I like being right, but I don’t mind being proven wrong.

Final interview with UM president Martin Paul

Towards a more creative design and architecture for nursing homes

Hilde Verbeek, professor of Long-Term Care Environments
Graciëlla van Vliet studied Econometrics in Maastricht, followed by a master’s degree in Rotterdam—a near guarantee for a top job at a top organisation. Instead she opted for independent entrepreneurship. She is now the head of two successful companies, Closure and NabestaandenLoket. In 2019 she was named Rotterdam Businesswoman of the Year.

Is Europe becoming a world power?

The world order is shifting. Putin continues to taunt Europe. China’s global expansionism seems limitless. And how to respond to the United States’ renewed desire for cooperation? The European Union’s answer should be greater strategic autonomy, says Sophie Vanhoonacker, professor of Administrative Governance and Jean Monnet professor.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said it some two and a half thousand years ago: ‘Change is the only constant in life.’ Some changes we initiate ourselves, others are imposed on us. In the latter category was last year’s switch from live to online education, which—understandably!—was hard on many teachers and students. Stuck at home, we lacked the very thing that makes our university community what it is: personal interaction and the exchange of ideas. Sitting at home behind our computers became the ‘new normal’.

Now we are focused on addressing the Aftereffects for us all. At the same time, we are anticipating soon being physically present at the university more often. We will offer a helping hand to all members of our academic community facing practical or emotional obstacles. At the same time, we are hoping for their understanding; for example, when their presence on campus is genuinely required for certain activities. Together we will again create a ‘new normal’, this time doing equal justice to both words.

Our objective remains the same: achieving the intended learning outcomes effectively and efficiently through well-designed, flexible education. The application of blended learning and the hybrid virtual classroom are cases in point. Of course, merging education with technology is not an end in itself. Our education will in principle remain campus-based: we see academic and social connection as prerequisites for optimal learning and the student experience. Nonetheless, we are open to different methods of enriching our education.

Finally, the composition of the Executive Board is set to change too. After a decade as UM president, Martin Paul is leaving us for the Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany. As of 1 November, he will be succeeded by Rianne Letschert, who is enthusiastic to take on this new challenge. In the meantime, we have every confidence in finding a new Rector Magnificus to replace her. Who wouldn’t want to work with us on the future of our great, dynamic, never-a-dull-moment university?"
More than meets the eye

Emilie Sitzia has been awarded a prestigious Comenius Leadership Fellowship for a three-year project focused on teaching sensory skills beyond the visual – from hearing to feeling and smelling. Lick this article to increase your likelihood of remembering it.

“We’ve been working on this topic for a couple of years now, but the pandemic lockdown and the long bouts of learning exclusively online have really brought home how much you lose when your experience is reduced to just a screen,” Sitzia explains.

“Yes, we’re visual creatures – but we’re so much more than that.”

What you lose using just the eyes
Sensory skills are essential to many academic fields and professions. In Sitzia’s view, they should not be taken for granted. She aims to figure out how best to train the sensory skills of students across disciplines to create better researchers and professionals. As an arts curator, she knows how much is lost when paintings are reduced to Instagram posts.

“You lose granularity, texture, smell, the context of other artworks, the immersive, social experience of being inside the building... The Musée d’Orsay, for example, is a monumental former train station, so you can imagine the acoustics. This is an important part of the experience. We don’t normally notice those things, but they’re a big part of our enjoyment.”

Water lilies and hot cocoa
One of Sitzia’s enduring childhood memories is of visiting the Musée de l’Orangerie with her parents. “When it was raining, we had the best hot chocolate in Paris and, for me, this smell is still intimately linked to my love of Monet – and vice versa! In my office, I still have a drawer of different chocolates and teas – I practice what I preach.”

She takes seriously the potential of multisensory experience to help us remember things more clearly and vividly. “I’m not unique in that: everyone has these associations. The senses are connected – to one another and to our personal history. Enduring memories could also translate into deeper learning.”

Good ears don’t grow on trees
Training future curators, Sitzia tries to impart on her students an awareness of how the senses influence our experience of an exhibition. “In tertiary education, we teach people to think – obviously – but often we just assume that they’ll hone their sense perception during internships, or even that it’s just natural. But that’s not good enough.”
Having grown weary of formulaic essays, she began putting her students in front of an artwork and having them experience it for 40 minutes before allowing them to start writing. Only after that first draft were they allowed to consult secondary sources. “I wanted to move them away from a purely theoretical approach, which leads to bad professionals and exhibitions that don’t really work for visitors. It has to start from immediate experience, not other people’s theories.”

**Thinking, doing – and sleeping in**

Online teaching made it harder to bring students into sensory contact with artworks. “We played sound snippets from train stations, libraries and museums. Students consistently assumed the library sounds were the museum, but actually silence isn’t ideal for experiencing art or even absorbing the information on the labels.”

Sitzia is keen to point out that she has nothing against online teaching. She started using blended learning as early as 2001. “If anything, I think lecture theatres will lose in importance. If the move towards digitalisation can kill off the 8.30 lecture, then all the better. I think instead we’ll see a hybrid between theoretical content delivered online and integrated interpersonal sensory learning: thinking and doing reinforcing each other.”

**Limp leaves and blunt blades**

While arts and curatorship is her core expertise, the principle applies across disciplines. “Physicians listen to heartbeats, botanists feel leaves and smell flowers, archaeologists assess the weight and sharpness of tools, and so on. We want to find out how the senses are being used and trained – explicitly or implicitly – across all faculties.”

Together with her collaborators Anna Harris (FASoS) and Ilse van Lieshout (Marres art institute), Sitzia will create an academic framework to study the impact of the senses on learning, from memorisation and contextualisation to attention and retrieval of information. They will investigate selected curricula from different UM faculties to identify examples of sense-based learning. Next, they will try to enrich the curricula using learning concepts designed with input from Maastricht-based sensory experts, from curators and medical practitioners to choreographers. An interdisciplinary team will monitor trials and extract insights that can be applied more broadly.

**Sensory Learning Lab**

Sitzia also wants to create a Sensory Learning Lab. “It will be a physical workshop with educational materials tailored to various curricula, as well as a digital toolbox with everything from small interventions to an entire elective. Of course, we also want to constantly evaluate and improve our work.

“After that, we were hoping to develop an extended network of sensory learning experts. But it turns out that a diverse range of people are already interested in the topic and many have already got in touch with us, so this is progressing rapidly.” The project has only just begun, but Sitzia hopes that within three years, her team will have turned teaching at UM into a meal for all the senses.

---

**Emilie Sitzia** is associate professor at the Department of History at Maastricht University. She studied art history and literature in France, Germany and Finland. Her research interests span art, literature and museology. She is Professor by Special Appointment of Illustration at the University of Amsterdam, a chair created by the Fiep Westendorp Foundation.
Psst, psst … meow! Sound familiar? Being hissed, whistled or meowed at on the street is a familiar experience for almost every woman. But that may be about to change: sexual harassment in public is becoming a punishable offence. It’s a good idea, says Suzan van der Aa, professor of Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure, but one that doesn’t go far enough. “Sexual harassment in the workplace is common too, and usually has a greater impact on the victims.”

For quite some time she was on the fence about the criminalisation of sexual harassment in public. “Maybe because I too have normalised this behaviour. When you’re of a certain age and you go out, you’re looked at, pinched, addressed in ways that have nothing to do with respectful flirting. We’ve all experienced it.” Still, Suzan van der Aa agrees with the proposed criminalisation. “It’s harmful behaviour and society has changed, not least as a result of the #MeToo movement. It’s no longer seen as acceptable.”

Sexual harassment in public is framed in the bill—which has yet to pass through the Senate and House of Representatives—as a violation of public order. The aim is to protect the collective interest, everyone should be able to enjoy public space freely. This includes the internet and social media.

But exactly what constitutes sexual harassment remains a thorny question. Where do you draw the line between ‘normal’ flirting and sexually inappropriate behaviour? The parliamentary documents provide some suggestions, but it is largely a matter to be decided in the courts, says Van der Aa. “You really have to be approached sexually in an intrusive way. That depends on the context. One person hissing at you is more serious than she would like. ‘Maybe I’ll write an opinion on the victims.”

