

# observant

First-year  
Special

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

VOLUME 45 / 26 AUGUST 2024



## What are must-dos while studying in Maastricht?

Check out the  
bucket list on pages  
6, 7 and 8!

Sitting too  
much and for  
too many hours  
in succession:  
unhealthy, but  
many students  
do it. How can  
you change that?

Read about it on  
page 3

Can students still  
take a joke? "As  
long as it is about others,  
it is funny, but when it is  
about themselves, it is not  
anymore."

See page 5





Photo: Joey Roberts

# What's this, a newspaper? At university?

**Why, yes, it is!** You might say you don't really read newspapers, but that's about to change. After all, you'll want to stay up to date with the latest news and information about your faculty, study programme, sports association and topics like skyrocketing rents or exam stress, right? *Observant* is Maastricht University's independent weekly newspaper, produced by professional journalists. We're published weekly, post articles on our website ([observantonline.nl/english](http://observantonline.nl/english)) daily, and you can follow us on social media. You'll find the print version of *Observant* in the newspaper stands at your faculty building entrance every Thursday, free of charge. You're currently holding a special edition for first-year students, a taste of what is to come. Complete with tips on how to survive and thrive in Maastricht, columns, interviews with students and much more.

The newspaper, like the website (and the university), is bilingual. So don't forget to grab your copy every Thursday morning!

**We hope you enjoy your time in Maastricht.**

*The editors*



## column

# Library anxiety



The inner-city library: four levels, 1,000 study places, and honestly, one of Maastricht's scariest locations. For the entirety of my first university period, I didn't dare set foot in the notorious study hotspot, choosing to play it safe in less daunting places. My room. A café. If I was feeling adventurous, The Social Hub's communal study areas. I couldn't provide a concise explanation for my fear of the library. Maybe it was the sheer number of students occupying the vast rows of study places. Or that as a first-year, I felt intimidated by the presence of the older students. It was only in December 2022, three and a half months after moving to Maastricht, that I took the initial plunge into the deep end. I booked my first-ever seat reservation, walked through the library's revolving glass doors, and studied amidst 999 other brave students. Of course, I was accompanied by not one, but two friends who held my hand and bestowed their library wisdom upon me. For my friends, going to the library alone was inconvenient- irritating. For me, it was impossible, metaphori-

cally speaking. I was grateful for any guidance, especially granted that during my first visit, I could barely find my reserved seat. Even more, I was thankful to take a break between my tedious study hours, and found comfort in the routine of purchasing a drink from Coop and catching up with my friends.

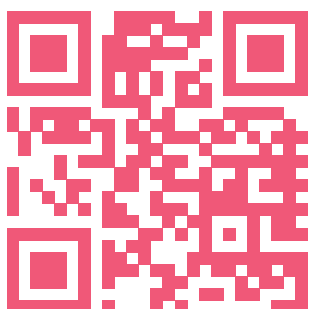
Two years later, I can proudly say that I am no longer the timid, inexperienced first year that saw the ICL as the university equivalent of a haunted house. I'm entering the final year of my bachelor's degree, I've fought my way through notoriously difficult classes, and most importantly, I habitually visit the place, even on my own. At times, I still feel my stomach lurch as I walk through the revolving doors and am overcome with a wave of anxiety when I realise that someone else is sitting in my reserved seat. Still, this is a clear improvement from avoiding the library entirely.

I suppose that the message I aim to deliver to any first-year readers is that, over time, things get better. You get braver.

The library, with its four levels and 1,000 study places becomes bearable, and even enjoyable.



*Robin van Wasen is a third-year student at the University College Maastricht. This academic year, she will write a weekly column.*



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news

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## colophon

**Editors** Riki Janssen (editor-in-chief), Wendy Degens, Peter Doorakkers, Cleo Freriks, Marion Janssens (assistant), Dennis Vaendel **E-mail** [observant@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:observant@maastrichtuniversity.nl) **Website** [www.observantonline.nl](http://www.observantonline.nl) **With the cooperation of** Wammes Bos, Lotte van de Loo, Robin van Wasen, Simon Wirtz **Design** Ellen Oosterhof **Translations** o.a. B. Wall & P. Nekeman, Maud Bovelandier **Print** Janssen/Pers Gennep

## Extra groups Social Dutch

# More writing skills in beginner training course Dutch

*Social Dutch, the beginner training course for students who want to learn Dutch, is to be given a make-over. More time will be spent on writing skills. The number of groups will also be increased.*

