Opening of the 2025–2026 Academic Year
Monday 1 September 2025
Theme: 'Impact without borders: local meets global'
Martinikerk, Groningen

Dear Members of the Supervisory Board of the University,

Members of the Board of the University and Board of the University Medical Centre Groningen,

Members of the University Council,

Mayor of the Municipality of Groningen Roelien Kamminga,

Mayor of the Municipality of Assen Marco Out,

The Kings Commissioner René Paas,

And, joining us here ánd online, I would also like to warmly welcome the Staff and Students of our University, and our esteemed guests, including honorary consuls and many representatives from The University of the North.

I cannot welcome you all in person but we warmly welcome you all here today.

It is the first Monday of September, and the university is starting up again, the students fill lecture halls and the streets of Groningen. The city has woken up! I am very happy to welcome you all in my capacity of Rector Magnificus to the opening ceremony of the 2025-2026 academic year. Also, today we celebrate our 411th dies natalis: after all, it was our birthday on the 23rd of August. It is wonderful to gather here and see all of you again in this beautiful church. I hope you took the opportunity to recharge, so you are ready to take on this new academic year.

Before I look ahead at what is to come, I would like to reflect for a moment on the past academic year. Like my first year as your Rector Magnificus, it was quite a turbulent period. Globally, we were confronted by the ongoing suffering in Ukraine. Also, the horrible scenes showing us the huge numbers of killed and starving children and civilians in the Kibbutz of Israel in 2023 and the ruins of Gaza as a result of the terrorist actions of Hamas and the policy of the Netanyahu government, are brutal. This is affecting us locally, leading to intense discussions about the role of the university in such complex situations, including in-depth contributions by our own scientists and scholars.

Closer to home, we once more realised that we have not yet achieved a society where women are safe. Here, on the streets of Groningen, women held a protest march, speaking out against femicide. It is very sad it is still necessary to do so. We have to continue to fight for equality and to ensure the safety of everyone day and night: at home and on the streets, going to parties as well as attending classes.
We will pay extra attention to the safety, equality and equity of women when next March we award the Aletta Jacobs Prize on International Women's Day. Providing a safe environment for everyone at our university is something we continue to work on. Meanwhile, I urge all of you to look out for each other and make sure everyone is safe.

Last January, the world held its breath when Donald Trump was inaugurated again as President of the United States of America. The attacks of his government on American universities in general and scientists in particular have far-reaching global repercussions. As rectores of the Dutch universities, we have published a statement about Academic Freedom. In the upcoming period, we will organise sessions and debates to create awareness and to discuss potential measures that can safeguard our freedom. At the same time, in a world that is boosting its defence capacity, we should not forget that knowledge and a strong democracy are indispensable for the resilience of both nations and unions. This is one of the reasons why it is unacceptable to cut spending on research and education.

It is clear that the world is changing and that we need to find other reliable partnerships. Both in terms of academic partners and related to the digital infrastructure. If we want to maintain our academic freedom, we need to safeguard solid and reliable knowledge and data infrastructures. In other words, we strive for digital sovereignty, as is also called for by many of our staff. This means we will reconsider our global partnerships and favour local EU-based digital and data solutions.

Local and global will always meet within the university. And they need to, certainly in the major transitions that are taking place in the fields of for example AI, green energy and healthy ageing. For those transitions to succeed, we cannot afford to hide behind the dikes, as some politicians seem to want. Forbidding or severely obstructing global cooperation is academically unwise, to say the least. These transitions require us to transcend borders. This also means encouraging students to learn more about democracy, peacekeeping and international diplomacy. Our interdisciplinary Master's programme in Philosophy, Politics and Economics is an excellent example of our drive to prepare students to play a major role in dealing with the global challenges in the future.

Local meets global means that we need to work with scientists and scholars abroad, and with institutions and people in our region. To improve upon each other's work and inspire each other to come up with new ideas, leading to further breakthroughs. This is why we are part of several regional and international programmes. We are interacting with universities all over the world, including local universities of applied sciences and vocational schools in the University of the North, as well as local and global entrepreneurs and dedicated R&D teams.

To give a few examples: we have global strategic partners and within Europe, we are one of the ten members of the ENLIGHT European University Alliance, working together on important local themes with impact on a global scale.

Regionally, in Emmen we are part of the Greenwise Campus, which wants the Northern Netherlands to become the global capital of the green energy transition. Furthermore, we are one of the driving forces behind the Health Technology Research and Innovation Cluster, which is playing a key role in the regional ambition to position our region as the leading centre for health technology. And last, but not least: we are looking forward to the arrival of our AI Factory, which will be part of our new IT hub in the former Niemeyer building on the Paterswoldseweg. This factory will be instrumental in developing advanced AI applications which will have a local as well as a global impact. In addition, it will also support our collaborations with a many other parties, like the Innovation Cluster Drachten.

