

# UMagazine

**October 2026**

**on education and research at Maastricht University**

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Ellen Blaak studies how the microbiome can play a part in weight reduction.

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# We have to hang on to hope

Emeritus Professor Sally Wyatt reflects on a life of activism, research, and teaching—from her Montreal roots to pioneering digital culture in Maastricht—championing fairness, citational justice, and hope. Now retiring, she embraces art, poetry, and supporting women’s rights.



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## Beyond the patient

Psychiatrist Irene Weltens’s PhD reveals how nurses, teams, and ward settings drive aggression on secure psychiatric wards. Urging a welcoming, de-escalation-focused culture, supervisor Thérèse van Amelsvoort stresses that staff wellbeing and environmental design are essential for safety.

## Alum Remco Beckers

As a curator, Remco Beckers shines a light on Limburg’s rich history.



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## Cover

For the cover image, photographer Sem Shayne was inspired by the interview with Mindy Duffourc on liability around AI-driven decision-making in medical contexts.

[semshayne.com](https://semshayne.com)

## Foreword

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

We are still celebrating 50 years of Maastricht University. From our special Dies Natalis to our Garden Gatherings for staff, students and alumni, many events were organised to mark this milestone. At the same time, we have been confronted this year with important challenges—all of which have revealed our strengths as a university community.

We have shown that, despite increasing polarisation in society and within our own community, we remain dedicated to shared academic values: respect for one another, open dialogue, academic freedom and the pursuit of knowledge. Universities flourish when different perspectives can be expressed, challenged and debated in an environment of trust and mutual respect.

We have shown our collective dedication to making a difference for science and for our region through our efforts to deepen the collaboration between UM and the MUMC+. While we will not pursue the level of integration initially envisioned, we remain committed to combining our strengths in education, research, healthcare and innovation.

We have shown not only technological savviness, but also creativity, flexibility and determination in handling the disruption caused by the cyber incident involving Canvas, the software system we use to share our educational material with students and teachers.

And we keep on showing our dedication to ensuring AI is developed and applied responsibly, ethically and in the service of society. This technology is transforming education, research and valorisation, as well as our daily operations. As a university, we embrace our responsibility to innovate and think critically.

Our community has shown what makes it strong. We may hold different opinions, weigh evidence differently or approach challenges from different perspectives. Yet we remain united in our willingness to listen, learn, understand and create a positive impact together.

It is with confidence in that resilience that we look ahead to the next 50 years. We are currently in dialogue with our community to develop the Strategic Plan 2028–2032 and jointly shape the future of UM.

Finally, we would like to express our deep gratitude to our former president, Rianne Letschert. Her contribution has left a lasting legacy at UM, and we are reminded of her impact every day. We are thankful for her contribution and wish her all the best in The Hague.

*Jan-Tjitte on behalf of the board*

# Still celebrating 50 years of Maastricht University



# MERIAN: Art creates knowledge

What if a painting, performance or sculpture could answer a research question? MERIAN, a collaboration between Maastricht University, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences and the Jan van Eyck Academie, facilitates research through artistic practice.

MERIAN is both an acronym (Maastricht Experimental Research In and through the Arts Network) and a nod to the 17th-century naturalist and entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian, who enjoys an enduring reputation in both art and science thanks to her illustrations of plants and insect life cycles within complex ecosystems. The network shares her dedication to exploration and creativity, and similarly operates in the fertile grey area between arts and science.

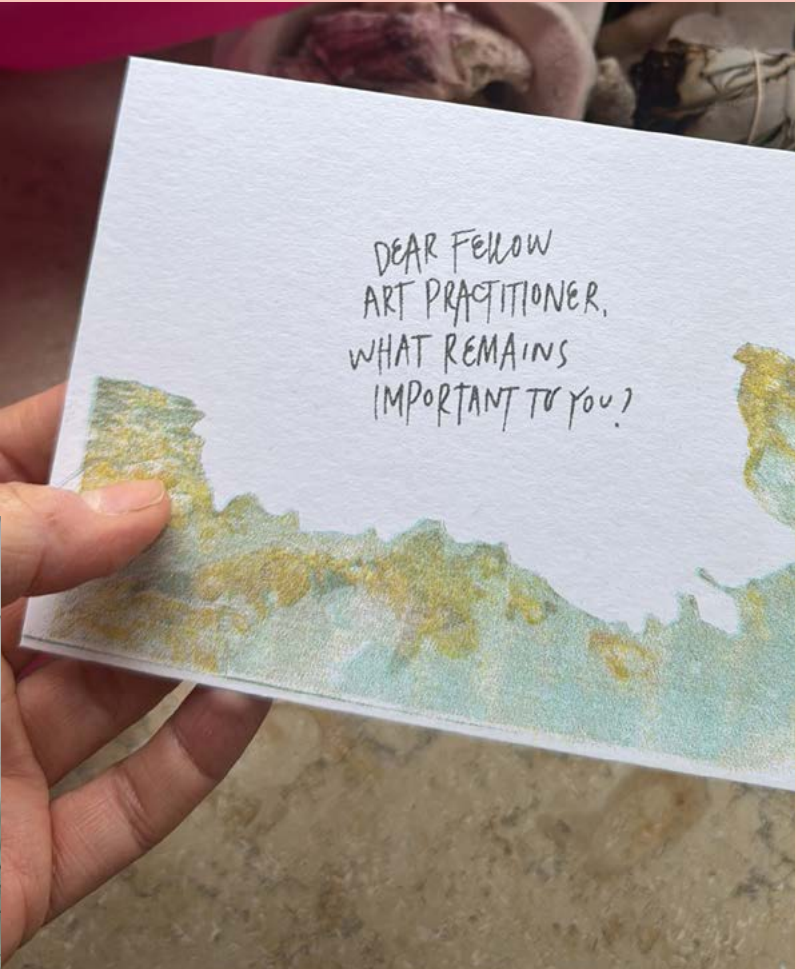
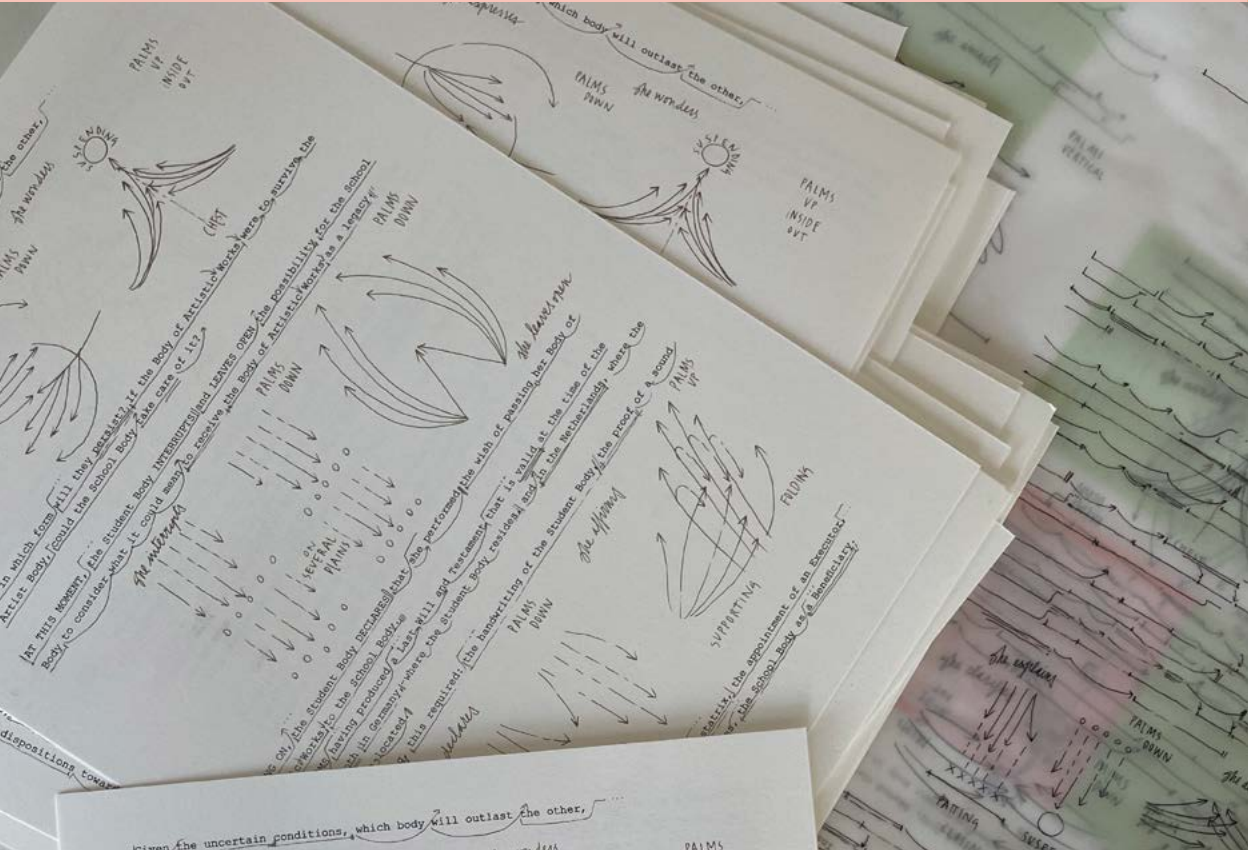
An interdisciplinary artistic-research platform, MERIAN offers a practice-based doctoral programme in which artist-researchers bridge academia and the arts to generate new, innovative forms of knowledge. “This is the first PhD programme of its kind in Maastricht,” says Flora Lysen from the MERIAN steering committee.

