



# Engaging excellent students

*Reflecting on five years of SIRIUS*



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# Engaging students is the **essence**



**For me, SIRIUS, with its MaRBlE and PREMIUM initiatives, matched Maastricht University's student-centred education system in seamless fashion. Engaging students is the essence of what our Problem-Based Learning system is all about. In addition, it is the key factor explaining the much higher study completion rates that we have traditionally obtained here in Maastricht compared to other universities in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. But engaging students also goes beyond this: it's about activating each and every student's talent, motivation and curiosity. And both MaRBlE and PREMIUM have shown broad scope in providing such opportunities at our university.**

Education, and in particular higher education, now operates in a radically different environment compared to 40 years ago when we started out with Problem-Based Learning. Today, our students – like students all over the world – can access with one click massive amounts of information,

commentary and reflection as well as many new, more formalised forms of blended learning. The balance between that external knowledge and the internal discussions between students and their tutors is likely to shift. Some students will continue to thrive on local interaction with their fellow students and tutor, but others will want to exploit this open access to knowledge in their learning experience. It is here that both MaRBlE and PREMIUM provide invaluable opportunities for our university to further experiment with new educational tools and methods, and to get the most out of the curiosity and intrinsic motivation of our top students. This booklet describes both programmes from different perspectives, showing how students as well as coordinators and supervisors greatly benefit from the experience.

*Prof. Luc Soete, Rector Magnificus Maastricht University*

# MaRBLe PREMIUM

Maastricht University offers talented, motivated third-year students the **opportunity to conduct their own research** within a Research-Based Learning (MaRBLe) project.

These research projects introduce students to the theoretical aspects of doing research in their field or discipline, before they conduct their own research. The skills they develop will come in useful for both an academic career and a research position in the business world.

“I experienced the MaRBLe programme as a reward for high performance, because it teaches invaluable skills to future leaders in healthcare. It transcends the regular university education by enhancing awareness of your own competences and training you to actively promote your academic achievements. Sharing these experiences with fellow students from different disciplines also made me realise where my talents lie, and underpinned my decision to pursue a career in the organisation of healthcare.”

***Rens Bokhorst** participated in the MaRBLe programme during his bachelor's in Health Sciences, Prevention and Health track. He is now a master's student in Healthcare Policy, Innovation and Management.*

2009 – 2015: **1,323 bachelor's students** participated in MaRBLe programmes

2011 – 2015: **615 master's students** took part in a PREMIUM project

In total, 4,230 students participated in an excellence programme (appr. 9,5% of the total number of UM students).

PREMIUM is **Maastricht University's honours programme for excellent master's students** who want to bridge the gap between their studies and their career. With their fellow team members, they work on a project for approximately three months (depending on the client's needs). This gives them excellent experience for their future careers. The students receive intensive individual coaching and attend master classes and workshops, all designed to develop the competences employers are looking for.

"PREMIUM gave me the opportunity to perfect my concept with the knowledge and expertise of four highly motivated students. It's a great way to connect Maastricht with its university."

*Mikos Pieters, cultural entrepreneur*

# Proven value



**During his years as Rector Magnificus of Maastricht University, Gerard Mols not only witnessed the implementation and the success of the SIRIUS projects. He was there when the idea first came about. “We had a brainstorming session with UM professors, lecturers and managers to find ways of adding innovative elements to our programmes”, he explains. “Of all the ideas presented, the concept of Research-Based Learning immediately stood out. In fact, as rector I felt it was the university’s duty to develop this idea and anchor research skills in our education.” The result: Maastricht University applied for SIRIUS funding and the proposal was accepted. That was the beginning of MaRBLe.**

An important aspect of these projects was social relevance, which naturally dovetails with the educational principles of Problem-Based Learning. Mols: “In the context of the SIRIUS research, too, we wanted to make a contribution to solving social problems. Carrying out projects for regional government agencies, but also businesses, has helped us set up a valuable network.” Research-Based Learning is good for Maastricht University in many ways: “You distinguish yourself as an academic institution. You show that you’re more than a training institute that provides students with facts and data. You become a true academy that offers students the opportunity to develop research skills.”

Mols is convinced that MaRBLe and PREMIUM must continue after SIRIUS. “These projects have proven their value and become part of our core academics. I would strongly advise faculties to continue them on their own account. Also, I think that good practices such as these should

be extended to all UM students, although in a way that’s perhaps not as challenging as in the excellence programmes. Acquiring research skills is important for the entire student community, and should therefore become part of every bachelor’s programme.”

The success of the SIRIUS projects confirms the principles of Problem-Based Learning, in Mols’s view. “In our system, students are responsible for the value of their own diploma. We offer the facilities, but it’s up to them to get the most out of it. As a university, you must have confidence in your students and give them responsibility. Practice has shown that they rarely disappoint you. On the contrary you’ll be amazed at what they’re capable of. The publications and proposals that resulted from MaRBLe and PREMIUM certainly prove that.”

Enthusiasm is the key, according to Mols: “The ideas were great, but the efforts by the coordinator Ellen Bastiaens and all the faculty participants to implement them have been outstanding. It’s thanks to their relentless determination that SIRIUS has become such a success. Projects like these stand or fall on the enthusiasm of lecturers, support staff and, last but not least, students. They all have every reason to be proud.”

*Prof. Gerard Mols was Rector Magnificus of Maastricht University from 2004 to 2012. He is now professor of Criminal Law and Law of Criminal Procedure at the Faculty of Law, and scientific director of The Maastricht Forensic Institute.*

# A different approach to excellence



**It all started in 2010: Jeroen van Merriënboer, professor of Learning and Instruction at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, was asked to write a funding proposal for the SIRIUS excellence programme. Together with a small group of colleagues, he reflected on the concept of academic excellence and the best route to take for the new project. He wanted to promote a 'healthy' view of excellence: "There are roughly two perceptions of excellence. The first concerns students who perform extremely well in their own field, and would benefit from a programme to deepen their knowledge in that particular area. We decided to take the other perspective and focus on a broader approach. We aimed to challenge master's students, motivated ones who excel in their own discipline, to develop outside that discipline. We wanted to offer them the opportunity to experience the real-life situations they'll encounter later on in their professional lives.**

The objective was to help them gain the competences. The proposal was accepted, and the Multiplex programme, as it was then called, went ahead in 2011. Van Merriënboer smiles: "We called it Multiplex as an acronym for the Dutch name *Multidisciplinair Praktijkleren voor Excellente Studenten*. Later, people decided the name made them think of a type of wood, so it was changed to PREMIUM. And indeed, that sounds much better." The programme focused on general competences that would prepare students to work in multidisciplinary, international teams. "That's why we immediately opted for a multidisciplinary approach: students from different faculties and programmes working together and giving input from their own academic backgrounds. This distinguishes PREMIUM from other honours programmes. We broke down the borders between faculties and confronted students with entirely new views on the problems they had to solve."

