

observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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Holiday!

This is the last *Observant* of this academic year. Follow us in the next weeks on observantonline.nl/ English Have a good summer!



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editorial

Old junk

We carried a full shopping bag with us to the venue where we recently celebrated our former editor-in-chief, who was stepping down after 29 years at the helm of *Observant*. The bag held a fat Dutch dictionary from the 1980s; a stainless-steel ashtray, complete with matches; small padlocks (with an amazing purpose – more on that in a moment); and a receipt spike. All these items featured in our thank-you speech.

During a bit of office reshuffling, spring cleaning and clearing out the old kitchenette, we stumbled across some brilliant finds. The receipt spike – jokingly dubbed our “murder weapon” because of its sharp end – once held pieces of paper known as *paartjes*, the classifieds that *Observant* used to fill an entire page with every week, back before the turn of the millennium. Three examples from September 1995: “For sale: white 1983 Honda Civic, f1,200 o.n.o. Lovely little car!” “Deep inside... every woman wants a Banalitas member.” “Wijlre brewery looking for students to work one or more days per week.”

Anyone wanting to place a *paartje* would simply stop by our office. In the age of social media and online market places, these mini adverts are a thing of the past. The Banalitas fraternity is no more, that lovely little Honda is probably rusting away in a scrapyard somewhere, and we all know what became of the Brand beer brewery in Wijlre.

Too heavy to carry in a shopping bag was a vintage radio, which our former colleague Wammes Bos insists “just needs a new valve” to get it working again. We have our doubts and decided not to test his theory. We also unearthed a hideous little plastic tray with a cushion inside – a mouse pad with wrist support, as it turns out. And we own some fifteen dictionaries and style guides from a bygone era and academic publications by researchers long retired.

As for those padlocks I mentioned – they were an old-school anti-theft device, used to physically secure one’s PC to one’s desk just in case someone tried to walk off with the PC. This actually happened once, or so the story goes.

It would be a shame to throw it all away. Instead, we’re photographing our best finds for a weekly series next academic year, in honour of the university’s fiftieth anniversary. The name? *Old Junk*. If anything catches your eye, feel free to come and collect it. Just don’t forget to bring a shopping bag – a sturdy one, especially if it’s the radio you’re after.

Wendy Degens

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



series maastricht and me



Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

“It feels like stepping into a different world”



Ombeline Suin, a third-year Psychology student, shares her favourite spot in Maastricht: a quiet, open stretch between St. Pieter and the edge of the Kanne countryside.

“I don’t even know what this place is called – it’s more like a state of mind. But if I had to describe it, it’s this stretch along the border between St. Pieter and Kanne, where I go running. There are fields, long roads, even a farm with llamas. It’s so far removed from the city, it feels like stepping into a different world.

“I discovered it recently while out running with a friend. We were training for a marathon. It’s quiet, spacious, and there’s this magnificent house along the route.

Every time I pass it, I wonder whether it’s a museum or if people actually live there. It adds a certain magic to the whole area.

“Maastricht can feel a bit crowded at times, especially for outdoor activities. But this spot is different. Just straight roads, flat fields, and silence. It makes you feel isolated, but in a good way. It’s where I go to get out of my head. You’re alone with your breath and the road and your thoughts. It’s perfect for anyone who needs space – to sit with their feelings, or just take a pause.

“I’ve been there with different people – my dad, my friends,

my housemates. Each time, it feels more wholesome. I remember pointing out the llamas to my dad when he came to visit. I don’t think he believed me at first. But they’re real! There really is a farm with actual llamas.

“Now that I’ve lived in Maastricht for a while, I’ve settled into a routine and don’t always notice its beauty anymore. But I know that when I leave, I’ll miss it deeply. I already miss certain parts – like when I used to live in Wyck. Now I’m in the city centre and rarely go back, but

when I do, I feel nostalgic. Even though it’s still there, I already miss it.

“I’m leaving soon to do my master’s in Belgium, but I’ll be back. One day, I want to bring my children here. Maastricht has become a part of me.”

