

# observant

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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## THE UNIVERSITY IS GOING TO USE MORE DUTCH IN RECRUITMENT OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS.

The use of English has gone too far, acknowledges UM-president Rianne Letschert.

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Illustration: Bas van der Schot



“LET’S SET A GOOD EXAMPLE AT UM – WEAR A HELMET!”

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## CUT TIES?

Contributing in no way to the violation of human rights. Are you going to achieve that by boycotting institutes in conflict areas, like Israel. “Be careful for any unintended consequences.”

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Photos: Shutterstock



## editorial

# Tiny little room

“Do you think you could give that last speech now?” We’re halfway through our annual dinner with the editorial team, editorial council, foundation board, and our student and freelance contributors. Café Abrahams Look is nice and crowded, and the conversation around my table is lively. I hesitate; I’m comfortable here, and I already climbed up on a chair earlier this evening to say a few words about Anita Jansen, our departing foundation board chair (our rock – no-nonsense, witty and always on the go), as well as Paul and Brenda Nekeman, the translation duo who handled nearly all our translations for twenty years with speed, skill and flexibility. They retired on 1 July.

I’d also planned to address a few words to Line-Marie Eichhorst, a University College Maastricht student and one of our regular columnists these past few years, but she hadn’t arrived yet. Classic Line, we all agreed with knowing smiles – a creative mind can sometimes be a bit chaotic and lose track of time. But a quick text asking, “Are you still coming?” worked like a charm. Over the past year, Line never once missed a deadline, and her weekly columns were warmly received. With a bright smile, she accepted my compliments and her farewell gift – *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, fitting for someone considering a career in journalism. Seeing her standing there, I suddenly recalled a day early in the academic year when her mentor, WB, wanted to discuss one of her columns with her in person. After all, it’s easier to give detailed feedback face-to-face than by email. The only available space in the office was the tiny little room where we usually put together the newspaper layout. They weren’t quite sitting on top of each other, but it was a warm day, and WB was already in his cycling shorts, ready to head home afterwards. They closed the door between my office and the room behind them.

Sitting at my desk, a sense of unease crept over me. I thought about how many lecturers now keep their office doors open when meeting students – total transparency to avoid any later complaints about awkward or inappropriate situations. I knocked on the door with a casual excuse: wouldn’t they like to open a window for a bit of fresh air? WB looked up, startled and puzzled; no, they were fine, the window was already open. Line said nothing. Later, WB was surprised by my concern. I called him naive.

At this week’s dinner, Line told us she’d understood perfectly why I poked my head in that day. Not only is she a skilled writer, but she’s also adept at reading between the lines. She assured me that she’d felt entirely at ease in that little room, as had WB.

Riki Janssen

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



## series everything you want to know about sex



Collage: Simone Golob

## “Life doesn’t come with trigger warnings either”

**If you’ve had negative sexual experiences in the past, how do you navigate learning environments such as skills labs, where Medicine students practise physical examinations on each other? And what do you do if traumatic topics come up in lectures? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte shares her insights.**

“In a course I teach on sexuality, students – future therapists – are trained to ask clients personal questions. Every year, some students tell me, ‘I’m nervous about this because I’ve had a negative sexual experience.’ It’s emotionally difficult to talk about, which is completely understandable, but it is important to inform your tutors, trainers or lecturers. You can do this discreetly, and you definitely don’t have to share any details – you are in control of what you disclose. If I know a student struggles with talking about sexuality, I’ll respect that. This helps avoid situations where a tutor might unknowingly put a quiet student on the spot in class by asking, ‘What are your thoughts on this?’ Simply skipping classes on difficult topics isn’t a good solution, says Dewitte. “That’s a form of avoidance. You’ll need to consider whether your study programme is the right fit for you.” If you want to become a doctor or clinical psychologist, you will have to go through skills training. Medicine students, for example, practise physical examinations on each other in skills labs. “You could see the university as a safe space where you learn to deal with these things, talk about them – at least to some extent – and seek support from teachers, confidential advisors or peers.” It’s also important to realise that everyone has their own vulnerabilities, she adds. “There’s a reason why therapists in training undergo therapy themselves: you learn to reflect on yourself so that later, as a therapist, you’ll be aware of your own sensitivities.” Telling your teacher is one thing, but do your fellow students need to know? “In a tutorial group, you might get away with staying quiet once or twice, but participation is essential in

my training sessions where you learn to interview patients. Other students will notice if you don’t engage. I could suggest one-to-one sessions, without others present, but your peers will still know that something’s up.” This issue isn’t limited to skills training. Traumatic topics can also come up unexpectedly in

