June 2021
on education and research at Maastricht University

Portrait of a resolute late bloomer
Marieke van den Beuken-van Everdingen, professor of Palliative Medicine

How diverse and inclusive is Maastricht University?
Interview with Constance Sommerey, UM’s first diversity officer, and student Hillmann Batuo

PANDEMRIC
Research on cross-border cooperation in crisis management
Forensics at UM: broad, innovative and multidisciplinary

Cybersecurity and Russian politics are global concerns—but digital technology is playing an intriguing role in Russia's own upcoming elections too. Russia expert Mariëlle Wijermars explains.

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If it were up to Melle Garschagen, after working as an NRC correspondent in England he would have settled in Maastricht. But fate had other ideas. When he was invited to join the editorial board of the NRC as of 1 March this year, it was an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Alum Melle Garschagen

For the cover image, young photographer Sem Shayne was inspired by the interview with Constance Sommerey and Hillmann Batuo on diversity and inclusivity.

The future of work

For almost 18 months, staff and students at Maastricht University have been confronted with constantly changing circumstances. Many will feel they have stumbled from one crisis to the next: COVID-19 followed hot on the heels of the cyberattack in December 2019. Both crises have necessitated a great deal of adaptability from the university community—and not in vain, as we can say with pride when we look at how well the university has fared. But it’s not over yet.

What the situation will look like when the new academic year kicks off in September remains unclear. Education is subject to the principle of ‘on campus if possible, online if necessary’. But what if classes can largely be taught in person again? Will the majority of employees return to their workplace as usual? We know that many staff are looking forward to working on the university premises again, but are keen to combine this with working from home more than they used to. How this desire for a hybrid approach will play out is an open question. We are, however, already weighing up issues related to the future of work.

What does it mean for the use of our buildings and the design of workspaces? How can working from home be accommodated from a health and safety perspective? How is the relationship between employees and managers changing, and what preparations should we make? We hope to gain insight into not only our employees’ expectations, but also the extent to which UM can meet these expectations.

The crises have caused a great deal of disruption and put pressure on our staff, students and the university as a whole. For better or worse, the new situation has forced us to improvise and come up with ad-hoc solutions. Some changes, it turns out, are improvements on the way things were. How our community has dealt with these challenges gives us every confidence that we will come out of this situation stronger.
Since 2018, third-year bachelor’s students have been able to obtain their teaching qualification through Maastricht University’s Education Minor. A comparable programme—the Education Module—is now open to bachelor’s and master’s graduates. “You learn all the skills you need to become a teacher in just one year. Leaving UM with an extra qualification is a great opportunity for our students,” says Juanita Vernooy, coordinator of the Education Minor and Module.

Nina Krommedijk (21), a student of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence, has always known she wanted to teach. She made a conscious choice for the Education Minor during the third year of her bachelor’s degree. “After high-school I did a test to see what study programme I should do, and it said I’d make a good maths teacher. But I was advised to choose something more challenging. After all, there are various routes afterwards to obtain a teaching qualification. The Education Minor is ideal for this, because it takes just one year. Since last September, I’ve been teaching a class of second-year high-school students for my internship. I’m their only maths teacher for the entire school year, so we really build up a bond. Initially, they dreaded the subject and didn’t see what use it could be. I always try to show them why we do what we’re doing. Many of the pupils are really enthusiastic and happy when I give them a good mark. I get a lot of satisfaction and pleasure from teaching, it’s something I definitely want to keep doing.”

Unique design
The Education Minor and Module at UM are different to those at other Dutch universities. “Elsewhere, both courses take only six months and the students spend two days a week doing an internship at a school,” Vernooy says. “That’s a struggle in terms of time and energy. And they’re sent in to teach immediately, which is intense. We spread the internship over the entire year, so we start at the end of August and let the students teach for a full school year. That’s better for everyone involved.”

PBL sparks interest in teaching
The Education Module is the result of an experiment by the education ministry to encourage university graduates to go into secondary teaching. Vernooy: “The Education Module is open not only to bachelor’s graduates, but also to master’s and PhD graduates as well as UM staff. It’s aimed at people who don’t want to spend several more years on their studies.” Niels Delahaije (27) obtained his bachelor’s degree in Biomedical Sciences from UM and, after graduating, decided to follow the Education Module. “I’d done a lot of tutoring during high school, but it never occurred to me to become a teacher. In Problem-Based Learning at UM, you discuss cases and explain the solutions you’ve found, and I enjoyed that so much that I realised teaching is right up my alley. When I heard about the Education Module, I jumped at the chance.

“For the internship, I’ve been teaching biology to third- and fourth-year pupils in a vocational high school [VMBO-T] for almost a whole school year. Trying to motivate and interest this group in the subject is a great challenge. If you want to learn classroom management, this is the best place. I’m hoping the school will give me a job next year and I can combine that with a master’s degree to obtain my grade-one …”
teaching qualification.” Delahaije’s plan will be made even easier by the partnership UM has recently entered into with Radboud University Nijmegen, Vernooy says. “There’ll be an airlift between Nijmegen and Maastricht, and during the programme at Radboud our students will easily be able to do an internship here in Limburg.”

**Skills for life**

Nina Krommedijk will spend the next two years doing a master’s degree in Data Science. “But I’ll keep on teaching alongside or after my master’s—maybe not full-time, but perhaps fifty-fifty.” Many students from the Education Minor teach while doing their master’s, Vernooy says. She expects it to become more common for university graduates to teach for a few days alongside their job. Whatever happens, Delahaije and Krommedijk are enthusiastic about the programme. “Don’t hesitate, just do it!” Delahaije says. “You get to do a four-year vocational study programme in one year. And you learn much more than just how to teach. You gain experience in dealing with colleagues, follow training courses offered by the school on holding career talks with pupils and other skills. What you learn will benefit you throughout your career, whether or not you go into teaching.” Krommedijk agrees. “When I started out, I had a very tight schedule. I’d underestimated what it means to stand in front of thirty pupils. You find yourself in unexpected situations, everyone wants something different from you. Here I learn skills that I can’t acquire from any other study programme. I’m always proud to say that I teach—everyone’s always impressed by that. For me this is the ideal combination: an academic challenge in addition to the practical experience of teaching.”

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**Education Minor and Module**

In 2018, UM launched the Education Minor in collaboration with Fontys Teacher Training in Sittard and Tilburg. The minor is currently offered to bachelor’s students of Biomedical Sciences, Data Science & Artificial Intelligence, Econometrics & Operations Research, Fiscal Economics, Health Sciences and the Maastricht Science Programme.

Last year, the Education Module was introduced for bachelor’s, master’s and PhD graduates as well as UM staff. Both the Education Minor and Module lead to a limited grade-two teaching qualification in one year.

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Juanita Vernooy works in the Department of Pulmonology at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. She is the coordinator of the Education Minor and Module.

Nina Krommedijk is a student of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence.

Niels Delahaije is bachelor Biomedical Sciences.

UM considers diversity extremely valuable
Asked about her aim as the first diversity officer in the history of Maastricht University, Constance Sommerey is resolute: “To be superfluous. Diversity and inclusion are more than just buzzwords. It’s a process, one that requires constant attention, care and refinement. Diversity and inclusivity touch the very core of society and thus also the heart of the academic world. I expect to be busy for a while yet.”

Constance Sommerey and her three colleagues play a key role in promoting, monitoring and drawing attention to issues of inclusion and diversity at UM. “The academic world in general and UM in particular have traditionally been internationally oriented. In this context, it’s important to celebrate diversity. It’s not a limiting factor but a social and cultural enrichment. Diversity doesn’t take anything away from us. Instead it enhances our world, our experiences.”

In recent years, the issues of inclusivity and diversity have been in the spotlight. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have reached a large part of the world’s population. Debates surrounding these movements have traditionally been internationally oriented. In this context, it’s important to celebrate diversity. It’s not a limiting factor but a social and cultural enrichment. Diversity doesn’t take anything away from us. Instead it enhances our world, our experiences.”

Search
As a child, Sommerey wanted exactly that: to go out into the world. At the age of 15 she spent a year in Atlanta. “That was a special, life-defining experience. I stayed with a family whose ideas were a million miles from mine, and yet the family was nothing but warm and welcoming. That ambivalence was at once confusing and formative.”

In recent years, the issues of inclusivity and diversity have been in the spotlight. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have reached a large part of the world’s population. Debates surrounding colonialism, racism and gender inequality also touch a nerve. “We live in a global village. When a Black man is killed by a police officer on a street in America it immediately goes viral. Here at UM, with 20,000 students and 5,000 employees, there are issues related to diversity on a daily basis. When I started in 2018, I immediately started collecting stories within the university. It was a form of anthropological field research. I wanted to know first-hand what was going on at UM. That opened my eyes.”

