

UM Magazine

February 2026

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For the cover image, photographer Philip Driessen was inspired by the interview with Bart Zweegers. In his new book, he tells the story of the university through 50 objects.

philipdriessen.com

Foreword

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

We wanted to take this opportunity to look back as well as ahead. Now, I know we're always looking ahead: What's the next groundbreaking line of research? How can we keep innovating in education and further improve our students' learning journey? How can we valorise our knowledge and skills for the people in our region and beyond? In that sense, this year may be nothing out of the ordinary—although I hope it encourages everyone in our wonderful community to double down on their efforts and ambitions.

I would, however, like to draw your attention to the other side of the coin: taking the time to reflect and see how far we've come. In our relentless drive to improve, we can sometimes forget to stop and appreciate what we've already achieved. UM started out as a small medical faculty in the provinces. In just 50 years, we've grown into a full-fledged university with 6 faculties and a community of almost 30,000 people from well over 100 countries.

We've had an incredibly positive impact in our region, from protecting Maastricht's architectural heritage to opening new campuses in Venlo, Sittard-Geleen and soon Heerlen. We've attracted talented young people who have helped to rejuvenate South Limburg's economy and cultural life. Through commercial partnerships, entire industrial ecosystems have emerged around our university. They now employ thousands of people and drive innovation and competitiveness in our region.

Photography
Arjen Schmitz

50

Happy anniversary! Maastricht University turns 50

Our work is more meaningful than we sometimes realise. What we do has a genuinely positive impact on the lives of many. So yes, we will all strive to make continued progress—but we should also pause now and then to take in all that we've achieved. Let's take the occasional moment to appreciate the difference we've made, the people we've met and the ideas that have opened our eyes. And if you struggle to indulge yourself, try telling a colleague how much you value what they do, and remind them of the positive impact they've had on you and others. <

Happy 50th, dear UM community!

President Rianne Letschert, on behalf of the Executive Board



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Education

Text

Jolien Linssen

Photography

Paul van der Veer

It's a fear shared by many parents and teachers: students who don't do their schoolwork themselves, but have it done by AI tools such as ChatGPT. The concerns are not unfounded. Nonetheless, education also stands to gain a great deal from the safe and effective use of artificial intelligence. Parents, in particular, can play a crucial role, which is why they are actively involved in a new project to develop teaching materials about AI.

Responsible use of AI at school starts with parents

Keeping up

It's no secret that schools themselves are struggling to keep pace with the rapid developments in AI. Pupils are often far ahead of the average teacher, says Linda Verlinden. She provides in-service training for teaching staff through the Stichting Voortgezet Onderwijs Parkstad Limburg (SVO|PL), a foundation that runs nine regional high schools.

"Very few schools have an AI policy in place yet," she says. "What's allowed, what do we want, what are we going to do with it? Students, meanwhile, know how AI can do their assignments for them, but they often don't know how to use it well. Not 'do my homework for me,' but rather: 'I'm struggling with this part of maths—can you explain how to solve these problems?'" When the university approached SVO|PL to take part in the project, the decision was easy.

Co-creation

The project might never have come about if not for the nephew of Martijn Boussé, an assistant professor at the Faculty of Science and Engineering. The 12-year-old was struggling with maths. His father couldn't help him with his homework, even after consulting ChatGPT. "At some point I was called in," Boussé says. "That's when I thought: we can do more. If we help parents with the technology, I make myself redundant."

According to Boussé, there's a lot to be gained by helping parents to properly support their children during the first three years of high school. "At that stage, parents still have a huge influence on their child's learning journey. That's why I think it's essential to bring them along now."

The project, titled Artificial Intelligence for Parents: Learning Together, Discovering Together and Making Together, is funded by a Science Communication Grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO). It brings together UM researchers with teachers, pupils and parents from the nine SVO|PL schools, ranging from practical secondary education to pre-university education. "We want all those parties around the table to create something that's useful for everyone," Boussé says. "Co-creation is one of the key principles."

Three groups will be formed, focusing on maths and arithmetic, natural sciences, and technology and ICT. Each group will include academics, teachers, pupils and parents. Together, they'll explore what they need to use AI effectively and >



Teacher
Practical secondary
education
Linda Verlinden

Lecturer
Advanced Computing
Sciences
Linda Rieswijk

Assistant professor
Advanced Computing
Sciences
Martijn Boussé



responsibly. Once those needs are clear, they'll work towards concrete solutions. Nothing is predetermined—both the route and the outcome are completely open.

Scientific literacy

"Perhaps we'll discover there's a need for an AI tutor, a chatbot that supports the learning process," says Linda Rieswijk. She is a lecturer at the Faculty of Science and Engineering and, along with Boussé, one of the initiators of the project.

This is also about equal opportunities.

←

Linda Rieswijk is a lecturer in the Department of Advanced Computing Sciences. As outreach coordinator, she translates scientific ideas for a wider audience. She is city coordinator for the annual science festival Pint of Science and is actively involved in outreach initiatives such as the PAS Festival, KidzCollege and Weekend of Science.



"But it could just as easily turn out that it's mainly about the right communication and explanation. There are already plenty of tools out there. The question is whether teachers, pupils and parents know how to find them."

The project leaders are well aware that not all parents have an academic background or a high level of trust in academia. Strengthening scientific literacy is therefore the primary goal of the project. "By actively involving parents in a scientific process, we hope to increase their knowledge and, where needed, rebuild trust," Rieswijk explains. At the same time, the project will produce concrete, directly applicable results, with both students and teachers reaping the benefits.

Equal opportunities

It's unlikely that students will stop using AI for tests or assignments in the future. "But they can learn how to use it in a way that actually helps them," Verlinden says. "Private tutoring costs around €35 an hour per subject, which isn't affordable for everyone. So this is also about equal opportunities."

Giving pupils and their parents access to the same information and materials about AI—regardless of income or educational background—can help to reduce that gap. "It's great that this is happening in Parkstad, where there are large socioeconomic disparities," Verlinden says. With UM set to open a new campus in Heerlen, the picture comes full circle. Boussé: "From a regional perspective, it's for the best if we can increase knowledge about and trust in the university." <

←←

Martijn Boussé is an assistant professor in the Department of Advanced Computing Sciences. He has extensive experience in science communication, including as project leader of Alvonturen, where he developed guidance for school students working on their final-year projects.

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Linda Verlinden works as a teacher and coach in practical secondary education (praktijkonderwijs) and as an I-Coach, linking ICT and education. She chairs the AI board of SVO|PL and coordinates practice-based learning. She works in learning and development at the SVO|PL Talent Academy and at Sterk Techniek Onderwijs Limburg, a programme to strengthen technical education in high schools.



A history of Maastricht University in 50 objects



Publication

Text

Caya Forman

Photography

Philip Driessen

He searched dusty attics, crawled through dark cellars and delved far into Maastricht University's past. In his new book, Bart Zwegers tells the story of the university through 50 objects.

→ **Bart Zwegers** has worked at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University since 2009. He teaches Cultural Studies, European Studies, and Art, Culture & Heritage. He obtained his PhD in 2018 for his research on heritage conservation in Germany and the United Kingdom.

One of the items that has stayed with him seems unremarkable at first glance: an old rubbish bin. "I found it in an attic next door," he says. We are sitting in a coffee room at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Zwegers points through the window to a white-painted dormer. The bin he found there bears the logo of the Rijksuniversiteit Limburg, as Maastricht University was first known.

That detail, Zwegers says, is exactly what makes the object interesting. "It's a good example of something that seems mundane, but tells a whole story," he explains. "That bin allowed me to talk about why we didn't keep the old name. And how the name change was later followed by a new corporate identity, in step with a more liberal mindset where the university began to present itself more like a company. It says a lot about the zeitgeist."

Ceremonial and commonplace

In his book, Zwegers showcases objects with an obvious link to UM's academic heritage, such as the ceremonial chain of office worn by the Rector Magnificus, as well as more surprising pieces. "Many people will think: an old rubbish bin, what's the deal with that?" he says, laughing. "I like that."

The book doesn't follow a strict chronology. You can open it to any page and learn something about the university's past. All 50 objects, from an 18th century book and the beadle's staff to a hacked UM laptop and a Covid distancing ribbon, are photographed and accompanied by a commentary provided by Zwegers.

History you can touch

As a lecturer in Cultural Studies, European Studies, and Art, Culture & Heritage, Zwegers' fascination with heritage comes as no surprise. He sees his focus on material heritage—objects with historical value—as part of a broader

development. One inspiration was *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum. "For a general audience, it's a great way to tell stories because it draws people in. It makes history tangible."

He experienced this first-hand during his PhD research in Paris. At the UNESCO headquarters, he studied archival documents from 1946 and 1947. "Just running my fingers over those documents told me so much. The feel of the thin paper spoke volumes about the scarcity and frugality of the postwar period. So it wasn't just the text that told a story, but also its materiality. That was an interesting experience."

Intellectual in jeans

UM is still one of the youngest universities in the Netherlands. What struck Zwegers during his research was that UM has always wanted to distinguish itself from other institutions and had to fight for its place in the academic world. As a result, when the university was founded, there was much debate about adopting traditional customs such as the beadle's staff and the academic gown.

"As a young university, you're kind of going against the grain, but you also want the respect of the established order," he explains. "Some people said about the gown: 'Nonsense, surely jeans are good enough for a progressive intellectual?' But the gown was adopted anyway, probably because the university also wanted to be taken seriously."