The likeliest stalker is the archetypal ex-partner; in this case, the risk of escalation is greatest. “Stalkers can not only have a huge impact on your life, but are also laborious to get rid of. How do you prove that your ex-partner showed up on your doorstep again yesterday if there were no witnesses? You have to record a number of incidents and substantiate them with evidence, which calls for a great deal of patience.”

Although violence against women is a common thread in her research, her focus is not exclusively on female victims. “The overarching theme is vulnerable victims. Victims have long received too little attention; even in criminal law faculties are still mainly concerned with offenders and suspects. This group could do with all the support they can get.”

Van der Aa recently conducted a study on hate crimes: offenses motivated by discrimination. “Like beating somebody up for being gay. We know from the literature that it’s precisely the discrimination aspect that causes hate-crime victims to be much more affected, and also less satisfied with the response of the judiciary and the police.”

In her research, her focus is not exclusively on female victims. “The overarching theme is vulnerable victims. Victims have long received too little attention, even in law faculties are still mainly concerned with offenders and suspects. This group could do with all the support they can get.”
UM as a gallery: the silent poetry of Sidi El Karchi

The Maastricht-based painter Sidi El Karchi (Sittard, 1975) is a big shot. Not only because he is among the best-selling artists in the Netherlands. Or because he is the creator of The Nomad, an eye-catching mural in Rotterdam. Or because he has contributed to a number of prestigious exhibitions and his work can be found in multiple museums (Bonnefanten, Schunck, Van Bommel van Dam). At the end of the day, he is simply a damn good portrait artist.

And at UM, you can enjoy two of his monumental portraits without even needing a ticket. One of them is located on the ground floor of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. Inside is a huge picture of a young woman with closed eyes—the model was an old friend of El Karchi’s. The second can be found at the back of the Minderbroedersberg foyer and portrays Jo Ritzen, the former UM president. Both portraits are unmistakably El Karchi: large, simple colours, two-dimensional, parsimonious, free of cliché ornaments and featuring an Eastern touch.

I discussed with El Karchi the origins of his style. He talked passionately about his own art, but even more so about his admiration for key figures in art history (Van Gogh, Morandi, Warhol). The longer you talk with him, the more you get a sense of what he seeks to capture in his portraits: Good portraits are not about superficial resemblance, he says. Rather, they must focus on the essence, on the archetypal shadow that people carry with them. This is best revealed by working in two dimensions, a style that he became interested in as a child: he loved the paintings on Chinese food products, and later spent hours reading Japanese manga.

El Karchi’s subjects are never shown in action. Rather, they are contemplating, fixed in moments of deep reflection. The titles of his paintings—Inside, The way things were, Waiting—often refer to a state of peaceful wandering of the mind. El Karchi aims to create “silent poetry” with his paintings—an ambition in which he succeeds. Rumour has it that he has been invited to create a mural in Maastricht: Having that in our city would be both a pleasure and a privilege.
They called me pretty much out of the blue to see if I was interested. Initially I said no, but after an exploratory conversation with the committee, the idea began to take root. I started thinking about my work here and realised that of everything I could've done, I've achieved 95%. Is it worth sticking around for that final 5% or better to try your hand something completely new? For example, I wouldn't want to become president of another Dutch university; I've been there, done that. But I see it as a challenge to try to apply in Germany, where the culture is completely different, what I've come to know and appreciate here in the Maastricht system.

Seizing opportunities

Martin Paul was born and raised in St Ingbert in Saarland. "The area has a lot of steel industry and mines. It looks a bit like Limburg." He was the first in the family to go to university. "My father would have liked to study, but wasn't allowed to. My grandfather worked in the steel factory and my father started out as a bank clerk and later worked in administration at a large supermarket. My mother was a housewife; she'd had to quit her nursing studies because she was allergic to rubber gloves and disinfectants. They encouraged my sister and me to seize the opportunities we were given. She chose computer science, I chose medicine in Heidelberg." Later, he more or less fell into research rather than medical practice.

"A deciding factor was that doing research was a way of avoiding military service. I'm not a fan of uniforms and figured I'd always being able to go into medical practice later. Not anymore though," he laughs.

He relishes a challenge, and the time felt right for the next step in his career. "I could have finished my term as university president and then hung around here as a professor for a few more years until I retired. But that didn't strike me as exciting enough. I wanted one last chance to do something different." On 1 November, Martin Paul will join the Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB) as its new rector/chair.
Supported by a grant from the German Research Foundation, he left for Harvard. He stayed for four years and met his wife there. “When I returned from the US I went back to Heidelberg until I got a few offers of professorships, funnily enough also from Bochum. I was 35 at the time and opted for Berlin; I figured it’d be a little more exciting. And so we moved to Berlin.” As did his parents. “I grew up in a close family. My grandparents lived at home with us, so it was natural for me to have my parents nearby.”

International dream

From his parents, Paul inherited values such as openness, pragmatism and freedom of choice. Likewise the urge to explore the world. “At the age of 17, just after the war, my mother spent a year working as an au pair in Lille, France. That was quite a challenge for her, as it was for me later on. It gave her friends for life and of course a great love of France. And she speaks excellent French. My father was a talented footballer, a striker, which I most definitely am not,” he smiles. “As a young man he had the opportunity to emigrate to America. He chose not to. He was an only child and didn’t want to leave his parents behind. He later regretted that decision. That international dream is definitely something I got from my parents.”

Inclusive

Paul believes that, as a director, you can effect change from above. “I recently met with the Bochum Executive Board and suggested we address each other informally, which is highly uncommon in Germany, but they were fine with it,” he laughs. “People in the Ruhr area are approachable, so if there’s one place I can put things in motion, it’s there.” He has already created a vice-rectorate for inclusion and talent development. “To my mind, the university should be a reflection of and set an example for society.”

When he moved to Maastricht in 2008 as dean of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, he noticed that professorial appointments were often age-related and there was a major imbalance between men and women. “As a result, many young people were leaving UM in frustration. Then came the idea to set up the top talent programme, which was a great success. In the first year, I asked all associate professors in the faculty to sign up and submit their CVs. Of the male associate professors, 100% wanted to participate, of the female ones, less than 50%. They came out with arguments like: ‘I’m not done here yet, I’ve got children, I’m unsure. So in the second year, I went for a class with 100% women. Of course some people objected, but I persevered. In the previous Executive Board, with Luc Soete and Nick Bos, we made sure that four of the six deans were women. There’s a reason I chose ‘Women in Academia’ as the theme for the Opening of the Academic Year in 2015. Change starts at the top. And I’m optimistic about this. If a third of the appointments are women, you build a critical mass. With Rianne now setting the example, things will work out just fine.”

Paul is proudest of Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE), a UM-led alliance of 10 universities. Subsidised by the European Commission, they have set up an inclusive European university spanning 10 countries. “The European idea of this university in this city in this region, as it is now anchored in the new strategic programme, is important to me. I’m very pleased about that.”

A courageous university

From experience, he has learnt that nobody can lead alone. “You do it together. Directors who think they can do everything alone will fail. UM has grown so much because for years it’s been a university that dares to think outside the box and approach things differently, that’s what really sets it apart from other Dutch universities. Even as the Executive Board has changed, that philosophy has remained the same, with the same risk appetite. Without that you wouldn’t dare to establish a University College or a Faculty of Science and Engineering or Brightlands. The people here have always been brave enough to go against the grain. Without all those different personalities, not only in the Executive Board but also on the work floor, UM would never have come this far. It is and will remain a special club.”

What does he see as his own personal qualities? “I’m pragmatic; I believe you shouldn’t take yourself too seriously. I’ve learnt not to be guided too much by my emotions—that’s progress. And I like being right, but I don’t mind being proven wrong. Looking back, things are better here than they were 10 years ago. The key is, as Willy Brandt once said, ‘der Politik der kleinen Schritte’: I’m on board with that. Small steps, as long as they’re moving in the right direction, not a procession of Echternach. It’s about staying the course. Bottom line, I’m happy with what we’ve achieved here.”

Saying goodbye

“When I leave a place, I close the door behind me. At that point, you also get to know who your real friends are. Many people want to be in your orbit purely because you’re university president.” What will he miss most at UM? “The buildings. Bochum was one of the first universities built after the war: a big campus in the Brutalist style, with large block-like structures of rough, unfinished reinforced concrete. It’s a far cry from my beautiful office here in a former convent. Beyond that, it’s not about missing things or not missing them, it’s just different, full stop.”