All first-year and second-year bachelor's and master's students are allowed to take a free course in Social Dutch at Maastricht University. As the name suggests, foreign students learn how to make their way 'socially' in Dutch. Those who complete the module, have therefore reached level A1 'with a minus after it'. "It makes it easier to integrate in Maastricht, but it is really the basics," says Melissa Verkleij, coordinator of the Dutch team at the UM Language Centre. The focus is on listening and speaking, but that will change after the summer. Writing skills will become more important. This will make the transition to the course at A2 level easier. "We will then be working with a continuous learning path." Something else that is new: more attention for Maastricht culture, such as events or history, "so that students are in a better position

when they 'land'. They will also be encouraged more to integrate, speak Dutch in the supermarket, with friends, with neighbours, or to take a job in catering."

### Lack of obligation

The Language Centre will start with a pilot in September: the changes will be introduced in one language group (with a maximum of 16 students). "It is easier to start with one group, because you want to know what works and you can adapt things more quickly," says Verkleij. If it is successful, we will change the setup of all Social Dutch groups. Moreover, the capacity will be increased after the summer: from 15 to about 25 groups per period. "We don't know the exact number yet; it is not a compulsory course. It also depends on the available funding." It not being obligatory results in a large number of drop-outs, roughly 30 per cent. Students quit because they find it takes too much time alongside their studies, "they underestimate it. But of those who continue, almost everyone passes," says Verkleij.

### Pressure from The Hague

Politicians in The Hague want more attention for Dutch in the academic world. This increases the chances of internationals remaining in the Netherlands after graduation. Therefore, language is an important part of the elaborate bill in Parliament called 'Internationalisation in balance'. Political pressure is being felt and administrators from the Maastricht faculties have been having discussions with the Language Centre about what is possible with Dutch language education within the studies that are in English, so focussing on the subject that the student is learning at that time. It is a fact that students of Law will ask different questions than students at Business Engineering. An important question here is: how can you ensure that a language course like that is not at the expense of the content of the curriculum? A working group led by the director of the Language Centre is currently drawing up various scenarios..

Wendy Degens

Too much sitting is ingrained in our culture, but there is a solution  
 "When someone enters, we immediately say:  
 'Take a seat!'"



Students in the renovated university library in Randwyck. Movement scientist Yingyi Wu would advise them to get up every hour and move for five minutes.  
 Photo: Joey Roberts

*The bad news? Sitting too much and for too many hours in succession is unhealthy, and students sit a lot. The good news? Healthier sitting is actually very simple.*

Lectures, tutorial group meetings, self-study in the library or in your room: those who study, generally spend a lot of time sitting. In her thesis on 'savvy sitting', movement scientist Yingyi Wu writes that it amounts to almost ten hours a day. Whether the students that she followed – first-year students of Biomedical Sciences at Maastricht University and at the Belgian KU Leuven – themselves realised how much time they spent sitting, is the question, Wu thinks: she believes

that people easily underestimate this. "Keep a tally. You will be surprised by the results." She laughs: "Yes, I myself too. During my PhD study I sat too much. My supervisor [FHML professor Hans Savelberg, ed.] won't be happy if I say this. You always see him walking, or standing at a standing desk."

Is sitting wrong by definition? Not necessarily, "but all the available research data points to sitting a lot and a long time in succession being bad for your physical and mental well-being". Diehard sitters run a higher risk of contracting certain types of cancer, diabetes, depression and poorer cognitive achievements. That is quite something, and it raises the question why we feel

sitting is so natural. "It doesn't take any effort and it is our culture," says Wu. "When someone enters, we immediately say: 'Take a seat!' Also, whether we are at home or at the university, our physical environment invites us to sit." Universities can do something about this "by making it easier and more comfortable for students to stand. Currently, classrooms are almost always spaces filled with chairs, where only the person presenting can stand. But why?" Wu thinks that standing desks, such as those in the recently reopened university library in Randwyck, would be a good investment. "There is research that proves that doing the same work standing instead of sitting, already makes a dif-

ference. When you stand, you also move about a bit and every kind of physical activity is good." If you can't avoid sitting a lot, there is a simple way to still make the day a little healthier, says Wu: "Cycle to the university, don't take the bus; stand up during the breaks of your working group and walk to the coffee machine; do an online meeting during a walk in the park." And, she emphasises, "set an alarm on your mobile phone when you are studying, so you will be reminded every hour to stand up and move for five minutes or so. Sitting is a habit, which you can only change by starting small."