After its 50th anniversary, UM will need to rethink how it presents itself, he says. That was one of the motivations behind the book. For years, UM profiled itself as a 'young university,' but that label is becoming harder to sustain. "Rankings of young universities usually set an age limit of 50. The question for us is what comes next. How do we want to be seen in the future? For me, the answer lies in our history."



Lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Bart Zwegers



More than a dummy

UM's history is unique, not least because it set out from day one to be different. That contrarian streak also laid the groundwork for an educational philosophy that lives on today. "Experimentation was always welcomed," Zwegers says. "That's why Problem-Based Learning and educational innovation were prioritised as early as the 1970s, leading to initiatives like the Skills Lab."

In the Skills Lab, medical students practice real-world skills, such as examining patients and conducting consultations. "One of my favourite objects in the book is an old medical dummy from the Skills Lab: a head on a stand with a small rod through the cheek, used for otoscopy training. By pulling the rod, you can simulate different inner-ear disorders."

For Zwegers, it's an entry point into the programme's practical approach. "In other medical programmes, students used to spend years in lecture halls. UM wanted to do things

differently. Through the Skills Lab, students came into contact with clinical practice from the outset. That's why I like this object so much: not only as a teaching tool, but because it reflects our educational philosophy and the way the university saw itself."

Saving stories from the scrap heap

Zwegers shows that even seemingly ordinary objects can be worth preserving. His book highlights just how many items can be regarded as academic heritage. "So think twice before you get rid of things. Check with the curator first to see whether something is worth keeping. As a society, we throw away a lot these days, which is a shame, because we also throw away the stories." <



Mirjana Spoljaric Egger receiving a honorary doctorate

Peter Stenvinkel receiving a honorary doctorate



50th Dies Natalis

On Friday 23 January 2026, Maastricht University celebrated its 50th Dies Natalis. The special jubilee ceremony was held in the Basilica of Saint Servatius, where the university's academic story began in 1976.

During the celebration, we looked back on 50 years of pioneering spirit. With His Majesty King Willem-Alexander as the guest of honour, no fewer than three honorary doctorates were conferred: one for societal impact and two for academic achievement.

The theme of this special jubilee celebration was 'A milestone and another step—we keep innovating and serving society.' The Dies Natalis marked the start of a year of celebrations across the university. In her speech, Rector Magnificus Pamela Habibović emphasised the resilience needed to reach the age of 50 and to keep forging ahead in the coming years. She also launched the first call for Join UM50, through which UM is funding initiatives that strengthen the connection between the university and society.

Royal visit and musical surprises

In 1976, Queen Juliana signed the founding charter of the then Rijksuniversiteit Limburg in the Basilica of Saint Servatius. Fifty years later, King Willem-Alexander signed Maastricht University's commemorative document in the same place—a symbolic moment on historic ground.

André Rieu and his Johann Strauss Orchestra, together with the Mastreechter Staar choir performed a festive repertoire, including the Coronation Waltz, *Mestreech is neet breid* and the UM anthem *Ode an die Freude*.

Three honorary doctorates

This year, no fewer than three honorary doctorates were awarded.

The honorary doctorate for societal impact went to **Mirjana Spoljaric Egger**, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross. She received this honour in recognition of her international leadership and commitment to humanitarian values.

Egger said she shares the honorary doctorate “with colleagues and millions of volunteers around the world, as well as with the visionary individuals whose efforts led to the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.”

Peter Stenvinkel, professor of Nephrology at Sweden's Karolinska Institute and a pioneer in planetary and climate health, received an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. He called the distinction “recognition of the importance of connecting the dots between nature, the environment and medicine.”

Roger Cox, a leading lawyer in international climate jurisprudence, received an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Law. “The interests of nature, the poor, children and future generations are worth fighting for,” he said. “This honorary doctorate strengthens my determination to continue this work.”

Wynand Wijnen Education Prize 2025

The Wynand Wijnen Education Prize was awarded this year to **Dr Nicole Kornet**, in recognition of her academic leadership and vision in the redesign of the European Law School bachelor's programme. Her efforts resulted in a thoroughly revised, future-focused curriculum.

Dissertation Prize 2025

The Dissertation Prize went to **Dr Uyên Châu Nguyễn** of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences for her impressive PhD dissertation *Multi-modality imaging in cardiac resynchronization therapy*.

Student Prizes 2025

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.

Eighteen students completed their bachelor's programme with a thesis assessed as 'excellent' by their faculty: **Henry Bogdanowicz, Yessin Schoutens, Pola Bereta, Mats Schmidt, Martina Enrich, Sofia Gavasi, Delnaz Yaghouby, Sarah Eggen, Primo Beekhuis, Isabel Backes, Paul Boldron, Nadia Tamminga, Puming Zhang, Cas van Haperen, Marlena Bonin, Hilde Abendanon, Moritz Strobel, Maria Mierzejewskav, Nina Bruyken, Palina Sinitsa, Eveline van Niekerk, Kayla Degrand and Luna Mitrović.**

Eight master's students received top marks for their final thesis: **Ilse Huijberts, Chiara Proietti, Adolfo Santamónica, Tim Rohrbach, Jona Schebesta, Janic Luca Belz, Defne Halil and Anna van Barschot.** <



Dr Nicole Kornet receiving the WWE Prize



Dr Uyên Châu Nguyễn receiving the Dissertation Prize



Students receiving the Student Prize



Roger Cox receiving a honorary doctorate

News

Portrait

Text

Florian Raith

Photography

Hannah Lipowsky



Tas ma nian ma ker

Anna Harris, recently inaugurated professor of Anthropology and Medicine, has travelled a long way—from medical training on the other side of the world to research that explores how the senses and material creativity shape medical practice.

“I was reading library books among eucalyptus trees.” Australian Anna Harris grew up on Groningen Road, in a suburb developed by Dutch settlers, just metres from the wild forests of Tasmania. Her childhood home was designed by her father. “It’s very modernist. His parents used to joke that it looked like a squash court.”

Her mother worked as an art teacher’s assistant. “I was always surrounded by art supplies, and we effectively lived in an architecture studio. Both my parents are makers, and that’s something I cultivate to this day. It’s not even a hobby, it’s just what I do.” She points to a knitted uterus hanging on her office wall; testament to how she has managed to integrate crafts into her research, be it as method, topic or pedagogical approach. >



Professor of
Anthropology
Anna Harris

A different time and place

At her all-girls Catholic school, Harris enjoyed a good, if somewhat quaint, education. “I wore brown pinstripes and gloves—it was all rather 1950s. When it comes to provincial clichés, Tasmania is the Limburg of Australia.” Taught alongside biology was “wedding class,” intended to prepare girls for life as good Catholic housewives. Lessons included the Billing’s ovulation method for spacing pregnancies.

“I guess it showed me that different ways of thinking about things can coexist,” she smiles. After she graduated, the school science labs were demolished to make way for cooking facilities—not to imply a causal link. For several science subjects, she had to commute to an elite all-boys school.

“I dreaded it. There were many pretentious wannabe doctors in fancy uniforms,” she recalls, “but it was ethnographically interesting.” She developed a lasting aversion to hierarchal thinking. “It’s complex; clear hierarchies are easier to navigate. In Dutch academia, there’s the pretence of flat hierarchies, but reactions do change with your status. It’s something you have to learn to work with.”

From healing to understanding

At school, she enjoyed both science and literature. “I cobbled together a vision from random bits of advice. My neighbours suggested that if I wanted to be a medical researcher, I should study medicine, which sounded reasonable.” She studied in Tasmania, intending to write about medicine rather than practice it. “There were only 50 people in the programme, and it wasn’t very competitive. We all wanted each other to succeed and have fun along the way.”

Which is not to say it was all plain sailing. “I had my doubts, of course. Once you become an intern, you have to make life-or-death decisions, and that wasn’t for me.” Did she ever regret not becoming a doctor? “Well, I do see my former classmates spending their free time in their second homes, while I’m here writing emails ...”

Her gateway into anthropology lay in the pleasure she took in interviewing people for medical case histories. She went on to a master’s programme in Melbourne, a decidedly hip metropolis where she initially felt provincial. “Medical Anthropology was a boutique experience: very few people with very diverse backgrounds, from paramedic and nurse to anthropologist and sociologist. We’re still great friends.”

Across disciplines and cultures

Interdisciplinarity runs through her work. “It sounds great on paper, but it’s a lot of work and very confronting at first. I graduated from med school without ever hearing about the difference between quantitative and qualitative research. It took me months to reconfigure my brain ... You always need to unpack your assumptions about methodology before entering into interdisciplinary discussions.”

That initial shock and the subsequent learning curve continue to inform her work today, as she brings together ethnography, sensory methods and attention to materials and infrastructure to explore what it means to “sense,” learn and practice medicine.

Leading an interdisciplinary research team is a challenge, she says. “How can I help both the people in my research group and the project thrive?” One of her key hiring criteria is quirkiness. “I want people who think in unconventional ways, even if they’re very different from me. You have to work harder to create synergies, but it’s worth it.”



↑ **Anna Harris** is professor of Anthropology and Medicine at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and a founding member of the Maastricht Young Academy.

Harris follows leadership coaching and asks others for advice. “I don’t have all the answers, but I find it easy to relate; I was quite an unruly postdoc.” She is not overly fond of her abundant managerial duties. “So much of my time is spent on admin, it’s difficult to carve out time to think about research.” Cheerfully, she points to a chair facing away from her desk: “I got this so I can actually read books.”

From red deserts to magical Maastricht

During her PhD in Melbourne, Harris met her husband Thomas on a blind date set up by friends. “It was very much love at first sight. Before leaving for Europe, we went on an incredibly Australian honeymoon with red desert and wide skies.” Thomas is a clinical psychologist. “He tried to get registered for clinical work in the Netherlands, but it was very challenging. Ironically, my PhD was on the obstacles foreign clinicians face when registering in Australia.”

