UMagazine

October 2025
on education and research at Maastricht University

Can Europe resist the digital oligarchy?

Valentina Golunova and Dani Shanley discuss the geopolitical and institutional consequences

p 4

I'm a 'sjeng' squared

Portrait of Marcel Merk, professor of Collider Physics

p 12

Soul kitchen

Pamela Habibović on Bosnian cuisine

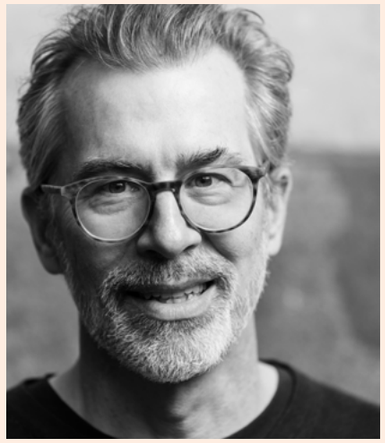
p 33

Maastricht University

p 4

10th anniversary of EDLAB

Ellen Bastiaens and **Walter Jansen** on the us of AI in Problem Based Learning at UM.



p 16

From ‘mama’ to ‘farewell’

What do we say at the start of our lives—and at the end? In his book *Bye Bye I Love You*, linguist **Michael Erard** explores the story behind our first and last words.

Alum Raneesha de Silva

She wants to work where the most vulnerable people need help. “I’d work for free if I didn’t have to feed myself,” says **Raneesha De Silva**, who works in humanitarian aid from her home country of Sri Lanka. Every year she returns to Maastricht, the city that changed her life.

p 36

Further

7
Science and society
Valentina Golunova and Dani Shanly: Can Europe resist the digital oligarchy?

12
Portrait
Marcel Merk: “I’m a 'sjeng' squared”

19
Sustainability
Sophie Vanhoonacker and Rob Bauer: Europe, arm(s) in arm

22
Photo spread
Hidden gems: The history of Duboisdomein 30

24
Professor–student
Eva Dijkstra and Alexander Sack: From heart to head: on depression and brain stimulation

28
International
Guleid Jama: Protecting children’s rights in non-existent states

30
Region
Petra Erkens and Angelique de Rijk: How to prevent a total collapse of the healthcare system

33
Soul kitchen
Pamela Habibović: “Food is for sharing”

38
Alum
Timothy Noelanders: From UM to Oxford to a world-leading law firm

40
University Fund Limburg
Bouwien Janssen and Emile Roemer on the University Fund Limburg: Bridging academia and society for 60 years

10, 11 and 42
News

Cover

For the cover image, photographer Hannah Lipowsky was inspired by the interview with Valentina Golunova and Dani Shanley on the geopolitical and institutional consequences of the new 'digital oligarchy'.

hannahlipowsky.com

Foreword

Maastricht University Executive Board
President **Rianne Letschert**
Rector Magnificus **Pamela Habibović**
Vice-President **Jan-Tjitte Meindersma**

Stronger through dialogue

As the Executive Board of Maastricht University, we place great value on dialogue and a sense of community. While we extol the virtues of rational, disinterested inquiry, we also recognise that strong emotions are essential—they motivate us, help us decide what truly matters and drive us to make a difference.

During several protests this academic year, we sought to balance the university’s core roles—education and research—with the right to protest. Reactions were sometimes contradictory, suggesting we had veered too far in one direction or the other. We are acutely aware of this tension and our responsibility in navigating it. Most people who approached us did so in a reasonable and understanding way. We certainly don’t conceive of the two sides as ‘enemy fractions,’ as our polarised, sensationalist age would have it. They merely give more weight to either the right to protest or the right to safety and education. Both make valid points.

In all of this, it is important to remember that we are, above all, a community dedicated to creating and sharing knowledge. Here, aspiring academics are trained to reason, structure arguments and present them persuasively. They will come to understand that not agreeing entirely is not the same as having opposing views. Often we agree on almost everything, but diverge in the nuances, priorities or even just the phrasing of a position. In academia, identifying exactly where and how we diverge is an indispensable part of progress.

An academic approach to dialogue means constantly striving for precision: defining terms clearly, examining assumptions and teasing out the nuances in each other’s arguments. Our goal is not to convince people to abandon their convictions, but to help one another make sense of the world. May that dialogue continue and make our community stronger still.

Photography
Arjen Schmitz

Education

EDLAB: innovator *and* bridge builder

Text
Jos Cortenraad

Photography
Philip Driessen

Director of EDLAB
Ellen Bastiaens

Senior coordinator of educational innovation at EDLAB
Walter Jansen

Less than three years ago, artificial intelligence took on a tangible form with the arrival of ChatGPT. It heralded the start of a new technological era, widely seen as nothing less than the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The impact will be enormous, especially on education. Now, EDLAB is launching a major research project on the use of AI in Maastricht University's system of Problem-Based Learning (PBL).

This autumn marks the 10th anniversary of EDLAB, UM's Centre for Teaching and Learning. The milestone will be celebrated with an exhibition and a modest party at the centre's Tapijn base. And, perhaps most importantly, with the launch of a large-scale study on the role of AI in university education. The project, which will run for at least 18 months and tackle a wide range of questions, has been dubbed Future of Learning.

"EDLAB was founded to keep our educational model current and to innovate it," says Ellen Bastiaens, who became director two years ago. "We track external developments and their impact on PBL in our six faculties, think about the future and identify trends. Nobody needs convincing that AI is more than a passing trend. Its rapid rise and impact force us to reflect on the future of learning, the role of knowledge, the role of universities and the changing labour market. And maybe even the ongoing viability of Problem-Based Learning itself."

Perfect storm

Is PBL under threat? Not just yet, says Walter Jansen, coordinator at EDLAB and lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. "But we can't just sit back and wait to see what happens. The education sector could find itself caught in a perfect storm. The wildest utopian, but also dystopian, theories are circulating about the consequences of AI: heavier workloads for teaching staff, falling student numbers, budget cuts, shifting public opinion. The question is how we can best organise our unique PBL system and address today's social and educational challenges. We want to analyse realistic future scenarios from a critical perspective—hence this in-depth study."

Staying sharp

This is exactly what EDLAB was set up to do: keep UM's education system sharp. "That's the heart of it," Bastiaens says. "We follow developments in higher education and consider them in light of UM's educational philosophy. Three years after it was founded, EDLAB carried out a major evaluation of PBL. That led to a recalibration and a fresh emphasis on our learning principles: constructive, collaborative, contextual and self-directed learning—CCCS for short. After Covid, we studied the effects of remote and hybrid learning. And now, the focus is on AI. Each step has been a milestone, but education is always changing. EDLAB is here to respond to that, and to support our professors, lecturers and tutors in offering students the best possible education and research, in line with the needs of society and the business community."

15 specialists

Today, EDLAB employs 15 education specialists who keep a close eye on educational developments and share knowledge with other institutions. "Every educational institution has its own EDLAB," Bastiaens says. "We're always looking for collaboration. Above all, we want to bring new knowledge and insights to our lecturers, paying special attention to the intersections with PBL. After all, that's what sets UM apart and what we're determined to preserve. It's been in our ›

DNA for nearly 50 years. Other universities have also shifted towards practical groupwork, but it's still what makes us unique."

All faculties

Education days, workshops, an informative digital magazine, courses—EDLAB uses a wide range of tools to share the latest knowledge and insights with tutors and lecturers. The challenge is to serve all faculties. "Science is different from medicine or law," Jansen points out. "Solving a maths problem together isn't the same as discussing a patient's case. But PBL remains our guiding principle. One of our jobs is to build bridges between the faculties. That's why we organise workshops and meetings to encourage dialogue and share experiences. Tailored to the different faculties, but with one common mission: to continue to develop and implement our education in line with CCCS, in a small-scale, student-centred and problem-based manner. EDLAB is the linchpin that connects everything and makes sure that all faculties and programmes take up the innovations."

Talented students

Alongside keeping the teaching staff up to date, EDLAB also runs special programmes for talented students: PREMIUM, MaRBLe and Honours+. "We offer research projects for high-achieving bachelor's students who want an extra challenge. In PREMIUM, master's students work together on academic issues and real-world projects with regional companies. All of these programmes bring together small groups of students and tutors from different faculties, exactly in the spirit of PBL. This way, issues are viewed broadly, with an eye for both content and entrepreneurship."

Top-quality education

EDLAB has become a vital cog within the university, says Bastiaens. "We're a permanent sparring partner for all six faculties when it comes to designing educational programmes, whatever the subject matter. We connect them with the latest educational insights. Our aim now is to embed AI in our PBL system in a relevant and meaningful way." <

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Walter Jansen studied European Studies at UM and has worked on its campuses in both Brussels and Bangalore, India. He became a tutor at FASoS in 2011 and has been senior coordinator of educational innovation at EDLAB since 2015.

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Ellen Bastiaens studied Applied Educational Sciences at the University of Twente, where she obtained her PhD in 1988. She has worked at UM's Academic Affairs department since 2010 and became director of EDLAB, the UM institute for educational innovation, in 2023.

Assistant professor in Digital Democracy
Valentina Golunova

Assistent professor in Human Factors in New Technologies
Dani Shanley

Text
Florian Raith

Photography
Hannah Lipowsky

Can Europe resist the *digital oligarchy*?

Are EU citizens essentially the serfs of a handful of American monopolies? Here, Maastricht University researchers Valentina Golunova and Dani Shanley discuss the geopolitical and institutional consequences of the new 'digital oligarchy.' Why do its leaders—paradoxically—still need our consent for the descent into a post-democratic digital dystopia?

When it comes to big tech, "Europe has been very naïve," says digital democracy researcher Valentina Golunova. "We've been asleep to the societal impact of not only the technologies themselves, but in particular the concentration of power." As a result, a handful of tech moguls in Silicon Valley have come to wield disproportionate global power and arguably stand outside—or even above—democracy.

This power is the consequence of algorithmic control, says Dani Shanley, a philosopher of technology. "They've become the feudal overlords of digital capitalism, with us as the data serfs," she says. "Their philosophy comprises a bizarre cluster of overlapping ideologies, such as libertarian utopianism, transhumanism and long-termism. Their disdain for the institutions that could curtail their power has played into the rise of ultranationalist authoritarianism and tech-enabled surveillance capitalism."

Digital threat to democracy

Techno-solutionism—the idea that technology can solve most, if not all, problems in society—sees tech as a boon for democracy. Instead it seems to have enabled a post-democratic drift, with bot farms interfering in the democratic process and a general move towards populism, which plays well on platforms that exacerbate outrage. "Tech solutions are often more of a Band-Aid for, or an even worse distraction from entrenched societal problems," explains Shanley. "Instead of direct democracy, we've seen the public sphere collapse into attention markets driven by outrage and distraction."