The PREMIUM approach to excellence has proven successful. Participants feel they have an advantage over others when they start working: they have enhanced communication skills, they work better in an international setting and they know how to deal with colleagues from different professional backgrounds. "During each project, the students receive guidance from UM lecturers, but also from experts in the company that submitted the research request. Moreover, they're supported by competence coaches in specific areas, such as communication, leadership or working in an international setting."

The UM supervisors are enthusiastic about the projects. They enjoy working with students from different faculties and are convinced of the added value of the programme. "It was never hard to find project supervisors or contractors", says Van Merriënboer. "But at first it was hard to find students. Master's students have very intensive work schedules. Writing their thesis, sometimes partly abroad, in addition to a full study programme is quite challenging. Only the very motivated are willing and able to take on an additional task. But as the benefits of PREMIUM became apparent, students became more and more interested in participating."

Van Merriënboer hopes PREMIUM will continue. "It sheds light on how we can improve the collaboration between faculties and study programmes. A lot of innovative programmes share common ground with several disciplines. If we want to keep developing as a university, we must look across faculty borders. That's exactly what PREMIUM does."

*Prof. Jeroen van Merriënboer is professor of Learning and Instruction at the Department of Educational Development and Research of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. He is also research director of the Graduate School of Health Professions Education.*

# ‘On expedition’ with students



**The Maastricht University Jesuit collection in the University Library contains several hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of books on travel, missions and exploration. All these books, dating mainly from the 17th to the 19th centuries, were collected or written by clergy of the intellectual Catholic order known as the Jesuits. They provide a wealth of information on how cultures viewed one another throughout the ages.**

Annemieke Klijn, a historian at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) and curator of the UM Art and Heritage Commission, felt that this treasure could and should be used in education. “Coincidentally, at a meeting of the Dutch Academic Heritage Foundation the Tropenmuseum proposed a project called ‘On expedition’. Our Jesuit library was the perfect match for this initiative.” And this is where MaRBL came in, even before the project had started on the national level.

In 2013, Klijn and her fellow historian Ernst Homburg selected a group of bachelor’s students and drew up an outline of the research theme. This is how excellent FASoS students came to study the perspective of the ‘other’, investigating how writers describe foreign countries and their people, culture, religion and politics (or lack thereof). The purpose was to teach students the art of interpreting primary sources and help them to better understand the exchange of knowledge, practices and values in the past. “In this way, the students gained both in-depth and broad knowledge. Moreover, by presenting and comparing their results they learned from one another. Knowledge transfer at its best”, says Homburg. Supervisors Klijn and Homburg made a pre-selection of about 35 books. “Few of them were in English; mostly they were in French, German or Dutch, and some in Latin”, says Homburg. Usually students were able to find an English translation on the internet. The books told tales of travels in Japan, China and America. The students learned to interpret the information and study the books from a critical point of view. “That was one of the major lessons the students learned”, says Klijn. “A book is greatly influenced by its publisher.

You have to continuously ask yourself ‘what perspective is this book written from, why was it written and what is its message?’”

Many factors influenced the views on foreign countries in these centuries. Klijn: “China, for example, was described in a positive light because the Jesuits had studied that country. They went on missions there and tried to understand its culture. What they didn’t particularly like were countries without a clear political structure; those countries were seen as degenerate. Communication played a crucial role. If the writers were able to speak with the people they described, their judgement was much kinder.”

“This is a great example of flexible research: you start with zero knowledge on the theme and three months later, you know a great deal about it”, Homburg continues. “Actually, Annemieke and I knew just as little as the students about the subject. We learned alongside them.” “We literally went ‘on expedition’ with them”, Klijn says with a smile. The students from the first cohort, in 2013, published their research papers in a book and curated an exhibition at the University Library. The students of the 2014 group wrote a series of Wikipedia pages on the books they had studied. There is enthusiasm all round for this MaRBL project. In Klijn’s view, “The students were excellent in every sense of the word. Also, the initiative was very well received at the University Library. Odin Essers, special collections curator, took the students on a tour through the library’s catacombs and organised the digitisation of many fabulous illustrations. Ernst and I have thoroughly appreciated this journey with the students.

*From left to right:*

- **Prof. Ernst Homburg** is Professor of History of Science and Technology in the department of History at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.
- **Dr Annemieke Klijn** is Assistant-Professor in the department of History at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.



# The look and feel of books



**Helen Piel, a student at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, participated in two MaRBLLe projects on the Jesuit collection. And she has a prize to show for it: in 2014, she was the first to win the Jesuit Library Contest, intended to promote the use of this collection among students. For her research she studied two volumes published by the Dutch priest Cornelius de Pauw in the 1760s. That De Pauw's work achieved instant fame is not surprising, Piel explains: "He applied what's known as degeneration theory to everyone who lived in America at the time. According to De Pauw, they were lazy, stupid, instinct driven and simple minded. These provocative views had a great impact in the 18th century, making him the most widely read philosopher of his time. Now, De Pauw is completely forgotten."**

This was Piel's first attempt at research. "It was a major departure from the regular study programme. Normally you just read a chapter or a paper. Instead, I had to concentrate on one whole book for almost two months. It gives you time to go in depth and get all the nitty-gritty details. It was a fascinating and challenging experience, because I had to get used to reading 18th century German and figure out where to find all the background information I needed for my research." She was captured by De Pauw's style of writing, but not too keen on his methods: "He took all these ideas and reformulated them for his purposes. He wrote about other authors in a condescending way; for example, he'd say they should have stuck with travelling instead of writing. Yet he himself never left his own study to visit any of the places he wrote about. He should definitely have been more modest." Piel is now doing a research master's. "I'm truly glad I got an opportunity to discover what it means to conduct research at such an early stage. It made me realise that my heart lies in research."

Odin Essers, the special collections curator at the University Library, is a strong advocate of the MaRBLLe Jesuit collection projects. "Of course, these days you can find digitised versions of almost

any book on the internet but to us it's important that students physically come into contact with the books in the closed stacks. They have to feel them, smell them and realise they're touching books that were published hundreds of years ago. And when they do, they're fascinated by the experience. The MaRBLLe projects on the Jesuit collection are a great opportunity for students to use these books over a longer period of time."

Working with the collections at the UM library is a way of promoting them explains Essers. "The students not only write about them in their theses and on Wikipedia, but also on social media, which makes others interested in seeing and using them. In the first MaRBLLe Jesuit project, the students wrote a book. In the second they published a series of Wikipedia pages, and for the third we envisage creating a world map with illustrations, enriched with multimedia elements. What we're seeing is that our publications on the internet don't go unnoticed. We get requests for the use of pictures or additional information from all over the world. These are all contacts that might lead to partnerships with other organisations. Every time, you reach more people."

Students have a genuine interest in the special collections at the University Library. Essers: "Recently, our Special Collections Student Promoteam organised a Poetry Slam based on the books of fairy tales and legends in our collection. It was a huge success, attended by 200 students. Who says young people find old books stuffy and boring?"