Harris came to UM as a postdoctoral researcher under Professor Sally Wyatt. Serendipitously, because “her preferred candidate had a change of mind.” She first heard about Maastricht when it featured as a case study in a paper on the intangible aspects of place. “There was a picture of a cobblestone street, which I absolutely loved.” This flight of fancy was as auspicious as it was pertinent. “I now live on a street like that!”

She vividly remembers arriving in 2010. “It was a really snowy winter, like we haven’t had since. Maastricht at its most beautiful.” Initially, it was difficult to get to know people, but they are now happy in their picturesque home.

“My neighbour’s grandmother was born in our house. The street is full of traditional Maastreechs families. We invested in the community, and they’ve embraced us.” Recently, she and her husband passed their intermediate Dutch exam—even if her language buddy insists that “your Dutch should be better by now.”

Crafts, medicine and anthropology

About her time as a postdoc, Harris says, “I was very enthusiastic, but never felt fully prepared. Only looking back do you realise what your transferrable skills are.” Among many other things, she learnt to be creative within project constraints. “I felt the faith and trust of my

supervisors. I’m always trying to put myself in the shoes of people I supervise now.”

Harris became a full professor in 2025 and embraces the eclectic nature of her career. Crafts, medicine and anthropology all come together in her project The Upcycled Clinic, which investigates how everyday objects and materials in hospitals are repurposed, reused or upcycled to reduce waste, cope with shortages and foster creativity in care.

One example is the first dialysis machine, which was improvised from discarded washing-machine parts, sausage skins and tin cans. “It’s about any spontaneous innovation in mundane settings. Think nurses during the pandemic filling surgical gloves with warm water to raise patients’ temperature, but also to overcome the sense of isolation that comes with quarantine.”

Facilitating creativity

Again, she motions to the knitted uterus. “Introducing non-traditional, non-dominant ideas can facilitate a lot of creativity, and I see a growing need to make things tangible.” Of course, there is also resistance. “There’s a certain dismissiveness about the ‘feminine arts’; you have to choose your setting wisely for innovation in teaching or research.”

Rather than lengthy theoretical explanations, Harris prefers to simply initiate unconventional formats. To her, “making things” means becoming aware of your body and dialling back the hypercritical cognitive part, which is prone to editing and thus stifling creativity. “The lack of constant eye contact also reduces pressure. The making doesn’t necessarily have to be related to the topic at hand.”

Both pondering research ideas and making things extend beyond working hours. “Our dining table has a craft section, much to my husband’s annoyance,” she laughs. Fortuitous timing helped her combine career and family. “When I found out I was pregnant, I was 39 and had already invested a lot of time in research. Fortunately, I’d just received a permanent contract and no longer faced precarity.”

Thomas was able to take parental leave, and their son Bastian, now 9, went to daycare from an early age. “It did him good: he’s fluent in Dutch with a Limburg accent.” He has also adapted to academic settings. During a UM outreach event, he assisted with a stethoscope workshop. “We had matching doctor’s coats—it was adorable! He lost interest in teaching quickly though ...” Bastian recently learned to crochet, and Harris describes his bedroom as half engineering workshop, half art studio. “Yes,” she smiles, “he’s a maker too.” <

I see a growing need to make things tangible.



Lawsuits for love

Lawyer and partner
Paulussen Advocaten
Roger Cox

Event UM50 Dies

Text
Ludo Diels

Photography
Paul van der Veer

Cup of tea in hand, Roger Cox walks down the corridor of Paulussen Advocaten in Maastricht—quietly, almost casually, as if he might sit down at his desk at any moment. You wouldn't immediately guess that this is the man who, with legal precision, has sent shockwaves through boardrooms, from the Dutch state to Shell and later ING. On Friday 23 January 2026, during Maastricht University's Dies Natalis, he received an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Law for his pioneering work in climate jurisprudence.

Cox speaks with a certain gentleness: thoughtful, sometimes almost apologetic, as if he'd rather not be put on too high a pedestal. An intriguing paradox, because he has been a major figure for some time. In 2021, he was named one of TIME magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the world, with words of praise from none other than Al Gore. The outside world mainly sees the image: black gown, court file, David versus Goliath. Cox himself prefers to start with something smaller—with what first moved him.

"This isn't primarily an intellectual exercise," he says. "It's something you do because you're touched by it." A little later, he puts it more poetically: it's about "doing something that feeds your heart."

Cox remembers exactly what 'touched' him: Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*. It was the mid-2000s, and for him, the documentary hit home. It was a shock, a wake-up call. Not because he had been indifferent before. On the contrary: as a boy, he was a keen birdwatcher, roaming the green spaces of South Limburg with binoculars and a notebook. He collected signatures against seal hunting and was involved with the IVN in Voerendaal, an organisation dedicated to nature and environmental education. "I've been fascinated by nature for as long as I can remember," he says.

But climate change—CO₂, systemic inertia, the long shadow cast by decades of emissions—operated on a different scale. A different kind of threat, neither local nor temporary. He explains calmly: "Even if we stabilised emissions today, global warming would continue for a long time. That affects my children too." Suddenly the issue was both intergenerational—we enjoy the benefits now and pass on the burden—and intragenerational: the costs fall first on those who have contributed least to global warming and are least able to escape its consequences. >





something, but for something.” He calls them “lawsuits for love.” For children. For nature. For a democracy governed by the rule of law that does not devolve into cynicism or powerlessness.

That, he says, lies at the heart of his international role: the law as a counterweight in a world where multinationals—oil, gas, tech, media—have grown so large and mobile that democratic oversight struggles to keep pace. A governance gap, he calls it: a power vacuum created by decades of deregulation, privatisation and globalisation. Guidelines for self-regulation have been developed at the UN and OECD level, but in practice, they often remain toothless. Only one arena remains, he says, where evidence still outweighs lip service: the courtroom.

In court, arguments must be substantiated. There’s no room for lazy framing. Politics and the media are dominated by punchy soundbites devoid of substance, Cox says. This is why the trend towards declining respect for court rulings—a trend he has seen accelerate in recent years—concerns him. Just when the judiciary is most needed, it is increasingly cast as suspect for refusing to bend with the times.

And yet Cox is no doomsday prophet. “I try to be realistic. Realism as a moral duty—because looking away is exactly what makes these crises worse.” The future? He chooses his words carefully: it’s about damage control. “The damage is inevitable. The question is how much worse we allow it to become.”

How does someone cope who spends his days poring over files describing a world that is growing hotter, drier and more unequal? The answer is disarmingly simple: routine, nature, ritual. He deliberately moved back to the Heuvelland—the hill country of South Limburg—so he could live close to the forest rather than in the city. “That regenerates me,” he says. “It calms me.” And then there’s the silence of a nearby monastery. He often drops in—not because he is a strict dogmatist, he stresses, but because the ritual helps him: praying, reflecting, breathing. “For me, faith isn’t about dogma. It’s about ritual.” Gregorian chant as a metronome for the mind. “It lifts me out of time.”

We talk briefly about basketball—American games he sometimes watches to unwind—and about music as a background that brings focus. Then someone is already waiting: the next appointment, another pile of work. All of it, he says, done out of love for the earth, and for what is still to come. <

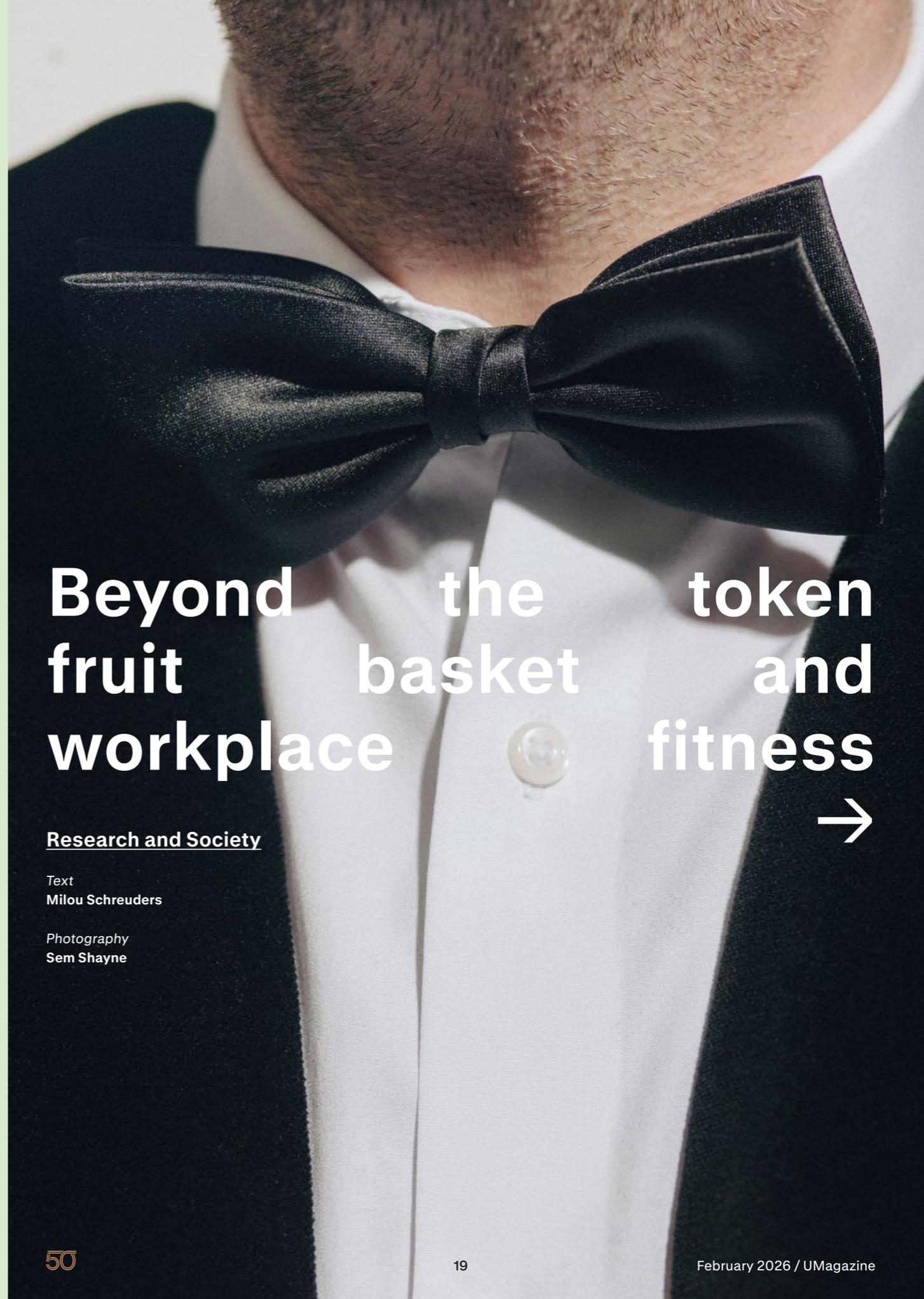
At this point, another key word enters his story: dignity. “Human dignity is the foundation of our democratic rule of law.” And it is precisely that foundation, he says, that the climate crisis erodes. Freedom should not come at the expense of someone else’s freedom. Yet, this is exactly what happens to people who live close to their environment and cannot simply ‘import’ what the landscape no longer provides.