Tech solutions are often a Band-Aid for entrenched societal problems.

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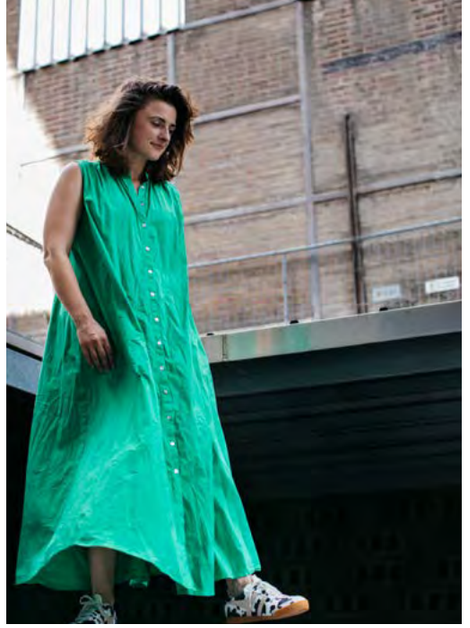
Valentina Golunova is assistant professor in Digital Democracy at the Faculty of Law and adjunct coordinator of the Globalisation & Law Network.



Until recently, a façade of modesty prevailed in the tech world. Meta, for example, appeared to ponder installing an oversight board following a string of scandals and US Congress hearings in 2018. "The election of Trump changed the discourse," Golunova says. "Zuckerberg et al. feel that their hands are no longer tied; they no longer need to pretend."

Why digital platforms are hard to regulate

Digital platforms like X and Facebook are treated differently from other publishers, Golunova says. "When these platforms emerged in the US, the debate centred around protecting children. But parts of the Communications Decency Act were struck down by the Supreme Court for contradicting the First Amendment, freedom of speech. Online platforms are still exempted from liability for third-party content. In the EU, a slightly narrower form of immunity was codified in the E-Commerce Directive and, later, the Digital Services Act."

She points out that digital platforms exercise editorial control through algorithmic curation, content moderation, and terms and conditions. "X is a good example of how much power a single CEO has in silencing voices and amplifying narratives." This is a serious problem for democracy, Shanley adds. "Democracy relies on a healthy information system and trust in expertise and institutions. These are hollowed out by the control these platforms have."

What makes us human

Still, Shanley is quick to put things into perspective. "With every technological breakthrough comes a lot of hype and big promises. Radio, TV and the internet were predicted to completely revolutionise education. And they did change things, but not remotely to the extent that was promised." Now some are predicting that artificial intelligence will replace us all. Hype and doom: two sides of the same coin.

"Whenever we step back and ask how to use and regulate a technology," reflects Shanley, "it quickly boils down to questions about what makes us human and what it means to live well. Who do we want to be when we're using these tools? We should be more mindful of the unsustainable use of energy and resources, the exploitation, the threat to democracy, and our own cognitive habits and emotional wellbeing."

Above all, she cautions against the perceived inevitability of handing over our sovereignty to tech overlords. "Interesting forms of resistance are already happening, both individually and collectively. We have more agency than we think."

A less digitally dependent Europe?

Golunova concurs. "The EU has created tools that allow us to push back, such as the Digital Markets Act, under which Apple and Meta were fined a combined €700 million. This is a meaningful step. However, the European Commission has been hesitant to fine X for violating the Digital Services Act, despite finding that the platform had breached several of its provisions. So we have the legal tools, but the intimidation campaign by Trump means there's no political will right now."

Golunova has high hopes for the new approach by the European Commission tech chief Henna Virkkunen. "Alongside the push for accountability, there will be greater efforts to make ourselves more independent of the US. The new strategy also allows for deregulation to empower European SMEs to build competing systems." Whether Europe will succeed remains to be seen—but at least its decision makers have shed their blinkers for now. <

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Dani Shanley is assistant professor in Human Factors in New Technologies at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She is also a research associate at the Brightlands Institute for Smart Society and chair of the Critical Technoscience Platform.

Opening of the Academic Year 2025/26

The traditional festive launch of the new academic year 2025/26 was held in the Theater aan het Vrijthof on 1 September. The programme included an inspiring keynote speech by Roxana Mînzatu, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Social Rights, Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness and the presentation of the annual Student Award and the Edmond Hustinx Prize.

Programme

UM President **Rianne Letschert** opened the 2025/26 academic year with a call for resilience and collaboration. She emphasised that educational innovation and diversity are structurally embedded in the university's DNA, which prepares students not only for a career, but also for citizenship and societal impact.

In her keynote, **Roxana Mînzatu** emphasised that Europe's response to all challenges must remain people-centred. Europe's strength lies not only in its market and its treaties. It lies in our people. When we invest in people and their talents, we are investing in the very core of Europe's DNA. That is why people, their education and their skills are at the heart of Europe's priorities.

Mark Levels, programme director of the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA), highlighted the significant and unpredictable impact of artificial intelligence on the labour market.

Ellen Bastiaens, director of EDLAB, demonstrated how Maastricht University's Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach has been providing a solid foundation for the future for fifty years.

Internationally renowned dance group **Oxygen** and their competition team O2, featuring our own FHML student **Jolijn van Vugt**, performed with impressive shows. The finale came from students of the Conservatorium, who, together with Jolijn, surprised the audience with a rendition of Ode to Joy – a performance in which tradition and innovation came together in an inspiring way.

UM Student Award

Every year, the UM Student Award is awarded to students who have made exceptional social or cultural contributions alongside their studies. This year, the prize went to to Busted!, a unique initiative by **Eva de Groeve** and **Laura de Raeve**. Through creative workshops, they raise awareness about breast health and breast cancer, and teach participants how to carry out monthly self-checks.

Edmond Hustinx Prize

This year, the Edmond Hustinx Prize went to **Roman Briker**. Briker's research focuses on collaboration and trust between humans and artificial intelligence. In doing so, he provides innovative insights into the future of work and organisations. As an ambassador for Open Science, he also makes research more accessible and relevant to society. The prize, worth €15,000 and made possible by the Hustinx Foundation, underlines the strength and impact of science in South Limburg. <

Mental health services **urgently need to address lifestyle**

Mental health services need to increase investment in lifestyle interventions to improve care and narrow the 15-year life-expectancy gap for people with mental health conditions, according to a new report by *The Lancet Psychiatry Commission*. Interventions focusing on exercise, diet, sleep, and smoking cessation are essential to mental health care, not optional extras, the report says. Produced by a team of 30 authors from 19 countries, the report builds on a 2019 Lancet study showing that people with mental health conditions have their lives shortened by 13 to 15 years, mainly due to preventable illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Mental health problems are an increasing public health priority, with a significant social impact and a greater disease burden than most physical illnesses. "This will require commitment and investment now, but in the long run it could substantially reduce costs and ease pressure on mental health care services and on society", says co-author Jeroen Deenik, a researcher at the Mental Health and Neuroscience Research Institute at Maastricht University. "To achieve this, it's vital to remember the importance of lifestyle in care, particularly for people with mental health conditions." <

News

Two **new degrees** set to launch in Venlo

From the 2026/27 academic year, two new programmes will be offered at Brightlands Campus Greenport Venlo. Both focus on the technical and natural sciences and are dedicated to building a sustainable world. The new degrees fall under the *Faculty of Science and Engineering*.

The new UM bachelor's in *Sustainable Bioscience* will train students to understand and tackle global challenges, such as the impact of climate change on food security. Students will study how natural systems function and how they can be harnessed in smart, sustainable ways.

The new master's in *Crop Biotechnology and Engineering* will focus on the local, environmentally friendly cultivation in greenhouses of healthy crops for use as food or raw materials in industry. This programme is a joint initiative between UM and Radboud University in Nijmegen.

How do plants make their **secret weapons**?

Scientists from Maastricht University, Wageningen University, and Utrecht University made a new digital tool called MEANtools that helps uncover how plants produce their natural substances, reducing laboratory work significantly.

Plants make a wide variety of special chemicals, also called specialised metabolites. These substances protect them from diseases, attract insects for pollination, or help them adapt to tough conditions. But how plants make these substances is still a mystery in many cases.

That's where MEANtools (Metabolite Anticipation tools) come in. This smart computer programme can scan through large amounts of data, such as information from a plant's DNA, the activity of its genes, and the chemicals found in it, to find clues about how these substances are made. And the best part? It doesn't need any starting guesses or preset targets. It finds patterns all on its own. This reduces the need for laboratory work, since scientists can now target their search based on MEANtools results.

"This project is a big leap forward in how we can use modern data to uncover the secrets of plant chemistry," said Kumar Saurabh Singh, lead author of the study, who works at Maastricht University's *Brightlands Future Farming Institute* in Venlo. "MEANtools can be used for more than just plants, it could help us understand complex biology in other organisms too." <