*From left to right:*

- *Odin Essers MA is special collections curator and e-learning adviser at the Maastricht University Library.*
- *Helen Piel is a student of the Research Master in Cultures of Art, Science and Technology Research at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.*

# Selection is the **key**



**Last November Kate Surala, a third-year bachelor's student at the Faculty of Law, flew to Hong Kong to present her paper 'Should the Common European Sales Law influence the Chinese Consumer Protection Law reform?' at the annual conference of the European–China Law Studies (ECLS) Association. Without MaRBLe, she says, this would never have happened. "Working on this research paper has been one of the best experiences I've ever had. I was allowed to choose my own subject and work both independently and in group sessions. All of us in the MaRBLe group conducted research on the Europeanisation of private law, each with a different focus. We discussed our results in weekly group sessions. If there was common ground in our respective research projects, we shared our data. It was the first time in my life I was allowed to dive deeply into a subject of my own interest, and I thoroughly enjoyed it."**

The project coordinator, Bram Akkermans, is proud of Surala and all the other MaRBLe students he coached. To him, it has been a successful experiment. "The question was threefold: can bachelor's students do this type of research, are they capable of doing it in a group, and can they do it as part of the curriculum? And it turns out they can." The extra workload on top of their normal programme demands a lot from the participants. Selection is therefore key, says Akkermans. "We look carefully at grades and motivation. Only the top 20% of students are permitted to take part. Thanks to this strict selection procedure, the dropout rate is very low. Over the years MaRBLe had an extremely high completion rate."

MaRBLe is not just about research; it's about learning to influence your own career path. Akkermans is living proof: "I give the students workshops on communication and presentation skills, leadership and the use of social media. They have to get to know themselves, to be themselves and to take charge of their own paths."

Surala is a good example: Akkermans and MaRBLe have had a major impact on her life. "In my first year here, I learnt about the PhD track you can do after your master's degree. That's not for me, I thought immediately. I want to practise law. And now, working on this research project has fascinated me so much that I'm seriously considering doing a research master's and possibly a PhD."

The Faculty of Law has also participated in multidisciplinary MaRBLe projects, although these were fewer in number. "It's not easy to find students who are willing to work in an interfaculty team. That's not unique to law students; it's universal", explains Akkermans. "We carried out two projects with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and those worked out very well. The difficulties are mainly administrative: scheduling the weekly sessions, deciding on the number of credits students will earn. But those difficulties can easily be solved. MaRBLe has brought the faculties much closer together."

There is no doubt in Akkermans's mind: MaRBLe must continue beyond SIRIUS. "Stopping is not an option. As they say in the world of economics, it's a matter of path dependency: it's easier and much more effective to continue along the set path than to create an entirely new one. And this path has proven value for both students and supervisors. Working on these projects with such highly motivated and bright students is very, very gratifying." Kate Surala, of course, couldn't agree more.

*From left to right:*

- **Dr Bram Akkermans** is assistant professor of European Private Law and member of the MaRBLe for Excellence Steering Committee.
- **Kate Surala** is a third-year bachelor's student of European Law School – English Language Track at the Faculty of Law.

# PREMIUM @LAW



**Christine van Basten-Boddin, Samantha Renssen and Mieke Olaerts are all involved in excellence at the Faculty of Law. Several years ago, Van Basten-Boddin was appointed project leader of PREMIUM at the faculty: “It was clear that a decentralised approach worked better, so ‘ambassadors’ were designated in all faculties. I strongly believe in excellence programmes, so I was happy to take on that task.”**

Law students were not easy to recruit for interdisciplinary projects. They were unsure of their role in that setting, which made them hesitant. Van Basten-Boddin picked up on that signal: “I looked for a faculty excellence programme that already existed and would fit in with the PREMIUM concept. I came across the ICGI master class series, an honours programme in which selected students conduct research on real-life themes in corporate law. They receive support from associated law firms and faculty coaches. Based on their research, they write an individual article that is published in the ICGI series. They both deepen their knowledge and broaden their competences. The interdisciplinary element is less prominent, but otherwise this faculty variant perfectly meets the PREMIUM objectives. Since 2013, PREMIUM @LAW has been extended to other international master’s programmes as well. Pro rata we have the most participants of all UM PREMIUM programmes, and other faculties are considering implementing their own versions.”

Samantha Renssen coordinates the ICGI PREMIUM master class series. She recruits and selects the students, and organises the programme together with the ICGI associated law firms. She is familiar with UM’s excellence initiatives from the inside: “I participated in the MaRBL programme as a bachelor’s student, moved on to an interdisciplinary PREMIUM project in my master’s programme and then took part in the ICGI PREMIUM master class series. For me, a regular programme wasn’t enough. I wanted to do more. It’s changed the course of my career: the master class series led to a job as a student assistant, thanks to my ICGI article I was able to

start my PhD research, and ultimately all this got me a position as a faculty lecturer.” Building up a network and community are great advantages of the programme. “You meet people through PREMIUM who can help you find an internship or even a job. You improve your personal and professional competences and learn to take your career into your own hands.”

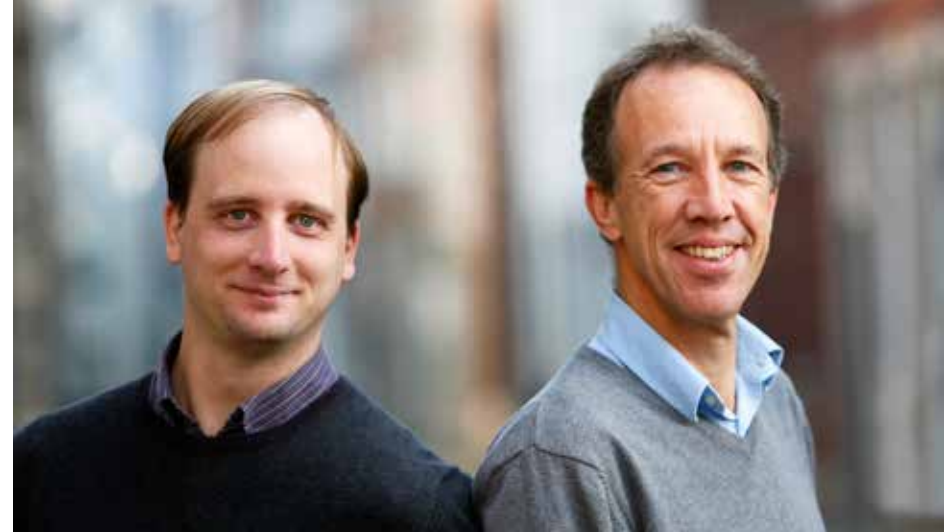
Mieke Olaerts coordinates an excellence programme in the Faculty of Law master’s curricula. She has initiated PREMIUM projects and also served as a PREMIUM project mentor. “Individual development is one of the greatest advantages of an excellence programme: discovering your own competences and knowing how to use them. As a PREMIUM project mentor I’ve personally guided teams that worked fantastically together. The members helped one another when things weren’t going well and were amazing at time management and task division. People learn a great deal from this group process. And they get the opportunity to solve a real-life problem in a safe setting, which gives them invaluable experience.” Olaerts emphasises the importance of a personal approach. “To recruit students for these programmes, you have to be in contact with them, speak about it in class, have them meet other PREMIUM students. Simply sending an email with information is not enough.”