Martin Paul studied medicine at Heidelberg University and previously served as dean of the medical faculty of the Freie Universität and vice chair of the Board of Directors of the Charité university hospital in Berlin. In Maastricht, he was dean of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences and vice chair of the Maastricht University Medical Centre, where he also holds a chair in Clinical Pharmacology. He was UM president from 2011 to 2021. He was elected as a member of the Dutch Academy of Technology and Innovation and the Austrian Science Council. He was also elected vice president of the Young European Research Universities Network and president of the Worldwide Universities Network. In 2019, he became president of YUFE. He has more than 300 publications to his name. Among numerous awards and prizes, Paul has received honorary doctorates from the University of Würzburg (Germany), the University of Rijeka (Croatia) and Lobachesvky University (Russia).
Stereotypes are persistent. You would expect someone who studies Care for older people to be older than 37-year-old Hilde Verbeek, who was appointed on 9 July as professor of Long-Term Care Environments at the Living Lab for Ageing and Long-Term Care Limburg. She may be relatively young, but her research, academic record and vision of care for older people all bear witness to her maturity, erudition and empathy. “Older people want to be at home, not in a home. Home is a feeling, a sense of security, a place that evokes memories. That’s what we have to work towards. I want to change things.”

Older people like to be in control of their own environment

If, as Einstein claimed, order is for lesser minds and it takes a genius to handle chaos, then Verbeek’s workplace, strewn with stacks of paper and stray photographs, gives an indication of where we can place her on the intellectual spectrum. “I can find everything,” she laughs. “Some people hang up photos or drawings by their kids, or frame them. I have a picture around here somewhere of my husband Fred with my children Wout, who’s six, and Thomas, who’s three. If I feel like looking at it—and I often do—I just dig it up.”

As unstructured as her space looks, she is methodical in her work, which focuses on the effect of the care environment on the everyday lives of frail older people. “As a researcher, I find methodology important. We don’t just do any old thing. There’s a system of thought behind it.”

Scientific research

She is a firm believer in the scientific research of care for older people. But surely what long-term care needs is more hands at the bedside, so to speak, rather than academics in their proverbial ivory tower? “The question of hands at the bedside is one that comes up a lot. But the image doesn’t correspond with reality. There’s no shortage of people—what’s lacking is adequate knowledge exchange.”

“I’m convinced that care for older people needs a more scientific approach. That’s how we can ensure that we ask the right questions, come up with solutions, share knowledge and put it to the test. At present too little thought goes into care for older people. Keeping one foot in professional practice is essential, but so is staying engaged with society. It’s all about being curious and having an impact. Networks are essential for theory building. Trans- and interdisciplinary research and collaboration between scientific and social partners—including care organisations, but also citizens, housing corporations, municipalities and health insurers—are indispensable.”

Linking pin

She was born in Valkenswaard, the youngest in a close family of four children. Her three older brothers always saw her as the little girl. Yet she stood on her...
own two feet from an early age. “I was 17 when I
started studying psychology in Maastricht. I’ve always
been fascinated by the workings of the brain. In my
last year of neuropsychology I did an internship at
(psychiatric hospital) Vijverdal. Until that point, I had
only theoretical knowledge. Suddenly I found myself
on the work floor of the clinic. It was an eye opener,
gave me a much deeper understanding. After my PhD
I became a linking pin in the Living Lab in Ageing and
Long-Term Care Limburg and the care provider
MeanderGroep. I have great faith in those linking pins,
which connect science with the practice of healthcare.
I also think it’s important to look beyond disciplinary
boundaries in a structural manner. Bring people
together from different backgrounds, working from
different perspectives—people from intermediate and
higher vocational education, university researchers.
Then you jointly develop a case study.”

Demography
Her interest in care for older people has grown
over the years. “I’ve become fascinated by older people
and their life histories. And with the number of older
people on the rise, especially in South Limburg, long-
term care will only become more and more important,
socially and economically. We’ll have to find creative
solutions to organise and design care for older people,
especially for the most vulnerable group. With that
demographic development and the connection
between care institutions, universities and other
knowledge institutions, I think we can set an example
for the rest of the country. We can put this region in
the spotlight with innovative concepts, for example by
adapting traditional working methods or coming up
with a more creative design and architecture for
nursing homes. Fortunately, a lot of collaboration is
already going on here, including with international
partners.”

Older people do not form a homogeneous group.
“They’re individuals. We shouldn’t assume that we
know the right solution for every older person. What
we do know is that we all like to have control over our
own environment. Autonomy is important. Also, people
don’t just like to receive care; they also enjoy returning
it. Care involves reciprocity. As a rule, people want to
make themselves useful, do something that distracts
them and gives them the sense that they’re making a
contribution.”

Innovative care farm
In Bocholtz, MeanderGroep is working on an
innovative residential care concept inspired by care
farms. People with dementia now live in the former
care hotel, where a great deal of attention has been
paid to design, the care component, user-friendly
technology and personal attention. “My team and I
were the first to study residential care farms. These
kinds of innovative care concepts will become more
common in the future. Again, the numbers speak for
themselves: one in five Dutch people will find
themselves dealing with dementia. Two thirds of them
live at home, one third in residential care centres.
Ultimately, long-term care concerns us all. We have to
take action. I’m ready.”

↑ Hilde Verbeek obtained her PhD at Maastricht
University in 2011 for her research on small-scale
housing for people with dementia. After a postdoc
at the University of Manchester, she joined the UM Department of
Health Services Research. She is vice chair of the
Living Lab in Ageing and Long-Term Care Limburg
and a member of The Young Academy, the
KNAW Council for Medical Sciences and the Board of
Directors of the Interna-
tional Psychogeriatric
Association. Last July she
received a Vidi grant for
her research on residen-
tial care farms.
Professor Yvonne van der Meer is investigating how companies can improve the sustainability of their products. She analyses every material, exposing the lifecycle in its entirety. “Everything has an effect, even additives such as dyes and plasticisers.”

Van der Meer kicked off her inaugural lecture on 11 June 2021 with a reference to Shakespeare’s ‘To be or not to be? That is the question.’ The sustainability of a product is rarely easy to pin down, but that, in her view, is what makes her field so interesting. With unbridled enthusiasm, she explains the challenges of the circular economy and the broad perspective required for her research.

Career switch
The Aachen–Maastricht Institute for Biobased Materials (AMIBM) was established on the Chemelot Campus fewer than five years ago. Van der Meer was one of the founders, and now holds sway as scientific co-director. The route she took to arrive at where she is today was unconventional, but as she sees it, logical. Until 2015, she was a policy adviser at Maastricht University. She helped to bring research on biobased materials to UM and launched the new master’s programme in this field. Then her career took a different turn: she decided to start doing research herself.

Biobased + sustainable
“All these researchers were saying: I want to work on biobased materials because they’re so sustainable. But I’d been exploring the field and found that it’s sometimes far from it. Biobased doesn’t automatically mean sustainable—a great deal of work is still needed to get from biobased materials to sustainable materials. It occurred to me that there should be a research group focusing on that topic. But nobody was keen on starting it, and then the dean said: you’ll have to do it yourself, or it won’t happen. That’s when I made the switch to research. Since then I’ve been combining my background in chemistry with an interest in sustainability.”

Product lifecycle
Van der Meer’s research group conducts research into the lifecycle of products, from raw material to finished product and beyond, including recycling and waste processing. She collects data on every step and performs complex calculations. “For a good sustainability analysis you need data on all processes and materials, including additives such as dyes and plasticisers. Thirty percent of product packaging can be made up of these types of additives. But data on all these substances are not yet included in databases. Nor is information on alternative raw materials, such as new biobased materials or waste products. Through our projects, we supplement these databases. You can then draw on that information when developing a new product.”

From cradle to cradle
Van der Meer uses all these data to calculate CO₂ and nitrogen emissions. She also considers other forms of environmental impact, such as water use and the risk of environmental disasters. Based on her findings, she then looks for ways to increase the circularity of a product. “From cradle to grave, or better yet: from cradle to cradle. Circularity involves much more than just recycling, which is mainly limited to product materials. You can also extend the lifespan of the product, or reuse or remanufacture it.”

