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Alum Abdifatah Ahmed Mohamed

From lab technician to FHML student to national decision maker: after spending a number of formative years at Maastricht University, Abdifatah Ahmed Mohamed has returned to his native Somalia. There he aims to make a difference as Director of Policy and Planning at the Ministry of Health and Human Service.

Foreword

Maastricht University
Executive Board
Rianne Letschert, Pamela Habibović and Nick Bos

Have you ever noticed that when you ask somebody how they’re doing, the response is often some variation on busy? Here we would like to take a moment to reflect on one particular professional group: that of young academics. This is not to neglect anyone else within our community, but rather to recognise that if anyone can rightly claim to be busy, it’s them.

The underlying causes have long been explored; by now we know the list off the top of our heads. Increasingly, the consequences are also being discussed openly: the fact that young people are leaving academia. They are no longer willing to put up with the pressure. Rightly, they wonder if there are less stressful (and better paying) jobs elsewhere. Jobs that provide more security in terms of career prospects, and that don’t require them to bring in a pot of money every few years, turning colleagues into competitors. Jobs that give them enough time to do what they were hired to do, instead of having to work on weekends or holidays.

Viewed from this angle, it’s sometimes hard to imagine why people stay in academia at all. Fortunately, there are as many pros as cons. The freedom to feed their curiosity. The urge to genuinely get to the bottom of things. The desire to improve the world. You can call it drive, or passion, or even love. And just as an infatuation does not always submit to a rational explanation, so researchers lose their hearts to academia.

Love makes you blind, which is exactly why it is our duty as university administrators to safeguard the wellbeing of our academics. We are pleased with the recent decision by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to invest, in the coming years, billions of extra euros in relevant themes. People are at last beginning to realise that young academics are the wellspring of innovation for the Netherlands, the rest of Europe and the world. Of course, this is just one part of the solution. The other part is our shared responsibility to pivot academia away from individualism towards ‘team science.’ In the future, this will enable us to share not only the costs, but also the benefits of doing research.
Companies and governments are in dire need of specialists and managers with knowledge of three separate fields: data management, cybersecurity and privacy legislation. It’s a rare combination, prompting the European Centre on Privacy and Cybersecurity (ECPC) at Maastricht University to establish a dedicated Advanced Master’s degree. The programme has met with considerable interest both in Europe and beyond.

Data has been called the new oil of the economy. Using this digital fuel, however, requires many new people with diverse skill sets. “Europe is short some 350,000 specialists,” says Cosimo Monda, director of the ECPC, which was established in 2016 at the Faculty of Law. “That’s a huge number, from cyber-intelligence analysts and cybersecurity experts to information-security officers and data scientists. And that always in combination with the necessary legal expertise.”

Three fields
First there are the digital specialists: people who organise data, identify patterns, create algorithms and devise AI applications. But lawyers are needed, too, to set out the legal standards for data use, protect citizens’ privacy and monitor the ethical aspects. Then there’s security, the domain of people who ensure that data does not fall into the wrong hands. “We’re actually talking about three different fields: data management, governance and security,” Monda says.

Bridging the gap
Knowledge institutions like UM are responding to the growing demand with various bachelor’s and master’s degree programmes. “We were alerted at least five years ago to the need for managers with insight into these three fields, leaders who can bridge the gap between technology, security, legislation and ethics,” says Joyce Groneschild, deputy director of the >
ECPC. “In consultation with the faculty, we initiated the Advanced Master in Privacy, Cybersecurity and Data Management. The accreditation came through in spring last year and we started recruiting.”

Greater substance

Almost 25 students started the programme after the summer of 2022. “Almost all of them have at least a bachelor’s degree, several years of work experience and a job,” Groneschild continues. “Most were familiar with our institute from a previous course. In principle, an Advanced Master is intended for candidates who want to give their job more substance and specialise at a high level in a rapidly changing field. People who combine work and study, with or without the support of their employer. A challenging combination, but this programme gives you something unique. It’s a ticket to a great career as a manager in the world of data.”

Asia and America

The master’s is also open to candidates with a relevant theoretical background who want to switch careers. “As far as I know, we were the first in Europe to offer this combination. And that was reflected in the applications, which came from all over Europe and America. In the second batch we’ve also seen applicants from Asia. We’ve limited this year’s intake to 35 participants. That number may grow in the future, but only if we can guarantee quality. Problem-Based Learning as we use it in Maastricht is very demanding for tutors and involves a lot of personal contact. You have to be able to provide that.”

Top quality

Surely that’s no problem, for a programme that costs €19,500 in tuition fees? Monda, a graduate of the University of Bologna, smiles. “It may seem like a significant amount, but our master’s is not subsidised; ECPC is self-supporting. We pay for the hours worked by the professors and tutors, and fly in experts from various organisations and companies during the two years of the programme. The participants gain top-quality insight into the developments in the three fields. This also benefits their employers by increasing the level of knowledge in their organisations.”

Three times a year, the students travel to Maastricht or Brussels for the experience weeks. “That’s when students, professors and tutors come together for an intensive programme of speakers, guest lecturers and external visits,” Groneschild explains. “They get to look behind the scenes at organisations like Europol, the EU’s Court of Justice and a large software company. These weeks are also ideal for networking and sharing experiences.”

Flying start

The first participants will graduate next year. The second cohort has already started, following the same curriculum of ten modules in the three fields of privacy, cybersecurity and data management, though the content is always being further refined. The initial orientation course will be modified. “To give the participants a flying start,” says Monda. “Our task is to make sure things run as smoothly as possible; our candidates’ time is very valuable. All in all, this master’s lays the foundation for a new generation of leadership in data.”

www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/ecpcmaste
Parents of small children can usually get away with serving apple sauce, especially if it’s the chunk-free variety. Try putting something green on their plate, however, and those little teeth invariably clamp shut. Teaching toddlers and pre-schoolers a healthy diet is not easy. But children are not preordained to dislike vegetables, say PhD candidates Anouk van den Brand and Britt van Belkom. The key to success: persist and reward.

Having a toddler or pre-schooler who refuses food can be exhausting and occasionally frustrating. But it’s by no means exceptional. Picky eating is a well-known phase of early childhood, which in most cases dissipates when the child is around five years of age. Last year, scientists at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN) began studying the underlying cognitive processes of fussy eating. What’s going on in those stubborn little heads?

“Our research is first and foremost relevant for parents who are struggling with their child’s eating behaviour,” says Anouk van den Brand, a PhD candidate and part of the research team. “Early childhood is an important time to establish healthy-eating habits. The fewer vegetables you learn to eat in those early years, the less likely it is that you’ll eat them as an adult.”

From fennel to slime
Van den Brand is following a group of children from the ages of three to five in nurseries and playgroups to find out what distinguishes picky eaters from others. “We give them pieces of tomato and cucumber to taste, plus fennel and celery, which are less familiar,” she explains. “It’s interesting to see the differences between children. Some just like the taste, some eat it even if they dislike it, and others refuse to taste it at all.” What underlies these varying reactions?

