

## **Open letter to the Executive Board of Maastricht University: Calling for a transformation to digital autonomy**

We, the undersigned, express our concern about Maastricht University's increasing reliance on services from Big Tech companies (particularly Microsoft) for our research, teaching and administrative activities.<sup>1</sup> Several years ago, the Rectors of the Dutch universities collectively and wisely warned about this (including Professor Letschert when she was Rector of UM).<sup>2</sup> Since then, little has happened. Worse, almost all Dutch universities migrated to Big Tech cloud services, at the expense of our internally operated computer centers.

Maastricht University is currently largely dependent on Microsoft Office 365 for all of our office work: emailing, writing documents, creating presentations, making video calls, sharing documents, and storing our data. Other significant dependencies exist for several key systems at our university. This creates multiple vulnerabilities, especially in the light of a rapidly changing geopolitical situation.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, there are significant security and privacy risks. Access to adopted services rely on authentication services that depend on transatlantic connections, that may be cut at the whim of the American government. In such a situation, all research and teaching would come to an immediate halt. We are also losing control over our data. Microsoft and other companies whose services we rely on can be required by law to share our communications, documents, and sensitive (personal) data with US agencies. The fact that the data are stored on European servers offers no (legal) protection<sup>4</sup>, and any protections that would be offered can be circumvented by US authorities without transparency.

Apart from these immediate security and privacy concerns, our reliance on Big Tech is fundamentally at odds with public values like freedom, independence, autonomy and equality—as pointed out already in 2019 by the Rectors. In other words, our reliance on Big Tech is also at odds with UM's stated core values.<sup>5</sup> The digital services we use for our research and teaching are profoundly shaping our professional practices; the incorporation of the newest AI-tools (e.g. co-Pilot) in basic software (e.g. MS Office 365) substantially shapes our teaching and research and hence impacts our professional autonomy.

Replacement of academic ICT infrastructure with software services from large companies has also changed what universities can offer to their community as well as to society in general. This is because universities increasingly favour corporate ICT and management environments over in-house or open source solutions developed for universities. In the process, they lose key capacity and flexibility to manage services beyond what is offered by the dominant companies. This inadvertently creates a preferential environment for the bigger players.

Combined, these matters transform universities from being a source of technical innovation and knowledge distribution to consumers of services. Or worse, by moving more research practices and associated innovation into the clouds, these companies end up determining the conditions for research, nudging research agendas and outcomes towards implementations in their environments. This means publicly funded research can at times come to entrench the dominance of these few companies into the future.

With this open letter we call upon you to change course, thereby freeing our university from this heavy reliance on services from these companies and contributing to greater technological self-determination, resilience and public innovation for and with universities across Europe.

We understand that these developments happened slowly over the years and our university cannot switch to its own IT-infrastructure or rebuild its ICT departments immediately. We therefore ask you to define a point on the horizon and collaboratively define a strategy. We ask you to make our university's explicit policy goal to move universities away from being consumers of Big Tech services in three years time. Universities, in collaboration with each other and SURF, need to work towards technical infrastructures and practices that restore our role in charting democratic and equitable digital futures.

Alternatives to Big Tech offerings—based on non-profit motives, public values and transparency—do exist and are essential for universities to transform digitally. Importantly, the less we use these alternatives, the more our reliance on Big Tech becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Below we list several things which can be done immediately.

- **Locally:** reverse the ongoing transition to Big Tech and invest in local expertise and deployment, for instance by running our own mail server, initiating Nextcloud- initiatives,<sup>6</sup> etc.
- **Nationally:** use your influence within SURF to make the point on the horizon a national goal for the (higher) education sector. Help turn universities into an engine of innovation for transformative and equitable digital futures.
- **Internationally:** work with other European universities for an autonomous academic IT-infrastructure that could be a source of innovation and resilience globally.

These issues have already been raised within our University Council to start moving towards digital resilience and self-determination in academic institutions across Europe and beyond. We know that a report making a similar case will soon be published by the Young Academy of the KNAW. If you support this strategy, [please sign this local petition](#)<sup>7</sup> to show your concerns and bring them to the attention of our university, preferably **before April 23, 2025**. We hope our initiative will be picked up by colleagues at other universities in The Netherlands to show the broad academic base of our concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. dr. Adriana Iamnitchi (Professor of Computational Social Sciences, FSE)

Prof. dr. Sally Wyatt (Professor of Digital Cultures, FASoS)

31 March 2025

#### NOTES:

1. This is a local UM version of a petition that was initiated by Jaap-Henk Hoekman, Bart Jacobs and Tamar Sharon from Radboud University Nijmegen (RUN) who launched an [Open Letter/Petition](#) that was quickly signed by more than 500 employees. In Utrecht, José van Dijck and Albert Meijer posted a UU version, that garnered more than 200 signatures on the first day.
2. Rectores magnifici van de Nederlandse universiteiten: "[Digitalisering bedreigt onze universiteit. Het is tijd om een grens te trekken](#)", *de Volkskrant*, December 22, 2019.
3. A. Meijer & J. van Dijck, "[Universiteit, maak je los van Big Tech](#)", *Trouw*, February 23, 2025.
4. Because of the U.S. CLOUD Act. See e.g. <https://iapp.org/news/a/questions-to-ask-for-compliance-with-the-eu-gdpr-and-the-u-s-cloud-act/>
5. UM's core values are: diversity and inclusion, sustainability, mutual respect, integrity, democratic principles, and transparency (UM Strategic Programme 2022-2026). Ways in which digitalization can support such values are discussed in *Building an ethical, empowered, and value-driven academic digital horizon: UM's 2030 digitalisation vision*, prepared by UM's Taskforce on Digital Society, October 2023. Available in the library, see: <https://maastrichtuniversity.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1418742227>
6. Pilot with NextCloud, supported by SURF. See: <https://communities.surf.nl/publieke-waarden/artikel/pilot-with-nextcloud-algosoc-and-surf-collaborate-on-digital-sovereignty>
7. <https://cryptpad.fr/form/#/2/form/view/tCrx6XpRvVWSEyepb7hlsEyybPX0EbVMpC5DwyzCx4w/>