Making gains
Her analyses occasionally throw up surprising conclusions. A new product may be more durable than the old one in some respects, but not in others. “That’s a difficult message to pass on to product developers. They usually want a simple conclusion on which to base their decision making. The good news is that I can often point out where gains can be made, preferably during a project rather than after. The product development may take a little longer, but at least you know it’s been done well.”

Broader perspective
The more the newly appointed professor explores product lifecycles, the more connections she sees between different cycles. For example, when certain product materials are recycled, the environmental impact is simply transferred to the lifecycle of the new product. This defers rather than prevents environmental damage. “We need to zoom out further to understand how we can reduce the environmental impact. Then we can zoom in again to make choices for the product we’re currently working on. For example, a new researcher in my group will investigate how we can best model recycling. It doesn’t make things any easier, but that’s exactly what I like about this research.”

Becoming a professor
Before Van der Meer returned to research, she never imagined becoming a professor. “There’s this idea that once you’ve left science you’ll never come back. Academia is like that everyplace, focused on how many publications you have to your name. But the emphasis should be on quality and whether you’re a good leader and teacher. So I’m very happy to have been given this opportunity. As far as I’m concerned, it shouldn’t be an exception in the academic world.”

Van der Meer uses all these data to calculate CO₂ and nitrogen emissions. She also considers other forms of environmental impact, such as water use and the risk of environmental disasters. Based on her findings, she then looks for ways to increase the circularity of a product. “From cradle to grave, or better yet: from cradle to cradle. Circularity involves much more than just recycling, which is mainly limited to product materials. You can also extend the lifespan of the product, or reuse or remanufacture it.”

Making gains
Her analyses occasionally throw up surprising conclusions. A new product may be more durable than the old one in some respects, but not in others. “That’s a difficult message to pass on to product developers. They usually want a simple conclusion on which to base their decision making. The good news is that I can often point out where gains can be made, preferably during a project rather than after. The product development may take a little longer, but at least you know it’s been done well.”

Broader perspective
The more the newly appointed professor explores product lifecycles, the more connections she sees between different cycles. For example, when certain product materials are recycled, the environmental impact is simply transferred to the lifecycle of the new product. This defers rather than prevents environmental damage. “We need to zoom out further to understand how we can reduce the environmental impact. Then we can zoom in again to make choices for the product we’re currently working on. For example, a new researcher in my group will investigate how we can best model recycling. It doesn’t make things any easier, but that’s exactly what I like about this research.”
After skipping a year, the Pleasure, Art & Science Festival returned on 3 and 4 September, organised by Studium Generale. In keeping with tradition, Maastricht University opened its doors at the start of the academic year to treat local and regional residents to a programme bursting with interesting information, music, theatre and more. This year the university’s 45th anniversary was celebrated.

Due to the distancing rules, the festival was held not in the university buildings in the city centre, but in the spacious Tapijn barracks.

Spread
Photography
Paul van der Veer

The Pleasure, Art & Science Festival
Together with her master’s students, Milena Pavlova is investigating the access to healthcare of undocumented migrants. Her findings give cause for concern: in many countries, this group has no or little access to healthcare. Yet such access is essential, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when vaccination is crucial. Politics and policy should be separate, Pavlova argues. Who can enter and stay in a country is a question for politics. Policy must ensure that everyone can access adequate healthcare.

Who is an undocumented migrant?
“This term refers to third-country nationals without a valid permit to reside in the EU. That includes people whose applications for asylum have been rejected and those who have violated the terms of their visas, as well as those who have entered the country illegally. The desire for a better life for themselves and their children leads people to migrate to stable countries, which sometimes results in their living in a country without being legally entitled to do so.”

How many undocumented migrants are there in Europe?
“It’s difficult to say, but there are indications that their number has increased in the last two decades. In 2017 the Pew Research Center estimated that there were about 3.9 to 4.8 million unauthorized migrants, which represented less than 1% of the total EU population and about 10% of its foreign population. But these estimates are based on inaccurate and unreliable data. The numbers are also constantly changing. For example, 137,000 undocumented migrants illegally crossed the Greek border during July and August 2015, a 250% increase compared to May and June of that year. That’s a dramatic rise within just a few months.”
How big is the problem?

“Undocumented migrants are a major concern in all EU member states, including when it comes to the provision of health services. Because they’re not official residents and have no health insurance, they’re not always entitled to use the full range of public health services. In many countries—including Germany, Denmark and Belgium—they only have access to emergency care and services for specific conditions, like infectious diseases, or specific needs, such as maternity care. In 2013, France, Italy and the Netherlands decided to give undocumented migrants the same access to healthcare as authorised residents. By contrast, Slovenia provides urgent medical assistance only.”

What are the barriers in accessing healthcare?

“The first barrier is at the individual level. They choose the treatment and provider based on their own perceptions of healthcare and their experiences in their own country. They often perceive hospital treatment as ‘good’ and GP services as ‘bad’, preferring to use emergency hospital services even when primary-care services are free of charge. Many countries have no gatekeeping system, so patients can skip the GP and go directly to a hospital specialist.

Evidence shows that tight government control of access to health services, such as requiring patients to register at GP practices, can be a barrier for this group. One solution could be to leave registration to the discretion of the GP, who is guided by the medical code of ethics and treats patients regardless of their immigration status. If needed, the GP can refer the undocumented migrant to hospital care. Whether there are other barriers at the hospital level depends on the system. There is a need for unified guidelines for all healthcare practices to avoid confusion regarding undocumented migrants’ entitlement to services. It’s also crucial to keep patient registration data confidential so the authorities can’t use this data to deport them. A number of European countries have chosen to pursue this approach. That will encourage the use of primary care.”

How can we break down these barriers?

“Involve NGOs such as the Red Cross. They can easily identify these people, build trust and provide information. All sorts of needs are met by convincing undocumented migrants to make use of healthcare providers. Systematic involvement of the Red Cross could be a European solution.”

Another problem at the individual level is self-medication, such as the use of over-the-counter drugs for minor symptoms. Many people only seek out a doctor in urgent cases. Others avoid healthcare services if using them somehow contradicts their cultural norms and religious beliefs. We need to offer a more personalised approach to account for all these individual-level factors.

“A very important barrier is the fear of deportation. Undocumented migrants often see visiting a doctor as risky: they might draw attention to themselves and be forced to leave the country. They rarely know who to trust. To avoid deportation, they use a fake registration number or address, or send a legal resident who pretends to be the sick person. Also, they may lack the language skills to access information on health services directly. In some countries they’re entitled to an interpreter, but they may not be aware of that. The fear of deportation needs to be assuaged and communities need to be informed about the potentially harmful effects of self-medication. For some migrants, years of irregular status coupled with negative experiences in their countries of origin can trigger ‘phobias’ of health services. In addition, the need for mental healthcare is high among undocumented migrants. The illegal status, continuous uncertainty and distance from their families can lead to depression and other mental-health issues.

The theme of the OAY 2021 on 6 September was ‘transforming universities’. How is UM itself transforming, adapting and innovating in response to recent events, but also how can we be change-makers in society, contributing to a safer and brighter future?

In addition, this year’s OAY included those award ceremonies that could not take place last year due to the COVID-19 measures. The UM Dissertation Prize, the Edmond Hustinx Prize and the Wynand Wijnen Education Prize of 2020 were all presented during the ceremony. The awarding of the honorary doctorate to Professor Jaap van Dissel was also postponed last year. During this year’s ceremony, honorary professor Christian Hobbé delivered the laudation. Van Dissel’s daughter—part of his COVID bubble—presented him with the cappa (gown).

Mamokgethi Phakeng

Keynote speaker Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice-Rector of the University of Cape Town and professor of Mathematics Education, is an experienced transformer. As a leader in higher education, she has long been at the forefront of transformation in education, research and society. Particular focal points for her are inclusivity and diversity; for example, she founded a non-profit organisation that provides financial and educational support to students from townships and rural areas.

Student Prize and Edmond Hustinx Prize

The Student Prize 2021 was awarded to Vera Karagiannidou, founder of the Legal Aid Clinic for Prisoners. The clinic is committed to raising awareness of the rights of those involved in the criminal justice system, offering legal aid for prisoners and providing practical work experience for UM law students.

The Edmond Hustinx Prize 2021 went to Katleen Gabriels, a researcher focused on the techno-moral implications of virtual environments, artificial intelligence and robotics. With her many publications for academics and laypeople as well as media appearances, she has made her profession accessible to a wide audience.