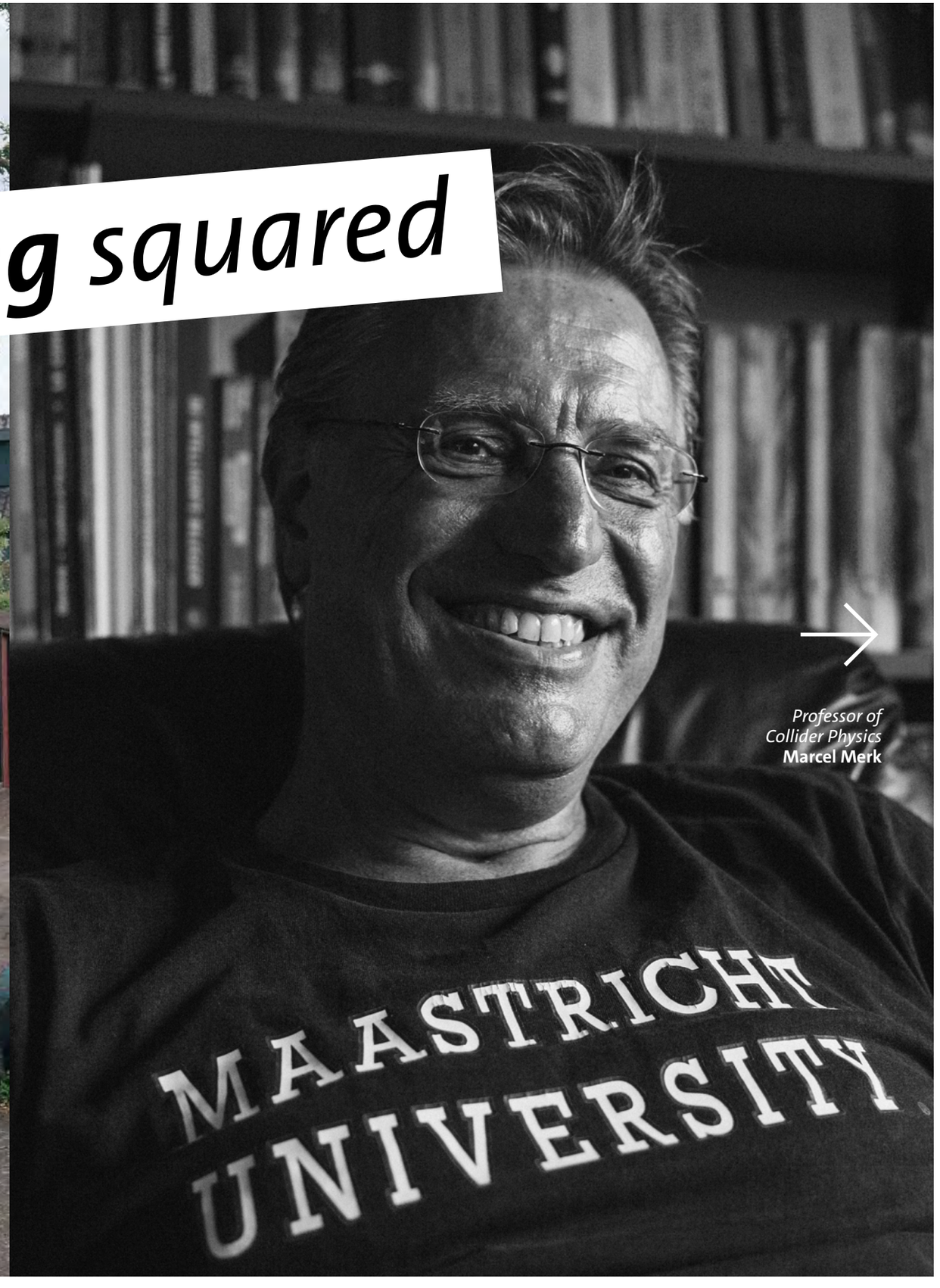
Portrait

Text
Femke Kools

Photography
Sem Shayne

*I'm a **sjeng** squared*

In primary school, his nickname was whirlwind—and that same energy comes across during the interview. "I've never been diagnosed, but I do think I have ADHD," says the cheerful physics professor Marcel Merk. He never imagined returning to live (partly) in his hometown of Maastricht before retiring. "I'm an opportunist, a family man, a Carnival nut. And I'm gripped by the question: why is there something rather than nothing?"



Professor of Collider Physics
Marcel Merk

Marcel would walk through a door whether it was open or closed—this was how Merk once heard himself described as a boy. Even now, at 61, he talks quickly, easily and candidly about his life. His fascination with elementary particles started in high school, helped along by his best friend, who sat next to him on his very first day of primary school and whose life has unfolded almost in parallel ever since. "Eric Laenen was calmer than me, and a little more serious about studying, but our personalities are very complementary."

Writing an encyclopaedia

When they finished high school, they threw a party together. They both went on to study physics in Nijmegen, both became research group leaders at Nikhef, and they lived across the street from each other in Diemen. They still share a guilty pleasure for fantasy novels. "When we were about 10, we both joined the Dutch Association for Meteorology and Astronomy and went with our mothers to the annual meeting in Utrecht. We decided we were going to write the Encyclopaedia of Astronomy together.

Sjeng: a term for a male inhabitant of Maastricht, used both by locals and by other Limburgers.

Science is about building bridges and listening.

The plan was to write 20 volumes: we bought binders and typed away on typewriters. I only ever got as far as Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 1.1, but I've still got it at home."

An appetite for particles

Without his friend Eric, he may well have taken a completely different path. As for his specialisation in elementary particle physics: this was partly down to the professor who later became his PhD supervisor. "In my final year of school, Professor Van der Walle wrote a series for the journal Natuur & Techniek about elementary particles. I devoured it. Nature is lovely, but physics—the processes behind it all—that's just beautiful."

He enjoys sharing his subject through Studium Generale lectures, particularly with laypeople who have an interest in physics. "That's a wonderful audience to spar with, maybe even more fun than scientists. Non-specialists dare to think outside the scientific box. It's very refreshing."

Beauty quarks

His research, based at CERN in Geneva with the Large Hadron Collider 'beauty experiment,' tackles the question of why matter 'won out' over antimatter after the Big Bang. "Everything you see is made of matter, and for every particle of matter there's an identical counterpart with the opposite electrical charge. When matter and antimatter collide, they destroy each other, releasing a flash of energy. But how is it possible that, just a fraction of a second after the Big Bang, there was ever so slightly more matter left behind, out of which came everything we know today? In short: why is there something rather than nothing?"

He focuses on 'beauty quarks,' fundamental building blocks produced when protons collide. His group in Geneva investigates the radioactive decay of beauty quarks and compares them with their anti-particles. "We're looking for incredibly rare quantum effects, which sometimes occur only once in a billion collisions. That means working with massive datasets. But we've recently seen some hints of a possible new force of nature, and with the planned upgrade of our measurement and analysis instruments, I'm hopeful we'll be able to explain the dominance of matter within the next decade."

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Marcel Merk has been professor of Collider Physics at the Faculty of Science and Engineering since 2020. He combines this role with his work as a researcher at the National Institute for Subatomic Physics (Nikhef), where he has worked since 1994. Merk studied physics and obtained his PhD in particle physics in Nijmegen.

Slow science

Science is always a marathon, not a sprint—and never more so than in this kind of research. "I'm still working on the same experiment we set up at CERN in 1994. We're now building the third version. My work encompasses project management, building of detector components, and data collection and analysis with students. Over time, I've come to enjoy creating and leading a group. Plus there's 'the pleasure of finding things out,' as the physicist Richard Feynman put it. I don't need to discover anything new, but I enjoy understanding for myself how something works—the logic of nature, the beauty of quantum physics. In that respect, my life has already been more than successful."

Social team

The pleasure of leading people was something he developed during his 19 years as head of Nikhef's B-physics group. "It was only meant to be five years, but everyone seemed satisfied and nobody was in a rush to take over. Our group was known as the 'social team.' I made a point of focusing on the social side, going out with PhD candidates until late at night. Everyone worked hard and did their jobs well. For me, science is about building bridges and listening."

The last of those 19 years were gruelling. The war between Russia and Ukraine brought political tensions even into CERN's international collaboration, and Merk had to navigate this as a representative of the Netherlands. "It also pretty much coincided with Covid, so I found myself Zooming with employees for 12 hours a day. The energy ran out, I had sleeping problems—it was time to hand over the baton."

Maastricht dialect

By nature, he's not a worrier. "Sometimes it helps not to talk about problems, whether at work or at home. The next day I'll think: wasn't something up? Oh well." In that respect, he's fine with the fact that his wife isn't in the same field. He met Esther a few months after starting his studies in Nijmegen. "She's from the centre of Maastricht, I'm from the east—so I married up," he laughs. They raised their two children in the Maastricht dialect, although they lived near Amsterdam. "If we'd lived in Germany, we wouldn't have spoken German to them, would we? Our Maastricht language is in our hearts." He's never missed Carnival in the city. "Because the problem is: if I'm not there, it won't happen." He roars with laughter. "I'm a *sjeng* squared."

Opportunist

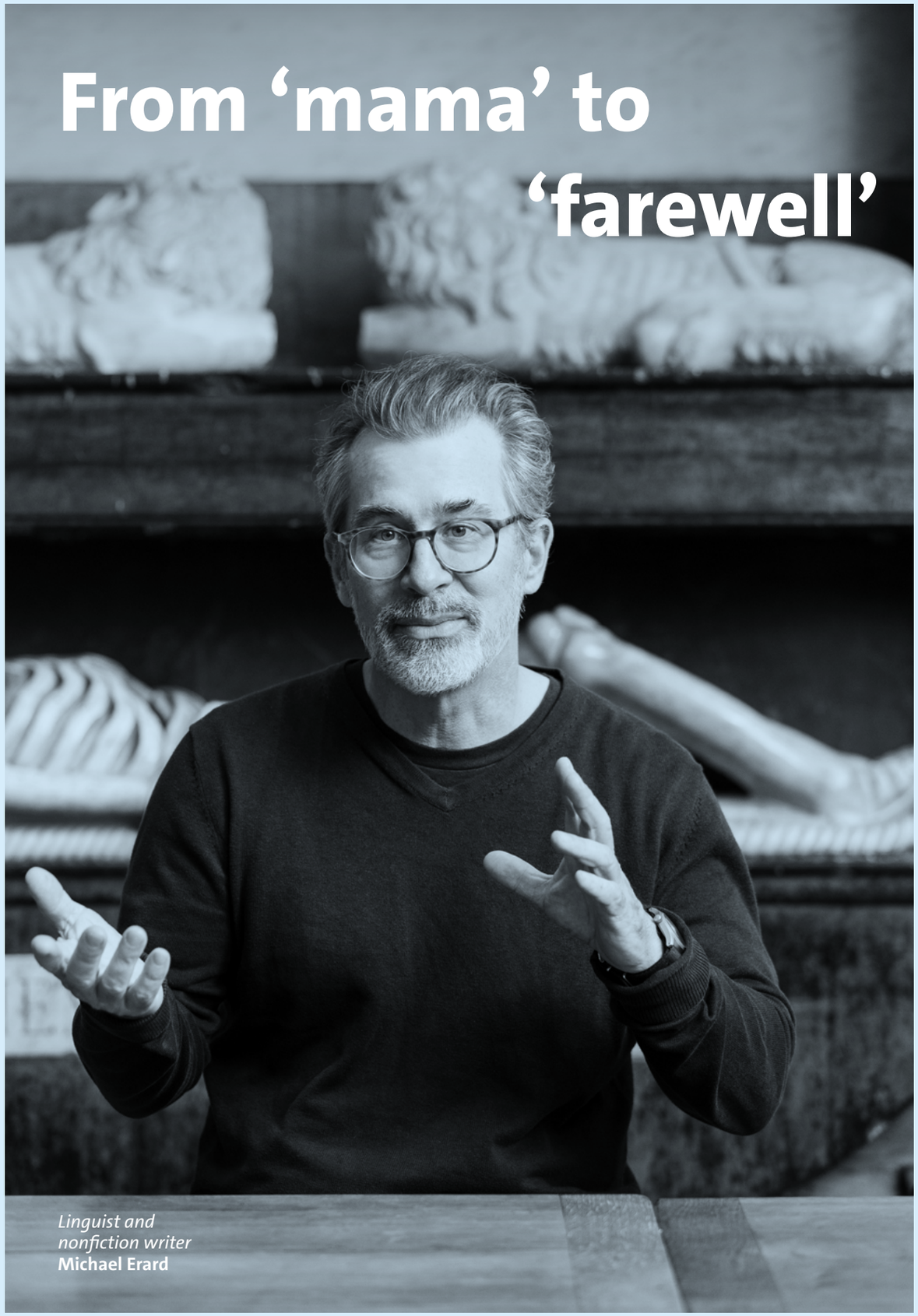
He and his wife thought they might move back to Maastricht after retiring. But he was offered a part-time professorship at UM, and Esther also recently found a job in the city. Now they live in Maastricht again for a few days a week. "I've never planned my career; I'm an opportunist. I try everything, and if two out of ten things succeed, that's fine. Maybe I've also been lucky at times."