At home
“It didn’t take long for me to realise that diversity is a crucial theme at UM. Issues surrounding racism, tolerance, discrimination, sexual harassment and bullying were being recorded and inventoried. We also dealt with issues related to parental leave, work-life balance and family-friendliness—themes that we’ve put on the agenda and approached from various angles. We want everyone here to feel safe and at home, and to have the same opportunities to work and study at UM based on their own abilities and talents. It goes beyond theory, of course; we also apply those themes in practice. Our gender-neutral toilets are a good example of a concrete measure. People are becoming more aware of our existence. We’re currently involved in some 30 projects. We’re like a spider in the web.”

No quick fix
Sommerey knows that dealing with issues related to diversity requires patience. “Of course, not everybody is happy with our work. Change is not always greeted with applause. Often it’s simply about learning to take one another’s feelings into account and our right to reflect on others’ feelings. In today’s world, complex as it is, this is something we have to work at constantly. And UM takes this very seriously, given our increasingly international future. It’d be great if my job were redundant in five years. Honestly though? I don’t expect so.”

Connection
Whatever Batuo does, he does with conviction. He is now president of ACMUS, the university’s association for students of African or Caribbean descent. “Creating mutual understanding is essential. And in this predominantly white city, it’s good for Black students to have a safe space where they can talk about their struggles and feel heard. But having fun is important too—it’s a place where we celebrate diversity.”

Batuo is also involved in a task force to diversify the medical curriculum. The medical world is still dominated by the white gaze. “Almost everything is based on the classic white male patient. Sometimes this can lead to absurd situations, for example, skin disorders can look very different on a Black person than a white one. Diversity is not a theory. The world is changing. Things are no longer black or white, but multicoloured. That’s something we have to learn to live with in practice. It’s a challenge—but a fantastic one, one that pays off. I’ll continue to dedicate myself to this.”

Hillmann Batuo
finds his niche in Maastricht

Hillmann Batuo, a fourth-year medical student from Cameroon, is a colourful personality. A man with a story. With a highly developed sense of equality and diversity, as well as a keen sense of humour. And with a mission in life: helping people.

He grew up with his eleven siblings in the shadow of the second highest mountain in Africa, Mount Cameroon (also known as Mount Fako). After high school he moved to the Netherlands to study medicine. “The first time I set foot in the lecture hall was a moment I’ll never forget. It was a dream come true. I felt proud.” But integrating here was not easy. For the first six months he lived in Berg en Terblijt, and found it hard to make friends. “In those early days I was quite lonely. I’ve always been sociable and suddenly I couldn’t connect with anyone. It was also alienating to find that people here didn’t understand my jokes. It was difficult to be myself. In Cameroon interaction is less regulated, more spontaneous. You just drop in on people without planning it. Here you always have to make arrangements in advance.”

“I now have a nice girlfriend—Audessa from Curaçao, she’s studying psychology—and I’ve found my feet. Fortunately, I’ve never experienced blatant racism. People do give me looks, which is something I’ve had to learn to deal with. Having a sense of humour and putting things into perspective are always good weapons. But that’s not to say you should just laugh everything off. It’s important to say what’s on your mind, especially when it comes to diversity or racism.” These days he has his own YouTube channel and podcast, where he discusses the issues he has had to deal with in Maastricht and the hurdles he overcame. “It’s important to me to share my experiences. They can be of use and ensure that social interaction goes more smoothly next time.”
UM as a gallery: geometrics and colours

There is more to the UM corridors than flyers, academic posters and signage: if you take your time, you will notice remarkable artwork.

I realised this some months ago (in pre-COVID times), when I walked through the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience in the company of an art expert. We were talking about other business, but suddenly she stopped in front of a painting. “Wait a minute,” she said. “This is a Ger Brouwer, you can see it from a mile away.”

Then she told me the story of the painter. In the early ’60s, Brouwer (1938) moved from the north of the country to Maastricht to study at the Jan van Eyck Academy, by then a reputed postgraduate art school. In those days, Catholic institutions were still the main sponsors of art in the region, and their preference for accomplished but dull pictures dominated the atmosphere at Jan van Eyck. But the times were changing, and Brouwer and his fellow students were determined to break with pastoral conventions. They were fascinated by the Cobra movement and the idea that the purpose of art is not merely to decorate churches or to impress people. Rather, it should reveal how we view the world by deconstructing our perception. Apply this philosophy in practice and you end up with a kaleidoscope of colours and geometrics—precisely what you see when you look at Brouwer’s work. After graduating, Brouwer enjoyed some success as a painter: his work was exhibited at the Bonnefanten Museum and received prestigious awards.

The expert and I continued our walk through the faculty. On a different floor, she spotted a second Brouwer. “This is quite remarkable,” she said. “Normally you’d only see two paintings like this in a gallery or at an auction.”

I did some detective work and discovered that the Municipality of Maastricht had bought the two Brouwers in the mid 70s. They had hung in an office on the Abtstraat, and when the university took over the office space, it acquired the paintings too—fortunately for UM!

Brouwer is still alive and kicking. Curious to hear his story, I visited him in his studio, where he can be found around the clock surrounded by an enormous collection of paintings that he does not intend to sell. A paintbrush is always clutched in his right hand, like an extension of his body. And when that brush is not hovering above a canvas, it paints whatever else it comes into contact with—doors, chairs, bicycles, taps, you name it.

I asked if we could hang the two Brouwer paintings closer to each other, as one would in a gallery. I like the result. The colours and geometrics are mutually reinforcing. Yes, this is clearly about perception, and yes, perception is a key topic in psychology. There is no better place for these fine paintings than in our faculty.

Dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience
Harald Merckelbach

Harald Merckelbach
Photography
Paul van der Veer

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It was a happy childhood, growing up in Vught. She enjoyed school—when she was finally old enough to go. “All my friends already went, but I had to wait another year because I was born in October. I wanted it so badly that I once ran away with my sister, who’s a year younger than me: to school.” Eventually she attended a Catholic primary school for girls, run by nuns. “I was fairly timid when I got to high school. There were girls and boys who’d been in a mixed class for a long time, which was new to me. I stayed very timid for a long time, but I enjoyed learning, getting good grades. Yes, I was the goody two-shoes of the class,” she says cheerfully. “I loved to read, especially Vestdijk, and I loved French chansons and classical music; I thought pop was just noise. And I always knew I wanted to be a doctor, it just suited me. It runs in the family: my father was a dentist, four out of five children are now doctors, and two of my three sons have also just become doctors. The third does economics — thank God.”

At school, she was a self-described goody two-shoes. She calls herself a late bloomer and jokes that she only entered puberty when she went to university. Naturally, she studied medicine, following in the footsteps of her grandfather, sister and one of her brothers. Marieke van den Beuken-van Everdingen was 49 when she obtained her PhD and 56 when she became professor of Palliative Medicine. “It took a while for me to find my feet. And in my day, internal medicine was still mainly a man’s world, which didn’t help either.” Here she talks about quality of life, flying from Eindhoven to Maastricht and meeting former health minister Els Borst.
**Palliative care in this country owes a great deal to Els Borst.**

*Life can’t be planned*

She completed her specialisation in internal medicine in Maastricht in 1992. By then she was married to Joop, whom she had met at the hockey club. “It felt right straight away. Within six weeks we were in Paris and we’ve now been married for about 30 years.” These days, 45% of the specialists in her field are women, but back then there was no guarantee that a married woman could become an internist. “In Eindhoven, where I did the second part of my specialisation, I was the last woman standing. In Maastricht I was advised by a well-meaning professor of Internal Medicine to become a company doctor—that would be easier to combine with the children’s school hours. Fortunately, a lot has changed.”

After a year of working in the ICU, she became part-time head of the outpatient clinic in Heerlen. “It sounds great, but I was ‘Marieke’ and the rest were ‘Doctor’. I liked the work and learnt a lot; I saw all kinds of different patients and could combine it with raising the children. But in the end it wasn’t good for my ego. I was seen as a great assistant, never as an equal partner. Maybe I should have stuck up for myself and been more assertive, but that’s not me. I’m more about harmony, and luckily I got there in the end. I always say to my children: life can’t be planned, so just take your chances—then you’ll end up where you belong.”