**Connect and inspire**

“This is not research on art or artists, but artists bringing their ways of working to research,” Lysen explains. In addition to writing a dissertation, the PhD candidates will create unique artworks. “We want to blur the distinction between theory and practice. The creative process becomes a method of investigation.” Beyond its PhD programme, MERIAN “seeks to create a platform that connects and inspires researchers interested in exploring unconventional methods, frameworks and collaborations.”

“The artistic approach is not only a way to communicate findings,” Lysen says. “It can be a game-changer when defining problems and research questions.” She refers to an artist with a medical background pursuing a PhD at MERIAN. “In taking on an artistic persona, she can ask different kinds of questions. In this case, you have a visual and performance artist questioning what brain-imaging software fails to reveal.”

Artistic research is a form of knowledge production that incorporates and communicates a more diverse range of knowledge, including tacit or experiential forms. “Academic disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, medicine and engineering, all have different ways of opening up to other forms of knowledge and >



Above  
Postcard from the MERIAN PhD  
fieldwork Preparing Wishes for the  
Afterlife (2025 -2026)  
Credits: Valentina Curandi

Left  
Performance documentation of Last  
Will and Testament (2023). MERIAN  
Art & Science Lab of UCM [University  
College Maastricht]  
Credits: Valentina Curandi

methodological experimentation. Methodologies are always in the making,” Lysen says. “We attune to our research questions. The more diverse the input, the better. Rethinking how you acquire and communicate knowledge makes you understand your subject matter differently.”

### An expanded model of knowledge

“All artists are researchers in their own way,” says Hicham Khalidi, director of the Jan van Eyck Academie. “Art understands through subjectivity and possibility, while science does so through objectivity.” At first glance, science may seem the more concrete of the two. Yet given the embodied, experiential nature of our existence in a Protean world, one could argue that science is in fact the more abstract and artificial approach.

“Art and science always seek each other out; they’re already intertwined,” Khalidi says. He sees the notion of a hierarchy between the two as artificial. “There are, of course, different languages and methods. What MERIAN’s PhD programme adds is the structure, the institutional embedding—and with it, the access to knowledge and labs.”

### Responding to changing societal conditions

Valentina Curandi, a current MERIAN PhD candidate, agrees that “art is already very collaborative and research-based. To be relevant, artists have to evolve and respond to changing conditions. It requires constant research and exploration.” This is a vision of art that opposes the market logic of producing objects as sellable assets; instead, it foregrounds the process, the research itself.

During her PhD, she will have to study not only her subject but also her own creative process and ephemeral work. This will be much more academic than the research she is used to. “I definitely had to adapt to the conditions, the dynamics, the language of the university. To some degree, I am researching academia itself—but in an artistic way. I’m very grateful for the opportunity to explore this.”

She wants her art to have societal relevance. After a brush with death and a chronic health condition, she has made mortality, fragility and the precarity of freelance life central themes in her work. “We have an alienated relationship with death and dying. I’m trying to explore our resistance to that through non-theatrical performance, from writing to storytelling.” In parallel to her artistic research, she is training to become a death doula, a supportive end-of-life guide.



### A new era of art–science exchange

Institutional collaborations between the arts and academia are part of a larger European development over the past 30 years, with networks of universities, universities of applied sciences and art academies emerging across the continent. In Maastricht, MERIAN emerged as a grassroots initiative incorporating several collaborations that arose organically. “The challenge was consolidating and formalising everything,” Lysen recalls. “We received funding to start up MERIAN in 2021; UM’s PhD regulations had to be adapted, and so on. Thankfully, UM is very progressive and open-minded when it comes to how research can be done and how it can make a difference.”

MERIAN aims to expand its mission in the coming years. Beyond PhDs and professional doctorates, the aim is to foster collaboration between the arts and academia by bringing artists-in-residence to UM faculties and organising intrainstitutional, interdisciplinary meetups between teachers and researchers. “Everyone could benefit from experimenting with transformative methods developed in exchange with artists,” Lysen says. Centuries after Sibylla Merian, a new generation of researchers is carrying that same spirit of inquiry forward, transforming not only what we know but also how knowledge is created. <

**We want to blur the distinction between theory and practice. The creative process becomes a method of investigation.**

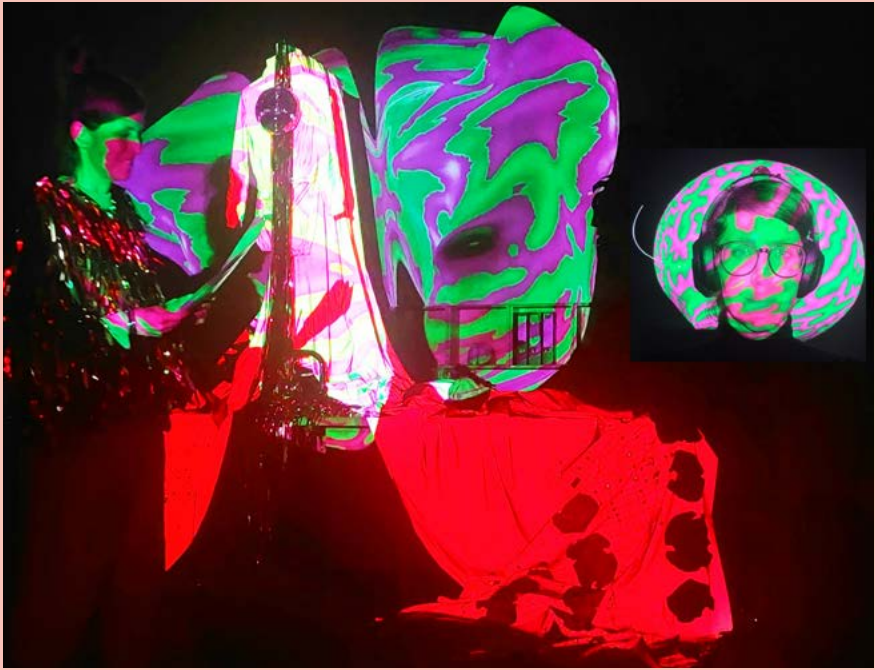
Flora Lysen

**Hicham Khalidi** is director of the Jan van Eyck Academie, which offers residencies to artists, designers, curators, writers and other artistic researchers. He curated the Dutch entry for the Venice Biennale in 2024, and previously worked as an associate curator for Lafayette Anticipations in Paris.



Left  
DATA DIVA in the Brain Lab (How to research trans\* and interdisciplinary in a different way?), [Laboratory of Bioengineering and Morphogenesis, KU Leuven], 2024  
Credits: Antye Guenther

Below  
Text performance of SMOOTH AND LEGIT (Smoothing as a Re-Shaping of the World), [Open Studios, Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht] 2023  
Credits: Antye Guenther



**Flora Lysen** is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and a member of the Maastricht University Science, Technology and Society Studies (MUSTS) research group.



**Valentina Curandi** is an art practitioner and a MERIAN PhD candidate. Her work interweaves performance and text in live acts, printed matter, video and sound works.



Professor  
Human Biology  
Ellen Blaak



## Research

Text  
Femke Kools

Photography  
Hannah Lipowsky

Losing weight is difficult, but keeping it off may be even harder. Researchers at Maastricht and Wageningen universities have discovered that a particular gut bacterium can help limit the weight people put back on after having lost it. The study was led by UM's Ellen Blaak. "Some of the effects were even stronger than we'd expected."

# A helping hand from a gut bacterium

The star of this story is the gut bacterium *Akkermansia Muciniphila*, or AM for short. It is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in everyone's gut microbiome, where it feeds on the mucus lining of the intestine. A pasteurised form of the bacterium—no longer alive, but still biologically active—is available as a dietary supplement. The latest research suggests that taking this daily supplement after losing weight may help prevent the kilos from creeping back. The findings were published this year in *Nature Medicine*.

## A major undertaking

The study involved 90 overweight or diabetic adults. Following a strict diet, they lost an average of 11 kilograms over eight weeks, after which they maintained healthy eating patterns for a further 24 weeks. In practice, this is the stage at which weight tends to creep up again. Half of the participants took a daily AM supplement, while the other half received a placebo.

Conducting a study like this is a major undertaking, says Ellen Blaak. "Recruiting participants is the first challenge. But the participants and the research team also have to really

commit to the follow-up and measurements. In this case, everything went exceptionally well. All the credit goes to our team of postdocs, PhD candidates and research assistants."

At the end of the 24-week intervention, the participants who had received AM had regained around three kilograms less than those in the placebo group. "We also analysed participants' stool samples to determine whether they naturally had high or low levels of AM in their gut microbiome. People with overweight often have slightly lower levels. We found that participants who naturally had low levels of AM regained as much as five kilograms less than those in the placebo group. That was a large effect that genuinely surprised us."

## Mucus-feeding bacterium

Other gut bacteria ferment carbohydrates and proteins that are not absorbed in the first part of the intestine. AM is different in that it feeds on mucus instead. "We still don't fully understand what effect this has on our metabolism, although there are indications that AM improves the barrier function of the intestinal wall," Blaak says. When the intestinal wall is more >

permeable, certain bacteria can pass beyond the gut, increasing inflammation in the bloodstream.

“There are indications that AM strengthens the gut barrier and helps reduce inflammatory markers in the blood. We also found that participants in the AM group excreted more energy in their stools, meaning they absorbed less. In addition, we took small samples of fat tissue from participants to analyse their gene expression profiles, and we found that the fat tissue was less inflamed in those taking AM. That’s interesting, because inflammation in fat tissue may trigger weight regain. The fat cells become stressed and want to revert to their original state. AM reduces that inflammation and stress, which may explain its beneficial effect on weight control.”

Finally, insulin sensitivity also improved among participants taking AM. This is encouraging, as reduced insulin sensitivity is a risk factor for developing diabetes.