One contributing factor is sensitivity to texture. Van den Brand also has the toddlers play with sand and slime, and records their reactions. Children who dislike having sand on their hands or under their feet also tend to struggle with the different textures of food. Another factor that comes into play is expectation: “We look at whether they can distinguish fruit from vegetables. Children who are better at that have a better idea of what to expect and are generally less difficult when it comes to eating.”

Research and society
Text
Jolien Linssen
Photography
Sem Shayne

What’s going on in those stubborn little heads?

Previous research had already shown that repeated exposure works,” Van Belkom says. “If you offer a child a certain vegetable eight to ten times, there’s a significant increase in how tasty they find it. The child gets to know and appreciate the vegetable. Our research shows that a reward system reinforces that effect. Offering a reward increases their willingness to taste the vegetable sooner and more frequently, so they also come to like it more quickly.”

Do try this at home
If your toddler keeps on refusing that broccoli, their advice is to just keep going. “Most parents give up after offering something four times,” says Van Belkom. “It helps to continue up to eight or ten times.”

And don’t reward food with food, as that interferes with the child’s hunger and satiety system. Use stickers, stamps or cards instead, as many parents already do during potty training.

Children should also be exposed to the different forms of vegetables. “For practical reasons, we only work with raw vegetables in our research,” says Van den Brand. “But at home you can easily show them how you turn raw carrots into a stew.” And from time to time, be sure to enjoy a crispy radish or a juicy tomato yourself; imparting healthy habits means modelling them too. “Show children that you eat and enjoy vegetables; they learn so much from that.”

Britt van Belkom studied biomedical sciences in Maastricht and in 2020 started a part-time PhD at UM’s Campus Venlo. Her research focuses on the promotion of healthy eating behaviour in young children and the psychological and environmental factors in the development of overweight and obesity. She also works as a project manager for Brightlands Campus Greenport Venlo.

Anouk van den Brand studied psychology at Utrecht University. In 2021 she started her PhD research at Maastricht University on the differences between picky eaters and other children. Her PhD is part of the major research project “Cognitive processes in learning to like vegetables,” for which Professor Chantal Nederkoorn of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience received an NWO Vici grant.
Opening of the Academic Year 2022/23

The traditional festive launch of the new academic year 2022/23 was held in the Theater aan het Vrijthof on 5 September. The programme included an inspiring keynote speech by the education minister Robbert Dijkgraaf, discussion of the network Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE), and the presentation of the annual Student Award, the Edmond Hustinx Prize and the UM Medallion of Honour.

Keynote speaker
Robbert Dijkgraaf

In her first opening speech as UM president, Rianne Letschert reflected on this year’s theme, ‘(Re)thinking borders: rails of creativity.’ She spoke about internationalisation, the future and pushing boundaries in the broadest sense of the word.

UM was honoured to host Robbert Dijkgraaf for his first official opening of an academic year as Minister of Education, Culture and Science. In his speech ‘When knowledge changes,’ he addressed the education sector as a whole. “We have to tilt the vertical image of education into a fan in order to break down unnecessary walls between and within institutions,” he said.

Young Universities for the Future of Europe
The YUFE network was also spotlighted during the ceremony. YUFE is a European partnership between various universities and three non-academic partners that makes education borderless. UM and YUFE student Eveline van Eend shared her insights and experiences. YUFE student Nis Hansen moderated a panel discussion between minister Robbert Dijkgraaf and Marieke van den Berg, HR director of YUFE partner Adeco. George Apeitos, a YUFE student at the University of Cyprus, also joined via video link.

Awards ceremonies

Daniel Cámpora Pérez from the Faculty of Science and Engineering received this year’s Edmond Hustinx Prize for his research at the intersection of physics and computer science. Cámpora developed the software for a data filter for one of the experiments at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN).

Rector Pamela Habibović presented the Student Award 2022 to the co-founders of Shelter Our Students Maastricht. This prize is awarded annually in recognition of a notable social or cultural achievement alongside the recipient’s studies. The jury praised the trio for their efforts to tackle the student housing shortage in Maastricht, including by setting up a couch-surfing platform.

Finally, Ineke Wolfhagen, associate professor of Educational Development and Research, received the UM Medallion of Honour for her contribution to education at UM.
insights that found their way into the book.”

lines. My new book, which is almost finished, is about

Mauritius is less trivial than you might think. I learnt to
got used to this sport again during my sabbatical in

“Last thing I am is a stuntwoman,” Heijltjes

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and coming across a professor who was speaking with

Academia fascinated me more. During high school I

Heijltjes nonetheless found her calling. “Ultimately,

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My sister attended the conservatory of music and

studied in Moscow. I abandoned my own musical

aspirations pretty quickly, but I’ve always retained that

interest in music.”

Heijltjes nonetheless found her calling. “Ultimately, academia fascinated me more. During high school I still flirted with the idea of going to Nijenrode. But I’ll never forget entering a classroom during an introduction day at UM [then the Rijksuniversiteit Limburg] and coming across a professor who was speaking with a student as equal. That made a deep impression on me. Over the years the university has always held onto that open, intriguing and human focus. Something new was happening here. Not for a single day have I ever regretted that choice.”

Internship in the US

During her studies, she did an internship in the US and attended Indiana University in Bloomington as an exchange student. “I spent a year in America. I was having some doubts about whether to pursue a business career or to seek refuge in a PhD. Although the business side has always attracted me, in the end I was really cut out for the work that I’ve been doing with great pleasure for so many years now. I did my PhD and became a professor in 2006. In 2008 I was appointed director at what later became UMIO.” UMIO is a privately funded unit within SBE that offers management education and courses for professionals. The portfolio encompasses MBA programmes, executive master’s programmes, tailor-made courses, management courses and coaching.

“From the outset, I felt like a fish in water. All my interests converged here. The international academic context, with frequent travel and contact with students, academics and businesspeople from all over the world. Plus my own background in organisational strategy, leadership development and social relevance. The UMIO slogan is ‘creating meaningful impact together’. I still think that’s a strong one-liner that I believe in wholeheartedly.”

Coming home

Now she is set to take on her new role as dean of the SBE, currently home to over 600 employees and 5000 students. “Somewhere it feels like coming home. SBE has always had that spirit where good ideas are brought to fruition, where innovation can take place. That free spirit and pleasant atmosphere still prevail. Obviously that’s something you want to hold onto. At the same time, you need an overarching purpose, a collective, overarching raison d’être. I think SBE can contribute to solving social challenges such as sustainability or the energy transition. You can’t address major issues like these through the lens of a single discipline. You have to work from various perspectives, but also from a joint sense of urgency. Also, SBE will have to continue seeking cooperation with the business sector and wider society. We’re not closed off in an ivory tower, but embedded in society. As dean, I want to foster those internal connections within SBE and UM that facilitate social relevance. That way we can create a meaningful impact together.”