All these examples of global and local collaboration focus on research and education that is both fundamental and impactful, seeking to provide the best solutions for transitions that matter regionally as well as globally. Inter- and transdisciplinarity play a pivotal role, and our four thematic schools are at the forefront of these developments.

Science has taken us to outer space and made us realise there are no real borders here on earth. Astronomy takes us even further: allowing us to look at the sky, knowing there is so much more out there to explore. The universe is filled with magnificent wonders we have barely begun to understand. That is why there should always be opportunity for curiosity driven research, for scientists and scholars to boldly go where no one has gone before. At the same time, it is important for the academic community to take our place in society, connecting our research with what the region needs. It goes without saying that all our research should be of high quality and internationally relevant. We have to find the right balance, combining the applied academic developments necessary to solve problems in the less far future with the fundamental academic developments that can help solve problems of the far future.

We want to have impact on a global scale AND we want to show what we can do locally. Now, I know this goes against the leaders with a protectionist agenda, but it's our job to show the world there is a better way. Let's continue to overcome and cross these boundaries, so local can continue to nourish the global endeavour of science and education.

We start that off with an inspiring program where multiple perspectives on crossing borders will be shared, intermixed with musical contributions by the *a capella* choir of Bragi and organist Eeuwe Zijlstra. For now, we will first show a video message of Universities of the Netherlands and after that the president of this university, Jouke de Vries, will address you.

[Video UNL]
[SPEECH JOUKE]
[BRAGI]

RM:
Thank you Bragi for bringing to us the French song “Margoton va't à l'iau”, composed by Francis Poulenc’.

And now it’s my true honour to introduce our next esteemed speaker, Prof. Robbert Dijkgraaf. We all long back to the days when he was the minister of education, culture and science in the Rutte 4 cabinet. But gladly, he took on another important role of leadership as the president-elect of the International Science Council, the organisation that works at the global level to catalyse and convene scientific expertise, advice and influence on issues of major concern to both science and society. Additionally, he is appointed University Professor of Science and Society from an International Perspective at the University of Amsterdam. Before all these impactful positions, Prof. Dijkgraaf worked as professor of mathematical and theoretical physics, served as president of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and was

Leon Levy professor and of the prestigious Institute of Advanced Sciences at Princeton University for nine years. Please join me in welcoming to the stage, Prof. dr. Robbert Dijkgraaf.

[SPEECH RD]

RM:
Thank you, Prof. Dijkgraaf. You inspired us with your words, by taking a ‘multiversal’ perspective on science and scholarschip and making christal clear that we need to foster collaboration across all borders and keep reaching for the stars, to serve society best.

We will stick to the stars for a bit. Please join me in watching a video on the winner of the Ubbo Emmius Medal 2025.

[Video winner UEP]

Now I would like to welcome to the stage, the person who wishes us through social media a Starry Night almost every evening, Govert Schilling, winner of the Ubbo Emmius Medal for his contributions to science communication.
[Laudatio RM:]
Govert Schilling is freelance science journalist and publicist. After the Apollo moon landing, astronomy became his hobby, and conveying knowledge of astronomy has always been of interest to him. Over 25 years, he told us almost everything there is to know about the stars in numerous astronomical contributions that appeared in national and international newspapers and magazines, including the National

Geographic and Science, and through books, of which many have been translated in many languages. He received numerous awards for his popular scientific contributions, including recently the David N. Schramm award from the *High Energy Astrophysics Division* (HEAD) of the *American Astronomical Society* (AAS). Astronomy and science as a whole should be, and is, very grateful to have such a strong advocate of curiosity and scientific research. It's therefore my honour to hand the Ubbo Emmius Penning for bringing scientific research to society through science communication to you, Govert Schilling.

[thank you speech Govert]
[BRAGI]

RM: Thank you Bragi for this wonderful Italian song entitled 'Sfogava con le stelle' by composer Claudio Monteverdi.

Today we have the honour to hear from Prof. Marijke Leliveld, who was very recently appointed Aletta Jacobs Professor of Consumer Ethics at the faculty of Economy and Business. She does not only cross disciplinary borders within this university, but also settles boundaries that block the development of knowledge that has direct impact on the major issues of our time. We are grateful for the active contribution of Prof. Leliveld to this universities' interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary activities, amongst others by serving as chair of the Young Academy of Groningen. We look forward to hear about her research during her academic speech.

After the speech by Prof. Leliveld, we will praise the Alumnus of the Year 2025, Khalaf Alkhalaf, who does impactful work for the Dutch Council for Refugees.

But now, Prof. Leliveld, the floor is yours.