He counts himself fortunate in his parents, who gave the whirlwind—and occasional know-it-all—the space to develop. They ran a chemist's shop on the Scharnerweg until the big chains came along and forced them out. "There was no money left, but no debts either. My parents had zero pension, but still a good life afterwards. That's how I learnt that in the Netherlands you don't really need to worry."

A kind of friend

It helped that his father, who lived longer of the two, was content with little. "He never once got on a plane. If he could have a drink at his local pub every day, he was happy. We often did that together—he was a kind of friend of mine. I'm still proud of my mother, too, of how she handled the end of her life. When she was told at 73 that she only had a few weeks left, she said, 'I've had a good life, it's fine, just let me go.' I find that so admirable. I hope I'll be able to do the same, though I doubt it. First I want to enjoy life in Mestreech a while longer. And who knows, maybe one day I'll see the next generation, too." <

From ‘mama’ to ‘farewell’



Linguist and nonfiction writer
Michael Erard

Publication

Text
Milou Schreuders

Photography
Philip Driessen

What do we say at the start of our lives—and at the end? In his book *Bye Bye I Love You*, linguist Michael Erard from the Faculty of Law explores the story behind our first and last words.

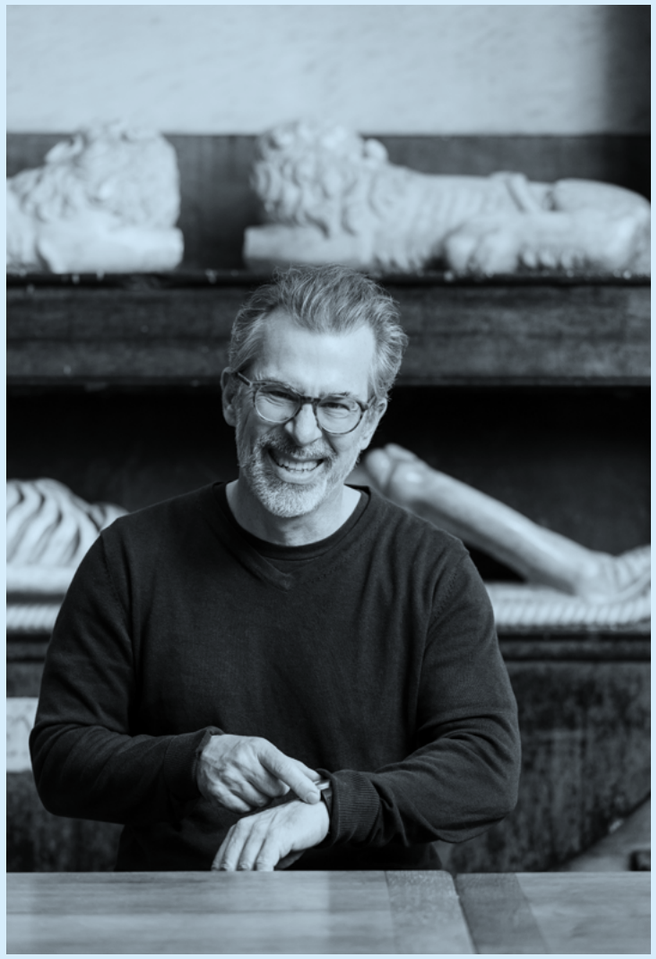
One morning in Maine in 2012, Michael Erard was walking in the woods when his peace was abruptly shattered. He had stumbled upon the remains of a woman. Later he learned she’d been homeless, struggling with addiction, and had died alone. The cause of death remained unknown.

That shocking discovery, combined with becoming a father for the first time, prompted him to write *Bye Bye I Love You*. “When I found that woman, I was unsettled and needed to make sense of it,” he says.
"I became interested in pairing the beginning of language with the end of it. But it wasn’t until I had read extensively about death, trying to make sense of the discovery I had made in the woods, that I felt ready to embark on that project."

What was left unsaid

Erard had been intrigued by language since childhood. He grew up around the US in a loving but reserved family. “As a child, I could sense when something was happening, yet no words were given to it. One example is when my father came back from the war in Vietnam, deeply changed and damaged by the experience. There were things he couldn’t or wouldn’t articulate. That shaped me. I was constantly trying to understand what was left unsaid. I thought if I could learn the rules of language, maybe I could make other people more understandable to me, and vice versa.”

It is no surprise that Erard went on to study linguistics and language, eventually earning his PhD. Since then, his career has followed a two-track path. “One is working with academics on research proposals, as I’m now doing for Maastricht University. That gives me the support and structure for my other track: writing. Most of my work is about language and the people who use it.” >



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Michael Erard is a linguist and nonfiction writer, as well as a grant writer and funding adviser. He has worked with the Institute of Data Science at Maastricht University and now works for the Faculty of Law. He holds an MA in linguistics and a PhD in English from the University of Texas at Austin. His books have been translated into several languages and his journalism has appeared in publications including The New York Times and New Scientist.

Humans are built for back-and-forth interaction.

His advice: have meaningful conversations while that window is open. “And respect the importance of presence at the end of life. Humans are built for back-and-forth interaction. Even at the end, that obligation remains. Sometimes simply being physically present keeps someone alive, because the body responds to the reminder of interaction. But at a certain point, stepping away—for example, by leaving the room—can allow the dying person to let go. In that moment, they seem to understand: you’ve stepped away, now I can step away too.”

Not ready

The book was also meant to cover the future of last words and how technology might change them, but Erard decided to save that for a separate project. He offers a glimpse: “Eventually, brain–computer interface devices will become cheap and easy enough to use with dying people who are unresponsive. But ethically, legally and personally, we’re not ready. What happens if such a person responds? How do we judge capacity in that situation? What is the legal status of those words? Could people change their will with them? We don’t know yet. What we certainly need are clearer frameworks for assessing capacity linguistically.”

Bag of soil

What does his own future look like? “I’d love to build a research programme around end-of-life communication, ethics and rituals. In the shorter term, I’m thinking about a book specifically on ritual last words. Some major religions prescribe words to be spoken at the moment of death. In Islam, for instance, it’s the shahada—‘There is no God but God.’ It’s the first thing whispered into a baby’s ear, and ideally the last thing a person says before they die. I want to know how often families actually carry out these rituals, because in practice they’re often adapted, improvised or even forgotten.”

Erard is no stranger to this himself. “Some people from Texas living outside the state want their children to be born on Texan soil. My wife and I are not Texan nationalists, but we thought it’d be fun to do, so we had soil from her great-grandparents’ farm. But during the birth we forgot all about it, and it immediately faded in importance. Now the bag of soil just sits in our garage.” <

Pure luck

Erard began reading about anthropology and birth, death, dying and burial practices. He also went looking for data. “The idea of a person’s final words hadn’t really been studied before, so that was a challenge. It was pure luck that I came across an archive in Montreal with records from a study conducted over 125 years ago, at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Among the notes by doctors and nurses were descriptions of what people said and did as they were dying.”

Interaction window

Contrary to what many people imagine, our first and last words are often simple or even unclear. “Take ‘mama’ and ‘dada,’ where a baby doesn’t even understand what it’s saying. And beautiful, iconic last sentences, such as Oscar Wilde’s ‘My wallpaper and I are fighting …’ Those are exceptions. Most people are silent, speak gibberish or just make noises. As someone dies, their window for interaction begins to close. It opens when we’re babies and remains throughout our lives, until it gradually narrows again at the end.”

Sustainability

Text
Florian Raith

Illustrations
Ted Struwer

Europe: arm(s) in arm

→

Europe's plans to increase its military capacity are controversial; not so much the if as the how. Maastricht University professors Sophie Vanhoonacker and Rob Bauer differ in their views of how optimistic we can be.

Europe is rearming, which is frightening to many and exhilarating to some. Sophie Vanhoonacker, professor of Administrative Governance, explains how we got here. "Europe was a major stake in the Cold War. We lived under the Pax Americana," she says, referring to the post-WWII period in which the US, as the dominant global superpower, played a leading role in maintaining international order. Europe, as both pawn and prize in a game of chess between Washington and Moscow, was assured of its defence by external powers. But in recent decades, some 220 US military installations have closed in Germany alone (although over 40 remain). We are now seeing the culmination of a gradual process of shifting priorities.

Shifting US priorities

"This hasn't come out of the blue," Vanhoonacker says. "Obama talked about a pivot to Asia as early as 2011." And Trump's disdain has been unambiguous. "It was already clear in the 1990s that Europe would have to do more to safeguard its own security. But the sense of urgency was limited and not much happened."

Having never been a military alliance, the EU is reticent to change its identity. Vanhoonacker sees this as not only necessary but also long overdue. She concedes, however, that defence and security remain largely national affairs. "Defence and the military, even more than the currency, are important symbols of our national sovereignty."

Broad consensus

The benevolence and protection of the US were foundational pillars of the European worldview; now President Trump talks about capturing Greenland by force. Meanwhile, the notion of Russian imperialism as quaint 1980s nostalgia has been turned on its head by the invasion of Ukraine. But the resulting sense of urgency is not felt uniformly across Europe. "Poland and the Baltic states are taking this very seriously; Spain and Italy less so."

Nonetheless, Vanhoonacker continues, "There is a broad consensus that investment in defence is necessary." It is critical that the money is invested wisely. "There's a lot of inefficiency due to fragmentation. But I see this as a chance for greater European integration and hope there won't be too much bickering." That not all EU countries are in NATO, and not all European countries in the EU, only adds to the coordination challenges.

Impulse purchases

Professor of Finance Rob Bauer agrees that a European army would be the best way to invest, but, like Vanhoonacker, he considers it unlikely. He is sceptical of decision making on the basis of Tagespolitik. "It's just not possible to spend that kind of money in such a short period—wisely, or at all. European countries are now competing to get their orders in first, and everything will be much more expensive than it needs to be." He adds that Europe is still largely dependent on the US when it comes to arms, digital infrastructure and cybersecurity.

"I think Trump pushing for us to spend more on defence is making a lot of money for US arms manufacturers. Decades of strategic underinvestment can't be remedied overnight. For example, due to budgeting priorities and a lack of human resources, the Netherlands only recently managed to increase its defence spending to 2%."