After her trip to Mauritius and a spot of rest, Heijltjes is ready for the next leap. With her forthcoming book, her appointment as dean and her future antics as a flying trapeze artist, it’s safe to say she is living up to her own working title—A matter of courage. »

You’d never guess it, sitting across from the thoughtful-looking woman who has just been appointed dean of the School of Business and Economics. But still waters run deep: Mariëlle Heijltjes is also a flying trapeze artist. And one who doesn’t shy away from a pelican, straddle whip, backend hocks off or layout. “Well, there’s always a safety net,” she grins.

Authority

Heijltjes is an authority in the field of managerial behaviour and leadership development. We speak in the renowned Maastricht café De Tribunal, not long before she is due to attend a major management conference in Seattle. She is no stranger to operating in an international context. Part of her childhood was spent in Germany, where her father was stationed as an air-force officer. During her high school days at the Rijksscholengemeenschap in Roermond and the Sint-Janscollege in Hoensbroek, the idea of going abroad never lost its appeal.

“As an 11-year-old I spent a few weeks living with a colleague of my father’s in Southampton. I picked up English quickly. I still speak German, and during my writing sabbatical in Mauritius I dusted off my French. I’m grateful my work has allowed me to travel. I once joined a trade mission to Australia, and I’ve worked in Japan, China and the US. Other cultures appeal to me. They shape you.”

Second cohort

Heijltjes is a product of Maastricht University. In 1985 she was among only the second cohort of business-economics students. “When I take office as SBE dean, I’ll be the first alum and the first woman in that role. I’ve always thought fondly of the school.”

Did she always aspire to an academic or teaching career? “To be honest, at first I didn’t really know what I wanted. I had broad interests. I come from a family with a strong interest in culture, and many musicians. My sister attended the conservatory of music and studied in Moscow. I abandoned my own musical aspirations pretty quickly, but I’ve always retained that interest in music.”

Heijltjes has taught in the executive MBA programmes at Maastricht and Reykjavik universities, as well as the TRIUM Global Executive MBA offered jointly by HEC Paris, the London School of Economics and NYU’s Stern School of Business. She is also a certified Business Coach. Her research on managerial behaviour has been published in numerous international journals.

In addition to her UM roles, Heijltjes sits on the international advisory boards of a Spanish, a French and a Peruvian business school (EADA, IESEG and CENTRUM PUCP, respectively). She also serves on the Supervisory Board of the Maastricht Exhibition and Conference Centre (MECC).
They call it a baptism of fire. Karin Faber had only just been made director of patient care at the Maastricht UMC+ when the crisis broke out. She wasn’t taken by surprise, however. “As soon as the first patients were diagnosed in the Netherlands, the hospital installed a crisis policy team that took measures like no longer shaking hands so promptly that people gave us strange looks: what on earth are you doing? We were able to keep staff engaged through informational meetings and, later, weekly live streams. It was nice to see everyone rolling up their sleeves towards the same goal.”

Daan Westra realised covid was “a big thing” when the measures prevented fellow researchers from attending meetings at the hospital. Under ordinary circumstances, Westra studies how hospitals are organised and managed. He decided to shift his focus and immediately received full cooperation. “We concentrated on how the five Limburg hospitals were responding to the crisis, in particular what it meant for the deployment of staff. Every three months we administered a questionnaire: how do employees feel, are things getting better or worse? We produced interim reports so the hospitals could adjust their policies accordingly.”

Looking back, Faber sees many things that went well. “Everyone, from high to low, went into ‘cooperation mode’; there was a strong sense of togetherness. We were also proud of how quickly we got things done. A teaching hospital can be a cumbersome organisation, but the MUMC+ rapidly set up a social team to monitor the psychological and social burden.”

Short-stay units were turned into covid wards, and suddenly employees were dealing with several deaths a day. “That’s a huge emotional burden for those who’d never experienced something like that before. Then it’s important to have a bit of success too.”

In retrospect, of course, there are also things that could have been done better. Faber cites the division that arose between employees working from home and employees on the front line. “It was difficult to keep the remote workers involved. That’s something we should organise better.” As Westra sees it, in a crisis things go wrong by definition. “You make decisions based on insufficient information, but you have to make them. Our research shows that adaptability is important. You make a guess at where things might be heading, act on that and reflect later to see what you can learn. Is this necessary, can it be done differently? And it’s a recurring cycle.” In this sense, every measure taken is an opportunity to learn.
Daan Westra is assistant professor of Healthcare Management at the Department of Health Services Research at Maastricht University. He is coordinating a study funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw) on how hospitals are adapting to the covid pandemic and its effects on staff deployment. He recently received a Veni grant for his research on networks and partnerships in healthcare.

Appreciation
Westra cites a lack of appreciation from society as the main cause of staff turnover and shortages. "Nurses couldn't fathom it. 'I'm working day and night, doing my utmost to help people, and just up the road there's a huge festival where nobody's sticking to the measures'" Faber. "People are becoming less understanding than in the early days about delays in treatment." Both are positive about the Integral Care Agreement (IZA), which stresses themes such as reducing regulatory pressure and offering development opportunities.

Appreciation is also essential in the workplace, Faber notes. "Healthcare professionals are intrinsically motivated, you have to give them the feeling that the work they're doing is valuable. Let them decide for themselves how this should be done." Westra: "You're talking about crucial factors such as a good team atmosphere. How does my manager treat me? Will I have access to development opportunities? This has direct consequences for the wellbeing of employees and thus for how well they can take care of others."

A new wave
Both are loath to predict a new corona wave. "A big difference now," Faber says, "is that the most vulnerable people and the healthcare staff were vaccinated fairly quickly. Still, there may be other variants, there may be a flu wave. Experience has shown that in this hospital we can deal with a great deal." Westra: "Even if there's no new covid wave, that's not to say all is well—there is another problem." Indeed: what impact will the consequences of the new poverty have on hospitals?

Westra is critical of the current assumptions around catching up with regular care. "People take it for granted that now covid has receded somewhat, hospitals will be able to catch up quickly on regular care. But that's not how it works. Even without covid, hospitals tend to be fully booked, they don't have hundreds of employees hanging around with nothing to do." He questions whether staff can be expected to handle all that catch-up care in any case. "They can't just do twice as much as normal. After such an intensive covid period, they need rest too."

Healthcare demand
And so we stumble upon what they both see as the real problem exposed by the covid crisis: the shortage of healthcare workers. To some extent, preventive medicine and digital resources can relieve the burden. The crisis triggered an explosion in digital resources, Westra says—a turning point that was not initiated earlier, despite the many studies stressing its importance. But neither believes these solutions will suffice.

Ultimately, the ever-increasing demand for healthcare will have to be reduced. "We can't avoid putting this up for discussion," Faber says. "We need more information on what treatments are useful or not, and we should discuss this openly with patients more often. The compensation system should also be geared along these lines; at present it's focused on interventions and treatments."