All three hope PREMIUM will continue. Van Basten-Boddin: “As a university we’ve learned from this experience. We know what works and what doesn’t. We should also be able to make the good elements of the programme, such as coaching, available to the entire student population. There’s a lot to be gained there.”

*From left to right:*

- **Christine van Basten-Boddin LL.M** is managing director of the Institute for Corporate Law, Governance and Innovation Policies and project leader of @Law for PREMIUM.
- **Samantha Renssen LL.M** is a lecturer and PhD candidate in the Private Law Department.
- **Dr Mieke Olaerts** is assistant professor in the Private Law Department.

# Robot World Cup



**By 2050 a team of fully autonomous humanoid robot football players, complying with the official rules of FIFA, will beat the winner of the latest World Cup in a football match. This is the official goal of the annual international robotics competition for NAO robots. The Maastricht Department of Knowledge Engineering (DKE) hopes to be in that game. Nico Roos and Mark Winands coordinate DKE's MaRBLe programme.**

On launching the programme, they decided to let their students work with the humanoid robot the department had recently acquired. "Excellent students sometimes feel constrained when they work in groups, so we decided to offer them a longer period in which they could develop individually as researchers", Roos explains. "At first we had a large group of participants, but as time went by, competition from other opportunities grew. Good students often get offers for great exchange opportunities and then their choice is easy."

"Also," Winands adds, "they found it demanding to work with embedded hardware. Robots can experience problems caused by temperature or other factors; their joints wear out, sometimes they don't do exactly what you want because the material causes deviations. That's challenging for students who are used to adjusting software to solve a problem." Still, one MaRBLe student, Gabi Ras, went to Brazil to take part in the World Cup with three NAO robots from DKE. "They didn't make it through the pool phase," says Winands, "but we were there, and even made it onto national television! Gabi is now setting up a Maastricht division of the Dutch NAO team. The objective of having these robots play football is to investigate ways of getting them to carry

out a task together. When you do that through football or another game, you make it appealing to the public."

It is unclear whether the MaRBLe robot project will continue at DKE. Roos: "It has even more competition now, because we started the project Knowledge Engineering at Work. One in four of our best students get the chance to work in a company, and most excellent students take that opportunity. However, we'll certainly continue the alternative MaRBLe @DKE programme. We got this idea from the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience: a MaRBLe honours track for the bachelor's thesis. If your teacher thinks you're good enough, you can join MaRBLe @DKE and try to get your bachelor's thesis published, which some students have actually managed to do. Only last year, three of our MaRBLe students even had full papers published."

MaRBLe has given bachelor's research at DKE a definite boost. "Teachers are now more alert", says Winands. "When they have a good student, they immediately think of a research paper. Some students have presented these papers at conferences abroad. That's a great incentive for them, not to mention the fact that their presence enhances UM's visibility worldwide." Roos agrees: "We've noticed that it helps us keep bachelor's students in Maastricht. And in evaluations, the scientific aspects of our programme score higher."

*From left to right:  
Dr Mark Winands and Dr Nico Roos are assistant professors at the UM Department of Knowledge Engineering.*

# Everybody wins



**Dominik Mahr is the programme coordinator and contact person for all PREMIUM students at the School of Business and Economics. “In this role you have to be the face of the programme. Personal contact and enthusiasm are crucial, otherwise you don’t get enough resonance”, he explains. “But it’s not difficult to be enthusiastic, because working with these students is rewarding. They’re very motivated, ambitious and smart, and PREMIUM provides them with extra skills on top of the ones we already teach.”**

Mahr feels that the most valuable experience for the students lies in their personal development: “These very clever students find themselves working in small, multidisciplinary groups where, for once, they’re not automatically the best, the leader. They start an entirely new project, together with equally smart people who speak a different professional language. They have to step out of their faculty comfort zone and present their ideas to other students who don’t share the same background.” Graduate feedback shows that SBE alumni are very good at their jobs once they start working, but it takes time before they are fully able to communicate professionally with clients. “We have to reduce this gap”, says Mahr. “Through PREMIUM they learn to better organise themselves and to improve their communication with clients of all backgrounds.”

The PREMIUM students at SBE have worked on several challenging projects for very different clients. For example, they developed an app for Statistics Netherlands (CBS) to help the organisation connect with young people. The question was ‘How to reach Generation Y?’, and the students were tasked with coming up with a communication strategy to reach people born in the eighties and nineties. The app they created raises awareness among young people of the importance of fact checking and the work of CBS. “We always try to select assignments that fit the age group of our students”, Mahr explains. “This job was perfect for them. At the end,

they presented their results to a large audience, and did so in a very credible way because they themselves are the target group.” Another successful, interdisciplinary project, commissioned by the Maastricht cultural marketer Mikos Pieters, was a business plan for a novel crowdfunding platform. The aim of the platform is to help artists in the Meuse-Rhine Euregion secure funding for their cross-cultural projects. The students detailed ways to break down mental, physical and legal barriers between the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, and designed a plan to fuel the Euregion’s cultural and creative sector.

For ARION, an innovative regional healthcare company, a team of SBE students investigated the opportunities for expansion to eastern Europe. Mahr explains: “The company wanted to introduce its new product – for hygienically ‘washing’ patients without using water – in central and eastern European hospitals and care centres. Over several months, the students collected and analysed data to gain a deeper understanding of the healthcare markets in these countries. Based on those findings, they were able to give ARION’s business developers concrete recommendations for expansion. In general, we try to connect our projects to regional companies and organisations. A local network is very important for the students.”

And PREMIUM has one further advantage, according to Mahr: “Students benefit, clients benefit – but our staff also benefit. Before we coach the PREMIUM students, we receive coaching ourselves. From next year, we’ll even have certified training in competence coaching. This type of training is extremely inspiring and valuable. I consider it employee development.”

*Dr Dominik Mahr is assistant professor of Marketing and Supply Chain Management at the School of Business and Economics.*

# A match made in heaven



**Over the years, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and Maastricht University (UM) have established a strong partnership in which they share their expertise and knowledge. There are joint, long-term research programmes, workshops and presentations at CBS for UM students, and temporary positions at CBS that enhance PhD students' knowledge of statistical methods in practice. And there is PREMIUM. Interdisciplinary teams of excellent PREMIUM students have already completed five research projects for CBS on themes ranging from traffic and transport to globalisation. The biggest PREMIUM eye-catcher was the development of a quiz app that will help CBS spark young people's interest in statistics. Devised by five talented UM students, the app encourages users to think and to apply the right facts. It is part of an innovative communication strategy at CBS focused on reaching Generation Y.**

All PREMIUM students left a big impression on CBS. Sector manager Jo Thomas was astonished by what they were able to achieve: "They were incredible, without exception. I've rarely seen so much independence and self-regulation in such young people. The way they allocated the tasks, approached the subject matter and delivered on time was amazing. I could have hired them all." His colleagues, the CBS programme managers Hans Schmeets and Martin Luppés, couldn't agree more. "They had great capacity for learning. They were expected to work with tools and knowledge outside their study curricula, but they picked these up in no time", says Luppés. "The team members hardly knew one another when they started, but they very quickly managed to become a real team with clear tasks", Schmeets continues. "They didn't compete, but complemented each other", adds Thomas. "There was synergy."

