

Opening Academic Year 2022-2023

5 September 2022

Resilience

Opening speech by Rector Magnificus Cisca Wijmenga

Members of the Board of Trustees of the University,

Members of the Board of the University,

Members of the University Council,

State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport, Mr. Van Ooijen,

Mayor of the Municipality of Groningen, Mr. Schuiling,

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

Welcome all to the opening of the academic year 2022/2023.

The past few years have tested our university, our society, and us too. In the midst of the COVID pandemic, we are confronted with the devastating war in Ukraine, soaring inflation, and other major challenges that society is facing today. These are issues we must deal with, or at least reflect upon. As always, we need to show resilience and face our problems squarely if we want to find solutions. And today we want to celebrate our ability to do this.

Of course, our message today focuses on the role academia can play in finding answers and in helping others to maintain their spirits in difficult times. After all, these are themes with which academics are familiar. As researchers who want to challenge well-known concepts, who want to understand how nature works, or who want to grasp the intricacies of the human mind, the human body, or society at large, we are all too familiar with the disappointments and failures we can meet along the way. These are hurdles we have to overcome on the road to success. Bouncing back and finding a way forward defines our way of living.

Exactly 350 years ago, at the beginning of the academic year in 1672, our city of Groningen had just warded off one of the greatest challenges in its history. A coalition of German rulers had marched up to Groningen and besieged the town for over a month. They were in an alliance with forces from France and England, who all attacked the Netherlands simultaneously, over land and over sea. The common opinion was that if Groningen were to fall, all would be lost.

However, amidst this disaster, there were some glimmers of hope. During the siege of Groningen, people from all parts of society rallied together, and our students played a heroic role. Although they were exempt from taking up arms, they still volunteered to help defend Groningen.

They had the chance to leave the city and no one expected them to help, but without being paid, they stayed and helped defend the city. They even volunteered to stand guard at the most dangerous parts of the city's defense – closest to the canons of the opposing army.

On 28 August, hostilities were ceased and the siege was broken – our city had withstood the brutal attack. It would take many years for peace to be restored throughout the Netherlands, but the victory in Groningen was considered to be a turning point in what later became known as 'the year of disaster'.

The heroic efforts of our students found their way into the university's annals and for centuries students have been inspired by the group that stood guard on the city walls.

There is an important lesson to be drawn here. History has shown how much society can gain from the university in times of crisis. It is easier to show resilience when you know you can collaborate with others. Fortunately, society does not always ask us to literally risk our lives, but it is asking us to collaborate and to help face some very serious dangers. I believe we are up to that challenge.

We, as the Board of the University, take inspiration from this spirit of collaboration; it is one of the reasons we are looking forward to the coming year. We will also officially open the four new Schools of our university. These interdisciplinary Schools focus on collaborations between the staff and students of the university's eleven faculties. The Schools will be gateways for them to make connections with other parties, academic and otherwise, such as knowledge institutes, societal partners, local businesses, and local government, all engaged in the *University of the North*.

Together we have an explicit goal to search for solutions to major societal issues, to make this a better world for everyone. The four Schools will start work on topics that include the energy transition and climate adaptation, the opportunities for society offered by digitalization, and the three e's of sustainability: ecology, economy and equity. And, of course, on health, all the way from the biological aspects to psychological and social facets.

Today we have a broad and inspiring program for you focused around the theme of Resilience. First of all, our key note lecture will be given by René Veenstra, Professor of Sociology in Groningen; he will talk about his research into bullying in schools.

He is a leading expert on this serious problem and he has helped develop various programs to tackle it and help school children and adolescents develop resilience. His aim is to stop this behavior at all levels of society.

Then Bragi, Groningen's own student orchestra, will perform for us during a musical interlude.

Later this afternoon Professor Marie-José van Tol of the UMCG will hold a discussion with the State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sport, Mr. Maarten van Ooijen; we will award a prize to our Alumnus of the Year; and we will also hear the inaugural poem of our new Poet-in-Residence.

Before I give the floor to Professor Veenstra, I want to show you this picture of a Ginkgo Biloba tree that stands near our former botanical gardens, at what is now the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences. This remarkable tree is more than 200 years old and is one of the oldest of its kind in the Netherlands; it was planted by one of our professors.

The Ginkgo is an extremely resilient tree; it has the ability to re-grow after withstanding fires and even the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima in 1945. Some specimens are known to be over a thousand years old.

Our own tree was planted so that the university's teachers and students could study it and unravel its secrets. Its history has become intertwined with that of our university.

There are still so many secrets to unlock, and sometimes we must stand up and fight for what is right, while at other times we can just marvel at this ancient tree.

Closing by Cisca Wijmenga

This brings us to the end of this annual ceremony.

You can find more information on the speakers and performances on our website. Today's ceremony will be concluded by a performance by Bragi. They will perform *Smile* and the solo will be sung by Jildou Duiven.

Last year, I ended this ceremony by saying that we understood that the coming period would be one of uncertainty, in which we would need to find how we could interact with each other in a responsible way, while all craving more human contact. Those words are still true today.

So I again want to recall the attack on our city in 1672. The students who stood guard on the city walls sang songs to comfort each other – and to keep their enemies awake.

Even in those grim circumstances, they found a way to keep their spirits up, and make something of their terrible predicament. Just as we too will find ways to cope in this coming year: just as looking at an ancient Gingko tree can give you comfort, as it has done for many generations, or just as you can find inspiration in the examples of research and in the students that we have presented to you today.

I am looking towards this new academic year, in which we can and will find a way to move forward and work together on a brighter future. A year in which we can once again keep making connections.

Thank you all and enjoy a great year!