

Summary of the podcast with Jouke de Vries, January 2026

UG on track for the future

Jouke de Vries discusses politics, governance, and the fifth-generation university

In a time of political uncertainty, financial pressure, and societal challenges, the University of Groningen (UG) is embarking on an important phase of its existence. This New Year's interview with President of the Board of the UG Jouke de Vries reveals the ways in which the University is preparing for the future. De Vries discusses the challenges, ambitions, and societal dilemmas that the UG expects to face over the coming years.

Political uncertainty and financial challenges

With the formation of a new Cabinet in The Hague, a lot depends on the political decisions to be made in the coming months. De Vries is following the developments closely and indicates that he is optimistic. 'Of course, we have to wait to see what comes about in terms of policy and how funding is arranged. But I am optimistic because I think that a number of parties still think much more positively about higher education, or education in general.'

An important point for discussion in the podcast is the report written by Peter Wennink, former head of ASML, which will shape the Dutch innovation agenda. De Vries values the report but points to a noticeable focus on the Randstad area and Brabant, while the Northern Netherlands remains underexposed. 'If you look at a map of the Netherlands, you see a large, empty area in the North,' he points out. 'This region still isn't fully counted.' He emphasizes that agriculture, for example, which is an important sector in the North, is rarely discussed in the report, while this sector is directly involved in major transitions.

Balance between technology and social sciences

Over recent years, the UG has strongly committed to strengthening its technological profile. De Vries defends this decision but does not want to focus one-sidedly on science and technology. 'Technology will remain important but, if you look at the transitions that we will all have to go through, you can see that behaviour is also really important. It is therefore clear that other disciplines are also necessary to make all of that possible.' De Vries sees the concept of the fifth-generation university as the answer to this challenge. A fifth-generation university is a network university that is international but still strongly embedded in the region. 'We are trying to retain the broad-based university concept while working more with clusters: the medical cluster, science and engineering, and social sciences and humanities. We are trying to make connections there. In addition, the fifth-generation university is working very closely together with the outside world.'

Governance: agility as a necessity

One of the biggest challenges facing the UG is the overhaul of its governance structure. De Vries indicates that the current faculty organization, with high walls between disciplines, stands in the way of an efficient and agile organization. 'We want to encourage collaboration and to standardize and centralize a number of processes. Some things vary too much within the University, making it very hard to pick up speed.'

'The agile university is important to me,' continues De Vries, 'because so many opportunities are coming our way. With the organization that we currently have, it often takes a long time before we can actually take action and get something done.' These changes are not only

administratively necessary but also financially crucial, as we are being forced to cut costs for political reasons and the number of students is decreasing.

But the plans are facing resistance, for instance from the Faculty of Philosophy. De Vries acknowledges that there are questions from within the University concerning the financial basis, among other topics, which cannot currently be answered and that this basis must be in place in the foreseeable future. He emphasizes that the aim is to prevent the forced termination of staff positions at the UG, to remain a broad-based university and to keep all disciplines going.

Dilemmas: collaboration with the Ministry of Defence and the security campus

One sensitive subject is the collaboration between the UG and the Ministry of Defence, particularly in the light of geopolitical tensions. De Vries acknowledges the criticism from within the University and emphasizes that such collaborations must be considered carefully. 'Our free, open, and democratic society is under threat. We need to do something about that. At the same time, political and ethical considerations must always be taken into account.'

A concrete example of this collaboration is the Veiligheids-campus (security campus) in Assen. De Vries notes that this project is not only about technical applications but also about topics such as cybersecurity and international involvement. 'It is important to make a distinction between the "hard" and "soft" sides of security.' In order to structure these considerations, a special advisory team for knowledge security and sensitive partnerships has been set up. 'Developing a framework with which we can consider partnerships is no easy feat', emphasizes De Vries.

Personal leadership and future

Finally, De Vries looks back on his years as President of the Board, during which he has had to deal with various crises. 'Despite all the crises, we've managed to formulate a strategy for the long term. I'm very proud of that.' With his departure in just over a year already in sight, De Vries is looking forward to having more time to write. 'I find writing the most beautiful thing there is. I've been drafting a book about democracy and the challenges we're facing. And I've also spent a lot of time working on a book about leadership in times of war.'