In return, CBS did great things for the students. Some were introduced to the Director General, while others were invited to The Hague to see a different side of the institution. Yet others attended the Floriade in Venlo in 2012, where they gained input for their research from different organisations and experts in the fields of traffic and transport. Both CBS and the students highly appreciated these visits. Thomas: "They were proactive, wanted to learn as much as they could and spoke freely and with interest to everyone they met."

CBS has several motives for cooperating with knowledge institutes like UM. It aims to acquire broad knowledge of different methodologies and content areas, share its vast expertise and present itself as an interesting employer. "And of course, this fits with our principle of pursuing sustainable entrepreneurship in the region", says Thomas. "We have to invest in building bridges between our data and knowledge. UM, for example, has extensive knowledge about the labour market, and we have a great deal of data on business, industry and the labour market", explains Luppés. "Combining these two sources allows us to study issues from different perspectives."

UM's future at CBS looks bright. "It's easy to think of new projects", says Schmeets. "For example, research on labour market or traffic data in the Belgian and German border regions as compared to other Dutch provinces. Or studies in the field of sustainability, which is a spearhead theme at both UM and CBS." Thomas: "We're increasingly emphasising the connection between different statistical themes, so that we can better describe the underlying phenomena. Collaboration with UM allows us to gain deeper insight in these matters."

Luppés has a plan: "UM and CBS should meet twice a year to explore current and future themes. This would allow us to anticipate and investigate what we each have to offer. We could create a long-term programme based on policy, academic knowledge and data infrastructure. I see numerous new PREMIUM assignments ahead."

*From left to right:*

- **Jo Thomas Msc** heads the CBS Surveys Department. Until 1 August 2014, he was Sector Manager for Traffic and Transport at CBS.
- **Prof. Hans Schmeets** is Programme Manager for Social Cohesion, Wellbeing and Public Opinion Research at CBS and professor of Social Statistics at the UM Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.
- **Dr Martin Luppés** is Programme Manager for Globalisation and Internationalisation at CBS.

# MaRBLe crosses borders



**In the library of the RWTH history department in Aachen, surrounded by books, Rüdiger Haude of the RWTH and Pieter Caljé of the UM Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences discuss their joint projects. “We met at the closing ceremony of the MaRBLe project ‘Mapping war memories of World War II in the Maas–Rhine border region’, which Meike Wulf supervised and I assisted with”, says Haude. “And we were convinced that this cross-border cooperation should be institutionalised.” Caljé agrees: “That third-year MaRBLe project suddenly made us realise that these students had never been introduced to conducting research before. The UM MaRBLe coordinator Ellen Bastiaens and I decided we should try to embed this element much earlier in the programme, and our idea was accepted by the steering committee of MaRBLe.”**

Supported by a number of colleagues, Haude and Caljé developed the concept of MaRBLe research for second-year students. It should not be quite as challenging as the third-year project, but still provide a good introduction to research skills. “Participating in this second-year MaRBLe project guarantees the student a place in the third-year project, which is very motivating for them”, explains Caljé. They came up with two projects: one on memories of World War I in the Euregion, and the other on the Selfkant region, a subject in which Haude specialises. “Selfkant, a German region very close to the Limburg border, was part of the Netherlands for 14 years after World War II”, says Haude. “The question is, what this has done to the collective identity of the people living there?”

The project on memories of World War I revealed interesting perspectives of the war. Caljé: “The students found that every nationality has its own view. Sometimes when you read a text about World War I, you can almost guess the nationality of the author.” “The students had to deal with the past tensions between their nations”, adds Haude. “But there were no hard feelings among the students themselves.”

One of the advantages of cross-border research is being able to use archives in another country. All

participating students gained access to both German and Dutch archives. “That also solved our problem with the international students”, says Caljé. “They were able to use German materials and not only Dutch sources.” Haude: “My main motivation for this cross-border project was to bring our students into contact with a completely different system of learning. They greatly benefited from working with the Maastricht students, as they told me over and over again. I also saw how their behaviour changed over the course of the project. They began to speak more in the group sessions, while at first the discussions were dominated by the Maastricht students.”

And there were other benefits, too: “Our students are not used to speaking in English all the time, so this was a useful experience for them”, says Haude. “The history programme here in Aachen still teaches great old historical values, such as source criticism, contextualisation and so on”, Caljé continues. “Our programme in Maastricht is much broader, not specifically focused on history. Our liberal arts students can benefit from the disciplinary, methodological rigour that Aachen offers.”

Both historians are convinced the cooperation must continue. “We even hope to include students from Leuven next year”, says Caljé. In Haude’s view, “It’s worth it to struggle and overcome the obstacles of cross-border activities. Personally I was most impressed with our Dutch counterpart’s capacity to solve problems. Everything could always be worked out.” Enthusiasm is the key word, according to Caljé: “When people really want to make something work, all the obstacles of bureaucracy and rules evaporate. That also goes for the students. They had to travel for an hour by bus to meet, and they had different schedules, so the planning wasn’t easy. But it worked. They did it for the thrill of actually doing their own research.”

*From left to right:*

- **Dr Rüdiger Haude** is a lecturer in the history department at RWTH Aachen University.
- **Dr Pieter Caljé** is associate professor of Political Culture in the history department at the UM Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

# MaRBLLe voyage



**‘Captain’ Arie van der Lugt proudly speaks of the MaRBLLe ‘sailors’ who go on a voyage of scientific exploration. The metaphor came from a student in the very first MaRBLLe cohort: “She likened bachelor’s students doing their own research to Columbus and his maritime voyage of discovery. She handed out fruit to all participants during the first plenary meeting to prevent them from getting scurvy. Ever since, here at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience (FPN) we recruit MaRBLLe sailors to come aboard and join us on this research journey.”**

MaRBLLe has been a big success at this faculty. Its initial critics were silenced years ago, when the first cohort came through. “At first, some colleagues were doubtful”, explains Van der Lugt. “They didn’t think bachelor’s students could do serious research; they called it ‘Mickey Mouse’ research. And then it happened: in that very first year, we had a brilliant MaRBLLe student whose article was published in a renowned peer-reviewed journal with her as joint first author. She’s now working on her PhD on a similar subject. In other words, she started her own line of research back in the bachelor’s phase. Isn’t that amazing? Now, whenever someone is sceptical about MaRBLLe, I flash the journal with that student’s article and ask: ‘Were you already on board back then?’ That usually helps.”