Line-Marie Eichhorst

This is the last installment of this series

news

For the first time, police were deployed against pro-Palestinian activists on university grounds

Fifteen protesters arrested after occupation University College Maastricht

On Tuesday evening, police ended an occupation at University College Maastricht, where at least fifteen masked pro-Palestinian activists had barricaded the building since 8 o'clock that morning. How they entered and whether they were (exclusively) students remains unclear.

This is the first time that police have been deployed against pro-Palestinian protesters at Maastricht University. During a previous occupation of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences last year, police were on standby but did not intervene, as the protesters left voluntarily. At that time, the activists were known and had communicated with the university, says UM spokesperson Koen Augustijn.

This time, neither police nor university knows whether the occupiers are students, making it impossible for UM to take disciplinary action, according to the spokesperson. UCM remained closed Wednesday. All locks are being replaced and the building is being inspected for damage. Which, at first glance, appears to be minimal – “little to none”, says Augustijn.

What happened on Tuesday at the Zwingelpuut? Doors and windows of the historic UCM building were locked from 8 a.m. Posters reading “Maastricht University has blood on its hands” were taped to the windows. The activists, part of the group Maastricht 4 Palestine, demanded that Maastricht University sever ties with Israel and denounce the “ongoing genocide” in Gaza, according to Instagram posts. They refused to leave until these demands were met. Staff and students had already vacated the building, and classes were relocated elsewhere in the city centre.

Throughout the day, the occupiers were joined by supporters from a pro-Palestinian march that had started earlier at the Student Service Centre. That group – which varied in size – remained outside the building, loudly supporting the occupiers vocally.

Around 4:30 in the afternoon, the Executive Board made contact with the occupiers – requesting they leave the building that evening.

Negotiations failed, prompting Vice President Jan-Tjitte Meindersma to address the demonstrators via megaphone, demanding they leave “immediately and without further delay”, saying they are guilty of “unlawful entry and occupation, which is a criminal offense.” At 6:30 p.m., the activists remained defiant. Fifteen minutes later, four police vans arrived. Officers repeated Meindersma’s message and warned those who stayed would be “arrested for trespassing”.

When that also proved to be ineffective, police prepared to enter via the back door around 7 p.m. By 7:45, the activists were escorted out

one by one and transported away by coach. Police confirmed fifteen arrests. All were arraigned and released later that evening. The Public Prosecution Service will decide whether to press charges.

Can UM take disciplinary action? After all, the code of conduct was violated. No, says Augustijn: “We don’t know who they are.” Police identified the individuals but, for privacy reasons, are not sharing names with UM, says a spokesperson.

Peter Doorakkers



The occupied UCM-building with supporting protesters in front Photo: Observant

Brainstorm session draws only a handful of students

Little progress in search for ‘new approach’ for student associations

A brainstorm session with a handful of students and a conversation with one expert. Those are the meagre results of Maastricht University’s search for a new approach to dealing with the traditional student associations Tragos and Circumflex.

“We feel the pressure to tackle this quickly. We want a solution sooner rather than later,” said Margriet Schreuders, director of the Student Services Centre (SSC), at the beginning of April, shortly after UM had temporarily frozen ties with the two associations, following incidents that violated the code of conduct – a document containing rules for hazing activities. It proved to be the straw that broke the camel’s back: the university is done with a system of codes of conduct, which are violated and amended in turn. A new approach has to be found, and it is up to the SSC to find it.

What about the conversations with “the UM community and experts”, which were announced two months ago? “The first steps

have been taken,” Schreuders said on the phone, but there is a disappointing lack of interest. At the end of May, there was a meeting in Tapijn Z where students could share their ideas. Only fifteen people showed up.

“We had hoped for more people, of course, we want to hear lots of opinions,” said Schreuders. “At the moment, we are thinking about a second meeting after the summer, and of sending a questionnaire to all the students and staff.” There has also only been one conversation with an expert. Nevertheless, the goal is to send a report with first findings to the Executive Board by the end of the academic year. Schreuders was unwilling to share what those findings are. “We don’t want to push people in a particular direction yet.”