*Palliative care is about quality of life*

When Van den Beuken–van Everdingen was invited in 1998 to set up a centre for the development of palliative care in Maastricht, she didn’t think twice. Els Borst, then minister of health, believed the Netherlands had some catching up to do in the field of palliative care. “And she was right. Six university centres were given a pot of money to set up an expertise centre. Maastricht was one of the first, but all the academic hospitals now have a centre like this. Palliative care in this country owes a great deal to Els Borst, she was the trailblazer. I once sat next to her; by then she was no longer the health minister but vice-president of the Health Council. Afterwards everyone was curious about what we’d discussed. Bathrooms, I said.” She roars with laughter. “We were both in the middle of a renovation. I’m cursed, of course.”

She loves her job and is proud of what she has achieved so far. “Palliative care is actually a very positive profession, focused on quality of life. You can make such a difference for patients and their loved ones who are dealing with a life-threatening illness. Palliative care is not an independent specialism, but it’s come to be seen in the Netherlands as a generalist skill where every doctor and nurse should know the basic principles. One of the tools we use to decide whether a patient needs palliative care is the ‘surprise question’: as a care provider, would I be surprised if this patient were no longer alive next year? If not, now’s the time to see what we can do for the patient in terms of palliative care. We look at not only the physical aspects—the disease—but also social, psychological and existential aspects. Pain management is an important part of palliative care, but it’s also about entering into a dialogue with the patient about his or her wishes, values and needs. For example, would I want to be transferred to intensive care? What happens then? That’s perhaps one of the few positive outcomes of corona: that it’s become less of a taboo topic.”

*Not scared of death*

Although there is still much to be done, including more evidence-based research, she is proud of what has been achieved here in Maastricht. “Nine specialists have now completed the palliative care course, and more and more nurses are being allowed to follow it too. This way, we’re trying to get palliative care into the DNA of the organisation. And we recently finished the Paemmeo project, which lays the groundwork to include palliative care in the basic medical curricula, where it used to be ignored entirely. Now there’s a great website with lots of educational material that anyone can use.”

In addition to her work for the palliative care team, which primarily plays an advisory role, she still sees patients. She spends two half-days a week at the oncology pain clinic, working on pain management and palliative care. How does she feel about dealing with so much death? “I can handle it well,” she says after a long pause, “except when I got breast cancer myself 10 years ago. With all the surgeries and chemo, I was off work for a year. When I returned, I did initially find it hard to see breast cancer patients showing up with metastases after five years. But that fear seems to have faded. I’m not afraid of death. The way I see it, when I’m dead I’m simply gone, full stop. I hope my turn won’t come for a while yet—there’s still too much fun to be had here. One of my colleagues once said: dying is not that hard, saying goodbye is hard. That, I believe.”

↑ Mariëlle Van den Beuken-van Everdingen is endowed professor of Palliative Medicine at UM and chair of both the Dutch Palliative Care Advisory Group and the Healthcare Working Group of the seven expertise centres in the Netherlands. She trained as an internist, served on various clinical guideline committees and was a member of the palliative care working group of the Dutch Internists Association.
Borderlessness is one of Maastricht’s unique selling points. Home to the Netherlands’ most international university and one of the EU’s defining treaties, the city bustles with employees and shoppers from neighbouring Belgium and Germany. But the pandemic has called into question the idea of a Europe without frontiers. Sarah Schoenmaekers and Martin Unfried—specialists in EU law and Euregional cooperation, respectively—search for answers.

“I could never have imagined this.” At the time of writing, the borders between Sarah Schoenmaekers’ home in Belgium and her office at Maastricht University are still closed. The pandemic has drawn some hard lines through the pan-European reality of the Meuse–Rhine Euregion (roughly Aachen, Maastricht, Hasselt, Liège and Eupen).

Schoenmaekers and Unfried are part of EMRIC, a network of organisations and services in neighbouring regions in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. Supported by an Interreg grant from the European Commission, they are now working on PANDEMRIC, a project focusing on cross-border cooperation in crisis management and public procurement. “Our cross-border governance systems do some things very well,” she says, “but they turned out to be unfit for this type of crisis.”

No playbook
“You can understand why everyone reverted to nations taking control and acting in their own interests,” Schoenmaekers explains. “This was an extreme emergency, which means all rules are set aside and national governments can act in their country’s interest. Freedom of movement, for example, is guaranteed by the EU, but exceptions can be made in a public health emergency.”

So is Europe not a reality in the hearts and minds of its people? “Europe has never been about emotions; it’s about mechanisms for guaranteeing solidarity. The health services are national and there was a striking lack of cross-border structures,” Unfried says. “Whereas there are protocols for industrial accidents near borders—people have concluded that coordinated cross-border collaboration is the best way.”

If anything, national corona policies have impeded existing structures for collaboration, such as an agreement between the Dutch city of Vaals and Uniklinik RWTH Aachen, which are separated by a mere 20 minute walk—plus an international border. “It should be normal to have a European exchange system for patients, and we had some agreements in place. But not for COVID.”

Bordering on the absurd
Guidelines around the pandemic are not harmonised across the EU, and regions have little freedom to be flexible. “It’s down to the division of competences,” Schoenmaekers explains. “Member states need to give the EU a mandate, otherwise it can’t just step in. The many political sensitivities have jeopardised public health. At the same time, national governments have upended longstanding local and regional collaborations.”

Assistant professor of European Law
Sarah Schoenmaekers

Senior researcher at ITEM
Martin Unfried
Cross-border commuters, for example, find themselves in a legalistic steeplechase. At one point, the curfew was 9 p.m. in the Netherlands, 10 p.m. in Wallonia, and midnight in Flanders. Those three lines meet on the edge of Maastricht, which throughout 2020 also hosted thousands of Belgian and German day trippers, simultaneously bemused and pleased to be able to remove their facemasks.

"Even I can't keep up," admits Unfried, citing as an example the quarantine rules of North Rhine Westphalia. "If you were in the Netherlands for less than 24 hours, you don't need to quarantine—but the Netherlands insists on quarantine for everyone except cross-border workers and students." The policy is not evidence based: at the time of writing, the infection rate in the Netherlands was more than twice that of Germany.

The PANDEMRIC team regularly produces side-by-side comparisons of the constantly changing corona measures in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. There are now more than 85 editions, running to 25 pages each. If nothing else, it makes a powerful case for a more integrated approach.

Respecting regional realities

Thinking along the lines of the 19th century nation state may not make sense in the current situation. "National borders were closed," Unfried says, "but borders between provinces were not, even though in epidemiological terms that would have made a lot more sense. The situation in Rotterdam is more than twice as bad as it is in Aachen, so restricting travel between South Limburg and South Holland would have been better."

"It’s understandable that mapping the pandemic along national lines was our default position, but by the second wave we should have had a better system in place," Schoenmaekers says. Unfried: "Established interregional networks tell national governments in what ways the strategies aren’t working for them, and there are now bilateral agreements to solve some cross-border issues. But there are still plenty of problems."

Better coordination

One of the biggest problems initially was the sourcing and distributing of personal protective equipment, such as gloves and facemasks. Left to fend for themselves and with established suppliers unable to fill the shortfalls, hospitals had to find creative solutions to ensure the shortage of materials would not affect the quality of care. After the chaos of the first wave, more established structures are now in place, Schoenmaekers says. "But for the next pandemic, we need to build up large stocks of medical equipment and up-to-date lists of certified suppliers. We also need protocols to avoid national protectionism and members states bidding against each other. Of course, it would be best to bargain on an EU level as was done with the vaccines. Then again, acting on the local level allows for more flexibility. In any case, in the future much better coordination and planning will be necessary."
Cybersecurity and Russian politics are global concerns—but digital technology is playing an intriguing role in Russia’s own upcoming elections too. Russia expert Mariëlle Wijermars explains.

United Russia (UR) holds three quarters of the seats in Russia’s State Duma. Once Boris Yeltsin’s right-hand man, the party’s de facto leader Vladimir Putin was elected president in 2000. He hasn’t looked back since. “His promise of stability and prosperity made him popular,” Wijermars says. “UR has been very dominant, but its popularity is plummeting.

The party’s grip on power is under threat after an unpopular pension reform and declining living standards due to mismanagement, sanctions following the annexation of Crimea, and decreasing oil and gas prices. “Still, the parliamentary opposition mainly consists of smaller ‘loyal’ parties that don’t really oppose UR.” This wasn’t always the case. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian politics initially enjoyed a period of lively opposition. In ’93, President Yeltsin declared a state of emergency and banned all opposition. In 2012, you notice a further decrease in the diversity of political parties. “Electorally, he’s not that relevant really—he’s not allowed to run for president and wouldn’t win if he did.” Navalny is pushing for a smart voting system that would allow the discontented to strategically vote against UR. But Wijermars believes that the Russian left, which would benefit from this system, are likelier agents of change. “They have a substantial base. The communist party is loyal to Putin to an extent, but their membership isn’t homogenous, particularly the young members want change.”