What makes MaRBLLe so special at FPN is the chance to take it abroad. MaRBLLe coordinators Herco Fonteijn and Arie van der Lugt worked hard to make that happen. Fonteijn: “It was necessary, because our best students were offered the opportunity to study abroad. That made it difficult for them to participate in MaRBLLe. We invested a lot of time and energy to set up partnerships with universities around the world. Now, MaRBLLe Abroad enables our students to conduct MaRBLLe research in other countries.” One of those students is Lotta Pries, who conducted her MaRBLLe project in Halifax, Canada. It changed her entire perception of research: “I was convinced that research wasn’t my thing, but I decided to give it a chance. In Halifax, my supervisor made me a full member of the psychology lab and I was involved in all the various aspects of research. I’d never

fully realised there are so many sides to doing research, each of which requires great personal dedication. You discuss things with many different people and carry out your own experiments. You get to make decisions, you write, you work with statistics ... It’s given my career a totally new direction. I’m now doing a research master’s, because I think that’s where my future lies.”

Bachelor’s programmes at FPN also have a strong research component earlier on, in the second year. “But MaRBLLe is the icing on the cake of bachelor’s research”, says Van der Lugt. “The best thing is that it transforms students from knowledge consumers into knowledge producers much earlier in their academic careers.” Fonteijn agrees: “Research-Based Learning enables students to acquire the social competences they need to increase their employability. Not only in research, but for any future position. It’s an enriching, valuable experience.”

A key word is empowerment, according to Van der Lugt. “If you have faith in the students, if you invest in them and facilitate them, they won’t let you down. You’ll be amazed at what they can achieve. You also have to be willing to let go of strict rules. You have to leave room for innovation without being caught in a web of rules and regulations.” Pries speaks from experience: “In MaRBLLe you can conduct research without the pressure of having to commercialise your work. It’s all about learning and doing something right, not about output.” Van der Lugt agrees: “The fact that no immediate value is attached to this research ultimately creates more value.”

*From left to right:*

- **Dr Arie van der Lugt** is associate professor in the History, Philosophy and Teaching section of the Department of Cognitive Neuroscience.
- **Lotta Pries** is a student of the Research Master in Clinical and Cognitive Neuroscience, specialising in Psychopathology.
- **Dr Herco Fonteijn** is associate professor in the Work and Organisational Psychology section of the Department of Work and Social Psychology.



# Learning **through** research



**For several years Oscar van den Wijngaard coordinated PEERS, the MaRBL programme at University College Maastricht. “In fact,” he says, “PEERS started even before MaRBL. We began incorporating Research-Based Learning into our bachelor’s curriculum at about the same time proposals for Sirius could be submitted, and UM decided it provided an excellent model for a university-wide, innovative project. The idea behind PEERS was developed along three axes of collaborative learning. The first is that of students working together, which is also essential to Problem-Based Learning. The second axis is close collaboration between student and researcher. And the third is to step out of the academic bubble and search for social relevance.” In MaRBL, the faculties create interdisciplinary projects on which students from various fields collaborate. UCM students, however, have different needs. “Our students follow an open, liberal arts curriculum, so they’re used to interdisciplinary work”, Van den Wijngaard explains. “They often long for the opportunity to focus on a single topic from one perspective over a longer period of time. We decided to give them the time – an entire semester – and the space to acquire essential research skills.”**

Researcher Teun Dekker has led several PEERS projects: “It’s an extraordinary experience, because you work with the students in an entirely different way. As a lecturer, you’re normally supposed to know everything. But this is a model of co-creation. None of us know what we’re going to find.” PEERS students work on their individual research, but also participate in workshops and lectures. Dekker introduces his groups to a methodology he developed in his own research: “I created a method to translate political debates on social issues into the language of philosophy. Philosophers are extremely good at analysing and evaluating arguments. Translating political debates into their language helps us understand and appreciate these arguments. My method can be applied to any topic, so students can choose a debate of their own interest, ranging from Scottish independence to the mobilisation of German soldiers in Kosovo. They gather all the discourse they can find on their chosen debate – reports, speeches, newspaper articles, parliamentary discussions and so on – and then try to reconstruct the central arguments and apply the method. That’s where true research comes in: they learn that they can’t just follow

the method religiously, but must use it as a guideline. They become conscious of its limitations and realise they have to modify it for their own purposes. They turn into reflective researchers.”

Student Jan Meijer couldn’t agree more. “First you think, oh well, it’s just a matter of assembling information, entering the data into the checklist and you’re done. But soon you find out that for your own topic you have to apply the method differently, focused on what you need. That’s a very important skill to learn.” His PEERS research investigated the debate on the common EU agricultural policy, specifically the arguments in support of direct payments by the EU to farmers and agricultural businesses. “Of the many different arguments, I focused on two. One of these turned out to be invalid due to factual errors; the other was dismantled because the word ‘reward’ was continuously used in two different senses, sometimes as ‘desert’ and sometimes as ‘incentive’. I thoroughly appreciated the opportunity to focus in depth on one subject for a whole semester. It was a valuable, intensive and intense experience.”

Even those students not considering a career in research will benefit from participating in PEERS, says Van den Wijngaard. “It’s Research-Based Learning. It teaches you skills that are relevant in every field, including outside research. You learn to analyse information, describe problems and find methods to solve them. PEERS is a good example of a learning project where students do their own thing, which makes them more motivated to work and get as much out of it as they can. It’s a great model for ownership of learning.”

*From left to right:*

- **Jan Meijer** is a fourth-year student at University College Maastricht.
- **Oscar van Wijngaard MA** is a lecturer in humanities and coordinator of Academic Advising at University College Maastricht.
- **Dr Teun Dekker** assistant professor of Political Philosophy at University College Maastricht, Acting Dean of University College Maastricht and Vice Dean of Academic Affairs.

# Added value



**“At the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML), we introduced MaRBLe much later than the other faculties”, says MaRBLe project leader Jonathan van Tilburg. “We wanted to make sure it had added value for our students. Because this is a science faculty, Research-Based Learning is already a strong element in our curricula. Our students start working on research from day 1: they do experiments, write reports, use statistics. They learn all these research skills in the regular programme. So we thought carefully about how we could give our excellent students additional tools through MaRBLe.”**

And they found a way. MaRBLe at FHML is all about presenting your research to a multidisciplinary group. “We decided the students should experience what it’s like to present their research at a conference. This allows them to find out which extra tools they need; tools that are not part of the curriculum.” Van Tilburg invites excellent students from seven tracks at FHML (the medicine track is excluded as there are no internships during the bachelor’s phase) to apply for the programme, and selects 40 on the basis of grades and motivation. Groups of 10 are formed, consisting of students from each track.

“They start off with a five-minute sales pitch about their research internship. That first time, it always goes completely wrong. They’re all used to speaking to people from their own academic discipline, so after a very brief introduction, they immediately go in depth. They don’t realise that most of the others in the group come from an entirely different background and only understand half of what they’re saying. You can imagine that a highly detailed explanation about molecular research is hard to understand for someone from European Public Health.

During that first session, they get feedback from one another and from the mentor. Based on that feedback, they rewrite their presentation and get a second chance.”