Karin Faber is director of patient care at the Maastricht UMC+ and director of the expertise unit on Quality Innovation and Research. During the covid-19 pandemic, she was a member of the crisis policy team. She is also professor of Neuromuscular Disorders at the Department of Neurology and the Mental Health & Neuroscience research institute of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences.
I want to make girls like me stronger

It’s a rare feat, but not impossible. The first paper ever written by Jiaru Zheng, a second-year bachelor’s student in Digital Society, was published as a journal article. The paper focused on the pop music album 3811, in which singer Tan Weiwei advocates for the status of women in China. “It’s the first pop album I know of that addresses topical women’s issues such as domestic violence and gender inequality in China. That’s very brave, and I admire her for it.”
Tan Weiwei is not widely known in China, particularly among Zheng's generation. The 40-year-old singer is seen as neither young nor commercial enough. “She’s classically trained, sings at a high level. It’s not easy to sing along to. My generation prefers rappers and hip-hop. Kris Wu is a good example—he’s very popular.”

For Zheng, Tan Weiwei is interesting not only musically, but sociologically too. “She dares to point out the negative sides of how the Chinese view women. Usually the emphasis is on a positive ideal: that Chinese girls should always be happy, sweet, gentle and charming. That’s a traditional male image of women. It implies that for a girl, getting an education is not important. But getting married and having children is—you should take care of your husband and children.”

These values continue to prevail, especially in rural and inland areas. Zheng herself grew up in Guangzhou, a large, prosperous city near Hong Kong, and her parents, who both studied English, are relatively open-minded. “My mother works and can otherwise do what she wants, but only because my father approves. Which is clearly not right. The man is the boss and the woman is seen as a second-class citizen—that’s a big problem. The Chinese government wants to convey a purely positive image; abuses such as violence against women are ignored. You won’t find anything about it on Chinese Twitter.”

De Beauvoir in China

Zheng was aware from an early age of the unequal position of men and women in China. One book that influenced her deeply is The second sex by Simone de Beauvoir. “She says women don’t take care of each other, they take care of the opposite sex: their father, their husband, their son. After reading her book, I wanted to be the kind of woman who took care of other women. I want to fight alongside other women for equal rights for men and women, even if that’s not easy in China. Fortunately, more and more women of my generation see the same need.”

According to Zheng, the strongest feminist movement at the moment is the MeToo movement which is banned in China. But there are other promising initiatives by and for women. “The government mandates nine years of education: six years of primary and three years of secondary education. After that you can, but don’t have to, spend another three years at high school. For many girls from poor families, that’s not an option. If a choice has to be made, boys are given precedence. But a woman named Guimei Zhang has started a free high school for girls all over China with her own money. That’s very important: equal opportunities for men and women start with education. Many girls who went to that school are now doctors or teachers.”

More and more women of her generation are choosing to study instead of getting married. “My ultimate goal is to get a PhD. That’s what I want above all else.” Her first academic publication means a lot to her. “It’s hugely inspiring, and who knows, maybe I’ll also be able to publish my bachelor’s thesis.”

Freedom is happiness

Sociology, communication, culture, women’s studies; these are the topics that interest her. Because science, economics and technology are seen as more valuable, Chinese university programmes in her fields of interest are still in the initial stage of development, Zheng says. So she was pleased when she came across the Bachelor of Digital Society in Maastricht. “It’s a very good, professional programme that explores sociological themes in depth. And here in the Netherlands you’re free. I want to wear the clothes I want to wear, I want to be a hot girl; in China that will get you labelled as a whore. Last year I went to the Pride Parade in Amsterdam—something like that is unimaginable in China.” She plans to stay in the Netherlands for the time being, and hopes her studies will contribute to a fairer world for women.
Eternal Blue: a reminder of the cyberattack

A work of art commemorating the cyberattack of 23 December 2019 is now on display in the main hall of the Aula at the Minderbroedersberg. In collaboration with the Arts and Heritage Committee, artist Richard Vijgen created an installation that depicts the vulnerability of our world to digital threats.

Eternal Blue is a screen in the shape of a clock or globe. Thousands of illuminated LED lights portray the approximately 10,000 attempts to hack Maastricht University systems every day. The colours represent the different countries from which the attacks originate. In close to real time, the ever-changing image of Eternal Blue shows that cybersecurity is a constant struggle.
Increasing numbers of young people reportedly make regular use of low doses of LSD or other illegal substances to improve their cognition. Disquiet among parents and educational institutions is growing. Nadia Hutten investigated this phenomenon during her PhD, supervised by Professor Jan Ramaekers. How dangerous is this type of ‘microdosing’? And does it actually enhance students’ performance?

No, Hutten has never used drugs to improve her own mood or cognition. Nor does she personally know anyone who does. Yet this type of drug use lies at the heart of the research for which she recently obtained her PhD. “I kind of fell into this field, building on interesting previous projects at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience,” she says.

**Cocaine and creativity**

Hutten investigated whether students actually function better after using drugs. Word has it that cocaine makes you more creative, or that a microdose of LSD helps you study faster. But is it true? “Not per se,” says Hutten. She asked healthy volunteers between the ages of 18 and 30 to perform various tasks after taking cocaine, cannabidiol, LSD or a placebo. “Only a minority of participants reported feeling or performing significantly better. That being said, we did measure a subtle improvement in some people’s responsiveness while performing the tasks.”

“Nadia’s research demonstrates once again that drugs affect everybody differently,” says her supervisor Jan Ramaekers. “We should point out, however, that this study wasn’t double-blind. Some participants were aware they’d been given either a placebo or drugs; the resulting expectation can influence what they report.”

**Just a coffee then**

Research like Hutten’s can shed light on the actual impact of low-dose drugs, something we still know little about. How dangerous is regular use? And does that danger extend to the unlawful use of medicines, such as Ritalin? “Although long-term data is lacking, we don’t expect microdosing psychedelics like LSD to cause long-term harm,” Ramaekers says. “We do know that abuse of other substances, such as amphetamine →
mines, can lead to health damage. We see less danger in the use of LSD: it’s not a toxic substance and is known to be relatively safe. At the same time, we don’t expect people to perform better after a low dose of LSD than after a cup of coffee. The effects are minimal.”

New claims
Society has long been preoccupied with the downsides of drugs. In recent years, however, attention has turned to potential upsides and clinical applications: the use of cannabis as a painkiller, for example, or mushrooms as antidepressants. “These developments give rise to a more positive view of drugs, which in turn results in new uses, such as microdosing psychedelics when studying,” Ramaekers says. “It’s important to respond to these new claims and practices from a scientific perspective. We have to acknowledge their presence, not immediately dismiss them as nonsense, and above all examine them with a critical eye.”

Distorted picture
With rising public interest in the topic, the media has begun to report more frequently on drugs to improve cognition. These messages sometimes present a distorted picture. “One recent headline reported that 20% to 30% of students use cognition-enhancing drugs, but that’s not systematic use,” Hutten says. “It’s mainly students who’ve tried it to cope with study stress or for the sake of experimentation. We don’t see that as a major problem in society. But it can be a signal for university administrators to consider issues such as whether the study load is too intense.”