It is tempting to cast Cox as the moral conscience of the world. But he is first and foremost a man of the law. He began studying political science in Leiden, but was soon drawn to law—its precision, its tools. “Law ... is craftsmanship,” he says. Less contemplation, more action. And action, for him, is not just about arguing a case, but about perseverance: years of work, stacks of documents, endless detail, teams of colleagues, four major cases at once. The diligence he is known for sounds less like bravado than necessity. A personal mission.

Those who know him only from his landmark victories may miss one of his most telling formulations: “These are not lawsuits against

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Roger Cox studied political science and law at Leiden University. He is a lawyer and partner at Paulussen Advocaten in Maastricht and author of the book *Revolution Justified* (2016). He gained international recognition by litigating landmark climate-change liability cases against the Dutch state, Shell and ING. In January 2026, he received an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Law at Maastricht University.



Beyond the token fruit basket and workplace fitness



Research and Society

Text
Milou Schreuders

Photography
Sem Shayne

Positive health—it's a term that crops up more and more often, including in relation to work. But what does it actually mean, and how can employers and employees put it into practice? Professor Tim Huijts studies positive health in the workplace. Here he discusses spiderwebs, self-management and the pitfalls of token gestures.

His father was a GP. Listening to his stories, Tim Huijts started wondering early on what it really means to be healthy. "Many people think it's just about whether you're physically ill or not. That's what our healthcare system has traditionally focused on. But people are so much more than a diagnosis."

Spiderweb

Huijts argues for a broader view of health. This ties in with the relatively new concept of positive health, developed around 15 years ago by the Dutch doctor Machteld Huber. "With positive health, the focus isn't on illness, but on the person as a whole," Huijts explains. "It's mainly about whether someone can do what they find meaningful, even with life's challenges and limitations. Self-management is key."

In practice, it works like this: people fill in a questionnaire to map their own health. The results are shown in a spiderweb chart with six dimensions: bodily functions, but also mental wellbeing, meaningfulness, quality of life, participation in society and daily functioning. That spiderweb forms the starting point for a conversation, for example with a GP or coach, about what matters to the person and what might help them get there.

Well-intentioned top-down measures often miss the point.

Walking

Until a few years ago, Huijts had heard of positive health but hadn't experienced the approach first-hand. That changed after a coaching session at work that used the positive health framework. "The conversation showed, among other things, that I needed to build in more moments of reflection. My coach and I agreed I'd take more walks. To this day, that helps me create more calm in my life."

He calls his experience "a small example of what positive health can do." It also sparked his curiosity. When he got the chance to research positive health in the workplace as a professor, he jumped at it. Now, the concept is becoming increasingly relevant and topical, both in society and in the business world. "With rising workloads, staff shortages and absenteeism, employers are looking for new ways to attract and retain people. At the same time, employees—especially the younger generations—want more meaning, balance and autonomy at work. Positive health could help to align these interests."

Health-washing

In practice, translating the concept into the workplace isn't straightforward. "It requires open dialogue, and that's usually the bottleneck," Huijts says. "Unlike in our private lives, at work, hierarchies and power dynamics are at play. Employees don't always feel safe to speak openly about what's holding them back or what they need. Employers, in turn, may worry they'll be saddled with extra responsibilities. That mutual caution can get in the way."

Huijts thinks this tension is one reason organisations still reach for symbolic health measures—often without consulting employees, and with limited impact. "Think fruit baskets, chair massages or a 'green' canteen. Well-intentioned, but standardised, top-down measures often miss the point of positive health, which is built around self-management. And if they're mainly for show, it quickly starts to look like 'health-washing'"

No one-size-fits-all

So what does Huijts advise organisations that genuinely want to work with positive health? "It only really comes alive when it becomes part of your vision, culture, values and day-to-day routines. And involve employees. Have the courage to enter into a proper dialogue with them focused on cooperation, and take their wants and needs seriously." What comes next will look different in every organisation. "There's no one-size-fits-all solution. What works depends on the organisation, the people in it and the context in which they operate."

That context dependence is also what makes it hard to draw neat conclusions about the effects of positive health at work. Huijts sees this as an important area for future research. "There's been very little research on positive health in relation to work. For now, practical experience gives us useful first insights, especially into how organisations are applying it. The Jeroen Bosch Hospital, for example, uses positive health in annual appraisals and in its flex-pool policy. By working with organisations over the coming years, I want to better understand why positive health works well in one setting and less so in another. Not to develop a standard approach, but to be able to give companies more targeted advice. For me, the key question isn't so much whether it works, but what works for whom?" <

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Tim Huijts is professor of Positive Health at Work at Maastricht University's Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA). The chair is partly funded by the CAOP, a knowledge centre for labour issues in the Dutch public sector. His research focuses on how people can work and learn in a healthy manner and reach their full potential. He holds a PhD in sociology from Radboud University.



UM50

On 9 January 1976, Queen Juliana signed the official document establishing the Rijksuniversiteit Limburg. Fifty years later, Maastricht University has six faculties and more than 23,000 students.

Spread

Illustration
Emma Formosa





Psychiatrist,
researcher at PsyQ
Dyllis van Dijk

Psychological distress in the Netherlands is not some abstract idea. It hits everywhere—families, schools, workplaces. Behind every graph is an individual of flesh and blood. The latest figures from the national research institutes in public health (RIVM) and mental health (Trimbos) are unequivocal: one in four adults struggled with a mental health condition in the past year. Among young adults, this figure is as high as one in three.

Care that can't wait

Anyone working with that reality on a daily basis is familiar with the urgency of the situation. Psychiatrist Dyllis van Dijk is one of them. She defended her PhD dissertation on outpatient depression care in October, but the questions she investigated—waiting times, dropout rates and treatment planning—are more topical than ever.

Waiting times

Reason enough to reflect on a process that spanned 10 years. We speak on Teams. Van Dijk appears first, calling in from her office near The Hague. Later, her PhD supervisor Frenk Peeters, emeritus professor of psychiatry at Maastricht University, joins from his spacious attic. The first question is unavoidable: wasn't this dissertation's angle—the impact of waiting times—rather like pushing at an open door?

Professor – student

Text
Ludo Diels

Photography
Hannah Lipowsky

Van Dijk smiles. "I understand that reaction. Anyone can surmise that a long wait isn't good. But as far as we could tell, nobody had systematically studied what waiting times actually do to treatment outcomes in everyday practice." Peeters agrees. "In healthcare, we make a lot of assumptions. We say long waiting times are harmful, but we didn't have any hard data. Science begins where assumptions end."

The study linked longer waits to poorer outcomes, regardless of the severity of the depression. Another striking finding: once treatment begins, around 15% of patients drop out. "And these are not necessarily people who'll get better on their own," Van Dijk says. "Often they've been around the system for a long time, or they've been let down by earlier care. They return later with symptoms that are harder to treat. That costs time and money, and it affects their quality of life."

Data and diagnostics

Peeters puts it more bluntly. "Our healthcare system is exceptionally wealthy compared to many other countries. That's great, but there's no free lunch. If you enter treatment, you also have to commit to it—just as practitioners have to use time and guidelines responsibly."

A key tool in the dissertation was the DM-TRD, a short questionnaire that maps factors relevant to the current treatment. "It's basically a route planner," Van Dijk says. "It helps to prevent a return to ineffective treatments and gives a clear overview of where someone is in their treatment journey."

Science begins where assumptions end.

What about the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the standard handbook for mental health professionals? “The DSM is a map,” Peeters says. “Without a map you get lost, but you shouldn’t confuse the map with the actual landscape. It helps you find your bearings, but it isn’t reality.”

