



Making Connections

Dear Members of the Board of Trustees of the University,

Members of the Board of the University,

Members of the University Council,

Minister Kaag,

And joining us here, and online, I would also like to welcome the Staff and Students of our University,

Esteemed guests,

It is my honor to welcome you back after our summer break, or perhaps for the first time for new staff and students. We are still in the midst of the corona virus pandemic, which marks one of the most distinctive years in the history of our university and of modern society.

Let me start by stating how proud and impressed we are with all the hard work and creativity with which you have tackled this global crisis and adapted to the new situation; it has surprised and impacted all of us. We, as the Board of this university, watched your ability to move the majority of our activities quickly online, keeping our university alive and kicking. Albeit in a different way than we were used to! Stay tuned today to hear about three great examples, from students, lecturers and a researcher, later in the program.

Back in 1952, for the first time in Dutch history, **Hendrik de Waard** experimented with a mobile live television broadcast, here in our city! De Waard was professor of experimental physics at our university for nearly the entire second half of the twentieth century. And **this is the actual camera he used** to connect Groningen to thousands of living rooms across the whole country.

During the corona crisis we were all able to connect with each other, by simply talking into our own mobile phones or laptop cameras. It quickly became normal to give or follow virtual lessons, to meet fellow students and colleagues online, or to continue collaborating online with people close-by or very far away. Furthermore, social events were also organized online, as well as the more formal ceremonies, like PhD defenses. We were not watching television shows, as in the 1950s of De Waard, but we all had a role in our own live television shows!

And so we continue today.

The traditional Opening of the Academic Year has always been a live event, either held here in our Academy Building, or in the magnificent Martini Church, with a procession of students and professors walking slowly through the heart of our beautiful city. This was one way we connected our academic community with the municipality. We form part of the living traditions here in the North of the Netherlands, a position we want to strengthen even more with the concept of the University of the North. In this way we hope to connect even more strongly with educational, societal and private partners in Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe.

Today, by broadcasting this event online, we can welcome and connect to everyone, not only with our students and staff close-by or around the world, but also with our local, national and international partners, and with our alumni. In today's ceremony we will also honor the 2019 Alumnus of the Year.

The internet connects us all, in a virtual way. However, over the past few months, we have realized that making connections also requires face-to-face interactions between people. Given that the pandemic is continuing apace, this presents us all with a major challenge, particularly for the thousands of new students that we welcome to our university this year. For them it is especially important to establish real-life connections to their university, to new friends, and to the city of Groningen. I hope you will all do your best to help the newcomers to settle in quickly.

We are proud to be an international university. This year we count more than 120 nationalities among our staff and students, and we have over 6000 international students. This is the reason this ceremony is being held in English. Because of the international character of our academic community, I feel honored that the next speaker will be the Dutch Minister Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Ms. Sigrid Kaag.

This pandemic is, in many ways, transformative and will catalyze changes in many different areas. For universities, it offers an opportunity to transform our educational system by taking advantage of how broad our university is, the current technological possibilities, and our local infrastructure.

We are currently finalizing a new strategic plan, which aims to increase connections across disciplines in our university, but also between the university and society. It is important that our students develop a broad set of skills and competences to tackle big problems – like the one we are confronted with today. As a university we have to move towards a blended situation, where physical interactions are mixed with virtual ones. Social distancing demands new concepts for connecting, sharing, inspiring, learning, and developing ideas with each other. Although today's world is a completely different one to last year's, it can also become a more inclusive one, if we can enable students to join us who might otherwise not have been able to do so for various reasons.

The theme of today's event is making connections; a theme that is even more relevant now that we need to stay social distant but together.

In the past few months I have seen a lot of creativity put into pursuing new directions to socially engage with others and maintain community cohesion. Building and maintaining these connections requires an effort from all of us. I am confident we can and will do this together.

I am happy to welcome **Ms Sigrid Kaag**, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. Minister Kaag has had a long and distinguished career as a diplomat and civil servant. As Minister she focusses on achieving stability in developing countries and enhancing Dutch trade abroad. She sees education as a crucial instrument in helping the fight against poverty worldwide.

Thank you Minister Kaag.

Many members of our academic community distinguished themselves during the lockdown last spring. In the past few months I have asked various representative committees of our university to nominate those who showed special resilience and creativity – as a student, teacher or researcher. The number of people nominated was truly overwhelming. Those who feature in this short film are only a small selection of all of you who have worked so hard to keep the university functioning.

Lung specialist **Dr. Sander de Hosson** was elected the 2019 Alumnus of the Year by the University of Groningen. He is receiving the award for the incisive way in which he calls for attention to be paid to the emotional side of palliative care, and for making death a topic for discussion amongst medical staff, starting during their early training. His calls include those made in his blogs and recent book.

It is my great pleasure to hand him this sculpture by the artist Wia van Dijk and I welcome Sander to give a short speech on his work as a physician.

A warm thank you to our new University Poet **Olivier van Dijk**.

This brings us to the end of this new-style virtual Opening of the Academic Year 2020. Many faculties are also organizing their own opening events. I am happy to refer you to our website and the webpages of the various faculties for more information.

It is normal for academics to keep asking questions and to live with uncertainties. What the long-term effects of the current crisis will be on higher education is not yet clear. We expect to face some tough decisions this coming year. For these we want to make sure we can make the next moves together with you, our academic staff and our students. We want to move forward, and share ideas and make plans as a community.

Perhaps it is good to repeat my words from June last year (2019) – as an African proverb states: *If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together*. In sum, we want and need to continue to make connections.