When it comes to financing, Bauer also worries about transparency. "Obviously the government makes the decisions, but the military and arms industry are influential. That's why I'm afraid we'll overshoot the mark. Is it really worth spending so much on the Russian threat?"

Who exactly pays?

This is, of course, ultimately a political question. But the classic left–right divide is no longer the best way of understanding party politics, Bauer says. "If you want to spend more on arms, you need to either increase taxes or reduce services. Neither option plays well with the base of far-right populists like Geert Wilders."

Alternatively, the government could incentivise investment by private investors, such as pension funds. To Bauer, this is an ethical minefield. "We have to pay into the ABP [the Dutch pension fund for government and education employees –Ed.] and, even if it's in our best financial interest—which is not a given—you have to wonder how many of us are happy for those contributions to be spent on war instead of, say, healthcare. I think for our democracy, transparency about the decision-making process is crucial from day one, not only a few years down the line after some parliamentary inquiry."

Problematic priorities

Germany's plan to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP—the NATO target—raised some eyebrows, especially after state frugality left its digital revolution lagging and infrastructure crumbling.

"I understand the frustration of those who have been calling for years for greater investment in the energy transition and infrastructure," says Vanhoonacker, "but the Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised public support of defence spending."

"Sure, there are adverse effects of climate change and biodiversity loss," adds Bauer, "but these are too abstract and psychologically distant to really trigger the population. Safety is just easier to sell." <

Sophie Vanhoonacker is professor of Administrative Governance and holds the Jean Monnet chair at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Rob Bauer is professor of Finance (Institutional Investors) at the School of Business and Economics. He also holds the Elverding Chair on Sustainable Business, Culture and Corporate Regulation.

Is it really worth spending so much on the Russian threat?

Hidden gems: ***the history of Duboisdomein 30***

Beside the Kennedy Bridge in Maastricht stands ‘the Black Box,’ as the building at Duboisdomein 30 is popularly known. It once housed the head office of *De Limburger*, the main regional newspaper. Today, ‘DUB 30’ has been transformed into the home of ET Pathfinder, complete with laboratories and a test site for the Einstein Telescope. This telescope will use gravitational waves to explore the origin and evolution of our universe. The building also houses the Facility Services department and part of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. Yet traces of its past remain, with features that recall its history as a newspaper office and printing works.”

Spread

Photography
Joris Hilterman

Professor of Brain Stimulation and Applied Cognitive Neuroscience
Alexander Sack

PhD graduate
Eva Dijkstra

How closely linked are the heart and brain, really? In early June, Eva Dijkstra completed her PhD on the heart–brain connection as a predictor for the effectiveness of brain stimulation in treating depression. Alongside her supervisor, neuroscientist Alexander Sack, she is on a quest for personalised routes out of the darkness. Here, they discuss depression, brain stimulation and the hope offered by science.

From heart to head: **on depression and brain stimulation**

Professor – student

Text
Ludo Diels

Photography
Paul van der Veer

What moves me is being able to offer patients something clinically.

The heart and mind have long been linked in poetry, literature and love. But the connection between the two also extends into clinical practice and the scientific field of brain research. Researchers are exploring how body and mind, emotion and cognition, physiology and behaviour interact—not only theoretically, but in real-life treatment.

Not just another hype

Worldwide, 300 million people suffer from depression; over a million in the Netherlands alone, according to Alexander Sack and Eva Dijkstra. Psychotherapy sometimes helps, as does medication. But what if nothing works? Since 2017, a promising treatment has been available: repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS). No pills, no surgery—just electromagnetic pulses directed at specific areas of the brain. Thanks to researchers like Sack and pioneers like Dijkstra, this technology is becoming increasingly personalised.

"Initially, people thought it was just another hype," says Dijkstra, who studied neuroscience in Amsterdam and first encountered deep brain stimulation during her master's degree. "That's when I realised how powerful brain stimulation could be—it really stuck with me."

In Amsterdam's Jordaan district, she and her mother, a psychiatrist, founded Neurowave, one of the first practices in the Netherlands dedicated to rTMS. She now works with a team of 10 colleagues. "We treat people with treatment-resistant depression and anxiety disorders like obsessive compulsive disorder. The results are encouraging."

Striking discovery

This clinical experience informed her PhD research. Supervised by Sack and Martijn Arns from Brainclinics in Nijmegen, she investigated two biomarkers for predicting the effect of rTMS: sleep disorders and the heart–brain connection. "Sleep disorders weren't a particularly strong predictor, but with the heart–brain connection, we saw something striking."

Sack nods. "If you stimulate exactly the right brain area, you see a measurable change in heart rate. This change reveals something about the effectiveness of the stimulation. The more precisely you target the ›

area, the better the treatment outcome. The effectiveness of rTMS is no longer in question; the focus now is on refining and personalising it."

Wearing a heart-rate monitor, the patient sits in the rTMS chair while the researcher briefly stimulates various brain locations. The heart-rate response helps to determine the optimal stimulation site in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. In Dijkstra's study involving 101 patients, the response rate was 29% compared to 11% for those without the heart–brain connection.

"The beauty of this method is that it's simple and scalable," Sack says. "It doesn't require expensive technology, and the idea of the heart and brain talking to each other captures the imagination."

Insurance milestone

Sack has been affiliated with Maastricht University for over 20 years. He was among the first to combine TMS with fMRI. "Maastricht is an international leader in high-field fMRI and non-invasive brain stimulation. We've built something unique here."

In 2015, he founded the Brain Stimulation Foundation, a Dutch–Flemish network that put rTMS on the map. Thanks to their efforts, the treatment has been covered by basic health insurance since 2017. "A milestone," he says. "It took years of negotiation with insurers and authorities. Now, thousands of patients can benefit from it."

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Alexander Sack is professor of Brain Stimulation and Applied Cognitive Neuroscience at Maastricht University. He specialises in combining TMS and fMRI and pioneered rTMS treatment for depression. Sack founded the Brain Stimulation Foundation and works on neuromodulation applications in fundamental and clinical neuroscience.

←

Eva Dijkstra is a neuroscientist, entrepreneur and founder of Neurowave, an rTMS practice in Amsterdam. In June 2025, she completed her PhD at Maastricht University, researching the heart–brain connection as a biomarker for personalised depression treatment. She chairs the scientific committee of the Brain Stimulation Foundation.

Revolutionary treatment

Yet, rTMS isn't the first step; Dutch guidelines recommend trying it only after two unsuccessful treatment attempts. "A pity, because we see that it genuinely helps many people," Dijkstra says. "That's why we want to gain a deeper understanding of who responds best to this treatment. If we can identify personal characteristics that predict a positive response to rTMS, we'll be able to offer interventions earlier and in a more targeted way. This will make treatment more effective and personalised."

Both are actively committed to raising awareness of the treatment: Dijkstra as chair of the clinical committee of the Brain Stimulation Foundation, Sack as a researcher, speaker and educator. In the future, they believe rTMS could be further personalised by AI. "Imagine being able to use heart-rate data to adjust treatments in real time," Dijkstra says. "That would be revolutionary."

"What moves me," Sack adds, "is being able to offer patients something clinically tangible. When you can explain that their heart rate literally shows how their brain responds, it fosters trust."

Unique combination

Their collaboration demonstrates how the trinity of science, clinical practice and entrepreneurship can reinforce one another. Sack supervised Dijkstra as an external PhD candidate. "We bounced many ideas around," Dijkstra says with a smile. "I always felt welcome, even though I mainly worked in Amsterdam."

"Eva is a unique combination of researcher and entrepreneur," Sack says. "And her work shows that fundamental brain research can also have an impact on society. With growing awareness of rTMS and the demand for personalised care, the future looks hopeful." <

Protecting children's rights in non-existent states

What happens to the universal rights of a child when their home is a "de-facto" state—a political entity that has all the hallmarks of nationhood, yet is not officially recognised? And who bears legal and moral responsibility for these children when war breaks out? These issues lie at the heart of the CHILD-WAR project, led by researchers from Maastricht University's Faculty of Law. Its aim is to inform policy and protect children living in legal and humanitarian voids.

International

Text
Theo Tamis

Photography
Guleid Jama

In theory, instruments like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) apply to children all over the world. In practice, this universality principle often falls short, says CHILD-WAR project manager Guleid Jama. On the phone from Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, he explains that the populations of de-facto states exist in a "legal limbo."

"This can impede their ability to ratify human rights treaties and engage directly with international monitoring mechanisms, which has grave consequences for children's rights," Jama says. "The situation becomes particularly acute in times of war."

Blind spot in international human rights law

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child does not monitor children residing in de-facto states. This means that when children are killed, wounded or displaced, or find their education disrupted due to armed conflict, there are few established avenues for international accountability and relief. This gap in protection is Jama's driving motivation.

After studying law, he went into human rights advocacy in Somaliland. "I challenged rights violations with domestic institutions, and when that didn't work, I turned to regional and international bodies, established under treaties to which the state is a party." He was bluntly informed by the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights that his case could not be handled because Somaliland is not a recognised state.

Sorry, your country does not exist

"It was very disappointing. Seeing the lack of international accountability for human rights violations in de-facto states, it became clear to me that we needed to investigate concrete ways to address this gap, focusing specifically on children's rights. I want to contribute knowledge that genuinely improves the lives of people caught in these impossible situations."

The two-year CHILD-WAR project launched in January 2025 with the aim of addressing this knowledge gap. It is financed through the SDG Scaling Grants programme of the Dutch Research Council (NWO), which promotes the practical application of research findings to advance the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Child-centred research

Overseen by fellow UM child rights researcher Marieke Hopman, the Principal Investigator on the grant, Jama's team is analysing the responsibilities under international humanitarian law of actors in armed conflicts involving de-facto states. Empirical data are drawn from three conflict zones: Gaza, Las Anod in Somaliland, and Nagorno-Karabakh, where Azerbaijan took control in 2023 and the population was displaced to Armenia.

Jama stresses that the focus is not on territorial claims, but on the rights of the children affected. Which of the actors involved—the de-facto state, the internationally recognised state (if applicable) or other armed groups—is legally obliged to protect children in such circumstances?

"Our methodology is profoundly unique and child-centred," he says. "We engage children not merely as research subjects, but as core researchers. We initiate a conversation with them about what they perceive as the most critical issues in their context—whether it's the right to education, play or other fundamental rights. The children identify the areas that we then focus our research on."

This collaborative model, developed by Hopman, ensures that the children's voices are at the heart of the study. "We actively go to places like Gaza, where despite the horrific circumstances and challenges of access, we have dedicated researchers on the ground leading the empirical case studies," Jama explains. "These local researchers build trust and connect directly with children, who, even amid immense suffering, are remarkably willing to share their experiences and opinions. At this very moment, we are conducting interviews with children in Gaza, enabling them to voice their perspectives directly to researchers."

