February 2021
on education and research at Maastricht University

New Bachelor in Global Studies
Taught by all six UM faculties

Reaching for the stars
Portrait of Bartel van der Walle, the new director of UNU-MERIT

How to solve a murder?
Robert Horsselenberg on his student cold-case team

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To much of the Dutch public, Jaap van Dissel has become the bearer of bad news, or the face of an evidence-based approach to handling COVID-19—or both. The government’s chief medical adviser on receiving an honorary doctorate from Maastricht University, the reality of crisis management and how you can’t be everyone’s darling.

Good education through the Educational Agenda Limburg

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‘A few’ good people in Lebanon

Her home country is reeling from one crisis after the other. After earning her master’s degree at the UM School of Health Professions Education (SHE), Zakia Dimassi is now back in Beirut, Lebanon, where she is an assistant professor at Saint George Hospital University Medical Center.

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Collaboration is to thrive

Maastricht University describes itself as a ‘network university’, an organisation looking to partner with other knowledge institutions as well as the public and private sector. For many of us, this brings to mind our international networks, or the Brightlands campus system. But we also ought to reflect on what we can gain closer to home, by increasing interaction and collaboration within the university.

As a young university, we have a history of new faculties popping up, like pearls on a string. These faculties have strong identities and, to some extent, their own cultures. When the Executive Board organised informal lunches with professors from different faculties, it was interesting to see that few of these professors had previously met—despite working on the same theme, albeit from different disciplinary perspectives.

In 2021, the university turns 45: an opportune moment to reflect on the synergies that could arise from enhanced collaboration between disciplines, faculties and groups on both sides of the Maas. The development of the Bachelor in Global Studies, featured in this magazine, is a prime example. Developed in collaboration between all six faculties, it offers an exciting opportunity to address global challenges in a multi- and interdisciplinary fashion. Another example is BISS (the Brightlands Institute for Smart Society) on the Smart Services Campus in Venlo. Collaboration between our oldest and youngest faculties—FHML and FSE—could also open the door to many opportunities, not least because a number of FSE programmes are (and will be) delivered on the Randwyck campus. Moreover, the nexus of medicine and technology is a breeding ground for the co-creation of innovative solutions for care and cure in the future. We will seek to align strategies with the Maastricht UMC+ and consider bridging the gap in other ways, too, as possibilities abound for cooperation between medicine and the exact sciences, but also the social sciences and humanities.

Cooperation should not be forced, and our disciplinary and faculty identities will always remain distinctive features of our university. However, by facilitating dialogue, increasing interaction and investigating win-win situations, we can undoubtedly open up new opportunities for the future.
Global Studies—the name of the new Maastricht University (UM) bachelor’s programme sounds perfectly Promethean. Yet the concept makes a lot of sense; indeed, it may well be the most pragmatic approach to preparing students for the 21st century.

Somali pirates? “The media narrative was: security concern. That makes sense, but it doesn’t help you understand or solve the problem,” says Valentina Mazzucato, head of the Global Studies development team. “Climate change has devastated the agricultural sector in Somalia. International companies are overfishing their waters in contravention of existing agreements. Livelihoods were destroyed and diseases broke out. A wave of migration followed—and some people have turned to piracy.”

Contemporary challenges are always more complex than one thing in one place at one time. Examples like the above and the omnipresent pandemic have economic, political, legal, psychological, scientific and moral dimensions. “The problems we face are global, complex and intricate. No approach is superfluous.” Global Studies suggests a wildly innovative answer: it is taught by all six UM faculties.

Joining forces like never before
“We pooled all the expertise from the many pockets within UM that research and teach global issues. Rianne [Letschert, UM’s rector magnificus] was instrumental in getting all the faculties on board.”

Being a young university with international cooperation in its DNA also helped. “It’s not a coincidence that this happened here at UM, which really has interdisciplinarity at its core.”

Rather than an eclectic buffet from different disciplines, all courses in a given semester are co-developed and taught by three faculties. Each focuses on a specific theme: besides an introduction to the field, there is Environment & Economy, Migration & Citizenship, Tolerance & Beliefs, Peace & Justice and 21st Century Learning. The penultimate semester includes fieldwork in the Global South with a small group, accompanied by an expert and hosted by a local partner.
It was a tremendous administrative challenge, but Mazzucato was delighted to head the core team of 26 people from all ranks and faculties developing the curriculum. “The collaboration was fantastic and left us all really energised. We started with a blank slate—that was really exciting!” Mazzucato was inspired by her own liberal-arts education. “All these lightbulbs went on because I was exposed to new ideas and disciplines that I’d never considered before. That’s what I want to recreate for our students.”

Integrating knowledge and perspectives

“Every course is about combining and integrating knowledge and approaches from different disciplines,” she says. “The difficulty of doing so is also integral to the curriculum, which emphasises the soft skills necessary for working in interdisciplinary, intercultural teams. The programme teaches canonical theories and concepts, but also compares them to those developed in the Global South.”

“Every course is about combining and integrating ideas and disciplines that I’d never considered before. It’s not just learning out of an ivory tower; we’re thinking about the world works, why things happen and how actors are affected.”

Fellow pioneer Julian Martinez agrees. “You need to view the big problems through different lenses to find the most suitable solutions.” He finds the interdisciplinary approach exciting and challenging. “Maths has always come easy to me, but in the methods course, we also use coding to do data analysis. We learn so many different skills. It’s not easy, but we’re a close-knit community and help each other out.”

Although their journey has only just begun, both report that they now consume news more critically. After performing stakeholder analyses of global supply chains, they have also become more aware of their responsibilities and agency as consumers. Diba believes Global Studies will give her the toolkit to find solutions—but not in a naïve way. You learn to challenge your own opinions and reflect on the positive and negative consequences of those choices on different stakeholders around the globe.”

Doing good, without being naïve

Clara Diba, part of the first cohort of 68 students, appreciates this proactive approach. “It’s not just learning out of an ivory tower; we’re thinking about solutions—but not in a naïve way. You learn to challenge your own opinions and develop a nuanced understanding of how the world works, why things happen and how actors are affected.”

The understanding that climate change, for example, looks very different for a software developer in San Francisco than for a subsistence farmer in Bangladesh is central to Global Studies. And this global character is the key to the programme’s success so far. Mazzucato is bullish about the necessary trade-offs. “We were very honest about this: you obviously learn a lot less about economics here than during an economics degree.” She is unsurprised about the high dropout rates among first-year students across the board in the Netherlands. “I think it’s crazy that we ask 18-year-olds to specialise. Our students learn to navigate complexity and work with others. After getting a taste of different disciplines, they will make a much more informed decision about what they want to focus on, what they want to ‘master’.”

The BioMaas student team has won the first Young Plastic Pollution Challenge with their plan to investigate which organic waste can be used to manufacture fully compostable products, such as cups, plates and packaging material. The BioMaas project is part of Precious Plastic.

The compostable products will then be sold to companies in Maastricht that participate in the collection of the necessary organic material. The students intend to publish the production methods open source, making them available to everyone.

The BioMaas team is composed of students and recent graduates from Maastricht University and Eindhoven University of Technology from different countries and disciplines. They will turn their idea into reality within two years. The prize also includes three months of coaching by experienced entrepreneurs and investors in sustainable technologies.
Imagine: 15 years ago, a woman was murdered. Now a cold-case team has reopened the case. The detectives discover that during the original investigation, no samples were taken from the victim’s lips or from under her nails. Should the remains be exhumed? This is the type of issue that a select group of master’s students is working on during the Cold Cases project.

“In this case, the answer is no,” says Robert Horselenberg, a legal psychologist and associate professor. He has been in charge of the Maastricht cold-case team since its creation about 10 years ago. “The victim was a Jewish woman who was buried according to Jewish tradition, which means she was washed completely clean. So there’s no point re-examining the remains.”