lectures, without the lecturer realising how this may affect some students. For example, a discussion on international conflicts might mention rape. How do you handle that as a student who has experienced sexual abuse? And what should the lecturer do? “I understand that lecturers don’t always think about this, but we could be more sensitive. Consider it beforehand and mention it at the start of the lecture. That’s what I do when teaching about negative sexual experiences. On the other hand, if you’re attending a lecture on wars and conflicts, it’s reasonable to expect that the topic of rape might come up. There’s an argument that life doesn’t come with trigger warnings either. As a student, you can choose to leave the lecture if necessary. It’s also not a bad idea to discuss it with the lecturer afterwards, so they can be more mindful in future.”

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



## New UM information campaign

# Information for prospective students no longer solely in English



Photo: Philip Driessen

*‘Echte antwoorden vinden we samen’. This Dutch slogan forms the central message of the new campaign to attract Dutch secondary school pupils to Maastricht University. UM has realised that English has started to take over too much, from online information to the language spoken at open days. “It was a barrier for some,” acknowledges President Rianne Letschert.*

Maastricht University is absolutely not changing its profile, Letschert affirms. It will still be ‘the European university of the Netherlands’, with an international classroom and problem-based learning. However, with regards to the considerable information provided to Dutch prospective students in English, UM has gone too far, acknowledges the president, “without gauging whether English works for everybody”. In response to information gleaned from secondary school pupils and parent-teacher meetings which shows that Dutch-speaking fifth and sixth years are not always happy with a fully English open day (“it can be hard to understand the English information provided for certain study programmes”), UM wants to change direction. At the most recent open day in October, visitors could opt for information sessions in either Dutch or English.

### Mile

A special information campaign for Dutch prospective students isn’t new. In the first half of 2016, the university launched the slogan ‘Go the extra mile’. After all, for many Dutch people Maastricht is a long way away. The idea was that anybody willing to come to the

south was prepared to do that little bit more. The new Dutch slogan ‘Echte antwoorden vinden we samen’ (Finding answers together) will be combined with the Dutch name for the university: ‘Universiteit Maastricht’. But the primary UM logo (two triangles plus Maastricht University) will remain as it is, in English, says the Marketing & Communications department on the intranet. “We will continue to use that in all other forms of communication outside the campaign.”

### Cabinet

This (modest) change of course is not entirely unexpected, of course. The last cabinet under Prime Minister Rutte was already working to limit the internationalisation in higher education through the ‘Internationalisation in Balance’ Act: fewer English-language programmes, fewer international students, and more Dutch in academia. Since about two years ago, all universities have also been forbidden from actively recruiting students abroad. The current right-wing cabinet has increased on previous efforts. Letschert emphasises that the new UM recruitment campaign had already been created before the Schoof cabinet’s plans were shared over the summer.

### Staff

The campaign isn’t aimed solely at prospective students, but also at new members of staff, says Letschert. Due to a tighter labour market, it is getting harder to recruit academic – and especially non-academic – staff from the Netherlands, she explains. Additionally, the campaign has to reach working professionals who wish to follow post-academic education at UM. “That’s why we have an Academy for Lifelong Learning and Development.”

### Critical

Not everybody is happy with the new direction. Mark Kawakami, assistant professor at the Faculty of Law, recently wrote an opinion article for *Observant* in which he was critical about the new campaign. He had attended an event for the new strategy and concluded that UM was experiencing a midlife crisis. What he was missing was a more substantive vision to complement the new look.

Letschert is disappointed the message has not been well “positioned and communicated. I can imagine that it might cause our international staff members, already heavily affected by the political debates, to rethink things. Like, ‘Oh, so my university is setting off down a different path.’” But the vision for the future is unchanged, she says. “We are still the university with a prominent international profile in the Euregion. That’s what we’re known for and that’s what we’ll build on.”

Wendy Degens



## FASoS merges with sex shop

“

It’s sometimes been hard to understand why UM wants to ‘integrate’ with the hospital. Maybe physical proximity is part of the reason. For those of us working in the inner city, it’s not always easy to tell the difference between the hospital and FHML.

If proximity is important, then I suggest the FASoS Board and the Executive Board take a stroll along the Grote Gracht. Across the street from FASoS are a sex shop, coffee shop (in the Dutch sense), and bookshop. They all sell goods and services of interest to students and staff. One could go so far as to suggest they are integral to academic life. After the recent revelation in *Observant* that university students have sex in unlikely places, maybe it’s time to explore other possibilities for the university to merge with local businesses.