Towards a brighter future

In this sense, the CHILD-WAR project transcends mere legal scholarship; it is a humanitarian undertaking driven by a sense of moral urgency. Jama and his team seek to provide much-needed clarity where there is currently confusion, and to instigate accountability where often there is none.

"From where we're coming from, it's not about politics. It's about the right of the child," he says. "Wherever you live, you have rights. The child didn't decide to live in a contested state, but there they are. So, what can we do about it without going into the politics? Our only concern is the rights of children there."

The aim is to generate a body of knowledge that can inform and influence global policy, advocating for the protection of children who are overlooked by a state-centric international system. This includes preparing rules of procedure for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on how to address the plight of children living in de-facto states. Practical recommendations will set out how international bodies can engage meaningfully with de-facto states, recognised states and external powers.

"It's not easy to be an academic, an activist and a human being all in one," Jama says. But it is precisely this powerful combination that underlies the CHILD-WAR project, striving to bring attention, protection and justice to the unseen casualties of our geopolitical blind spots. <

We are alive and dead at the same time.

Children's voices from Gaza

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Guleid Ahmed Jama is a lawyer and founder of the Human Rights Centre advocating for human rights in Somaliland. In 2024, he obtained his PhD at Maastricht University with a thesis on children's rights in Somaliland. The CHILD-WAR project builds on Jama's PhD thesis. His findings highlight a paradox: while Somaliland's domestic laws often echo international principles, they are affected by inconsistencies, legal gaps, and the influence of customary law (Xeer) and Sharia law.

How to prevent a **total collapse** of the healthcare system

Region

Text
Jolien Linssen

Photography
Paul van der Veer

It sounds ominous, but the numbers don't lie: within 10 years the Dutch healthcare system could face collapse, with no guarantee that people will receive the care they need. Nursing home care is set to be hit hardest. Yet despite these forecasts, Professor Angelique de Rijk and assistant professor Petra Erkens remain optimistic. "There are so many levers we can pull."

According to FNV Zorg & Welzijn, by 2034 the shortage of healthcare professionals will have risen to 265,600. In nursing home care alone, the shortfall is expected to reach 82,900, compared with 16,100 today. While patient numbers are steadily rising due to an ageing population, the supply of professionals is decreasing. Older people are also living longer and often need more complex care. The challenge is clear.

Under the radar

Of course, this looming crisis hasn't come out of the blue. The system has been creaking for years, and shortages are already causing problems. In elderly care, the strain is felt most by nurses and caregivers, says Angelique de Rijk, professor of Work and Health.

"Take a district nurse who doesn't have enough time to complete a task properly, so doesn't quite stick to the guidelines," she says. "Or a team where one person is off sick, on top of an existing shortage. The work just gets redistributed somehow." That such gaps are patched up in countless ways on the work floor means that problems largely fly under the radar.

Petra Erkens, assistant professor at the Living Lab in Ageing and Long-Term Care, knows from colleagues in the field that essential care isn't always available when someone's health suddenly deteriorates. "It means much more is being asked of informal carers. A partner, son or daughter."

Leaving the sector

When professionals can't deliver the level of care they would like to, some leave the sector altogether. "Nurses and carers usually choose this profession for the contact with patients," says Erkens. "If you lose that because you have too many tasks or clients, it becomes very difficult."

Losing specially trained staff to other sectors is a real shame, De Rijk adds. "Recent research among young nurses at Maastricht UMC+ shows they can cope with high workloads, especially when there are good career prospects. But managers need to recognise this more."

Recognition matters

One of her students investigated stress prevention among Belgian healthcare workers. The results show that recognition can come in surprisingly small ways. "Eating together, sending a thank-you email, arranging a food truck on staff day ..." Such gestures help employees feel seen, which boosts motivation and productivity.

Erkens also stresses the value of professional development opportunities in retaining staff. "We increasingly involve caregivers and vocationally trained nurses in our research, through combined positions. It's a win-win situation: they broaden their horizons, and we gain valuable insights." >

Assistant professor at Limburg Living Lab in Ageing and Long-Term Care
Petra Erkens

Appointed professor of Work and Health
Angelique de Rijk

Attracting new workers

At the same time, new workers are urgently needed—no easy task when student numbers have been falling. “That’s why there’s now a focus on more flexible ‘learning and working,’” explains Erkens. “People can get started with partial certificates, which lowers the entry threshold.”

De Rijk points out that nearly one million people with occupational disabilities are currently sidelined in the Netherlands, but could do support work. “The government should also make it easier for people to retrain through targeted subsidies.”

Demand for care

Efforts are under way to reduce reliance on professional care, including through technology and informal caregivers. “But we shouldn’t imagine technology can solve everything,” De Rijk warns. “Otherwise all the money will just flow to tech companies. And informal carers are already stretched thin. We need to pull several levers at once. There’s no magic pill.” She and her colleagues have developed a model for addressing labour shortages in healthcare, mapping out which levers can be pulled.

Prevention is another key: tackling chronic illness through healthier lifestyles and diet, though the impact will only be seen in the long term. At the same time, there is a shift towards appropriate care, focused on quality of life. “Sometimes things are done out of routine that aren’t really necessary. Regular bladder irrigation, for example, even though it hasn’t been proven to reduce the risk of urinary tract infection,” Erkens says. “Artificial intelligence can help by analysing patient data and spotting complications early, so we only deliver care that’s really needed.”

Both agree that appropriate care also requires reorganising the healthcare system. De Rijk: “Who’s the first professional you speak to? Can that person assess where you need to go, or do you get shuffled from one place to the next?” There’s a wider social responsibility, too: “If you really want to support professionals and informal carers, you need to organise childcare and public transport better.”

Positive signs

Despite the challenges, neither looks to 2034 with dread. Solutions are already emerging. “I hope and expect that we’ll take a broader view of who can work in healthcare. Not just looking at the diploma, but at people’s qualities,” Erkens says.

“What makes me optimistic,” says De Rijk, “is that working conditions and employment terms are finally high on the agenda. We already know a lot about this. Now that the urgency is clear, we can share that knowledge more widely.” <

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Angelique de Rijk studied Work and Organisational Psychology at Radboud University Nijmegen and obtained her PhD at Utrecht University. She joined UM in 1999 and was appointed professor of Work and Health, specialising in work reintegration, at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences in 2017. In 2024/25 she served on the Labour Deployment and Sustainability advisory committee of the National Healthcare Institute.

↑

Petra Erkens studied Nursing at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences. She completed a master’s in Epidemiology and obtained her PhD at Maastricht University. She worked as a lecturer–researcher at Zuyd from 2012 and became an assistant professor at the Limburg Living Lab in Ageing and Long-Term Care in 2020. She also acts as a scientific linchpin for the vocational training partners VISTA college and Gilde Zorgopleidingen.

A peek inside the kitchen of UM employees

Soul kitchen

Food is for sharing

Text
Annelotte Huiskes

Photography
Hannah Lipowsky

Rector magnificus
Pamela Habibović

“As a little girl, I loved food. After mealtimes I was allowed to go outside and play. But before long, my mother would find me at the neighbours’, being fed all over again.” Pamela Habibović, born in Tuzla and raised in Srebrenica, talks about the importance of food in Bosnian culture. “After breakfast and a good cup of coffee, the first question is always: what shall we eat today?”

In Bosnia, food is meant to be shared.

Srebrenica is now mainly associated with the genocide that took place there in 1995. One of the victims was her father: he was killed while fleeing, his body never found. Pamela Habibovic, along with her mother and sister, had escaped to the Netherlands three years earlier.

But she recalls an earlier Srebrenica, from her childhood. Autumn, for her, is forever linked with the smell of plum jam. “I’d walk home from school—it was already getting dark—and I’d smell the plum jam simmering in large pans over an open fire in the garden. Srebrenica is in the mountains. I still love harsh winters with snow, and the mountains.”

Religious holidays

Habibović’s parents both worked as engineers in the mining industry. They met while studying in Tuzla. “My mother always worked full time, that was normal. In the Netherlands I was shocked by the prejudices that still exist around working mothers.”

Her mother came from a Catholic background, her father from a Muslim one. “In Srebrenica there was an Orthodox church right next to the mosque, and Tuzla had a Catholic church as well. I wasn’t raised religiously, but we celebrated the religious holidays. There were plenty of them, and food was always a part of it. We spent Christmas with my mother’s eldest sister, which involved four entire days of feasting. Huge amounts of food were made, from cakes to stuffed sauerkraut leaves. There was always enough to go around. In Bosnia, food is meant to be shared. Even now, I always cook for more than the four people in our family. In the Netherlands I had to get used to the question, ‘will you eat with us?’ That’s taken for granted in Bosnia. I have a Turkish neighbour and it’s the same there; we recognise that in each other. Recently I brought back a box of pastéis de nata from Lisbon. My son Pep took a bite and said, ‘Oh yum—can we keep these just for us?’”

Pamela Habibović studied chemical engineering and obtained her PhD at the University of Twente in 2005. She was appointed professor of Inorganic Materials at Maastricht University in 2014 and rector magnificus in 2022. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre. It is being commemorated with the multimedia project *De 11 stemmen van Srebrenica* (The 11 voices of Srebrenica), in which Habibovic also shares her story.

With daugther Mia

Identity

Bosnian cuisine is not complicated. “It’s very pure cooking, using what the seasons offer. Big bowls of food, cooked with care. Stews of vegetables and meat, with Mediterranean herbs like bay leaf, parsley and basil. Comfort food.”

Her mother was an excellent cook, and still makes pita, one of Habibović’s favourites. “Unlike me, she’s very good with dough. Pita is made from very thin pastry, stretched over the whole table, then filled, rolled up and baked. The filling can be anything: spinach, feta, meat. Tricky to make, but I want to learn, because it’s so delicious. Whenever she knows we’re coming, my mother asks a week in advance what we’d like to eat. Then she’ll spend at least two days preparing a proper Bosnian feast. She’s in a wheelchair now because of MS, so everything takes longer—but make no mistake, there will be food. It’s part of our identity.”

Self-care

Cooking is a way of unwinding. Habibović enjoys nothing more than a morning trip to the market to buy ingredients, then spending the day in the kitchen. Her busy job means this is a rare occurrence. Still, good food has to be eaten. Habibovic can put a decent meal on the table in 15 minutes. “I don’t know what people mean by ‘easy cooking.’ What is that? I just cook, with good products and with care.”

Every Sunday afternoon she cooks for the three days she spends in Maastricht (she lives in Utrecht). “My husband loves food, but he can’t cook. And I don’t want them eating from packets or jars.”