Awards for Martin Paul

The 11th OAY led by UM president Martin Paul will also be his last: on 1 November he will start as rector of Ruhr-Universität Bochum. At the end of the ceremony, Paul received the City of Maastricht’s Decoration of Merit (Teken van Verdienste) from mayor Annemarie Penn-Te Strake. The next day, he was presented with the badge of honour from the City of Venlo by mayor Anton Scholten. Martin Paul has made a significant contribution to Venlo and the region. By establishing a UM campus in Venlo, he helped to pave the way for the foundation of the Brightlands Campus Greenport.

Vera Karagiannidou

Keynote speaker Mamokgethi Phakeng

Honorary Doctorate Jaap van Dissel

Wynand Wijnen Education Prize

Student Prize

Edmond Hustinx Prize

Keynote speaker Mamokgethi Phakeng

October 2021 / UMagazine
Is Europe becoming a world power?

President Joe Biden is breathing new life into the relationship between Europe and America. “Compared to Trump, it can only be positive,” Sophie Vanhoonacker laughs. During his recent visit, Biden called for repaired relations. But he also called for the China policy to be harmonised and for Europe to form a front against autocratic countries—for Europe, a step too far. “Europe has different interests and can’t be as critical. There’s also the concern as to who will succeed Biden. It could be Trump again, or someone in the Trumpian mould.”

Is Europe a rising world power? China shows that it wants to go its own way in security and military affairs; Vanhoonacker says. “There’s been a growing awareness since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Will America remain committed to European security? Not that this has led to much in the way of concrete action.”

Europe’s reticence to follow Biden’s hard line towards China is high. “That’s a concern,” Vanhoonacker continues, “but we can’t afford to put China in a corner. We export a lot to them and are highly dependent on Chinese imports for medicines, certain raw materials and other products. China is also a major player in the context of climate change. But Europe is becoming more cautious. The EU’s new global strategy of 2016 talks about ‘principled pragmatism’. Europe has its principles, but we mustn’t act like some sort of naive missionary, we have to defend our interests and industry.”

Compromise
This division may go some way to explaining Putin’s aggressive stance. “In the EU, there was too little awareness of the trauma caused by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Russia feels humiliated. Putin wants to make the country great again and play a role on the world stage. He knows perfectly well that Europe can barely put up a fight militarily, and is exploiting its lack of unity.” Nonetheless, Vanhoonacker believes continued dialogue is crucial. “Russia is on our doorstep, we have common interests and depend on their gas. But it’s a compromise. It’s still an autocratic regime that ignores human rights.”

Political model
China, the EU’s largest trading partner, is a different story. The country is fast becoming an empire with an unprecedented global role in information technology, capital provision, and logistical, diplomatic, military and cultural power. With its Belt and Road initiative, a colossal global infrastructure programme offering investments and loans for high-speed links, airports and shipping routes, China is cursing favour with individual countries, including in Central and Eastern Europe. “And it’s succeeding, because there are no political strings attached to its aid, not even for dictatorial regimes. This way China is able to increase its influence all over the world, and with that, its political model.”

That’s a concern, Vanhoonacker continues, “but we can’t afford to put China in a corner. We export a lot to them and are highly dependent on Chinese imports for medicines, certain raw materials and other products. China is also a major player in the context of climate change. But Europe is becoming more cautious. The EU’s new global strategy of 2016 talks about ‘principled pragmatism’. Europe has its principles, but we mustn’t act like some sort of naive missionary, we have to defend our interests and industry.”

Hard men
In Vanhoonacker’s view, the new world order demands a different type of power play. “It’s a rougher world, with hard men like Putin and the Chinese president playing the power game. They bang their fists on the table, spare nothing and nobody. Europe is still learning that. We’re a peace project, used to discussing and resolving our conflicts peacefully. That’s worked well within Europe, but it doesn’t work geopolitically.”

In other words, Europe must learn to exercise coercive power. “Internally, this is a first step towards less fragmentation and more cooperation in military mobility and innovative defence. As for foreign policy, relations with Russia are seen as consisting of three components: push back, constrain and engage. Push back on human-rights violations. Constrain by improving our own security. And engage on issues like the fight against corona and the climate crisis.”

Whether unanimity can be achieved in terms of security remains an open question. Will the EU ever form a joint power bloc? “That’s far from certain. But the pressure to act together is increasing. The urgency is high.”

Liberal democracy
Even as a major world power, Europe will need alliances. “And that’s what the EU wants. Strategic autonomy doesn’t mean excluding other parties. On the contrary, it’s vital to work towards our goals with partners who share our liberal-democratic values, such as the US and institutions like the WHO and the WHO. Perhaps the biggest concern is not the intertwining of trade and economics with autocratic countries, but the threat that their political model poses to the free world. “Biden is right when he says that Western countries set a moral example for the world. When I think about the future and the next generations, I hope we continue to defend liberal democracy and the welfare state.”
Ann Meulders, associate professor of Experimental Health Psychology, is working on a Vidi project focusing on pain avoidance, a proven predictor of chronic pain. As her PhD candidate Eveliina Glogan demonstrates in her dissertation, an important mechanism behind the generalisation of pain avoidance is uncertainty about future pain. The Vidi project is all about collaboration. “We become better scientists not through competition, but by sharing ideas and helping one another,” Meulders says.

Pain is an alarm signal that warns of possible damage to the body. It is our brain that processes this signal and sounds the alarm. This means the experience of pain is not just a reflexive response, but is influenced by top-down factors. Hence the importance of psychology—perhaps all the more so in the case of chronic pain. Chronic pain is of a different order than acute pain, Ann Meulders explains. “The pain is real, but often no anatomical cause can be identified.” Her research team focuses on a psychological mechanism as a cause of chronic pain: pain avoidance stemming from fear of pain. “Biomedical models are poor at predicting who will develop chronic pain. A psychological factor like pain avoidance is demonstrably better at this.”

“Pain avoidance is first and foremost good, as it can aid the healing process,” adds Eveliina Glogan. “But you can take this behaviour too far and start avoiding safe activities too.” This can go from bad to worse, from fear of exacerbating an injury to fear of ending up in a wheelchair. “This is the paradox of pain avoidance,” Meulders says. “You don’t really know whether avoidance was necessary. Instead you stay afraid or become even more afraid, which in turn weakens the body.” More than three million people in the Netherlands suffer from chronic pain.

Generalisation of pain avoidance
Glogan’s PhD research zooms in on the question of how pain-avoiding behaviour spreads to safe activities. What are the underlying mechanisms of generalisation? “For example, if you hurt your back doing a yoga move, you may start avoiding yoga entirely, or even all sports.” Her experiments show that generalisation is typically triggered by uncertainty about future pain. “Which makes sense. If you don’t really know which movement increases the pain and which doesn’t, you’re going to avoid everything.”

“What is new in Eveliina’s research is that it’s not fear alone that predicts avoidance, as is often assumed. Because even if you’re afraid, you can still confront pain,” Meulders says. “The predictive power lies in the avoidance behaviour. People are willing to pay a price in the form of job loss, reduced social contacts, less enjoyment of life. Pain-free people value these aspects of everyday life more than they value pain avoidance. In people with chronic pain, this balance is out of whack. Their number one goal is to control pain at all costs.”

October 2021 / UMagazine
When it comes to treatment, Glogan’s study highlights the importance of people with chronic pain understanding early on which activities are safe and which are not. “You get people with chronic pain to face their fears. You want them to realise that as long as they don’t avoid the things they fear, that fear will not lead to chronic pain and limitations in their everyday life.” The results of her research were recently published in the Journal of Pain.

Cooperation, not competition
Both laud their collaboration. Glogan: “Ann is very engaged and gives thorough feedback. We’re in regular contact, also outside of work.” For Meulders, collaboration is a key pillar of her Vidi project. “It’s crucial that we as researchers form a team and work together. I want to emphasise that here, because recently the NWO director again compared science to top sport, where only the best win. That’s a sad comparison. We become better scientists not through competition, but by sharing ideas and helping one another.”