If such mergers are pursued, the UM website will need further updating. The latest revamp includes many pictures of smiling students on the homepage, but no mention of the library. Maybe there are spots in the different libraries where students (and let’s be honest, perhaps also staff) could pursue activities suitable for adults, including reading and meditation. We could also think of cross branding. Each party could include the logos of the others, together with the now mandatory QR codes. Linking to those would provide more information about the services offered and the opening hours. We could introduce a loyalty card, transferable between the different activities. For each cup of coffee drunk at the Banditos café at FASoS, or book bought at the bookshop, or borrowed from the library, you get a sticker. With enough stickers, you get a discount at the sex shop or coffee shop, and vice versa. The possibilities are endless, and do not require too much imagination.

As Mark Kawakami described recently in an opinion article in *Observant*, UM has been searching for a new slogan. ‘Come to Maastricht for the sex and drugs’ might prove to be more effective than ‘Come to Maastricht for the hospital with a university attached’. This advice is free, unlike that of the consultants Kawakami discusses.

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Sally Wyatt,  
professor of Digital Cultures

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



/ Michiel Boer (Wezep, 1998)  
 / Fourth-year student of Law, president of the Christian student association Lux ad Mosam  
 / Relationship status: single  
 / Lives in Maastricht

Photo: Joey Roberts

“ I have a sharp tongue; if something bothers me, people will hear about it ”

**My mother thinks I'm...** When I was younger, she would've said I was incredibly hyper. I've calmed down a bit since then. Now, she'd say I speak my mind and can't stand injustice – I stand up for people who are struggling. Growing up in a religious family in the Dutch Bible Belt, I was taught that if you want change, you have to be willing to make a difference. That's why I'm involved with the [Christian political party] ChristenUnie. And I speak up when I feel someone is being treated unfairly, like in tutorials. I have a sharp tongue; if something bothers me, people will hear about it.

**Beer or Bible?** [Laughs] Why not both? As a Christian, I'm free to enjoy God's blessings, and that includes a beer now and then. You can often find me at the bar here in our student association building. Besides, some of the best conversations about faith happen over a beer.

**In ten years, I'll be...** I used to think I knew what I wanted: be a legislative lawyer at the Council of State, or maybe work in corporate or tax law – I enjoy solving abstract problems. But I'm not so sure that's what I want anymore. I don't want to blindly follow the “study, work, retire, die” path.

I want to live with purpose. I'm not entirely sure how yet, but there's so much more to life than work. Really connecting with the people in your community, for example, and helping friends and neighbours. Or the man outside my local supermarket asking if I can spare some change – as long as I can afford to shop at Albert Heijn, I can spare some change. In that sense, living as a Christian is as simple as you make it. The main rule I try to live by is: love your neighbour as you love yourself, and love God above all.

**Everyone should read this book.** I have ADHD, so it's hard for me to focus on books. I don't read much outside of my studies, but I love the wisdom literature of the Bible – like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes – and I finished *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama in two days. He writes very candidly about his search for his roots and the struggles that came with it. I prefer films, especially war films like *Midway* and *Fury*. They're dramatised, of course, but they remind us that peace in Europe isn't a given – people made sacrifices for it.

**What music do you love?** Dutch music by artists

like Merol and Roxy Dekker. But I also love Elvis Presley and Dire Straits – older music, a love I share with my father. I study well to Dutch Carnival music; it cheers me up when I have to read thick textbooks. And I like to listen to Eminem's rap while working on assignments.

**I love getting compliments.** I'm terrible at taking compliments. If someone tells me, “Good job!” I'll immediately downplay it. My friends say I should take life a bit easier and stop trying to carry everyone's burdens. They feel it takes a toll on me, but I don't see it that way. I just like to be of service. It's how I was raised, but I also struggled with depression and burnout when I was about sixteen. My friends and family really got me through that period. Now, I want to be there for others. Social media makes it look like life is perfect, but I want people to know it's okay if things feel dark sometimes – and that the light can come back.

**This is how I relax.** By heading out with a backpack, a tent and my percolator – good coffee is important, even on the go. Last year, I went to Scotland for the first time. The landscapes there are stunning. I went back this year, on my own – I really enjoy being by myself. Closer to home, I like to go to Sint-Pietersberg or take the bus and get off at a random stop to explore the Dutch Hills.