### Burping and flatulence

The researchers now want to better understand why AM reduces inflammation in fat tissue.

“Apparently there’s some interaction between the gut and fat tissue, and animal studies and laboratory research suggest that the gut barrier plays a role,” Blaak explains. “We want to map the body’s energy balance: what do people eat, how much energy do they burn, how much do they excrete in their stools, and how does all of this relate to changes in the gut microbiome?”

It helps that the university now has, alongside the respiration chambers that have brought Maastricht international recognition, a new fermentation chamber. The respiration chambers measure a person’s metabolism and energy expenditure by analysing the air they breathe in and out. The fermentation chamber also measures methane, hydrogen and hydrogen sulphide. These gases are released both in our breath and through burping and flatulence, providing valuable information about the activity of gut bacteria.

### Thirty grams of fibre

The power of nutrition is still underestimated, Blaak says. “You can actually influence your gut microbiome through your diet. Gut bacteria feed primarily on dietary fibre, so ideally you should consume well over 30 grams a day. Fibre is mainly fermented in the first part of the large intestine. If you eat plenty of different types of fibre, they also reach the final section of the large intestine, where fermentation has very clear health benefits. We’ve demonstrated that here, from improved insulin sensitivity and reduced liver fat to beneficial effects on blood lipid levels.”

All we have to do is switch to a more plant-based diet. To this end, the national Health Council recommends replacing meat with pulses a few times a week. “They can be really delicious too, once you know how to prepare them.”

Along with helping people lose weight, a healthy diet combined with lifestyle changes offers substantial health benefits. Blaak’s research focuses particularly on precision nutrition, in which dietary advice is tailored to a person’s metabolic profile or gut microbiome. “Take the Mediterranean diet, for example. We’ve shown that it’s especially beneficial for people with insulin resistance in the liver. I find that fascinating.” <

**We found that participants who naturally had low levels of AM regained as much as five kilograms less than those in the placebo group. That was a large effect that genuinely surprised us.**

*Ellen Blaak*



**Professor Ellen Blaak** joined Maastricht University as a postdoctoral researcher in 1995 and was appointed professor of Human Biology in 2007. She heads the Department of Human Biology and is a member of the Health Council of the Netherlands.

# Opening of the Academic Year 2026/27

Maastricht University welcomed the new academic year at the Theater aan het Vrijthof on 31 August with a celebration that also looked to the future. As the university continues to mark its 50th anniversary, the event posed the question: **what will the next 50 years bring, and how can we shape that future together?**

For UM president **Pamela Habi-bović**, the answer lies not in trying to predict what comes next, but in building on the qualities that have shaped the university since its foundation in 1976. Innovation, courage, flexibility and collaboration, she said, will remain essential as the university looks towards its next half-century.

The idea of imagining the future—rather than predicting it—returned in the keynote by **Loes Damhof**, UNESCO Chair in Futures Literacy. Damhof invited the audience to envisage a range of possibilities for the future of education. Her message was that imagining different futures can change how we see and act in the present.

*“When we imagine more, we perceive more in the present.”*

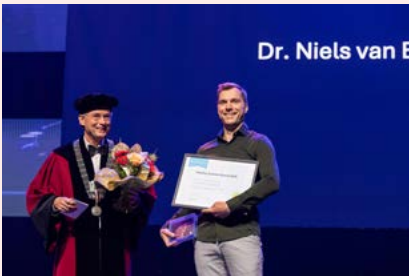
The theme was also brought to life through the arts. In a performance moving from the classical The Dying Swan to contemporary dance, world-renowned ballet dancer **Igone de Jongh** created a bridge between tradition and the future. The **Maastricht University Choir** accompanied the academic procession and brought the celebration to a close with *Ode to Joy*.



Another key theme was the university's role in the wider region. Journalist and UM alum **Marcia Luyten** moderated a panel with **Emile Roemer**, governor of Limburg, **Wim Hillenaar**, mayor of Maastricht, and **Jeanette Oostijen**, president of VISTA college, on how UM's relationships with regional partners might evolve over the next 50 years.

**Niels van Best**, assistant professor of Medical Microbiology, received the **2026 Hustinx Prize for Science**. His research examines how microbes in our environment influence the gut microbiome and immune system during the first years of life, and how this knowledge could help prevent allergies and respiratory problems. The €15,000 prize will support the further development of his research.

The **2026 UM Student Prize** went to **Anaïs Hublet**, founder of **Tauli**, an initiative working with local partners in Malawi to provide cervical cancer screening. Tauli's approach revolves around sustainability and local ownership: nurses conduct the screenings themselves, and knowledge and materials remain available locally, allowing the work to continue beyond the initial project. <



## News

### Maastricht University is expanding its horticultural research in Venlo

**Maastricht University is expanding its horticultural research in Venlo through a €4.18 million grant from the Regio Deal Noord-Limburg II.** This funding will accelerate the development of Brightlands High Tech Agro at the Brightlands Campus Greenport Venlo. The project addresses challenges in the agricultural sector, including global food security, sustainable production and labour shortages, by integrating digitisation and automation into greenhouse farming.



The project has two distinct phases. Phase one, funded by the first Regio Deal, focused on the deployment of hardware such as robots, drones and advanced sensors. A dedicated robotics lab opened in June 2026. Phase two, backed by the new funding, will involve constructing an autonomous cultivation greenhouse paired with an advanced robotics laboratory. Scheduled for completion by late 2028, the facility will merge plant biology with engineering.

This interdisciplinary initiative brings together biologists from the Brightlands Future Farming Institute and engineers from the Department of Advanced Computing Sciences. Biologists specialise in plant genetics and crop breeding, while the engineering team

supplies expertise in artificial intelligence and automation. Using AI-driven robots capable of conducting continuous, unbiased experiments, researchers will be able to condense decades of traditional agricultural research into a few years.

The ultimate goal is to create an entirely autonomous greenhouse where robots and drones manage, tend and harvest crops with minimal human intervention. Beyond their application in smart agriculture, these automated innovations are also highly transferable, with potential to drive cross-sector collaboration in North Limburg's manufacturing and logistics industries. <

### Dr. Michiel Bron awarded 2026 Dirk Jacob Veegens Prize

**Dr Michiel Bron was awarded the prestigious 2026 Dirk Jacob Veegens Prize for his outstanding doctoral dissertation, 'The petro-atom: A century of ubiquitous oil involvement in nuclear energy, 1895–1993.'** The biennial prize, awarded by the Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities (KHMW), celebrates exceptional historical research that offers insight into contemporary economic, political and social matters.

Bron defended his PhD, supervised by Cyrus Mody and Vincent Lagendijk, at Maastricht University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) in January 2025. His work challenges the conventional narrative of energy transitions by demonstrating that nuclear

energy and the petroleum industry are historically inseparable. Indeed, major oil conglomerates—including Exxon, Shell and TotalEnergies—actively shaped the trajectory of atomic energy from its inception. This industrial overlap spanned pivotal historical periods, including corporate participation in the World War II Manhattan Project, uranium mining operations across the United States and the Global South, and corporate diversification plans in the later 20th century.

The KHMW jury unanimously selected Bron's dissertation from 13 submissions, praising its archival depth and relevance to global debates on climate change, corporate responsibility and the



strategic behaviour of multi-energy corporations. Bron's findings indicate that energy transitions are rarely driven by technological innovation alone. Rather, they also depend on existing commercial infrastructure and on oil executives who viewed their businesses as broader 'energy companies' long before the current climate crisis. <

# We have to hang on to hope

## Portrait

Text  
Femke Kools

Photography  
Harry Heuts



Emeritus professor  
Sally Wyatt

“I still have the sense of fairness of a five-year-old,” Sally Wyatt says. This is, she thinks, why she is so bothered by inequality and social exclusion. She dedicated most of her research to these topics, but equally enjoyed teaching in London and serving on the Faculty Board in Maastricht. In a summer-silent common room in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, she looks back on her life and work. “There’s a difference between taking what you do seriously and taking yourself seriously.”

What if her parents hadn’t moved the family to Montreal when Sally, the youngest of four, was 14? “I might have become pregnant at 16, out of boredom,” she said in her farewell lecture. “I belong in a city.” She had spent most of her childhood in a small Canadian town, interspersed with periods in England, where her parents were from. Both were born into lower middle-class families and hadn’t been able to afford university.

“My dad became an engineer in the British navy, working for companies and later the government,” she says. “He got a master’s degree in political science when he was in his 40s. His graduation photo went up beside the children’s, which my parents proudly put on the wall in every house they lived in. My mum trained as a nurse, but didn’t really practise. She wrote fiction and plays, both for stage and radio. She had quite a talent: she used to say she could have supported herself with her writing, but not four children.”

### Easily bored

They had emigrated to Canada before Sally was born. “My dad liked new challenges, so we moved a lot.” She describes herself as someone who is easily bored. During her bachelor’s in economics, she considered switching to engineering, inspired by her father. “Whenever we went on holidays we’d look at dams and electricity stations, and he’d explain everything to us. Even now, when I go on holiday, I get really excited when I see a power station.” She finished her economics degree, but also took electives in history, French and fine arts, showing the breadth of interests she would enjoy throughout her career.

After her master’s in economics at Sussex University in England, she was offered a job as a research assistant with Luc Soete, Maastricht University’s former rector. “I started a PhD with him, but I never finished it. I was too young.” After 10 years of research in Sussex and Brighton, the big city called once again, and in 1990 she joined the University of East London. “It was a polytechnic, what you would call an HBO in the Netherlands; very teaching-oriented. I learnt more about teaching in the first three years there than in the 30 years since. East London is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in England, and the student body was incredibly diverse. These people had fought hard to get there, so we felt very committed to teaching them right.”