### The youth wants change

Electoral reforms have hampered political opposition. Russia has a 5% hurdle, making it difficult for new candidates to enter parliament without the backing of an established party. But there is a way. Wijermars says. “Half of the MPs are determined by party lists, the other half are directly elected in their constituencies in a first-past-the-post system.”

Naturally, the poisoning and imprisonment of Alexei Navalny has received a lot of attention. The lawyer and anticolruption activist had organised a network of independent candidates pushing for political change. “Electorally, he’s not that relevant really—he’s not allowed to run for president and wouldn’t win if he did.” Navalny is pushing for a smart voting system that would allow the discontented to strategically vote against UR. But Wijermars believes that the Russian left, which would benefit from this system, are likelier agents of change. “They have a substantial base. The communist party is loyal to Putin to an extent, but their membership isn’t homogenous, particularly the young members want change.”

### Post-truth: made in Russia

Feeling threatened, UR went on a propaganda offensive. “The narrative was something like ‘we’re the only choice’ and ‘change is impossible anyway’. Only a quarter of Russians think that political participation can make a difference. But there’s a dilemma: apart from a big majority, UR needs a high turnout to legitimise the party. That might require more fraud than ever—which can be made public through the internet.”

“Federal TV channels are under state control. Since 2012, you notice a further decrease in the diversity of opinions. Nowadays, the political talk shows are full of propaganda.” There’s been a strategic shift too. “At first, they ignored Navalny; now they offer conspiratorial, nationalist counter-narratives, claiming that he’s funded by Western agents.”

“Post-truth was invented by Russian state TV. Russia started sponsoring extreme nationalist youth movements to make Kremlin rhetoric look more centrist. The idea is to carpet-bomb people with information to undermine trust.” In a confusing world in which the concept of truth makes little sense, unflattering facts are of little importance.

### Cynically social

Russia’s most popular search engine, news and social media platform are all domestic products. “The USSR already had a strong tech sector and Russian companies had a head start since they worked with the Cyrillic alphabet. They were the first to establish themselves in the Russian-speaking former Soviet countries.”

Unlike traditional media outlets, however, not all of these companies are controlled by oligarchical conglomerates with personal loyalties to the Kremlin. “Some big players are quasi-independent and the government relies on them to communicate with people. It’s a paradox: the Kremlin needs social media—but it’s even more vital to the opposition, which has no other outlet.”

Yandex, Russia’s leading tech company, runs a popular personalised content platform whose guidelines ban ‘excessively negative’ news that could skew public opinion. “Yandex is a for-profit company; they rely on their credibility and customers. At the same time, they don’t want to fall foul of government regulation. It’s a kind of dance.” Wijermars and her colleagues will use fake profiles to see how Russian newsfeeds change in the run-up to the election.

Taking on the tech giant

Russia also regularly files complaints with foreign-based social media companies—but to little effect. “Russia imposes fines for non-compliance, but companies like Facebook or Google are so unspeakably rich that it doesn’t even register.” Still, Russia was able to throttle Twitter’s bandwidth from the Black Sea to the Bering Strait, making it difficult to load pictures and videos. And Russia’s proposed sovereign internet law would compel internet service providers to install ‘deep packet inspection’, data-processing tools that can identify the source of internet traffic and filter content.

“A standoff with those tech giants would be complex. Google owns YouTube, which hosts investigative videos into election fraud in Russia. It also owns Android, the most popular operating system, so it could retaliate.”

### Media repression

Since the 2000s, the Kremlin has been using bots to simulate grassroots consent on contested issues. “It’s very cheap—certainly compared to military campaigns. Bots amplify certain narratives and undermine others. When they came to the West’s attention after Trump’s election, Russia had already gained a lot of experience domestically and in neighbouring countries.”

Wijermars’ prediction is sombre. “There have already been raids and arrests of candidates. I think there’ll be widespread media repression. UR will win a majority but pay a massive price in the long term. The regime is clinging on but they’re ruining their power base. It’s a shame: there’s so much promise in the country and it’s not allowed to flourish.”

It’s a paradox: the Kremlin needs social media—but it’s even more vital to the opposition, which has no other outlet.

Mariëlle Wijermars is assistant professor in Cybersecurity and Politics at FASoS. She co-edited the Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies and Freedom of Expression in Russia’s New Mediasphere.
Maastricht University (UM) has a 50% stake in a solar park with approximately 30,000 solar panels at Belvédère, a former landfill site in Maastricht. As a result, some 25% to 30% of UM’s power supply is completely green—that is, its generation is CO2 neutral and it is used within 10 km of the generation site. The solar park opened in October 2020 and will help UM achieve the goals of the climate covenant it has entered into with the municipality of Maastricht. In this covenant the university, as a major regional employer, has committed to being CO2 neutral by 2030.
When we think of forensic medical research, we usually associate it with crime investigation. But there’s so much more to it than that. With no fewer than three forensics chairs, Maastricht University is unique in the Netherlands. Bela Kubat, professor of Forensic Pathology, Paul Hofman, professor of Forensic and Post-mortem Radiology, and Wilma Duijst, professor of Forensic Medicine and Health-Related Criminal Law, discuss the developments in their field. The first students of the new-style forensic medicine will graduate this year.

All three professors agree that with their different areas of expertise, they complement and strengthen one another: “It opens up doors for us to take great strides forward, and we’re seizing that opportunity,” Hofman says. “The Netherlands conducts fewer post-mortem examinations than almost any other country in Europe. Here we’re always looking for the most cost-efficient way to achieve the highest quality result. There’s a lot of room for improvement, but we’re well on our way.”

**Final tool for healthcare quality**

In Maastricht, clinical autopsies are performed not only in the case of crime investigations, but also to allow for the study of the healthcare system. What did the person die of? Did they receive the right treatment? Did anything go undiscovered? And what can all this tell us about the quality of healthcare in the Netherlands? Kubat: “Clinical autopsies are an important final tool in quality assurance. Research shows that, despite all the modern technologies in hospitals, there’s a considerable discrepancy between what the attending physician considers the cause of death and what actually appears to be the cause of death. You can use the information obtained through a post-mortem to check the quality of your hospital. And doctors can learn from it too.” Hofman: “This kind of research has been done in several wards at the MUMC+ where accurate records were kept of the cause of death according to the attending physician. The deceased patients were then examined using post-mortem radiological examination, and numerous autopsies were performed. The attending physicians turned out to have correctly determined the cause of death in only 50% of cases.”

Kubat: “That’s not to say that doctors are doing it wrong. The cause of death is often very difficult to determine clinically. We can look inside the body; something a doctor can’t do with a live patient. It’s important for both the next of kin and the doctor to know the correct cause of death. And it’s important for national statistics, because they feed into the government’s policy and funding of healthcare. The more accurate the statistics, the better the available money can be channelled towards the most prevalent types of disease.”

**Medicine and law**

Forensic medical examinations conducted for the justice system typically involve many different people. It starts with the discovery of a body and the investigation of the crime scene. This is followed by an external inspection of the body; the domain of Wilma Duijst. Then there may be additional examinations, such as toxicological and forensic radiological examinations—Paul Hofman’s remit. The next step is the autopsy. Bela Kubat’s area. Duijst now wants to bring the medical and legal worlds closer together.
It’s so important for these fields to understand each other. Forensic physicians need to be able to produce clear reports, and the legal world has to learn to ask the right questions about these reports. We’ve got the ball rolling on several developments that will further professionalise the field, such as the new Forensic Medicine programme launched in 2018. The first forensic doctors will be registered in the Netherlands by 2024. We’ve had PhD candidates doing research in forensic medicine for several years now. There’s a new scientific journal—the Nederlands Tijdschrift Forensische Geneeskunde—and the Handbook Forensische Geneeskunde will be published by Gompel & Svacina soon. I edited the book, and my colleagues Wilma Duijst and Paul Hofman made valuable contributions.”

Education

The three professors place a great deal of value on forensics education, and consider it a pity that it is only an elective subject in the medical curriculum. Since all doctors inevitably come into contact not only with the death of patients, but also with victims of crime, they need some knowledge of the field—for legal as well as medical reasons. Who do you report findings or suspicions to? Who infers the next of kin? But there is a preventive aspect too, the professors say, because you can’t recognise what you don’t know. As a doctor, at some point in your career you will deal with victims of abuse, and it is important to recognise signs and injuries. Doing so requires dedicated training.