**As a non-Limburger in Maastricht, I feel...** [Chuckles] I originally planned to go to Leiden University, but they require a certificate in Dutch on pre-university education (VWO) level. I didn't finish secondary school; I worked for a few years and got a higher professional education (HBO) first-year certificate through the 21+ admissions test. Three days before the application deadline, one of my father's colleagues mentioned how impressed he was with Maastricht Law graduates: “They've had Problem-Based Learning, so they don't need hand-holding.” That sounded good to me. And I thought: I love cycling, there are hills there, I'll just go for it. Regrets? None – I felt at home here from day one. Though, in my four years in Maastricht, I still haven't taken out my racing bike even once...

Peter Doorakkers

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Doctors report a rise in serious accidents involving fat bikes and e-bikes

# “Let’s set a good example at UM wear a helmet!”

Every year, thousands of people, including many children under 16, end up in Dutch accident and emergency (A&E) departments with serious injuries from fat-bike accidents. This is the conclusion of a nationwide sample survey partly initiated by doctors in Maastricht. “Half measures won’t solve this crisis.”



Photo: Shutterstock

In early October, all 82 A&E departments in the Netherlands recorded data on bicycle accident victims over a week. They counted more than a thousand victims on regular bicycles and e-bikes – and, perhaps most strikingly, nearly a hundred on fat bikes. Projected over a full year, this equates to about five thousand fat-bike accident victims. “This figure is far higher than the few hundred cases we initially anticipated”, says Marcel Ariës, a neurologist-intensivist at Maastricht University Medical Centre+ (MUMC+) and researcher at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML). Another alarming finding: almost half of these fat-bike accident victims were children aged 12 to 15, and almost none wore helmets. It’s concerning, says Ariës. “Fat bikes are often modified to

reach high speeds, up to 70 kilometres per hour. They’re basically heavy mopeds, yet they aren’t classified as such. And children are particularly vulnerable, with their proportionately large heads and lower muscle mass. We’re seeing a lot of fractures, brain injuries and abdominal trauma from the impact of the handlebars. It’s shocking, but not surprising. We need to protect children from this.”

## Stricter regulations

The hope is that these survey results will prompt politicians to push for stricter regulations “while we have the momentum”, says Ariës. Just last month, the Dutch House of Representa-

tives passed a motion calling for mandatory helmets and a minimum age of 14 for fat-bike riders. “After conducting smaller sample surveys earlier this year, doctors took their findings and a petition to the House of Representatives with a clear message: ‘Please do something about this.’ Apparently, it resonated with politicians.”

But Ariës feels this doesn’t go far enough. “We advocated for a minimum age of 16, not 14, and for all pedal-assisted bicycles, not just fat bikes.” This would include e-bikes and the new “skinny bikes” manufacturers are promoting to circumvent anticipated regulations. “It would discourage them and dissuade children from begging their parents for an e-bike.” Thanks to the survey, doctors now have national data to support their case. In addition to finding that many fat-bike accident victims were between 14 and 16 years old, the survey showed that a lot of e-bike accident victims were also very young: one in ten were aged 12 to 15. “This figure is lower than for fat bikes, but considering that there are far more e-bikes in the Netherlands, it’s a substantial figure in absolute terms.”

## Maastricht’s role

Although most fat-bike accidents (two out of three) occurred in the Randstad region, Maastricht plays an important role in the national debate. “We in the south were the first to sound the alarm and put this issue on the agenda”, says Ariës. In 2020, he himself co-founded “Doctors for Safe Cycling”, a think tank now including over a hundred doctors across the country. They advocated for the national survey, which was carried out by VeiligheidNL.

Alongside age restrictions, Ariës stresses the importance of raising awareness, “particularly about helmet use. We need to take personal responsibility as well. Hospital staff shake their heads every time a tragic case comes in, but at the end of the day I’m usually the only one wearing a helmet while cycling home.”

## Christmas gift boxes

To promote helmet use, MUMC+ launched a campaign in 2019 offering discounted bicycle helmets to staff. “We approached UM to see if they wanted to join in, but it never took off. The offer is still available... I think universities, like hospitals, should set a good example, especially if they have health and behavioural scientists among their staff. Once enough people start wearing helmets, we’ll reach a tipping point in society – though it will probably be a slow process.” Creative solutions can also help. A few years ago, the Mental Health and Neuroscience Research Institute (MHeNs) at FHML included bicycle helmets in employee Christmas gift boxes. “That idea could easily be replicated elsewhere. Personally, I think

