
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR A DIGITAL SOCIETY



Digitalisation is not just a phenomenon affecting higher education, but also a field of study in its own right. In the fall of 2019, Maastricht University welcomed its first highly international cohort of students to a new bachelor's programme designed to instil in students the critical capacities needed to navigate digital society.

Maastricht University welcomed its first cohort of students for a new Bachelor's programme in 'Digital Society' in September 2019. This three-year, interdisciplinary programme provides students with a unique opportunity to develop skills required for a career at the intersection of technological developments and societal changes, with the goal of producing graduates who can help to shape and implement effective and ethical digital transformations.

To fully appreciate the ways in which digitalisation is affecting how we live and work, it is necessary to take an international perspective. Digital technologies have enormous potential to connect people

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around the world, and their production is a good example of global production. But national laws and local customs and cultures still guide many activities, so digitalisation does not necessarily make the world a uniform place.

Digitalisation promises tremendous benefits, but it also presents challenges. For example, robots can take on tasks that are dangerous for people – but at the same time can put people out of work. Digital data collection may improve healthcare by providing more personalised treatment – but it may also challenge patient privacy and autonomy. Digitalisation has brought

about new forms of social and political engagement, but not everyone has the skills needed to participate so some people are at risk of being excluded.

Both the advantages and disadvantages of digitalisation are addressed in the curriculum. We aim to produce a new generation of socio-technically knowledgeable and engaged humanities and social science graduates who are able to critically assess, anticipate and shape the social, political and cultural impacts of digital transformations. Graduates will be equipped to understand the technical aspects of social issues, and the social aspects of technological developments.

BRIDGING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

The BA Digital Society bridges the humanities and the social sciences to reflect upon and address the socio-technical challenges and opportunities of digitalisation, especially as they relate to society, culture and politics. It integrates research from history, philosophy, media and cultural studies, science and technology studies, digital arts and heritage studies, critical data studies and political science. The programme also incorporates knowledge and skills originating in data and computer science. Students acquire the skills required for 'computational thinking', namely the creative and critical capacity to assess how digital technologies may solve as well as raise societal concerns.

Interdisciplinarity is core to the design of the curriculum, and core to all of the work of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The faculty's motto is 'moving boundaries, building bridges'. Different teaching and research programmes are all concerned with the relationships between Europeanisation, globalisation, scientific and technological changes, political change and cultural innovation. Paying attention to the historical contexts in which

technologies and cultures emerge and intertwine is also key to the teaching and research of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

We aim to train ‘interactional expertise’ in order to be able to mediate between different groups in society. They will be able to translate the questions and concerns of policymakers, private companies, civil society organisations and cultural institutions into problems understood by computer and data scientists. Equally, our graduates will understand enough about programming and systems in order to translate possible solutions in terms that can be understood by those who do not know that technical language. Graduates will also be able to imagine the range of possible future implications of emerging digital transformations, and thus will be able to foresee ethical and societal concerns.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

Problem-based learning (PBL) is core to Maastricht’s teaching philosophy. Students work together in small groups of 15, with a tutor, to define their own learning goals. There are four key principles of PBL. First is constructive learning, in which students draw on prior knowledge and experience to help them understand new information from lectures and reading. Second is collaborative learning, in which students learn from one another and develop a sense of shared responsibility. Third is contextual learning, in which new information is placed in relevant contexts, to help students learn to transfer knowledge across different situations and to bridge theory

and practice. The fourth principle is self-directed learning, in which students play an active role in planning and evaluating their own learning. This is particularly important for digital society students. We know the situation is constantly changing, and thus students need to become confident life-long learners.

THE FIRST COHORT

Seventy-five students from twenty different countries started the programme in September 2019. This multicultural group provides students with opportunities

Healthcare systems are nationally organised and regulated but the World Wide Web and social media make it possible for people to learn about experimental treatments not yet available in their own countries, perhaps leading to innovation or to frustration.

We do not expect students who join the programme to have a technical background; all are welcome. As well as learning from staff, students will have many opportunities to learn from each other and to share technical, academic and professional skills.

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to learn from one another, and to share experiences, consistent with the PBL principles outlined above. Digitalisation is often presented as a universalising process, but local and national contexts still play an important role in shaping how digital technologies are incorporated into people’s lives. Having students from different countries helps us to understand why some countries still use cash for small transactions whereas others operate already almost entirely with direct payment systems. Such a diverse group of students also sheds light on different reactions to phenomena ranging from surveillance to fake news. Some students come from countries where surveillance has been a feature of their lives and their parents’ lives, and may be regarded as benevolent or at least as normal.

QUESTIONING THE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED

I prepared this text while Maastricht University was suffering the after-effects of a major ransomware attack that brought all of the university’s educational and administrative systems to a close for two weeks (and some even longer). This served as a stark reminder to us all not to take for granted the ways of working and learning offered by digital technologies. Once the crisis has passed, we will reflect not only on what the disruption means for how the university organises but also what it means for how we think about digital societies now and in the future.

— SALLY WYATT