Multidisciplinary

The forensics field is developing apace, especially when it comes to technological possibilities. Hofman: “We use all kinds of technical methods when examining the deceased, but by no means all the methods we have at our disposal. For example, we could do very good blood vessel tests or make more use of MRI. The latter is happening more and more often, but we’re not yet making use of all the possibilities offered by this technology. It’s our job to further develop this.”

“Increasingly we want to be able to report at the activity level,” Kubat says. “That means establishing not only that there’s an arm fracture, say, but how that fracture arose, which direction the violent impact came from. For that you need a multidisciplinary approach involving radiology and other things. We already do that for gunshot injuries, where we reconstruct bullet trajectories and the direction of the gunshot injury. The goal is to do this in a much more complex way and in many more areas. In addition to medical disciplines, this requires technical disciplines, such as computer animations. The major challenge for the coming years is to bring together all the available information from all disciplines in a sound, objective way. Then you can develop detailed scenarios.”

The crime scene in 3D

Hofman: “A few years ago we started a project together with the police and the Netherlands Forensic Institute. We’re now seeing the first results. Imagine there’s been a shooting, there’s body with injuries and bullet trajectories in the body. The bullets are examined, the investigators inspect the damage to walls, furniture, powder traces at the scene of the crime. This results in spatial information that the public prosecutor then has to piece together from various reports. What we’ve done is to create a visual representation of all that spatial information. The police make a 3D scan of the scene of the crime. That shows where the damage is on walls and furniture, where the victim is, and—in CT scans—where the injuries are located. So you get a picture of the entire crime scene. Then you can ask all parties—the police, witnesses and suspect—for their version of events. Based on the combined information in the 3D scan, you can check whether the scenarios described are physically possible.”

Emotional

Kubat and Hofman both worked on an army base on the investigation of the MH17 victims. Hofman: “That investigation had a lasting impact on everybody involved. I still think about it a lot.” Kubat: “Every case is emotional, because there are always relatives who mourn the deceased. But there the circumstances and the scale of it had a huge impact. You carry that experience with you for the rest of your life.” Duijst: “A lot of things stay with you in this field. A certain image—a house, a railway crossing, a photo—can trigger memories of a case. The one that most affected me was an accident in which a boy jumped from a roof to a tree. The branch broke and the boy died on the spot of a skull base fracture. I was the medical examiner. The story was no different from many other sad stories, but the impact was such that it left me physically distressed. Honestly, I think every story lodges itself somewhere in your brain. Sometimes a new experience touches what’s already there, and occasionally that leads to a short circuit.”

The European Research Council awarded more than €2 million to Professor Stefan Hild through its ERC Advanced funding scheme. The grant will enable researchers to test and develop technology to make future gravitational wave observatories, like the Einstein Telescope, even more sensitive than planned.

The ERC Advanced Grant will fund the research and development of a new type of interferometer, an instrument that measures the wave patterns that arise. When beams of light are superimposed. Evidence of gravitational waves that disturb the light beams—by making them a tiny bit shorter or longer—can be picked up through subtle changes in those patterns.

In theory, the improved interferometers will not only be able to detect more gravitational waves, but also enable the search for different populations of black holes that cause them. Because the improved instruments will be compatible with current observatories, they can potentially save millions of euros on future upgrades. The challenge is now to translate these theories into practice and get the technology ready for use.

Comprehensive Cancer Centre status for MUMC+

The MUMC+ Oncology Centre and the GROW research institute at Maastricht University have together been accredited as a Comprehensive Cancer Centre by the Organisation of European Cancer Institutes. The MUMC+ is the first UMC and, following the Antoni van Leeuwenhoek hospital in Amsterdam, the second hospital in the Netherlands with this prestigious certification. The quality certification is valid for five years and indicates that the centre offers integrated oncological patient care, education and research at an excellent level.

Cross-border research centre to enhance understanding of the microbiome

Scientists based in the border area of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany will work together to gain more insight into the functioning of the microbiome: the trillions of bacteria, viruses, fungi and other microbes that live in and on our bodies. To this end, the researchers have launched the European Microbiome Center. This new partnership brings together researchers from UMC and the MUMC+, the University of Liège and the university hospital in Aachen. A better understanding of the microbiome is essential for the study of a healthy lifestyle and the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases.

UM president Martin Paul moves to Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Martin Paul, president of Maastricht University (UM), will become rector of Ruhr-Universität Bochum on 1 November 2021. Ruhr-Universität Bochum is one of the 10 largest universities in Germany, with 43,000 students and more than 5,800 employees spread over 20 faculties.

“I am honoured that the senate of Ruhr-Universität Bochum has elected me as its rector,” Paul says. “I’m pleased to be able to put my experience in Maastricht to good use at one of the largest and most highly regarded universities in Germany. I’m now halfway through my third and final term at UM. I’ve been president here for almost ten years, so this is a good time to announce a new step.” Paul joined UM in May 2008, combining his professorship in clinical pharmacology with administrative positions. Previously, he served as vice chair of the MUMC+ and dean of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. He has been president of the university since 2011.

ERC Advanced Grant for improved gravitational wave detection

Hild’s group intends to do just that. The group is currently leading the construction of the ETpathfinder, a collaboration of more than 15 research institutions from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and France. The ETpathfinder is a testbed for the development of the technology required for future gravitational wave detectors like the Einstein Telescope. The facility at Maastricht University will play a crucial role in the development of the new interferometers.
Depression can behave in the same way as the economy, according to doctor and researcher Suzanne van Bronswijk. An approach based on econometric modelling can therefore help in deciding between treatment options.

Depression is like the economy

Science and society

Text
Pauline van Schayck

Photography
Rafael Philippen

Suzanne van Bronswijk is a psychiatrist at the MUMC+ and assistant professor of Clinical Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University. She studied medicine at UM and trained as a psychiatrist at the MUMC+ and various mental health institutions in Limburg. In 2019 she obtained her PhD cum laude at UM for her dissertation entitled ‘Personalized treatment strategies for depression.’

Anyone who has suffered from depression will be familiar with the sometimes-labourious quest for an effective treatment. “It’s hard to predict which treatment will work best for a patient,” Van Bronswijk says. “During our training as psychiatrists or psychologists we learn which treatment we can use for which type of patient. But the considerations at the level of the individual patient are actually much more complex. Treatments that have proven effective often work well for a third of patients, to some extent for another third and not at all for the remaining third.” This means a treatment may have to be discontinued after a few weeks and a new one started. The first statistical models to predict treatment outcomes were therefore developed as early as the 1990s. But these models remain stuck in the research phase, with insufficient evidence on whether they predict the treatment outcomes only for the group under investigation or for other patients as well.

Smart move

“A complex combination of factors determines whether a person is likely to become depressed, remain depressed or respond to treatment,” Van Bronswijk says. When she read the book Dit kan niet waar zijn by journalist Joris Luyendijk, a light bulb went on. “The book is about the banking crisis of 2008. Luyendijk explains how financial products are becoming increasingly complex. They were invented by ‘quants’—quantitative analysts—who work with complex mathematical models and use them to weigh up the risks of investments. It struck me that these models could be relevant for predicting the response (risks) to treatments for depression (investments).” She reached out to the Department of Quantitative Economics at Maastricht University with the idea of joining forces. “It turned out to be a good move. “They have more knowledge of building these kinds of complex models, we have our clinical expertise in treating depression. Together we were able to set up a complex models, we have our clinical expertise in treating depression. Together we were able to set up a great interdisciplinary partnership.”

Complex models could be relevant for predicting the response (risks) to treatments for depression (investments).” She reached out to the Department of Quantitative Economics at Maastricht University with the idea of joining forces. “They have more knowledge of building these kinds of complex models, we have our clinical expertise in treating depression. Together we were able to set up a great interdisciplinary partnership.”

Seven-year project

The collaboration with the Quantitative Economics department, in particular with econometrician Nalan Bastürk, led to the development of a project that started last January and will run for seven years. The aim is to be able to make predictions, for the first time, for a diverse group of patients with depression. To this end, the researchers will set up a model based on Bayesian statistics. “The model will draw on data from a large number of previous studies and input from experts in the field, patients and family members.”

The story behind the prediction

Van Bronswijk and her colleagues aim to make a handy computer program for use in the consultation room. During an intake interview with the patient, the psychologist or psychiatrist can enter additional information that the model uses to make its calculations. Practitioner and patient then receive a clear answer that can help them choose a treatment. “Soon the program will also be able to tell the story behind its recommendation,” Van Bronswijk says. “So it will say, ‘This treatment is probably best due to the severity of the depression, certain past characteristics, and the current home situation. But we’ll keep measuring and predicting, as other factors may increase in importance. Because something can happen suddenly in the patient’s life that completely changes the prediction. If you don’t have a model, it takes time to realise that.”