The students receive career coaching, learn about their strong and weak points, and practice presenting in English. But the end product of their MaRBLe project is an abstract for the Science Research Conference. “For the first time, they have to work within the constraints of an abstract lay-out. They have to write about their research for their bachelor’s thesis in only 200 words. That’s difficult for them: how do you grasp the essence of the research? We discuss this all together and give feedback.”

The best four abstracts are chosen, and their authors invited to present their research at the annual MaRBLe closing conference. The other students present a poster on their theme. “That’s quite a challenge as well”, says Van Tilburg. “Normally they write a 24-page paper. Now they have to limit themselves to 6 pages.”

There is no doubt that MaRBLe will continue at FHML in the coming years. Van Tilburg has plans: “Next year, I want the MaRBLe students to present their research at the Student Research Conference of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). I’ll have them all upload their abstracts and see if they get selected to experience the real thing!”

*Dr Jonathan van Tilburg is assistant professor at the FHML, track coordinator for Molecular Life Sciences and MaRBLe project leader.*

# Vulnerable is good



**“As a PhD student I’ve benefited from coaching, and I wanted to return the favour”, says Nadine Kiratli, a competence coach in the PREMIUM programme. She and her fellow coach Gonny Willems are busy bees. Kiratli, who will soon complete her PhD dissertation, tutors and supervises master’s students at the School of Business and Economics. Willems is head of the Student Affairs Office at the Faculty of Humanities and Sciences. She, too, is working on her PhD at the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience. Where could you find more inspiring models for ambitious PREMIUM students?**

As a study adviser, Willems gives lectures on competence building: “Science students often see the development of these soft skills as a less important part of their education; just a way of tweaking their CVs. Their main focus is on content: hard-core mathematics, computer science and artificial intelligence. When I started coaching the PREMIUM students, I noticed a similar attitude. Some recognise the benefits of competence coaching. Others feel they have everything under control, and they form the biggest challenge for a competence coach. You have to show them how important competence development is for their studies, but especially for their future careers. At first, students often want to develop more obvious competences, such as leadership or creativity. But talking to them individually gives you the opportunity to dig deeper, and you can start to work on other roles and personality aspects as well.”

Kiratli agrees: “They have to realise it’s not only about professional competence coaching, but also about personal development. Your private profile extends into your professional arena, and has an impact on how you engage in a professional environment. I usually see two extremes: there are the students who come to the obligatory meetings and you’re lucky if you get them to understand the importance and concept. And then there’s the other extreme: students who are already self-reflective, who have critical attitudes towards themselves. You click with them from the first minute on. Those sessions are almost like open heart surgery. Everything you do with them has an immediate consequence. With the reluctant people, you have to be more careful.

You don’t want to distance them even further from the idea of coaching. I’m convinced it’s just a shield they put up. They’re very good at hiding their insecurities; it’s a defence mechanism. They have no interest in showing weakness. What they have to realise is that being vulnerable is a strength. People who are highly self-assured have no problem revealing and reflecting on their weaknesses.”

“For some of these excellent students, it’s the first time in their studies that they’ve received individual attention”, explains Willems. “Students who do well usually only hear ‘carry on, good job’. In fact, most of the personal guidance the university offers is focused on getting our struggling students on track. The focus on high achievers in PREMIUM offers a whole new perspective. Talented students deserve personal guidance too. While they often seem to have everything under control, they can gain so much from competence coaching. For example, their professional profile has to match their personality. Introverts are more likely to flourish in a more autonomous setting or a small team, where they can serve as experts; this will be preferable for them than being, say, the CEO of a large company. It’s important to open their eyes: being happy in life means finding what suits you, not what you think should suit you.”

For Kiratli, education is not a balanced split of 50% knowledge and 50% social skills: “It should tip towards social skills. They provide the basis for acquiring additional knowledge in collaboration with others. This type of education is the only way to prepare us for the problems we face today.”

*From left to right:*

- **Nadine Kiratli Msc** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Marketing and Supply Chain Management at the School of Business and Economics.
- **Gonny Willems Msc** is Head of Student Affairs in the Department of Knowledge Engineering at the Faculty of Humanities and Sciences.

# An excellent future



**Ellen Bastiaens, coordinator of the MaRBLLe and PREMIUM programmes, just finished speed-dating 104 students who are keen to participate in PREMIUM. “The key words are high quality, motivation and the desire to work in a team on a real job. Excellent students want to learn and be useful.”**

Both the number of applications and their quality have significantly increased over the years. PREMIUM and MaRBLLe have proven themselves: “The two programmes are well known among students and staff. Word has spread that participation demands extra effort, but definitely helps you on your way to a career. And there are other benefits, too: staff members from all faculties have built up close teams that exchange ideas and share experiences.” This success is probably also the result of the open attitudes of the organisers. “We listen to the students”, explains Bastiaens. “Some of them want to broaden their knowledge and competences; others specifically want to go in-depth in their own academic field. We’ve kept all options open, and that’s worked.”

Maastricht University (UM) offers a wide range of honours and excellence programmes. There is University College Maastricht and the Maastricht Science Programme, there are the faculty honours programmes, and there is MaRBLLe and PREMIUM. Top-level students can take their pick on the basis of their own needs and wishes for personal development. Should these programmes be included in the regular curricula? “I wouldn’t advise that”, says Harm Hospers, Vice-Rector of Education. “Part of the success is due to selection. Not just selection by staff, but more importantly self-selection. Students realise that programmes like these come with responsibilities. The work is demanding and requires a great deal of self-reliance and personal development. Not every student is willing and able to take on that challenge, so you can’t impose it on them. At the same time, what we learn from these programmes reflects upon our entire curriculum. All students benefit from our experience with excellence.”

What does the future hold for MaRBLLe and PREMIUM? Bastiaens is confident: “In the past six years,

UM has embraced the idea of honours programmes, both university wide and within individual faculties. A policy has been developed for a common core and an excellence community. Actually, the proposal for the development of this community was written by students. The proposal has been received with great enthusiasm, and will also be implemented with the help of students. The common core initiative involves workshops for generic competences, such as poster design, presentation skills and debating techniques. In the excellence community, second-year students will organise a lecture series for first-year students. There will be academic activities, but also social gatherings. The objective is to create a community for honours students across faculty borders.”

But that’s not all. The excellence initiatives are also making their way to Tapijn, the former Maastricht army barracks, where Hospers is setting up a brand new UM institute for educational innovation: EDLAB. “The centre will have three pillars: educational innovation, educational services and excellence”, he explains. “We’re delighted to be able to include the coordination of the excellence programmes in our package. This gives us an opportunity to build upon something with proven value. Excellence will not only continue at Maastricht University; it will also be updated and evaluated, and experiences will be shared. EDLAB will become the home base and physical platform from which everything we learn about excellence can be disseminated to other faculties. It will also serve as a dovecote, where students and staff fly in and out to meet and exchange ideas.” Excellence is important for UM – that much is clear. However, says Hospers, “excellence must never be exclusively for the happy few. One of EDLAB’s goals is that all the lessons we learn and all good elements are spread right across UM. It’s all about the engagement of students and staff in education. And EDLAB will be very happy to facilitate that.”