Peter Doorackers

## science

# Intestinal bacterium repairs marl walls

Maastricht students were able to take a bacterium that is normally found in the intestines and use it to repair cracks in marl. In March, they were awarded for this (again). “The first time that the bacterium created limestone, we held a party.”

Maastricht and marl are intimately connected: the light-coloured limestone adorns many facades in the Limburg capital. Beautiful, but it also requires a lot of maintenance: marl is soft, not resistant to acid rain, discolours easily, and cracks develop quickly. Methods do exist to counteract this, but they are not ideal, say Floor Vervuren and Fien Eickmans. Some actually lead to unwanted discolouration; others are “very labour-intensive, because they involve replacing a whole block of stone”.

## DNA origami

There should be an easier way for that, thought Vervuren, Eickmans, and nine other students from the Faculty of Science and Engineering, who were supervised by associate professor of synthetic biology Erik Steen Redeker. As ‘Team SublimeStone’ (a play on the word ‘limestone’), the eleven participated in iGEM in 2023, an international competition for research projects at the interface of

biology and technology. Their solution for the marl problem? A genetically modified bacterium.

Or actually two, Vervuren and Eickmans explain: the one is adapted in such a way that it creates “DNA origami”: a strand of DNA that spontaneously forms a kind of spider web in the crack. The second one has an enzyme added to it that uses CO<sub>2</sub> from the ambient air to form bicarbonate. “Combine this with calcium, and it creates calcium bicarbonate, or limestone,” says Vervuren. “We did that by adding both bacteria to a gel that also contained calcium ions.” The calcium then attaches to the ‘spider web’ and fills in the crack.

There is a photograph on Team SublimeStone’s website of a bottle containing small white lumps: the first bacterial limestone created by the team. “It was really cool to see that it actually worked,” says Vervuren. More so, Eickmans adds: “There was a party.”

Apart from the party, their work was worth a golden medal and a top-10 classification in the iGEM competition. On top of all that, in March, they received the public award at the award ceremony for the annual Prins Friso Engineering Prize. “So cool, we did not expect that,” they say, even though compared to last year, celebrations were more modest. “Princess Beatrix and princess Mabel were sitting in the first row,” Eickmans clarifies. “So you don’t scream when you win.”

## Wake up

And now? Will the gel soon find its way onto the shelves of your local DIY shop? The two laugh: we are not there yet, for sure. Team SublimeStone is proud that in such a short time – “we had four months’ time for the lab work” – the idea was proven to work. “But for practical applications, there is still a lot of research to do,” says Vervuren. For that, more equipment than is currently available at FSE is needed, says Eickmans, in order

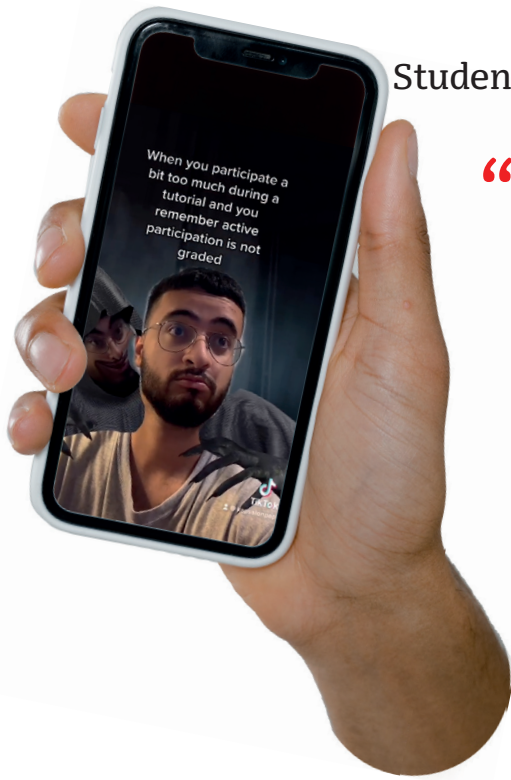
to test how strong the newly created marl actually is. More research, and also more time, which was very scarce since many team members were in the final stages of their bachelor’s programmes and had to write their theses.