[speech ML]

[Video AvhJ]

[Rector neemt AvhJ mee op podium]
RM: Khalaf Alkhalaf, congratulations on your appointment as Alumnus of the Year 2025. Before we proceed to the official presentation of the statuette that marks this appointment, I would like to say a few words about the election of the Alumnus of the Year and, Khalaf Alkhalaf in particular. I will also say a few words about the statuette.

Since 2009, we have awarded the honorary title of Alumnus of the Year to a former student who, according to the criteria:
-has made a special contribution to society, science, sports, or culture;
-is a source of inspiration for others;
-and is considered a promise for the future.
In recent years, the award has gone to environmental lawyer Taku Mutezo, Russia correspondent Iris de Graaf, pulmonologist Sander de Hosson, investigative journalist Christiaan Triebert, and Medical AI entrepreneur Stef van Grieken, among others.

The new Alumnus of the Year, Khalaf Alkhalaf, fits perfectly into this list of exceptional and inspiring former students.

Khalaf Alkhalaf receives the Alumnus of the Year award for his tireless dedication to supporting refugees in the Netherlands and the inspiring way he shares his story and knowledge with others. A former nurse in Syria, Khalaf fled his country after being kidnapped by IS. In the Netherlands, he quickly mastered Dutch and English, earning a BA in Middle Eastern Studies and an MA in International Relations.

Now a team leader at the Dutch Council for Refugees (in Dutch: Vluchtelingenwerk), he guides new refugees with compassion and practical advice, encouraging them to take charge of their lives. He also educates professionals and students—such as those in medical sociology—on the realities of asylum and its impact on mental health.

Khalaf's motto, "I want to help others as I was helped," shines through his resilience, intellect, and generosity. He is a role model and a powerful advocate for humane refugee reception and integration and makes him the rightful Alumnus of the Year 2025.
The statue was created by Groningen-based visual artist Wia van Dijk (who is present here today) and is called Athena Noctua. Although the artist has made several owls, each statue is unique. Every bronze statue has a different eye colour.

The diversity of her handcrafted, labour-intensive owls beautifully reflects the unique work that our alumni of the

year do after their time at the University of Groningen. It is therefore my pleasure to present a unique copy to you.

[handover & applause]
[short speech Khalaf]

RM:
The university is nothing without its students. They bring colour and make the academy a lively space whose contours are constantly the subject of debate. We are therefore very happy and proud that two of the students, Maaike ten Hoor and Hannan van Rooij, are here today.

Maaike has been selected as the most excellent student of the year by her faculty, the Faculty of Medical Sciences, and can therefore call herself a GUF-100 student. Maaike is a multi-talent, who currently is a MD-PhD candidate and hold Bachelor-degrees in Medicine, Law, Philosophy of Life Sciences, European Languages and Cultures and a Master in Philosophy, Science and Humanities. Also, she is an international top-athlete. She for sure enjoyes everything this broad university has to offer and we are proud to further contribute to the development of such bright and ambitious minds.

Hannan van Rooij is this year's university poet laureate, who also serves as the recently appointed poet of the Vinkhuizen neighbourhood, here in the city of Groningen. She is a student of religious studies and previously studied ethics and nursing. As a spoken word poet, she tries to create visual

work about big questions, healthcare, heartbreak, and other everyday things.
We are delighted that these exceptional students are here to grace this opening with their contributions.

Maaike will give a speech, after which Hannan will recite a poem.
After these contributions, we will hear the final musical interlude of this afternoon, where organist Eeuwe Zijlstra will play ‘Het hèt nog nooit zo donker west’ of local hero Ede Staal.

[Maaike]
[Hannan]

RM:
Dear all, what a wonderful afternoon we have had. Looking back, I would like to connect to Jouke’s words. For a true fifth generation university a shift in our organisation might be required. That is why I want to invite all students and colleagues to take part in the consultation sessions about our new institutional plan.
[showing slide with QR code]
Please share your thoughts and ideas during these sessions or give your feedback online.

For now, I wish to thank everyone involved for their contribution to this ceremony: our distinguished speakers Robbert Dijkgraaf, Govert Schilling, and Marijke Leliveld. I would also like to congratulate our alumnus of the year,

Khalaf Alkhalaf and the students who won the GUF awards, represented by Maaike ten Hoor.

Furthermore, I really enjoyed listening to the beautiful poem of our new University Poet Hannan van Rooij and the musical interludes performed by the BRAGI a-capella choir, directed by Rein de Vries, and the church organist Eeuwe Zijlstra. We also thank Bob van der Linde for playing the church carillon. Well done, every one of you.

When the organist starts playing his final piece (Mien toentje by Ede Staal), both processions will first walk to the back of the church. The professors will walk behind the beadle that takes the route right from the stage. The civilian procession will follow the beadle that walks the route left around the stage. After that, the other guests will be invited to follow for the reception. Before we start moving towards the drinks and bites, I hope you will join me in a final applause for everyone who contributed to this ceremony.