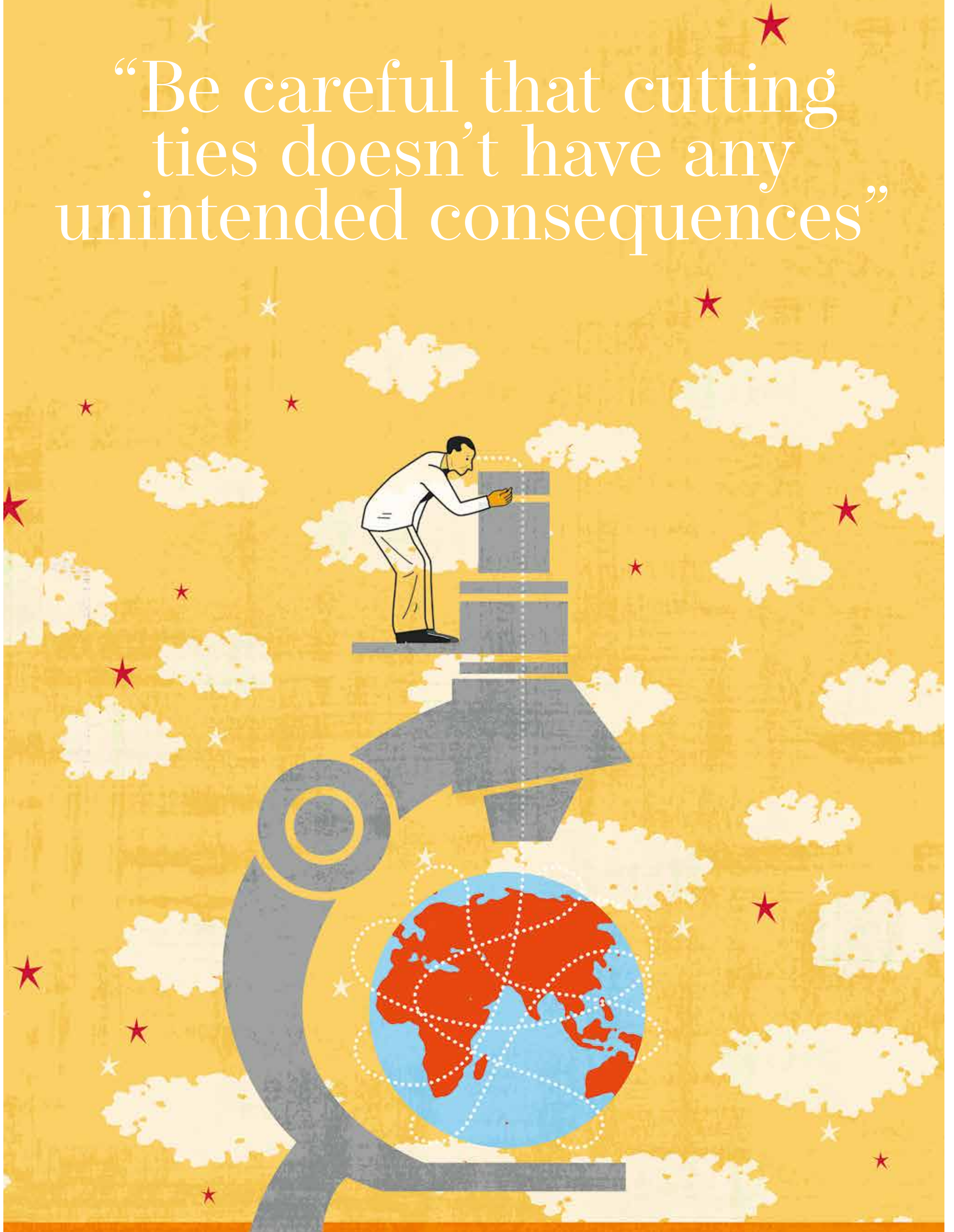
students should be offered discounted helmets during the introduction week. Many international students come here with little or no cycling experience and suddenly find themselves navigating busy traffic. It only makes sense to offer them head protection.”

After all, accidents can happen in a split second, as Ariës knows all too well. “The danger is that many people think, ‘It won’t happen to me.’ But I see the reality every day in A&E. And you’re not always in control. The survey reflected this as well: in addition to nearly a hundred fat-bike riders, over thirty people ended up in A&E after being hit by a fat bike.”

MAASTRICHT PHILOSOPHER

about (whether or not) collaborating with institutions in conflict areas

“Be careful that cutting ties doesn't have any unintended consequences”



## Pro-Palestinian protesters have repeatedly called for it: Maastricht University must cut ties with Israeli institutions. But how do you decide that? What role could the Human Rights Due Diligence tool currently under development play? And what are the consequences for researchers both here and there?