### Phoning Wiebe

When the university decided to create a master’s programme, she was asked to ‘ring up Wiebe Bijker’ in Maastricht. Bijker and a group of colleagues had set up the European Studies in Science and Technology (ESST) programme, “and he was very famous already,” Wyatt remembers. “I don’t recall how I found his phone number in 1993, but he was the nicest person in the world. He even said he’d heard of the University of East London, which couldn’t have been true! But we ended up setting up ESST in London, which was great.” Bijker later supervised her PhD, which she defended in Maastricht in 1998.

A year earlier, just before turning 40, she had met Hans, a philosopher of science who worked in Amsterdam. After a few years in a long-distance relationship, she moved to Amsterdam. “Hans had three teenaged sons; that wasn’t always easy. But now they’re in their 40s and have children; I love having grandchildren.” Not having children of her own is fine, she says. “If I’d met the right person at the right time, it might have happened, but it didn’t. I never felt I desperately wanted children.” >

Speaking truth to power

She did feel the need to live in a city at least the size of Amsterdam, so she didn't move to Maastricht when she became a professor here. During the four years she served as the faculty's associate dean for research, she rented a flat. "I enjoyed being on the board, getting to know all the different fields of research within the faculty. It was the right time in my career." She wasn't afraid to speak truth to power, as she calls it. For a meeting with the Executive Board, she prepared a quiz that showed why a smaller arts and social sciences faculty could not be measured with the same tools as a larger medical faculty. "They started to see how successful our faculty really was and that one set of criteria for all faculties doesn't make any sense."

She also set up the Digital Society bachelor's programme—in collaboration, she stresses, with many others. "Someone said to me lately, 'I really like how you get people to do things without them feeling like they're being told to do things.' I can tell you: it's an enormous amount of work, setting up a new bachelor's programme in this country. The day we welcomed the first batch of students—my 'guinea pigs,' as I jokingly called them—was a memorable day in my career."

Her research focuses on social exclusion, inequality and injustice, and how these are affected by digital technologies. What role does technology play in producing knowledge? Who do scientists cite when they write? "A special issue with the theme citational justice came out this year in an obscure but excellent Canadian journal called KULA [Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies –Ed.]. I'm on the editorial board. Citation is not a neutral process. Men are over-represented and self-citation is also a typically male phenomenon." She hopes to see the day when "mediocre women" have careers as successful as those long enjoyed by mediocre men. "Women have to be brilliant to reach the same level." Her sense of fairness originated in her early youth, she thinks. "When you're the youngest of four, sometimes you have to fight for a piece of cake."

Next life phase

Another question she dove into: whose knowledge counts, both in academia and in society at large? "It's good that we have medical doctors, but sometimes we do know our own bodies." And what do 'we' find interesting enough to collect data about? "I've had a frozen shoulder twice; it typically affects perimenopausal women, who are nobody's research priority." She doesn't mind having a reputation for speaking up about matters like these, sometimes in the form of a joke. Or a haiku, like the title of her farewell

lecture: 'Technology – life, Contingency – irony, Hostility – hope.' "I wanted to end with hope, because there's enough to be completely depressed about. We have to hang on to hope."

During her retirement, she hopes to read more and join a painting course. "Last week I went to an online poetry workshop, and the other day a yoga class. Finding time for that was unthinkable a year ago."

She is happy she will never again have to apply for research funding. Instead, she might spend her free time accompanying women to an abortion clinic, to save them from being harassed by protestors outside. "That's the last thing you need at that moment, I can imagine." And who knows what else is on the cards? "My mother died when she was 94, my grandmother at 97, so I'll live to be 120, I suppose." <

***Emeritus professor Sally Wyatt studied economics in Montreal and Sussex and obtained a PhD at Maastricht University in 1998. From 2007 until her retirement in May 2026, she was professor of Digital Cultures at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She was one of the founders of the Bachelor in Digital Society, which started in 2019. She is the editor of Hostility by Design: How Technologies Lose Their Innocence, which will be published in 2027.***



International

Text  
Jolien Linssen

Photography  
Philip Driessen

Professor  
Giselle Bosse

International  
policy officer  
Ayda Frings

PHD candidate  
Wicke van den Broek



How quickly  
democracy can  
unravel



For more than 20 years, Professor Giselle Bosse has been studying relations between the European Union and countries such as Ukraine and Belarus. Much has changed over that time. When she first began her research, few people could point to these countries on a map. Today, Bosse is regularly consulted by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and it has become ever clearer just how closely our own fate is tied to that of Eastern Europe.



Halfway through the interview, Giselle Bosse pulls out a map. She points to the Suwałki Gap, a narrow strip of land connecting Poland with the Baltic states. Lying between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus, it is a weak link in NATO’s defences: were Putin to try to seize it, Belarus would do little to stand in his way.

“This is a big problem, because Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania would effectively be cut off from the rest of NATO,” Bosse says. “And it’s why Belarus is so strategically important. I can’t stress enough that if the Baltic states become isolated, that would be a problem for NATO as a whole.”

**Belarus: obscure but relevant**

Bosse’s PhD candidate, Wicke van den Broek, nods. His research focuses on how the European Union and Poland seek to promote democracy in Belarus. “To the general public, Belarus is still a rather obscure country that people know little about,” he says. “The challenge is to use our research to make the urgency clear.”

Under dictator Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for more than 30 years, Belarus has become Russia’s closest ally and, in practice, something close to a satellite state. This means the country plays an important role in the hybrid war against the West, through cyberattacks, sabotage, influence operations and disinformation. “It’s not a pleasant message, but the hybrid war has already reached the Netherlands,” Bosse stresses.

Following Lukashenko’s fraudulent re-election in 2020 and the subsequent protests—forcefully suppressed by the regime—the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on Belarus. Further sanctions followed after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But since the US unilaterally decided to pursue closer relations, the West no longer speaks with one voice. In exchange for the release of political prisoners, the US has eased some of its sanctions.

**The risks of US rapprochement**

That shift called for a political response, and it was at this point that a dialogue began between the Maastricht researchers and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “You want to gather as many perspectives as possible so that we can brief the minister as thoroughly as we can,” explains international policy officer Ayda Frings. “On the basis of this information, along with what we hear through our diplomatic channels, the minister decides which direction to take. The Netherlands can play a guiding role on this issue within the EU, so it’s important to think it through carefully.”

The motives behind the US approach remain a matter of speculation. “Trump is probably not motivated by humanitarian concerns; this is a strategic move,” says Bosse. At the same time, the agreement between the US and Belarus has not led to structural change: opponents of the regime are still being imprisoned. “By dismantling USAID, the Americans have effectively withdrawn their support for democratisation processes,” Van den Broek adds. “Our argument is that the EU should step into that gap.”

**Lessons for Western democracies**

For his research, Van den Broek has spoken to Belarusians both in exile and inside the country. “We can see that people abroad are managing to stay in touch with their home country and continue working for positive change. And inside Belarus, there are still people conducting investigations, keeping independent media alive. The crucial question is: do you invest in official relations with the regime? Or do you work on a more horizontal level and invest in civil society, both inside and outside Belarus? And yes, I realise it’s easy for us as researchers to say this. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they’re the ones who actually have to make the choice.”

At a time when our own democracy is under pressure, Bosse adds, a degree of humility is called for. “Democracy can unravel very quickly—just look at the US. Things that once seemed unthinkable are happening. I don’t think the Netherlands is prepared for that. We can learn from countries like Moldova and even Ukraine. Civil society there has proved remarkably resilient and has developed strategies for resisting anti-democratic tendencies. In Moldova, the public successfully pushed back against Russian disinformation; the pro-European party won last year’s election.”

Bosse herself, who grew up in the former East Germany, has never taken freedom and peace for granted. “I feel very strongly that, as a society, we have a responsibility to safeguard those two things we have secured: peace and freedom,” she says. “That’s also why it’s so important for academics to engage in dialogue with policymakers. We can’t just sit in our ivory tower; we need to make recommendations that can actually be used in practice. That, too, strengthens democracy.” <



**Wicke van den Broek** is a PhD candidate at UM, researching democracy promotion by the EU and Poland in Belarus. He completed his bachelor’s in European Studies at UM in 2017, and subsequently obtained a master’s in International Relations in Kraków and a master’s in History in Warsaw.

**Ayda Frings** is a policy officer for Russia and Belarus at the Europe Department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She developed a strong affinity with Eastern Europe from an early age, partly thanks to frequent visits to Ukraine. She studied at Eindhoven University of Technology and has worked in various countries, including Oman and Tanzania.

**Giselle Bosse** is a professor at Maastricht University’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She holds a personal chair in EU External Democracy Support and the Jean Monnet Chair in EU Foreign Policy and International Relations. She is also a fellow at the European Democracy Hub in Brussels.

## High-tech Greenhouse in Venlo

The 1,600 m<sup>2</sup> Nick Bos Greenhouse in Venlo allows Maastricht University to develop climate resilient crops and innovative cultivation methods.

### Spread

Photography  
Philip Driessen



# AI making medical decisions

## — and what happens if things go wrong

Who is responsible if a medical decision made using artificial intelligence causes serious bodily harm or death? Are the doctors liable, or the hospital? What about the developers, or even the AI itself? Mindy Duffourc is working to develop legal frameworks that protect patients and promote the implementation of novel, life-saving technologies.

### Research and Society

Text  
Florian Raith

Photography  
Sem Shayne

Assistant professor  
Private Law  
Mindy Duffourc



Ethical and cultural implications aside, the prospect of AI making medical decisions is a legal minefield. If a doctor makes a decision about your loved one's healthcare that leads to harm, the decision-making process can be retraced, and a court might decide the decision was made without due care. Similarly, if a tool such as a laser scalpel malfunctions in a way that results in harm, a court might find that it was defective or that its operator or producer acted negligently.