Van Dijk likes that image. “You need a shared language for research and comparison, but in the consulting room you have to look beyond it: at the patient’s work, relationships, financial stress, trauma. That entire landscape is part of the diagnostic picture.”

Journey through time

Van Dijk was an external PhD candidate, combining the research with her work as a psychiatrist and later as a medical director. Her organisation, PsyQ, which is part of the Parnassia Group, provided her with the opportunity to dedicate one day per week to research. “I felt really supported. That time allowed me to connect my research directly to questions from everyday practice. I still did a lot of early mornings, and worked evenings and weekends. But these days it’s quite something for an organisation to accommodate you like that.”

Life carried on in the meantime, too. Her sister had a serious accident that left her with permanent brain damage. Later, her daughter was diagnosed with leukaemia. “I don’t want to make a thing of it, but that’s what landed on my plate. The research gave me continuity, something to hold on to. And most importantly: my daughter is doing well now.”

Over time, the research evolved. The original plan—to develop a decision-support tool in collaboration with a company—turned out to be less feasible than expected. Developing and validating an instrument with commercial partners involved more time, coordination and complex data issues than the PhD programme could accommodate. “That’s how it goes,” Peeters says of the resulting course adjustment. “The core remained intact: using data from the real world to make healthcare more meaningful and efficient.”

That link between science and practice is what makes this project special. “A lot of research in mental healthcare never really reaches the consulting room. And as a practitioner, you come across questions you wouldn’t necessarily encounter in a university setting,” Peeters says. “External PhD candidates can help to close that gap.”

It’s clear the pair challenged each other intellectually and valued each other personally—a combination that isn’t always a given in PhD projects.

Van Dijk now links science with practice on a daily basis. “I’m still doing research as an extension of the PhD, mainly practice-oriented analyses of treatment outcomes and the organisation of care. I might not have done that without the doctorate. And my organisation values it: it helps us to base policy on data rather than intuition.”

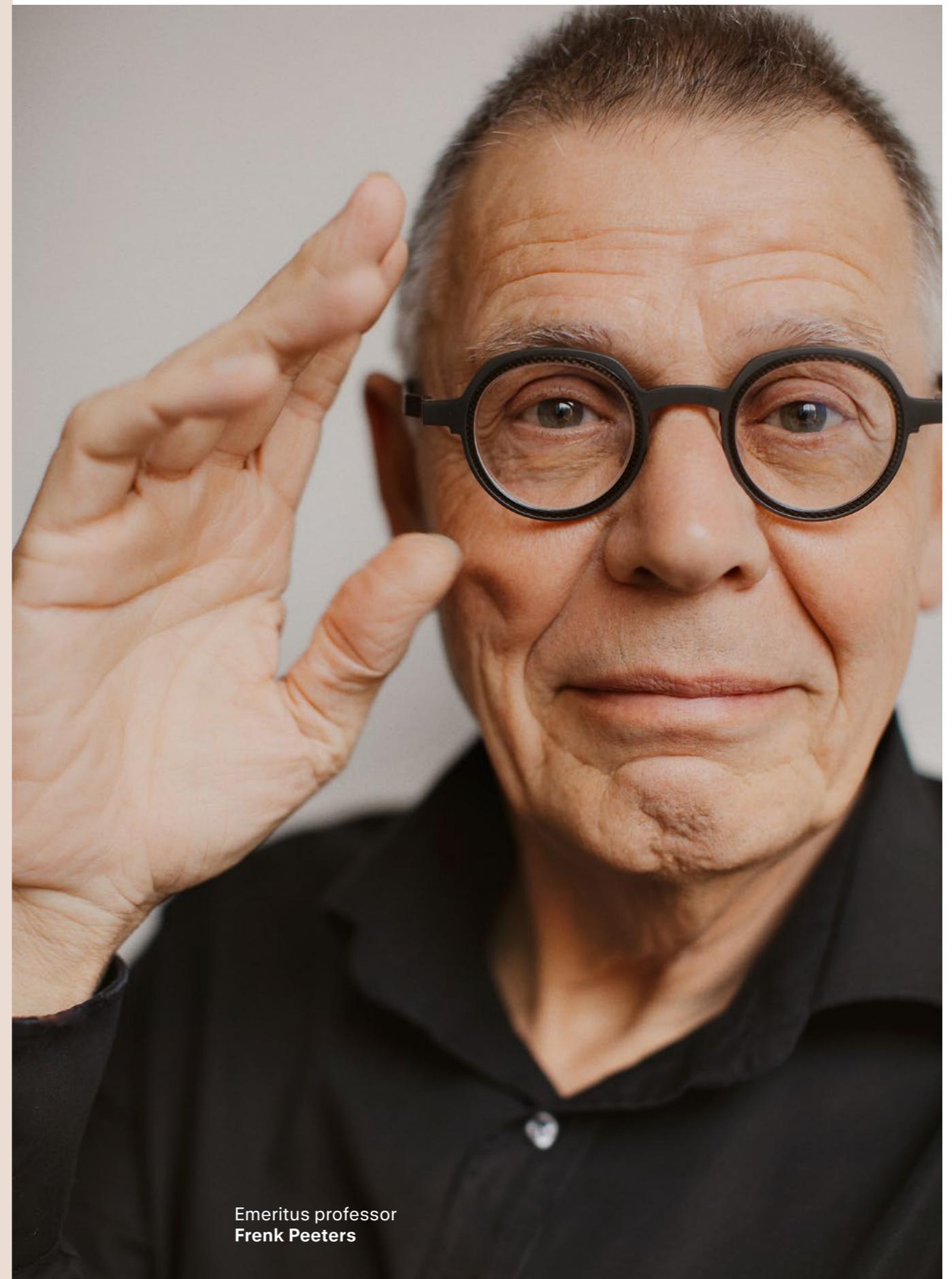
Maybe that’s the heart of it: healthcare needs time and scientific insight, but it can’t wait forever. After all, psychological distress can’t simply be put on hold. <

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Frenk Peeters is a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and emeritus professor of psychiatry at Maastricht University. His clinical and academic work mainly focuses on depression treatment.

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Dyllis van Dijk is a psychiatrist, researcher at PsyQ, and medical director at the Parnassia Group. She obtained her PhD at Maastricht University in 2025 for her research on improving outpatient depression care.



Emeritus professor
Frenk Peeters

DigiMach: digitisation for SMEs

Is it code red for European manufacturing now that cars, electronics and energy systems from Asia are flooding the market, with added pressure from American tariffs and the threat of wars? One thing is clear: digitisation is part of the answer, including for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). DigiMach is a Euregional innovation project designed to help smaller companies in the metal sector move forward with digitisation. Maastricht University is one of the partners.

Region

Text
Jos Cortenraad

Photography
Harry Heuts

They dominate the headlines: tech giants launching satellites into orbit, automating and robotising factories, and investing hundreds of billions in artificial intelligence and vast data centres. By comparison, Europe's star shines only faintly, with just a few bright points such as ASML. Are we losing the race?

Finding the niches

Not according to Rudolf Müller, professor at the School of Business and Economics and researcher at the Brightlands Institute for Smart Society (BISS) in Heerlen. He shakes his head at what he sees as an overly bleak picture. "European manufacturing has enjoyed a technological head start for years. Look at car manufacturers and machine builders, or at the energy sector with solar panels and wind turbines. But increasingly we're being undercut by mass producers in low-wage countries who can deliver more cheaply. Should we try to compete head-on? I think we should focus on critical components that no one else can make. Find the niches. Digitisation is crucial in that context."

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Rim Stroeks is an innovation business developer at the Maastricht University Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

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Anna Wilbik is professor of Data Fusion and Intelligent Interaction at the Faculty of Science and Engineering. She studied computer science in her hometown of Warsaw.

Small businesses

Hasn't European manufacturing already been doing this? "It has," confirms Rim Stroeks, innovation business developer at the Maastricht University Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. "But Covid and recent geopolitical developments mean the industrial landscape has shifted. For many products, parts and raw materials, we've become too dependent on less friendly regimes. That's why the EU is rethinking its strategy. Far-reaching digitisation is one of its spearheads, and this will impact the entire supplier ecosystem, which largely consists of SMEs."

Digitisation is costly, Müller adds. "Entrepreneurs have been automating things for years and want to keep up with the latest developments, but they often lack the resources, the right people or simply the time. So projects like DigiMach are important in order to support them, to bring them along. That's exactly what DigiMach aims to do."

Euregional project

DigiMach is a Euregional innovation project funded by seven partners from Flanders, Wallonia and East Belgium; North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany; and the Dutch province of Limburg, including Maastricht University. With additional funding from the European Interreg programme, it has a combined budget of more than €3.6 million to introduce metalworking companies in the region to the latest digital tools.

"At BISS, for example, we're developing a platform where companies can access digital tools such as design software and AI applications," Müller explains. "By the end of the project, in 2028, this platform should support an ecosystem where companies and experts ask questions, share knowledge and help one another. We'll back this up with an AI chatbot that can turn available information into answers. The goal is to create an independent platform that continues to stimulate and drive innovation."



250 entrepreneurs

First, companies need to be identified and brought into the fold. This is where Stroeks comes in. With over 20 years' experience as an innovation consultant for industry in the Netherlands and Germany, he knows the terrain well. "Our ambition is to involve at least 250 entrepreneurs from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. They'll be able to experiment with cutting-edge tools that continuously optimise production processes and allow high-quality products to be made more accurately and efficiently. Various technologies will be presented and tested in demonstrations and workshops. Ultimately, we'll run 20 pilot projects with companies that actively start working with the new tools. From experience, we know this has a strong motivating effect on other participants and on the sector as a whole."