The work hasn’t come to a complete standstill though. Until then, the team used *E. coli*, a bacterium found in the large intestine in humans. However, it is not very resistant to heat, which prompted Eickmans to devote her thesis to the question of whether a different bacterium, *Bacillus Subtilis*, could be used. The answer? “The literature and my research show that it should be possible to use the same mechanism in this bacteria.” *Bacillus Subtilis* also forms spores, small ‘dormant’ particles that can survive in a stone, Eickmans explains: “If a crack occurs and water seeps in, the spore ‘wakes up’. The idea is that it then repairs the crack by itself.”

Peter Doorakkers

Student behind the popular *Memestricht* became a well-known face

“Some students feel everything is funny, except when it is about themselves”



Students who want to take a photograph with him, being recognised by professors: with his popular Instagram page *Memestricht* – which at its height had some twenty thousand followers – law student Kevin Mousa became a well-known face within UM the past few years. But there are drawbacks too: “I received messages from people who wrote that they would ‘do me in’ if they met me.”

Many university cities already had one: a popular page with memes of local student life. Why hasn't Maastricht got one yet, Kevin Mousa (who was born in the Netherlands and grew up in Germany and France) wondered at the end of 2018. “As a fan of memes. I thought that was such a shame. So, I decided to create an Instagram page myself: *Memestricht*.”

It was successful, because with more than 15 thousand followers, you can certainly say that the page has become a household word among Maastricht students. “At one point, there were even 18 thousand, but if you don't post anything in a busy period, the number quickly drops,” says Mousa. *Observant* interviewed Mousa last academic year. Meanwhile, he graduated and renamed his page *Kapsalonpapi*. On the street and at the university, he is frequently recognised as ‘that guy from Memestricht’. “Especially by students, who sometimes even want to take a selfie with me. But every now and again, there are also lecturers who stare at me during a lecture and

afterwards tell me that they sometimes watch the memes.”

Not that it is about the attention for him, says Mousa, he primarily wants to entertain people. “For the first couple of years, nobody even knew who was behind Memestricht. That was quite funny, sometimes I heard students around me speculating about who it could be.” The mystery ended in 2021 when he posted video clips in which he himself featured. “Such clips, in TikTok style, were becoming more and more popular at the time and I had so many ideas. So, I thought, no more anonymity.”

### Stereotypes

By now, the page features hundreds of memes, often with thousands of likes and dozens of reactions. They are about expensive student rooms, studying at the University Library, or taking exams in MECC, but also about the Dutch weather, carnival, and André Rieu. “I get inspiration from the experiences I have at the university or in the city, or from friends' stories. As soon as I have an idea, I immediately sit at my laptop and post it.”

Sometimes the humour is in stereotypes, for example, that Belgians always talk too loudly in the University Library, or that only rich Germans study at SBE.

“That sometimes takes some exploring: what do people like and what don't they like? Fortunately, the reactions are mostly positive and the very ones who are ridiculed can also laugh about it.”

### Death threats

But not all jokes go down well. Last year, a clip about the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS)

caused a lot of commotion. In it, you can see Mousa being chased by a police car with flashing lights and the text “If you say ‘that's gay’ at FASoS”.

Mousa: “In my mind, it was pretty innocent and clearly a joke about the ‘cancel culture’. But ironically, it was this meme that provoked vehement reactions. People sent me DMs in which they called me discriminating or xenophobic, or they said they were going to report me to the university, because I should be kicked out. There were even some death threats, people were going to ‘do me in’ if they met me on the street.” *Observant* couldn't see these messages; some of them, says Mousa, were removed afterwards by the senders and he deleted the rest himself, because he “didn't want to see them anymore.”

### Drawing the line

“Sometimes, it is difficult to estimate beforehand when you are crossing a line. If there are a lot of negative reactions, I often delete a meme. It is not my intention to hurt people. But in this case, I drew a line. I thought ‘What is taking things too far: my meme or those reactions?’ Moreover, you can hate me, but then don't follow me. It was only a small number of people who were fiercely rude; there were also a lot of positive reactions. I received dozens of DMs from people who wrote that they supported me and that I shouldn't allow myself to be intimidated.” He never considered stopping. “I was troubled by it in the beginning, but I never had any regrets. I also noticed that people write all kinds of stuff online, but ‘in real life’ they dare not say anything when they recognise me on the street. I decided that I had to learn to live

with the fierce reactions on Instagram.” Even though they appear more and more, he says. “But only in specific cases, especially when it is about FASoS and University College Maastricht (UCM). The reactions are often from students who, based on their profile, would be very tolerant and great advocates of freedom of speech. But apparently that only applies when your opinions fit in with theirs. I try to make memes about all faculties, study programmes and nationalities. As long as it is about others, it is funny, but when it is about themselves, it is not funny anymore.”