What did she learn from Glogan? “How someone comes across on paper and based on output doesn’t necessarily reflect how they feel. Eveliina published a paper in her first year. She communicates clearly and seems to be at ease giving presentations. She came off as confident, but turned out to be very nervous and insecure. I’ve learned that as a mentor I need to pay more attention to this.” When asked what she learned from Meulders, Glogan is silent for a moment. “Actually, everything. I look up to her professionally. Honestly, I think Ann is number one in her research field. Not many female researchers can say that. She’s groundbreaking.”

Reduction of pain avoidance
After defending her dissertation later this year, Glogan will relocate to KU Leuven. “They’ve given me a postdoctoral grant, which will allow me to continue this research.” Meulders: “Eveliina’s being very modest. This is a prestigious grant that shows she excels in her research.” As for Meulders, she aims to expand her Vidi project in two directions. “On the one hand, we want to teach people with chronic pain to reduce the generalisation of pain avoidance. And on the other, we want to prevent relapse after successful exposure to the movements they fear. The project is a first step towards a broad research field revolving around avoidance behaviour. There’s still a lot of work to do.”

Ann Meulders is associate professor of Experimental Health Psychology at the UM Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience and visiting professor at KU Leuven. She received a Vidi grant for her research on psychological mechanisms in the transition from acute to chronic pain. She is particularly interested in the learning processes surrounding pain-related fear and avoidance.

Eveliina Glogan studied Psychology at the University of Glasgow and Cognitive Neuroscience at Maastricht University. She hopes to defend her PhD in late 2021. Her research focuses on the contribution of pain avoidance behaviour and its generalisation to the development and maintenance of chronic pain.
Fried chicken with banana on Sundays, his mother’s homemade waffles, his father’s lobster à l’Armoricaine, his grandmother’s unsurpassed fries. When it comes to food, Didier Fouarge has a wealth of happy memories. An only child raised in Namur, Belgium, he was used to eating fresh, delicious food from an early age. “I was disappointed whenever my mother was pressed for time and plonked down a tin of peas on the table.” For this economics professor, cooking is more than a mere hobby.

Fouarge’s passion also works its way into his role as the new director of the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA). “I compare my role to that of a chef; I’m nothing if the team doesn’t cook with me. Just like in a kitchen, everyone at ROA has a different part to play, and we all have to do it right and on time, otherwise we’re of no use to one another. If the ice cream is already on the plate and the main course isn’t ready yet, you’re doing something wrong. It’s about timing, talking, sharing expertise and ideas. In style I’m more of a Sergio Herman than a Gordon Ramsay. Less of the shouting, more of the delegating responsibility and showing how inspiring it is to do research or how many different ways you can use, say, a piece of star anise. You can make it into a drink, or a dessert. How do you get such a big taste out of such a hard little thing?”

That’s what research is about, too: how do you handle your ingredients? Our ingredients are data and infrastructure, and together we have to make something from them.”

Fouarge is not only the figurative chef at ROA; he has also served as chair of the drinks committee and organiser of multiple culinary experiences. On one such occasion, he personally delivered a homemade dinner to the outgoing director Andries de Grip. “Because of corona, we had to hold his farewell party via Zoom. I left the session early, jumped in the car and drove from Venray to Maastricht. I added the finishing touches there—sprayed a dollop of whipped cream on the chocolate mousse, burnt the layer of sugar on the crème brûlée—and then off I went back home.”

Genetics

The roots of his passion lie in Namur, where his mother cooked delicious food with fresh ingredients. “She also bought the wine, mostly French of course, and kept a log of what it cost, what to pair it with, what it tasted like. I’ve tried to do that too, but I never manage to stick with it.” Fouarge loves nothing more than cooking for large groups, and this, too, he inherited from family. “My maternal grandmother cooked for weddings and parties, and whenever there was something on at school, my parents would make lasagne and spaghetti for everyone. My idea of fun is preparing a meal for 60 kids on a couple of gas burners during a Scouts expedition. Which is not to say it always turns out right,” he laughs. “I once put the meat in the river to cool, but the water wasn’t cold enough and the meat went off. I had to settle for pasta with some nice herbs, and make up for it with the dessert.”

How do you handle your ingredients.

On his father’s 70th birthday, he and a friend—a regular cooking buddy—prepared a 12 course dinner for 70 people. “So great to do, making everything yourself, preferably with local ingredients. We served asparagus in different ways and made various dishes with pork, which is easy to get your hands on in Venray. We braised pork cheeks in abbey beer, and to get the guests involved, we came up with a dish with a nice piece of fatty bacon marinated in juniper that we laid on everyone’s arm with tweezers to give them a different taste and texture experience. It was brilliant, seeing my parents’ friends and family eating a piece of bacon like that in their Sunday best. That’s why you do it.”

Better in Belgium

It was love that brought him to the Netherlands, specifically, to Venray, his wife’s hometown. In his words: “I was there for love.” There, he took on the role of director at ROA. “It was a logical step,” he says. “We braised pork cheeks in abbey beer, and to get the guests involved, we came up with a dish with a nice piece of fatty bacon marinated in juniper that we laid on everyone’s arm with tweezers to give them a different taste and texture experience. It was brilliant, seeing my parents’ friends and family eating a piece of bacon like that in their Sunday best. That’s why you do it.”

Fouarge is not only the figurative chef at ROA; he has also served as chair of the drinks committee and organiser of multiple culinary experiences. On one such occasion, he personally delivered a homemade dinner to the outgoing director Andries de Grip. “Because of corona, we had to hold his farewell party via Zoom. I left the session early, jumped in the car and drove from Venray to Maastricht. I added the finishing touches there—sprayed a dollop of whipped cream on the chocolate mousse, burnt the layer of sugar on the crème brûlée—and then off I went back home.”

Broadly speaking, Fouarge prefers the food in his native country, although in recent years a lot has changed for the better. “But chicken is still better in Belgium, perhaps precisely because the Netherlands has more chickens than people.” Fortunately, his wife shares his interest in culinary pursuits. “She’s into soups with her own broth. I like making everything myself too: mayonnaise, pizza dough. Much tastier and healthier. We’d rather go out for one really nice dinner than six mediocre ones. I’m critical; I want to be able to taste and understand what’s on my plate.”

Tasting everything

As a Wallonian, he was raised on classic French and Mediterranean cuisine. Lobster and mussels are among his favourites, but he likes organ meats too: kidneys, liver, sweetbreads and confit duck gizzards and hearts. When on holiday in France, he can’t go past andouillette, a type of sausage made from tripe and entrails that the rest of the family abhors. His most exotic food adventures took place in France and China. “We were staying at this campsite where the local shepherd roasted one of his sheep on a spit. As a delicacy, I was allowed to taste the kidneys, cut straight out of the sheep, unwashed and all. That was no fun; it tasted like piss. But if food is offered to you with love, you can’t refuse it, if you ask me. In China, I once sucked out duck brains and ate duck tongues, which are very small and hard.” At home, vegetables have become more prominent since their youngest daughter became a vegetarian a year ago. In a corner of the garden Fouarge grows his own herbs and tomatoes, and is currently trying his hand at artichoke. “Whether it succeeds remains to be seen. In any event, tonight’s menu is Portobello mushrooms with goat cheese, and crème brulée for dessert.”
Graciëlla van Vliet studied Econometrics in Maastricht, followed by a master’s degree in Rotterdam—a near guarantee for a top job at a top organisation. Instead she opted for independent entrepreneurship. She is now the head of two successful companies, Closure and NabestaandenLoket. In 2019 she was named Rotterdam Businesswoman of the Year.

Reluctantly, Graciëlla van Vliet admits that these days she rarely visits Maastricht. “Absolutely not enough. I don’t have the time, and when I am there it’s a quick trip for a business meeting. Recently we were in Maastricht with my in-laws for a weekend. They figured I’d know the best restaurants, but I had to disappoint them. As a student, I had no money for eating out. A sandwich at the HEMA, that was it. I put a lot of time into my studies, I worked with the SBE PhD committee and Research Project Maastricht, and I was involved with my dispute Nos Ergo and the student association Tragos. That was my little world.”