The example illustrates the broad general knowledge and natural curiosity required of cold-case detectives. These are the characteristics Horselenberg seeks when assembling his team. Ten students, mostly from the master's degree in Forensics, Criminology and Law, are given six months to study an existing cold case and come up with recommendations for the Public Prosecution Service and the cold-case team of the Limburg Police. There is great enthusiasm and the bar is high. “I don’t need 10 people who all think alike; I’m looking for people who dare to disagree respectfully, based on rational arguments.”

Critical thinking

In other words, open-minded, articulate students with diverse backgrounds; technical, biological, legal and psychological. Horselenberg and his colleagues focus on training them in critical thinking—because above all, a cold case is a puzzle that requires a great deal of thought.

“There are a lot of misconceptions about how to solve cases, such as the idea that you can solve everything with forensic DNA research. We saw this recently in the Nicky Verstappen case, where many questions remain unanswered and both parties are appealing. In current and cold cases alike, DNA leads to a genuine breakthrough in less than 3% of cases.”

Facts

Forensic technology is not a magic bullet. The core of detective work—the pillars that underpin the development of plausible scenarios—are dry facts. This is why Horselenberg’s team spends much of its time studying the file and establishing those facts. Who is
the victim, who were they in contact with, what was the cause of death, and—above all—what is not known? Only then do they turn to what may have happened. After all, the outcome is known: someone is dead. But what happened in the hours and minutes leading up to that?

“Our students work in pairs to make a certain scenario as strong as possible,” Horselenberg explains. “It may be plausible that the victim had a secret lover, for example, and that person is the culprit. You look at what facts support this assumption, and what information you need in order to prove it. In this case, it would be a good idea to speak with the victim’s friends. Especially when you consider that witnesses, family, current and ex-partners and neighbours contribute to three quarters of the cold cases that end up being solved.”

Fresh eyes

Although students can create fake social-media accounts and consult experts, they are not allowed to contact anybody involved in the file. At the end of the investigation, they write an extensive report with recommendations that is sent to the police and the Public Prosecution Service. Unfortunately, these reports are then put on a shelf, where they sit for years. Horselenberg attributes this to chronic understaffing of the cold-case teams, which are lumped with missing-persons cases in addition to unsolved murders.

“We do very serious analyses, make suggestions and come up with points the police hadn’t thought of. This is partly due to the fresh eyes and uninhibited perspective of our students; they’re not encumbered by experience.” That lack of experience can be an advantage, he says. “In cold cases, detectives who have done their job just fine for 30 years can easily fall into the trap of: well, that was a junkie and they talk nonsense. So we don’t need to interview that person again—whereas doing so might just pay off. In short, you have to approach cases like these with an open mind.” Horselenberg is in favour of a national cold-case team comprising inexperienced detectives with strong critical-thinking skills, who work according to a protocol. At present, no such protocol exists.

Meanwhile, cold-case education has proven its worth as a learning tool for students. “There are students who come to Maastricht specifically for this course. And alumni tell me that they’re still reaping the benefits of the knowledge and skills they acquired with us. In that sense, the cold cases we discuss are of great educational value whether or not the police actually do anything with our investigations. Though it would be nice, of course, if we could help to bring about closure for the next of kin. They want nothing more than to finally turn the page on that chapter of their lives.”

Large-scale research on causes of hypertension

Maastricht UMC+ and Maastricht University are leading a large-scale international study into the underlying causes of hypertension, or high blood pressure. The study is supported by a European grant of more than €4 million, which will be used to set up a collaborative network of research centres and schools with expertise in hypertension. In the coming years, the researchers will develop fundamental insights into the underlying causal mechanisms of hypertension.

“Hypertension is an expression of underlying damage or dysregulation,” says Prof. Thomas Unger, project initiator and coordinator on behalf of the Maastricht research institute CARIM. “If we want to go further than just treating symptoms, we need to gain a better understanding of the complex and varying interactions between the vascular system and the endocrine system.” The multidisciplinary research programme, called MINDSHIFT (www.eumindshift.eu), started on 1 January 2022 and will run for four years. Alongside Maastricht, the programme includes 14 other partners from the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland and Poland.

ContinuUM online provides access to a piece of UM history

UM Magazine’s predecessor, ContinuUM, is now available online. The magazine was published (in Dutch) approximately three times a year between 1997 and 2009. All issues were recently digitised and are now freely accessible through the University Library.

ContinuUM originated as a ‘magazine for, by and about alumni of Maastricht University’. Later it became a more general publication for anybody interested in developments at the university and the accomplishments of its staff and students from a variety of perspectives. It contains interviews with key UM personalities and feature articles on education, research, collaboration and partnerships, management and supervision.

ContinuUM shines a spotlight on memorable moments in UM’s history, making it a valuable source of information on our institutional heritage.

Visit the archive at umlib.nl/continuum

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Robert Horselenberg is a legal psychologist and associate professor at the Faculty of Law. He studied Health Sciences in Maastricht and obtained his PhD here in 2005. For his research on false memories and false confessions, he publishes regularly on topics such as memory, child interrogations and false confessions, and has served as an expert witness in some 170 court cases.

UM researcher Lizza Hendriks appointed member of The Young Academy

In 2021 Lizza Hendriks, assistant professor at the Maastricht School for Oncology and Developmental Biology (GROW), will join The Young Academy. This is a platform of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences, where young top academics from different disciplines collaborate on research and scientific policy.

ContinuUM online provides access to a piece of UM history

UM researcher Lizza Hendriks (1981) has worked as a lung doctor at the Maastricht UMC+ since 2012. She is specialised in thoracic oncology, in particular the prevention and optimal treatment of brain metastases in lung cancer. Since 2019, she has coordinated the clinical lung cancer research of the lung diseases department in Maastricht.

Within The Young Academy, Hendriks plans to focus on early career policy, inspiring young people to pursue careers in research. She will also contribute to the new Recognition and Rewards initiative, focusing on policy for physician-researchers.

Eight NWO grants for talented UM researchers

The Dutch Research Council (NWO) has awarded prestigious grants to eight talented researchers from Maastricht University.

Jordi Heijman (CARM), Ali Zaheshchianvar (MHeNs) and Bettina Sorgor (FPN) each received a Vidi grant worth €800,000. Laureates can use this funding to develop an innovative line of research and set up their own research group.

In addition, five young researchers received a Veni grant worth €255,000: Glynis Bogard (FPN), Andrew Mackenzie (SBE), Mor Dickman (MHeNs), Willemin Jansen (MHeNs) and Anna Schueth (FPN). These grants are intended for researchers who have recently obtained their doctorate and are still at the beginning of their academic career.
Starting a new job during the corona crisis really makes you think, he says as we begin the interview. “In an academic career spanning 20 years, you’ve acquired quite a few skills that you think you can use in a new job like this. But that was all in an offline setting, in person; at meetings, workshops, seminars. Suddenly all that’s of no use. There’s nothing more informative in a new job than a chat at the coffee machine.”

Astronomy

It was clear to him from a young age that he would pursue an academic career—the first in his family to do so. During his studies in maths and computer science in Ghent, there was ample opportunity for “self-development,” he grins. “I could study hard when it was needed, but I also had a lot of time for other things.” His favourite side activity: the astronomy club that he founded. He also wrote his master’s thesis on astronomy. “It’s kind of a missed calling, or maybe a childhood trauma,” he laughs. “I wanted to study astronomy in Amsterdam, but I was 17, and my parents thought that was too far away from Bruges.”

Beauty

After graduating from Ghent, he quickly found a PhD position at SCK•CEN, the renowned nuclear research centre in Mol, Belgium. He saw the university as a place where people could think critically. “I always dreaded ending up in a company where I’d be one of many having to do this or that to improve the business. For the same reason, I didn’t want to join the army. Instead I opted for civilian service: I’d rather think for myself.” He obtained his PhD among an inspiring group of mathematicians. “They were brilliant; I learnt so much there.” His dissertation focused on choices that are not binary (a or b; “right or wrong”), but vague or fuzzy (“better or worse”), which he expressed in mathematical language. “The beauty of mathematics can still move me. Formulating something elegantly and seeing that it’s right!”

