent.

FSE management secretary Rob Kock: "Students who performed well in a classical secondary school environment don't always have the complex problem-solving skills that a university STEM programme requires." Stumbling blocks such as

maths also play a part, as does the fact that for Computer Engineering, Maastricht's is the only programme in the Netherlands that doesn't have an intake quota. Everybody can apply. A portion of these students drops out because of a negative binding study recommendation.

## Not the right choice

Pupils find it harder to imagine what some degrees involve than others. According to associate dean of education Sjoerd Claessens, ignorance about the subject matter – and then discovering in first year that it doesn't suit you – is the main reason law students drop out. In 2023, the European Law School saw a dropout rate of 24.1 per cent, Dutch law, 15.6 per cent. 'Broad' degrees at other faculties show similar percentages. For example, at Arts and Culture, 26 per cent of the 2022 cohort and nearly 16 per cent of the 2023 cohort dropped out. Psychology (2022: 11.1 per cent, 2023: 13.2 per cent) has a similar problem. "Students don't always have a good idea what the programme can offer, other than clinical psychology, which everybody can imagine," said associate dean of education Anke Sambeth. "We try to take this into account during the selection process, by adding content that offers students insight into what they could expect, but it still seems to be hard for some people to make the right choice at a relatively young age." Another hurdle is that this programme tends to attract people who suffer from mental health issues, something that is an age-old reason for dropping out.

## Interim degree

Some students know exactly what they want, becoming a doctor, for example, but fail to make it through the initial

*"Students don't always have a good idea what the programme can offer"*

selection. They often choose a different programme for a year and then try again. This is reflected in the figures for Biomedical Sciences, for example, where in 2023, 12 per cent switched to Medicine, or Health Sciences, where 14 per cent switched.

## Covid

A number of associate deans of education noted the effect covid is still having on the 2022 and 2023 cohorts. Although the direct measures had been lifted, these students had spent part of their secondary school careers in lockdown. At SBE, where dropouts are offered an exit interview to explain why they're leaving, there has been a clear rise in the number of students who are dropping out for mental health reasons – although it was noted that it has also become more normal to talk about mental health. Students also often find the programme 'too hard' since covid.

## Measures

While dropping out can never be prevented entirely, hard work is being done to reduce it as much as possible. A small selection of the measures listed: one-on-one or group discussions with a mentor, calling on students who have failed to show up on a number of occasions to visit the student adviser, designing a curriculum in such a way that students have a chance to 'land' in the first period, and ensuring a close connection to the group, the university and the city. For example, since this academic year, SBE organises informal student-staff breakfasts, where students can chat to staff members.

## science

UM researchers take on the fight against bacteria

# Preparing for a world without antibiotics



Photo: Shutterstock

With resistant bacteria rapidly on the rise, treating an infection with a course of antibiotics is something we can no longer take for granted. Antibiotic resistance already claims millions of lives each year and could even become the world's leading cause of death. Researchers in Maastricht are working on new technologies and materials to help prevent that outcome.

"It's something we haven't really seen since the 1960s: people dying of pneumonia. But now it's happening more and more, simply because antibiotics no longer kill the bacteria. Then it's down to your own immune system, but that's not always enough", explains Chris Arts, a researcher at Maastricht University, speaking from his office in Randwyck. "Likewise, infections that occur during surgery can cause major complications. Think of a hip or knee replacement becoming infected. In the worst-case scenario, this can lead to amputation or even death." These kinds of cases are still relatively rare in the Netherlands, says Arts. Bacteria in the body can become resistant when patients use antibiotics too often, for too long or incorrectly. "Thankfully, we're cautious about prescribing antibiotics in the Netherlands. But in many other countries,

that's not the case." As a result, the number of resistant bacteria strains is increasing. "And bacteria don't respect borders. They spread through physical contact, food and the environment. It's a problem we can't keep contained." This year alone, antibiotic resistance will cause around 4 million deaths worldwide, according to Arts. "If nothing changes, that number is projected to reach 20 million by 2050. That would mean tens of thousands of deaths in the Netherlands – a small city's worth of people per year. And that's not even counting the millions left chronically ill, which would drive healthcare costs through the roof."

## Reduce the reliance

In the search for solutions, researchers tend to focus on making existing antibiotics more effective or developing

new classes. But that's not a viable long-term strategy, says Arts. "It often takes longer to develop a new antibiotic than it takes for bacteria to develop resistance to it. That's why we need to think bigger and find ways to reduce our reliance on antibiotics altogether."