International

Van Vliet, who was raised in Roosendaal, has fond memories of her studies. “Maastricht is a nice city with an international character and a university that draws students from all over the world. That really appealed to me back in 2012, when I was deciding where to study econometrics. I was sold right away during the open days, especially when I heard that the bachelor’s programme included a compulsory module abroad. I was keen on going to Australia. In the end I spent a few months in China conducting research for Dutch organisations. Research Project Maastricht, I spent four months in Maastricht, is still active. That was the trigger for us. We did some research and discovered not only that many social media accounts continue to exist, but also that it takes a long time to cancel subscriptions, contracts and other periodic payments. As a surviving relative, having to give notice to all these organisations means you’re constantly being reminded of the loss of your loved one. First and foremost, we wanted to develop an automatic cancellation system to help the families of deceased relatives. At the same time, we figured the organisations and companies involved would also be interested. There’s a lot of administration involved in things like returning money that’s been overpaid. Good and compassionate communication is difficult and also expensive.”

The idea was a platform that helps relatives of deceased people to cancel their subscriptions and other obligations. “Chantal’s grandmother had passed away several years earlier, but her Facebook account was still active. That was the trigger for us. We did some research and discovered not only that many social media accounts continue to exist, but also that it takes a long time to cancel subscriptions, contracts and other periodic payments. As a surviving relative, having to give notice to all these organisations means you’re constantly being reminded of the loss of your loved one. First and foremost, we wanted to develop an automatic cancellation system to help the families of deceased relatives. At the same time, we figured the organisations and companies involved would also be interested. There’s a lot of administration involved in things like returning money that’s been overpaid. Good and compassionate communication is difficult and also expensive.”

Facebook

The idea was a platform that helps relatives of deceased people to cancel their subscriptions and other obligations. “Chantal’s grandmother had passed away several years earlier, but her Facebook account was still active. That was the trigger for us. We did some research and discovered not only that many social media accounts continue to exist, but also that it takes a long time to cancel subscriptions, contracts and other periodic payments. As a surviving relative, having to give notice to all these organisations means you’re constantly being reminded of the loss of your loved one. First and foremost, we wanted to develop an automatic cancellation system to help the families of deceased relatives. At the same time, we figured the organisations and companies involved would also be interested. There’s a lot of administration involved in things like returning money that’s been overpaid. Good and compassionate communication is difficult and also expensive.”

Graciëlla van Vliet studied in Maastricht, Adelaide and Rotterdam. She has won a number of awards and prizes for entrepreneurs, including the Philips Innovation Award. In 2019 she was named Rotterdam Businesswoman of the Year.

Analytical

Is a background in econometrics a good starting point for building a business? “Yes, as an econometrician you learn to think and act analytically. That’s an indispensable attribute for an entrepreneur. I also seem to have some entrepreneurial blood in me. For the Research Project Maastricht, I spent four months in China conducting research for Dutch organisations. My module abroad for the bachelor’s programme was partly focused on entrepreneurship. And right after my studies I ran a food truck. Yes, I’d say that entrepreneurship grabbed me and I haven’t let me go. Looking back, we should have started even earlier. During your studies even, if you’re flexible in terms of time, have few financial obligations and can therefore take a little more risk. Why not try to get a business idea off the ground alongside your studies, instead of joining a committee or doing an internship? As far as I’m concerned, universities could pay more attention to this, for example by bringing enterprising students together and providing support from alumni.”

Wings

The young entrepreneur’s success was recognised in 2019 with the title Rotterdam Businesswoman of the Year. “An honour, for sure. An award like that opens doors and does good things for your network. At the same time, I like to keep my feet on the ground. Currently I’m putting all my energy into our two companies. We want to grow, spread our wings across borders, add new products. If you ask me, creating and building something myself is the best thing there is. No other job can compete with that.”

Trial and error

Their reasoning turned out to be spot on. They now have two companies: Closure, focused on cancelling subscriptions and obligations, and NabestaandenLoket, for all matters involved in handling a death. Four years after they were founded, both companies are in perfect health. They have 11 employees, process some 80 files a day, and have formal partnerships with dozens of organisations, including funeral companies and telecom firms. “That didn’t happen by itself,” Van Vliet admits. “Resigning on a whim was the easiest thing. The advantage was that neither of us had a mortgage, children or other big obligations, but we also didn’t have real experience, capital to invest or a good network. We were fortunate to receive help from UtrechtInc, an incubation programme for startups. With wanting to be too critical, we had this idea that we could or would learn everything ourselves: sales, building a platform, marketing, finding partners. That’s not how it works. Through trial and error, we built up a team, sought expert support and grew the business step by step. First Closure, later NabestaandenLoket.”

No other job can compete with that.”

Graciëlla van Vliet studied Econometrics in Maastricht, followed by a master’s degree in Rotterdam—a near guarantee for a top job at a top organisation. Instead she opted for independent entrepreneurship. She is now the head of two successful companies, Closure and NabestaandenLoket. In 2019 she was named Rotterdam Businesswoman of the Year.

Reluctantly, Graciëlla van Vliet admits that these days she rarely visits Maastricht. “Absolutely not enough. I don’t have the time, and when I am there it’s a quick trip for a business meeting. Recently we were in Maastricht with my in-laws for a weekend. They figured I’d know the best restaurants, but I had to disappoint them. As a student, I had no money for eating out. A sandwich at the HEMA, that was it. I put a lot of time into my studies, I worked with the SBE PhD committee and Research Project Maastricht, and I was involved with my dispute Nos Ergo and the student association Tragos. That was my little world.”

International

Van Vliet, who was raised in Roosendaal, has fond memories of her studies. “Maastricht is a nice city with an international character and a university that draws students from all over the world. That really appealed to me back in 2012, when I was deciding where to study econometrics. I was sold right away during the open days, especially when I heard that the bachelor’s programme included a compulsory module abroad. I was keen on going to Australia. In the end I spent a semester in Adelaide, which is where the seed for entrepreneurship was planted.”

The idea

But that penny only dropped after her master’s degree and during her first job. “I’d become good friends with Chantal in Maastricht. She was doing Econometrics too, but three years ahead of me. So she left Maastricht much earlier for her master’s and later for work, but we kept in touch. And just when I’d committed to a good job at a company in Rotterdam, Chantal and I talked about starting our own company. On a whim, we handed in our resignations and took the plunge.”
Boston is an epicentre of science

As a physician and clinical researcher, Frederic Schaper has one burning ambition: to create a ‘map’ of the network connections in the brain. Ultimately, this will enable doctors to provide better treatment for brain diseases such as epilepsy, depression and Parkinson’s. The UM alum and his colleagues from Harvard Medical School expect to publish their first, promising results this autumn.

He would have preferred to have done the interview in Maastricht, the city where he studied Biomedical Sciences, completed the combined Physician–Clinical Investigator programme and did his PhD research until 2019. “I haven’t been there for over 18 months, corona, of course,” he says from his office at Boston’s Harvard Medical School, one of the top institutes in the US. “It still makes me smile to think of the Maasbrug and the places I used to go with friends, family and fellow students.”

Not that Schaper is bored in Boston, where he began working as a clinical researcher in 2019. “Definitely not,” he laughs. “I’m thrilled to be here. The Boston area is an epicentre of science. You’ve got universities like Harvard, MIT and Tufts and companies such as Pfizer and Moderna practically next to each other, thousands of scientists concentrated in a single city. It’s great to be part of that.”

Failures

In addition to a healthy record of publications, prizes and grants, his CV also contains a list of rejected articles and grant applications. “That list of ‘failures’ is intended to remind myself and others that doing research is not only about success. Every researcher, even those who bring in hundreds of thousands or even millions in funding, has had to deal with many disappointments. I’m just happy to have the opportunity here at Harvard to continue working on the research we started in Maastricht: mapping the network connections in the brain to develop better treatments for severe epilepsy.”

Deep brain stimulation

Explaining what exactly he does in a nutshell is not easy. “My research is on deep brain stimulation for patients with severe epilepsy who don’t respond to medication and can’t have surgery for whatever reason. After implanting an electrode deep in the patient’s brain, we use electrical pulses to try to stop the seizures. It’s comparable to treating cardiac arrhythmias with a pacemaker. Cardiologists have made great strides forward with that.”

Neurologists and neurosurgeons at the Academic Centre for Epileptology in Maastricht and Kempenhaeghe have used deep brain stimulation successfully. “But so much remains unclear. The networks in the brain are extremely complex, with different patterns in every patient. My dream is to map those networks, just like a circuit board in an iPhone or a computer. But I don’t want to create false expectations: we’re not there yet.”