Schreuders has also since spoken to the boards of Tragos and Circumflex. They had asked the university for clarification: in a press release, they stated they were not aware of incidents that had violated the code of conduct. Despite UM stating that they had explicitly come to

light during the conversations with the student associations. Schreuders had no comment on these conversations, but said she was “surprised” by the statement from the associations, and that she still supports UM’s interpretation. The chairs of both Tragos and Circumflex have refused to answer *Observant’s* questions for weeks.

As long as there is no new policy, the sanctions against the student associations will remain in place. This also means that Tragos and Circumflex will not be allowed to join the introduction week INKOM, although individual members will be allowed to serve as mentors for groups of participants. “We cannot exclude students based on membership, nor do we want to. It’s not as if they’re part of a criminal organisation. But we are stopping the associations from taking part at other times when they are normally present, such as booths at events.”

Dennis Vaendel

column



When Live Throws Curveballs

“

Exactly three years ago, I graduated high school. On Saturday, the 4th of June 2022, I walked onstage to Abba’s *Our Last Summer*, beaming with elation as I accepted my IB diploma. As one profound chapter in my life came to an end, the next began with a formal announcement revealing my next academic endeavour. Funnily enough, this next academic endeavour could’ve been wrapped up today, exactly three years later. Well, perhaps not quite, as my graduation will only be taking place on the 28th of November — and only once I’ve fulfilled all the necessary criteria for my degree. However, today was supposed to be the day where I submitted my bachelor’s thesis.

I walked by my campus today to pick up my graduation hoodie. In the courtyard, I could see members of the graduation committee unboxing bottles of prosecco in preparation of UCM’s annual “champagne popping ceremony”. Several of my peers were already lingering in the hallway, giddy from the submission of what can only be described as the most substantial assessment during our time at university. I left through the back door with a heavy heart, a pit in my stomach, and barely suppressed tears. Unfortunately, I would not be attending the ceremony alongside my friends. Due to personal reasons, I fell behind on my thesis — forcing me to take a step back and request an extension.

However, even with the extension granted to me, I’m struggling to finish on time. Sitting here now, I’m teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown. My fingers seem to be moving in autopilot, writing down the thoughts that my brain is too burnt out to fully comprehend. I can’t seem to shake the feeling that I’ve failed, and how terrified I am of disappointing my thesis advisor, my parents, *myself*.

Certainly I’m not the only one who feels this way. Life has a way of throwing curveballs at us when we least expect it. Plans unravel, hurdles appear out of nowhere, and sometimes, despite our best efforts, we fall behind. It’s a bitter truth that I have yet to accept — trying my hardest won’t always look the way I want it to. For now, all I can do is breathe, refocus, and keep writing.

”

Robin van Wasen,
student at UCM

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

/ Alexandre Skander Galand (Tunis, Tunisia, 1981)

/ assistant professor of International Law

/ relationship status: partner, three children

/ lives in: Maastricht



Photo: Joey Roberts

“ I was a rebellious teenager, but I always had a strong moral compass ”

My childhood bedroom window looked out on...

I was born in Tunisia, but when I was five, we moved to a small coastal town in Quebec, Canada, called Gaspé. It has a population of 12,000 and the nearest bigger town is almost 400 kilometres away. My mother is a psychiatrist and was granted a work permit in Canada on the condition that we lived in a rural area. We were surrounded by nature and snow – quite a change from Tunisia’s warm climate. I spent hours playing in the woods around our house, where a friend and I built a cabin. I could just about see it from my bedroom window.

I was named after... I have two first names, Alexandre and Skander – the French and Arabic versions of Alexander. My mother is Tunisian and my father was Belgian. They knew we’d leave Tunisia one day and were worried I’d face more racism with an Arabic name. At school I went by Alexandre, but I later chose to use Skander. If people are going to be racist, I’d rather know from the start. When we moved to Canada, we were the first immigrants Gaspé had ever seen. Our arrival even made the local newspaper. A lot of people were curious and came over to chat with us, but not everyone was welcoming. One day, a friend came up to me and told me his parents had said he couldn’t play with me anymore. They’d found out – I myself look fairly white – that my mother wasn’t “like them”. I never saw him again.

