

UMagazine



February 2025

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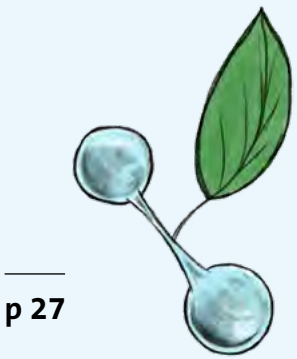
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Maastricht University



By 2050, more than half a million Dutch people will suffer from dementia. **Sebastian Köhler**, professor of Neuroepidemiology at Maastricht University, studies how dementia might be prevented and advises the World Health Organization. He talks to us about his outreach efforts and why UM is a global player when it comes to risk prevention.



It’s not easy being green

As the world seeks cleaner energy solutions, green hydrogen has emerged as a key component in the transition to a sustainable future. Many governments have drawn up policies to support this technology, but competing priorities mean initiatives often fall short. **Fabianna Bacil**, a PhD candidate at UNU-MERIT/Maastricht University, is part of an international research group investigating green hydrogen in emerging economies.

Alum Sjoerd Maillé

Sjoerd Maillé works as a trainee at the Limburg District Court. At just 24 years old, he is also the second youngest member of the Limburg Provincial Council and a citizen councillor in Maastricht. It’s the start of a very promising career, in spite of his disability: Maillé is almost blind.

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For the cover image, photographer Paul van der Veer was inspired by the interview with Maja Brkan, endowed professor of Digitalisation and EU Law.

[Beeldplus.nl](https://beeldplus.nl)

Foreword

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

An international university in the Euregion

Firstly, I want to thank everyone who joined us in protesting the cuts to education. It was genuinely inspiring. As the European university of the Netherlands, we have landed in the crosshairs of Dutch politics. We take legitimate concerns seriously and are always open to argument. Here, however, I would like to offer a bit of context to explain our position.

UM was founded to revitalise and transform a shrinking, deindustrialising South Limburg. Its ambitions ranged from preserving the city’s remarkable architectural heritage to rejuvenating its population and launching new industry. The Brightlands campuses are a good example of how we have helped to turn Limburg’s fortunes around. On these campuses, UM is working in a “triple-helix” partnership with other higher education institutions, the Province of Limburg and the business sector—not to mention talented students from all over Europe—to make our region competitive, drive innovation and create tens of thousands of jobs.

UM did not become international by design, but that it turned out this way was predictable. Take a 100 km radius around Maastricht and you’ll find numerous large urban centres and many young people eager to learn and make a difference. That these young people are German, Walloon and Flemish as well as Dutch has necessarily shaped our identity. The university’s languages are both Dutch and English in order to accommodate students and researchers from the Euregion.

Our English-language education, along with our organically developed culture of making people feel welcome, appeals to talent from all over the world and has propelled us to where we are today. We are very proud of this. At the same time, we remain a Euregional university serving the people of Maastricht and the surrounding regions.

In many ways, we embody the European ideal of free movement of people, services and ideas at its best. This is why UM punches well above its weight. It is also, by force of geography, the best thing this university could ever be.

We stand by this ideal, and we never stop being grateful to all members of our community, past or present, Dutch or international, who have made us what we are today. Despite the political pressure, we will keep on fighting for our community. Together, we will continue to learn, teach, conduct research and make a positive impact in our region and beyond.

Rianne Letschert
on behalf of the Executive Board



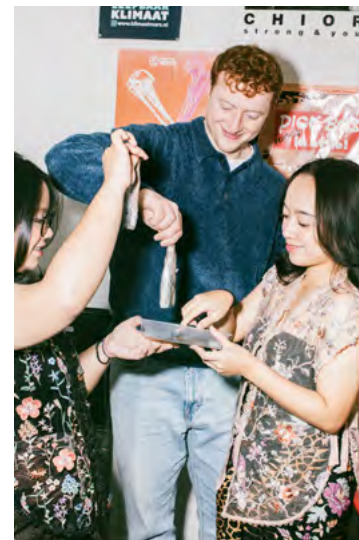
Students from Indonesia gain international experience in Maastricht



Niels Peeters, Alyssa Yaffanda
and Grace Octovella



Maastricht University is one of the partners of IISMA, an Indonesian programme that sends students abroad to expand their horizons and get acquainted with Western education. Last August, eleven talented young students arrived in South Limburg. Shortly before their return to Indonesia, we spoke to [Alyssa Yaffanda](#) and [Grace Octovella](#), both from Java.



Maastricht, where Octovella and Yaffanda sit down for the interview. “And what’s even better is that the tutorial groups are very international. Brits, Italians, Germans, Americans, Asians. The result is that you get to consider topics from many different angles and cultures. After all, we all view things through the lens of our own backgrounds. For example, we recently talked about environmental pollution and the ‘plastic soup’. Having someone like Alyssa join that discussion is very instructive. We have no real idea how Indonesia deals with environmental issues, but she can talk about what’s going on over there based on her own experiences and observations. That’s very valuable, in my view. The international classroom is never boring.”

Popular

IISMA’s latest cohort included eleven students in total, the largest number so far. “UM is one of the most popular destinations in Europe,” says Octovella. She returned to Indonesia in February to start her final semester of Economics at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta. “Maastricht is very centrally located. You can easily reach Amsterdam, Brussels, Cologne and even Paris. The train connections are fantastic. Obviously we come here first and foremost to follow courses, to learn, and to be able to pass on knowledge about how the education system here works when we get back home. But it’s nice that we’re also able to explore the region and travel a bit.” >

What appeals to them most about UM? Neither needs to think long about the answer. “Working in small groups with other students,” Yaffanda says. “It forces you to prepare in advance and means there’s nowhere to hide. You’re expected to take part in the discussions. It’s not always easy, but I do have the feeling that it helps me to remember more, retain more knowledge.”

Octovella nods. “In Indonesia, we’re used to the professor or lecturer standing at the front of the hall and lecturing at us. My thoughts tend to wander, which doesn’t happen in Maastricht. What I also really like here is that you can discuss your questions directly with the tutor. It’s a very interactive way of studying.”

International

In other words: they are enthusiastic about Problem-Based Learning. As is Niels Peeters, who also started UM’s Bachelor in Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2023. “It’s a very broad programme where we discuss current issues and think about solutions,” he says in the kitchen of his student house in the heart of



Selection

“If you’re selected by IISMA, you can specify three preferences,” explains Yaffanda, who has almost finished Environmental Sciences in Jakarta, her hometown. “I’d also put Maastricht first, so I was lucky with the allocation. UM is known as the most international university, which really appealed to me: coming into contact with many different people. Like Grace, I travelled a lot, saw many sights. Do I have a good picture of the Netherlands, of Europe? To some extent, I think. What strikes me is that people here love their own country and at the same time really believe in European cooperation. Also, the people in my immediate environment show a lot of interest in my background. They want to know where I come from, how things are going in Indonesia.”

That might also have to do with the past, Octovella suggests. “Indonesia gained its independence from the Netherlands a long time ago, but maybe the Dutch still feel a connection. We regularly use Dutch words, and the older generation in particular still talk about the past. Young people, less so. It’s only here in the Netherlands that I’ve started to think about it a bit more. You can’t erase the past.”

Privileged

Octovella and Yaffanda are both aged 21 and describe themselves as belonging to the Indonesian middle class. They grew up in small families where their parents did all they could to send their children to university. “We’re privileged to be able to study,” says Octovella. “Not everyone gets the chance, although Indonesia badly needs well-educated people. The economy is growing rapidly and facing major challenges. I’ve learnt a lot during these six months, which I’ll take back to my own faculty.”



IISMA

IISMA is an Indonesian government-funded scholarship scheme that has partnerships with 126 higher education institutions in 28 countries. Thanks to its scholarships, more than 4500 students have been able to study abroad.

The students spend six months at a foreign institution, following elective courses related to their studies at home. Travel and accommodation costs are fully reimbursed. The aim is “to develop intercultural communication and leadership skills, experience the culture of the host country, expand international networks and carry out practical assignments,” explains IISMA president Dr Rachmat Sriwijaya.



The Indonesian students are returning to their homeland with backpacks filled with new impressions and knowledge. Octovella and Yaffanda are both more than positive about their time abroad. “We never felt homesick,” Octovella says, “partly because there were eleven of us living in one house in Valkenburg. It’s easier in a group. We often cooked and ate together—yes, usually with Indonesian herbs that we brought from home. And, of course, we shared experiences with one another.”

Study

Which is not to suggest they lived in a bubble, Yaffanda emphasises. “Definitely not. It was easy to make contact with other students, given that we worked together in the tutorial groups and studied together in the library. We explored the city, made friends and found that a lot of open-minded people live here. Who knows, maybe I’ll come back for a master’s degree someday.” <

Science and society

Text

Florian Raith

Photography

Philip Driessen



Professor of
Neuroepidemiology
Sebastian Köhler



By 2050, more than half a million Dutch people will suffer from dementia. Sebastian Köhler, professor of Neuroepidemiology at Maastricht University, studies how dementia might be prevented and advises the World Health Organization. He talks to us about his outreach efforts and why UM is a global player when it comes to risk prevention.

Sebastian Köhler was 11 when his grandmother was diagnosed with dementia. “I was scared by what I saw. No one understood the disease well enough to explain to me what was going on.” Today, he is working to combat that lack of awareness. “Dementia is a heterogeneous condition characterised by a progressive loss of cognitive ability. There are around 50 different causes; Alzheimer’s is the most well known, but it can also be due to constricted blood vessels, stroke or trauma.”

Around 300,000 people in the Netherlands suffer from dementia, a number that is set to double by 2050. “As a society, we’re not prepared to cope with this. We don’t have the facilities to care for all those people, and demographic changes mean there’ll be fewer informal carers available. We need to act now.” He attributes the rise in prevalence to longer lifespans. “Age is the biggest risk factor.”



Sebastian Köhler is professor of Neuroepidemiology at UM and co-chair of the Guideline Development Group on Risk Reduction of Cognitive Decline and Dementia at the World Health Organization. He leads the research lines Rehabilitation & Prevention at the Mental Health and Neuroscience Research Institute (MHeNs) and Risk & Prevention at the Alzheimer Centre Limburg.