Physician–Clinical Investigator

Schaper completed his secondary education at College Rolduc, a former abbey in Kerkrade, South Limburg (“a kind of Harry Potter environment”). Early on he knew he wanted to become a doctor. But instead of graduating cum laude—a condition at the time for direct admission to medicine in Maastricht—he fell short by one tenth of a point. He then twice missed out on a place by lottery. “The Bachelor of Biomedical Sciences was my fallback option, and gradually I grew more and more interested in medical research.

I completed the bachelor’s programme quite happily and then did the Physician–Clinical Investigator research master’s.”

The research master’s is a combined programme that trains students as both medical doctors and clinical researchers. Schaper graduated cum laude and turned down the option of becoming a junior doctor in favour of epilepsy research. “Something about it touched me. More than 200,000 people in the Netherlands, including some of my friends and acquaintances, have epilepsy. Sometimes the symptoms are mild, sometimes they’re very severe and disabling. There’s still a taboo around epilepsy, partly because you can’t tell just by looking at a person that they’re epileptic.”

World top

Epilepsy is currently treated with medication (which can have negative side effects) and, occasionally, invasive brain surgery. In the last few years Schaper’s field of research, deep brain stimulation, has been added to the mix. “I first came into contact with it during my PhD research. My supervisors at the MUMC+ were Professor Yasin Temel, a neurosurgeon, and Dr Rob Rouhi, a neurologist. They always encouraged me to gain experience abroad. So I contacted Dr Michael Fox at Harvard, a global expert on network connections in the brain. After a brief internship at Harvard during my PhD, I was invited to stay on as a postdoc. Clearly I also have the solid education I got in Maastricht and my PhD team to thank for this job.”

Exciting

With his research group at Harvard, he expects to submit his first publication to a scientific journal shortly. “Obviously it will first undergo peer review, but we expect it to change our thinking about networks in epilepsy. It’s a very exciting first step.” And then? “For the time being, we’ll continue to analyse the data. There’s still so much work to be done before we can apply this in patients.”

Will Schaper one day return to his roots? “Why not? In the longer term, I plan to pursue my first choice: being a doctor. Maybe put into practice what we’ve been researching—that would be nice.”

Frederic Schaper studied Biomedical Sciences, completed the Physician–Clinical Investigator research master’s and obtained his PhD in 2019 at UM. He currently works as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard Medical School. He received a number of awards during his studies, including the KNAW Van Leersum Grant.

Frederic Schaper
Maastricht University students and researchers who wish to raise funds—for example, through crowdfunding—can count on the support of the University Fund Limburg/SWOL. The resulting collaboration often yields much more than just donations. Guido Vanderbroeck, who works for the fund, and researcher Sjacko Sobczak discuss their experiences.

Academia and fundraising join forces

Rewind to March 2021, an exciting period for Sjacko Sobczak. She is in the throes of crowdfunding for her research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and dementia. Guido Vanderbroeck, senior adviser at the University Fund Limburg/SWOL, is guiding her campaign. So far they have received many nice donations, but they are still hoping for that one decisive windfall. Then they find themselves in conversation with the renowned women’s cycling team SD Worx. The team members are impressed with Sobczak’s research and, for starters, want to donate their prize money from the Amstel Gold Race. It’s a great moment in the campaign.

The initiative by Team SD Worx is just one of many special moments that Vanderbroeck has experienced in his work. What exactly does the fund do? “The University Fund Limburg/SWOL is UM’s charitable foundation. It was established in 1965 and formed the basis for the founding of the university. To this day, we support research and education, scientists, scholars and students. For this we have a great deal of contact with the external community. It’s safe to say we form the ‘bridge’ between UM and society. This connecting role—bringing together wishes and needs, academia and fundraising—is the best part of my job.”

Together on a tandem

One of the fund’s activities in which connection is vital is crowdfunding. The UM Crowd platform went live three years ago. Sobczak discovered it by accident when she was looking for funding for her project. “I was delighted to make use of it. From the outset, the collaboration with Guido and colleagues went smoothly; we became a real team in no time.”

What is the secret to this successful synergy? “Crowdfunding brings together different passions—the researcher or student’s for their project and our passion for fundraising,” Vanderbroeck says. “We complement each other and learn from one another. The academic is the ‘face’ of the campaign and goes out actively seeking donations; we at the fund provide support in terms of networking, communication and strategy. This often leads to a special tandem construction where you also get to know each other personally. The end of the campaign really feels like a goodbye, like a cold shower.”

500 kilometres through the rain

Professional support for crowdfunding is a must, Sobczak says, not least because a campaign is “a rollercoaster.” “One minute there’s not much going on, the next you’re overwhelmed. It may sound cliché, but although my campaign largely ran during the lockdown, I’ve never felt so connected. I can only be grateful for the initiatives of friends, family, colleagues, even complete strangers. It wasn’t just Team SD Worx, take Benno and Raoul, who cycled for 500 kilometres to raise money for my project, of all things! It was pouring that day, but they did it anyway. Such selflessness—I was deeply touched.”

There were learning moments too, such as dealing with expectations that don’t come to fruition. Vanderbroeck: “In crowdfunding, as with anything else, patience is a virtue. But if you’re willing to bring your project out into the light, work hard and persevere, you’ll almost always be rewarded. People aren’t used to thinking of research as a good cause. Hopefully that will change in the future. After all, universities are becoming more and more dependent on external, private funds.”

Courage of conviction

Sobczak’s campaign has come to an end, but her collaboration with the University Fund Limburg/SWOL will continue. “This autumn we plan to set up a separate Named Fund [a fund within the fund—Ed.] aimed at further expanding research on PTSD, dementia and geriatric psychiatry,” Vanderbroeck says. “It’s great to see that many of our fundraisers can count on external support for the longer term. We continue to follow them after their campaign; we’re still in touch with all of them.”

In the near future, the fund will support crowdfunding campaigns on the themes of brain injury and poverty in Maastricht. There is also room for new projects. “Does Sobczak have a message for prospective fundraisers? ‘Believe in your project, dare to dream and go for it! Don’t be too modest, have the courage of your convictions. Be prepared to step outside your comfort zone. Make space for your crowdfunding—mentally as well as in your diary. But most importantly, enjoy it.’

You can find more information about crowdfunding at www.uff-swol.nl.

Sobczak’s crowdfunding campaign

Sjakko Sobczak raised funds for the TRADE interview. This innovative instrument helps experts to diagnose PTSD even when patients also have other conditions, such as dementia. The ultimate goal is to facilitate better, more humane care. Sobczak raised more than €35,000. The TRADE interview has now been further elaborated and a digital version will be developed. It will be implemented at various health-care institutions in autumn 2021.
Tinkering with microRNAs helps heart cells regenerate

Scientists and cardiologists have known for decades that once a piece of heart muscle has died, for example due to a heart attack, it will never grow back. This is because an adult heart muscle cell is not able to divide in the way a skin cell does to repair a wound. However, a research group from Maastricht University led by Professor Leon de Windt has now shown that tinkering with microRNAs can trigger the regeneration of heart muscle cells. The research was published earlier this month in Nature Communications.

The researchers have discovered the three genes in the DNA of heart muscle cells that contribute to the division of heart muscle cells and muscle tissue repair. These genes rarely occur in an adult human heart, but are strongly expressed in the heart of an embryo, which still has to grow and in which heart muscle cell division thus still takes place.

De Windt warns that the road to clinical application may still be long. “The next step is to find the best way to administer the treatment, perhaps in the form of a ‘lipid nanoparticle,’” as used in the COVID-19 vaccines by Pfizer and Moderna. After that you enter a test phase, which lasts at least seven years and is very expensive. But we’re satisfied with the basis we’ve found: the three ‘golden genes’ that can lead to a heart muscle that does repair itself.”

Maastricht to host European citizens’ summit on the future of Europe

The European Institute of Public Administration (EIIPA) and UM’s Studio Europa have been selected to host a pan-European citizens’ summit as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The conference is a joint initiative of the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament. The Maastricht-based centres of expertise, EIIPA and Studio Europa, will lend their expertise and support to the organisation of the citizens’ panel, which will take place in Maastricht from 14 to 16 January 2022. Other citizens’ panels will be held in Dublin, Florence and Warsaw.
Blow up

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

facebook.com/maastricht.university