For Habibović, cooking is also a form of self-care. Even during her studies and when living abroad, she always cooked for herself. “Some people don’t think it’s worth it, but I’ve never felt like that. Even when I lived alone, I wouldn’t just grab a sandwich; I’d set the table and have a proper meal. I once rented a room in Boston from an elderly lady. Whenever I wanted to use the oven, I first had to clear out a stack of books. She almost always ate out, and when she did eat at home, it was always the same thing: a frozen tilapia fillet with a sauce from a jar, heated in the microwave. I couldn’t live like that.”

Passing it on

Her children may not speak the language, but they know all about Bosnian food culture. “We’re going to visit my aunt in Croatia soon. My daughter Mia and I are already excited about the stewed peppers. They’re thinner than the ones here, and you stew them with onions, tomatoes and salt. Very simple, but so tasty. We plan to make them every day for lunch.”

Her family has visited Bosnia several times, but not specifically Srebrenica. “It’s not exactly a tourist attraction,” she says with some understatement, “and we don’t know anyone there anymore. But we’ll go one day. They’re familiar with my father’s story and of course they find it tragic, but—and this is important to me—it doesn’t define who we are. We talk more about how the culture I grew up in shaped me than about the war. I like cultural differences. You can plop me down anywhere, I’ll find my way. As long as people try to understand each other—that’s what it’s all about.” <

I reinvented myself in **Maastricht**

She wants to work where the most vulnerable people need help. “I’d work for free if I didn’t have to feed myself,” says Raneesha De Silva, who works in humanitarian aid from her home country of Sri Lanka. Every year she returns to Maastricht, the city that changed her life.

Alumni *meeting minds*

Text
Femke Kools

Photography
Harry Heuts

Initially, Raneesha De Silva thought she’d become a war reporter, so she studied journalism. But when the time came to head into the field, she realised she wanted to be more directly useful to people living with the harsh realities of war. That decision led her to study psychology. “I was especially fascinated by the module on abnormal psychology, the very deviant and antisocial behaviours. That pulled me down the rabbit hole. I became very academically interested in serial killers—with the emphasis on ‘academically,’” she says, smiling.

There were no forensic psychology programmes in Sri Lanka. It was only when she started searching online for postgraduate programmes that she learnt the term. “I’m an Excel girl, so I made a spreadsheet with all the information I gathered about programmes abroad. I reached out to about 50 universities with questions about their curriculum, scholarship opportunities and more. My shortlist came down to King’s College London and Maastricht University.”

Deep dive

The two-year programme in Maastricht appealed because it gave her the chance to dive deep into the curriculum. And the content was exactly what she was looking for, she says. “It was quite comprehensive, covering many different areas of forensic psychology. They offered everything you need to work in the field.”

Problem-Based Learning was very different from the traditional education model she grew up with in Sri Lanka. But since she’d always been the girl in class who asked too many questions, she thought it might suit her. In the end, she applied only to UM. Soon she was on her way, leaving Sri Lanka for the first time in her life.

Homesick for Maastricht

“I didn’t know anyone in the country and felt free to discover who I really was. It was the first time I was independent, coming from a conservative community. I had to figure out finances, how to take care of myself. It was very liberating—I wasn’t homesick for Sri Lanka at all. But I do get homesick for Maastricht and the Netherlands, because of that welcoming, liberating experience. I go back every year; I don’t have to, but I want to.”

She’s still close with the friends she made during her studies. Her class had 24 students representing 21 nationalities. “They’re scattered all over the world now, but we try to meet whenever we can, or at least do video calls. In that international classroom, I learnt to be culturally sensitive, to understand different communication styles and values. It’s been immensely useful in my current global adviser role.”

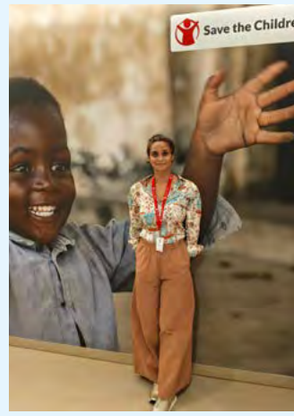
Highlight

Finding internships was a challenge, as her Sri Lankan passport restricted free movement. But with the help of the UM faculty, she managed to secure placements in Sydney and Liverpool. “I’m still so grateful they helped me. The Ashworth Hospital in the UK was a highlight of my second year, because it was exactly what I’d hoped a clinical internship would be. It’s a specialist psychiatric hospital for men with a severe mental illness or personality disorder who pose a serious risk to others. I felt blessed to have had that experience.”

She also made valuable professional connections who recognised her eagerness. At the end of the placement, De Silva secured a UK Research Council grant to lead a project on post-crisis trauma recovery in the Sri Lankan military. And during Covid, she worked as a psychology lecturer. “Once the travel restrictions were lifted, I was so sick of working from home that I applied for a role with a nonprofit in Iraq. They were looking for an international psychologist to support, train and supervise local psychologists and social workers. I didn’t have the required experience in the humanitarian sector, but I had nothing to lose by applying. Two weeks later I was in Iraq.” She laughs. “My parents are still trying to process that.”

Funding cuts

Now she is based once more in Sri Lanka, covering Asia and the Pacific for Save the Children International. Four priority countries with high-conflict situations tend to dominate her attention: Bangladesh, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Pakistan. “I’m deployed to provide training and supervision, and in emergencies I also do fieldwork. Because of global funding cuts, we’re not deployed as much as we used to be, or as much as I’d like. But when I do get the chance to go to the field, I feel so alive. When I see a child smile, when they hold my hand and thank me, it makes me emotional. I come back recharged and am then able to spend a few months working behind the laptop. I don’t care about my safety. I want to be where people need support.” <



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Raneesha De Silva has worked for Save the Children International since August 2023, first as a regional and now as a global adviser on mental health and psychosocial support programmes. She completed the UM master’s in Forensic Psychology in 2019. Now a PhD candidate, she has published on psychopathy and serial homicide, crisis and trauma recovery in the Sri Lankan military, and minority distress and resilience of the trans and gender non-conforming community in Sri Lanka.

From UM to Oxford to a **world-leading law firm**

Timothy Noelanders studied European Law in Maastricht and completed his Master's in Law at Oxford. Now, he is part of a team establishing the first European offices of one of world's largest and most prestigious law firms in Brussels.

Alumni meeting minds

Text
Jos Cortenraad

Photography
Timothy Noelanders

www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/alumni

He is reluctant to comment on recent developments in the United States. Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, founded in 1875, is a white-shoe firm with over 1,200 lawyers and an annual turnover exceeding $2.6 billion. The firm has recently found itself in cross-hairs of the US Administration, primarily because it has represented opponents of the current President.

So things are indeed a little touchy, Timothy Noelanders acknowledges—particularly at a time when relations between the European Union and the US are strained. "Since last summer, we've been building the European headquarters of Paul Weiss," he says via a video call from his flat in central Brussels. "It's a great challenge full of opportunities and significant potential. We aim to establish a strong presence here in Brussels, and I'm optimistic we'll succeed. Our focus is competition law, particularly international mergers and acquisitions. Whatever happens politically, the EU remains a key market. So, companies (including American ones) will continue to be active in Europe. My job is primarily legal, but what we do has an inherent political angle as well. With heightened geopolitical tensions come new challenges and it is our role to help our clients navigate them."

←

Timothy Noelanders studied European Law in Maastricht and Edinburgh. At Oxford, he completed the Magister Juris.

A Peruvian experience

After high school, Nielander spent a year in Peru as part of a Rotary exchange programme. Together with other teenagers from around the world, he established a foundation to provide clean drinking water to native communities of the Peruvian Rain Forest. "I'd just turned 18, and what a year it was. I will never forget this adventure and the life lessons it taught me. One morning, after a night in the middle of the Amazon Rainforest, where you fall asleep with nature's beautiful symphony, I woke up with a whole fish on my plate. I don't normally like fish, but when I was told that the twelve-year-old son gets up every morning to catch fish for the entire family in the Amazon River, I could not say 'I don't like fish'. So, I ate it. It was the best food I ever had. As I was eating, I saw monkeys leaping from tree to tree. How lucky I was!"

Pinching pennies

The young lawyer, born and raised in Belgium, speaks candidly about having to watch every penny during his student days. "I am the first person of my family to attend university. When I told my parents I wanted to study in Maastricht, they were happy of course, but they were also worried about how we would afford the €2,000 tuition (compared to Belgium's €600). Thankfully, the university allowed us to pay in instalments and that enabled me to afford my studies. I lived frugally. I lived in a modest student house on the Kleine Gracht with six others and made the most of Jumbo's 'four croissants for one euro' deal! It was a great sacrifice for my parents, and I am very grateful they invested in my future. Today, I am glad to say that I reimbursed them in full."

European ideal

Nielander was set on Maastricht. "Its Problem-Based Learning was right up my alley: working in small groups, discussing and solving problems actively together. Besides, there are few places better than Maastricht in which to study European law and gain insight into different legal systems. I genuinely believe in the European ideal, and in a way, Maastricht embodies that ideal: people from different backgrounds and cultures, working together and learning from one another."

Oxford

Noelanders graduated cum laude in 2019, having also completed an Erasmus exchange at the University of Edinburgh. Then he gave his parents an even bigger shock. "I had applied to Oxford. It's not easy to get in, but I somehow managed; the recommendation letters I received from my Maastricht professors surely played a big role—I am really grateful to them. I remember the moment the acceptance email arrived. I was sitting with friends in the hotel lobby near TEFAF (we'd managed to get free tickets). I screamed when I saw the email, and all the art collectors turned and stared at me."

At Oxford, everything fell into place. "In Maastricht I'd studied criminal law, property law, and a range of other disciplines. At Oxford, I had the opportunity to delve deeper into four subjects of my choosing: Intellectual Property Law, Law and Computer Science, Regulation and, Competition Law. It was intense—writing an essay every week, discussing and refining it with other students and the professor; not unlike Maastricht, actually. I even got to experience one-on-one tutorials with one of my favourite academics: A. Ezrachi. Academically, it doesn't get better than that."

Paul Weiss

Noelanders then returned home to spend six months with his parents. "After Peru, Maastricht, Oxford and the pandemic, I'd missed them," he says. When he began applying for jobs, his Oxford degree proved to be key. After gaining experience at two leading American and British law firms, he joined Paul Weiss in autumn 2024. "Here in Brussels, I can put into practice everything I learnt in Maastricht and Oxford, especially the soft skills: collaboration within an international team, leadership, and adaptability. We've built a fantastic team, and we're growing quickly. Maastricht will always have a special place in my heart. I go back at least once a year and I want to give back to the Maastricht community that gave me so much!" <

The University Fund Limburg (UFL) was founded on 8 November 1965, originally under the name Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs Limburg. It originated from a mix of regional ambition, social disadvantage and political strategy, with the aim of stimulating academic education in the Province of Limburg. Now, 60 years later, the Fund looks back on a rich history—and forward with strong ambition.

