

Dear Excellency, dear members of the Supervisory Board,
dear members of the Board of the University and the Board of the UMCG,
dear Rektorin der Universität Bremen, mayor of Groningen,
members of the University Council, representatives of education and science,
dear students, colleagues, alumni, partners of the University of Groningen,
honorary consuls, and friends of academia.

When the world begins to shift,
a university must not step back, but move forwards.
Today we are opening the 2026-2027 academic year
and celebrating our 412th anniversary!
Our dies natalis marks the starting point for us to chart our course
once again in a world that is changing rapidly.
For years now, there's been war on Europe's borders.
A society in which people find it difficult to understand one another.
A government bogged down in complex issues that affect people's lives.
A climate that is changing rapidly due to human behaviour.
And AI that is turning our education and way of working on its head.
This calls on all of us, in the Netherlands and across Europe,
to undergo a major transition:
not to sit back and relax, but to move forward,
be agile, and chart our course!
Our contribution begins with research, education,
impact, and constructive critical thinking.
Research helps us to distinguish facts from opinions,
to test assumptions, to discover patterns, and to enable long-term solutions,
so that society can navigate on the basis of knowledge
and does not become adrift by reacting to incidents.
Through education, we pass on this mindset to new generations:
observe, ask, weigh options, and make solution-oriented judgements.
Critical thinking has kept us sharp for centuries.
And we must remain sharp,
especially in this age where stimuli and disinformation run amuck.
In this way, we contribute to generations who think independently,
act with care, ask uncomfortable questions, and propose solutions.
That is what this era demands of us, the academic community:
to have an answer to what is happening now,
and to be prepared for what is to come.

We do not do this alone, but at the heart of society,
by learning together with social partners, the government,
citizens, and the business community,
by exchanging theoretical, practical, and experiential knowledge.
If we want to move forward, we must innovate.
If we want to innovate, we must work together.
Innovation is the lifeblood of our future and rarely arises in isolation.
A good idea conceived in a study rarely changes society.
This requires intensive collaboration between academia,
government, social partners, educational institutions, and businesses.
Innovative applications sometimes demand rules and systems changing rapidly.
In my own field of control engineering, I see this very clearly.
For example, technical solutions exist to use our energy infrastructure better.
Using real-time information, we can better utilize available grid capacity
and help prevent, or at least reduce, electricity grid overloading.
We have proven that it's technically feasible, yet grid congestion
remains one of the major problems facing our country.
It is not technology alone that determines success,
but rather the way in which we have structured the entire system.
Legislation, market structures, short and long-term commercial interests,
public interests, and the willingness to explore new avenues together.
It is this interplay that breeds success and to which we contribute,
across the full spectrum of science.
And this is just one example.
Fundamental research and education, but we've also been
committed to interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity for years:
collaborating across the boundaries of academic disciplines and sectors.
We have been doing this for 10 years by promoting
interdisciplinary collaboration amongst early-career researchers.
We are proud of our Young Academy Groningen.
Amongst the excellent contributions in today's programme,
you'll see a few short videos in which four young researchers explain
how and why they collaborate across these boundaries.
We also see this approach to working across boundaries
reflected in our Schools for Science and Society,
which focus on energy & climate, the digital society, tech and AI,
public health, and sustainability.
Over the coming year, resilience will also be fully integrated into these initiatives.

We also have trans- and interdisciplinary partnerships within our Health Technology Research & Innovation Cluster (medical technology), Cognigron (neuromorphic computing), and the Research School of Behavioural and Cognitive Neurosciences. Cross-boundary collaboration is essential for innovation. If we are to work together, we must learn together. These examples make one thing clear: the major challenges of our time cannot be solved by a single discipline or by a single organisation. And we need the full breadth of education. We can be proud that here in the North we have managed to build a strong educational infrastructure together. MBO, HBO and WO reinforce one another within the University of the North. Many people here today work on this daily and energetically. I am also pleased to see that, after two gruelling years for higher education, our current government offers us opportunities once again. I say this with some relief, but also with a sense of responsibility. With a renewed talent strategy and the sector plans, we can continue to build on the power of knowledge and education. The Wennink report rightly emphasizes the importance of strong research and innovation ecosystems: sustainable partnerships where knowledge institutions, public authorities, businesses, and societal partners reinforce one another. Learning together means sharing knowledge. Independence is crucial, even within collaboration. New opportunities arising from rapid developments in AI, for example, should help us, not take over. We must continue to keep a firm grip on the controls over data and AI ourselves and strike a new balance, with one clear mission: to retain control over our own data. With that, the Netherlands and Europe will retain control over their future. Innovation requires sound regulations that allow for inventions. But we all know that regulations can go too far and can stifle innovation. Sometimes we need a crisis to realize what we are capable of. On the other hand, we also know that speed has its downside. Decisions may be taken less carefully, risks may only become apparent too late. That is why we should not wait until everything grinds to a halt.

Instead, we must use the strengths of the university
to practise our capacity for change:
carefully when we can, agile when we must.
Ultimately, a university does not begin with systems, strategies or career paths.
It begins with people's curiosity.
That is the spark we must all nurture.
For that is the driving force behind science,
that which helps us cope with all the pressure and uncertainty,
evident from the recently published Academia Barometer by
De Jonge Akademie on the mental health of scientists.
Science, in fact, also springs from passion, wonder,
and the freedom to take an idea further.
Scientists must not only meet expectations,
but also keep pursuing questions whose outcome is not yet certain.
We must keep providing space for that too.
Also for 'failure', for doubt.
Let us cherish that, and stay on course together.
Only this way will we make progress.
As we say in Groningen: Kop d'r veur!
For it is here in Groningen that we demonstrate what is possible
when academic curiosity, collaboration, and entrepreneurship come together.
As a university, we are actively involved in developing ecosystems,
for example on AI in the North.
In doing so, we see that engineering plays an indispensable role.
What not everyone realizes is that we've been
a leader in engineering for a long time already.
You could call us the Technical University of the North.
But a Groningen version of a Technical University part of a larger whole,
with solid links to all other disciplines needed to solve major social challenges.
That makes us unique and well-positioned to work across the full spectrum:
talent, health, energy, AI, public values, innovation, and business development.
In short, this is about our economy and society as a whole.
This new economic activity is already clearly visible in the North.
In the second quarter of 2026, the number of start-ups in Groningen
grew by 14% compared to last year - the strongest growth in NL.
Our region demonstrates that innovation and entrepreneurship
can truly reinforce one another.
The North is evolving from the much-discussed 'shrinking region'

into an innovation region, flourishing thanks to collaboration.

Let's agree, here and today, to refer to the North like that from now on:
an innovation region.

I shall conclude.

We have choices to make:

between dependence and autonomy,

between stagnation and renewal,

between isolated interests and collaboration.

Our university is indispensable in this regard.

I warmly invite everyone here today to contribute their ideas,
to get involved, and to help chart a course together, guided by science.

And above all, I hope you feel welcome here today, at our university,
in Groningen and in the North, our innovation region!

Thank you very much.