Other goals

The most appropriate treatment depends on not only the initial situation and the occurrence of sudden events, but also the patient’s goals. “Typically they want to reduce the symptoms of depression, but they may have other goals too—returning to work, finding meaning in their lives.” The model will therefore predict different treatments for different goals, such as quality of life. “It may be that one treatment scores slightly better on reducing the severity of the depression, while another scores slightly better on quality of life. The therapist and patient can decide together what to give more weight to.” Van Bronswijk hopes that the computer program will soon support the joint decision-making process of therapists, patients and their loved ones. During the project, she will test it at four different mental health institutions.

Culture change

Some resistance to the implementation of the program is to be expected. Psychiatrists and psychologists may fear that the computer will usurp their role and make decisions for them. Van Bronswijk would like to offer reassurance. “What we’re trying to do is build a bridge between researchers and clinicians. It’s extremely difficult to predict the outcome of a treatment yourself, no matter how much expertise you have as a psychologist or psychiatrist. A model like this can be a useful tool. We’re not saying the computer can do everything better—in fact, we want to involve practitioners in the process and draw on their expertise to build the model.”
South Limburg is a shrinking region. The population has long been in decline, partly because young people are leaving in droves, headed either for the Randstad or abroad. As part of her PhD at Maastricht University, Inge Hooijen investigated why young graduates in particular tend to cash in on their knowledge elsewhere. Her six-year search, supervised by Frank Cörvers, gave rise to some surprising conclusions.

The Meuse–Rhine Euregion has one of the highest concentrations of universities and universities of applied sciences in Europe. But a thriving education sector is no guarantee of long-term regional prosperity. Much to the chagrin of local administrators and politicians, a relatively large number of graduates leave South Limburg to build a life elsewhere. Fewer young people means an ageing population, capital flight and, typically, lower economic growth—not exactly a recipe for success in the face of global competition. What can be done about it?

Quality of life
The answer seems obvious: create more challenging jobs, offer better career prospects. Right? “Economic motives such as salary and opportunities for promotion certainly play a role,” says Inge Hooijen, who, like her supervisor Frank Cörvers, was born and raised in South Limburg. “But my research shows that other factors are important too: quality of life, contact with local residents, tolerance and ethnic diversity. In our study, the average technical knowledge worker prefers a suburban living environment—something outside the city, with more greenery, more space. Facilities are less of a deciding factor. So when it comes to recruiting and retaining people, the attractiveness of a region is definitely important.”

One of her conclusions was that unexpected events and personality traits like extraversion also play a role. “Whether a person perceives a place as attractive or not depends on subjective assessments and lifestyle choices, and is influenced by individual characteristics. Having a relationship or not, the proximity of family and friends, the prevalence of crime, and the presence of places of worship, cultural provisions and sports facilities all influence mobility.”

Technical people
Frank Cörvers was intrigued by these findings. A professor focused on the labour market, he has worked on numerous studies and publications analysing—and, where possible, predicting—the choices made by companies and people. “Inge and colleagues have shown that the majority of students in the Euregion intend to leave after graduation. Doing an internship in the region increases the chances of staying. It broadens their network, helps them get to know the area and see what’s on offer. That can entice them to stay and look for a job locally.”

Data analyses
After a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees, in late 2014 Hooijen took up a PhD position in Maastricht. “The research topic suited my interests and background, and Frank and I had an immediate click. It took some time to get started, though.”
time to find the right approach. An assignment to collaborate with urban planners came along at exactly the right time; we were commissioned to investigate how employees of the Chemelot industrial complex view their living and working situation. We also collaborated with colleagues from UNU-Merit’s Migration Group to map the mobility intentions and actual mobility behaviour of future and recent graduates in the region. Later, a sub-study was added focusing on the city of Maastricht. In the last few years we’ve collected an enormous amount of data through online surveys and interviews and were able to find thousands of respondents.”

Extra exciting
This was the first time Cörvers had served as the main supervisor of a PhD candidate. “It was very special, yes, that made this PhD extra exciting. Inge’s done a great job and her research will definitely help policymakers to make the right decisions in the future. High-quality knowledge has become a key factor in local and regional development. In the case of shrinkage, that knowledge is lost. That’s why we want to understand the factors that entice people to stay. Why they make certain choices, what they find important. Governments and policymakers can then use this information to guide their policies for the housing market, infrastructure, education. A great deal of spatial policy is based on paradigms emphasising growth, but the effectiveness of such an approach is questionable. It makes sense to consider alternative approaches too, like the development of local labour markets and personal networks.”

After six years of academic research, Hooijen is now focused on her own research agency. “I’ve learnt a lot and would like to put that knowledge to good use. I want to find out how shrinking regions such as South Limburg can take full advantage of their potential. Regions are always developing, that’s nice to see. This is my birthplace, this region is very close to my heart.”

Frank Cörvers studied general economics in Maastricht and Hanover and obtained his PhD at UM for his research on the influence of education and training on the international competitiveness of manufacturing sectors. He now combines the chair in Demographic Transition, Human Capital and Employment at UM with the research programme Human Capital in the Region at the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA). He represents ROA in Neimed, Limburg’s centre of expertise on demographic change. He is also scientific director of the UM Graduate School of Business and Economics (GSBE) and part-time professor in the Teacher Labour Market at Tilburg University.

Inge Hooijen studied Social Work at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in Sittard, completed master’s degrees in London and Barcelona and did fieldwork in Istanbul. In 2021 she completed her PhD dissertation ‘Place attractiveness: A study of the determinants playing a role in residential settlement behaviour’ at ROA. In addition to running her own research agency Regional Capital, she works as a researcher at Neimed and a lecturer in Employability at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences.
Ronit Shiri-Sverdlov was born in Baghdad in 1951, when both sets of grandparents fled to Israel to escape rising anti-Semitism in Iraq. “They had to make arrangements in secret so as not to be betrayed by their neighbours. They left everything behind to start over in Israel.”

Ronit Shiri-Sverdlov’s roots are actually in Baghdad. In 1951, both sets of grandparents fled to Israel to escape rising anti-Semitism in Iraq. “They had to make arrangements in secret so as not to be betrayed by their neighbours. They left everything behind to start over in Israel. My parents met in the reception camp for refugees from Iraq. Israel is a country of immigrants from all over the world, but in my parents’ neighbourhood most people were of European heritage. So it took them some time to get used to the culture and the food. I remember that in our apartment complex, people loved my mother’s food precisely because it was different. In Israel the hot meal is in the afternoon, so when I came home from school there was always this wonderful aroma of Mediterranean spices. We ate traditional Iraqi dishes like kubbeh [dumplings], sambusak [pastries with savoury filling], meat and rice. My father couldn’t conceive of a meal without rice. So it’s in my genes,” she jokes. “I literally can’t make bad rice.”

Global inspiration
Her mother didn’t exactly teach her how to cook. “The kitchen was her domain, she wouldn’t allow anyone in there. And we had a very small kitchen, so we wouldn’t have fit in there anyway. My mother didn’t follow recipes. She used a bit of this and a bit of that, and even that, she varied. She did inspire me a lot, though. I like to cook what I used to eat at home, but not only that. My husband has Russian, Polish and German roots, so he was used to a very different type of cooking. Thanks to him and my brothers and sister-in-law, who also come from different places around the world, I’ve got to know many different types of food. I draw on those influences too. There’s no such thing as ‘Israeli cuisine’—it’s still such a young culture that, and with whatever’s available. We like to cook, but we don’t love cleaning,” she adds with a laugh. “So we often play a game after dinner and the winner doesn’t have to clean. If we can choose between eating out or staying in, we all choose staying in. Not so much for the food, but for the atmosphere. At home things are freer and more relaxed. Eating out feels a bit like you always have to sit up straight.”

At home things are freer and more relaxed.

Ronit Shiri-Sverdlov, professor of Inflammation and Metabolic Health, studied biology at Tel Aviv University. In 2002 she obtained her PhD there on genetic mutations in breast and uterine cancer. She then took up a postdoc position in the Molecular Genetics department of the NUTRIM research institute at Maastricht University. She is now chair of the Department of Genetics and Cell Biology.

“My family is sitting around the table in Israel just as we are here is exciting for me.”