Dennis Vaendel



# Must-dos while studying

## Going out

- Tell yourself you'll spend "an hour at most" at an outdoor café, only to blink and find yourself in a Market Square pub at six in the morning.
- Go to an open party at each of the "Big Four" student associations: Saurus, Tragos, Circumflex and Koko.
- Vasteloavend!* Dress in your finest *pekske* and throw yourself headfirst into Maastricht Street Carnival (in 2025 from 2 to 4 March).
- Lose yourself in epic guitar solos at Muziekgieterij, booming beats at Complex or electrifying dance music at Cavo.
- Embrace your alternative side at a party at the "cultural freezone" Landbouwbelang, while you still can.
- Hook up with someone from a different nationality.
- Spend an evening at a real student bar, ran by and for students – De Uni, De Beurs or De Boschpoort.
- Experience the INKOM as a mentor or crew member.
- Celebrate St Patrick's Day at one of the Irish pubs: Shamrock, Peter's or John Mullins.



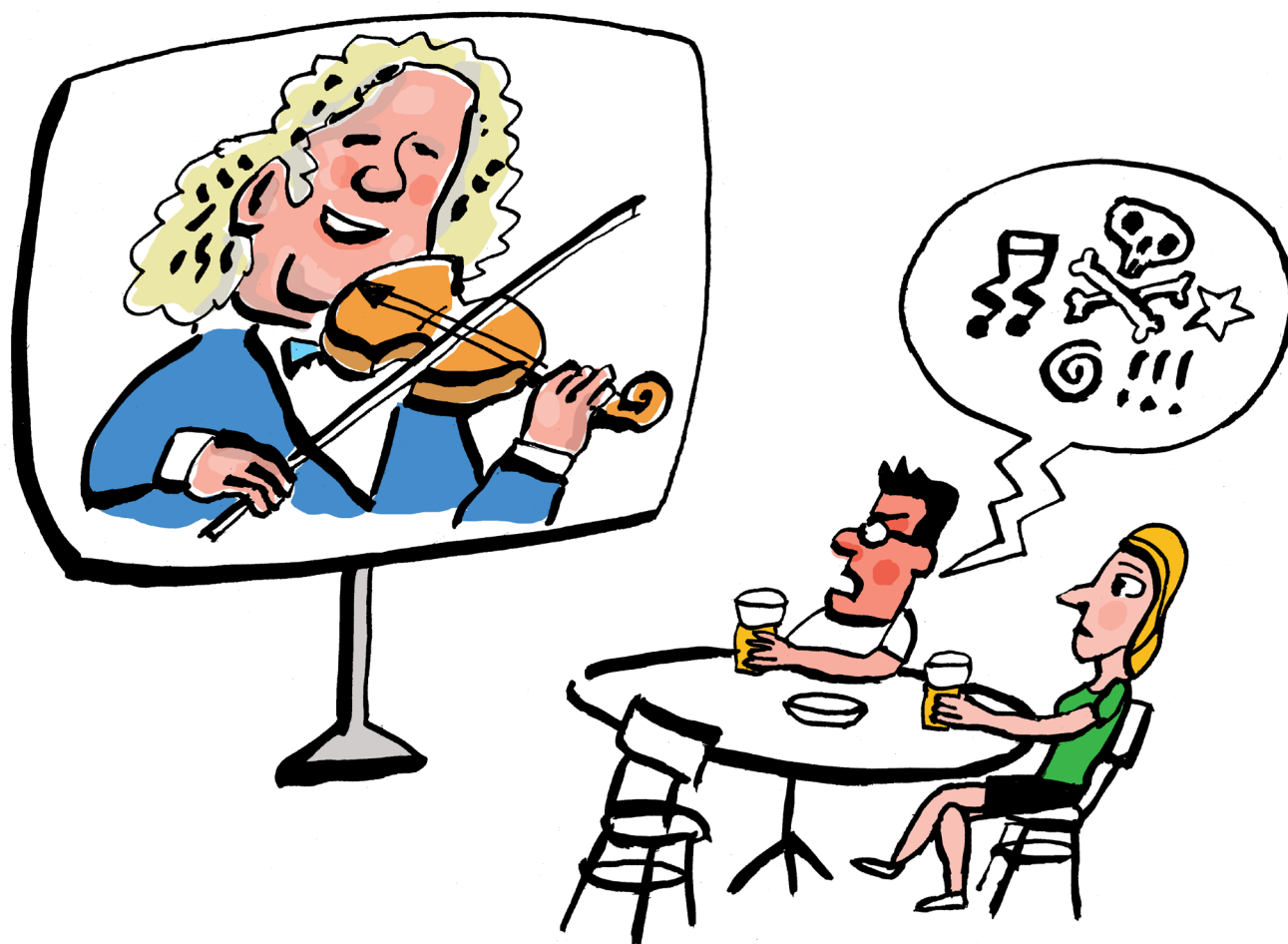
*While the INKOM introduction week is a great opportunity to attend open parties of student associations, you'll have plenty of chances throughout the year, from the Tragos Multi-Room Party to InMosae at Circumflex.*