Metalworking

The project focuses specifically on SMEs in precision mechanical metalworking that manufacture components. Isn't the proposition too abstract for such hands-on companies? "Not at all," says Anna Wilbik, professor of Data Fusion and Intelligent Interaction and a project partner. "DigiMach is aimed precisely at these kinds of businesses. We're not foisting something completely new on them; we're building on

existing equipment and machines—enhancing them, so to speak. Our partners will develop sensor kits that can be installed on any machine. Using the data from those sensors, we'll build AI models to make machines more reliable and extend their lifespan."

She gives an example: "Take a milling machine. We look at the drills and chisels it uses, the raw materials, and the products it makes. Experienced operators can sometimes hear when a machine is about to fail. We want to analyse those sound patterns and develop an AI model that detects anomalies before a breakdown occurs."

Real-life cases

There's another major advantage, Wilbik adds. "Capturing everything digitally means knowledge is preserved, and the step towards AI-driven automation becomes easier. At a time of staff shortages, that's a real benefit: machines can take over parts of the work where needed. So we're making very concrete contributions to the manufacturing industry. At the same time, we can use these real-life cases to give practical insights to our students in the data science, AI and computer science programmes."

www.interregmeuserhine.eu/nl/projecten/digimach/

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Rudolf Müller is professor of Quantitative Infonomics at the School of Business and Economics and a researcher at the Brightlands Institute for Smart Society in Heerlen.

Associate professor
of International Relations
Yf Reykers

An end to subservience: how Europe must assert itself

Europe is waking up to a hard truth: the safety net once provided by the United States is fraying, and the continent must finally stand on its own feet. Political paralysis, fragile militaries and rising Russian aggression demand a unified European defence—one built on genuine capability, shared strategy and renewed democratic resilience.

International

Text
Florian Raith

Photography
Philip Driessen

Europe must build an independent defence capability and stop relying on the whims of the US. This is, in a nutshell, the position of international relations researcher Yf Reykers. “The US’s attention has been shifting away from Europe and towards the Indo-Pacific for quite a while,” he says. For Europe, a Kamala Harris presidency would have meant the same reality—just communicated more competently. If anything, Reykers thinks Trump’s lack of diplomatic and rhetoric skill was the “kick up the backside” that rattled Europe out of its complacency.

Real Russian threat

Now, with war on our doorstep, Europe needs to act. “Russia’s inevitable victory is a false narrative. This war won’t end with a clear victory but more likely with some kind of settlement,” Reykers says. Intelligence services estimate a postwar Russia would need six months to regain the capacity to attack a Baltic country, and three to five years for a full-scale attack on Europe. “Putin’s gradual creep towards a Greater Russia will continue, not only with ground invasions but also through hybrid warfare, including disinformation.”

Symbolic gestures, such as pledging 5% of GDP for defence, veil the underlying problem: Europe depends on US military and political support. “The cancellation of US arms transfers to Ukraine underlines that we can no longer rely on them.” Yet, Europe is limited in terms of the size and equipment of its armies, its military-industrial complex, and most importantly its political and civic will.

Europe unfit for purpose

“We don’t have a strategy for Ukraine, also because defence remains a national prerogative under EU treaties,” Reykers explains. Being a European Council member, defence requires unanimous intergovernmental decisions. The process can be blocked by a single veto, often by Viktor Orbán, a man close to both Putin and corruption allegations. “The decision-making process is not fit for purpose; it’s like picking a restaurant with 27 friends.”

Despite recent tinkering, such as creating a European Defence Commissioner role to oversee industrial defence investment and coordination, Reykers thinks we need broader reform. “Ideally, we’d move to qualified majority voting, but this is implausible since it requires a unanimously approved treaty change.” >

An expanded and expanding EU also comes with a growing diversity of perspectives and priorities. “We need to rethink the institutional architecture,” Reykers continues. “Several core member states could form a European Security Council, which sets the strategic direction for the union as a whole.” In the short term, he sees smaller coalitions of European countries galvanised by converging national interests as more likely.

Diplomatic and economic heft

Russia’s war on Ukraine has also shown that, while Europe is economically powerful enough to provide the lion’s share of financial support, it cannot fill the gap left by the US. “France, the United Kingdom and Germany have increased their military allocations sharply, but not to the extent of the Nordic countries. Other states, such as Spain and Italy, have lowered their support. Even combined, the European nations can’t match US capabilities in arms, equipment and readiness.” Europe is held back by its “national reflex,” where each country tries “to minimise impact on national budgets and benefit their own industries.” The result is fragmentation and an incoherent group of relatively small countries.

Reykers calls for a unified European defence industry, or at least much bigger consortia, with joint procurement to create scale and foster innovation. More European integration is the only way forward—yet still not sufficient on its own. With the US hanging up its global sheriff boots, Europe has to “look to other countries that are also affected. We have to invest more in striking up and extending security partnerships with Canada, Australia, Japan, India, et cetera.” The EU’s diplomatic capacity should not be underestimated, Reykers says, especially when combined with its economic heft. “Governments need to do a better job communicating what the EU is achieving and how they benefit from that.”

Security over defence

Reforming NATO to function without the US will also be crucial. However, recent defence spending targets are not, on their own, a panacea. “There’s a risk of creative accounting and countries outbidding each other.” And there are other problems, too, such as “the critical dependence on US arms manufacturers and military enablers such as intelligence. We also don’t have European alternatives to cloud computing systems.”

To be autonomous and strategically assertive, Europe needs to guarantee its own security. “But you have to understand security much more broadly, in terms of societal resilience. Think hospitals, infrastructure, food supply chains,

communications channels and so forth.” We are not, and will not be, adequately prepared for a direct military attack, but Reykers thinks that an unlikely scenario. More likely is a hybrid attack—and he is equally sceptical about Europe’s ability to withstand this.

Societal resilience

“We’re in a period of geopolitical uncertainty, and we should be more concerned about societal resilience,” he says. The pandemic has exposed how feeble sensemaking and civic spirit is in a hyper-individualistic culture. “Universities have a big role to play there too. Russian disinformation campaigns are undermining our democracies. Where do people get their information? How does that influence how they vote and behave?”

In Reykers’ view, “We as a university have to help make sense of the context we live in and educate society—not just students—in how to deal with information.” Societal resilience is more than merely rallying behind common economic and security goals. “We should look towards our belief in democracy, liberalism and multilateralism. We have to invest in a sense of community; we have to be ready to help each other.” <



Yf Reykers is associate professor of International Relations at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He is also programme director of the Research Master in European Studies, co-editor of the journal *Contemporary Security Policy* and a regular contributor to Belgian news media.



A peek inside the kitchen of UM employees

Soul kitchen

Text
Annelotte Huiskes

Photography
Sem Shayne

A culinary education across India →

Open Science in Education specialist
Akorshi Sengupta

The table is already laid for lunch. Alongside deem begun, an aubergine-and-egg dish from his grandmother, there's a traditional Bengali potato dish with poppy seeds (Aloo Posto) and, of course, rice. Beaming, Akorshi Sengupta asks if I'd like to eat with my hands, as is customary in India. The Open Science in Education specialist at the University Library explains how to mix the rice with aubergine and dal, place it on the upper part of your fingers, then gently push it into your mouth with your thumb. It's delicious.

Sandwiches for lunch? I can't get used to that.

"I was born and raised in Guwahati, in north-east India. There, we only use the top half of our fingers," he says. "But in Chennai, where I went to high school, people use their whole hand. That was quite a shock."

To Akorshi Sengupta's parents, education mattered greatly. His father would have liked to become a doctor, but was prevented by family circumstances. As an only child, Sengupta was to be given every opportunity, even if it meant moving more than 3,000 kilometres away at the age of just 13. In Chennai, in southeast India, education was better and more affordable.

"The south of India is very orthodox. I went to a co-ed school, but as a boy you were expected not to talk to girls. It was looked down upon. That was a culture shock for me. I did make friends with girls, but you were constantly monitored. I was punished for having a girlfriend. At the time I adapted, but only later did I realise the impact of that way of thinking."

Nostalgia

Sengupta was raised more spiritually than religiously. "My parents were originally Hindu, but not practising idol worship. They meditated, and my father read texts from many different religions. That was his way of figuring things out. I grew up with their daily meditation rituals.

"My grandmother, who lived with us, was a devout Hindu. She would get up before sunrise, around 4.30 a.m. She'd have a cup of tea, meditate, perform a puja at her small altar with incense and offerings, and then start cooking. By the time I got



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Akorshi Sengupta

studied psychology at Amity University in Delhi. He moved to Maastricht for the Master in Public Policy and Human Development at UNU-MERIT in 2018. He joined the Maastricht University Library as an Open Science in Education specialist in 2023 and additionally now coordinates the 'Doorlopend het beste onderwijs' project at EDLAB and MUO.

up, at around seven, the food for the entire day was already prepared. I'd have breakfast—rice, fried vegetables and dal."

He has warm memories of learning to cook by observing his grandmother and mother in the kitchen. "Sundays were special. Sometimes my grandmother would make my favourite dish for lunch: mutton. Just for the two of us, because my parents are vegetarian. It has a very rich aroma that reaches the street. The mix of garam masala and turmeric with the fat from the meat is such an inviting smell that you immediately want to eat it. For me it's also a nostalgic smell. If I smell it on the street in India, I immediately feel at home."

Food is central to life in India. "People just drop by, and no one leaves the house without eating something. That's how I grew up. For example, if there was work going on near our house, my mother would cook for the labourers."