The best advice I ever received... came from my mentor during my post-doc at Koç University in Istanbul. She taught me to always try. I had lots of ideas but was afraid to pursue them because I thought they were too ambitious. She

told me, “Be creative – just try it and see where it takes you.”

My partner can’t stand it when I... burp at the table. I think it’s natural and perfectly acceptable; she hates it.

Always in my carry-on: my e-reader, even though I rarely get round to reading. I love historical fiction, especially with a bit of mystery woven in. If I had to name one author, it’d be Yasmina Khadra – the pen name of Algerian writer and former military commander Mohammed Moulessehoul. He’s brilliant at describing social tensions, particularly in his novels about the Algerian Civil War, and his writing is deeply empathetic.

Is there anything you’ve done that you wouldn’t let your children do? As a teenager, I used to sneak out at night, climbing out of my bedroom window and jumping from the second floor into the garden. My father knew but never said anything. I don’t think I could be that hands-off. I’d tell them they can stay out later if they want, just as long as they use the front door.

I’ve always had a strong sense of justice. Yes. I may have broken the rules when I was a rebellious teenager, but I always had a strong moral compass. And I understood that the law isn’t always fair. Several of my mother’s relatives were arrested and imprisoned in Tunisia for their beliefs. One of our very close family friends was even tortured. Except for some years after the revolution in 2011, Tunisia has never truly had freedom of speech. Whenever we went to visit in the

summer, my parents would urgently remind me not to talk about certain topics in public. I think that’s what pushed me towards studying law.

I’m fascinated by... how international courts approach major social issues, attempt to address them – sometimes belatedly – and how much their views can differ. Take the war in former Yugoslavia. One court said it was an internal conflict; another said it was a conflict between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. I studied law in Canada and worked as a lawyer for a while, dealing with everything from neighbour disputes to contract issues. I enjoyed the contact with clients, but the cases themselves bored me – they were too simple. So I went to Europe, to the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, and began specialising in international law, specifically international criminal law and laws of war.

I call my mother... I try to call her every three days, but since she still lives in Canada and the best time to reach her is around 2 p.m. here, I end a lot of our calls with, “I’ve got a meeting – I’ll call you back.” My father died of cancer when I was 21. Our family was always close, but my mother, sister and I have been a tightly knit unit ever since, even though we’re separated by distance. My sister moved back to Tunisia. We text every morning.

My little joy in life is... being at the beach, seeing the sea. The moment I feel sand beneath my toes, I’m happy.

In ten years... I’ll still be working in academia and at an international legal institution, as a lawyer or a judge. Where I’ll be living is a trickier question. My partner works at the University of Zurich and commutes between the Netherlands and Switzerland, which is very tough. She’d like us to move to Switzerland, but I’m not sure I can see myself living there. I’m quite happy in the Netherlands. Back to Tunisia? No, my lifestyle is far too liberal. I’d have to be a different person in public than I am at home – and it would be even harder for my partner, being a woman. I don’t want that.

Cleo Freriks

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

A tour of the University Library's Special Collections during the Pilgrimage of the Relics

"The first real biography of the city's patron saint – truly something special"



Woodcut of Saint Servatius with Maastricht in the background in the first real biography of the city's patron saint from 1662

Odin Essers' eyes are bright. The curator of Special Collections at the Maastricht University Library is clearly proud of the piece of local heritage he's holding: the first real biography of Saint Servatius, Maastricht's patron saint, dating back to 1662. In honour of the Pilgrimage of the Relics – a septennial religious and cultural event centred on the saint, which begins today – Essers will be giving three guided tours of the Special Collections.

But first, a question: why does Maastricht University, a secular institution, own books about saints? The answer lies in the university's origins, Essers explains. Its first building was the former Jesuit monastery on Tongersestraat, now home to the

School of Business and Economics. The library that came with it laid the foundation for what is now Maastricht University's Special Collections. And the Jesuit Collection didn't just contain religious texts, notes Essers – it also included "anatomical

atlases, medical and economics manuals, travel books and a legal history collection."