Lifestyle makes a difference

Genetics play a role, Köhler says, but lifestyle is perhaps more important. “Certain genes will lead to early onset dementia. But for those who develop dementia at 65 or older, genetics is only a small factor. Lifestyle, on the other hand, can make a big difference.” Köhler co-chairs the Guideline Development Group installed to update the WHO guidelines on risk reduction of cognitive decline and dementia. “We look at the most important risk factors for dementia and what interventions might be effective.”

Köhler was an external reviewer for the 2019 guidelines, and had previously collaborated on WHO projects. “Of course, I was honoured to be asked. It’s a tribute to what we’re doing here in Maastricht. UM has one of the world’s largest research groups for dementia risk reduction.” For the guidelines, the UM team will study two risk factors: stroke and lack of social contact.

What kind of lifestyle interventions might help to prevent dementia? “It’s the usual suspects,” he says. “Physical activity, a healthy diet, not smoking—everything that’s good for your heart is also good for your brain.” Avoiding brain trauma helps, unsurprisingly. “But to build resilience, it’s also important to use your brain, to keep learning, to stay curious and to pursue social activities.”

Greater awareness

People tend not to associate these common-sense behaviours with brain health. In a survey of 700 Limburgers, Köhler’s team found that few 40- to 75-year-olds made the link with dementia. “Raising awareness is crucial. People fear dementia enough for it to cut through the information fatigue; it can trigger lifestyle changes.” There are, of course, limits. “The studies we use are observational. For many risk factors, direct causal evidence is lacking. We can only figure out how risks change across big groups, not in individuals.”

Moreover, some factors are beyond the realm of individual control. “Not everyone can easily move somewhere with less air pollution. Socioeconomic differences make a healthy lifestyle more difficult for some. It’s not about blaming individuals. We want to inform people which interventions can reduce their risk and thereby improve public health.”

World-class prevention research

Köhler credits his group’s success to UM’s interdisciplinary approach, close cooperation with the MUMC+ and an exceptionally strong embedding in the region. “At the Alzheimer Centre Limburg, we have a huge group of collaborators, from municipalities and health professionals to cultural and recreational services. We can draw on data from the Maastricht Aging Study and the Maastricht Study. Recently, we even started working with primary schools to create intergenerational awareness of brain health.”

In partnership with the South Limburg Public Health Service (GGD), Köhler ran the 2018 campaign *Wij zijn zelf het medicijn* (We ourselves are the medicine). “We gave lectures, designed posters, talked to the press and developed the free MyBraincoach app.” He also leads the Dutch Dementia Prevention Initiative, a national consortium set to roll out an updated awareness campaign in 2025.

“We’re working with GPs to get dementia risk prevention into the consultation room. It can be readily integrated with existing cardiovascular risk-management protocols,” Köhler says. He is also trying to incorporate dementia prevention into healthcare curricula and the protocols of other healthcare providers. “We offer lifestyle coaching for people with memory problems, who have not yet received a dementia diagnoses. This could also be integrated into the MUMC+’s *Vitaliteitsloket*, where specialists offer help with lifestyle improvements.”

Prevention remains key

Limburg, an ageing, relatively car-centric province with an array of socioeconomic challenges, tends to have worse health outcomes, lower life expectancy and higher rates of dementia than other Dutch regions. “The Ministry of Health has commissioned us to study regional differences in modifiable risks—those where lifestyle interventions can help to prevent dementia.”

There are promising medications in the pipeline, but Köhler says these are not yet ready for broad use. Lecanemab is a drug that clears the brain of protein plaques. If administered in the early stages of dementia, it slows cognitive decline. “It’s a subtle effect,” Köhler says, “and expensive and rather impractical, but it’s certainly a first step. Given the scientific progress of recent years, I think we can be more optimistic than ever. Still, prevention is key. Twenty years ago, prevention was neglected in hopes of a pharmaceutical solution that never materialised. I think we need to invest in both treatment and prevention.” <

Age is the biggest risk factor.



49th Dies Natalis

On Friday 31 January, Maastricht University celebrated its 49th Dies Natalis in the Sint Janskerk in Maastricht. This year's theme was 'The 21st century (Maastricht) University—ideals, responsibilities and challenges.' Rector Magnificus Pamela Habibović opened the ceremony. "Universities serve society not only with knowledge that can be transformed into money and comfort," she said, "but also with knowledge that challenges."

Professor **Ioan Fazey (1)**, a leading expert in the field of transformative change and sustainability, built on this theme in his inspiring keynote speech, 'The renewal of universities in a transforming world.' "The future of research and education lies in a shift from knowledge-oriented systems to wisdom-oriented systems, rooted in ethics and creativity," he said. "Transformation is inevitable. The question is whether we can shape it with intention, vision and hope."

The importance and impact of education and research were further highlighted by the awarding of an honorary doctorate to Professor **Katrin Amunts (2)**. Her groundbreaking research on the human brain, including the BigBrain Project and the Human Brain Project, has pushed the boundaries of neuroscience research. "This achievement is not mine alone, but that of a dedicated team of researchers with a shared vision: to fully understand the human brain," she said in her acceptance speech. <



News

Dissertation Prize 2024

The annual Dissertation Prize was awarded to Giulia Giardi from the Faculty of Law for her impressive thesis 'Illegal waste management activity in the process of bunker fuel production.'

Wynand Wijnen Education Prize 2024

This year, the Wynand Wijnen Education Prize was awarded to **Oscar van den Wijngaard (3)**, Education Development Officer at UM. He was praised for his innovative teaching methods and his outstanding contribution to students' personal and academic development. His dedication and vision make him an inspiration to our entire community.

Student Prizes 2024 (4)

Every year, the best master's and bachelor's theses by UM students are recognised during the Dies celebration. The prize winners receive €500, a certificate and a small gift from the rector.

Twenty-three students completed their bachelor's degree in 2024 with a thesis marked as excellent by their faculty: **Ainsley Shaw, Esther Miguelez Barragan, Teodor Iankov Krandarov, Peter Kastner, Jocelyn Morrison, Maja Gójska, Claudio Lo Sciuto, Shereen Cok, Kees van Kuilenburg, Alexander Vyvey Declerck, Renata Stefan, Ariana Orlić, Alice Mazzetti, Laura Widdershoven, Anna-Lucia Thoelen, Sara Rikken, Lee-Ann Lichtenberger, Moritz Burghardt, Rok Lobnik, Franka Grefer, Merle Engelen, Alice von Seidel and Antonia Gruber.**

Eight master's students received top marks for their final thesis: **Levi Kroezen, Valerie D'Hondt, Paul Haimerl, Katarzyna Lasek, Iveta Dzivite, Justus-Jonas Erker, Myra Alon and Greta Carlevaro.** <



Maastricht research institutes M4I and MERLN join new national collaboration

On 1 January the research institutes M4I and MERLN, both part of Maastricht University, joined a new national collaboration: the laser and magnet lab HFML-FELIX. As of this year, the Nijmegen-based lab is part of the Foundation for Dutch Scientific Research Institutes (NWO-I), an umbrella organisation for select research institutes in the Netherlands. HFML-FELIX is a unique, large-scale scientific infrastructure involving the Dutch Research Council and five other universities in addition to Radboud University and UM.

"We've been collaborating with HFML-FELIX in recent years to understand the fundamental principles of magnetic levitation," says Professor **Lorenzo Moroni**, scientific director of MERLN. "This will help us to enhance the self-assembly of cells and the way they mimic human tissues for applications in regenerative medicine."

"HFML-FELIX offers a unique infrastructure for detailed interdisciplinary studies in the technical and biomedical sciences," adds **Ron Heeren**, director of M4I. "The complementarity with M4I provides a strong foundation for the further development of joint imaging programmes, focusing on the analysis of molecular structures in cells and tissues." <

New research by Maastricht University and the Youth Education Fund

Schools with a *brugfunctionaris* ('bridging officer') devote more time to developing pupils' talents and arrange the help that pupils and families need faster. This is one of the conclusions of 'Bridges between school and home: experienced and expected effects of bridging officers in primary schools,' a study by Maastricht University commissioned by the Youth Education Fund. Pupils, parents and teachers all benefit from the link between child, family, school and society. In terms of perceived effectiveness, however, the results vary widely across schools.

Education Lab NL, a research group within the UM Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA), investigated the effects of bridging officers in primary schools. "Pupils in vulnerable situations really benefit from the help of bridging officers," says **Inge de Wolf**, professor of Co-creation and Evaluation in Education and director of the Education Lab. "They receive assistance with basic needs such as food, clothing and school supplies, are less stressed, behave better in class, attend school more often and are therefore in a better position to learn."



Bridging officers not only offer advantages for the children. "They also relieve teachers, internal supervisors and school leaders of various tasks, which means teachers are better able to focus on their primary task of teaching. This benefits all students, and it leads to greater job satisfaction and less teacher absenteeism. Moreover, timely identification of problems tends to stop them from getting worse. This reduces the need for intensive and costly care or assistance programmes for both children and parents." <

Coll-a-Gen: animal-free synthetic collagen

Maastricht University has secured over €400,000 in funding for the development of Coll-a-Gen, a synthetic, animal-free alternative to collagen. If successful, this project could herald a breakthrough in medical treatments, ranging from advanced wound healing to biocompatible implants. At the Aachen-Maastricht Institute for Biobased Materials (AMIBM) **Jordy Saya** and his team are working on the chemical synthesis of collagen.

Collagen, a protein that provides strength and structure in the body, is found in bones, skin and cartilage. Thanks to its robust and versatile properties, collagen is increasingly used in wound healing, the creation of artificial tissues and even bioplastics. Natural collagen is typically derived from animal sources, making it difficult and expensive to obtain as well as variable in quality. A safer alternative is to recreate collagen in the lab, though this process is complex and time consuming. The Coll-a-Gen project aims to simplify the production of artificial collagen. <



Portrait

Text
Femke Kools

Photography
Paul van der Veer

The right person

She is “close to AI efficient” in her work, according to her UM colleagues. **Maja Brkan**, professor of Digitalisation and EU Law, sees the humour in this praise. After living and working in Maastricht for eight years, she moved to Luxembourg to become a judge at the General Court of the European Union. “A lot of big decisions in my life have been intuitive ones, while my work as a judge is the exact opposite.”