*From left to right:*

- **Prof. Harm Hospers** is Vice-Rector of Education.
- **Dr Ellen Bastiaens** is programme leader of Excellence Programmes and Education Innovation at UM.

# Student-driven community



**Maastricht University (UM) is working on an excellence policy. One of the goals is to develop a common core shared by all honours programmes and an excellence community for honours students university wide. To write a concrete proposal, a working group of students from different faculties was set up. The students Elin Börjedal, Ulrike Thurheimer and Frederick Thielen were involved in the procedure.**

“Actually, the idea of creating our own community is entirely student driven”, says Thielen. “We had a meeting with a national association of honours students and, although participating in that association sounded interesting, we decided we wanted to establish our own community.” The working group departed entirely from the existing ideas of the national association. As Thurheimer explains, “We had a brainstorming session to gather thoughts on elements that current honours students felt were lacking and components that would improve the faculty honours programmes. In a later feedback session, students could comment on our proposal.” The working group designed a programme that binds faculties together and offers training in skills not offered in the faculty honours courses. Thurheimer: “We focused on personal development and skills training through workshops and social activities. We decided to build a community through networking and interfaculty exchange, and we wanted to broaden the horizons of honours students by organising academic activities and lecture series.” “The lecture series are entirely do-it-yourself”, Thielen adds. “Honours students organise them for one another. They make an inventory of topics that are of broad interest to the audience and invite speakers from all faculties, and occasionally from other universities and organisations. The result is a very diverse programme, specifically for the UM honours community.”

The common core also incorporates personal development workshops, with themes such as time management, networking skills, presentation skills and poster design.

“Another important element is the appointment of faculty student representatives, who keep the community going by organising events and acting as a link between the faculties”, says Börjedal. “Something that could still be improved is the fact that honours students are allowed to take courses at other faculties, but it’s not easy to find out which courses are suitable and how to register for them. The registration systems vary between faculties. Having someone there who can answer your questions and guide you through the system would be helpful.”

Another good idea is having an official opening ceremony for honours students, and handing out the honours certificates at a special closing ceremony. “To date the certificates have been handed out at the regular graduation ceremony, without further ado”, explains Börjedal. “Now there’ll be a specific ceremony where all honours students present their projects to an audience and receive their honours certificates.” Thielen continues: “We see a great future for excellence at UM, especially now that we’ll have a common room at Tapijn. There we can all come together and exchange thoughts. The rest will follow naturally.” All three agree on the importance of excellence at UM. Honours programmes allow students to study in depth and specialise in a subject that interests them. Thurheimer: “You share knowledge with people who want to excel just like you – that’s how you expand your knowledge.”

*From left to right:*

- **Elin Börjedal** is a third-year bachelor’s honours student at the Faculty of Law.
- **Ulrike Thurheimer** is a master’s student in Business Research at the School of Business and Economics. She is an alum of various honours programmes.
- **Frederick Thielen** is a student of the Research Master in Health Sciences at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. He is also the founding member and first president of the Maastricht Alumni Association of Honours Students (MAAHS).

# Critical friend



**“I’m glad I got the opportunity to be on the SIRIUS audit committee”, says Doeko Bosscher, emeritus professor of Contemporary History at the University of Groningen. “We acted as critical friends of the participating institutions, looked over their shoulders and gave advice when necessary. In fact, I learned a lot myself about honours programmes.”**

Bosscher attended several presentations of the SIRIUS programme at Maastricht University. “There was a good atmosphere. The programme was accessible and well organised, with time and room for experimentation and development.” Participants had to get used to some aspects of SIRIUS, for example the ‘intervision’ sessions with a partner university. “The idea was that the intervision would be a type of audit, where two universities review each other and inform the committee of the results. In most cases, the institutions found it difficult to find the right balance between a friendly exchange of experiences and critical scrutiny of the other’s approach. It’s a learning process, but one from which there’s a lot to gain.”

The SIRIUS subsidies ended in 2014. This is the right moment, then, to look both back and forwards. Was it a success? Does the end of SIRIUS mean the end of the programmes, or is this the beginning of the sustainable implementation of excellence in higher education? Bosscher: “SIRIUS has yielded more than you could possibly expect. It was true seed money: investing in a project that will now stand on its own two feet and reinforce itself. Of course, in some cases the results were better than in others. Some institutes, for example, are so strictly regulated that they have hardly any room for a new policy that will allow permanent implementation of excellence. But in general, I have high expectations for the future.”

What did we learn from SIRIUS? “First of all,” says Bosscher, “we gained a clearer view of the presumed connection between honours programmes and research masters. We learned that honours students may very well choose not to go into research, and pursue an entirely different

career instead. Academics traditionally think that good students are research oriented. That isn’t always the case. Good students simply want to get as much out of their studies as they can, whether they want to become prime minister or a CEO. We also saw the necessity of creating a community for honours students, which will allow them to work together. We learned that we have to differentiate between honours students. It’s much more diverse than intelligence and ambition; you also have to look at personalities and talents. And we realised the importance of cherishing the relationship with future employers.”

Almost all SIRIUS participants faced the same challenges. “They all struggle to transfer their experience with excellence into their regular curriculum. This transfer should not be incidental, but structural. Good practices ought to be shared with regular students; think of coaching, for example, or an introduction to research in the bachelor’s phase. The choice of lecturers for the excellence programmes is another issue. Should the best lecturers work in these programmes? That sounds logical, but we can’t let regular education suffer. Also, good lecturers are not always good researchers, and vice versa. It is difficult to find a standard for this.”

These days, most universities offer a wide spectrum of excellence programmes, from study exchanges and internships to University Colleges. Are there *too* many options? “Most organisations want to meet each and every demand. That’s both costly and time consuming. Bear in mind that demography shows we’re heading towards a decrease in students, so universities will have to compete more”, says Bosscher. “So it would be advisable for universities to create a distinctive profile, with a few well-defined options. That will allow students to make a deliberate choice.”

*Prof. Doeko Bosscher is emeritus professor of Contemporary History at the University of Groningen and member of the SIRIUS audit committee.*



**Maastricht University** (UM) stands out for its innovative approach to learning and its international outlook. With almost 16,000 students and 4,000 staff, UM offers a wide range of academic programmes, all designed to bring out the best in our students.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has been in use at UM ever since the university was founded. Over the last 35 years, we have become leading experts in this educational method. PBL is about more than just acquiring knowledge; it's about exchanging that knowledge in a challenging and effective way. Our researchers work in multidisciplinary teams and in close cooperation with international institutes, business and industry. In addition, research is integrated into the curricula at every level.

With almost 45% of students and more than 40% of teaching staff coming from abroad, UM can easily call itself the most international university in the Netherlands. Most of our study programmes are taught in English, and international themes are deeply rooted in our research and education.

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