Essers believes these books, some of them centuries old, deserve to be seen – or better yet, used – by students, staff and anyone else interested. "This isn't some locked-away collection of interest only to a handful of historians. It's part of the city's heritage." So it came as no surprise when the organisers of the Pilgrimage of the Relics got in touch. "We're always looking for opportunities to collaborate, with external parties as well. That's something we've really invested in."

But the organisers' first question wasn't about books – it was about poetry. "For years, we organised a spoken word event for students at the Dominicanen bookshop during Museum Night. The cultural coordinator of the Pilgrimage of the Relics asked if we'd be interested in doing something like that again. We've put together a two-hour programme featuring three students exploring this year's Pilgrimage theme: 'Be a Bridge Builder'. Three secondary school students from the United World College will also be performing."

Essers' guided tours will take place on 17, 18 and 19 June. He gestures to the biography of Saint Servatius. "I think it's truly special that we own this – the first real biography of the city's patron saint. It'll be the centrepiece of my story, along with the heated Protestant response it provoked in the form of the book by the pastor Van Hamerstede, who thought it contained *leugenachtige vertellingen* [lying tales]. All this happened in the seventeenth century when tensions between Protestants and Catholics were running high, leading to fascinating polemics." And some people even found ways to profit from the situation, he laughs. "There were books printed in different versions with different title pages – one aimed at Catholics, the other at Protestants. But the contents were exactly the same! That was a printer with a keen business sense."

Peter Doorakkers

The spoken word event is taking place on Monday 16 June at 8 p.m. at the Dominicanen bookshop. Entry is free and there's no need to sign up.

More information: www.heiligdomsvaartmaastricht.nl

More students turning to Disability Support, ADHD most common

An increasing number of students with disabilities are turning to Disability Support at the Student Services Centre. In 2024, over a hundred more students applied for support compared to the previous year, with ADHD now the most common diagnosis. But international students in particular still face barriers, as highlighted in a recent faculty council meeting.

Students with physical, psychological or sensory disabilities, chronic illnesses or conditions such as dyslexia or autism can turn to Disability Support for guidance and help with requesting accommodations. "We look into the options, which may include extra time in exams, smaller exam rooms or assistive technology", explains disability officer Sigrid Peters. "We advise the Board of Examiners, which ultimately decides whether accommodations are granted."

The team works closely with UM psychologists and the UM project team *Embracing Neurodiversity*, offering students individual coaching as well as workshops. Prospective students with questions about the university's educational approach can also get in touch. "Even before you start your studies, we can advise you on Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and the social nature of the

university", says Peters. "Not everyone thrives in group settings – for example, students with ADHD who are easily overstimulated, or those who are physically unable to actively participate in discussions." That said, there are limits to the accommodations that can be made. "Adjusting a PBL schedule? That's generally not an option for the Board of Examiners."

Disability Support saw a sharp increase in demand in 2024, with over a hundred more students applying than the year before, bringing the total to 1,072. What is causing this increase? "Perhaps students are becoming more open about their disabilities", says Peters. "And we're also more visible than before."

Students with ADHD now make up the largest group at 30 percent. Last year, dyslexia and dyscalculia were the most common diagnoses. Is there a risk of students abusing the system to gain, say, extended deadlines? "That's not possible. We always require a medical certificate, which must be issued in English or Dutch," Peters emphasizes. "And we never grant accommodations lightly. In fact, students with ADHD can lose focus if they are given too much additional time for assignments."

While both Dutch and international students apply for support, there are clear cultural differences. "Dutch students tend to be

more familiar with the system, having often received similar support in secondary school", explains Peters. "Some international students are a bit more reserved. In Asian cultures, for example, disabilities are less openly discussed, especially in professional contexts."

And that's not the only barrier international students may face. At a recent FASoS Faculty Council meeting, concerns were raised about the cost of having a medical statement professionally translated into Dutch or English. "There's no way around that", says Peters. "We're not allowed to contact doctors directly because of medical confidentiality."

Students who can't or won't pay for translation need to be reevaluated and diagnosed here in the Netherlands. We understand that's difficult. In some cases, we can provide temporary support for students in the process of getting a diagnosis." She also points to UnliMited, a student-led initiative that advocates for the interests of students with disabilities in university policy and organises social events.