Professor of
Digitalisation and EU Law
Maja Brkan





Her mother is a professor of English and French, her father a judge. Maja Brkan describes herself professionally as a blend of the two. Born and raised in Slovenia, she wasn't set on law from a young age. "I also liked economics, and Slovenian language was an option too, because I was very interested in literature and poetry." After many long discussions with her father in particular—who has "quite good analytical skills"—she opted for law. "And I immediately felt it was the right choice for me. In my first year I attended a seminar on European Law in Copenhagen, and I knew straight away this was the field I wanted to work in for the rest of my life. It was quite intuitive; more something I felt than I could rationalise. Later I had more of those moments. If I feel something is right, I follow that path and it usually turns out to be the right one."

Sharpening her legal mind

After completing her bachelor's in Ljubljana, she wanted to broaden her horizons by going abroad for her LL.M. "I chose New York University, figuring it might

As a judge, you should listen most to the person you agree with least.

be the only time in my life I could actually live there for a year. It was an intense experience, not only study wise. Culturally, New York has a lot to offer. I often went to the opera—I still recall an impressive *Madame Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera House. And studying at NYU sharpened my legal mind enormously. The approach was different from what I was used to in Slovenia: working on cases, reasoning, weighing arguments. I see Problem-Based Learning in Maastricht as a nice mixture of the more systematic Slovenian system and the skills training I received in the US. Maybe Maastricht was a good fit for me for the same reason."

PhD in two years

Before moving to Maastricht in 2013, she completed her PhD in two years and spent six years as a legal adviser at the EU Court of Justice. Why the accelerated PhD? "I applied for the position at the Court of Justice while I was working on my PhD and was accepted. I couldn't let Advocate General Trstenjak wait for me too long, so I worked long hours every day and tried to be as efficient as possible. What helped me was that I had a clear idea of what I wanted to research, and I'd already collected a lot of literature before starting my PhD. I managed to publish a book based on my PhD afterwards, so the quality of the research didn't suffer. My free time did—but when you're immersed in writing, you don't really notice."

When it was time to move on, Brkan applied to two Dutch universities, including UM. "I'd never been there before my interview and only knew the city from the Maastricht Treaty. So choosing Maastricht was also quite an intuitive decision. My mind wasn't sure what to do, but my heart knew Maastricht was the right path. It turned out to be a good fit." Problem-Based Learning and the university's international, dynamic character suited her perfectly.

The right person

She is grateful for the support she received from UM while she applied to become a judge at the EU General Court. The process took roughly a year and resembled the procedure for applying for a large academic grant. "You have to be qualified and knowledgeable, but you also have to be the right person in the right place at the right time. It depends on so many factors." Although she enjoyed aspects of the process, such as an intensive hearing by a committee on her knowledge and intellectual

capability to reflect, it was occasionally stressful. "I'd been working and studying in this field all my life and I really wanted to pass, but you have to be well-prepared." In the summer of 2021, she joined the General Court as a judge.

Digging deeper

Being an early riser, she often discusses cases with her cabinet before nine am. "Some cases are challenging because of their scope and sensitive nature. But sometimes a seemingly 'small' case can also be difficult to decide, because two decisions are possible. In my experience, judicial decision making is something that ripens over time. If you're not yet sure how to decide a case, it's important to take more time, reflect more, dig deeper. You have to wait for that moment when you 'crack' the case, to be sure of your decision and not hasten the process." This is also why she's sceptical about using artificial intelligence for judicial decision making. "Decisions have to mature, and that involves a lot of thinking, even when you're not in the office, because then your mind is often fresher and clearer. I like spending time in nature to clear my mind. Or attending a cultural event. But as neither Luxembourg nor Maastricht has an opera house, I haven't seen much opera lately."



Professor Maja Brkan studied Law and obtained her PhD at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. She worked as a legal adviser at the EU Court of Justice before joining Maastricht University in 2013. In 2021, she was appointed as a judge at the General Court of the EU. She has also been an endowed professor of Digitalisation and EU Law at UM since November 2023. Her current research focuses on the interplay between EU fundamental rights and technology.



Avatar Sarah

Brkan was appointed professor of Digitalisation and EU Law at UM in November 2023. In her inaugural lecture, she introduced the audience to "Sarah," an avatar whose application for an Erasmus exchange scholarship had been rejected based on a decision made by an algorithm. This was Brkan's segway into the legal aspects of the right to explanation. "Everyone should know that national authorities that use high-risk algorithms for decision making have an obligation to explain such algorithmic decisions, and you always have the right to ask for a human to review the decision. The childcare benefits scandal in the Netherlands is a good example of how this went wrong. As far as I know, the victims were not even aware that an algorithm had been involved in deciding their case. Maybe universities can or should play a role, as part of their valorisation efforts, in educating a broader audience about their rights."

Virtues

Although she now spends most of her time at the EU General Court, she is pleased that the professorship has renewed her link to UM. "I like to share my knowledge, especially with students. They sometimes ask difficult questions that make you think, just like in the courtroom."

Combining her work in Luxembourg with her academic duties in Maastricht as well as her private life can be challenging. Fortunately, efficiency is one of her virtues. "That and integrity. Also, I think reflecting on and weighing up different options is something I've been doing all my life. I can see an argument from different perspectives, and I'm not stubborn or unable to reconsider my point of view. As a judge, you should listen most to the person you agree with the least. They can make you reinforce your reasoning or even change your mind."

Her parents taught her to keep her feet on the ground. "When you advance in your career, you get a lot of attention and praise, but in the end it's all about who you are at your core and how to remain the same person regardless of what you achieve in life. Every human deserves the same respect on that basis alone. I look up to many colleagues as role models, including at UM. Interestingly, they all share two characteristics: they're intelligent but also humble. That's what I strive for, too." <



Associate professor
Kim Kuypers

Sciences

Text
Milou Schreuders

Photography
Sem Shayne

Fast forward to 2040: if you have ADHD or another psychological disorder, the doctor may no longer prescribe Ritalin or antidepressants, but instead a low dose of magic mushrooms, truffles or LSD. Associate professor Kim Kuypers is studying the use of psychedelics as potential medicines of the future.

“You don’t have to worry that they’ll make you trip. You’ll probably only take a 10th to a 20th of a regular dose,” says Kim Kuypers. “That’s about 5 to 20 micrograms of psychedelics at a time.” Research suggests that psychedelics, even in low doses—known as microdoses—can affect the body and mind. “They act on certain serotonin receptors. These are proteins on the outside of cells that capture serotonin, a substance that’s important for how you feel and how your body works. So the receptors play a major role in your mood, sleep, appetite and emotions.”

Innovative research

She knows what she’s talking about. Kuypers has spent years researching the effect of psychedelics on our cognition, creativity, hormones and underlying brain mechanisms. She is now starting a four-year study on LSD microdosing in people with ADHD. Radboud University Nijmegen and the University Hospital of Basel are also involved as partners. “We plan to study about 100 people with ADHD for six weeks in a non-clinical setting. They’ll take regular microdoses of LSD. We’ll have them perform cognitive tasks and answer questions about side effects and topics like sleep quality and emotions. They’ll also participate in EEGs [tests that measure electrical activity in the brain] and blood tests. The aim is to find out whether a low dose of LSD is beneficial—and if so, for which participants and why.”

The study is supported by an €800,000 grant from the NWO Open Competition. Kuypers outlines the novel aspects of the research: “Our participants will actually have ADHD, whereas previous studies mainly involve subjects with no symptoms. We’ll also work with a relatively large sample over a longer period of time, which will allow us to study long-term effects. And our participants will know they’re taking LSD, an ADHD drug, an antidepressant or a placebo, but not which one. In previous studies, people could often guess.” >





Kim Kuypers is an associate professor in the Department of Neuropsychology and Psychopharmacology at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. She studied psychology with a specialisation in neuropsychology at Maastricht University, where she also obtained her PhD and conducted postdoctoral research on the pro-social effects of MDMA. Kuypers is the author of the book *Enjoy or cure: How psychedelics can help to make you psychologically healthy* (in Dutch).



Addictive and dangerous?

Is it responsible and ethical to give LSD to people with ADHD or another psychological disorder? “The addiction potential of psychedelics at the micro level seems to be minimal,” Kuypers says. “Of course, we have to be careful and screen people thoroughly in advance. We know from previous research that the heart rate and blood pressure can go up. In any event, people shouldn’t experiment with psychedelics on their own, and always take them under professional guidance.”

Kuypers has published a book, *Genieten of genezen* (‘Enjoy or cure’), in which she argues that psychedelics should be seen as an additional tool in a psychiatrist’s toolkit, rather than automatically being labelled as dangerous or for recreational use only. “When it comes to medicines, it’s important that we look at what suits the patient and what they feel comfortable with. It could be a traditional medicine, such as antidepressants or Ritalin, but also a non-traditional medicine, such as LSD or truffles. The demand for products that improve our wellbeing is increasing. People with ADHD often have concentration problems, anxiety and mood disorders, for which conventional medications are not always effective. Based on previous studies, we can assume that microdosing LSD may be an alternative treatment for ADHD, potentially with fewer side effects and holistic benefits such as improved emotion regulation, increased focus and better sleep quality. We want to shed more light on this through our research.”

Drawing conclusions

Research on microdosing in psychological disorders is still in its infancy, Kuypers adds. She expects it to take at least another five to ten years

*You don’t
have to
worry that
they’ll
make you
trip.*

for psychedelics to be marketed as standard, lawful medicines. “There’s still a lot we don’t know, including about the functioning of our body and mind. What factors play a role in depression, and how do the connections between our brain and our biological system really work? Can we use psychedelics for psychological disorders other than ADHD? If so, what can be used for what, and in which dosage? And, not least, who benefits and who doesn’t? Every body reacts differently, and that sometimes makes it difficult to draw conclusions.”