"A medical AI makes decisions, but it's a product. We have no framework for assessing a product's behaviour," explains Mindy Duffourc, assistant professor of Private Law. This is not about asking ChatGPT for a new diet or workout routine. Highly specialised medical AI systems might offer new insights that can change the course of a patient's medical treatment. Complex 'black box' AIs usually offer higher quality output, information or recommendations that lead to quicker diagnosis or improved treatment. They are trained using artificial neural networks designed to mimic neurons in the human brain, with vastly more data than a human could ever process.

## Healthcare providers themselves have a role to play in explaining the risks and benefits of AI in a way that doesn't overload their patients.

Mindy Duffourc

"A deep neural network is like a decision tree with millions of possible outcomes. The problem is that the reasoning process showing exactly how the AI got from the input to the output isn't understandable for a human." And this black box aspect is "a feature, not a bug," Duffourc says. "It can provide more accuracy, but the process is just too complex for humans to check if a mistake has been made." She contrasts this with other complex technologies. "Most radiologists probably don't fully understand how an MRI scanner works. But in principle, engineers and scientists can understand how it works and trace the exact cause of a malfunction."

### Can AI be responsible?

A doctor can make mistakes; a product can be defective. What to make of AI then? "The law of negligence is quite general: you're legally responsible if you do something unreasonable and it causes harm," Duffourc explains. "This principle has got us pretty far, because it's very flexible and leaves room for interpretation. But the AI question is stretching the boundaries of that principle."

When a doctor makes a decision, the law assesses not merely whether the decision itself was ultimately right or wrong, but whether the decision-making process was unreasonable. Did it breach some standard of care? But standards of care cannot be applied to an AI, she says. We can legally assess only the output, not the quality of the reasoning process that led to that output.

It is this fundamental shift that makes Duffourc's research so novel and relevant. A product is assessed on its condition; for example, whether it offers a reasonable level of safety. As a new kind of product that makes decisions in a way we usually associate with humans, AI breaks this mould. So can we hold it responsible? "If we granted AI limited legal personhood, like corporations, we could judge its behaviour and assign liability. That could be a way forward."

Already, parties can contractually agree to distribute liability risks in cases of harm and obtain insurance to cover those risks. "Here, however, insurability becomes a problem. How much do insurers want to cover and in which cases? Holding the developers and producers of the AI responsible for every instance of harm isn't sustainable, just as not every medical decision that leads to harm constitutes malpractice."

### Managing risks to enable progress

Duffourc is trying to come up with a framework to manage these risks. After all, keeping AI out altogether would deny patients the best possible healthcare. "If AI is proven to offer patients better outcomes than humans alone, wouldn't it be negligent not to use it? Perfection is impossible, so there will be mistakes. But we can demand that humans and organisations take all reasonable measures to identify and reduce the risks of harm in AI-driven care."

The important thing is finding a healthy balance, lest liability risk hamper the integration of potentially beneficial AI into medical practice. One issue is that safety regulation is proactive, while liability law is reactive. "There needs to be harm first, but this is so new there's no precedent. Courts haven't yet been asked to consider cases involving AI-driven medical decision making. It's important to think about these questions in advance, rather than trying to solve them ad hoc."

Robust liability rules and standards of care that take account of AI would make developers, insurers and practitioners less apprehensive about costly eventualities, alleviating the need for stringent regulations that prevent harm but might also stifle innovation. In the meantime, "healthcare providers themselves have a role to play in explaining the risks and benefits of AI in a way that doesn't overload their patients," Duffourc says. "That too is a way of managing existing risks."

Duffourc works with the Law and Tech Lab and the MUMC+ in UM's thriving multidisciplinary AI research environment. "You become aware of your own limitations," she laughs. "I share an office with a data scientist, and there are several computer scientists on my corridor, so I can discuss a lot of things informally. And I talk to medical practitioners to understand how they interact with machines." Ultimately, she remains optimistic. "If we can adapt our medical-liability framework, patients will benefit greatly from these technological advances." <



**Mindy Duffourc** is an assistant professor of Private Law and a member of the Law and Tech Lab. Her research focuses on comparative health law and technology. She practised law for 12 years as a member of the bar in Illinois and Louisiana.





Psychiatrist /  
Clinical director at GGZ  
**Irene Weltens**

Professor of  
Transitional Psychiatry  
**Thérèse van Amelsvoort**

## Professor - Student

Text  
**Ludo Diels**

Photography  
**Paul van der Veer**

# Beyond the patient

Scientific research can begin with a question from every-day clinical practice. In her PhD project, psychiatrist Irene Weltens looked beyond patients to examine how nurses, teams and the treatment setting contribute to safety on secure psychiatric wards. Together with her supervisor, Thérèse van Amelsvoort, she reflects on a study in which research and clinical practice went hand in hand.

*Ultimately, it's about a welcoming attitude. Having more staff is important, but so is changing the way we work.*

Thérèse van  
Amelsvoort

While Maastricht is slowly waking up, Café de Tribunal is still eerily quiet. The espresso machine lets out the occasional hiss. Sitting by the window, psychiatrist Irene Weltens and her supervisor, Professor Thérèse van Amelsvoort, enjoy a coffee as they look back on a PhD journey that spanned almost eight years. During that time, research, clinical practice, and professional and family life were constantly intertwined.

The title of Weltens' PhD is 'Beyond the patient: Unravelling staff and ward dynamics in aggression in psychiatry.' At the centre of her research into aggression on secure psychiatric wards was the nurse's perspective. "Plenty of research had already been carried out from the patient's perspective," she says. "We consciously decided to look at what violence does to the nurse, to the healthcare professional."

### Aggression on the ward

Aggression is a major issue in psychiatric care, faced by some 65% to 80% of nurses at some point during their careers. It rarely has a single cause, Weltens says. It is shaped not only by the patient, but also by the atmosphere on the ward, the nurses' workload and the cooperation within the team.

To capture these day-to-day dynamics, Weltens used the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). At several points during their shifts, nurses answered brief questions about their mood, the atmosphere on the ward and events taking place at that moment. This enabled Weltens to identify when tensions tended to rise and where opportunities for de-escalation emerged. >

Rather than starting with a scientific theory, the project was inspired by everyday clinical practice. “I’ve always combined patient care with research,” Van Amelsvoort says. “Working with patients raises the questions you then want to investigate scientifically.”

Combining research and practice

Weltens studied medicine and trained as a psychiatrist in Maastricht. She worked for a number of years at Mondriaan and is now clinical director at GGZ Breburg. Van Amelsvoort was appointed professor of Transitional Psychiatry at Maastricht University in 2012 and also works as a practising psychiatrist. “I can’t imagine being a full-time researcher,” she says. “I need both.”

At Maastricht UMC+, the link between research and psychiatric care is reflected in their physical proximity: both are based in the same building. “That makes collaboration incredibly easy,” Van Amelsvoort says. “You can just drop into each other’s offices.”

A welcoming attitude

Part of the research focused on High Intensive Care wards, where patients can be admitted—sometimes involuntarily—in the midst of an acute psychiatric crisis. Often they are frightened, exhausted and under extreme stress. They may not have eaten or drunk properly for a long time. This makes the initial welcome incredibly important.

“The best thing you can do is say: ‘I’m sorry you have to be here, but welcome. We’re going to take the best possible care of you,’” Weltens says. For her, de-escalation begins from the very first encounter, not when a situation is already spiralling out of control. A chair, something to eat and drink, a calm tone of voice. “The admission interview can come later.”

Van Amelsvoort nods. The physical environment matters too: staff are increasingly working to make wards feel less clinical, with more natural light, greenery, openness and space for loved ones. “People need to be able to feel at ease,” she says.

“Ultimately, it’s about a welcoming attitude,” Weltens adds. “Having more staff is important, but so is changing the way we work. How someone is greeted, how you communicate with one another and how a team works together makes a huge difference.”

Co-supervisor Maarten Bak first proposed the idea for the study. Van Amelsvoort provided direction and monitoring, while ensuring that Weltens remained firmly in charge of her own research. “I often told her, ‘It’s your PhD,’” she says.

Weltens smiles. “That freedom was really important. And towards the end, it was also helpful to have someone say: ‘Right, now it’s time to finish.’” Weltens wrote her dissertation while working full time and raising three children. “I took my laptop everywhere. My family was on the journey with me, especially when the finish line came into sight. Mainly they’re just happy it’s over,” she laughs.

Strength and sensitivity

Her children were in the audience when she defended her dissertation. By then, they were familiar with her work. Sometimes they would

The best thing you can do is say: ‘I’m sorry you have to be here, but welcome. We’re going to take the best possible care of you.

Irene Weltens

ask whether their mother had ever experienced aggression herself. What Weltens deliberately never shared with her patients was that she had a black belt in karate. “I didn’t want people thinking, ‘Here’s someone who’s ready to fight me.’” She enjoys hard rock music and going for a spin in her Jeep. Van Amelsvoort smiles at this side of her former PhD candidate; she herself prefers to unwind with a good book or by travelling.

Listening to Weltens and Van Amelsvoort talk, it is clear that the words ‘Beyond the patient’ transcend the choice of research topic. Good psychiatric care requires attention not only to the patient, but also to the nurse, the team and the treatment setting as a whole. It is the interplay between these elements that creates space for de-escalation, deeper understanding and, ultimately, recovery. <

Irene Weltens studied medicine and trained as a psychiatrist at Maastricht University. She is clinical director at GGZ Breburg, a mental healthcare provider in Tilburg and Breda. Her PhD research focused on aggression in psychiatric care and the influence of patient-, team- and ward-related factors on creating a safe treatment setting.

