



rijksuniversiteit
groningen

Alumnus of the Year 2025 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 2025 is Khalaf Alkhalaf, team leader at the Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland), source of inspiration, refugee support worker.

Khalaf Alkhalaf (1988) has received the Alumnus of the Year award for his commitment to providing good care and guidance to refugees in the Netherlands and the inspiring way in which he shares his experiences and knowledge with refugees, professionals, and students.

Khalaf is a team leader at the Dutch Council for Refugees. He fled Syria ten years ago after being kidnapped by IS. It meant that he was no longer able to continue his work as a nurse in a children's hospital for Doctors Without Borders. In the Netherlands, he quickly learned Dutch and English, and went on to obtain a Bachelor's degree in Middle Eastern Studies (2021) and a Master's degree in International Relations (2022).

As a team leader, he is now an important point of contact for new refugees. He helps to find their way and also offers a listening ear, hope, and inspiration. 'Don't sit around doing nothing, take control of your own life, and even if you're not allowed to do much as an asylum seeker, keep making plans, learn Dutch, exercise, eat healthy,' he tells them.

At the same time, he teaches COA staff, police officers, and students about what it means to be forced to flee your country and end up in an asylum centre. For example, he gives guest lectures to medical sociology students about the impact of asylum centres on refugees' mental health.

His motto, as he told the Dutch broadcaster NOS a few years ago, is: 'I want to help other people, just as I have been helped myself', a motto he more than lives up to.

Khalaf inspires other refugees with his perseverance, resilience, intellectual achievements, and dedication to others. He shows that it is possible to succeed in your studies and work in the Netherlands despite a difficult start in life, making him an important role model.

At the same time, Khalaf's story shows how important it is that we in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe offer refugees a supportive, humane reception, with the opportunity to continue developing themselves.

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

Jacqueline Scherpen, Rector Magnificus, chair

Stef van Grieken, tech entrepreneur, co-founder and CEO of Cradle, Alumnus of the Year 2024

Casper Albers, Dean of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences

Odette Ruyters, Deputy Head of Alumni Relations

Previous winners

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