He is a free spirit. “As a child I was always wandering around outside, building huts, counting stars.” He is self-deprecating: “I was interviewed for my PhD by a committee of old white men, a bit like myself now,” but also self-aware: “I consciously moved away from fundamental mathematics after my PhD.” As a leader, his main goal is to serve others. “You don’t shake hands with an institute, but with the people who work there. First and foremost I want to look at what everybody needs.” Bartel Van de Walle has been director of UNU-MERIT since September 2020.

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Turning point: 9/11
He was still keen to go abroad, and in 2000 he moved to the New Jersey Institute of Technology in the US, where he had previously spent 10 months working at a stock exchange. His then wife and two young children joined him. The research revolved around group decisions and was relatively theoretical in nature. After the attacks on the Twin Towers, Van de Walle realised he “wanted to do something in the real world.” “Maths is not the real world, no,” he laughs. “It’s different. In maths you make a lot of abstractions: you build your model on the basis of assumptions that are often very fundamental. Practice is always much more complex.”

He began studying how people make decisions under pressure. Why were the police officers in the collapsing Twin Towers warned to evacuate on time, while the firefighters were not, resulting in many casualties? “I investigated what went wrong in terms of communication. That shows you where mistakes were made, and you build your model on the basis of assumptions that are often very fundamental. Practice is always much more complex.”

Return to Europe
Another lesson he learnt in the US: “to think big and reach for the stars.” “With the ‘pursuit of happiness’ inscribed in the constitution, people more readily dare to dream and to follow those dreams. If something is a good idea, Americans focus on how to make it happen—not all the things that could go wrong.” Still, the family was keen to return to Europe, especially when the mood shifted after 9/11. “I had the choice between Ghent or Tilburg. I already knew Ghent, so Tilburg it was.”

His research developed in the direction of humanitarian aid. How can the available information be put to more effective use? “I also did fieldwork in places like the Congo and the Gaza Strip. I slept in very basic places, flew in small, rickety planes. A wonderful period, which was over before I knew it.”

Best of both worlds
He had been a professor in Delft for five years, heading the Department of Multi-Actor Systems with some 130 employees, when he learnt of the vacancy at UNU-MERIT in Maastricht. His main consideration was the fact that it involved becoming a UN diplomat. “It means I’ve officially left the academic world. I still have an honorary appointment at UM, but doing my own research will be a challenge. I’ve made my peace with that, I no longer have to land big publications for myself personally. In this position I can really make a difference and contribute to the UN agenda. I think it’s the best of both worlds: I want to help create the best conditions for our academics, with recognition of all types of activities, from teaching and impact to publications.”

He is very concerned about the developments in the academic world in recent decades. “The term ‘excellence’ is very limited these days. What’s excellent about a Nature publication that changes nothing in the real world? We’re driving ourselves crazy, not least with the competition for research funding. It’s at the expense of research time, at the expense of those academics who run into a wall, and at the expense of free research that doesn’t yet have a practical application. Fortunately, it’s increasingly up for debate.”

Climbing the academic ladder
If he had to start his academic career over—like his eldest son, who recently started his PhD—he is unsure whether he would make the same choice. “I don’t envy young people in academia, with the hyper-competitive system of applying for grants at the same time as starting a family. In hindsight, I sacrificed a lot for my career. I missed a lot of my first three children’s younger years. I’m trying more consciously to make time for my youngest, who’s now four.”

At Harvard, where he worked as a senior scholar for six months before moving to Delft, money was never an issue for researchers. “I had a great time there, for that and other reasons. At the same time, I’m annoyed by the glorification of the top universities. They’re just not comparable to others. In Europe, we need to profile ourselves differently. For example, by giving opportunities to students from less wealthy countries. I see that as an obligation of this institute.” The idea behind UNU-MERIT’s PhD programme is that alumni put their knowledge to good use in their home countries afterwards. “But often they’d prefer to stay here, and so far we don’t really have a good answer for that. I’d like to explore the possibility of supporting PhD candidates in their home countries.”

Bitterballen
Van de Walle himself never felt the urge to return to Belgium. “I like the Dutch academic system. Undoubtedly things are different now, but when I left Belgium 30 years ago it was a very closed system, with a lot of favouritism. Narrow-minded, even. I like the Dutch directness. The Dutch are fairly self-aware, but also open and warm, if you ask me. It’s only the food that I’ll never get used to, although maybe it’s better in this region. Those bitterballen—my god, guys…”
In 2014 Trudie Schils, professor of Economics of Education, was one of the driving forces behind the start of the Educational Agenda Limburg. The agenda is a long-term project seeking to improve education in the province and the connection to the labour market. The first concrete results have since been unveiled, including a monitor to track pupils’ and students’ development. But she is most proud of the cooperation involved. “Primary, secondary, vocational and higher professional education have joined forces with the university and speak with one voice.”

Why do we need an Educational Agenda Limburg—surely the link between education and the labour market is a national, not a provincial, issue? It’s not the first time Schils has heard the question. She and her colleagues from Maastricht University had to pull out all the stops to get the intended grant providers (including the Province of Limburg) on board. “In several respects, Limburg simply isn’t comparable with other regions. Because of its location, the province is often oriented more towards Belgium and Germany than the Netherlands. And the problems that certain regions face are bigger than elsewhere: ageing, a shrinking labour market. In the former mining areas, unemployment is systematically higher, incomes and labour participation lower. There are fewer people who go on to higher education, and more people with health problems, more school leavers, teenage mothers, young people turning to crime. Cities like The Hague and Rotterdam face specific challenges too, but they’re completely different. And those are large cities, while Parkstad, for example, is a collection of smaller municipalities. That calls for a different approach and greater cooperation.”
Guidance
The aim of the Educational Agenda Limburg is to ensure that more young people finish their education before entering the labour market. “It’s not about making all children go on to higher education,” Schils says in the lounge of the School of Business and Economics (SBE), where she became a professor in June 2020. “It’s about making sure they choose the type of training that’s right for them, and receive the guidance and support they need to complete it. Research shows that young people from poor families have just as good judgement as their better-off peers, but they feel more insecure. Often they’re less motivated and more fatalistic. They have lower expectations of life and behave accordingly. This is something we can address with targeted education, which is important in terms of equal opportunities and important for the labour market. Companies and organisations in this region need good people. And a healthy labour market attracts new commercial activity, which stems the flow of young people leaving. Locals who leave to study in the Randstad often don’t return, or at least not quickly, because there are no good jobs here. But with the developments on the Brightlands campuses and the growth of the chemical industry, services and the logistics sector, the tide seems to be turning.”

Collaboration
The grant was awarded and the Limburg Educational Agenda was launched in 2014. The initiators—Maastricht University, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, the Open University and Fontys—were joined immediately by school boards from primary, secondary and vocational education. “I sometimes compare the education sector to a block of houses, with gardens separated by tall hedges,” Schils says. “To offer children the best and most appropriate education, you have to look over those hedges and work together. The transitions need to be smoother between preschool and primary school, primary school and high school, and then vocational or higher education. That calls for a different, more personal approach. Some children are ready for secondary education sooner than others. What does a child want and what can he or she do? It means more flexible education, in which teachers, of course, play an essential role.”

Monitor
The project began with several concrete objectives. Schils, who studied economics and obtained her PhD in Tilburg, summarises the goals: “Extra training for new primary school teachers, recruitment of new blood for teacher training, professionalisation of high school teachers. The idea is to address teacher shortages and reduce dropout rates—a serious problem six years ago. Things have improved somewhat now. We also put a lot of energy into developing a monitor that allows us to track the development of pupils at every stage of their education. Not only their performance, but their socio-emotional development.”