## Living

- Find an affordable student room (good luck!).
- Catch a rat or mouse nibbling at your rubbish bag.
- Discover a new species of mould on your forgotten washing-up.
- Realise you still don't know who your neighbours are after a few years, and invite them over for a drink.
- Break into your own place after locking yourself out.
- Keep a plant alive.
- Get a late-night visit from the police because of a house party going on into the early hours.

## Sports

- Try a new sport at UM Sports.
- Cheer on the world's best pro cyclists during the Amstel Gold Race in spring. And cycle up the famous Cauberg yourself.
- Sign up for Maastrichts Mooiste or a charity run like the annual Run to Fight Cancer.
- Take a dip in the Geusseltbad swimming pool.
- Compete in, or cheer on the rowers competing in, the annual Saurus International Regatta.
- Go ice skating on Vrijthof Square (powered by mulled wine) during Magisch Maastricht, around Christmas.
- Join in a game of spikeball (also called roundnet) in the Stadspark.
- Explore the beautiful Heuvelland area on foot or by bike.
- Play some field hockey and have a beer or two at the student field hockey tournament Us Leef Vruike on Ascension Day.
- Go sailing, kayaking, surfing, standup paddleboarding or pedal boating on Pietersplas or Grindgat Oost-Maarland.
- Go to the UM Sports gym to see and be seen.
- Climb to the highest point in the European Netherlands, Vaalserberg, and visit the Drielandenpunt (Three-Country Point) right next to the summit.



Illustrations: Bas van der Schot

# in Maastricht

## Studying

- Join your study association and become part of a committee.
- Participate in the “German Run” by queuing for the University Library early in the morning during busy exam weeks and literally running inside to secure a study spot when the doors open.
- Attend a Studium Generale lecture, simultaneously lowering the average age in the room.
- Skip the sad excuse for coffee dispensed by the university vending machines and instead treat yourself to some good coffee by studying in a trendy café.
- Win a debate with your tutor during a tutorial group meeting.
- Take a break sitting in the sun on the city wall next to the Inner City Library or on the Tapijn lawns. Or, if you're in Randwyck, take a stroll through one of the many wonderful car parks.
- Get lost in MECC Maastricht on your way to your first exam.
- Complete your study spot bingo card by having at least one study session in each university building.
- Take a Dutch language course (and practise your Dutch by reading *Observant* – the whole newspaper is bilingual).
- Go to class hungover. Bonus points if you have to give a presentation that day.
- Experiment with not using ChatGPT for an assignment.
- Create or share memes with fellow students that are incomprehensible to outsiders.
- Relieve stress from studying by practising meditation or yoga at The InnBetween.
- Pull an all-nighter to finish an assignment.
- Read *Observant*.

**Popular spots with students include** *Coffeelovers* (the “Starbucks of Maastricht” with locations in the SSC and on Plein 1992, among others), *Bandito Espresso* (Oxfordlaan 55 in Randwyck or at FASoS), the *Bakery Café* next to UNS40, *Alley Cat Bike & Coffee*, *KOFFIE bij Joost en Maartje*, *Café Zuid* and the café in the Jan van Eyck Academie building.