The cuisine of the south

Instead of returning home after high school in Chennai, Sengupta went to study psychology in Delhi—still some 2,000 kilometres from his parents. "That's where the good universities were." He lived with family friends he'd known since childhood. "They're like second parents to me; I call them uncle and aunty. My uncle loved cooking. Unfortunately he passed away in 2016. He introduced me to a different type of Indian food, so not the Bengali cuisine from the east, where my parents and grandmother are from, but from Bangalore in the south. That's where he came from. He was trained as a Bharatnatyam dancer [Indian classical dance] but got injured before he could make a career out of it, so he became a cameraman for the national television network. From him, I learnt to cook southern dishes like delicious dosa [thin pancakes made

from rice and lentils], idli [a savoury steamed cake made from fermented rice] and urad dal [black lentils]. People in the south eat a lot of fermented food. I had a wonderful time there."

Crossing borders

After Delhi, his educational journey was not yet over. His father wanted him to gain international experience. Sengupta's deepest wish was to one day work for the United Nations, so he searched online for a UN university. That led him to the Master in Public Policy and Human Development at UNU-MERIT in Maastricht—a place he had never heard of before.

In 2018, he set foot in Europe for the first time, landing in Amsterdam. "The first thing I noticed was the silence: it's never that quiet in India. It was a new start for me in many ways. The study programme was transforming; I had to unlearn things I had learnt for 25 years. Critical questioning, which Problem-Based Learning encourages, was completely new to me. In India, it's not cultural practice to critically question your teacher; here, lecturers expect it."

He has also grown fond of Dutch food culture. "Eating at 6 p.m. is healthier than eating late, as we do in India. My diet has changed too. I eat fewer carbohydrates, so less rice and smaller portions. I quite like potatoes, vegetables and meat. But sandwiches for lunch? Ugh. So dry. I can't get used to that." He recalls his excitement at seeing mangoes in the supermarket. "In India, we eat mango every day in summers, prepared in all sorts of ways. I took one bite and was so disappointed—the mango was chewy. In India, it melts on your tongue."

Coming home

Sengupta is not thinking of returning, at least not yet. "I love my work here. But eventually I will go back, in 10 or 20 years. I know my parents depend on me. My work as an Open Science specialist is about making education accessible, which is something I could really make a difference with in India."

One day, he hopes to combine both Indian and Dutch values in his own family. "I miss the togetherness of life in India. We lived in a typical Assam-style house, made of bamboo and mud with open spaces. I didn't have my own room. Until well into my 20s, I slept in the same room as my parents; that's completely normal there. The nice thing about it is we grow up as someone who is mindful of other's need in our decisions which is not always the case here. At the same time, I've grown attached to the privacy and freedom you have here, as well as that Dutch directness. So for me, it'll be a mix." <



It used to be something the village doctor did on the side. Today, geriatric medicine has evolved into a burgeoning, forward-looking specialty—which is for the best, given our rapidly ageing population. Janine Collet, a pioneer of geriatric medicine, and Femke Deguelle, now training as a specialist, discuss the past and future of their chosen field.

Geriatric medicine is the specialty of the future

Alumni meeting minds

Text
Caya Forman

Photography
Femke Deguelle and
Janine Collet

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Femke Deguelle started training as a geriatric specialist at Maastricht University in September 2025. Previously, she studied medicine and trained as a GP at UM.



In the early days, Janine Collet rented a small farmhouse in a North Brabant village; chickens roamed freely in the garden. When her pager went off while she was out visiting a patient, she'd hustle to find a landline to call the practice. It was during her medical studies at Maastricht University in the 1980s that her interest was sparked in older patients with complex care needs.

"As trainee GPs, we were sent all over the country. I ended up at a practice in Waalre with a large elderly population. I enjoyed puzzling through their problems, especially when they showed unusual behaviour." Driven by that fascination, Collet carved out her own path into geriatric medicine. At the time, there was no dedicated training programme for the specialty.

Both generalist and specialist

That has since changed. A postgraduate training programme in geriatric medicine has been on offer in the Netherlands since 1989. Doctors learn to treat vulnerable older people who often have multiple health problems at once. It was initially a two-year programme focused narrowly on nursing home care, but as the field developed into a recognised medical specialty, the programme was extended to three years. Since 2020, it has also been offered at UM.

GP Femke Deguelle started the UM programme last September. "In this field you're both a generalist and a specialist," she says. "Very few specialties take such a broad, holistic view of the

patient. The medical aspect matters, but it's really about the person sitting in front of you. Who are they, and how can you improve their quality of life? At the same time, the cases are often complex, which allows me to go into depth. That combination really appeals to me."

The structure of the programme is similar to GP training, so she knew what to expect. "There's a lot of space to share stories with other students and to reflect together. Not just about medical content, but about how you deal with family members or conduct a difficult conversation with a care manager. We also discuss ethical issues and dilemmas. You can learn the facts of medicine from books, but these kinds of conversations are what I gain the most from."

In the 1970s and 80s, the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences was still in its infancy. "The programme was very much a work in progress, and we helped to shape it," Collet recalls. "Our cohort rewrote an entire coursebook because we disagreed with the content. We invited experts ourselves—we'd just call them up and ask if they'd teach us. We took the train to Amsterdam for our anatomy class because there was no one in the region who could teach it."

All facets of elderly care

Today, Collet works at the mental-health organisation Mondriaan. She supervises all interns in geriatric medicine and, among other roles, leads the neuropsychiatry speciality. "Our interns learn a great deal about diagnostics and treatment in old-age psychiatry, which is increasingly in demand in nursing homes."

Only the most care-dependent older people are admitted to nursing homes. Meanwhile, the number of older people living independently continues to grow, and their care needs are often too intensive and complex for GPs to manage on their own. Here, too, geriatric specialists play a crucial role.

"Anywhere you find older people, a geriatric specialist can work," Collet says. "As an adviser or consultant to GPs, in residential settings for older people with psychogeriatric or physical impairments. Training programmes today cover all these facets."

Trust the professional

Fifty years ago, older people only had their GP to turn to. "Which was fine," Collet says, "because you still had village doctors who'd known their patients forever and understood their family situations and backgrounds. That knowledge is essential in elderly care. When things became too complex, patients were admitted to nursing homes."

And so the demand grew for doctors specialising in elderly care outside the hospital setting. "More protocols and guidelines were introduced, both in general practice and in geriatric medicine. The focus turned to the most appropriate treatment, rather than the same approach that had been used out of habit for years." An important step forward in terms of professionalisation, but Collet adds a caveat. "Over the past decade, regulation and bureaucracy have exploded. It's increasingly about ticking boxes: does someone meet the criteria for treatment or admission? A GP or geriatric specialist may know perfectly well what a patient needs, but an assessment body may decide otherwise. I find that troubling. My hope is that, in the future, professionals will be trusted more."

Nothing old-fashioned about it

According to Deguelle, the future of the geriatric specialist is assured. "No other specialty is developing as rapidly, especially here in the south, with our ageing population. As a result, we're being deployed in more and more settings. In some parts of the Netherlands, geriatric specialists are even working in emergency departments. The specialty is sometimes seen as a bit dated and unfashionable, but I think that view is undeserved. It's an incredibly forward-looking field that keeps on evolving." <



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Janine Collet is a geriatric specialist, working at Mondriaan as a care programme leader and neuropsychiatry lead. She was among the first medical student cohorts at UM in 1977.

Fan of Problem-Based Learning

As a Digital Transformation and AI Consultant at Eurolink, [Tara Miranović](#) can't help noticing how much she gained from Maastricht University's system of Problem-Based Learning (PBL). The sessions she now runs with clients closely resemble the tutorials during her studies. "They all involve questions like: 'What do you mean by this?', 'Do we all agree on this?' and 'Do we share the same understanding of a particular concept?' So my very first professional workshop went really well, because it didn't feel new at all. I'd done it before."



For her bachelor's degree, Miranović knew early on that she would move from Bar in Montenegro to Maastricht. Her sister was already studying Arts and Culture at UM. "We're very close. We shared a small flat near the Emmaplein and had a fantastic time. Maastricht has a vibrant student life. Because there are so many international students, you're all in the same boat and you really support one another. I made friends for life."

Her favourite activities included going to the Lumière ("good films and nice food"), taking a walk along the river Maas, picnicking with friends in the city park, and of course visiting the Boekhandel Dominicanen: "possibly the most beautiful bookshop in the world."



Alumni meeting minds

Text
Annelotte Huiskes

Photography
Duško Miljanić

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Tara Miranović obtained her BA in Digital Society at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 2023 and the MSc in Digital Business and Economics at the School of Business and Economics in 2024. She now works as a Digital Transformation and AI Consultant at Eurolink.

Perfect match

Both the bachelor's in Digital Society and PBL turned out to be a perfect fit. "Studying in Maastricht genuinely got me excited. I've always naturally enjoyed learning, but there I was given so much autonomy. I could really choose what I wanted to focus on within the programme, which I found incredibly motivating. Digital technologies were examined critically through the lens of culture, philosophy, politics and the media. Very broad and interdisciplinary—it was fascinating." Her enthusiasm is contagious, and it's easy to imagine that as an international student ambassador she persuaded many prospective students to sign up for the programme.

Next, the master's in Digital Business and Economics proved to be the ideal follow-up. "Together, the two programmes gave me a comprehensive overview of what's happening in the field of digital technologies. The master's was more practice-oriented, focusing on how to guide organisations in the process of digital transformation. There was also a strong emphasis on AI, and—fortunately—room for ethical reflection as well. Should we, or do we even want to, do everything that is technically possible? That's an important question."