Result
The monitor was developed by a broad-based team of educators and has since been used extensively at various schools around the province. “Thanks to the monitor, we know that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop out. But with the right guidance at school, the percentages improve considerably. That’s a wonderful result—the knowledge that, based on research, we can offer equal opportunities to young people. Of course, this demands a lot of teachers: they’re the ones who have to persuade and encourage parents.”

United
This year, the project is entering a new phase. “With less money from the province, but more united than ever,” Schils says passionately. “We’ve joined forces in education, we listen to one another, and together we make decisions that improve education in the broadest sense. That’s good for the region. We intend to further refine the monitor, do more research. We’ll be paying more attention to online education—yes, prompted by corona. Education has had to change gears very quickly in the past year. We’ll be studying the consequences of that, too, for young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. And yes, of course, other regions are free to come and see what we’re doing. We’re proud of our approach. This agenda, especially the monitor, can be used widely.”

Trudie Schils was raised in Maastricht and studied in Tilburg. She worked as a researcher at the University of Amsterdam and moved to Maastricht University in 2008; first as an assistant professor, then associate professor, and now professor of Economics of Education.
To much of the Dutch public, Jaap van Dissel has become the bearer of bad news, or the face of an evidence-based approach to handling COVID-19—or both. The government’s chief medical adviser on receiving an honorary doctorate from Maastricht University, the reality of crisis management and how you can’t be everyone’s darling.

“‘It’s been an intense year,” concedes the chair of the Netherlands’s COVID-19 Outbreak Management Team (OMT). It is an understatement in keeping with the calm, collected demeanour for which public health aficionados and, since last year, the Dutch public have grown to appreciate Jaap van Dissel. With his televised explanations of the OMT’s decisions, he has become the spokesperson for science.

Van Dissel is keen to play this down. “I’m only one of many experts collaborating on the OMT. The advice we give is about how best to contain the spread of the virus. From a purely scientific perspective, what would be the best course of action in light of the available data and the expertise of the OMT members? It’s then up to the government to make a decision that also considers the economic and social impact of measures.”

Difficult decisions
The process following the OMT’s advice is thorough and inclusive. Before reaching the government, recommendations are tested for feasibility by the BAO (Bestuursafstemmingsoverleg), an advisory group comprising representatives of affected groups. “Communication is also very important: people need to understand why the measures are necessary. Of course, the government also tracks the public reaction to interventions and explanations in order to tweak them accordingly.”

While “public support for the COVID-19 measures is quite high in the Netherlands,” Van Dissel concedes that criticism is inevitable—including of him personally. “You try to do what’s best for the greatest number of people, but there are always negative consequences. Ultimately, you have to be convinced that you found the right balance and stand behind your advice. And that’s what we hope to accomplish: the OMT decides on recommendations together, the government tests feasibility by the BAO and that’s what we hope to accomplish: the OMT decides on recommendations together, the government tests feasibility by the BAO and the BAO then puts them accordingly.”

Between too much and too little
Van Dissel empathises with the criticism from some that the measures are too harsh, and from others that they don’t go far enough. “We do our best to balance those diametrically opposed concerns—but you can’t be a friend to everyone.” He experienced the two waves of COVID-19 very differently. “People responded incredibly well during the first wave. It’s much more of a challenge to motivate everyone in the second wave.” Since COVID-19 is potentially deadly for risk groups, but causes mild to no symptoms in most people, fear is no longer a motivating factor; for many, a sense of solidarity and moral duty is all that is left. “Fatigue has also led to a loss of urgency. That’s human nature.”

Damned if you do, damned if you don’t
“Still,” Van Dissel adds, “trust in the authorities and in science is relatively high here: Public health interventions are usually simple—wash your hands, keep your distance—and they always aim to contain the disease by limiting transmission. But the media tends to amplify single, contentious issues at the expense of the bigger picture.” Technical solutions are often valued more highly than behavioural changes. Take face masks: when the OMT did not advise their use, it became the target of international criticism. “Medical masks clearly work—that’s why we use them.” Van Dissel urges caution: 60% to 70% of the population need to be vaccinated to achieve ‘herd immunity’. The OMT has yet to see the data from the clinical trials, since the vaccines were ordered before being registered with the medical authorities. Reported efficacy figures appear to refer to the prevention of severe symptoms, how well the vaccines prevent transmission is less clear. According to the authorities, the first to receive the vaccine will be the most vulnerable: elderly people and care workers.

Van Dissel was scheduled to receive an honorary doctorate from UM during the celebration of the 45th Dies Natalis. Due to the new corona measures, the presentation has been postponed to the Opening of the Academic Year on 30 September. The support from my peers in academia, which has been my home for so long, means a lot to me. It’s a validation and recognition of what the whole OMT has achieved.”

Rector Magnificus Prof. Dr. Rianne Letschert: “Through the ‘Recognition and Rewards’ movement, we will be giving space to the different talents that a university needs within the fields of research, education, impact, leadership and patient care, and also offering people career prospects in these areas. It’s a great honour for me to offer Jaap van Dissel an honorary doctorate in this context: like no other, he is a symbol of how a scientist can fulfill a role with huge impact on society. This is certainly worthy of our recognition and rewards.”

A wicked problem
“That’s what makes COVID-19 such a wicked problem: you have to take action without knowing everything.” Van Dissel reflects on the early days of the pandemic: “We were aware of the spread within China, but their initial data suggested a disease manifestation like pneumonia rather than various manifestations ranging from mild to severe. We, along with the whole of Europe, basically prepared for a different outbreak. At the time, no one could have predicted the scope.”

The international mobility of people and goods may need to be reconsidered, and better international collaboration is necessary. Van Dissel regularly exchanges ideas and finds that his European counterparts “makes you understand the importance of human nature and cultural context. For example, multigenerational households are common in Italy, which makes it harder to shield vulnerable populations.”

Vaccine, not panacea
Despite another lockdown, there is hope on the horizon. “It’s remarkable how fast the vaccines were developed: you’d expect that to take years.” However, Van Dissel urges caution: 60% to 70% of the population need to be vaccinated to achieve ‘herd immunity’. The OMT has yet to see the data from the clinical trials, since the vaccines were ordered before being registered with the medical authorities. Reported efficacy figures appear to refer to the prevention of severe symptoms, how well the vaccines prevent transmission is less clear. According to the authorities, the first to receive the vaccine will be the most vulnerable: elderly people and care workers.
Carnival in Maastricht in times of corona

14 February 2021 / 13.46 hours

Photography
Paul van der Veer

Spread
Gerard van Rooij, professor of Plasma Chemistry, was the first PhD candidate of Ron Heeren, university professor and director of the M4I institute. Together they reflect on a pioneering period in which they took the first tentative steps in the development of imaging mass spectrometry. Heeren: “From Gerard I learnt to put myself as a supervisor to one side.” Van Rooij: “I find it impressive how Ron wants to change research field every ten years. I’ve now managed that too.”

From instrumentation physicist to socially engaged scientist

There is something incongruous about interviewing two professors, both around the same age, for an article featuring a professor and his student. That’s certainly not how they experienced their relationship. Van Rooij: “We’ve gone through pretty much all phases of collaboration together, starting from when we were students at the AMOLF institute for fundamental physics in Amsterdam.” Heeren: “At some point I became Gerard’s supervisor; he was my first PhD student. But we did almost everything together: experimenting, coming up with ideas. I’d sooner call it a friendship.”

“Of course, we sometimes had conflicting interests. The donkey doesn’t want to walk, and the master is pushing and pulling,” Van Rooij laughs. “You have that in every relationship. Now that I supervise PhD students myself, I also see it from the other side. Doctoral research is not something where you can just say: you figure it out. You have a common goal and together you spend four years working towards it. I try to coach my PhD students in their development, rather than having some distant supply-and-demand relationship.”