## Food & drink

- Try *zuurvlees*, the regional meat dish.
- Get your 3AM fast-food fix – have you ever had *kapsalon* or *broodje kebab*? – at *Musti*, at the station.
- Complain about the lack of eateries in Randwyck. Or, alternatively, get overwhelmed by the sheer number of great lunch places in the city centre.
- Smoke a joint aboard one of the cannabis-selling coffeshop boats on the Meuse River.
- Enjoy a slice of real Limburg vlaai, e.g. at *Bisschopsmolen*.
- Picnic and chill at the Stadspark (City Park) or *Sint Pietersberg* (Mount Saint Peter).
- Order chips (that's *frietten* – don't let anyone tell you chips are called *patat* in Dutch; it means they're not from around here!) with mayonnaise (trust us) at *Reitz* on Market Square, the Netherlands' first and oldest snack bar (that's *frituur*, but you may hear people refer to it as *snackbar*, depending on where in the Netherlands they're from).
- Just one time, go out for an overly expensive meal at *Vrijthof*, the main gathering spot for tourists and the Maastricht elite.
- Buy fresh fruit from the Friday market.
- Have lunch at the MUMC+ staff cafeteria. You can get in with your student card!
- Sample one of the many locally produced beers or wines.

## Entertainment & arts

- Catch a film in the Sphinxkwartier area, whether it's a blockbuster at *Pathé* or an art-house film at *Lumière*.
- Waltz along with *André Rieu* during his *Vrijthof* concerts (for free, through the big screens at the outdoor cafes outside the fence).
- During those same *Vrijthof* concerts, don't forget to gripe about the busloads of tourists, *Vrijthof Square* being closed off and hearing the same music every day for weeks.
- Go see a play at *Theater aan het Vrijthof* (or join *Alles is Drama*, the international student theatre association).
- Visit a museum. During *Museum Night*, you can visit several in one evening!
- Sing along with *Beppie Kraft*.
- Dress like an elitist and go to *TEFAF*, the annual European fine art fair at MECC Maastricht.
- Attend a cultural event at *Kaleido*, the international student community.

### Recommendations:

**Bonnefanten Museum** Marvel at an extensive collection of traditional and contemporary art. Tip: the museum has free admission on some Friday nights!

**Natural History Museum of Maastricht** Meet the mosasaur and other historical creatures.

**Fotomuseum aan het Vrijthof** Admire the works of famous photographers.

**Maastricht Museum** Explore the city's rich history, from the Romans to the Maastricht Treaty, at this recently completely renovated museum in Centre Céramique.

**Marres** Enjoy rotating exhibitions of contemporary art in a historic building.

**Vestingmuseum** Experience the thrilling history of Maastricht's sieges and defence at this small museum inside(!) *Helpoort*, the oldest city gate in the country.



## Maastricht

- Curse the municipality when they remove the bike you parked on the pavement “for just a second”.
- On a summer evening, watch the sunset from the steps by the Meuse River (next to Wilhelminabrug).
- Wabbleef?* Learn to understand *Mestreechs*, the local dialect.
- Figure out a comfortable way to take the Hoge Brug stairs (spoiler: it’s next to impossible).
- Give some money to a busker on Sint Servaasbrug.
- Buy a book at Dominicanen, the famous bookshop in a former church.
- Climb the tower of Sint-Janskerk (Saint John Church).
- Meet some true-blue, born-and-bred Sjengen at a traditional Dutch pub.
- Spot an oehoe (Eurasian eagle owl) at the ENCI quarry.
- Explore Maastricht Underground by taking a tour of the caves of Sint Pietersberg (including the fort), the casemates or the former NATO headquarters on Cannerberg.
- Take a walk through Frontenpark or along the Groene Loper.
- Do voluntary work (e.g. at Oma’s Soep, Maas Cleanup, Match Maastricht, Refugee Project Maastricht).



### And finally:

- Get your degree!