University Fund Limburg: **bridging academia and society for 60 years**

↑
Emile Roemer and Bouwien Janssen

Want to know more about the activities of the University Fund Limburg?

Scan the QR code to find out how UFL supports research, talent and social impact.

University Fund Limburg

Text
Noa Reijnen

Photography
Harry Heuts

In the mid-1960s, the impending closure of the Limburg mines highlighted the economic and social vulnerability of the region. At the same time, there was a shortage of highly educated workers, while the government strived to ensure knowledge institutions were more evenly distributed across regions. The Rijksuniversiteit Limburg was founded in 1976, backed by the business community and broad citizen support—300,000 signatures in favour of a medical faculty. UFL was a driving force behind this institution, which would later grow into Maastricht University (UM).

"The university would not be here today without the strength of the region," says UFL director Bouwien Janssen. "Businesses were in search of highly educated professionals, and society believed in this leap forward." That spirit of social engagement still defines UFL's work today.

Original goal

Even in 2025, the original goal is still very much alive. "The world is changing rapidly," says Emile Roemer, chair of UFL and governor of Limburg. "Whether it's healthcare, sustainability or digitisation, the challenges are only growing, and with them the need for high-quality research."

According to Roemer, UFL's strength lies in supporting research that not only matters to Limburg but also makes an impact far beyond. "Consider the drive towards sustainability in the chemical sector and the pursuit of equal opportunities in education — both key issues that benefit from strong public backing. By responding to urgent local needs while aiming for a supra-regional impact, we put Limburg on the map."

Strong bond with the Province

The medical faculty was officially opened on 16 September 1974, with the first 50 students and staff welcomed at City Hall and the provincial government offices—a landmark moment. "There's always been a strong bond with the Province, and that continues today," says Janssen. Legally, the university did not yet exist: it was officially founded by Queen Juliana on 9 January 1976.

Roemer highlights the international character of the region as a strength for the university. "We're in a unique border region, but we don't think in terms of borders. Our strength lies in working across them."

Building bridges

From the start, UFL has been committed to supporting education and research in the region—a mission that has never changed. "We see ourselves as a connector, the bridge between UM and society. Knowledge is created inside the university, but it shouldn't stay within these walls. Through the Fund, we make research possible, visible and accessible," Janssen says.

Improving the world is paramount for UFL—and public support is indispensable, since not all projects receive government funding. Thanks to its broad network of regional companies and stakeholders, UFL can finance a wide range of research projects and scholarships. One notable example is the annual UM Dinner, organised in partnership with the Province of Limburg since 2009.

"This dinner has a unique format. It's attended by well-known Limburg companies that select a theme that matters to them. During the dinner they're paired with professors specialising in that area. This often leads to new insights, and even surprising new regional partnerships," Roemer explains.

Alumni ambassadors

In 2026, UM will celebrate its 50th anniversary. Its alumni community is growing, both in number and age. "Alumni are a key audience for the Fund. Many hold influential positions in the business community and tend to have a strong connection with their alma mater. It would be valuable to involve them more, through their knowledge, networks or support," Janssen says.

Some alumni who have spent years working elsewhere in the Netherlands eventually return to Limburg. "They see opportunities here that appeal to them and find their way back," Roemer says. "This shows that the region remains attractive for top talent."

Together with other university funds, UFL has been working to raise awareness around legacies. "It's a campaign that fits well with our ageing alumni base. People often don't consider the option of including a university in their will. But it's a wonderful way to make sure your ideals live on when you're no longer here," Janssen says.

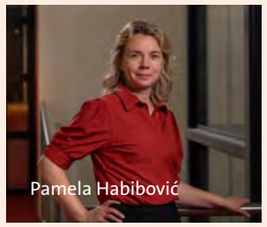
Looking ahead

With an impressive past behind it, UFL is firmly focused on the future. "Limburg has always adapted to major events, such as floods and economic setbacks," Roemer says. "But we've shown resilience and keep on reinventing ourselves. The Fund plays an important part in that."

"Sixty years ago,we joined forces to offer the region new prospects after the mines closed," Janssen adds, "I would very much welcome the opportunity to join forces again in the near future. Not out of necessity, but out of a commitment to urgent social issues such as healthy childhood development, equal opportunities and healthcare innovation. That's how we'll continue to build a resilient future together." <

News


Anouk Vandenboorn


Pamela Habibović

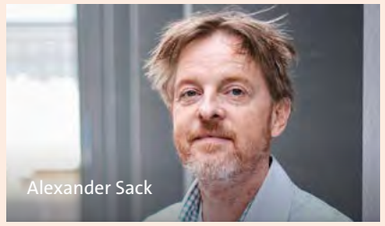
Most prestigious European grant for two UM scientists

Lorenzo Moroni (MERLN) and Alexander Sack (FPN) have each been awarded the most prestigious European research grant for individual researchers: an ERC Advanced Grant, worth more than €2.5 million.

Lorenzo Moroni, professor of Biofabrication for Regenerative Medicine, has spent years working on biomaterials that can help the body repair itself. His MECCANO research programme, for which he received the Advanced Grant, focuses on training pluripotent stem cells. The ultimate aim is to repair damage that currently often requires transplantation. As proof of concept, he will attempt to regenerate a section of heart tissue by designing a specific biomaterial for each of the cell types that make up the heart.

Alexander Sack, professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, received the grant for his research project FLOW, which studies the brain not in isolation but as part of a complex biological system. By examining the dynamic rhythmic interactions between brain and body, he aims to contribute to solutions for neuropsychiatric disorders such as depression, autism and anxiety, as well as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. These disorders are already known to involve atypical coupling between the brain and body. To tackle this, Sack and his team will develop and test new rhythmic, non-invasive brain-stimulation protocols. <


Lorenzo Moroni


Alexander Sack

Vandenboorn appointed Knight in the Order of the Crown

Anouk Bollen-Vandenboorn, Director of the Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM) at the Faculty of Law, Maastricht University, was appointed Knight in the Order of the Crown on 3 July, during a formal ceremony at the Belgian Embassy in The Hague.

The royal honour was presented by Ambassador Anick Van Calster on behalf of His Majesty the King of the Belgians. Professor Bollen-Vandenboorn received this distinction in recognition of her exceptional contributions to strengthening the ties between Belgium and the Netherlands. <

Pamela Habibović joins Executive Board Universities of the Netherlands

As of 1 July 2025, **Pamela Habibović**, UM's Rector Magnificus, will join the Executive Board of Universities of the Netherlands (UNL).

UNL is the umbrella organisation and advocate for Dutch universities. Habibović has already been active at UNL, as a 'board lead' on various dossiers, including the PhD system, sector plans, and quality assurance.

Appointments to the UNL Executive Board are for a term of two years. As of 1 September, two more new members will join the UNL Board: Vinod Subramaniam (President of the University of Twente) and Patrick Groothuis (Vice-President of Eindhoven University of Technology). <

Working together to build a **future-proof knowledge and innovation ecosystem** in North Limburg

HAS green academy and Maastricht University signed a letter of intent to strengthen their collaboration. An important step toward a long-term strategic partnership in Venlo. This collaboration will focus specifically on the Brightlands Campus Greenport Venlo and aims to combine strengths for the benefit of the region.

The partnership will focus on pressing themes such as agrifood, living environment, health and technology, with special attention to robotics, AI and other state-of-the-art developments that are transforming the professional field.

Rianne Letschert, President of the Executive Board of Maastricht University: *"Venlo is the number one place in Limburg when it comes to knowledge and innovation in the agrifood domain. Together, we aim to expand our impact by improving access for prospective students in this rapidly evolving field."* <

Profile

Education and research at Maastricht University is organised primarily on the basis of faculties, schools and institutes.

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
- Arts, Media and Culture (AMC)
- Globalisation, Transnationalism and Development (GTD)
- Politics and Culture in Europe (PCE)
- Science, Technology and Society Studies (MUSTS)
- Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Graduate School
- Centre for Gender and Diversity (CGD)
- Centre for the Innovation of Classical Music (MCICM)
- Tracé - Limburg Community Archives

Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences
- Care and Public Health Research Institute (CAPHRI)
- Cardiovascular Research Institute Maastricht (CARIM)
- Research Institute for Oncology and Reproduction (GROW)
- Institute for Nutrition and Translational Research in Metabolism (NUTRIM)
- School of Health Professions Education (SHE)
- Mental Health and Neuroscience Research Institute (MHeNS)
- MERLN Institute for Technology-Inspired Regenerative Medicine
- Maastricht MultiModal Molecular Imaging Institute (M4I)

Faculty of Science and Engineering
- University College Maastricht (UCM)
- University College Venlo (UCV)
- Maastricht Science Programme (MSP)
- Department of Advanced Computing Sciences (DACS)
- Aachen-Maastricht Institute for Biobased Materials (AMIBM)
- Brightlands Institute for Smart Society (BISS)
- Brightlands Future of Farming Institute (BFFI)
- Department of Circular Chemical Engineering (CCE)
- Department of Molecular Genetics (DMG)
- Department of Sensor Engineering (SE)
- Gravitational Waves and Fundamental Physics (GWFP)

Faculty of Law
- Globalization and Law Network
- Institute for Corporate Law, Governance and Innovation Policies (ICGI)
- Institute for Globalisation and International Regulation (IGIR)
- Institute for Transnational Legal Research (METRO)
- Institute for Transnational and Euregional Cross Border Cooperation and Mobility (ITEM)
- Maastricht Centre for European Law (MCEL)
- Maastricht Centre for Human Rights (MCfHR)
- Maastricht Centre for Law & Jurisprudence (MCLJ)
- Maastricht Centre for Taxation (MCT)
- Maastricht European Private Law Institute (M-EPLI)
- Maastricht Law and Tech Lab
- Maastricht Institute for Criminal Studies (MICS)
- Montesquieu Institute Maastricht

Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience
- Graduate School of Psychology and Neuroscience (GSPN)
- Clinical Psychological Science (CPS)
- Cognitive Neuroscience (CN)
- Experimental Psychopathology (EPP)
- Neuropsychology & Psychopharmacology (NP&PP)
- Work & Social Psychology (WSP)
- Maastricht Brain Imaging Centre (M-BIC)
- Section Teaching and Innovation of Learning (STILL)

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

Interfaculty institutes
- The Maastricht Forensic Institute (tMFI)
- The Maastricht Centre for Citizenship, Migration and Development (MACIMIDE)
- Maastricht Centre for Systems Biology (MaCSBio)
- Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH)
- Centre for European Research in Maastricht (CERIM)
- Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM)
- Institute of Data Science (IDS)
- Centre for Integrative Neuroscience (CIN)
- Maastricht Science in Court (MSiC)

Colophon

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