Moments of despair

Van Rooij obtained his PhD in 1999. His research focused on macromolecular imaging mass spectrometry, a technique that allows for the detailed visualisation of thousands of molecules in a single experiment. In those early days, it was unclear whether this was even possible. Heeren: “Lots of things were new, lots of things failed. We built the instruments ourselves and worked with new concepts, which in theory we always thought would be huge breakthroughs.” Van Rooij had his fair share of moments of despair. “At times I even questioned the laws of physics. Is what I see through the device really there?”

After his PhD, Van Rooij moved to the Dutch Institute for Fundamental Energy Research (DIFFER), then the Rijnhuizen Institute for Plasma Physics. Leaving mass spectrometry behind, he turned his attention to low-temperature plasma physics, the development of solar fuel and sustainable plasma chemistry. Meanwhile, Heeren made overtures to bring Van Rooij to Maastricht. “An environment like Chemelot needs his knowledge. Gerard fits perfectly with the profile of the Faculty of Science and Engineering.”

There is something incongruous about interviewing two professors, both around the same age, for an article featuring a professor and his student. That’s certainly not how they experienced their relationship.
Baby steps

In Maastricht, Van Rooij is working on the transition of the chemical industry at Chemelot to electrical energy. Plasma allows for the electrical generation of very high temperatures, without which such a transition would be impossible. “We also think we can use plasma chemistry to control new circular processes, like the production of plastic from methane and fertiliser from air,” Van Rooij says. The social relevance of the research on sustainable plasma chemistry was the drawcard that ultimately lured him to Maastricht.

Five years after Van Rooij obtained his PhD, Heeren had his hoped-for breakthrough in imaging mass spectrometry. Since then, it has grown into a full-fledged field in which Maastricht University is one of two world leaders. “Gerard took the first baby steps, laying the foundation on which the M4I institute was eventually built,” Heeren says. The mass computer is primarily used for precision medicine and improved patient care, including the early detection of tumour cells and, recently, a large-scale international study of Parkinson’s disease. “Knowledge is important, but more important is its added value for patients, researchers’ careers and society,” Heeren adds.

The place to be

“Ron is part of my central nervous system,” Van Rooij says. “I’ve always remembered his comment about setting his sights on a new research field every ten years. I found that very impressive, an eye-opener. I’ve now made the move to Maastricht too. I don’t intend to stay cooacasin in my research, but to roll up my sleeves and get my hands dirty at Chemelot, as Ron does in the hospital. That’s where it’s all happening.”

Heeren: “One thing I learnt from Gerard, perhaps indirectly, is to put myself as a supervisor to one side and give people the space to develop. If a study isn’t going to your liking, don’t try to take over. Don’t say anything, Gerard will be fine.”

Making a difference

However different their current fields, Heeren sees the same thread running through their careers. Both have evolved from the role of instrumentation physicist to socially engaged scientist. “Our research is about building instruments and developing methods to measure phenomena at the interface of physics and biochemistry.” Both operate at the forefront of science, and, in particular, both are driven to make a difference in society. “We have that in common, and perhaps also sparked it in each other. For Gerard, it’s about helping industry switch to sustainable energy, whereas mass spectrometry enabled me to transition to clinical care and healthcare.” This requires interdisciplinarity—for Heeren, the new way of doing science. “The clustering of physicists, chemists, biologists and doctors, who put their knowledge together to tackle a complex problem.” Now, they can both put their knowledge to good use in Maastricht.

Both are driven to make a difference in society.
Mark Kawakami, assistant professor of Private Law, grew up in Japan and Hawaii. Omotenashi, Japanese hospitality, was drilled into him from an early age, but when it comes to food, he prefers the spicy cuisines of Thailand or Mexico to that of Japan. “Japanese cuisine is about savouring the purity of the ingredients, whereas I like strong flavours.” Here he speaks about traditions, his love of finger food, his son Sam’s favourite food—and pizza Hawaii. “That’s not a thing, period.”

Mark Kawakami spent his early years in Japan with his mother and grandparents. He has little to no memory of his father, who left after his parents divorced when he was a toddler. “We lived in Kobe, a large port city. My grandmother was a well-respected teacher of ikebana, the art of Japanese flower arrangement, and she was even congratulated by the Japanese royal family for her contribution and dedication to ikebana. At home she taught up to 300 students in one day, so there were always people coming and going. My mother worked as a Japanese-English interpreter and translator, and my grandfather was already retired. My first fond memories of food are with my grandfather. Every afternoon around five, he’d drink sake or beer, which meant accompanying snacks—or as we call it, otsumami. Nice fatty appetisers, but also things like cheese and cold cuts. He’d share them with me while I sat on his lap watching baseball or sumo wrestling.” The tastiest snack they ever shared was a fish they caught together. “He cleaned the fish that same day, fried it and dripped some ponzu, a citrus sauce, on it. So good, my mouth waters at the thought of it. I still love finger food, like fried chicken or nachos.”

East meets west

When Kawakami was 10, his mother decided to move to Hawaii. For her work, ostensibly—but also for his education. “My kindergarten teacher told my mother I wasn’t really suited for the Japanese school system, which is very authoritarian and hierarchical. I struggled with that,” he laughs. “I wasn’t happy about leaving my grandparents, but I’m glad I was able to go to schools in the States.” There he was introduced to very different flavours: his taste for Thai, Korean and Mexican cuisine developed in New York. He also became aware of his Japanese tendency to try to please others by cooking elaborate meals without actually asking what they like. “That’s part of omotenashi. In Japan, you’re supposed to put huge amounts of effort into figuring out what others might like without bothering to ask them; it’s a sign of hospitality, and it takes time. Even as a boy I’d help to serve tea and coffee with a little treat on the side for all the people traipsing in and out. I remember when I was about 11 years old, I went to a Michael Jackson concert in Hawaii with my mom, which was great, but we had to leave halfway through because she had to prepare dinner for her guests.”

Tradition with a twist

Living in the Netherlands, Kawakami is happy that he can let some of those Japanese values go: it makes life a lot easier. “Traditions are valuable, but they can hinder creativity and innovation. In Japan, food is deeply rooted in tradition. My mom is now back there, living with my grandmother, and I normally visit every New Year. The traditional New Year’s food is osechi, a box containing 50 different small bites, which looks absolutely perfect. Every bite means something: a certain fish represents beauty, or a particular fast-growing vegetable represents growth in your career. My mom and my grandmother used to spend weeks making exactly the same box every year. As a boy I found this beautiful and magical, but now I also see it as somewhat confining, and a form of culinary stagnation. My favourite cookbook is by the Italian celebrity chef Massimo Bottura. In Italy people value their grandmother’s traditional recipes too, but he shows how you can reinvent them, while still respecting the essence of the recipe.”

The way to the heart is through the stomach

But his sense of omotenashi is more persistent than he thought—and not always appreciated, he says. “My wife calls me ‘the feeder’. She doesn’t like it when I bring her food without her asking. It makes her feel obliged to eat something she may not even feel like eating.” His son Sam (one and a half years old) is unequivocal on this front, too. “I once made a really nice meal for him, with a bit of chicken, rice and broccoli, but he simply refused to eat it. Instead, his current favourites are bananas and grapes,” he beams. Kawakami is over the moon with his family, but when it comes to cooking and eating, a lot has changed. “I still love to cook with lots of chillies, herbs and strong flavours, and I still cook often, because I find it relaxing. But now it’s mainly about it being healthy: lots of vegetables, little salt and sugar, and definitely not spicy at all. Actually, I’ve kind of returned to Japanese flavours, even though I’m still not a big fan of it”, he smiles. “But now I ask first what they would like to eat, rather than cooking what I think they will like… most of the time.”
In August 2020—the year of the coronavirus—Vivian van Saaze, associate professor at FASoS, moved with her husband and daughter to London for a fellowship at the renowned Tate museum. There she faced the challenge of doing field research in a museum virtually empty of staff and visitors. “I had to think carefully about how to adapt my research methods to the situation.”