Freedom to choose

During a minor in Entrepreneurship during her bachelor's, she realised she wanted to run her own business one day. Freedom and autonomy are important to Miranović, and her current role at Eurolink offers ample room for both. This consultancy and project management firm, founded by her father in 2005, is very much a family business: her sister and two aunts (her father's sisters) also work there.

"I'm a co-owner, which gives me the freedom to work on a wide range of things and to choose projects I genuinely believe in, such as AI and education. That's a field where I really feel I can contribute to society. My master's thesis was also about AI in education and how it can support intellectual and moral development. One of the institutes I work with, for example, is linked to the education ministry in Montenegro and publishes school textbooks. Together we discuss how AI can be used in education and teaching materials, exploring questions with the staff like: what is AI? What can the technology do, and what can't it do? How can we safeguard students' privacy? What data can be collected? How do you implement AI? Because Montenegro is a candidate for EU membership, we also look closely at European AI legislation. Our country is at a key moment in its digital development, and I try to apply the knowledge I gained in Maastricht here. Hopefully, I can help to guide things in the right digital direction."

Supervision over prohibition

But what is the right direction? A growing body of research shows that social media can have negative effects on the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of young people. Australia has therefore decided to legally ban children under 16 from having social media accounts.

"Debates about social media are often very polarised," Miranović says. "But social media isn't only bad. As a teenager, I benefited enormously from access to so many different sources of information. But of course there's also a lot of harm online, and that requires proper regulation. Schools and parents should be better supported in how to supervise children digitally. Many digital technologies, including social media platforms, can be used well or badly—that's up to us. So education and regulation are very important. I also think the ban will be very hard to enforce. Young people will quickly find ways around it, and banning something often just makes it more interesting. I lean much more towards supervision than prohibition."

Advice for current students

"You don't need to know exactly what you want to do from day one. Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Choose subjects you genuinely care about and then look for the common thread. And pay attention to how you function in tutorials: what's the dynamic? Do you enjoy working in groups, and in what way? By the time you're choosing a master's, you'll have a much clearer sense of what you want and what you're good at." <

Our brains shape how we think, feel and live. Yet millions of people are affected by conditions that threaten this vital organ, from dementia and mental health problems to acute brain injury caused by a cycling accident or stroke. The University Fund Limburg (UFL) is working strategically with four of its Named Funds—the Brain Battle Fund, the Brain Injury Fund, the Age@Minds Fund and the Smart Tears Fund—to build a future with healthy brains.

The University Fund Limburg is building a future with healthy brains



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From left to right: Marcel Ariës (Brain Battle Fund), Marlies Gijs (Smart Tears Fund), Bouwien Janssen (UFL), Guido Vanderbroeck (UFL), Caroline van Heugten (Brain Injury Fund), Sjacko Sobczak (Age@Minds Fonds)

University Fund Limburg

Text
Noa Reijnen

Photography
Alf Mertens

In the Netherlands, 25% of people live with a brain disorder, a figure that continues to rise. This is a serious concern: patients often experience a lower quality of life or require long-term, intensive care. It also poses a challenge to society through growing pressure on the healthcare system. The urgency to improve brain health has therefore never been greater.

Multidisciplinary brain health research at Maastricht University spans the full spectrum, from cellular processes to human behaviour. UM plays a leading role in the field both nationally and internationally. At the same time, private individuals—including alumni—and organisations are increasingly willing to contribute to brain health research. This creates a powerful movement to tackle these challenges together.

Joint mission

Brain health is a particular focus of the philanthropic partnerships the UFL forms to strengthen cutting-edge research at UM. The UFL has established four Named Funds, each with its own angle across the different phases of illness: prevention, diagnosis, therapy and rehabilitation. Their shared mission is clear: to improve the quality of life of patients and their loved ones through smart technology, better diagnostics and personalised treatments.

To bring these themes to a wider audience, the Funds organise a range of public fundraising campaigns, from art auctions to cycle races. Such initiatives are a good match for the UFL's preferred approach: creating visible impact with broad public support.

Brain Battle Fund

Led by Dr Marcel Ariës, the Brain Battle Fund aims to improve care for patients with severe brain injury. After a stay in intensive care, many leave

hospital with lasting damage. Because prevention is better than cure, the Brain Battle Fund also focuses on preventing brain injury, with campaigns on issues such as bike safety.

Brain Injury Fund

The Brain Injury Fund, led by Professor Caroline van Heugten, goes a step further by also supporting patients' loved ones. This Fund is active in all stages of recovery, with the aim of improving physical and cognitive rehabilitation, including the emotional wellbeing of patients and the people around them.

Age@Minds Fund

Mental illness is one of the most common brain-related health problems, particularly among older people. Led by Dr Sjacko Sobczak, the Age@Minds Fund focuses on treating psychological symptoms that can be difficult to recognise in dementia, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The Fund aims to improve older people's quality of life and independence.

Smart Tears Fund

There is also much to be gained in dementia detection. Dr Marlies Gijs discovered that disease-specific substances (biomarkers) for Alzheimer's disease can be detected in tear fluid. The Smart Tears Fund was established to further investigate this finding.

Gijs and colleagues are exploring when tears can best be used in the course of the disease: during diagnosis, to make predictions, or to monitor whether a therapy is effective. While tear fluid has long been used in ophthalmology, for example to diagnose dry eye, its use in brain disorders is still new. "Yet it makes sense, given the direct connection between the eyes and the brain," she says. "Tear fluid can also be collected quickly and easily using a paper strip that absorbs basal tears, the tear film that's always present on the surface of the eye."

Her ambition is for this method to become a standard part of clinical care. "My hope is that tear-fluid collection can eventually replace an epidural, and that we can use it to detect not only Alzheimer's earlier, but also other brain disorders."

Scientific innovation through social engagement

The success of these Funds depends in part on donors who support research. Hans Petri was among the first cohorts of medical students in UM's early years. Inspired by that formative experience, he co-founded an alumni group in London. With undiminished enthusiasm, he is now actively committed to supporting these Funds. "I've always been involved with UM. I like putting my energy towards a good cause by backing research that improves brain health. Because I worked in the medical profession, healthcare projects appeal to me."

Petri contributes on several fronts: he supports the Smart Tears Fund financially, has advised the Age@Minds Fund and volunteers with the Brain Battle Fund. "It's wonderful to see what can be achieved by committed volunteers." Thanks to his dedication, he is able to make a difference, stay connected to the wider UM community, and have a positive impact on society. "I would say to everyone: don't wait until you retire. Think now about how you can support your alma mater. Show your commitment and help move society forward!" <

Nava Tintarev takes leading role in national computer science platforms

UM's Nava Tintarev has joined the boards of two of the Netherlands' most prestigious computer science platforms. Tintarev is professor of Explainable AI at the Department of Advanced Computing Sciences.



One of her new roles is chair of the Computer Science Round Table, which advises the Dutch Research Council (NWO) on its strategy for computer science research. In 2025, Tintarev served as a regular member, addressing issues such as the low success rate of computer science funding proposals.

She has also joined the board of IPN, a national platform that brings together and represents academics in the field of ICT. IPN serves as a central point of contact on ICT innovation and its societal impact, now and in the future. <

€17 million for Dutch mega-cohort: working together on healthier ageing

Maastricht UMC+ is the main applicant in the Netherlands Cohort Consortium, which received a grant of more than €17 million from the Dutch Research Council (NWO). The consortium brings together most university medical centres, public health institute RIVM and VU Amsterdam in a unique national research infrastructure: a mega-cohort comprising hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens.

The consortium combines the strengths of the 11 largest and most comprehensive cohorts in the Netherlands, including The Maastricht Study. Together, these data form a coherent source of knowledge about health, lifestyle, environment and ageing. The grant will enable large-scale research into how and why people age

healthily and what we can do to prevent diseases. The focus will be on multimorbidity (the co-occurrence of multiple conditions) and new health risks, such as emerging infectious diseases.

"The consortium brings together health data from almost half a million Dutch people," says Miranda Schram, lead applicant and professor of Diabetes Epidemiology at the UM research institutes CARIM and MHeNs. "With these data, we're conducting groundbreaking research into the causes of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, dementia and depression, and why these are occurring at an increasingly younger age." <



Exposure to daylight improves metabolic health

Natural light has a positive effect on blood-sugar levels in people with type 2 diabetes, according to an international study led by Maastricht University. The researchers say it is the first study to show that natural light supports metabolism more effectively than artificial light. Natural light helps to align our body clocks with a range of physiological processes, including blood-sugar regulation. The results were published in the journal *Cell Metabolism*.

Metabolic disorders such as type 2 diabetes are becoming increasingly common. This is due in part to physical inactivity and disrupted day-night rhythms. It also has to do with long periods spent indoors: we spend almost 90% of our time inside and are therefore exposed to little natural daylight.

The findings of the study were clear. When participants were exposed to daylight, their blood-sugar levels remained within healthy ranges more often and fluctuated less. Their metabolism also improved. In the evening, participants had slightly higher levels of melatonin, a hormone that helps to regulate the sleep-wake cycle.

"Daylight can have this effect because light-sensitive cells in the eye play an important role in regulating that rhythm," explains lead researcher Joris Hoeks. These cells are more sensitive to the short wavelengths that are common in natural light. People with type 2 diabetes may therefore benefit from getting more daylight—even just sitting by a window. "It's simple, free and available to everyone," he says. <



Profile

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

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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

Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences

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

Faculty of Science and Engineering

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

Faculty of Law

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

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

Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience

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

School of Business and Economics

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

Interfaculty institutes

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

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