You are the medicine

The initial research results may be positive, but Kuypers emphasises that psychedelics are not “silver bullets” that will solve all our health problems—a picture often painted by the media. “If you ask me, medicines, be they traditional or non-traditional, are not the basis of health. So much comes down to a healthy diet, adequate exercise and a good night’s sleep. We may even have more influence over our own wellbeing than we already know. In the future, I’d like to start a broader line of research that also includes nutrition, sleep and exercise in the treatment of psychological disorders.” <

Sustainability

Text
Florian Raith

Photography
Sem Shayne

Understanding urban food insecurity

Assistant professor
Filippo Oncini



His research lies at the intersection of sustainability, socioeconomics and politics. Assistant professor [Filippo Oncini](#), from the School of Business and Economics, studies food charities and develops practical instruments to analyse urban poverty and food support. He has been awarded an ERC grant to conduct urban ethnographic research in Palermo, Kyoto and Rotterdam.

For his PhD, Filippo Oncini studied food inequality in Italy, focusing on how families obtain and consume food depending on their social class. “I looked at the role of school meals in improving children’s eating habits, but also at how their different social origins influence their knowledge of and relationship with food.” He conducted fieldwork in a school in an underprivileged neighbourhood of Palermo, Sicily. “I realised that, for many children, this was their only proper meal of the day. So, I decided to focus on urban poverty—but still with food at the heart of it.”

Poverty and food banks on the rise

Oncini received a Marie Curie Fellowship and moved to Manchester to study how access to food support impacts the lives of the urban poor. The UK, he says, has one of the most advanced systems of food-support provision, combining food donations with the redistribution of food surplus. “The Trussell Trust, for example, developed the first network of food banks and became incredibly successful. It’s a traditional model where private citizens donate food.”

In 2006, the Trussell Trust distributed fewer than 3,000 emergency food parcels; last year, this figure topped 3.1 million. This dramatic increase reflects not only a decade of austerity politics, but also a growing emphasis on sustainability. “Twenty years ago, people primarily bought and donated new food,” Oncini explains. “Since then, the focus has shifted to recovering food waste and channelling it back into the system, creating a more sustainable model of food provision.”

From Manchester to Kyoto

Next, Oncini secured a fellowship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) for a comparative study of charitable food-provision systems in the UK and Japan. While there are similarities, the Japanese system involves more informal actors. Many small, independent groups organise monthly distributions of bento boxes or food parcels, often outside the scope of formal food-safety regulations. “These grassroots initiatives are typically run by local communities or neighbourhood associations, reflecting a decentralised approach to addressing food insecurity.”

Another feature of the Japanese system is the prominence of *kodomo shokudo*, or children’s cafeterias. Initially designed as safe spaces for children, their role has expanded to address food insecurity. “They now distribute bento boxes and food parcels to support families in need.”

Japan faces unique challenges in this area. “Poverty remains a taboo topic, often discussed only in private,” Oncini explains. The sector relies on neighbourhood associations that operate discreetly. This helps to mitigate the shame of receiving charity, while also sparing the public from confronting these realities directly.

As food insecurity continues to grow, many Japanese now rely on multiple food providers to meet their basic needs. “You only receive so much food at a time, so people plan their lives around the schedules of different food charities. This adds significant stress and fatigue to their daily routines.”

Win-win-ish

Reducing food waste while providing for the hungry might seem like a win-win situation. “But you’re not really solving either problem,” Oncini says. “It’s a buffer against hunger, not food security. And it doesn’t disincentivise overproduction either.” In his view, the idea that the problems can cancel each other out is debatable.

Moreover, the shift from cash to food transfers restricts people’s autonomy over their time and food choices. That charitable food provision ramps up as the



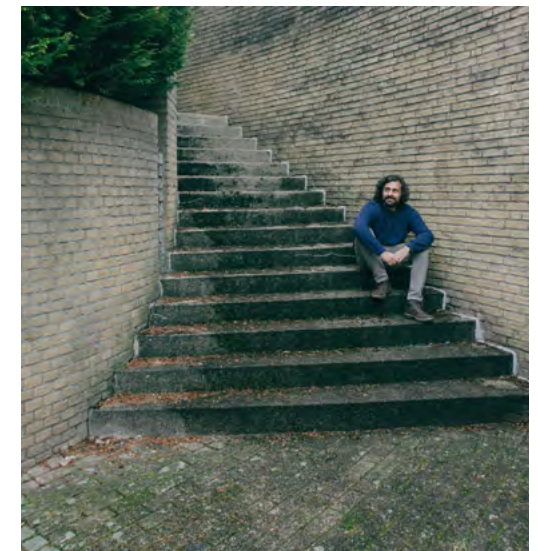
state reduces welfare spending is politically convenient. “Governments save money, and corporations can brand themselves as sustainable and socially responsible. But you end up perpetuating the very system that produces poverty in the first place.” Framing the redistribution of surplus food as a socially responsible solution masks the deeper issues of structural inequality and overproduction.

Comparing systems

Oncini will use the ERC grant to develop a theoretical and methodological framework that integrates quantitative and qualitative methods and can be applied in various countries. The aim is to create tools to better understand how charitable food provision has become so important in many upper- and middle-income countries. At the same time, he will explore the impact of such food provision on the survival strategies of those who rely on it.

A key component of the project is event sequence analysis, a method used by several researchers at the Maastricht Sustainability Institute, where Oncini is

↑ [Filippo Oncini is an assistant professor at the Maastricht Sustainability Institute. He earned his PhD in Sociology and Social Research from the University of Trento in 2018. His recent projects explored the dynamics of cooperation and competition among various food charities in the UK and Japan, with particular attention to the relationship between social and environmental sustainability. From January 2025, he will further pursue these topics through the ERC Starting Grant for his project, FOOD CHARITIES.](#)



based. “This approach abstracts the roles of actors and events to a level that allows for meaningful comparisons across different contexts. It provides a common language and shared categories for studying systems in diverse countries.”

Understanding poverty

Oncini hopes to bring greater scholarly attention to the issue of charitable food provision. “We need to make the system more resilient and resistant to shocks,” he says. He also pushes back against oversimplifications of poverty, which he calls “incredibly frustrating.”

“Engaging with statistics on poverty is fundamental, but it’s not enough,” he says. “Interacting with the people affected is something entirely different. You come to understand the immense burden it puts on them and the suffering it causes. My research won’t solve the problem, but I hope it contributes to a deeper understanding of the situation.” <

Engaging with statistics on poverty is fundamental, but it’s not enough.

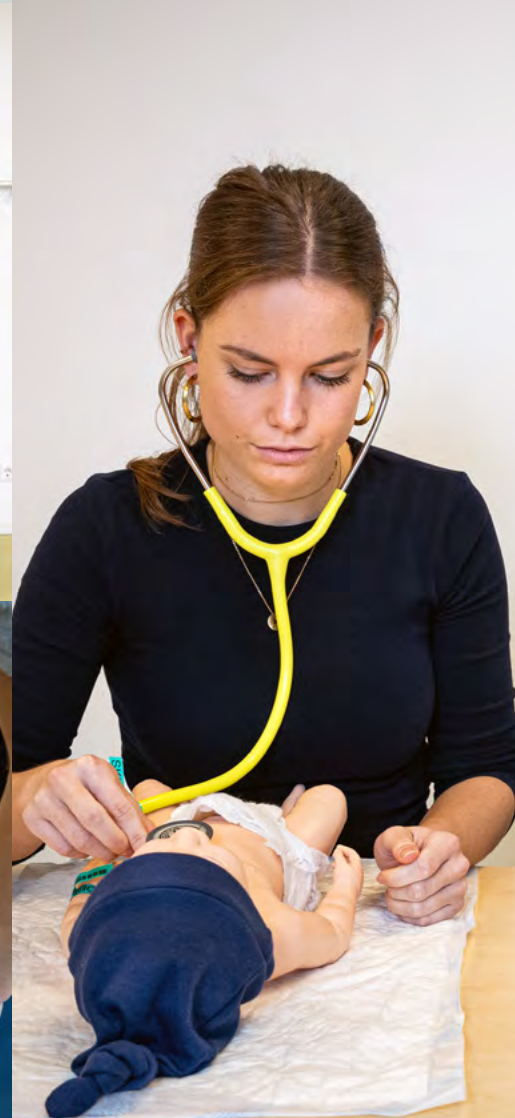


The Skills Lab

Maastricht University's Skills Lab offers medical students a unique, state-of-the-art simulation environment. Here, they can develop their clinical skills by practising medical techniques and procedures. Just as importantly, they learn how to make contact with patients, communicate effectively during consultations, cooperate with others and work on their personal and professional development. Diversity and inclusivity are the norm: students are encouraged to be curious about "the person behind the patient."

Spread

Photography
Paul van der Veer



How to increase vaccination rates: “It’s not a matter of convincing people”

Professor – student

Text
Jolien Linssen

Photography
Hannah Lipowsky



Last year, at least eight people—the highest number since the 1960s—died of whooping cough in the Netherlands. Most of them were babies. Behind this tragic statistic lies a years-long trend: fewer and fewer parents are vaccinating their children against serious infectious diseases, which jeopardises herd immunity. How can we turn the tide? Veja Widdershoven recently obtained her PhD for her research on vaccine willingness. “Why do we doubt something that is so effective?”

One size doesn’t fit all

Notably, she found that the motivation differs per vaccination. “Take outbreaks—people are afraid of getting sick and are therefore more likely to get vaccinated. If you then look at the vaccinations of pregnant women, this doesn’t appear to be an issue for expectant mothers. They want to make sure their child stays healthy, so the consideration there is, can a vaccine offer my child protection?”