Thérèse van Amelsvoort has been professor of Transitional Psychiatry at Maastricht University since 2012. She is also a practising psychiatrist at Maastricht UMC+ and Mondriaan, a regional mental healthcare provider. She has long combined patient care with scientific research, both in her own career and in her supervision of PhD candidates.



# How climate change is affecting our health

## Region

Text  
Caya Forman

Illustrations  
Emma Formosa



Scorching summers, prolonged droughts and torrential downpours—climate change is taking its toll not only on the planet, but on our bodies too. How exactly does it impact our health, and what can we do about it?

Associate professor Hafez Ismaïli M’hamdi, together with the Climate Health Institute, is investigating the health effects of a changing climate.

*We’re seeing all of these trends intensify. For example, droughts are becoming more common and water quality is deteriorating.*

Hafez Ismaïli M’hamdi

A few years ago, Hafez Ismaïli M’hamdi was living on a busy road in Rotterdam. His son, who was two at the time, began experiencing respiratory problems and soon developed bronchial hyperreactivity. “It’s when your airways react very strongly to things like viruses or respiratory infections,” Ismaïli M’hamdi explains.

A doctor advised the family to move to a greener area with better air quality. They took that advice to heart and settled in Pijnacker, a quiet town between Rotterdam and The Hague. His son’s health improved, and Ismaïli M’hamdi could quite literally breathe a sigh of relief. “I’d already been researching the health effects of climate change,” he says. “But it was only then that I experienced first-hand what something like poor air quality can do to you.”

## What is climate health?

Although air pollution is generally lower outside major cities, air quality in the Netherlands has been deteriorating for years, particularly during the summer months as temperatures rise. Heatwaves create stagnant air, allowing harmful pollutants to accumulate. And because periods of hot weather are becoming both more frequent and longer-lasting, the effects on our health are becoming more pronounced.

All the more reason for Ismaïli M’hamdi to become involved with the Climate Health Institute, established in 2025 at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. He is the scientific coordinator of the institute, where researchers study climate health: the impact of climate change on human health.

Poor air quality is one concern, but so too are extreme heat, heavy rainfall and declining water quality. “We’re seeing all of these trends intensify,” says Ismaïli M’hamdi. “For example, droughts are becoming more common and water quality is deteriorating. These factors increase health risks, particularly for people who are already vulnerable.”

## Disadvantaged on all fronts

Those most at risk include older people, infants and people living with chronic illnesses. But vulnerability is not only a matter of health. People living in disadvantaged circumstances, such as families on low incomes, are also disproportionately affected.

“We were fortunate to be able to buy a new home somewhere else,” Ismaïli M’hamdi says. “Houses alongside busy, polluted roads are often more affordable, so people with fewer financial resources are more likely to live there and less likely to have the means to move.”

These are often people who have faced disadvantage throughout their lives. “Along with lower incomes, they tend to have fewer educational opportunities and less job security. On top of that, they’re often the people who have contributed least to the problem in the first place. So it’s profoundly unfair.”

## Body-wide inflammation

The Climate Health Institute has not been operating long enough to report concrete research findings, but enough is already known about the health consequences of climate change to paint a worrying picture.

“Everyone understands that particulate matter is not good for your lungs. But everything is connected: when your lungs become irritated, the inflammatory response spreads throughout your body. Air pollution also damages blood vessels, causing chronic inflammation and increasing the risk of blood clots. Whenever levels of particulate matter rise, we also see an increase in heart attacks and strokes.”

And climate change affects our mental health as well as our bodies. For example, floods have tangible consequences, like water damage and mould, but they can also leave lasting psychological scars. “People live with the fear



### Acting quickly and fairly

Although its primary focus is research, the Climate Health Institute also wants to put solutions into practice as quickly as possible. “The ultimate goal is for our interventions and policy recommendations to measurably reduce the health impacts of climate change. That’s a long-term ambition.”

Robust findings take time, Ismaïli M’hamdi acknowledges, but the health benefits of some interventions become apparent relatively quickly. “Take people with chronic illnesses. During a heatwave, we can adjust their medication to reduce their risk of dehydration. Interventions like that should be implemented as quickly as possible.”

Fairness is a guiding principle in the institute’s work. “What makes us unique is that we conduct not only fundamental biomedical research, but also social and normative research. The people who stand to benefit the most are the ones we prioritise.” <

**Hafez Ismaïli M’hamdi** is associate professor of Medical Ethics and Philosophy at Maastricht University and scientific coordinator of the Climate Health Institute. He is also vice chair of the Centre for Ethics and Health (CEG) and a member of the Council for Public Health and Society (RVS).



that it will happen again.” >

### From regional approach to national contribution

The Climate Health Institute has established three project teams focusing on the themes of air, water and heat. Their aim is to prevent or treat the health impacts of climate change, starting in the South Limburg region.

“Climate-related health problems are a global issue, but they can’t be tackled effectively at a global level,” Ismaïli M’hamdi explains. “That’s why we’re taking a regional approach. We want to identify best practices that can later be scaled up. We’re keen to work with civil servants, politicians and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport to explore how our work can contribute at a national level.”

The institute also plans to embed the resulting knowledge and best practices in education at FHML. “We have a dedicated working group looking at how climate health can be integrated into the regular curricula, elective courses and continuing professional development. It’s not just about sharing our findings with doctors and students—we also want to hear the solutions they come up with themselves. It’s a two-way exchange.”

# Everything revolves around food

## Soul kitchen

Text  
Annelotte Huiskens

Photography  
Philip Driessen



Junior lecturer  
Faculty of Arts and  
Social Sciences  
Anna Villarica

She'd get out of bed for hotpot or Filipino pork adobo, and is learning to love Dutch cuisine. "Fine, zuurvlees—but only if it comes with rice." Anna Villarica, a junior lecturer at FASoS, was born and raised in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. After stints in Singapore and Kyoto, she has been living in Maastricht for four years, and hopes to stick around. "I can be myself here," she says.



Anna Villarica is a junior lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She graduated from the MA in Media Studies: Digital Cultures, for which she received a UM-Holland High Potential scholarship. Before moving to Maastricht, she studied at the National University of Singapore, where she received a BA majoring in Communications and New Media. She then spent six years working in compliance and education, including a two-year stint in Kyoto as a participant in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme.



As a child, she was no stranger to the famed Dutch stroopwafels and Droste chocolate pastilles. "My father often went on work trips to the Netherlands, and would bring back what he considered the country's best sweets for my two brothers and me. To be honest, I can't bear the sight of stroopwafels anymore, but I immediately went looking for Droste chocolate. Imagine my disappointment when I could only find it at Kruidvat. What do you mean, the best from the Netherlands, and I can't find it anywhere but the drugstore?" she says, laughing.

Whenever her father returned from a trip, her mother would make pork adobo for him, one of his favourite dishes. "Now, when I come home from travelling, I make it for myself. Pork braised in vinegar, garlic and soy sauce—so good. Those are the smells of my childhood. Filipino food is saucy and meaty and rice based."

Eating with all your senses

When it comes to cooking, she was a late bloomer. "At home, it was always my mother or our nanny who cooked. When I moved to



Singapore, I lived in a student house with five other students from ASEAN countries in one room. We usually ate in the cafeteria or at street stalls. The hawker food there is delicious and very affordable.

"Japan was the healthiest period of my life. I taught English at a junior high school, and at lunchtimes we were served very responsible meals. That's typical of Japan. Every school has its own nutritionist, who plans school lunches months in advance based on nutritional value and calorie counts. Everything is beautifully presented: a bowl of rice, vegetables, miso soup, some fish or meat, an orange and a small carton of milk every day.

"That was when I realised Filipino food isn't all that healthy. It's delicious, but fattier and everything is served with a lot of rice. In Japan, children are taught to eat in moderation. During lunch, the food would also be discussed at length over the school radio: From which prefectures do the rice and yam come from? How are they produced, what's their nutritional value? I wasn't brought up that way, but it teaches you to appreciate the food much more.

"I loved those lunches. That's also where I learnt that you don't just eat with your mouth, but with your eyes and nose as well. Presentation matters too. On the other hand, Japan has a strong drinking culture. In the Philippines, I only drank soft drinks or iced tea; I was taught women aren't really expected to drink alcohol there. In Singapore, alcohol was too expensive. But in Japan, I learnt to drink. When you went out, you ordered nomihoudai—all-you-can-drink with small snacks—and then went on to karaoke."



At home in Maastricht

In her first year in Singapore, she was homesick for her family. And the study was demanding: if you failed an exam, you lost your scholarship. "It was tough, not just the programme, but also my teaching job after graduation. The pressure to perform is enormous. Children have to perform from their first day at school, otherwise you're out. That puts huge pressure on pupils, but also on teachers and parents. It was a little less intense in Japan, but here in Maastricht, everything has really fallen into place for me. Life is more easy going."

When the weather is nice, she enjoys sitting out on a terrace with colleagues and friends. She also likes cooking Asian hotpot for them: mushroom broth for dipping meat and fish balls, with vegetables and a variety of mushrooms. "In Manila, you couldn't really walk down the street, because there were too many vehicles, and pollution, like in many big cities. People mostly stayed indoors. Luckily, we had a big garden to play in."

She has her own studio flat here: small, but pleasant and centrally located. In one corner is a futon, a holdover from her time in Japan. She also has a collection of cookbooks, which she adds to whenever she travels around Europe. "For me, everything revolves around food. So after I've been to Italy, I want to be able to cook the dish I ate there once I'm home, so I can feel a bit like I'm on holiday again."