Lena Reichel

Test facility ETpathfinder is taking shape

“We’re testing things that have never been built before”

Just five years ago, the hall behind Duboisdomein 30 in Randwyck was little more than a dusty storage space. Today, it’s home to cutting-edge technologies – a test bed paving the way for the ultra-sensitive Einstein Telescope. And industry is starting to take notice.

TEXT: Dennis Vaendel

“Sometimes, it can be hard to grasp the sheer scale of this project”, says lab technician Elliott Duvieusart, looking out from the large windows of the viewing platform over the space where ETpathfinder is being built. Several of his colleagues, wearing blue overalls, face masks and plastic gloves, are working on scaffolding. “I’ll give them a quick call to let them know we’re about to take a flash photo – we don’t want to startle anyone.”

The facility will be used to develop and test technologies for the Einstein Telescope. This gigantic gravitational wave detector, designed to measure tiny ripples in spacetime, is expected to offer physicists a new view of the universe – potentially from beneath South Limburg (see box). “It’s truly the next big thing in our field”, says lecturer Sebastian Steinlechner. The project has been years in the making. “As early as 2008, I wrote my thesis in

Hannover on the technologies that would be needed here. Now it’s all coming together.” In early 2020, the hall was still being used to store desks and chairs for exam sessions at MECC Maastricht. Now, it houses a pristine white clean room – accessible only via an airlock, virtually dust-free and temperature-controlled, resting on a floor isolated from the rest of the building to minimise vibrations. Inside stand six huge towers, connected by



The viewing platform over the space where ETpathfinder is being built, with (from left to right) lab technician Elliott Duvieusart, researcher Sebastian Steinlechner and PhD candidate Luise Kranzhoff Photo: Ellen Oosterhof



Overview of the ETpathfinder by the end of 2024. Photo: ETpathfinder.eu

tubes that will eventually maintain a vacuum and temperatures close to absolute zero. The total cost of the test facility's construction will be many millions.

TRIAL AND ERROR

The towers will house mirrors between which laser beams will bounce, using the same technique the actual detector will use to measure gravitational waves. (This test setup is almost certainly too small to ever detect them directly.) But that's still a long way off. "The outer structure is complete, but we've only just started working on the internal systems, like the lasers and mirrors", explains Duvieusart. That's what the people in blue overalls are working on. "We're going tower by tower – we're currently on the first. So far so good. But how long it'll take? No idea. It's a process of trial and error."

That's not to say they'll be twiddling their thumbs until everything is up and running, though. "We can start experimenting before the entire system is complete. In fact, the process of building and developing the necessary technologies is incredibly valuable in itself. You run into practical issues you might never have considered – small details that can have a big impact on the construction of the actual detector, like how much room you need to clean certain systems. That's not something you want to discover when the whole thing has already been build deep underground."

BLACK HOLES

The biggest challenge, however, lies in developing the technology to measure gravitational waves. The concept was first proven by LIGO, a pair of detectors in the United States, in 2015. It was a scientific milestone; for years, physicists – including Albert Einstein himself, who developed the general theory of relativity that predicts the existence of gravitational waves – believed it was impossible to detect such tiny ripples in spacetime directly. Since then, LIGO and the Virgo detector in Italy have recorded hundreds of detections. "But those detections are still riddled with noise", says Steinlechner. "You can tell there's something there, but you miss a lot of details.

It's like Galileo's first telescope, which only gave blurry images of bright objects." With the Einstein Telescope, physicists hope to really get down to business: far more, and far more precise, measurements from deeper in the universe. These could help answer big questions about the true nature of black holes and other, possibly still undiscovered, exotic celestial bodies – and perhaps even about the Big Bang.

First of all, the Einstein Telescope will be much larger, with arms stretching up to ten kilometres. But the technology is also getting a major upgrade. "Part of it is improving on current detectors, but we're also adding new elements, like low-frequency lasers", explains Steinlechner. "These allow us to make more and different measurements, which researchers are really excited about. But it requires specific materials, like mirrors made from silicon rather than glass." The mirrors will also be cooled to around minus 250 degrees Celsius. "Warm objects vibrate more than cold ones." And vibrations need to be reduced as much as possible, as they can seriously interfere with such sensitive measurements.

