Alumnus of the Year 2024 Jury report

The University of Groningen is proud of its alumni. They are our ambassadors, our ties to society. Every year, we award one of our alumni the title Alumnus of the Year. The prize is an expression of appreciation and encouragement. The title is awarded to a UG alumnus who, in our eyes, has made an extraordinary contribution to society, academia and/or culture, is a source of inspiration for others and shows promise for the future.

The alumnus of the year 2024 is Stef van Grieken, tech entrepreneur, co-founder and CEO of Cradle.

Stef van Grieken (1986) obtained a Master’s degree in Industrial Engineering and Management at the University of Groningen in 2014. During his studies, he was already highly active in the digital world. He organized hackathons and as founder or board member, he was closely involved in initiatives such as Het Nieuwe Stemmen, Hack de Overheid, and the Open State Foundation, aimed at making the government and institutions digitally transparent and aware.

Subsequently, he had a dream career in Silicon Valley at Google. Long before ChatGPT became popular, he already worked on machine learning and AI-models at Google X and Google Brain.

Two years ago, he changed course because, in his own words: ‘I am incredibly grateful to Google for allowing me to take part in the early stages of the current AI-developments. But if, in the future, my daughters ask me: ‘Where were you when the Earth was on fire?’, the wrong answer will be: I was a plumber in a very large advertising agency.’

Together with Jelle Prins of Uber, he launched Cradle, a platform that uses AI to accelerate the developments of practical, applicable proteins. Just as ChatGPT can help write a text, Cradle’s AI helps to find the most promising protein constructs that can be used for a medicine or an alternative for plastic, milk, or a detergent, for
example. As a result, the development time of these products can be drastically
reduced.

Even though the use of AI is complex and sometimes controversial in our society,
Stef shows that you can also do very useful things with it, that can actually help
society progress.

He is therefore rightfully the Alumnus of the Year 2024.

This year, the jury of the Alumnus of the Year award consisted of:
Jacquelin Scherpen, Rector Magnificus, chair
Christiaan Triebert, investigative journalist, Alumnus of the Year 2018
Lisa Herzog, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy
Remco Kouwenhoven, Director of Alumni Relations & Philanthropy / Ubbo Emmius
Fund

Previous winners
2023 – Takudzwa Mutezo (1992) environmental lawyer who fights both legally and
administratively against illegal international animal trade / sustainable farmer in
Zimbabwe
2022* – Iris de Graaf (1991) Russia correspondent for the national Dutch broadcaster
NOS, Slavonic Languages and Russian Studies
2020 – Laurien Meuter (1976), founder of the Tiny Miracles Foundation, Economics
2019 – Sander de Hosson (1977), pulmonologist and trailblazer for good palliative
care, Medicine
2018 - Christiaan Triebert (1991), visual investigative journalist at the New York
Times / Bellingcat, IRIO
2017 - Carolien de Bruin (1977), founder of C-Change which helps international
businesses and organizations achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, Business
and Finance
2016 - Merel Rumping (1984), founder of Carewithinreach, orthopedagogical care
accessible to all, IRIO
2015 - Luuk van Middelaar (1973), writer, professor and expert on Europe, History/
Philosophy
2014 - Monica Arac de Nyeko (1979), Ugandan writer and humanitarian specialist at
UNICEF, on the Africa39 list and winner of the Caine Prize 2007, the film Rafiki is
based on her short story about two lesbian girls, Humanitarian Assistance
2013 - Wim Pijbes (1961) former director of the Rijksmuseum, Art History
2012 - Matthijs Bierman (1964), director of Triodos Bank, Business and Law 2011 -
Stine Jensen (1972), philosopher, writer, programme maker, Philosophy
2010 - Jelle Brandt Corstius (1978) writer, programme maker, History
2009 - Jeroen Smit (1963), journalist, writer, Business

* as from 2022, the prize bears the year of presentation of the award