That's exactly the aim of DARTBAC, an international consortium of over twenty universities and companies. In 2021, the project received nearly €10 million in funding from the Dutch Research Council (NWO) as part of the Dutch Research Agenda. And Maastricht University plays a key role in it: Arts leads the project, and "at least 25" UM researchers across various research groups are involved within DARTBAC. Just last week, dozens of researchers from all over Europe gathered at MECC Maastricht for the consortium's annual conference.

A major focus of the research is infection prevention. This is one of the most effective ways to reduce the need for antibiotics, but it's not as easy as it sounds, explains Arts. "Take prosthetic implants, for example. During surgery, bacteria from the patient's skin can enter the body, attach to the implant surface and form an impenetrable layer of slime called a biofilm. As a result, the body's own cells can no longer attach to the implant and there's a risk of serious infections. So, we need to prevent biofilms from forming in the first place."

## Special goggles

This requires an understanding of how biofilms form and how bacteria communicate with each other, "so we can disrupt that process. Here in Maastricht, we've got the M4I Institute, which can visualize biofilm formation – very unique." This insight is helpful in developing techniques and materials that make it harder for bacteria to attach to implants, or even kill them outright. "One promising approach is to heat implants just before insertion. This can be done in just about any hospital and doesn't require expensive equipment. Textured implant surfaces also seem to make it harder for bacteria to attach. And we're working on what's known as 'bioactive' glass and gels that can change acidity levels to inhibit bacterial growth. These techniques are already fairly advanced. On top of that, we're exploring things like special goggles that can light up bacteria during operations. This could be especially useful in soft-tissue procedures like intestinal surgery, where finding solutions is much harder than with hard surfaces like implants."

## Faster and better

DARTBAC aims to bring "at least three, but hopefully five" new technologies into clinical practice over the coming years, says Arts. A new lab in the recently renovated part of Universiteitssingel 50 will help make that happen. "It's got state-of-the-art equipment – for everything from biomaterials research to animal studies – and more capacity, allowing us to work much faster and better." With NWO's funding, they're set for the next three years. And when those millions run out? "We'd hoped to secure funding from the National Growth Fund [now scrapped by the government], so we're currently looking into other options."

In addition to new technologies, Arts believes something else is needed: greater awareness. "Clearly, the current campaigns aren't doing enough. Some people still take antibiotics for colds – even though they don't work on viruses – or stop taking them early, which increases the risk of resistance. Researchers at the UM Department of Health Promotion, amongst others, are studying how to improve education, not just for patients but also for nurses and doctors. I'm also pushing for antibiotic resistance to be more prominent in the medical curriculum."

Dennis Vaendel

UM PhD candidate crowned beauty pageant winner

# From timid mouse to shining star: meet Miss Universe Limburg

Not just beauty, but also brains – for Bo van Engelen, a PhD candidate at Maastricht University, the Miss Universe Limburg pageant provided the perfect platform to share her story and shine a spotlight on her PhD research. “I want to show people that personal development is possible, going to university is possible, even if it doesn’t seem like the obvious path for you.” And her story clearly struck a chord: on Sunday evening, Van Engelen was crowned the winner of the beauty contest.

The first time she stepped onto the stage, Van Engelen felt completely out of place, the 29-year-old told *Observant* just days before the Sunday finals. “It was a whole new world. I had to strike a pose like a proper Miss – hands on hips, standing tall, that sort of thing – but I didn’t have a clue. I do now, though. I’ve been practising nonstop these past few months, even walking in heels.” Her biggest fear? Tripping and falling at the critical moment – or worse, tearing her dress. A sudden eye infection only added to the stress. She’d already made a GP appointment to keep it from getting worse, she explained during the interview, because now that she was participating in the contest, she was in it to win it. “It would be odd not to admit that, wouldn’t it?” Entering a beauty pageant had never even crossed Van Engelen’s mind, but she unexpectedly ended up on the list of candidates through her part-time job as a hostess at football clubs Roda JC and PSV. “I started working at Roda when I was eighteen. It was a student job”, she explains. “I welcomed guests in the business lounge and made sure they had a good evening. Later, I did the same work at PSV. I met lots of people from different backgrounds, and one of them brought up the pageant.”

At first, she dismissed the idea. “I wasn’t sure it was for me. But when I gave it some thought, I realised it could be a platform – something more than just a beauty contest.” The stereotypes – curled hair, evening gowns, swimsuit presentations, flawless smiles – are part of it, she acknowledged, “but there’s more to it than that. It’s also about your values and your story.”