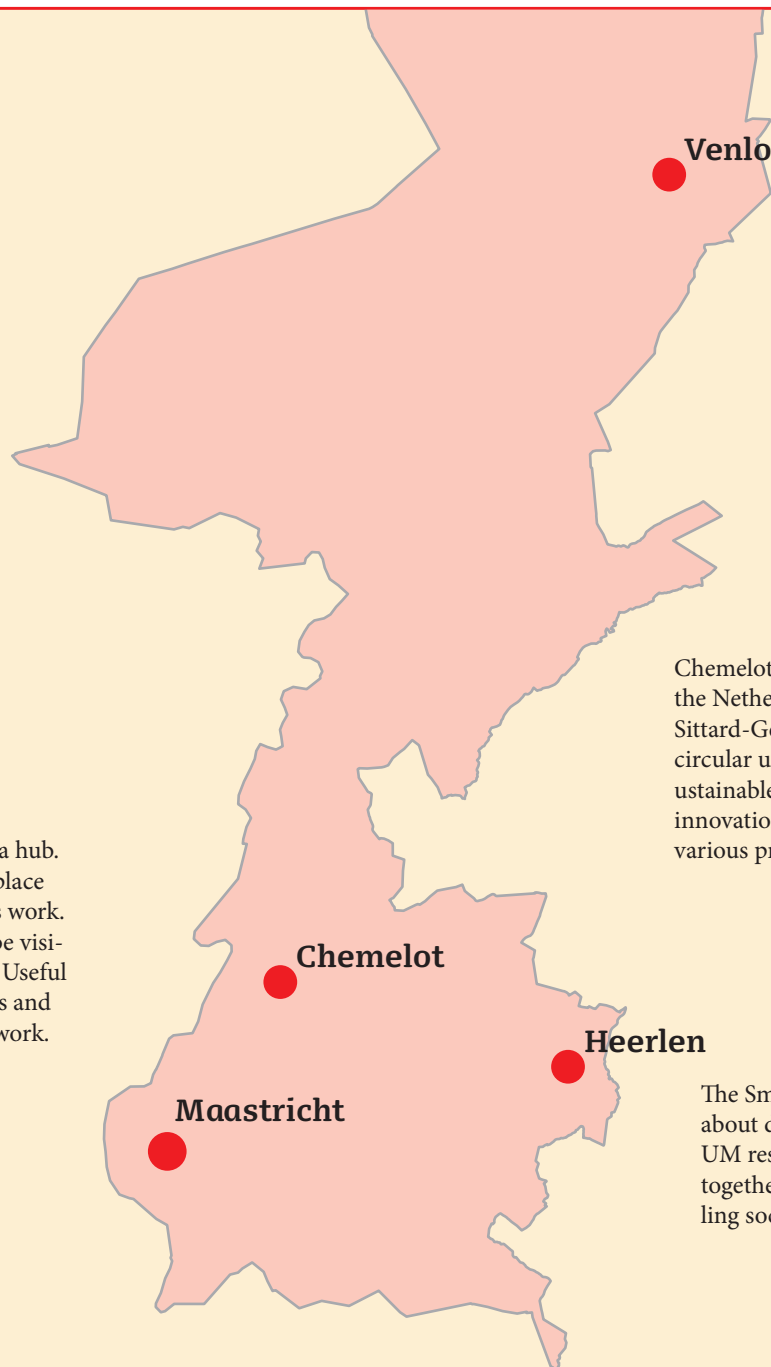
## UM outside Maastricht

Unlike its name suggests, Maastricht University also has several locations outside the Limburg capital: the ‘Brightlands campuses’ and a hub in Brussels.

At the four Brightlands campuses, UM collaborates with industry, government and knowledge institutions. Here, researchers and students see how scientific findings are applied in practice, while companies and start-ups in turn benefit from the knowledge and expertise of these scientists. With the aim of boosting the (regional) knowledge economy and employment growth. For example, there is the Maastricht Health Campus in Randwyck, which is all about innovation in the field of health, and in which the academic hospital MUMC+ is also involved. The other three campuses are outside Maastricht.

In the Belgian capital, UM has a hub. Not part of Brightlands, nor a place where students and researchers work. So what is it? Mainly a way to be visible, close to the European ‘fire’. Useful for bringing in European grants and setting up an international network. A kind of UM embassy.

**Brussel**



Venlo, located in one of the largest greenhouse farming areas in the Netherlands, is all about research and education in the field of safe, healthy food and sustainable agriculture. It is the only place outside of Maastricht where you can also follow a bachelor’s (University College Venlo) as well as two master’s. Home base for these students is a small campus in downtown Venlo.

Chemelot is one of the largest chemical parks in the Netherlands, located in the municipality of Sittard-Geleen. The focus is on recycling and circular use of materials such as plastics, sustainable chemical processes and biomedical innovations. There are labs where students from various programmes have practicals.

The Smart Services Campus in Heerlen is all about data science and digital innovations. UM researchers and students work there together with companies, for example on tackling societal problems with AI.