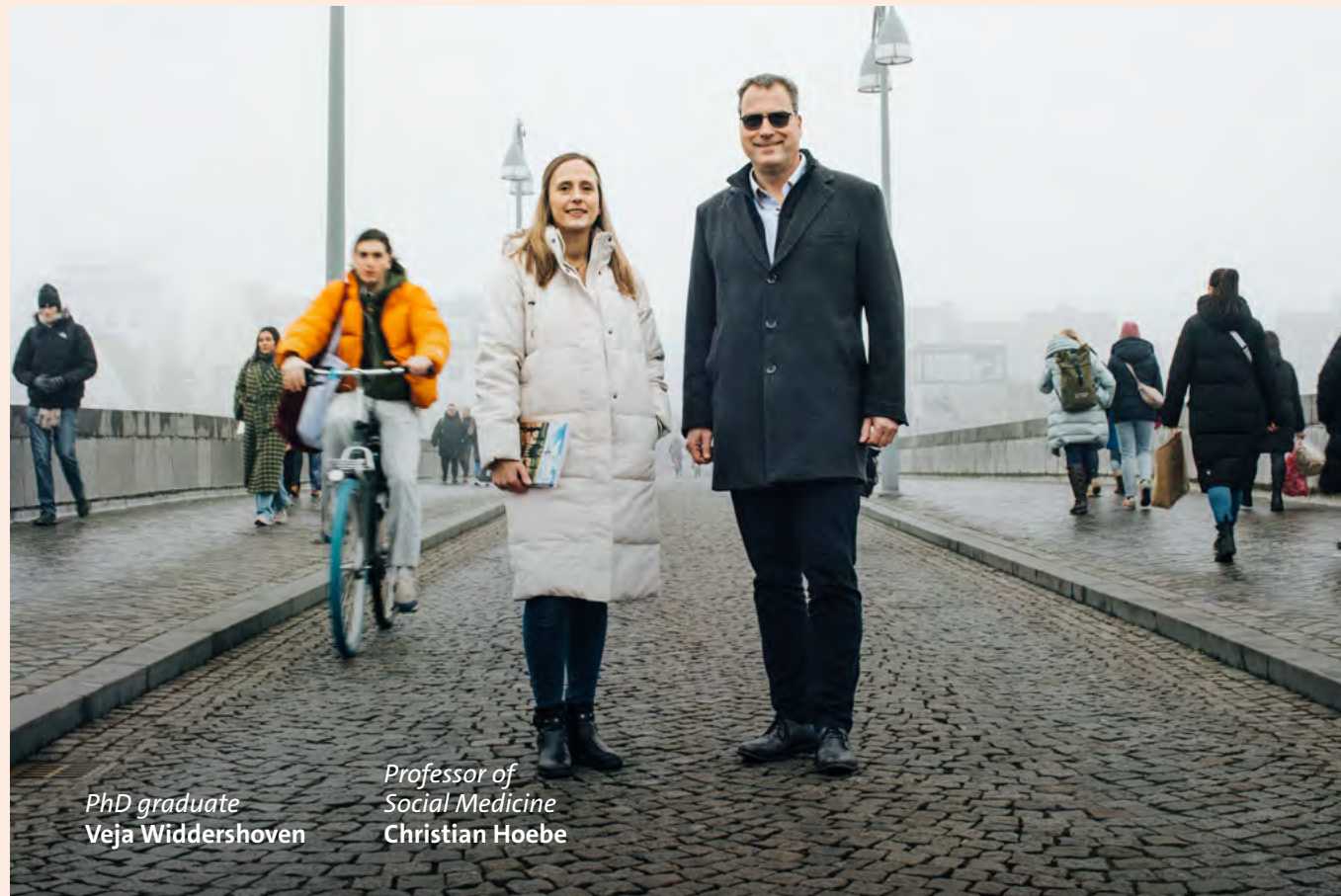
There are also major differences between the DTP (diphtheria, tetanus and polio) and MMR (mumps, measles and rubella) vaccinations for nine-year-olds, and the HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccination for ten-year-olds. “Parents of children who have missed the DTP and MMR vaccinations tend to report practical obstacles, such as an inconvenient time or a missed call. With the HPV vaccination, which has only recently been offered to boys, they’re more likely to wonder why it’s necessary. They just have less faith in it.”

Fundamental opposition

Vaccination coverage has long been declining throughout the West, but the Covid pandemic sharpened the public debate. “Since then, disinformation and mistrust have increased. It’s a general trend you see throughout Europe,” says Christian Hoebe, professor of Social Medicine specialising in Infectious Disease Control. “What I find hopeful is that very few people actually refuse vaccination on principle. There’s a large group that hasn’t been vaccinated but still shows quite a bit of movement.” >

Initially, Veja Widdershoven wasn’t particularly drawn to doing a PhD. But the subject matter appealed to her, so she applied. “Even though it was for a PhD programme,” she says with a laugh. During the first interview, she felt an immediate click with supervisor Christian Hoebe and decided to take the plunge. “I sensed straight away that it could be a very complex matter—and that’s what I like so much about it.”

In her dissertation, she discusses the factors that play a role in whether people accept or refuse a vaccination. She also investigates whether motivational interviewing is an effective method to increase parents’ willingness to have their children vaccinated.



PhD graduate
Veja Widdershoven

Professor of
Social Medicine
Christian Hoebe

This is what most surprised Widdershoven. “I started out with the idea that there are people who refuse vaccination and people who accept it. I didn’t expect there to be so much doubt in between.” Her research shows that the doubts of people in the latter group can be reduced by entering into dialogue and addressing their questions. “The principled refusers have already made up their minds,” Hoebe says, “so with them there’s no point in trying.”

Decision-making process

In half-hour sessions with parents whose children had not been vaccinated, healthcare professionals from the South Limburg Public Health Service (GGD) put motivational interviewing into practice. “The goal is not to convince them, but to help them take the next step in their decision-making process,” Hoebe explains. “Ultimately, they have to make the decision themselves. But that decision should be based on the right information that answers their questions.”

The advice of healthcare professionals can make a big difference, as became clear from interviews with midwives and gynaecologists. “When it comes to vaccination, they’re often asked, what would you do? That’s a clear request for advice,” Widdershoven says. “Yet, midwives and gynaecologists are reluctant to give their own opinions because they’re trained to give neutral counsel. We were shocked by that.” It’s strange, Hoebe adds, that vaccination is treated differently than, say, smoking. “Most professionals will say smoking is bad for you and advise you to quit. Patients can then choose whether or not to follow that advice. As healthcare professionals, we have no doubts about that at all. So why with vaccination?”



↑
Veja Widdershoven holds a bachelor’s in Health Sciences and master’s in Health Education and Promotion from UM. She successfully defended her PhD on vaccine willingness in late 2024. She now works as a policy officer and postdoctoral researcher at AWPG Mosa.

Confidence

Despite her initial hesitation, Widdershoven enjoyed the PhD process. “Christian had faith in me, which made me believe in myself. And once that happens, it just takes off.” Hoebe: “Veja has tremendous passion for this subject. I once joked that Veja stands for *vaccinate ja*. She’s also great at connecting people and has a very disarming attitude.”

Widdershoven will continue to be involved in new PhD research on vaccination coverage at AWPG Mosa, the Academic Collaborative Centre for Public Health. The focus will be on how to make the vaccination experience more accessible and pleasant, and how to improve vaccine communication with people with lower levels of literacy.

“Together with motivational interviewing, these are the ways to boost the vaccination rate,” says Hoebe. “In terms of vaccination coverage, not a single municipality in South Limburg is at the level we would like, which means there’s a realistic chance of an outbreak.” <

←←
Christian Hoebe studied medicine at UM and completed the Society & Health medical training in Utrecht. In 2004, he obtained his PhD in infectious diseases and outbreak management. He is head of department and professor of Social Medicine specialising in Infectious Disease Control at UM and head of AWPG Mosa (a partnership between UM and the GGD South Limburg).



It’s not easy being green: the challenges and benefits of international research collaboration

International

Text
Theo Tamis

Illustrations
Ted Struwer



As the world seeks cleaner energy solutions, green hydrogen has emerged as a key component in the transition to a sustainable future. Many governments have drawn up policies to support this technology, but competing priorities mean initiatives often fall short. Fabianna Bacil, a PhD candidate at UNU-MERIT/Maastricht University, is part of an international research group investigating green hydrogen in emerging economies.

Led by UM and supported by the Worldwide Universities Network, their project brings together insights from four continents on policies guiding the development of green hydrogen. The focus is not on technical aspects, but rather on the opportunities it offers for economic development, particularly in contexts where energy solutions can significantly impact emerging markets. “The strategies adopted by Brazil, Chile, China and South Africa are surprisingly varied,” explains Fabianna Bacil. “They’re all developing countries, yet each has its own development path and priorities.”

Money matters

Brazil and China, Bacil says, consider green hydrogen a strategic, but not always a top, policy priority. Their technology-agnostic approach is not focused solely on green hydrogen. For Chile and South Africa, on the other hand, green hydrogen features prominently on their national agendas. Countries invest in the technology for diverse reasons, from pursuing export opportunities, decarbonisation and energy security to fostering socioeconomic benefits, innovation and industrial development.

Each country is also taking a distinct pathway to integrate green hydrogen. Chile has an export-driven strategy for economic growth, while South Africa aims to foster new domestic industries through green hydrogen. But high costs often form an obstacle to these goals. “Green hydrogen is very expensive,

making it particularly challenging for developing countries,” Bacil says. They struggle to compete with the subsidies offered by wealthy nations. At the same time, unilateral measures such as carbon taxing taken by countries seeking to develop demand for green alternatives could hamper the competitiveness of production.

There is a stark disparity between government strategies and developments on the ground, the researchers found. In South Africa, for example, the official push to industrialise using green hydrogen is undermined by its expense, which leads producers to focus on exports. “Creating a domestic market would require offering subsidies or similar measures, which can be too expensive for developing economies,” Bacil says.

Next steps for renewable research

As the project concludes, Bacil reflects on what lies ahead for her research. “We’ve learnt an immense amount from this collaboration,” she says. But she also expresses concerns about the potential economic implications of relying solely on green hydrogen exports. This could lead to a scenario known as “Dutch disease,” where the success of one sector harms overall economic health. “We need to consider what will happen if Brazil implements strict environmental policies while other countries don’t. This would be beneficial for the environment, but it could also harm the competitiveness of local companies.”

Additionally, the research uncovered political-economy issues. Interest groups and stakeholders can influence policies and cause delays. The development of green hydrogen could also be stymied by competition from alternative renewable energy sources.