“We need to communicate transparently about LSD microdosing,” Ramaekers adds. “All the media attention for the potential applications of microdosing psychedelics creates false expectations. The first controlled studies, like Nadia’s, show that the effects are negligible. But few publications report on this and thereby temper users’ expectations. The media and research institutes have an important role to play here. People need a realistic picture of the effects of a low dose of drugs, so they can weigh up the pros and cons for themselves.”

Not mapped out
How does Hutten look back on her PhD research? “It was an instructive process, thanks in part to Jan and my two other supervisors. Jan in particular taught me to view things from a broader perspective.” Ramaekers is satisfied too. “Nadia has developed both as a scientist and as a person.”

Hutten’s work offers ample opportunities for follow-up research. “We could zoom in on the clinical applications of microdosing drugs, or on the impact of low doses on different types of productivity or creativity. I’m also working on a study with older participants, instead of students,” she says. In other words, there is no shortage of work to be done. And after that, Hutten hopes to stay in the world of research. “Which is definitely not to say my career is already mapped out.”

→ Nadia Hutten chose Maastricht University for its Problem-Based Learning approach. She obtained her bachelor’s in Health Sciences and master’s in Neuropsychology at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. Her PhD dissertation is entitled ‘With a little help from my “friends”. The mood- and cognition-enhancing effects of illicit substances.’

→ Jan Ramaekers is professor of psychopharmacology at Maastricht University. His research group focuses primarily on the relationship between drug use and behaviour. Ramaekers studied psychology in Groningen, specialising in experimental psychology. In 1989 he relocated to UM, where he was closely involved in the establishment of the Institute of Human Psychopharmacology and the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience.

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They can do it already: deliver pizzas and medicines, inspect windows for cleanliness, monitor crowds. And all that autonomously, without a human driver. But how do you ensure that drones comply with laws and regulations? Professor of Private Law and technology expert Gijs van Dijck translates legal rules such that drones can understand and implement them. “For the time being, I don’t envisage an airspace full of swarms of drones.”

Gijs van Dijck is in teacher mode. Do I know what the drone’s natural enemy is? No, I say—I didn’t realise it has enemies. Tech haters, perhaps, or activist opponents? People who fear it will land on their heads? Wrong. The correct answer is breeding birds; they tend to mistake drones for birds of prey and go on the attack. “The pilot then extracts the drone from the area.” Van Dijck explains. “You don’t want to kill birds, nor do you want to damage the drone.”

This was an unexpected discovery during a series of test flights at the High Tech Campus in Eindhoven, carried out by companies and researchers such as Van Dijck. The drones operated independently; instead of a human pilot giving commands, the driving was done by software. Some drones checked whether windows were due for a wash, others experimented with pizza delivery and the detection of unauthorised persons. “The aim was to see whether the infrastructure works and whether it’s possible to make a business case that people want to invest in,” Van Dijck says. The Eindhoven trials kicked off a series of demonstrations in five European cities, in which drones will perform tasks like observing crowds and transporting medicines.

Fly safely
But what does all this have to do with the law? “Our research group translates laws and regulations in such a way that drones can read, interpret and execute them. They have to be able to understand legal rules and comply automatically. Somebody has to determine, or at least check, what they are and aren’t allowed to do.” This is especially difficult during flight, he explains. “Legal rules are often formulated vaguely. But ‘fly safely’ is of no use to a drone. It wants to know what it can and can’t do in this case.”

Liability
What a drone may or may not do is largely regulated in what Van Dijck describes as drone-specific legislation. These are rules that apply throughout Europe, and regulate not only technical specifications (weight, speed, wingspan) but also the actual flying of the drone. Hobbyists need a kind of driver’s license, and not all types of drones are allowed to fly every-

where. “You’re not going to get permission to launch and announce it when you do.”

Other risks are covered by generic legislation and regulations. For example, various liability laws apply to drone use, although open questions remain. Who is responsible if a pizza—or the drone itself—falls on someone’s head? “In the case of an independent drone, this is a thorny issue. Is the operator or the client liable? Or both?” Liability also exists for movable assets, but aircraft are excluded: is the drone an unmanned aircraft? “We try to interpret and answer these kinds of questions from a legal perspective.”

Privacy law
In the domain of privacy law, existing rules cover issues relating to mass surveillance or the possible use of drones for facial recognition. The research group encountered problems in this area when inspecting the window glass in buildings. “How do you instruct a drone to check the windows, but not to record what’s going on behind them? The drone has to be taught what it can and can’t do in this case.”

Van Dijck was asked to join the project for his expertise in the field of innovative technology. He is director of the Maastricht Law and Tech Lab, an interdisciplinary research group composed of lawyers and computer scientists. They use data science and artificial intelligence, such as machine learning, to better understand and apply the law. “In all modesty, we’re one of the few research groups worldwide that can do this. We have the required legal and technical know-how.”

Swarms of drones
What will fly above our heads in the world of tomorrow? A decade from now, will the skies be filled with drones? Van Dijck thinks things are unlikely to change that fast. Any breakthrough hinges on the business prospects of automatic drones. Is a home-delivery pizza drone cheaper than a normal pizza delivery? “The effect of technology is often overestimated in the short term and underestimated in the longer term. I think this is the case with drones too. I don’t see us looking up in ten years and sighing: busy day up there! But at some point, that day will come.”

The effect of technology is often overestimated in the short term and underestimated in the longer term.
From polarisation, misinformation and populists at home to geopolitical pressure from abroad: European democracy is feeling the strain. In an effort to uphold and expand one of its core values, the EU is financing a research project on the promotion of democracy. Professor Giselle Bosse, an Eastern Europe expert at FASoS, leads the work package ‘Democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes.’

Earlier this year, the EU awarded a Horizon grant worth €3 million to a consortium of 14 universities for a project called ‘Embracing change: Overcoming obstacles and advancing democracy in the European neighbourhood’ (EMBRACE). So where is this European neighbourhood? “I’m not overly keen on the name,” Bosse says. “But you can think of all the countries around the Mediterranean and the former Soviet countries.”

Her part of the project revolves around economic modernisation and its interaction with democratisation. The focus is on authoritarian and hybrid regimes, the latter combining democratic traits (e.g. frequent and direct elections) with autocratic ones (e.g. political repression). “We’ll explore whether the EU’s democracy-promotion tools are still up to the task, and how they need to be adjusted in a constantly changing global context.”

Naïve economic beast

“Not everyone wants to become like the EU—and that’s perfectly legitimate,” Bosse says. In her view, the EU has fallen for the naïve belief that democracy flows logically from commerce. “The EU is inherently an economic beast that approaches the rest of the world through trade agreements. But does this alone actually promote democracy?”

The two big roadblocks, she says, are Eastern Europe’s deeply ingrained corruption problem and state capture by oligarchs, who impede reform processes through political influence or dominance of the media. “Ukraine, for example, had great difficulties developing a public prosecutor’s office that could rein in the oligarchs’ monopolies.”

