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Alumnus of the Year 2026 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 Alumnus of the Year 2026 is Ninah Tiemersma, teacher of Greek and Latin language and culture, theatre-maker, speaker, coach.

The criteria state that the Alumnus of the Year ‘has made an extraordinary contribution to society, academia and/or culture, is a source of inspiration for others, and shows promise for the future.’ Ninah Tiemersma (1997), Alumnus of the Year 2026, embodies all of these qualities like no other.

Working as a teacher in a secondary school, she makes a special contribution to society every single day. She imparts knowledge to a new generation, guiding young people on their path towards adulthood. Yet teaching in secondary education remains a shortage occupation in the Netherlands, despite being one of the most important professions in society. By presenting Ninah with this award, we as a university wish to express our huge appreciation for all teachers working in secondary education, from lower vocational level to pre-university schools. We hope that it will encourage others to embark on this rewarding career path.

But Ninah Tiemersma is more than a teacher. She is a teacher of Greek and Latin language and culture, which shows just how up-to-date and relevant her field still is, including to young people. She bases her lessons on texts from Antiquity, teaching her pupils to deal with the kind of deep emotions they encounter today. Pupils read tragedies or myths together and use the stories as starting point for discussions about stress, pressure, emotion, and resilience. ‘It would be such a pity’, she says, ‘if classrooms were only used as places to pass on knowledge. You’re a person, with other people who are also learning and developing.’

She has largely devised this pedagogical approach – which also addresses wellbeing outside the care domain – on her own. In 2025, thanks to her unique approach, she

was selected as Teacher of the Year. According to the jury, she is using her profession and subject matter to help pupils develop into individuals.

Ninah Tiemersma is determined to inspire others. Her pupils, obviously, but also others, including fellow teachers and other professional colleagues. Everything she does revolves around her conviction that stories and literature can be meaningful during existential moments. She gives workshops, lectures, and coaching, and even goes on stage in theatres to talk about personal trauma, the healing power of literature from the classical era, and the importance of mental wellbeing in the education sector. This is a meaningful way for knowledge to contribute to society.

In the eyes of the jury, this makes her a highly deserving Alumnus of the Year 2026.

This year, the jury members of the Alumnus of the Year award were:

Jacqueline Scherpen, Rector Magnificus, chair

Khalaf Alkhalaf, Alumnus of the Year 2026

Hanneke Muthert, Dean of the Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society

Rob van Ouwerkerk, head of Alumni Relations

Previous winners

2025 - Khalaf Alkhalaf (1988) – former team leader at the Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland), source of inspiration, aid worker.

2024 – Stef van Grieken (1986), tech entrepreneur, co-founder and CEO of Cradle, which uses AI to accelerate the development of new protein models, Industrial Engineering and Management

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