## Poverty

And Van Engelen definitely has a story to tell. She was born in Heerlen – “that’s where the hospital was” – and grew up in Hoensbroek, in a neighbourhood where, as she put it, “there was a lot of poverty. I didn’t experience it directly, but other children in the neighbourhood did. It shapes how you see the world. I was the first in my family to go to university. My dad worked at DSM, and my mum at Hema.” Her parents always encouraged her to aim high, and she took their words to heart. Van Engelen enrolled in the Maastricht Science Pro-

gramme to pursue a bachelor’s degree, focusing on biology and chemistry. “I was terrified. I was just a local girl who didn’t speak English very well, and suddenly I was expected to speak it all the time. I was hesitant – a timid little mouse.” But that shy first-year student is long gone. Van Engelen, who teaches in addition to her research, now lectures to three hundred Health Sciences students without batting an eye. “I think it’s fair to say I’ve grown”, she laughs. It was during an internship for her master’s degree in Drug Development and Neurohealth, also in Maastricht, that Van Engelen’s eyes were opened. She abandoned her original plans of becoming a pharmacist or working for a pharmaceutical company. She couldn’t see herself doing it, “especially for the rest of my life. It made me stop and wonder what I really wanted.”

## PhD opportunity

As if on cue, a PhD opportunity came up in the Healthy Primary School of the Future project, studying how proper nutrition and physical activity affect children’s school performance and health in neighbourhoods with relatively high levels of poverty, social disadvantage and health problems. “There’s not

much knowledge about what’s actually healthy. My mum used to pack me a Capri-Sun every day, thinking it had fruit in it, but it’s basically just a sugar drink.” To Van Engelen, who is involved in another project studying how greener school playgrounds affect children’s well-being, it feels like a way to give back. “As a student, I learnt how to help people get better. Now, I get to help prevent people from becoming ill in the first place. How great is that?”

Her message is clear: always believe in yourself. “You can grow and thrive, even if you grew up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. I hope that by participating in this pageant, I can be a role model for young girls – especially in academia, where they’ve got so much to offer.”

Whatever happens

next, no one can take the experiences of these past few months away from her. And she may yet add a few more chapters to this part of her story: having won the Limburg title, Van Engelen will now move on to the national finals in May – and perhaps even the global finals in Thailand a month later. “Although I’ve actually got a conference around then, so I’d have to see if I could make it work...”

“I wasn’t sure it was for me. But when I gave it some thought, I realised it could be a platform”

Deborah Blekkenhorst



Bo van Engelen, second from the left Photo: Bo van Engelen

background

Palestinian journalist speaks at Tapijn as part of the Safe Haven Fellowship Programme

“Speaking the truth is the only weapon we have left”

“Are there any questions from the audience?” the moderator asks Wednesday evening 9 April. Silence follows. You could hear a pin drop in the room at Tapijn Z as Palestinian journalist Amal Helles concludes her talk. She is currently in the Netherlands as part of the Safe Haven Fellowship Programme, run by the Amsterdam-based research institute NIAS.

The programme, financially supported by Maastricht University since February, offers scholars, artists and journalists from conflict zones a safe haven in the Netherlands to continue their work. While a previous talk at Tapijn Z by pro-Israel speaker Rawan Osman was disrupted by protestors just last month, this evening passes without incident. Hosted by the dialogue platform Omnium, Helles shares her story with a quiet and attentive audience.

She talks about how she, a young local journalist, became a war correspondent for the British newspaper *The Times* after Israel



Helping victims in Gaza Photo: Pixabay

invaded Gaza in response to Hamas attacks, denying access to international reporters. She recounts what it was like to report daily on

violence, devastation and immense human suffering. “The mothers who lost their children, the man who cried, ‘I have no one left’,

the piles of dead bodies... I will never forget.” She speaks of the constant fear of becoming a target herself – in early April, several Palestinian journalists were killed when their media tent outside a hospital was bombed. One of them burned alive. “Our flak jackets marked ‘PRESS’, meant to protect us, became targets. We took them off so others wouldn’t be put at risk.” She explains why she eventually decided to flee: “It was the realisation that my own children could end up buried beneath the rubble.” And she describes what it’s like to be in the Netherlands with her two children, while her husband stayed behind in the Gaza Strip. “I live every day in fear of losing him.” Helles also levels sharp accusations against Western democracies that claim to support human rights but turn a blind eye to what she calls “the best-documented genocide in history. You’ve watched it unfold in real time, and still you ask for proof. How much more proof does the world need to see that Palestinian lives are worth protecting?” And she accuses Western journalists of paying far too little attention to the suffering of the Palestinian people and their own Palestinian colleagues. “We were abandoned by the very media organisations that claim to stand for press freedom”, she says. “A journalist burns alive, and no one loses sleep over it.” As a fellow at NIAS, Helles is currently researching the role of women journalists in Gaza, who must navigate the terror of war while also facing gender-based discrimination. What keeps her going? “I didn’t choose this”, she says firmly. “The war chose me. Speaking the truth is the only weapon we have left.”

Peter Doorackers

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