There's
no one-size-
fits-all
solution.



↑
Fabianna Bacil is a PhD candidate at UNU-MERIT/Maastricht University, focusing on economic development linked to green hydrogen in emerging countries. In addition to collaborating with the UN Industrial Development Organization on green hydrogen topics, she has worked at UN Trade and Development on innovation and technology and with the UN Development Programme on social development in the Global South. She holds an MPhil from the University of Cambridge and bachelor's degrees in Economics and International Affairs from Brazilian universities.



Bacil and her team are intent on sharing their findings with policymakers worldwide. “Each country faces its own barriers and has unique preconditions for the development of a green hydrogen sector. Studying the variations allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics. This comparative analysis is just the first step towards in-depth research that could help produce more effective policies.”

International collaboration

The research team capitalised on opportunities for international collaboration early on in the project. Face-to-face workshops in Maastricht enhanced teamwork. “Online meetings don’t foster the same level of understanding,” Bacil reflects. “Meeting in person brought us together and showcased our individual expertise.”

She also highlights the value of cross-fertilisation in research. “I was in South Africa when the energy crisis was the big issue, but in discussions with academics and policymakers, I learnt that their primary concerns were the financial implications and job creation rather than energy itself. They wanted to know whether transitioning from a coal-based economy to greener energy would adequately compensate for job losses in the coal sector. They were focused on how to achieve a just energy transition, one that’s fair and inclusive and addresses the needs of young people in the workforce.”

Newfound insight

For Bacil, the project has been transformative. Engaging with experts from diverse backgrounds has shifted her perspective. “The project has made my thinking more flexible,” she says. “I used to believe

Creating a domestic market would require offering subsidies or similar measures, which can be too expensive for developing economies.



that export-oriented governments should incentivise companies to pursue green hydrogen. But seeing Chile’s significant production potential showed me that an export-driven approach can make more sense than focusing on domestic markets.

“I now also understand why Brazil’s progress has been slow. Why would it choose to be at the forefront of the green transition? I’ve learnt that there’s no one-size-fits-all solution; policies often can’t be directly translated or copied. This also explains why strategies rarely align with reality. Countries face unique challenges and have to navigate them in their own way, even if they agree on the ultimate goals.”

This newfound insight extends to her expectations about green hydrogen use. “I’ve shifted from an overly optimistic view of its potential to a more realistic one,” she admits. “Research is evolving, market conditions are evolving; I now grasp the complexity of the needs and challenges surrounding green hydrogen.” <

Rivier Atelier: an ode to the Geul

Region

Text
Ludo Diels

Photography
Paul van der Veer

Assistant professor of
Cultural Policy and Art
Management at FASoS
Claartje Rasterhoff

Assistant professor of
Heritage Studies at the
Faculty of Arts and Social
Sciences at FASoS
Christian Ersten

Those who stroll beside the Geul are usually unaware that along the banks of this meandering river unfolds a story of water, history and hope for the future. This landscape, bursting with history and culture, is home to ‘Rivier Atelier’: a project led by Claartje Rasterhoff and Christian Ersten in collaboration with Natuurmonumenten, an NGO dedicated to preserving natural areas and cultural heritage in the Netherlands. They want to protect the unique watermill landscapes of the Geul in the face of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change. How can this two-sided coin—beauty and pollution—help us to understand our environmental heritage in a new way?

Funded by the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency and the Province of Limburg, the study is part of the project ‘Toxic love: Commoning heritage in times of climate crisis.’ This project focuses on how collective action can aid in the management of landscapes long shaped by human activity and environmental problems. “The Geul is not just this idyllic picture,” Claartje Rasterhoff explains. “It’s a landscape with a layered history that needs care and attention. We’re trying to unpack those layers and develop an integrated, multidisciplinary strategy for the area.”

Layered history

The research offers a unique opportunity to see pollution not just as a problem, but as a key to a deeper connection with our environment. Walks, workshops and policy research will bring to light historical layers of pollution and their impact on the landscape. The researchers will also consider the role

of non-human actors: the flora and fauna that have adapted to these toxic conditions.

Here, the history of industrialisation, conservation, water management and tourism coexist, often in a delicate balance. “The Geul is ‘frozen’ in the public imagination as this pristine, unspoilt landscape,” says Christian Ersten. “But the reality is messier than that. Agricultural and industrial activities have been polluting the river since Roman times.”

Symbolic of the pollution caused by the zinc industry is the *zinkviooltje*, a type of violet that flourished along the Geul after adapting to an excess of the toxic metal in the environment. Yet history also offers hope. Rasterhoff explains that the Geul is an example of how communities successfully utilised and managed the landscape for centuries. “This special landscape offers valuable lessons for our contemporary approach to heritage and nature.”





Christian Ersten is assistant professor of Heritage Studies at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS). He is the programme director of the Research Master in Cultures of Arts, Science and Technology (CAST) and chair of the Maastricht Experimental Research In and through the Arts Network (MERIAN).



Claartje Rasterhoff is assistant professor of Cultural Policy and Art Management at FASoS, director of the inter-faculty Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH) and co-founder of the Playground and Laboratory for New Technologies (PLANT), a teaching and research lab for the humanities and social sciences.

A landscape in flux

Rivier Atelier emphasises that the Geul forms a living, constantly changing landscape. To preserve it, we must go beyond the image of it as a 'frozen' idyll. > "We don't want to destroy that romantic image," Ersten says. "But we do have to 'thaw' it, conceive of it as fluid and dynamic. We want to learn from historical practices and apply them in the complex context of today."

One focal point is the Volmolen in Epen, an iconic part of the Geul valley. This historic watermill is considered an example of effective medieval water management. "The watermill is more than a heritage object," Rasterhoff explains. "It's a case study of how a landscape has been used over the centuries and adapted to changing conditions."

The researchers are proposing a new role for the mill in the form of exhibitions, sustainable tourism or education on historical water-management techniques. "The goal is not just to preserve the mill," Ersten says, "but to make it relevant to the current community."

Climate and heritage: an integrated approach

The challenges facing the Geul valley are complex and call for a broad-based approach. Climate change, extreme weather conditions, and nitrogen and phosphate pollution are placing a strain on both the landscape and its historical heritage. The Rivier Atelier project is working towards an integrated vision that addresses not only the effects of pollution, but also its causes.

"Every discipline has its own perspective, but the trick is to connect them," Rasterhoff says. The research will bring together farmers, designers, scientists, nature organisations and local communities. Together, they are mapping out the available expertise and interests.

A call for care and attention

Rivier Atelier is striving for concrete results that contribute to the preservation of the region. By mid-2025, they aim to publish a report for policymakers and organisations such as Natuurmonumenten, including a proposal for the sustainable management of the Geul valley.

The project invites us to rediscover the Geul, not as a static painting on the wall, but as a living landscape that needs care and attention. "The South Limburg landscape has something poetic about it," Rasterhoff says. "It's inspired many song lyrics and great admiration. But if we want to preserve it for future generations, we need to understand that it's not just a pretty picture. It's a living, breathing landscape, with an eventful past and a hopeful future." <

A peek inside the kitchen of UM employees

Soul kitchen

Text

Annelotte Huiskes

Photography

Philip Driessen



A night in Tehran: rose water, saffron and pistachio

Assistant professor at the MERLN research institute
Niloofar Tahmasebi Birgani

The right proportions, experimenting with tastes and smells - it's just like chemistry.

Niloofar Tahmasebi Birgani, assistant professor at the MERLN research institute, was born in southern Iran. It was only when she moved to the Netherlands in 2010 for her PhD research that she began cooking for herself. Instead of recipes, she uses intuition and memory to bring her mother's and grandmother's dishes to life in her own kitchen. Cooking gives her peace and brings her back to her native country, from fragrant Iranian stews to made-up cakes with the flavours of Tehran.



Niloofar Tahmasebi Birgani was born during a troubled period: the Iran–Iraq War. Her childhood in Khoozestan, close to the Iraq border, was one of endurance and privation, but also warmth and family traditions. She is the middle of three girls and has only vague memories of the war, whereas her older sister vividly recalls the bombings and bomb shelters. Simplicity was the keyword. They may have had few toys, but they had a close family bond and enough love for a happy childhood. Her father—a devoted maths teacher who taught her that education is not just a job, but a calling—remains an inspiration. It was from him that Tahmasebi Birgani inherited her passion for mathematics. “He still apps me maths problems to solve,” she says, smiling.

She describes herself as an introvert who buried herself in her books. “My sisters went out a lot more than I did. I loved being on my own, in my own world. I still do, actually. And I had friends who, like me, loved science and books and really wanted to learn.” At the age of 18, she moved to Tehran to study. Her parents followed her to the capital shortly thereafter. On her father's advice, she chose biomedical engineering: it offered better career prospects than her first love—maths—and meant she could work with numbers and help people at the same time. She developed into a gifted, ambitious student.

An important decision

During her studies, Tahmasebi Birgani became passionate about science and decided to pursue a PhD. When she graduated top of her class, her family offered to contribute to a car as a gift. She asked to use the money to attend an international conference in Switzerland instead.



Iran are built around a courtyard garden surrounded by rooms and the kitchen. There's always a wing available for family, and newlyweds often continue living there until they can afford a house of their own.”

Her uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces were present. The children played in the courtyard garden while the adults sat inside because of the heat. In the evening everyone came outside, a large tablecloth was placed on the ground and the roughly 30 people ate together. “In Iran, you eat on the ground. To this day, my parents prefer to eat on the floor, while we children would rather eat at the table.”

Rice was the main ingredient, paired with rich stews of meat, lentils or aubergine. Fresh herbs, pickles and yoghurt abound. “Everything is pickled, from cucumber and aubergine to kale. Vegetables were only available in season, so they had to be pickled to make them last longer. Luckily, there's a Turkish shop in Maastricht that sells delicious pickles.”

Cooking has become one of her favourite pastimes, something she only discovered when she moved to the Netherlands. In Iran, her mother was always in the kitchen, but here she had to fend for herself. “I also see cooking as a chemical process. The right proportions, experimenting with tastes and smells—it's just like chemistry. I work mainly from memory: my mother's and grandmother's culinary skills are stored in there somewhere. I rarely use recipes.”

