



university of
 groningen

campus fryslân

Opening Academic Year 2026- 2027

3 September 2026

Speech by Vice-Dean Dr. Indira van der Zande

Dear guests,

Welcome to the Faculty Campus Fryslân, the University of Groningen's regional hub in Leeuwarden, dedicated to understanding and guiding societal transitions. Our faculty was founded on a simple conviction: the major challenges facing society do not respect disciplinary, institutional, or geographical boundaries. Our purpose is to understand societal transitions, help shape them, and educate the people who will lead them.

Deeply rooted in Fryslân, we link local insights to global challenges, turning knowledge into action and innovation into impact. And we are proud to be part of one university, with two cities, firmly rooted in the North.

An opening is, above all, a moment to look ahead to a new academic year and to what we hope to achieve together.

When we look at **research and impact**, we are excited by the strong increase in the number of our PhD appointments, particularly in domains that are central to the Dutch Talent Strategy: artificial intelligence, circularity, regenerative agriculture, and broad security and resilience. In this context, we are also continuing an important conversation about the role and responsibility of the university, and how we, as a university, respond to questions of peace and conflict.

We are proud that our well-established research lines continue to flourish. We can celebrate colleagues' publications in *Nature*, dissertations awarded *cum laude*, and prestigious grant applications currently under review. These achievements reflect the dedication of our three Science Teams working on societal transitions.

Looking ahead, we are eager to contribute further to the three focal points identified by our province: water, soil and, importantly, circularity. These challenges require excellent science, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a strong connection with society.

It is in this spirit that we are particularly pleased to establish two new Chairs at our faculty this year, placing us firmly at the heart of both society and the University.

The first is the Chair of Sustainable Behaviour in a Circular Economy, held by our own Professor Berfu Unal. Her excellent research contributes to our understanding of societal transitions, and of how we can enable people to adopt more circular and sustainable practices through innovative solutions.

The second is the Chair of Data Governance and Digital Autonomy, held by Professor Oskar Gstrein. His work on the transition from fundamental rights principles, such as privacy and academic freedom, towards digital governance frameworks addresses the urgent challenge of how society engages critically with emerging technologies.

Berfu and Oskar, congratulations on these meaningful appointments, and we wish you every success in the year ahead.

When we turn to **education**, our mission is to equip learners with the competencies to become globally engaged citizens, capable of leading societal transitions and creating positive social and technological change.

To achieve this, we shift the focus in our education from *what* we know to *how* we know it; to *how* different areas of scholarship relate to one another; and to how knowledge can be applied to act and transform society. Through our educational vision, “Transformative Learning for Social Impact”, we put transitions and transdisciplinarity at the heart of education itself.

And this is not simply an ambition on paper. We see this vision taking shape in practice.

We see it in the overall increase in our student numbers this year, as well as in our growing success in encouraging students from local universities of applied sciences to continue their studies in our Master’s programmes. This is undoubtedly supported by our scholarships scheme —no fewer than 40 this year!— thanks to the generosity of our partners, many of whom are here with us today. Thank you.

We see our success in the quality of our educational programmes, which consistently rank among the best—including our Bachelor programme Global Politics & Sustainability, recognised for the fifth consecutive year as the best Bachelor in the Netherlands.

We see it in our alumni, who go on to pursue successful careers, both locally and internationally.

And we see it, first and foremost, in our students, who demonstrate the entrepreneurial spirit we seek to cultivate. Just this week, one of our students was selected as one of five finalists for the title of “Most Innovative Student of the Netherlands.”

That is exactly the kind of talent we want to foster: students who do not simply understand the world as it is, but who have the scientific tools to imagine what it *could be*, and the courage to help create our sustainable futures. And that brings us back to where we are today: here at the Faculty Campus Fryslân, in Leeuwarden, as part of a University that puts itself at the heart of society.

We are proud to be **one university, with two cities, firmly rooted in the North**: strengthening our connections with Groningen while continuing to build the special community we have created here in Fryslân.

Because, ultimately, what makes this Faculty and Campus special is not only *what* we do, but *how* we do it: together, as a community.

So let us look ahead to a new academic year with ambition, curiosity and confidence. And, as we have said at all our previous openings, make this the best academic year ever!