Accommodating Russian sensibilities

Geopolitics also plays a significant role. “Russia’s interference in Ukraine’s fight for democracy is only one example. Armenia had prepared a trade agreement with the EU, only to pull out at the last minute after…”
Giselle Bosse is associate professor of EU External Relations and Jean Monnet Chair at Maastricht University’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She is also co-director of the Centre for European Research in Maastricht (CERiM).

The EU has fallen for the naïve belief that democracy flows logically from commerce. After Russia’s 2014 war against Ukraine, the EU has been less ambitious in supporting countries like Georgia and Moldova on their path towards democratisation and reform.

Bosse points out that the eastward enlargement of the EU brought with it not only new members, but also new neighbours, such as Ukraine. “The EU wanted good relations and no hard borders. At the same time, there was a sense of enlargement fatigue, resulting in reluctance to give these countries the prospect of joining the EU eventually.” Instead they were to become the European ‘neighbourhood,’ which initially included Russia. But Russia rejected this idea, preferring to remain ‘strategic partners.’

As an example, Croatia’s candidature lasted over 10 years, and it had the advantage of not being at war. “Candidates are not expected to fulfil all the membership criteria already. Under its association agreement, Ukraine already implemented many reforms, particularly in banking and public procurement. They still only score 3.2 out of 10 for corruption [10 being the least corrupt]—nothing to be proud of—but Poland was at 3.6 and Romania 3.1 the year before joining.”

Close to home
For her research, Bosse has visited Ukraine many times. “The Maidan, or independence square, where more than 100 people died fighting for democracy and freedom, left a strong impression on me.” The current Russian invasion has hit hard. “I recognise all the places in Kyiv they show on the news.”

Bosse speaks of friends and colleagues who are unable to leave the country because of conscription, who have relatives stuck in war zones, or whose relatives have been killed or reported missing. “Everyone has a story like that. I got to know many Ukrainians when we were students. Now there’s this massive rupture in their lives.”

What worries Bosse most is that ‘the West’ is gradually losing interest in the war. “International media coverage has gone down markedly in the past two months. Ukrainian flags are disappearing from windows and flagpoles, donations are decreasing. That makes a project like EMBRACE all the more important. We’re working together with scholars from Ukraine to analyse how the EU can best support the country’s reform efforts in the coming years, and to ensure that Ukraine and its people stay high on the agenda of EU policymakers.”

The Prematurian candidate?
Now the EU is offering Ukraine candidate status not only to boost democratic reform in the country, but also to make a political statement. “Ukraine isn’t suddenly ‘more ready’ to join the EU.” Even those countries that previously acceded to the EU fell short on the reform indicators set out in the EU’s Copenhagen criteria from 1993, Bosse says.

“Not even the Netherlands is implementing all of the rules and regulations—take the lagging food-safety standards due to the agricultural lobby.” EU membership is by no means a panacea for Poland’s legal issues, the situation in Hungary or corruption issues in general. “But there’s an overall trend towards the better. If you look at press freedom, Estonia and Lithuania are now ranked among the top in Europe; far ahead of the Netherlands.”

Chemistry in the kitchen
Annelotte Huiskes
Photography
Arjen Schmitz

Professor of Clinical Chemistry
Yvonne Henskens

A peek inside the kitchens of UM employees
In February 2020 Yvonne Henskens received a message from a man asking what he could do with smoked mozzarella. She sent a few links with recipes and heard nothing more from him. “After 10 days I was curious if it had worked and got the answer: ‘Sorry, it was incredible’. I’d left a line from another recipe, for piccalilli, that said you should salt the vegetables, so it was way too salty. There was only one way to make it up to him—I offered to bake him a cake.”

One thing led to another and the first coffee date was a hit. “We had so much in common: passion for food, nature, animals and small, beautiful things. Of course I’d also checked him out on Facebook and saw that he posted about food as much as I did. What man does that? Photos of dishes that were successful, but also those that had failed. I was so impressed by that. In the end, he cooked for me: a kind of kale stampet with meatballs hidden in it—delicious.”

**Passion for eggs**

For Henskens, cooking means making everything yourself. Barbecue with homemade corn tortillas, limoncello, mayonnaise, bitterballen met zuurvlees (which even made it into the Volkskrant)—you can make everything from scratch. She enjoys making her own cheese; she’d like to make more time for that. But her greatest love is the humble egg. “I’m glad I now have chickens again. I want to write another cookbook about the egg, with illustrations by my sister. I think you should do it while it’s warm.”

**Burgundian roots**

The Limburg native inherited her love of food and cooking from home. Her parents are both from Bocholtz. Her father is a chemist and her mother worked with the nuns in Bocholtz, that was where she fine-tuned her cooking skills. “She has a very traditional style: pastries, potato croquettes, knoedel [cold platter], knie in de zoer [rabbit stew]. My mother had the same penchant for making everything herself. She got that from her mother, and passed it on to my sister and me. Every Sunday we ate at my grandmother’s, and there’d be a table full of homemade cakes. Parties mean food, that’s a very Limburg idea. I’m no good at making those cold platters like my mother does. It starts with how you chop the ingredients, but I definitely got it from her. The cake recipes are still hers. And her sponge cake recipe is unbeatable. The secret is that you have to beat it while it’s warm.”

When you boil an egg, the result depends on the temperature, the conditions and your equipment. If you ask ten people to boil an egg for four minutes, you’ll get different results. The same holds for coagulation tests: I have all sorts of devices to measure coagulation, but they’re still not good enough.”

**Sources of inspiration**

Even at the age of 12, Henskens had the compulsory cook to cook for herself. This she had to do in secret: her mother considered the kitchen her domain. “One evening I made pizzas with a friend. Of course we made a huge mess. We thought we’d cleaned everything up, but my mother must have found traces the next day. She didn’t say anything though.” Unlike her mother, Henskens was mainly interested in cuisines from other countries and cultures. “When I was 16, I bought this Japanese cookbook. My father had to go to Japan for work, but he didn’t like the food there. I was intrigued. I still use that cookbook.” Later, she began to travel to get a proper taste of other cultures. “I had a great time in Asia, but actually I love all cuisines. I can’t go to a country without buying a cookbook. I just bought this one in London: The Philosophy of Cheese—lovely.”

**Cooking buddies**

Proudly she shows off a well-thumbed notebook that is almost falling apart. “This is my recipe book from 1985, when I went to study in Wageningen. I collected all the recipes I liked and wrote them down in my best handwriting. My mother’s lasagne, goulash, mayonnaise. My first boyfriend’s mother’s potato puffs.”

In Wageningen she made friends with Myreen Minnaar, with whom she later set up the food blog. They lived in the same student flat and both enjoyed cooking. “Especially from the Tip Culinair and Allerhande, the Albert Heijn magazine. We cooked and ate with flatmates, but were very critical of their meals. We gave Maggie the nickname Maggie Saroma, because she only ever made Saroma pudding from a box; we thought that was disgusting and just not done.”