A life in the Netherlands

Tahmasebi Birgani has built a life in the Netherlands after moving here more than 13 years ago. “I've reconciled myself to the fact that I no longer live there. Simple dishes and certain smells take me back to my childhood; that's enough for me.” While she misses her family, she is grateful for the opportunities she has been given.

“It's a privilege to live here. It's safe and comfortable. I had a wonderful childhood in Iran with many good memories, but I've also developed those feelings about the Netherlands. This is where I lived on my own for the first time, found my first job and met the love of my life. I now have a second family of friends and colleagues here. If I were to go back, I'd be homesick for the Netherlands.” <

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“My parents were surprised, but they supported me. The abstract I submitted was accepted and that's how I travelled abroad for the first time.” It was in Switzerland that she met Professor Clemens van Blitterswijk, whose presentation made a lasting impression. She decided to look for a PhD position in the Netherlands, and eventually found one at the University of Twente with Pamela Habibović, who was part of Van Blitterswijk's group. The move to the Netherlands was an emotional step, especially for her parents. “But they wanted me to follow my dreams,” she recalls.

Flavours filled with childhood memories

For Tahmasebi Birgani, flavours and smells form a direct connection to the past. For the interview, she baked a Persian pie with rose water, saffron and pistachio that evokes her childhood. “I first made it for a baking competition with colleagues. I had to give the cake a name, which became ‘Flavours of a night in Tehran.’ When I close my eyes, I see the dark sky, the busy, brightly lit streets of Tehran and my sisters and friends, who I used to join in the city to eat ice cream with rose water, saffron and pistachio.”

Meals were important traditions during her childhood. Dinner in particular was a ritual that brought the family together. Her fondest food-related memory is of gatherings at her grandmother's place. “Old houses in

“Anyone can SHOUT from the sidelines”

Alumni meeting minds

Text
Jos Cortenraad

Photography
Harry Heuts



Sjoerd Maillé holds a bachelor's in Law and a master's in Law & Labour (cum laude) from Maastricht University. Born and raised in Brabant, he now works as a trainee at the Limburg District Court. At just 24 years old, he is also the second youngest member of the Limburg Provincial Council and a citizen councillor in Maastricht. It's the start of a very promising career, in spite of his disability: Maillé is almost blind.

Stargardt's disease, a form of juvenile macular degeneration, is a serious eye defect that affects vision from a young age. “According to the doctors’ definitions, I’m blind,” Sjoerd Maillé says cheerfully. “When I was seven, my vision suddenly deteriorated. It got worse and worse and now I see about 5% of what others see. It’s a progressive disease, but since it’s been stable for 15 years, I don’t expect my vision to deteriorate further. People are sometimes shocked, but to be honest, it doesn’t bother me that much. I occasionally run into things, but otherwise I function perfectly well. I can live with it just fine.”

Inclusion

One thing is clear: Maillé is not one to sit around feeling sorry for himself. However, he is committed to promoting inclusion—especially for people with disabilities—both legally and politically. “And not only for people with a physical disability. I think everyone should have the opportunity to organise their own lives, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, background or disability. In my ideal world, the differences between people no longer hold us back. That’s why I became politically active. Anyone can shout from the sidelines—I want to make a concrete contribution.”

Maillé grew up in Esbeek, a village in North Brabant. “A very sheltered environment. From the moment I was diagnosed, I received a lot of help. I was able to stay at my own small primary school instead of switching to a special school. Everyone adapted to me, and I adapted to them. I learnt Braille together with the teachers, special books and aids were arranged for me. I kept going to gym class; actually I took part in all activities. I wasn’t an outsider.”

Digitisation

He felt included, too, at high school in Tilburg, which he finished in six years. “It wasn’t easy, but again, I got all the help I needed. An extra-large laptop, and a separate computer with speech and magnifying software and a Braille display to read books digitally. All in all, I passed easily, although the final exams were an ordeal. I was given extra exam time: six hours per exam instead of three. Fortunately, a lot of material was digitised during my high school years, and the computers have improved a lot. I’m no longer dependent on Braille. Without digitisation, higher education would have been difficult.”

Problem-based

Law appealed to him because he wanted to study something that made a contribution to society. He chose Maastricht because his girlfriend had been admitted to Medicine here. “And because of Problem-Based Learning. Of course, I learnt early on to stand up for myself, to solve practical challenges. But despite the help and support of many people, I believe that you have to be in the driver’s seat yourself,

make your own decisions. You learn that better when you tackle a practical case in a group and view it from all angles. That’s exactly what UM stands for. I felt at home from day one, also because the university does all it can to support people with disabilities. The facilities are there, you just have to go after them yourself. Which is fine—as I said, I value independence.”

In early 2020, barely six months into his studies, corona struck. “Student life came to a virtual standstill. You studied at home, tutorials moved online. Partly out of boredom, I started to delve into local politics. One thing led to another: I followed the council meetings and joined the VVD.”

Provincial Council member

In 2021, Maillé became a citizen councillor in Maastricht. Two years later, he stood for election to the Provincial Council in Limburg. He just missed out on a preferential seat, but within a year he was offered a place anyway. “Someone moved on to The Hague and I was able to take her spot. It was a fantastic opportunity, although I did have to figure out how to combine it with my job as a trainee at the court in Maastricht.”

Returning to Brabant is, for the time being, not on the cards. “No, I feel very connected to this region. During my studies, I became quite attached to Maastricht, with its international and inclusive university. We really have to cherish it. I also see major challenges, like students leaving after their studies because there just aren’t enough interesting jobs around. We have to devote ourselves to creating a strong and attractive economy with appealing employers and affordable housing. Of course, the Province of Limburg has a major role to play, and I’m very keen to make my political contribution to that.”

Public administration

A career in the judiciary or politics, that is the question. “Both appeal to me. I want to work at the heart of society. Which is clearly the case with the court. Though as a politician, you can change policy. I can also see myself ending up in public administration. As a mayor, maybe—who knows?” <



Sjoerd Maillé grew up in Esbeek, Brabant, attended Willem II College in Tilburg, and obtained his bachelor's in Law and master's specialising in Labour and Health Law at Maastricht University. He is now a trainee at the Limburg District Court, Provincial Council member for the VVD and a citizen councillor in Maastricht. In his spare time, he volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House in Maastricht.

Living the dream (job)

When Nina Gormanns was cleaning out her house in Canada, she found some old folders containing notes from a career workshop she had followed as a student at Maastricht University. “There was a sheet of paper where I’d written down the three things I really wanted to do later. I thought: Ha, I have my dream job!” Gormanns is director of Environmental Taxation and Policy at the Canadian Department of Finance.



Originally from Mönchengladbach, Germany, Nina Gormanns would never have guessed that studying in the Netherlands would lead her to meet her husband while on exchange in Singapore, and then eventually settle in Canada. But that’s exactly what happened.

Gormanns came to Maastricht for its English-language economics programmes and the Problem-Based Learning system. She still benefits from the discussion and leadership skills she acquired here, and from being pushed outside her comfort zone. Not to mention how her choice of study programme shaped her future, in the form of her husband, John. “During my bachelor’s, I went on exchange to Singapore. John, who’s from Canada, was in Hong Kong for his exchange. One of my fellow students was a friend of his, and we met during a trip to Hong Kong. It was like sparks flew at first sight.”

Calling UM alumni

After her bachelor’s, she moved to Canada for a year to see if the relationship had a future. It did—but following her chosen master’s programme in Canada

turned out to be difficult, so Gormanns returned to Maastricht. “Like many German students, I was able to work at the Mercedes-Benz call centre here to pay for my studies.”

She and John explored career options in both Europe and Canada, and decided to settle in Canada. Gormanns was determined to find a job in her field—a challenge that local UM alumni were able to help with. “I even looked into setting up an Alumni Circle, as I find that a great way to stay in touch. We didn’t have enough people for that, but I really appreciated that UM sponsored some informal get-togethers I organised.”

At home in Ottawa

The couple moved around in the following years, between Toronto and Ottawa. “We started out in Toronto, which is a bit like Amsterdam: a big, immigrant-rich city with different areas such as Little Italy and Koreatown. I loved that there was always something going on, like festivals in the summer. Ottawa is a big city with a small-town feel, but it’s developing rapidly. Plus, it’s a better place to raise a family, since it’s not as expensive as Toronto. We now live here with our daughter, and I’ve come to appreciate what the city has to offer.”

As the capital, Ottawa is also home to the headquarters of the federal government. John was already working there, and Gormanns joined him in 2016. “Before that, I was working at an advocacy group for small and medium-sized businesses. I was on the research side, interacting a lot with lobbyists, trying to influence policy. But there’s only so much you can do, and I started to feel like it would be interesting to work where policy is actually made.”

Protecting the environment

Gormanns was hired by the Department of Finance. She spent six months conducting quantitative analyses, then stepped in for a colleague who was going on parental leave. At the time, Canada was considering the implementation of carbon pricing as a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. “I’ve always been very interested in environmental protection, and it was great to have the opportunity to work on policy and see if it was for me.” She conducted analyses for working group meetings, and wrote briefing notes for the finance minister, taking into consideration the many aspects of policy development. “Pushing that forward, helping to design the policy—which is quite politically charged—was great. I loved it and was able to stay.”

Fearless advice

Carbon pricing was implemented, and, in 2023, Gormanns was appointed to lead the team responsible for the federal fuel charge. This is part of Canada’s carbon-pricing system, which is, in turn, a key pillar of the country’s climate plan. With the forthcoming elections, chances are that the policy will be reversed by the new government. “I’m a public servant, and that means giving advice fearlessly, but implementing policies loyally. So that’s what I would do. I uphold the values of the public service, which entails being professional and non-partisan. There are so many interesting policy questions that I find valuable and exciting. Also, Finance is a small, but very productive and professional department. What you work on is one thing, but who you work for and with also makes a big difference.”