**Text:** Cleo Freriks

**Illustrations:** Simone Golob

It's important with such a complex subject as this not to set your expectations too high, says Olga Zvonareva. She is a philosopher with the department of Health, Ethics and Society and researches the intersection of politics and science. "Don't think that a tool, whatever that looks like, is a silver bullet solution. It can be really good, but these are complex problems that involve all sorts of interconnected topics. There is no single simple solution."

Don't expect to be able to separate politics and research either, she says: "They are always linked." Public opinion, which way the political winds blow, that is what citizens in democracies find important and is visible in the choices made in research.

That influence is often clearly unwanted under authoritarian regimes. "If you want to try to research anything about 'gender' in Russia at the moment, or so much as mention that word in your research proposal, you will receive some unpleasant attention, potentially also from the security services," says Zvonareva, who is herself Russian. "There's no law forbidding gender studies, but people do think twice – or even three times – before starting anything like that."

### NOT HERE

That will never happen here, a

Dutch person might think now. But while it is less severe, Zvonareva does see that there are "problematic" topics in Western democracies, too. "Ethics committees, for example, do spend more and more time considering potential damage to the institute's reputation. They determine whether there are risks attached to the research and whether it is responsible to take those risks. For example, if you want to carry out fieldwork in a war zone, there are clearly risks attached. But research funders – thankfully, I have yet to see it happen at Maastricht University – now more often raise the question: what would it mean to our reputation if we are associated with this research?"

It means that potentially controversial or sensitive subjects are avoided more frequently and are harder to obtain funding for. "Despite the point of universities also being to do research on more unpopular, but potentially societally relevant, topics." She lists a recent Canadian example, where a researcher – who was doing a study into assisted suicide – had his confidential research data subpoenaed. At that time, involvement in assisted suicide could result in up to fourteen years in jail. "He refused to name names, but was not supported in this by his university. They washed their hands of him, scared of the damage to their reputation. Yet another barrier for others to do similar research."

### IN DEPTH

In short, even with a tool, you can't prevent political influence entirely. Self-censorship can play a part anywhere. It's part of the reason that Zvonareva finds it so important that when certain institutes are examined, it is done very carefully. "I hope that this HRDD tool means that there will be a committee looking into each case in depth." She is worried that cutting ties "automatically, so with all institutions in a specific region, without looking at them individually" could have unintended consequences. "From my own experience I can tell that after the Netherlands cut ties with Russia, it affected staunch war-supporters and dissenters, who persisted in trying to preserve respect for human rights and international law in their teaching and research in Russian universities, equally."

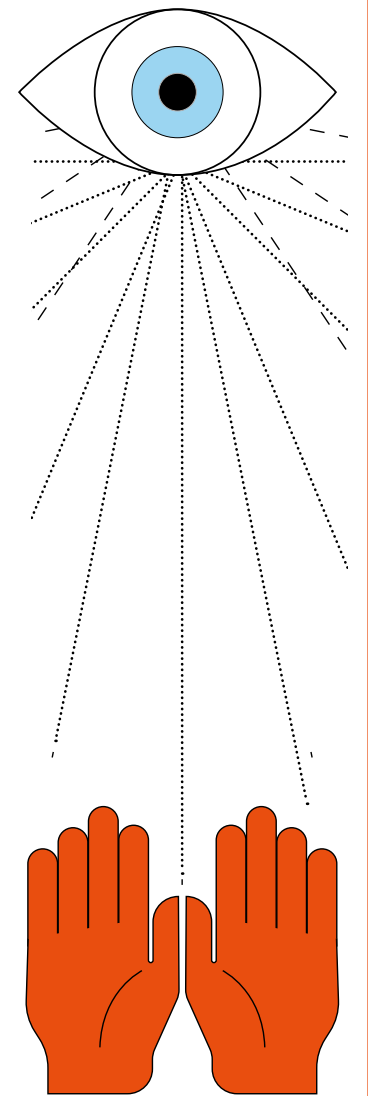
### SEEDS

Scientific collaboration won't solve any major conflicts or topple any authoritarian regimes, but you can plant seeds, says Zvonareva. "During the time of the Cold War, contacts were maintained, which helped promote understanding, aided the conversation. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it was precisely those seeds that massively helped break up the old systems." Another downside when you stop collaboration: it's harder to know

what is going on in the area. "It's almost impossible to carry out research in a country where there are no local contacts. That's impossible without collaboration. And that raises the question, does this help prevent the violation of human rights? Because the ultimate aim of the HRDD tool is that as a university, we don't contribute in any way to the violation of human rights. So then you have to ask yourself how you're going to achieve that. And consider how you avoid losing allies, what the impact is of being unable to plant seeds for a more peaceful future, and of not knowing what is going on in the area."