The fellowship was part of the research project ‘Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum’, an initiative of Professor Pip Laurenson, head of Tate Collection Care Research and endowed professor at Maastricht University. “What’s special about Tate is that it has a strong research department that works closely with the museums’ other departments,” Van Saaze says. “Museum practice is viewed as a form of research: practice as research. That’s very different to the more typical art-historical research on collections. During my fellowship I examined this new research model. What are the assumptions and expectations, and how can academic methods contribute to its further development? Usually when I study museum practice, I take an ethnographic approach, observing people in their daily work. Now everything had to be done through Zoom and we could only talk about their activities and approach. I missed those hallway chats, but I was able to attend all the gatherings and meetings online.”

Life in the museum

International

Text
Margot Krijnen

Illustration
Ted Struwer
Changeable

“One of the aims of this three-year project is to reveal to the public the ‘life’ of artworks in the museum,” Van Saaze continues. “Museums are designed to preserve objects in their physical form and protect them from change. As a result, artworks are usually presented as stable andunchanging. But contemporary art—performance art, activist art, net art, digital art—challenges this understanding of objects as static. Changeability is inherent to artworks like these. We’re investigating how the museum can adapt to this type of work and what changes it necessitates. What’s special about this research project is that it was initiated by conservation, but because it involves case studies, there’s intensive collaboration with all departments: the curators, collection management, registrars, education, communication and archiving. Employees from different departments have been released to participate in the research and to initiate change processes from within. Not surprisingly, this isn’t always easy in an institution as large as Tate.”

Procurement process

The moment you as a conservator or curator no longer see an artwork as a static object that you have to freeze and preserve, as it were, you also accept that an object changes within the museum and that the museum plays an important role in this. This also alters the role of the conservator. “Previously, the best conservator was an invisible one: he or she repaired whatever was wrong. Contemporary art calls for a more proactive attitude: how can such changeable art survive? Acquiring an artwork is often a long process involving cooperation with the artist, technicians, curators, conservators and so on. Say a museum is considering purchasing an activist work. You have to think very carefully about whether the institution will survive? Acquiring an artwork is often a long process involving cooperation with the artist, technicians, curators, conservators and so on. Say a museum is considering purchasing an activist work. 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Of the Dutch population, 50% are overweight and 14% obese. These numbers, Goossens fears, will only increase with the current pandemic and the accompanying pile-on of ‘corona kilos.’ The lockdown measures and quarantines have an impact on physical activity and eating behaviour. Sports activities and treatment programmes for obese people—which are oftenorganised in groups—have been severely restricted. Even in the short term, this can increase the risk of cardiometabolic disorders. And self-isolation means that people are eating more food with a longer shelf life instead of fresh produce. These foods often contain more salt and fat; cause for concern when you know that every extra kilo can lead to additional health problems.

Fat tissue is a metabolic organ

Goossens’s research focuses on the metabolic phenotyping of people with overweight and obesity. In other words, he tries to shed light on what goes wrong in the metabolism and how this can differ from person to person. “Up to 30% of obese people are still ‘metabolically healthy’; they don’t have high blood pressure and the amount of fat and sugar in their blood is in the normal range. On average, however, they are much more likely to develop type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease within 10 years. Why one obese person develops certain diseases more quickly than another relates to factors such as age and gender. What seems to play a key role in this is the ‘health’ of the adipose tissue—that is, fat—and its distribution around the body.”

Over the last 15 years, Goossens has seen a rise in studies focusing on the biology of the adipose tissue. “Fat is really a metabolic organ; it not only stores excess calories, but is also involved in many physiological processes in the body. For example, obesity is associated with more inflammation of the adipose tissue and a less effective immune system: the more adipose tissue, the more inflammation. This contributes to disturbances in the metabolism of sugar and fat, which increases the risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. Meanwhile, it has become clear that obesity is particularly—along with lung diseases; type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure—leads to more severe symptoms and a higher risk of death from COVID-19. Obese people often have more virus particles in their body, and these particles stick around longer than in people of normal weight. Obese people have a less effective immune response: the immune system produces many inflammatory factors to suppress the virus. In severe cases of COVID-19, this results in what’s known as a ‘cytokine storm’: an uncontrolled release of inflammatory molecules that spread throughout the body, leading to organ damage.”

Adipose tissue as a possible reservoir for the virus

In the first quarter of 2021, Goossens hopes to publish the results of his research into the effect of valsartan on the number of ACE2 receptors in the abdominal fat of obese people. Valsartan is an angiotensin II type 1 receptor blocker that lowers blood pressure. Could this drug contribute to better treatment for COVID-19? “ACE2 is part of what is known as the renin–angiotensin–aldosterone system (RAAS). The ACE2 receptor, the gateway for the SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for COVID-19, is also present on fat cells. We suspect that the increased fat mass in obese people can serve as a reservoir for the SARS-CoV-2 virus to multiply,” Goossens says. “In previous research, we showed that valsartan not only reduced blood pressure, but also had a positive effect on sugar metabolism. We also saw a reduction in certain inflammatory cells in the adipose tissue.” If this tissue is indeed a reservoir for viral replication that contributes to the intense inflammatory reactions in patients with COVID-19, then—so the theory goes—RAAS blockers like valsartan could influence the multiplication process and thus the course of the disease. “It won’t be the magic bullet, but it could help to optimise the treatment of COVID-19 patients. Several clinical studies are already underway. Our research will contribute to a better understanding of how this process may work.”

Wake-up call

Goossens, who is also chair of the Scientific Advisory Board of the European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO), recently discussed the relationship between obesity and COVID-19 with the World Health Organization. He stresses the urgency of action against the double obesity–COVID-19 pandemic: “The problem should be tackled at different levels in society. It starts with you: in just a few weeks, a healthy diet, stress reduction, and adequate sleep and exercise can lead to weight loss, lower blood pressure, better regulation of sugar levels and improved functioning of your immune system. But the obesity problem also requires an integrated approach by the government: developing a healthier living environment by creating more playgrounds for children, incentivising product improvement and adjusting the tax on healthy and unhealthy foods. I hope the COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call that accelerates the fight against obesity. It’s time to join forces and devote more energy to the prevention and treatment of obesity.”

Gijws Goossens is associate professor of Human Biology at NUTRIM. He studied Health Sciences at Maastricht University, where he obtained his PhD in 2006 for his dissertation ‘The metabolic and haemodynamic effects of the renin-angiotensin system in obesity’. He is chair of the Scientific Advisory Board of the European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO) and, until July 2020, also chaired the Netherlands Association for the Study of Obesity (NASSO).
Her home country is reeling from one crisis after the other. After earning her master’s degree at the UM School of Health Professions Education (SHE), Zakia Dimassi is now back in Beirut, Lebanon, where she is an assistant professor at Saint George Hospital University Medical Center. There, she hopes to put her knowledge to good use, contributing to better healthcare and education.”I want to get across that there are a few good people here—as in the film A Few Good Men—who are struggling to make ends meet and keep the country from being devoured by the corrupt.”

Unfortunate events are nothing new to Lebanon, but 2020 was an all-time low. The country suffered an economic meltdown, the value of the Lebanese pound nosedived, and in August the port of Beirut was rocked by a major explosion that killed hundreds, injured thousands and left hundreds of thousands homeless. “Some of us are more privileged than others, but we’re all just getting by day by day,” Dimassi says. “We avoid making long-term plans. We’ve cut down on expenses because the cost of living has tripled. And we rely on personal support from our community, family and friends. Thankfully, Lebanon still has a good social fabric. Some people have close relatives living abroad, who transfer money to their families here to help sustain them. Personally, I’m considering leaving to continue my career abroad. I want to be able to provide for my parents, who are getting older, and for whom leaving Lebanon, where they’ve lived their entire lives, is virtually impossible.”