So what were the three key words she wrote down as a student about her dream job? “Policy, environment and government. I don’t plan years ahead, but what’s always served me is knowing what’s important to me and what my values are. I want to work on something I care about and that challenges me, but also with really good people. So I hope to still be doing that in 10 years’ time.” <



← **Nina Gormanns holds a bachelor’s in Economics and a master’s in International Economic Studies from UM. She moved to Canada in 2009 and began working for the government in 2016. In March 2023, she was appointed Director of Environmental Taxation and Policy at the Department of Finance Canada.**



Alum provides financial and employability support for young students

From the very first day of their master’s programme, SBE students Can Temiz and Mamadou Jabbie have had both feet planted firmly in the professional field. They are supported by scholarships from LKPU, a boutique German firm specialised in management consultancy. They receive mentoring and support through the scholarship programme, which links the university with industry, helps LKPU meet its corporate social responsibility goals, and scratches the itch among a growing number of alumni to give back to their alma mater.

University Fund Limburg

Text
Anouk van den Brink

Photography
Anouk van den Brink

Last September, Temiz and Jabbie began their UM adventure at the School of Business and Economics (SBE), where Jan Koppetsch also studied over two decades ago. Koppetsch graduated with a master’s degree in International Business; today, he is a managing partner at LKPU. He has reconnected with his alma mater for a special partnership.

“Every year, LKPU gives to a good cause,” Koppetsch explains. “They used to be one-off activities, mainly focused on symptoms instead of root causes. We wanted to meet our philanthropic goals in a more sustainable way, by making a structural contribution to knowledge and education and supporting young

talent.” The decision to collaborate with UM was an easy one. “The university knows like no other how to bridge the gap between education and practice; the Brightlands campuses are a perfect example. And the Problem-Based Learning approach offers students a great deal of freedom while also requiring a high degree of creativity, which is very important later in your career. Creativity is one of LKPU’s four core values.”

LKPU supports German students who want to pursue a master’s degree at SBE. The financial contribution opens doors to higher education that otherwise might have remained closed.



“The scholarship offers me a lot of freedom,” says Jabbie, who is following the master’s programme in Managerial Decision Making & Control. “The monthly contribution for the tuition fee, study materials and living expenses means I can fully focus on my studies, and I don’t have to worry about finances.” The time freed up by the scholarship enables him to engage in valuable extracurricular activities. Jabbie is an active member of SCOPE (SBE’s study association) and the Maastricht Student Consulting team. After all, the experiences and contacts students acquire during their studies can significantly enhance their career prospects in the future.

The scholarship offers more than just financial support: Temiz and Jabbie will also write their master’s theses at LKPU. “The collaboration with LKPU is very valuable,” says Temiz, a master’s student in Business Intelligence & Smart Services. “When you write your thesis for a company, you have to consider different objectives and wishes: those of the organisation, the university and, of course, your own. Making compromises and finding a good balance between those objectives is an important learning experience. LKPU offers me a lot of freedom and trust.”

←
Mamadou Jabbie and
Can Temiz.

↓
Jan Koppetsch

During his own studies, Koppetsch was given a similar opportunity at the consulting branch of Ericsson. Thanks to feedback and support from industry as well as academia, his thesis had added value for the professional field. The outcomes of Jabbie’s thesis, too, will be directly applicable. “This means that even as a student I can already make a positive impact on the business sector. LKPU gives me a taste of the different sides of consulting that appeal to me, such as project rescue and payments.” These are, together with “people practice,” the firm’s key focal areas.

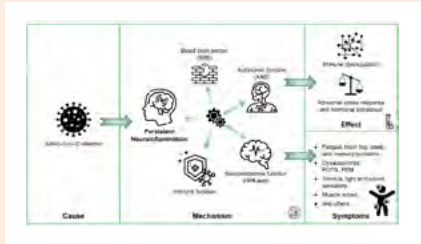
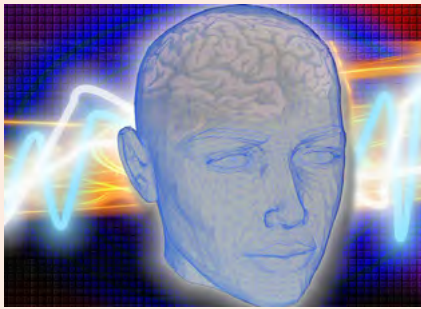
“LKPU’s motto is we solve problems others ignore,” Koppetsch says. “We give our clients rigorous, honest feedback, which is sometimes necessary to help them face reality, grow and make informed decisions.” He takes the same approach when mentoring students. “What I hope to offer is a hands-on, sleeves-rolled-up perspective on deliverables. We have them look through a different lens at things they learn at the university, but will only really discover and experience in the field.”

If Koppetsch has anything to say about it, the scholarship programme is just the beginning of a broader partnership with UM. With fond memories of his alma mater, he is keen to strengthen its connection with the professional field and enhance student employability. “In the future, I hope to see an increase in the number of not only students, but also faculties. Perhaps we can one day work with the university to develop a module in which students solve problems we haven’t even conceived of yet.”

For its part, LKPU opens a door to the professional field and provides access to valuable connections. By creating a good mix between academia and industry and helping to close the gap between education and practice, collaborations such as these offer young professionals the best of both worlds.

In recent years, we have seen growing interest among our alumni community to give back to the university. The University Fund Limburg frequently collaborates with external organisations and individuals, supporting them in meeting their corporate social responsibility goals. This can involve contributing financially to education and research projects, developing a new scholarship programme or setting up a joint research project with leading UM academics. Want to find out more about the options? Send an email to info@ufl-swol.nl. <





Post-Covid research: the quest for a common origin

Could persistent inflammation in the brain be a common cause behind the symptoms experienced by many post-Covid patients? Led by Maastricht University, scientists from across the Netherlands are joining forces to uncover the underlying causes of symptoms such as fatigue, post-exertional malaise and concentration issues.

The interdisciplinary team of researchers from UM, Utrecht UMC, Radboud UMC, Erasmus MC and Amsterdam UMC has received a grant of nearly €800,000 from ZonMw, a healthcare funding body. The grant will enable them to further study the role of persistent brain inflammation and disruption of the brain's control over immune, autonomic and hormonal functions.

The project leader is **Martina Summer-Kutmon** from the Maastricht Centre for Systems Biology. "Our approach is designed to integrate extensive biological measurements on different levels, from molecular profiling of the blood to brain imaging, within the same individual," she explains. "We're pursuing a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected biological systems affected by post-Covid." <

News

Maastricht University opens Nick Bos Greenhouse in Venlo

Last October saw the official opening of the new sustainable research greenhouse on the Brightlands Campus Greenport Venlo. This marks a significant step in research on sustainable food production. Maastricht University has named the greenhouse after **Nick Bos**, the former UM vice president who stepped down in 2024.

With a surface area of 1600 m², the high-tech greenhouse enables researchers to develop climate-resilient crops and innovative agricultural techniques. It is completely gas-free and equipped with sustainable technologies for energy supply, climate control and lighting. This makes it an essential tool for the Brightlands Future Farming Institute, which focuses on new crops and circular horticultural techniques.

The opening doubled as a celebration of a cooperation agreement between UM and the municipality of Venlo. Both parties are investing €8 million each in research and education in the region, focusing on sustainable solutions for food production and technological innovation. The aim is to expand the student population in Venlo to approximately 1200. <



Vidi grants for UM research on AI models and our brains

Two Maastricht University scientists have received Vidi grants worth €850,000 from the Dutch Research Council (NWO). Laure Wynants will work with her team at CAPHRI/FHML to develop more reliable AI models for healthcare. And at FSE and FPN, neuroscientist Michelle Moerel will study how our brain filters sound.

Michelle Moerel: "I'm intrigued by how the brain rapidly adapts to process the sounds around us. Regions hidden deep in the brain likely play a crucial role in this auditory flexibility, but studying them is challenging because they're so small. The Vidi grant will help me overcome these challenges and investigate how auditory flexibility works in individuals with normal hearing. Ultimately, I hope to shed light on what's going wrong in those who struggle to hear in noisy environments."

Laure Wynants: "I've mainly been developing new prediction models for diagnostic and prognostic applications, and assessing existing models. With the current assessment criteria, it remains unclear when a model is good enough to support clinical decisions in practice. With the Vidi grant, I'll be able to set up a team to develop better measures to assess whether a model is ready for use, or if more research is needed. This way, I hope to contribute to the optimal integration of AI in healthcare." <

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

- School of Nutrition and Translational Research in Metabolism (NUTRIM)
- School for Cardiovascular Diseases (CARIM)
- School for Public Health and Primary Care (CAPHRI)
- School for Mental Health and Neuroscience (MHeNS)
- School for Oncology & Reproduction (GROW)
- School of Health Professions Education (SHE)

Faculty of Science and Engineering

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

Faculty of Law

- Globalization and Law Network
- Institute for Corporate Law, Governance and Innovation Policies (ICGI)
- Institute for Globalisation and International Regulation (IGIR)
- Institute for Transnational Legal Research (METRO)
- Institute for Transnational and Euregional Cross Border Cooperation and Mobility (ITEM)
- Maastricht Centre for European Law (MCEL)
- Maastricht Centre for Human Rights (MCFHR)

- Maastricht Centre for Law & Jurisprudence (MCLJ)
- Maastricht Centre for Taxation (MCT)
- Maastricht European Private Law Institute (M-EPLI)
- Maastricht Law and Tech Lab
- Maastricht Institute for Criminal Studies (MICS)
- Montesquieu Institute Maastricht

Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience

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

School of Business and Economics

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

Interfaculty institutes

- The Maastricht Forensic Institute (tMFI)
- MERLN Institute for Technology-Inspired Regenerative Medicine
- The Maastricht Centre for Citizenship, Migration and Development (MACIMIDE)
- Maastricht MultiModal Molecular Imaging Institute (M4I)
- Maastricht Centre for Systems Biology (MaCSBio)
- Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH)
- Centre for European Research in Maastricht (CERIM)
- Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM)
- Institute of Data Science (IDS)
- Centre for Integrative Neuroscience (CIN)
- Maastricht Science in Court (MSiC)

Colophon

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