Expectations back home are different from here. "If I went back, everyone would say, 'You're 35, unmarried, no children—what have you done with your life?' My mother cooked and looked after us every day alongside her work as a doctor, and never complained. I get tired just looking after myself. I want to be able to take care of myself first before I start doing that for little kids. That's why I like it so much here: I can become who I want to be, at my own pace." <

If I went back, everyone would say, 'You're 35, unmarried, no children, what have you done with your life?' Anna Villarica

# Social sustainability in the logistics sector: *Money isn't the only factor*

Karoline Schulz grew up near the renowned RWTH Aachen University, but chose to study in Maastricht instead. She has never regretted that decision. She joined Arvato, one of the world's largest providers of supply chain and fulfilment solutions, even before completing her master's degree.

Yes, she regularly finds herself defending her employer. "We manage the entire logistics operation for dozens of clients from our own warehouses," Karoline Schulz explains. "That includes storage, inventory management, packing, distribution and returns—the whole process, including finance and customer service. It all relies on automation, robotisation and a huge range of cloud-based ICT applications. So those warehouses along the A2 and A73 here in Limburg, plus the large data centres in the west of the country, are indispensable to Arvato. But they're indispensable to the public as well. We all shop online, have our groceries delivered and want unlimited access to AI. It's a bit hypocritical to say we should get rid of these ugly warehouses and energy-hungry data centres. The real challenge is to make supply chains as efficient and sustainable as possible. And that's what I mainly work on."



## Alumni

Text  
**Jos Cortenraad**

Photography  
**Karoline Schulz-Kowalik**

**Karoline Schulz-Kowalik** was raised in Baesweiler and studied at UM's School of Business and Economics from 2016 to 2020. She is due to complete her PhD in autumn 2026, focusing on innovation and industry 4.0. In her spare time, she enjoys travelling the world to run marathons. So far, she has taken part in races in Hawaii, New York and Rotterdam.

## Social sustainability

Crystal clear. "I can be very persuasive," she says on this sweltering June morning in the restaurant of the former Tapijn barracks in Maastricht. The building is now home to the School of Business and Economics (SBE), where Schulz is doing her PhD. "My supervisors, Ron Cörvers and Dominik Mahr, recently asked me how someone with my outspoken views managed to land such a great job at Arvato. It's a company that naturally has to keep a close eye on the costs of logistics systems, and here I am talking about the impact of technological developments on ecological and social sustainability. What do robots mean for the people on the work floor? How do consumers view the demanding work performed in distribution centres? But these issues are becoming more important. Money is not the only factor, not even in the rapidly expanding logistics sector. Arvato recognises that, which is one reason I enjoy working there."

## Robots and drones

Explaining exactly what she does at the logistics company—a subsidiary of the German multinational Bertelsmann, which employs more than 20,000 people across 100 locations worldwide—is not straightforward.

"To be honest, after a bachelor's in Emerging Markets and a master's in Information Management, I never expected to end up in a kind of IT role. But it actually really suits me; I enjoy working on innovations, provided I can combine them with sustainability. As a business support manager, I lead a team of analysts and oversee a range of IT projects aimed at optimising logistics flows. Before that, as a logistics engineer, I focused on introducing robots and drones into distribution centres to replace heavy labour. Robots retrieve parcels from the shelves and place them on conveyor belts to move on to the packing and dispatch department. The process is continually refined through innovation and automation."

## Choosing Maastricht

Born and raised near Baesweiler, Schulz decided to leave home after she finished school, moving 100 kilometres away to study at Maastricht University. "I went to a bunch of university open days in Germany, especially in Aachen, which would've meant I could stay at home," she recalls. "But the education system in Germany is quite hierarchical, with lots of lectures and exams. I was immediately drawn to Problem-Based Learning in Maastricht—working together to address problems, analysing them, presenting findings, learning to work independently while also developing your soft skills. I felt at home in the city from my very first day."

There was always something going on. I really enjoyed the four years I spent in Maastricht."

Arvato recognised Schulz's potential early on. "I did an internship there for Mercedes-Benz, which included a five-month placement in Taiwan. I would've loved to stay, but it was impossible to get a visa. So I started working at Arvato, where I could do my PhD on innovation in logistics supply chains at the same time." She started that research four years ago; this autumn she will defend her dissertation.

"It's been quite intensive, alongside a full-time job. I also supervise master's students and help out at the SBE Business Days. But I'm happy to give something back. I've learnt so much here that I can apply in my work. And it gives me the chance to see my lecturers again."

"For my research, I interview clients and there's a lot of data already available. That helps, but the PhD is also complex in terms of content. It involves two different SBE departments. Of my supervisors, Dominik is mainly interested in the supply chain itself, while Ron places more emphasis on the social aspects and sustainability. That occasionally leads to debates about the choices to be made. Fortunately, the collaboration is great and allows me to conduct impactful research."

## The soft side

She is referring to the 'softer' aspects of the logistics sector. Working with Arvato's clients, she examined not only the economic impact of sustainable business practices, but also their social impact. Additionally, she developed a tool companies can use to quickly assess their sustainability performance.

"I'm already seeing both clients and consumers paying more attention to social impact. Robotisation and automation are replacing monotonous, physically demanding and mind-numbing work. Of course, that requires investments that are not based solely on financial returns. That's progress, if you ask me, because I expect the world of online retail and distribution centres to keep on expanding. Well-designed logistics will be essential." <

As a curator at the Limburg Museum, alum Remco Beckers spends his days exploring the province's remarkable history. In his view, Limburg's story is richer and more surprising than we often realise.

# Limburg in his heart — and in the museum

## Alumni

Text  
Milou Schreuders

Photography  
Levin den Boer/  
Christine Munz



His favourite object in the museum collection? Remco Beckers ponders the question for a moment. Then, decisively: “A 1928 painting of the Sint Servaas Bridge in Maastricht by Henri Jonas. It’s a colourful piece with a great story behind it, because the bridge you see in the painting no longer exists in its original form. By the 1920s, the original bridge had become too narrow for road traffic and for the increasingly large vessels using the River Meuse, so the decision was made to demolish it. That caused quite a stir, and painters rushed to capture it before it disappeared. In the end, the bridge was completely rebuilt in the same style. Now, 100 years later, there’s debate once more about whether the Sint Servaas Bridge should be demolished or altered. History is repeating itself, and I find that fascinating.”

### Coming out of his shell

One thing is clear: Beckers has a deep love of culture and history. That passion was sparked at an early age by two inspiring teachers: Mr Hagelstein and his classics teacher, Ms Prakken. “Thanks to them, I even considered training as a history teacher myself. But at the time, the prospect of standing in front of a class felt too daunting. My plan B—studying classics—wasn’t really an option either. I wanted to stay close to my home village of Bochtoltz for a little longer.”

Almost on a whim, he chose Cultural Studies in Maastricht. It turned out to be an inspired decision. Problem-Based Learning challenged him to speak up, take part in

discussions and give presentations. Before long, the still rather shy and insecure Beckers began to come out of his shell. “I found a close-knit group of friends. Every Wednesday, we’d get together for hours to talk and philosophise, either at Café De Perroen or just sitting on the city wall.”

### A broader perspective

Beckers was keen to pursue an academic career. After his bachelor’s degree, he went on to take the research master’s in Cultures of Arts, Science and Technology, also in Maastricht. But when no PhD position materialised, he decided to try his luck elsewhere. After two years at Philzuid, he interviewed for a position at Bureau Europa, a platform for architecture and design. Once again, his academic background worked in his favour. “I later heard that I was hired because my studies had given me a broader perspective. I’m still grateful to Bureau Europa, because I learnt a lot there about working in the museum world.”

### Industrial Revolution

The broad perspective that had served him well at Bureau Europa proved equally valuable when the Limburg Museum was looking for a curator of cultural history. Beckers had experience curating exhibitions, but he had never worked as a fully-fledged museum curator before. Even so, his boundless enthusiasm for Limburg—and especially its history—ultimately won over the selection panel.

“Limburg’s history is incredibly rich and complex,” he explains. “The earliest evidence of human presence in the Netherlands, for example, was found along the Meuse, and since 870 the river has repeatedly formed a border between different rulers and countries. And did you know that the Industrial Revolution on Dutch soil began in Maastricht? These are stories that receive very little attention in our national history, yet they tell us so much about this part of the country.”

### Fossilised ferns

As curator, Beckers helps bring Limburg’s story to a wider audience, primarily through exhibitions such as last year’s successful Burgundians in Limburg. There is no shortage of inspiration for future exhibitions. “Our collection contains around 100,000 objects,” he says, “ranging from 40-million-year-old fossilised ferns to an LP by the local online phenomenon Kirchroa Tropical. It’s an extraordinarily varied collection, reflecting the full sweep of Limburg’s history.”

### Keeping up with the times

The museum’s collection is constantly evolving. Beckers and his colleagues actively seek out suitable objects, but they are also regularly approached by people wishing to donate or offer an item to the museum. “We examine every object carefully. What’s the story behind it? Could it have been looted? And what does it add to the story of Limburg?” he explains. “But we’re selective, not least because our storage

facilities are now full. So from time to time, we also part with objects that no longer fit the collection.”

When acquiring new objects, Beckers and his colleagues think carefully about how the museum can move with the times. “The museum world has become more accessible and inclusive in recent years. These days, visitors are often invited to share their own stories. And fortunately, there’s growing interest in looking at our history from different perspectives, including those of women and people of colour. But we don’t yet always have the right objects in the collection to tell those stories.”