### INDIVIDUAL COLLABORATION

Wouldn't it be possible to maintain all that through collaboration with individual researchers? Proponents of a boycott emphasise that they have no objections to that. "Up to now, in Russia's case, it has always been deemed by universities that as soon as you start working together in areas of research or education, that it's a collaboration between institutes. Because you represent an institute and so do they. That means only personal contact is possible – my emails and phone calls aren't being checked. As soon as it turns professional, it's out of bounds. So unless that interpretation changes, cutting ties with institutions effectively means cutting all ties."



## What is the HRDD tool?

Last Spring, the Executive Board announced the development of a Human Rights Due Diligence assessment tool. This tool is designed to help make well-founded assessments on whether collaborative partners in conflict areas around the world have 'clean hands'.

If that cannot yet be determined – as is currently the case with the Israeli institutes, according to UM – then ties are frozen, while an open dialogue with the administration of the relevant institution is maintained. It should be noted that this concerns administrative ties, not collaborations between individual researchers. In fact, in a policy update on guidelines at the end of May, UM encouraged collaboration with individual researchers from the Middle East, with the aim of supporting the start of a peace process.

The Executive Board's proposal is expected to be discussed in various committees this fall, so more clarity on the specifics of the tool should be available soon.

## New calls for boycott of Israeli universities

*"Freezing" ties with Israeli universities and institutes is not enough – that was the message during the public round in the University Council meeting last week, a special slot when students and staff are free to raise important issues without immediately being followed by debate.*

The speaker, a student, introduced himself as Adam, from Free Palestine Maastricht. He has Palestinian heritage, and although born in Canada, he has spent a lot of time in East Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. This conflict, he explained, is understandably very personal for him.

He repeated the message that FPM has been spreading by any means possible since the beginning of the war in the Middle East. Maastricht University must break ties with institutes that are linked in any capacity to the Israeli armed forces and thus complicit in the many deaths in Gaza, the

West Bank and Lebanon. He named the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as an example of an institute that UM has ties with and which is "responsible for training elite troops".

"Does the university want these partners?" the student asked, before continuing. "Does UM wish to be associated with institutes that train soldiers who fight in Palestine and Lebanon? Follow the example of other universities such as Columbia (New York) and UCLA (Los Angeles) and boycott these institutes. Just like when Dutch universities did the same during the time of apartheid in South Africa."

The University Council acknowledged the argument and – as is procedure after the public round – carried on with the meeting.

RJ

## science

## UM students win iGEM medal for fifth year in a row

## From cow farts to salt-eating bacteria



Photo: Shutterstock

*Using a genetically modified bacterium as a solution to water pollution caused by over-fertilisation in agriculture. That idea helped Maastricht students to a golden medal – yet again – at the international iGEM competition in Paris last month.*

Developing living systems and organisms that can tackle societal problems: that is what the annual International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) competition is all about. “A very well-known competition within the field of synthetic biology,” says Erik Steen Redeker, assistant professor at the Maastricht Science Programme (MSP). Late last month, he and ‘his’ team of thirteen Maastricht students travelled to Paris for the grand final, along with

more than four hundred other student teams from around the world.

There they presented the idea they had worked out on paper last spring and then spent months testing in the lab: a genetically modified organism that filters excess nitrates from polluted water and converts them into proteins that can then be used again as animal feed.

Almost all the work took place outside the regular courses – i.e., without any credits. “Even though it is a lot of work,” says Steen Redeker, who has put together and (together with his colleague David Cortens) supervised a Maastricht iGEM team every year since 2019. “Sometimes you can hear the students sigh: ‘What did I get myself into?’. But when

they get the chance to present their work at an event with four thousand people in Paris, they are very proud. Moreover, it is an amazing learning experience: they go through all the steps they will have to face later as researchers, right down to applying for funding.” And not without success, it must be said: the team received a gold medal from the jury. That honour is reserved for teams that excel in several areas: not only originality and a solid proof-of-concept are important, but also, for example, outreach and market research that shows that the idea is practically feasible. That makes it five in a row: last year, the Maastricht team also took home the gold, and silver three times before that.

The topic always comes from the students themselves. “We don’t push them in any particular direction, although we do like when they focus on a local challenge.” Last year, for example, an intestinal bacterium was modified in such a way that it can repair cracks in marl walls, common in Limburg. In 2020, it was a genetically modified bacterium that acts as pesticide that tackles the oak processionary caterpillar, also a veritable pest in Limburg, without harming other insects. And in 2021, students developed microbes in cattle feed to reduce the amount of methane in cow farts. All innovative ideas, although the project is too short to arrive at a practically deployable ‘final product’. “That always requires much more follow-up research,” says Steen Redeker.