Family values
Shiri-Sverdlov grew up with two older sisters, a brother and many cousins. “My parents both grew up in big families. When my mother gave birth to my oldest sister, her mother—my grandmother—had twins around the same time. We’re a big, close-knit family.” Reminiscing makes her emotional, given the corona situation, she has not been able to visit her family for over a year. “I really miss them. I talk to my parents every day, which for me is essential. I was raised to see family as the most important thing, and that’s how I raised my children too. I’d do anything for my family, not just for my parents, brother or sisters, but for any one of them. Differences of opinion on religion or politics are irrelevant. Our family bond runs much deeper than that.”

She misses other things from Israel, too: the sea, the language, the culture. “It’s the little things. I don’t have to explain anything there, everybody knows how to pronounce my name. People interact more naturally, more emotionally. Whenever I’m there, I feel like a Dutch tourist for the first few days, but after that I’m like a fish in water again. I dream of returning, but I’ve learned not to plan, so we’ll see. For the first four years after moving to the Netherlands I was convinced I’d go back soon. Over the years I’ve become more relaxed about it and I enjoy living here too.”

Mini Israel in Maastricht
Tel Aviv is, she says, an open, vibrant and youthful city. “For me it was the centre of the world, it’s alive and happening 24 hours a day. Gronsveld [the village she first moved to] was an adjustment,” she adds—quite the understatement. She arrived with her husband and two eldest children in 2002; her youngest two were born here. In 2006 the family moved to Maastricht. The eldest now lives in Israel and the second is studying in Amsterdam. At home they speak Hebrew; she is keen to pass on Jewish traditions and values.

“Our house is a kind of mini Israel, not only when it comes to food, but also culture. During Passover there’s a ritual feast where we sing together and read the story of the exodus from Egypt. There are all kinds of rituals, we bless certain foods, we sing and drink four glasses of wine over the course of the evening. Because they couldn’t bake bread during the exodus, flour products are prohibited. Passover lasts a week in Israel. It’s an important celebration, our children will come home for it, just as I used to. The ceremony has been performed in the same way for thousands of years, handed down from generation to generation all over the world. I don’t see it as a religious thing. I didn’t have a particularly religious upbringing, but it’s a direct connection to my heart, to my roots, to my family in Israel. This way I hope to raise my children’s awareness of where they come from. Only then can they know which direction they want to go in the future.”

At home things are freer and more relaxed.

Ronit Shiri-Sverdlov’s roots are actually in Baghdad. In 1951, both sets of grandparents fled to Israel to escape rising anti-Semitism in Iraq. “They had to make arrangements in secret so as not to be betrayed by their neighbours. They left everything behind to start over in Israel. My parents met in the reception camp for refugees from Iraq. Israel is a country of immigrants from all over the world, but in my parents’ neighbourhood most people were of European heritage. So it took them some time to get used to the culture and the food. I remember that in our apartment complex, people loved my mother’s food precisely because it was different. In Israel the hot meal is in the afternoon, so when I came home from school there was always this wonderful aroma of Mediterranean spices. We ate traditional Iraqi dishes like kubbeh [dumplings], sambusak [pastries with savoury filling], meat and rice. My father couldn’t conceive of a meal without rice. So it’s in my genes,” she jokes. “I literally can’t make bad rice.”

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She doesn’t really have a favourite dish. “Anything that’s fresh. I have two girls and two boys. The boys in particular love to cook, so they’ve been helping out in the kitchen since they were young. We have fun with it, we don’t plan anything, we just cook what we feel like and with whatever’s available. We like to cook, but we don’t love cleaning,” she adds with a laugh. “So we often play a game after dinner and the winner doesn’t have to clean. If we can choose between eating out or staying in, we all choose staying in. Not so much for the food, but for the atmosphere. At home things are freer and more relaxed. Eating out feels a bit like you always have to sit up straight.”
If it were up to Melle Garschagen, after working as an NRC correspondent in England he would have settled in Maastricht as a Europe reporter.

“I feel more connected with Maastricht than any other city in the Netherlands,” says the European Studies and International Law alum. But fate had other ideas. When he was invited to join the editorial board of the NRC as of 1 March this year, it was an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Journalism in his genes

Born in Amsterdam, Melle Garschagen was raised in Belgium and the US as well as the Netherlands. His father Oscar Garschagen was a journalist and correspondent; the family travelled with him. At first Melle had no intention of following in his father’s footsteps. He settled on European Law School in Maastricht, attracted by its international, small-scale character and law. It was very inspiring; I remember a guest lecture given by Martin Schulz, the future leader of the [German] SPD, largely in Dutch because he’d grown up in the border region. That highlighted for me that here in the Euregion there’s such a thing as a European identity that transcends the nation state. It was an important lesson for me. A lot of what I learned back then—analytical thinking, a multidisciplinary approach—has stayed with me as a journalist. I see the Brexit vote as a combination of political and economic factors.”

Student life

In his first year, he lived in a Tragos student house. “I’d never want to live next to that place now, it was awful,” he laughs. “Too many parties, too much loud music, the police always knocking at the door and then us asking the police if they could give us a lift to the Alla [the notorious nightclub that shut down in 2018]. In retrospect, I’m not particularly proud of that. I’d like to extend my sincerest apologies to my neighbours at Alla. Still, it was very exciting.”

His book on the divided Yugoslavia tribunal read like political thrillers: they’re about war, suffering, horrible circumstances, but they’re also beautifully analytical. You learn how such a spiral of violence is analysed through a legal lens and leads to concrete consequences in the form of convictions.”

Journalistic genes

After his master’s, he joined a lobbying firm in The Hague. “That was quite frustrating: during your studies you’re presented with the best side of a profession, and during your first internship or job, it all turns out to be a lot tougher and less compelling than you’d envisaged. During my studies I discovered that I really enjoyed writing and was good at it, so when I saw an advertisement in a newspaper aimed at university graduates who wanted to retrain as journalists, I applied. I was accepted and that immediately sat well with me.” It was in his genes after all.

His father had some concerns, however. “He’s been editor in chief of Algemeen Dagblad and Vrij Nederland, and saw newspaper circulation plummeting. Newspapers didn’t have much of a digital strategy in 2007, certainly one they could make money with. Everything was still free. The future of the entire newspaper business was in the balance.” Naturally, Oscar was also pleased that his son ultimately followed in his footsteps—but the younger Garschagen wanted to do it on his own. “Obviously my father plays an important role. I don’t know if I would’ve been so keen on being a correspondent if he hadn’t been one. We discuss the state of the world and how journalism is changing, but it’s not like he reads my drafts. Besides, right now I find it more important that he’s a good grandfather to my two daughters.”

Read the newspaper

Any advice for current European Studies students?

“They’ve already chosen wisely; that’s half the battle. It’s an open door, but I’ll kick it in anyway: read a newspaper. In my day, the Financial Times was available for free at the UL and the economics faculty. I always read it and I had a student subscription to The Economist. At first I understood very little of it, but because European Studies is so broad and teaches you to analyse from an academic perspective how a system like the EU works, it’s useful to have a good grasp of current affairs. When I was writing about the euro crisis, I once gave a talk to European Studies students in Amsterdam. They turned out to have no idea what the euro crisis was, how the eurozone functioned, what the role of Juncker and later Dijsselbloem was. I think you get the most out of your studies if you can link the academic perspective to European current affairs.”

He looks back on his time in Maastricht with great pleasure. “I feel more connected with Maastricht than any other city in the Netherlands. And I met my wife there. I haven’t been there in years, but when everything is open again I’d like to show my daughters where both their parents studied.”
At EGGXPERT, a local startup, two waste products from eggs are put to use in the production of facial masks and wound plasters. Co-founder Chang Liu was one of the first graduates of the master’s in Biobased Materials at the Faculty of Science and Engineering.

A new life for eggshells

Every day, chickens in the Netherlands lay nearly 30 million eggs. These eggs are destined for retail sales, export or the egg-processing industry, which transforms them into all kinds of egg products. Some of the eggshells, which are rich in calcium, are used in agricultural soil improvers. But there is also a great deal of waste, says chemical product designer Chang Liu. Coming from China, she was familiar with the everyday household use of the membranes that can be found on the inside of eggshells. This thin skin protects the chick and contains substances that promote the development of the embryo in its early stages. “In China, people use these membranes for skincare and wound healing,” Liu explains. “They contain proteins that protect and repair the skin.” These types of proteins are already used in the production of some skincare creams, only they are produced in different ways.