NOISY FRIDGE

That's one of the main challenges, says Steinlechner. The installation must be as quiet as possible. "We can't have it interfering with the measurements. But it's tricky – cooling systems tend to be noisy. Just think how you can hear your fridge humming when the house is quiet." Then there's the issue of polishing the silicon mirrors to reflect the laser beams with as much precision as possible. "If the mirror was the size of IJsselmeer [the largest lake in Western Europe at 1,100 km²], the highest 'wave' on its surface would need to be less than the width of a human hair. Very few companies in the world can achieve that", explains Duvieusart. "Existing techniques need to be improved, sometimes by a factor of one to ten thousand."

To tackle these challenges, researchers in Maastricht are working with industry, universities and research institutions across the Netherlands and beyond. Various consortia have already been formed, with several mil-

lions of euros in funding, to develop specific components – from quiet mirror cooling and suspension systems to ultra-stable lasers, sensitive measuring techniques and vacuum systems.

"It takes companies with a very specific mindset", explains Steinlechner. "They're not just selling us a product – if the technology already existed, we'd be using it. They need to be willing to help us develop something that's never been built before." That comes with risks, adds PhD candidate Luise Kranzhoff, because success isn't guaranteed. "But if they succeed, they'll be the first in the world to do it. And they know the components for the actual Einstein Telescope will have to be built eventually, too."

CHIP GIANT

What's more, technological breakthroughs from large-scale scientific projects like this often ripple out into other fields and far beyond academia, which can be economically attractive. This is already happening, says Kranzhoff. For her PhD research, she's working with a small company to reduce vibrations in equipment. "They're already coming up with ideas for other applications, like stabilising microscopes." Dutch chip giant ASML, which co-owns a company involved in mirror polishing for ETpathfinder, is keeping a close eye on the project, says Steinlechner. "Creating ultra-smooth surfaces is relevant for chip manufacturing, too." And those are just a few examples. "We've even seen that major conferences on topics like vacuum technology are being held in Maastricht all of a sudden." While not all technologies and materials are being developed on site at Duboisdomein, over the coming years they will all eventually come together here to build a single working system. "It's quite special to be working on something that brings together so many different fields", says Duvieusart, casting another look at the towering installation. "I don't know of anywhere else quite like it." And the best part, adds Kranzhoff with a grin, "is that it's a test facility, so we get to play around with everything. You definitely won't be able to do that with the actual detector."

Will the Einstein Telescope come to Limburg?

Will the Einstein Telescope – the underground gravitational wave detector that ETpathfinder is paving the way for – also be located near Maastricht? That decision won't be made until 2026 or 2027, and construction of the detector is expected to take another ten years.

Geological surveys are currently being carried out to determine whether the subsoil in the border region of Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany is suitable for housing a kilometre-long, ultra-sensitive detector approximately 250 metres underground. Initial results are promising, but further research is needed. This will also help pinpoint where the detector's corners should be located – there's even a possibility that all three of them could end up in Wallonia.

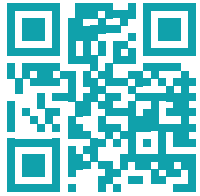
Eventually, a bid will be submitted to persuade a working group of European countries. The Euregion faces competition from Italy, with the island of Sardinia also vying for the multi-billion-euro project. The eastern German state of Saxony has joined the race as well but appears to have entered too late to be considered a serious competitor. Earlier this year, Germany's new federal government expressed support for the Einstein Telescope without explicitly favouring either of the two proposed German sites. The Dutch and Belgian governments, along with the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, have already thrown their weight behind the Euregion bid. The Netherlands has earmarked nearly €900 million for the project, with Flanders reserving €200 million.

Whichever site is chosen, it won't affect the ETpathfinder facility, which will remain in Maastricht. Even after the Einstein Telescope is built, the test facility will continue to be used for decades to develop and test technological upgrades.

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