**Complementary**

She also enjoys cooking with her current partner René, though they have very different styles. “When one of us is cooking, the other is the helper and vice versa. I don’t want to change his style. He’s always making platters with many different snacks, and cooks from intuition, without recipes. I can’t do that. And he has no interest in things like making bread or cheese himself. In that sense we complement each other well.”

Her latest purchase was a knödel (boiled dumplings) cookbook. “That was René’s influence; he’s a fan of German cuisine. I’d never liked them, but I recently tried two recipes and they were delicious. It’s such a nice book, it’s also about the origins of the knödel. Who wouldn’t want to know when the first dumpling was made?” she laughs. Now we just have to wait until she puts the recipes on her blog so we can all enjoy them.
From lab technician to FHML student to national decision maker: after spending a number of formative years at Maastricht University, Abdifatah Ahmed Mohamed has returned to his native Somalia. There he aims to make a difference as Director of Policy and Planning at the Ministry of Health and Human Service.

Potential

After more than 30 years of civil war, the country indeed faces many health challenges. “We’re under-resourced financially, but also in terms of personnel and infrastructure. And we’re working within very immature institutions. It’s a fragmented system that relies heavily on donor support from institutions like EU or the World Bank.”

Mohamed grew up in a small village in the south of Somalia. “The soil is fertile; we have enough rainfall and a river. The natural environment could support prosperity.” Before the war, the village had a sugar factory, an electric grid and a railway. Now the country suffers from a lack of infrastructure and struggles with preventable tropical diseases.

“I knew things could be better. I was always ambitious and eager to learn.” He won a scholarship to train as a lab technician in Nairobi and, after returning, joined the Doctors Without Borders clinic in his village.

“I understood what they needed from me, so I grew quickly within the organisation.” Mohamed went on to advise on cultural issues in their office in Norway. “I liked the work, but I felt a bit helpless; I was desperate to change things, so I looked for a way to have more of an impact.”

“This is where I have to be”

As noble as his motivations were, the next step could hardly have been more mundane: “I googled ‘public health in the Netherlands in English,’ he laughs. “I found UM and thought: this is it! This is where I have to be.” That feeling was confirmed during his studies. “I also came to appreciate how important it was for me to gain more knowledge in the health sector if I really wanted to make a difference.”

This ambition led him to the master’s programmes in Healthcare Policy Innovation & Management and Global Health. “It’s exactly what’s urgently needed in Somalia. Global Health has really shaped how I view big international organisations in the field. It gave me a new perspective on what globalisation actually means.”

Mohamed went on to advise on cultural issues in their office in Norway. “I liked the work, but I felt a bit helpless; I was desperate to change things, so I looked for a way to have more of an impact.”

During the programme he worked on diverse global health projects. “We collaborated remotely with people from many backgrounds on different continents, from Canada to India, China and Sudan.” He made lasting friendships from the international cohort, as well as building up a professional network. “I’m still in touch with people doing relevant PhDs or working for the WHO, the Swiss Tropical Institute and so on.”

Formative experience

Mohamed looks back on his time at UM with fondness and gratitude. “Maastricht shaped the man I am today—I use the knowledge and in particular the skills I acquired during my three degrees on a daily basis.” Still, it was a challenge, both academically and personally: “It was a new life, a new city, many new cultures… In my first year, I didn’t really get Maastricht. By the third year I was helping others settle in.”

That UM is highly international is hardly news. “But you don’t appreciate just how international it is unless you stay in Maastricht for a bit. For me, it was eye-opening to learn about the differences between European cultures as well: Dutch, Belgian, French, Spanish, Italian and so forth.”

Swearing at drivers

Mohamed appreciated the straightforward Dutch communication style and the lack of hierarchy. His time here certainly had a lasting impact. “I got used to driving in the Netherlands. Upon my return to Mogadishu, where traffic is a lot less rule-based, I found myself swearing at the other drivers. That’s when I realised I had changed,” he laughs.

“I love Maastricht, it still feels like home. I can’t wait to visit again. Still, I always knew I’d have to come back and do my part to help Somalia.” Mogadishu, already overpopulated and growing ever larger, has a thriving nightlife and a beach. Mohamed may have his work cut out for him, but he is happy and confident that Somalia can thrive.

To good health!
Migration is normal

Jessica Hagen-Zanker works for ODI, an international, independent think tank that conducts research and advises governments and NGOs on global issues such as migration. The Maastricht-trained senior research fellow notes that politicians tend to shy away from humane and practical solutions. “Migration is at an all-time high. We need to support migrants, and not just for humanitarian reasons. In Europe, we need people from outside to keep our economies going.”

With the continuing influx of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, as well as refugees from other areas that are less frequently in the news, these are exciting times for researchers working on migration issues. And that’s an understatement, says Jessica Hagen-Zanker. On behalf of ODI, she is coordinating several major research projects that are intended to shed light on various migration flows. The research focuses mainly on the effectiveness of policies.

“ODI’s goal is to expose injustice and inequality,” she explains. “Many countries try to reduce migration through measures like sending refugee boats back across the Mediterranean, or the British government’s plan to fly refugees to Rwanda. That not only clashes with international law, but it’s also not an effective way to prevent migration. All it does is make migration less safe and more expensive. People come anyway, looking for a better life. Historically speaking, it’s quite normal.”

Short-term politics

Ner is keeping migrants out economically wise. “Throughout Western Europe there are huge shortages of manpower. In the manufacturing industry, healthcare, logistics, actually in most sectors. Migrants are a key solution, but politicians are afraid that embracing more welcoming policies will cost them votes and power. Nobody’s working on structural solutions, it’s all short-term politics. With our research, we bring facts to light and propose solutions.”

Global think tank

ODI was founded in 1960 and now has more than 200 employees. In recent years it has been working to decolonise its research and engagement agenda, for instance, by dropping the old name Overseas Development Institute, with its colonial connotations and focus on ‘developing’ countries. Today the organisation is regarded as a serious global think tank on sustainability, economic development and social issues. And thus also migration, Hagen-Zanker’s field of expertise. She joined ODI over 12 years ago, after studying International Economics and obtaining her PhD in Maastricht, where she also worked as coordinator of the master’s in Social Protection Policy/Financing.

“The years have flown by,” she reflects from her office in London. “I’m still far from finished, am still learning new things all the time. The world is in such a state of flux. The issue of migration is so vast. I want to contribute to solutions. And yes, we do have some successes, sometimes, where the right people read our research or use it for discussions. Occasionally we even see some changes in policy.”

Studying in Europe

Hagen-Zanker was born in Germany and moved to England at the age of 12. From there she went to Australia, where she completed high school in 1999.

→ Jessica Hagen-Zanker studied and obtained her PhD at Maastricht University, where she also worked as a tutor. From 2004 until late 2009 she coordinated the master’s programme in Social Protection Financing/Policy, after which she joined ODI in London. She has published widely on migration issues and since 2020 has also been a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute (PRIO) in Oslo.