From waste to daily products

The idea to process eggshells sustainably for skin and wound care arose during Liu’s studies at UM in Biobased Materials. During a meeting with a company that processes eggs, she learnt about the enormous waste stream generated by the process. “They didn’t know what to do with it. At the moment companies have to pay to get rid of it.” Together with Rong Wang, a friend and scientist in biomaterials and regenerative medicine, she came up with the idea of processing some of that waste into sustainable products for skin and wound care. They laid the scientific basis for the use of the proteins from the membranes and developed the first ever egg-based serum for the production of facial masks. A line for wound-care products is also in the works. “We want to use not only the proteins, but also the structure of the membrane,” Liu says. “That structure resembles human skin and can be processed into a kind of plaster.” EGGXPERT aims to use the calcium from the eggshells in nutritional supplements, including for people with rheumatism, and Liu can envisage applications in toothpaste as well. “I think we’ll eventually be able to use the membrane and shell in all kinds of different products.”

Unique programme

EGGXPERT’s working philosophy revolves around sustainable entrepreneurship underpinned by scientific knowledge. For Liu, the roots of this approach lie in her choice for the master’s in Biobased Materials. Before coming to Maastricht, she studied Polymer Materials and Engineering in Shanghai. “For my master’s, I wanted to focus more on sustainability and recycling. The focus here on natural materials really appealed to me—that’s why I chose Maastricht. And the setup here was something I couldn’t find anywhere else.” She is referring to the home base of the Biobased Materials programme at the heart of the Chemelot campus. She was a member of the very first cohort of this new master’s programme in 2015. During her studies, Liu found herself surrounded by interesting players from the field. She lunched with her classmates in the same canteen as people who worked at the surrounding companies. “That made it easy to build up a network in the industry.”

Half studying, half working

Each student in the Biobased Materials programme had a business coach who advised them on their choice of subjects and career planning. Liu also followed an entrepreneurship course that prepared her to start her own business. “We got to develop an idea for starting our own company. We were told that no idea was too crazy. Then we looked at the possibilities and feasibility of our plans. Wang and I came up with the idea of eggshells and that’s when we started working on it seriously.” All this took place within the Aachen-Maastricht Institute for Biobased Materials (AMIBM) and the innovative learning, working and research environment CHILL which celebrates this year its 10th anniversary. In CHILL, companies and knowledge institutions work together on the development of new products. “I felt as if I was half working and half studying. I think that made the programme unique.”

Sustainable entrepreneurship

After graduating, she continued to work on the development of the EGGXPERT products. Liu is determined to gear the entire process around sustainability. All other ingredients of the serum they develop are natural and subject to sustainability evaluations. And Liu does not want to use aluminium for the packaging of the facial masks, as is often the case. “We’re in the process of developing paper packaging.” The company that will eventually produce the facial masks is entirely CO2 neutral.

Liu hopes to launch the facial masks this year. She has since moved back to China to gain more work experience in the business sector. “I want to work on sustainability evaluations or the development of sustainable materials. Sustainability is becoming more and more important in China, so I think I can make a real contribution here. Sustainable entrepreneurship is much more common in the Netherlands, but China is starting to get on board with the trend.” Liu will remain involved with EGGXPERT from China.

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A sustainable partnership

Technical service provider ENGIE Services is the very first participant in the UM Partner Programme. The programme was established by the University Fund Limburg/SWOL to build a bridge between the university and the business sector. André Polgar, commercial director at ENGIE Services, discusses the mutual benefits of this new form of partnership.

ENGIE had already long felt like a partner to Maastricht University. The two organisations worked together on a regular basis. “When the University Fund Limburg/SWOL approached us to participate, we didn’t think twice,” says André Polgar. “It not only makes us an ‘official’ partner of the university, but also marks the start of closer, reciprocal cooperation.”

In the UM Partner Programme, companies make a financial donation to research and education on social themes affecting the Limburg region. In return, they gain access to UM’s expertise, talent and network. Together the partners put together a tailor-made service package involving a range of initiatives—for example, a workshop delivered by a professor, access to an exclusive networking event, and a knowledge project on location, carried out by talented students. “It was this win-win situation that appealed to us.”

Back in balance

A classic optimist, Polgar is focused on the future, alert to opportunities. For the last three and a half years, he has worked as commercial director at ENGIE Services, the technical and business arm of parent company ENGIE. Besides Services, ENGIE has another branch, Energy, which also focuses on the private market. Polgar previously worked as a facility manager at companies including Bilfinger (now Apleona), AAFM and Zuyderland.

Clever solution

He praises his employer for its flexible and open internal culture, which encourages employees to work on their personal and professional development. “We’re a learning organisation, constantly taking new steps. The Services division was originally focused on installation technology, but we’re now increasingly concerned with sustainability transitions. We guide our customers—factories, municipalities, hospitals—towards a more climate-friendly future using sustainable heating, solar, wind, hydrogen, a circular energy system or some other clever solution.”

Cross-pollination

“Just like UM, at ENGIE we believe in the importance of innovation and sustainability. Both our organisations feel responsible for the next generation. We inspire each other. That’s why in our UM Partner Programme we mainly focus on knowledge sharing and cross-fertilisation. We can learn a lot from UM’s scientific knowledge in the fields of sustainability, innovation and training. In exchange, we can show the university the practicalities of the business. With all these new insights, we can ultimately accelerate and improve both our processes.”

Bright future

The first activity in the UM Partner Programme, a workshop, had to be postponed due to the corona crisis. Once the restrictions are lifted, ENGIE and UM will pick up where they left off. Meanwhile, Polgar and his team are not twiddling their thumbs—far from it. “Our technical maintenance services for existing customers are continuing as usual. We’re a financially healthy company and under the circumstances things are going well, though we miss the live interaction with customers.” Post-corona, there is no shortage of ambitions. “We’d like to find new ways to support our customers and capitalise on solar, water and wind energy. UM may be able to help us with that too. Whatever happens, we’re looking forward to a bright future and partnership with UM!”

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’. www.ufl-swol.nl
Extensive field research reveals extent of health problems among homeless

Almost all homeless people in the Netherlands suffer from multiple health problems, ranging from physical or mental illness to addiction or intellectual disability. These are the findings of recent field research by Maastricht University among 436 homeless people who used 16 different shelters in seven Dutch cities. It is the first time since 2015 that such an extensive health study has been conducted among homeless people in the Netherlands. The co-occurrence of their health problems underlines the importance of an integrated healthcare approach to offer homeless people better prospects for recovery, the researchers say. The findings were recently published in the journal Frontiers in Psychology.

Ron Heeren appointed to Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) has appointed Professor Ron Heeren as a member. Heeren is distinguished professor of Molecular Imaging at Maastricht University and scientific director of the Maastricht Multimodal Molecular Imaging Institute (M4I). Academy members are prominent academics from all disciplines, chosen on the basis of their scientific and scholarly achievements. This year, 23 new members have been selected. The Academy has around 600 members, who are appointed for life. The new members will be installed on Monday 13 September.

Large-scale DNA research aims at personalising medication in psychiatry

As many as two thirds of psychiatric patients do not respond well to treatment with drugs. While compliance and frequent side effects play a major role, a patient’s genes can also determine whether serious side effects occur or prevent the medication from working altogether. An international consortium led by Dr Roos van Westrhenen from working altogether. An international consortium led by Dr Roos van Westrhenen (Maastricht University/Parnassia) will conduct a pharmacogenomic study to establish the relationship between response to treatment and genetic background. This will enable psychiatrists to personalise drug prescriptions for their patients, thus increasing efficacy. The study was recently awarded €8 million in European funding. Apart from Maastricht University, the consortium also includes the University of Groningen and the mental healthcare provider Parnassia Groep.

Profile

Education and research at 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 (CAPPH)
- 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)
- University College 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 (JCG)
- 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 Psychopathology (EPP)
- Neuropsychology & 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, Organisation and Performance and human Excellence (NSCOPE)
- Marketing- Finance Research Lab
- Service Science Factory (SSF)
- Maastricht Sustainability Institute (MSI)
- Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGGSoG)
- UMID - executive branch
- Education Institute

Interfaculty institutes
- The Maastricht Forensic Institute (MIF)
- MERIN 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 (MACCH)
- 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 (BISS)

Limburg logistics innovation institute BISCI can continue

After eighteen months of preparation, the Brightlands Institute for Supply Chain Innovation (BISCI) in Venlo can continue with the implementation of logistics projects. BISCI forms a knowledge centre for the North Limburg logistics region, bringing together knowledge institutions, companies and government representatives. Thanks to this partnership, smart and sustainable supply-chain innovations can be researched, developed and rapidly applied. With a €1.5 million grant from the Province of Limburg, BISCI can continue its existing project portfolio.

BISCI brings together researchers from Maastricht University, Fontys University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) and several dozen regional companies.

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Blow up

Want to know which part of Maastricht is zoomed in on? Visit the Facebook page of the UMagazine.

facebook.com/maastricht.university