Seeds of change
The people of Lebanon stood up to the government over its dismal performance and corruption—to no avail. “We resorted to social and political activism, protesting in the streets, but in a system that is corrupt through and through, it takes a long time to induce change. Intellectually, people have started to look at things differently. You can sense the seeds of change beginning to take root. But true change will only happen a few generations down the line.” After the blast, the international community was supportive: “We received so many donations and even manpower to help us recover from the tragedy. Nobody here, even the international community, trusts the government anymore. They rely on local or international NGOs to make sure that donations end up in the right place.” Dimassi also calls for international support for academics, who are working under difficult circumstances, barely able to publish. “Keep them involved. Academic leaders should reach out to graduates around the world where resources are meagre and academic opportunities scarcer.”

Enriching time at UM
Dimassi does not regret coming to Maastricht for her master’s degree. On the contrary, “It was the best experience of my life on many levels. We got the opportunity to interact with teachers and classmates from all over the world. SHE is special in terms of how knowledge is delivered and who delivers it. You can have the best programme in the world, but if the teachers are not up to the challenge, you achieve nothing. Our teachers were always keen on getting our feedback, always there to listen.” Her advice to current students at SHE: “When you go back home, don’t be dismayed if you can’t immediately apply everything you learned. I know you can’t wait to implement it all and make your country the best in the world. But change doesn’t happen in big steps. Take the culture into account and tailor your ideas to it.”

Gurus in health professions education
Dimassi’s choice for UM was based on the advice of a professor from the US at the American University of Beirut. “I was building my career in medicine, had already graduated as a paediatrician, and everyone thought I would become a clinician. But I became fascinated by health professions education.” She still has strong connections with teachers and classmates from Maastricht. “They give you an open line to contact them if you have questions and are always willing to support your research projects. Whenever I’m at a conference, people know my former professors, who are genuine gurus in medical education, having developed well-known frameworks in medical education. All SHE students have the privilege of being influenced by these academics, who are making a worldwide contribution to the field.”

Good citizens everywhere
“If I do manage to find good opportunities abroad, I would want to return home, maybe in ten years or so, and be part of a constructive change in medical education across the country and the region. I call on the international community to open their arms to Lebanese people who seek chances abroad. A lot of us want to stay here and make this country a better place. We want to invest what we know in improving the various disciplines and build a better future for younger generations, but the circumstances are not in our favour. So I really hope the international community looks at the good people, good citizens, who are genuinely passionate about their country. If they don’t stay here—which is unfortunate—maybe they can be good citizens somewhere else.”

Zakia Dimassi, MD, MHPE, is assistant professor of Clinical Teaching, Simulation and Pediatrics at Saint George Hospital University Medical Center in Beirut. She previously worked as co-coordinator and instructor, as well as co-director, of the Standardized Patient programme at the American University of Beirut.
Cognitive Neuroscience alum
Job van den Hurk works as a data scientist and scientific manager at the MRI centre Scannexus. He is also ‘the prof’ in Brainstorm, a youth television programme on NPO Zapp. His passion: making neuroscience accessible.

“We have to teach children to develop a bullshit detector.”

Nerd with a calling

Why psychology, why Maastricht? “Well …” After a calling with a Nerd artificial intelligence as a way to approach brain data.” He may even be the reason I got involved in the rise to the human mind.” His teachers were his role technique that facilitates functional brain research.

During his studies, Van den Hurk became more and more intrigued by the brain, in particular the MRI stuff like that.” I wanted to learn about cool witnesses in a court case. I wanted to learn about cool stuff like that.”

During his studies, Van den Hurk became more and more intrigued by the brain, in particular the MRI technique that facilitates functional brain research.

“I find it fascinating how brain matter—neurons—give rise to the human mind.” His teachers were his role models. “I was impressed by their knowledge and skills. People like Federico de Martino have always inspired me. He may even be the reason I got involved in artificial intelligence as a way to approach brain data.”

Superhero powers
He may be a nerd, but he is one with a calling. Van den Hurk aims to popularise neuroscience. “Even as a student, I used to speak at Open Days on how cool the brain is and what scanners can do. Teaching is one of my passions.”

Six months ago, Van den Hurk became a co-presenter of Brainstorm, a new children’s programme about the brain. As ‘the prof’, he performs all kinds of brain experiments. Why do we lose our appetite when we see blue spaghetti? Why does the brain function less well in a freezing cold or hot environment? One of his favourite experiments concerns whether humans have superhero-like powers. “There are stories about a daughter who sees her father trapped under the wheels of a car, and lifts up the car by herself. Is that possible? Yes, it is: a boost of adrenaline and stress hormones can give you extra strength.”

Bullshit detector
“It’s important that children are introduced to science at a young age,” Van den Hurk says. “On social media, they’re too focused on what they should think. Instead, they need to learn how to think. What is probable, what is not? Which information can you trust, what’s not reliable? You see how things go wrong in the US, and in the Netherlands too. Fake news, conspiracy theories—these are the greatest dangers of our time. We have to teach children to develop a bullshit detector.”

He believes that scientists have to take joint action. “There are many misconceptions about science. That’s an elitist hobby for people who get to decide what the ‘truth’ is, when really it’s just about predicting how reality works through models.” This skewed perception is reinforced by the uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus. Academics cannot let this go unchallenged, he says. “They have a duty to show how fascinating science is and to help society learn to think better. They need to join forces and take a stand against the conspiracy theories on social media.”

Best of both worlds
Does his future lie in the television world and a life of celebrity, or will he stick to the nerdy world of research? “I don’t want to have to choose between the two,” he says. “If I were only a television presenter, I’d miss immersing myself in science, and I’d no longer be an expert. I’d like to combine both worlds. That’s also ideal when it comes to bridging the gap between science and the general public.”

A sensitive breast reconstruction
After his PhD, Van den Hurk was asked to conduct research at the MRI centre Scannexus. He manages innovative projects in the field of functional brain research. Often these involve possible future treatments, such as a breast reconstruction that allows for physical sensation. “When new breasts are created after a mastectomy, the main nerve pathways and blood vessels are connected to those of the transplant-ed skin of the new breasts. This way, women regain feeling in their breasts. What we’re investigating is whether the sensation that a woman feels in a specific breast area after such surgery is also visible neurologi-cally, as it is in healthy women. Can they distinguish between the stimulation of different parts of the breast? What’s nice is that it’s not only about the brain, but also about the consequences for a person’s life.”

Van den Hurk most enjoys writing complex computer algorithms that extract the information he needs from a dataset. “To be honest, I’m a proper nerd. I get a kick out of learning to understand things from complex patterns of information. Here we do that with the help of the latest scanners. It’s exciting to use advanced computer techniques to produce data from the body—you discover parts of reality that you didn’t know existed.”

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Professor Jeanine Verbunt and Hanna Hesemans of Maastricht University are working on innovative projects to contribute to a healthier and better society. Verbunt is developing a ‘corona aftercare instrument’, Hesemans an initiative that brings together young people and senior citizens. To help them reach the finish line, they are enlisting the help of the university community.

A different kind of matchmaker

Jeanine Verbunt is professor of Rehabilitation Medicine and head of the Department of Rehabilitation at Maastricht University. She also works as a rehabilitation doctor for the Adelante healthcare group. Verbunt studied medicine and health sciences in Nijmegen before relocating to Maastricht for her PhD.

Hanna Hesemans was raised in Maastricht and studied at University College Maastricht, followed by the master’s in Art, Culture and Heritage at FAoS. She began working for Match Maastricht as a student. Match Maastricht is an initiative of Maastricht University and the City of Maastricht that brings together students and other city residents, for example through the HomeSharing project.

Left: Hanna Hesemans thinking. “As a child, I was able to experience them how valuable it is for young and old to come into contact with a different generation. Talking to them, I learnt a lot about resilience and the importance of a warm family relationship. I wanted to pass on that experience to others. When I heard on television about the international concept HomeShare, where young people live with senior citizens in need of support, I was immediately inspired.”