That she ended up at university in Maastricht was more or less a coincidence. “I missed Europe and knew I wanted to study there. England was my preference, because my parents were going to live there, but I was too late to apply. I did some research, realised you can study in English in the Netherlands and heard about Problem-Based learning at Maastricht University.”

She visited the city with her mother, found a room in a student house, and in 2000 started International Economics, at the time still a four-year doctoraal programme. She would stay in South Limburg for 10 years—and not just out of a love of the city. She met Alex in her first student house and a year later they moved in together. “Alex was doing his master’s, and when I graduated he had a good job in Maastricht. Then I got the chance to work as coordinator of a new master’s programme at UM.”

Perfect match

As coordinator at the Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, Hagen-Zanker’s duties included assessing dozens of thesis proposals. Inspired, she enrolled in the new PhD programme in Public Policy in the same institute. In 2010 she defended her dissertation on migration from Albania and Moldova. “A perfect match with International Economics. Migration and economics are inextricably linked. In my job and in leading the research teams, I still benefit every day from that combination and the experience I gained in Maastricht. Just as Problem-Based Learning laid the foundations for teamwork and critical thinking.”

Forever connected

In 2010 Hagen-Zanker and her family, now with three children in tow, moved to London. “Alex had accepted a job in Cambridge and I started working at ODI. It was with pain in our hearts that we left, but I also wanted to live closer to my family. Fortunately Maastricht isn’t that far away. We still visit regularly for weekends and to see friends. And UM is one of ODI’s project partners; every year I give a presentation there about my work. So that connection remains.”

Text
Jos Cortenraad
Photography
Jessica Hagen-Zanker
The University Fund Limburg/SWOL and Maastricht University alike are constantly striving to contribute to regional growth. To address social issues and needs, and to bring about synergies between the university and Limburg companies, the Fund needs to be plugged into the region. This means having at our disposal people who can build bridges between the academic community and society at large. People like Peter Thissen, a board member of the University Fund Limburg/SWOL and chair of Ondernemend Venlo.

**Peter Thissen connects region and university**

**Tapping into the region**

In Venlo, Peter Thissen feels like a fish in water. Although he was born in Geleen, he moved to North Limburg at an early age. In 1985 he joined the family business Thissen Installatietechniek, founded by his grandfather in 1926, and quickly proved his mettle as an innovative, future-oriented entrepreneur. In 2000 he built a new, sustainable office at Tradeport in Venlo—the first gasless office building in Limburg.

**Connection with UM**

Since selling his company to Unica in 2007, he has been as busy as ever, taking on various new roles. In 2009 he was appointed chair of Ondernemend Venlo, an organisation that represents the interests of companies and entrepreneurs on local industrial sites. Among its members are more than 1,200 companies, with upwards of 40,000 employees. Thissen has also long felt connected to Maastricht University. “In the 1970s, a friend of mine was responsible for managing the Jesuit collection, a set of valuable old books at the heart of the University Library’s collection. I love history and helped to make an inventory of the Jesuit collection. Then the university hired my company to perform installation work. Any many years later, I came into contact with the University Fund through the former Limburg governor Theo Bovens. That connection with the university immediately felt familiar.”

**A true bridge builder**

Fostering collaboration means making the right connections and bringing people together. Thissen’s network is large and diverse. He has his finger on the pulse of the manufacturing industry, logistics and other sectors in North Limburg. He makes contacts easily and facilitates introductions such that people from different walks of life can build the future together.

The University Fund, too, benefits from Thissen’s network. It was Thissen who identified a speaker for the UM Star Show, an alumni event on leadership and climate change. A few phone calls later and the matter was settled: Thissen’s acquaintance Sander Geelen from Geelen Counterflow, a sustainable manufacturer from Haelen, captivated the audience of the UM Star Show with his story.

**Broad support**

Bridge builders like Thissen are crucial for the Fund. They bring the business sector’s needs to our attention and brainstorm how we can help one another. “The University Fund was originally established to promote socioeconomic improvement in Limburg,” explains Bouwien Janssen, the director of the Fund. “It’s vital that we get to know companies, formulate social ambitions and tackle regional challenges together. As they say, if you want to go far, go together. That way, we can achieve a better future for our region.”

Important examples of cooperation include innovation and the retention of highly educated people in the region. “We have to prevent the brain drain of well-educated people,” Thissen says. “Our goal is to achieve this by further improving contact with educational institutions like UM. We need to introduce students to local companies at an earlier stage and in a better way. Also, UM’s innovative knowledge holds so much added value for companies. I want to put the Venlo region on the map and show how important the manufacturing industry and the logistics sector can be for Limburg.”

**Joint event**

The University Fund already comes into contact with companies in various ways, for example, during the annual UM Dinner in the provincial government building in Maastricht. This event serves to strengthen ties between the university and the business community in a convivial atmosphere. Separate partnerships with organisations have also been established.

Another event is now on the books too: a networking event on 21 October at Canon Production Printing in Venlo, facilitated in part through Peter Thissen’s contacts. North Limburg companies will be introduced to the university under the banner Maastricht University meets Entrepreneurial Venlo. We look forward to seeing what great projects and partnerships will arise. <
People with healthy gut flora are more stable, more social, and make wiser decisions. This is the conclusion of research by Aline Dantas, Alexander Sack, Elisabeth Brüggen, Perian Jiao and Teresa Schuhmann of Maastricht University. Taking probiotics can improve both gut health and cognition.

The gut has a major impact on overall health, including the brain. The brain–gut axis is a fancy term to describe how our brains connect and communicate with the gut. The research shows that a healthy gut has a positive effect on our decision-making abilities, including a significant decrease in risk taking and an increase in forward-looking choices.

The study also shows that people who improve their gut flora by taking probiotics start to exhibit different behaviours. They take fewer risks and are better able to assess time effects. Probiotics consist of bacteria and yeasts that reduce intestinal complaints and allergic reactions and ensure a better function of the brain, and therefore also our metabolism. All this ultimately benefits the quality of elderly care. The research will make use of data not only from the region but also from care organisations outside Limburg.

“The project will contextualise results on quality indicators by supplementing them with other important data, such as the experiences of clients and relatives,” says Jos Schols, project manager and professor of geriatrics at the AWO-L. “This will allow professionals to better address the root cause when problems arise.”

Labour shortages put climate goals at risk

Researchers from UM’s Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market and the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency have developed a model that identifies, five years in advance, labour-market issues that may be caused by the implementation of climate policies. The government will only be able to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and meet its climate targets if the right workers are on hand: that is, if there are enough suitably skilled workers to install solar panels and build wind farms, charging stations, energy-efficient equipment and other installations.

The analyses reveal an expected shortage of other installations.

Solar panels and build wind farms, charging stations, energy-efficient equipment and other installations.
Blow up

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

facebook.com/maastricht.university