“It’s something the students would like to do, but during and after graduation it usually doesn’t happen.” A PhD student continuing the projects would be the solution, but there currently is neither time nor money for that. However, certainly not every project is simply abandoned at the end. Last year, one team member devoted her thesis to a continuation of the ‘marl project’. Most notable is the 2022 project, in which the students designed a bacterium that eats salt, which could be used to desalinate seawater for use in agriculture. Part of the original team developed the technique further, won the Maastricht University Challenge last year and has since created a start-up called Aestuarium.

“Not that that is the main reason for taking part in iGEM,” says Steen Redeker. “But when you reach the point where you can actually tackle a societal problem, it’s nice that something happens with it.”

Dennis Vaendel

*There will be an information session next Tuesday (18:00 in room B1.001 at Paul-Henri Spaaklaan 1) about taking part in the 2025 edition. Students from other study programmes than MSP are also welcome. “Not everyone works in the lab,” says Steen Redeker. “We also need people who can code, conduct market research, manage social media and so on.”*

## iGEM

The iGEM competition was created in 2004 at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States. The concluding conference, known as the Jamboree, was also held there for many years, but since 2022, it has been moved to Paris. The number of participating teams is steadily increasing – this year, for the first time, there were more than 400. UM has been taking part since 2019.

## Agenda academic ceremonies

### Aula Minderbroedersberg 4-6

07-11, 10.00h	Kailiang Zheng	20-11, 13.00h	Erin Barry
07-11, 16.00h	Thales Felipe Costa Bertaglia	20-11, 16.00h	Benson Ku
08-11, 10.00h	Chaira Serrarens	21-11, 13.00h	Koen Willem Frederik van der Laan
08-11, 13.00h	Maud van Dinther	21-11, 16.00h	Maud Simone Hevink
08-11, 16.30h	Dr. Desirée Joosten-ten Brinke	22-11, 10.00h	Wendy Nuis
	inauguratie	22-11, 13.00h	Rudolf Theodoor Tolsma
11-11, 13.00h	Hanxu Liu	22-11, 16.00h	Xinxin Zhu
11-11, 16.00h	Dewi Elisabeth Wilhelmina Peerlings		Double doctorale degree Maastricht University – Dongbei University of Finance and Economics
12-11, 10.00h	Koen Martin Frederik Gorgels	25-11, 10.00h	Florencia Jaccoud
12-11, 13.00h	Tobias Michiel Hommels	25-11, 13.00h	Aygül Zengin
13-11, 10.00h	Giulia Spanò	25-11, 16.00h	Sinead Grealley
13-11, 13.00h	Ece Kaya	26-11, 10.00h	Syed Muhammad Mueez Aizaz
13-11, 16.00h	Marie Carla Ternes		Double Doctorate Degree Maastricht University - RWTH Aachen University
14-11, 13.00h	Mélanie Nadège Winanda Monfrance	26-11, 16.00h	Jana Viktoria Nysten
14-11, 16.00h	Eric Lambertus Maria Dumont	28-11, 13.00h	Jennifer McDonald Double Doctorate Degree Maastricht University – Western Sydney University
15-11, 10.00h	Benson Mutuku Muthama		
15-11, 13.00h	Mauro Cavarra Double Doctoral Degree Maastricht University – Università degli Studi di Messina, Italy	28-11, 16.00h	Ahmad Malkawi
15-11, 16.00h	Laura Nießen (Niessen)	29-11, 10.00h	Olesia Nikulina
18-11, 10.00h	Maria Gabriella Fois	29-11, 13.00h	Merel Margaretha van der Thiel
19-11, 10.00h	Chiara Stival	29-11, 16.30h	Dr. Maja Brkan inauguratie
19-11, 13.00h	Andrei Utina		
19-11, 16.00h	Rald Victor Maria Groven		
20-11, 10.00h	Lieke Maas		



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## Maastricht University

### Vacatures

Werken voor de meest internationale universiteit van Nederland? Scan de QR-code voor ons actuele vacature overzicht\*.

Voor meer informatie over werken bij de Universiteit Maastricht, ga naar <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/nl/werken-bij-de-um>

\*Medewerkers van UM kunnen een volledig overzicht van interne- en externe vacatures vinden door in te loggen op SuccessFactors via Umployee.



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