### A teacher after all

Outside work, Beckers is equally keen to raise awareness of Limburg’s history. He has regularly led walking tours of Maastricht. “In theory, I plan for them to last an hour, but with my enthusiasm they can easily end up lasting two and a half,” he admits. “Maybe one day I’ll write a book so I can find a home for all my stories. Or perhaps I’ll become a history teacher after all. The shy Remco I used to be would never have dreamt of that.” <

**Remco Beckers** studied Cultural Studies and Cultures of Arts, Science and Technology at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Before becoming curator of cultural history at the Limburg Museum, he worked at Philzuid, Huis voor de Kunsten, Bureau Europa and elsewhere. Beckers lives with his partner in Maastricht.

As sources of knowledge and innovation, universities are instrumental in developing solutions to societal challenges. Maastricht University plays its part through leading research in areas such as health and sustainability. Yet scientific research is costly, which means private donations are becoming increasingly important. By making a donation or leaving a legacy to science, you can support research that matters to you and makes a lasting difference to future generations.

# Let your ideals today live on in tomorrow's science

The affordability of healthcare, the energy transition, the future of education—the challenges facing society are becoming ever greater. Universities have a key role in finding solutions, but scientific research requires specialist knowledge, long-term commitment and strong financial backing. Many promising research projects are, however, not eligible for government funding. This is why scientific breakthroughs are increasingly dependent on donations from organisations, individuals and charitable foundations. Those wishing to support research at UM can do so through the University Fund Limburg in a tax-friendly way, even if they live abroad.

## Rigorous scientific research

More and more people recognise the importance of rigorous scientific research and want to contribute to it themselves. Dr Rogier Veltrop, a cardiovascular researcher in the Department of Biochemistry at UM and founder of the Healing Heart Fund, a Named Fund within the University

Fund Limburg, has seen this first-hand. Veltrop is working towards a definitive solution for cardiovascular disease, a mission with particular personal significance for him as the recipient of a donor heart. He can now create beating 3D heart tissue using a patient's DNA. This is important because the heart consists of multiple layers of cells, whereas much previous research has focused on single-cell layers. By developing 3D heart tissue, Veltrop can study in the laboratory how these different layers interact, bringing the research closer to the complex conditions found in the human body.

Donor support has played a significant role in this breakthrough. In recent years, Veltrop has received several major donations from the Netherlands and abroad, enabling him to accelerate his research. This support also gives him considerable scientific freedom, unlike conventional grant programmes, which often require researchers to specify both their research plan and the use of funds in advance.

## University Fund Limburg

Text  
Milou Schreuders

Photography  
Gettyimages



“Donations give me the freedom to better understand genetic heart failure and explore new directions,” he says. “We may initially think we need to pursue route X, only for an early study to show that route Y will actually bring us closer to a solution. Scientific progress can’t be planned according to a fixed timeline.”

## Extra hands, expertise and equipment

Thanks to the donations, Veltrop has been able to expand his research team with several PhD candidates. “It literally gives me extra pairs of hands in the laboratory, as well as additional expertise. I build the team around complementary strengths, so that everyone brings something different. Some members specialise in bioinformatics and write programming scripts, for example, while others have a strong background in genetics.” Together, these different areas of expertise bring him closer to his goal: improving the quality of life of patients with genetic heart failure.

Advanced equipment is equally indispensable. Thanks to another donor, Veltrop has been able to invest in technology that distinguishes his research from that of others. “If you want to be at the forefront of the field, you need access to advanced equipment that isn’t available everywhere.” Smaller donations also make a meaningful difference, helping to cover the costs of laboratory supplies, for example—think cell culture media and pipette tips.

Many of Veltrop’s donors have a personal connection to heart failure. Some are patients themselves; others have a loved one with heart failure and therefore understand the impact of the disease. “We sometimes invite donors into the lab to update them personally on the latest research developments and innovations. Their commitment and trust are the fuel that keeps the engine running.”

## Leaving a legacy for a better future

It is not only donations made during a person’s lifetime that can help drive research forward. Many people are looking for ways to make a lasting impact on future generations. Leaving a legacy to science enables you to turn that ambition into reality by supporting research that reflects your personal values. You decide which field of research or project your legacy will support. It might contribute to research into treatments for serious diseases, such as Veltrop’s work, but equally to sustainable food production, reducing loneliness among older people or improving living conditions in slums. In short, it can support research across virtually any of UM’s research areas.

You can leave a legacy to UM by including the University Fund Limburg in your will. You can choose to name the Fund as a beneficiary of your estate, in which case the Fund receives a specified percentage of the estate. Alternatively, you can leave the Fund a specific sum of money or a particular asset. The Fund holds annual information sessions on legacy giving and can also explain the options in more detail during a personal consultation.

Leaving a legacy to UM supports the university’s growth and advances in research and education, but above all it is an investment in the society of tomorrow. It helps ensure that knowledge, talent and social progress can continue to flourish for generations to come. <

## Would you like to know more about donating or leaving a legacy to UM?

Scan the QR code or contact us at [info@ufl.nl](mailto:info@ufl.nl). [ufl.nl/en/support-the-fund/bequeath/](https://ufl.nl/en/support-the-fund/bequeath/)



# Maastricht University researchers will join AI in Science Working Groups

Three Maastricht University researchers will join the prestigious European AI in Science Working Groups (AISWGs). These expert panels are part of the Horizon Europe-funded SCIANCE ('AI in Science') project, a pan-European initiative to accelerate AI-driven scientific discovery and develop blueprints for technological innovation. The researchers' selection confirms UM's position as a key contributor to European policy discussions on AI in research.

The three faculty members will bring distinct disciplinary perspectives to their respective working groups. Michel Dumontier from the Faculty of Science and Engineering has been appointed to the Life Sciences group. Bart Penders from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences and Massimiliano Simons from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences will join the Open Science & Trustworthy AI group. They will focus on developing frameworks for



Prof Dr Michel dumontier



Dr Bart penders



Dr. Massimiliano Simons

regulatory compliance, reproducibility, research integrity and alignment with the European AI Act.

Operating until June 2028, the working groups are tasked with co-creating the European Strategic Research & Innovation Agenda (SRIA) for AI in Science. The roadmap will guide upgrades to computing infrastructure, streamline cross-border data-sharing agreements and formulate open-source governance guidelines within the European Commission's broader digital sovereignty strategy. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that AI serves the scientific community by maximising collaborative research output and accelerating breakthroughs, while maintaining stringent safety and ethical data standards. <

## Dr Costas Papadopoulos awarded €1.5 million grant to lead PURE3D2.0

Dr Costas Papadopoulos has been awarded a €1.5 million grant to lead PURE3D2.0, an advanced digital infrastructure for 3D scholarly publishing. Papadopoulos is associate professor in Digital Humanities and Culture Studies at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The grant was awarded by Open Science NL, a Dutch Research Council (NWO) programme aiming to develop digital frameworks that make scholarly publications, data and software openly accessible.

The PURE3D2.0 initiative expands the capabilities of the original PURE3D system, the first open, non-commercial environment designed for 3D scholarly narratives. The updated infrastructure integrates interactive 3D models with annotations, structural metadata and multimedia elements. By organising the software architecture around three

pillars—Workflows, Applications and User Communities—the project aims to address challenges in long-term preservation, analytical workflows, data interoperability and web accessibility for spatial academic content. This will help ensure that future 3D research adheres to the international FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) principles.

Maastricht University is coordinating the PURE3D2.0 international consortium, which brings together national libraries, heritage organisations and research-infrastructure leaders. Partners include the University of Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum and the National Library of the Netherlands, alongside international collaborators such as the Smithsonian Institution, the Europeana Foundation and Cyprus University of Technology. By aligning these disparate organisations,

PURE3D2.0 aims to create a unified publishing platform that strengthens European leadership in digital cultural heritage conservation. <



Dr Costas Papadopoulos

## News

### 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)
- Centre for the Social History of Limburg (SHCL)

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

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

#### Faculty of Science and Engineering

- Globalisation and Law Network
- Institute for Corporate Law, Governance and Innovation Policies (ICGI)
- Institute for Globalisation and International Regulation (IGIR)
- Institute for Transnational and Euregional Cross Border Cooperation and Mobility (ITEM)
- Maastricht Centre for European Law (MCEL)
- Maastricht Centre for Human Rights (MCHR)
- 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)
- Maastricht Institute for Legal Education (MILE)
- Maastrichts Onderzoekscentrum voor Samenleving en Recht (MOSaR)

#### 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 and Euregional Cross Border Cooperation and Mobility (ITEM)
- Maastricht Centre for European Law (MCEL)

- Maastricht Centre for Human Rights (MCHR) (graag zonder f in afkorting, dit is ook gewijzigd in de tussentijd).
- 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)
- Maastricht Institutes for Legal Education (MILE)
- Maastrichts Onderzoekscentrum voor Samenleving en Recht (MOSaR)

#### 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

- Maastricht Graduate School of Business and Economics (MGSBE)
- 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

#### Publisher

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#### Chief Editor

Florian Raith

#### Editorial Board

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#### Texts

Jos Cortenraad, Ludo Diels, Caya Forman, Annelotte Huisjes, Jolien Linssen, Florian Raith, Milou Schreuders

#### Photography and Illustration\*

Levin den Boer, Valentina Curandi, Philip Driessen, \*Emma Formosa, Antye Guenther, Harry Heuts, Hannah Lipowsky, Christine Munz, Arjen Schmitz, Sem Shayne, Paul van der Veer

#### Translations and English editing

Alison Edwards

#### Graphic concept and Design

TD Zuiderlicht Maastricht

#### Print

Andi smart print solutions Beek

Maastricht University magazine is published in spring and autumn. It is sent on demand to UM alumni and to external relations.

#### Editorial Office

##### Marketing & Communications

Postbus 616, 6200 MD Maastricht  
T +31 43 388 5238 / +31 43 388 5222  
E florian.raith@maastricht-university.nl

#### ISSN

2210-5212

#### Online

www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/news-events/umagazine



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