The Maastricht version of the concept, Match HomeSharing, is now almost ready. The idea is that students move in with older city residents. “Obviously, to get to know one another and learn from each other, but HomeSharing has other benefits too,” says Hesemans, the project coordinator. “Many people in our society, especially senior citizens, are lonely and need social contact or help around the house. At the same time, students are looking for an affordable, pleasant place to live. We help to create a nice home for both parties.”

An informed choice

With more and more people at risk of becoming socially isolated, the corona pandemic makes HomeSharing more relevant than ever. Similarly, Jeanine Verbunt’s initiative seeks to improve the quality of life during and after corona. With her colleagues, the professor of Rehabilitation Medicine is developing a digital ‘corona aftercare instrument’ for general practitioners. “Many people who have had corona report to their doctor later feeling anxious, fatigued or depressed. The broad range of residual complaints makes it difficult to decide on the appropriate aftercare,” Verbunt explains. “Through our app, patients can already answer a number of questions about their health at home. This gives GPs more insight into the symptoms, allows them to ask better questions during the consultation, and ultimately helps them make an informed choice of treatment.”

Sounds good in theory, but...

Both initiatives are essentially about making good matches—patient with care provider, young with old. Is this hard for HomeSharing, now that we all have to keep our distance? “People shouldn’t be afraid to participate,” Hesemans says. “Naturally, we take the corona measures into account throughout the process. We select all students and homeowners carefully, and we visit regularly after the match to check that things are going smoothly and safely.”

If she has doubts, they are about the funding of the project. The corona crisis means that fewer financial resources are available to finalise the development phase—for Hesemans and Verbunt alike. This is why both projects are featured in the campaign ‘For Each Other 2020’ of the University Fund Limburg/SWOL. Verbunt: “There’s already a hardcopy version of our aftercare instrument, which was developed with the help of healthcare professionals. Based on this, we know that the instrument does help general practitioners, but that a hardcopy version also creates extra pressure within a general practice. So we’d like to get started with the app, but that’s only possible with additional financial support.”

Scotland-bound

Verbunt is looking forward to the day she can get out and about to see friends, patients and colleagues ‘for real’. “I’d like to travel again, take a city trip. And in terms of work, I’d like to set up new rehabilitation treatments with young professionals, so that more patients can participate in society again. It’s always great when you can treat people and give them a better quality of life.”

Hesemans, too, is feeling ambitious. “We hope to launch HomeSharing this year with eight matches between students and senior citizens. If the project is a success, we’d like to expand it, maybe to other cities.”

When the pandemic is over, she plans to go to Scotland to visit a friend she has not seen for a long time. “The crisis is a good reminder of how important it is to look out for others. So: pay attention to one another, now and in the future. Ask your neighbour how they are, call your great-aunt, have a coffee with your uncle … and stay strong!”

The University Fund Limburg/SWOL provides support and inspiration to entrepreneurial UM students. The fund awards grants to student activities four times a year, contributes financially to the Student Idea Competition, and includes scholarships and student projects—such as the recycling machines—in its annual fundraising campaign ‘For Each Other’.
underestimate this problem, by 2050, 10 million people worldwide will die every year from the effects of AMR," Arts says, "and that’s a conservative estimate. In the last 20 years, no new antibiotics have entered the market. That’s why it’s so important that we start researching alternative technologies to reduce the use of antibiotics." The research will focus on the development of materials that prevent bacterial growth.<

**Materials technology in the fight against antibiotic resistance**

An interdisciplinary international consortium led by Maastricht UMC+ researcher Dr Chris Arts will spend the next six years researching new technological solutions to the rapidly growing problem of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). The research focuses on social awareness of AMR and the development of alternatives to traditional antibiotics through the use of new materials technology.

AMR, in which bacteria are increasingly resistant to antibiotics, is a major and growing problem worldwide. It increases the risk of life-threatening infections after surgery, resulting in poorer treatment outcomes and an increase in healthcare costs. "If almost everyone continues to

**Consortium receives €11 million grant for research and development**

During his farewell as dean of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences and vice president of the Board of Directors of the Maastricht UMC+, Professor Albert Scherpier received the highest distinction at UM, the Dr. J.G. H. Tans Medal. He also received the Maastricht UMC+ Award. Scherpier was presented with the awards by the UM president (Tans Medal) and the president of the Board of Directors of the Maastricht UMC+ (MUMC+ Award).<

**Tans Medal for Professor Albert Scherpier**

**Profile**

**Education and research at Maastricht University**

The Maastricht University is organised primarily on the basis of faculties, schools and institutes.

**Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences**

- Politics and Culture in Europe
- Science, Technology and Society
- Arts, Media and Culture
- Globalisation, Transnationalism and Development

**Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences**

- School of Nutrition and Translational Research in Metabolism (NUTRIM)
- School for Cardiovascular Diseases (CARIM)
- School for Public Health and Primary Care (CAPHRI)
- School for Mental Health and Neuroscience (MHEYS)
- School for Oncology and Developmental Biology (GROW)
- School of Health Professions Education (SHE)
- Institute for Education

**Faculty of Science and Engineering**

- University College Maastricht (UCM)
- Maastricht University Venlo (UCV)
- Maastricht Science Programme (MSP)
- Department of Data Science and Knowledge Engineering (DKE)
- Aachen–Maastricht Institute for Biobased Materials (AMIBM)

**Faculty of Law**

- Institute for Globalisation and International Regulation (IGIR)
- Institute for Transnational Legal Research (METRO)
- Institute for Corporate Law, Governance and Innovation Policies (ICGI)
- Maastricht Centre for European Law (MCEL)
- Maastricht Centre for Human Rights
- Maastricht Centre for Taxation (MCT)
- Maastricht European Private Law Institute (MEPLI)
- Maastricht Graduate School of Law
- Montesquieu Institute Maastricht

**Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience**

- Graduate School of Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience
- Clinical Psychological Science
- Cognitive Neuroscience (CN)
- Experimental Psychophysiology (EPP)
- Neuropsychology and Psychopharmacology
- Work & Social Psychology
- Maastricht Brain Imaging Centre (M-BIC)

**School of Business and Economics**

- Graduate School of Business and Economics (GSBE)
- Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA)
- Network Social Innovation (NSI)
- Limburg Institute of Financial Economics (LIFE)
- The Maastricht Academic Centre for Research in Services (MAXX)
- Accounting, Auditing & Information Management Research Centre (MARC)
- European Centre for Corporate Engagement (ECCES)
- United Nations University – Maastricht Economic Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT)
- Social Innovation for Competitiveness, Organisational Performance and Human Excellence (NISCOPe)
- Marketing–Finance Research Lab
- Service Science Factory (SSF)
- Maastricht Sustainability Institute (MSI)
- Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGSOG)
- UMIQ - executive branch
- Education Institute

**Interfaculty institutes**

- The Maastricht Forensic Institute (tMFI)
- MERLIN Institute for Technology-Inspired Regenerative Medicine
- The Maastricht Centre for Citizenship, Migration and Development (MACIMIDe)
- Maastricht MultiModal Molecular Imaging Institute (M4I)
- Maastricht Centre for Systems Biology (MaCSBio)
- Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACACH)
- Centre for European Research in Maastricht (CERIM)
- Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM)
- Institute of Data Science (IDS)
- Brightlands Institute for Smart Society (BBSS)

**UM in Keuzegids guide to Dutch universities 2021**

Five Maastricht University bachelor’s programmes are ranked first in their category in the new Keuzegids Universiteiten (Dutch universities guide) 2021: Data Science and Artificial Intelligence, European Studies, Tax Law, Fiscal Economics and the Maastricht Science Programme. The latter retains the designation ‘top-rated programme’, a quality label also held by the two university colleges (Maastricht and Venlo). UM as a whole placed fourth in the ranking of Dutch universities. <

**Colophon**

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