

Jouke de Vries: ‘Coming up with solutions together, that’s a wonderful job’

An end-of-year interview about 2024, budget cuts, and the flexible University

In this end-of-year interview, Jouke de Vries, President of the Board of the University of Groningen, reflects on 2024. He discusses his personal highs and lows and looks ahead to the future of the University in the midst of financially challenging times. This article is a translated summary of an interview in Dutch. You can listen to the full interview [here](#).

What are the things you look back on with pleasure when you reflect on 2024?

‘It was the University’s anniversary year, packed with activities. These were wonderful events, such as the Festival of Wonder in the Stadsschouwburg, where numerous academics shared their stories in an alternative way to a large audience. That was fantastic.’

And when you look back on your work, what are you proud of?

‘We faced a lot of incidents and problems, but in the end, the UG is doing reasonably well. Because of the political interventions, things are now becoming difficult, but if you look at the operations and at student and staff wellbeing, that’s all going well. I do feel proud of that, that you can still manage the University in this way, under these tumultuous circumstances.’

‘I am still glad that, during the coronavirus period, we drew up a new strategy and that we subsequently implemented it. It means, for example, that we boosted interdisciplinary research through the Schools. It also means that we have given high priority to the University of the North. Those kinds of things take a long time before you see the actual results, but they are starting to take shape.’

What was the most difficult moment for you lately?

‘Last year, the war in Israel and Gaza affected me deeply. First, because of the situation that people in Israel and Gaza have been forced into and the horror that came with it. Second, because the University was confronted with a lot of protests and a tent camp. This made it clear that it is very difficult to engage in conversation because the opinions that arise as a result of that conflict are being formulated in such absolute terms that at some point there is no possibility to come together anymore, so we stop talking. That, of course, doesn’t benefit the University community at all.’

What research or social impact has made a lasting impression on you last year?

‘It is very difficult to choose just one thing. But to give you an example, we recently had [a meeting with shipbuilders in the Northern Netherlands](#) in order to promote sustainability in the maritime sector. By doing that, we are trying to boost innovation and encourage collaboration between the University, shipbuilders, and governments. And it’s proving successful. I believe that is a great example of the things we are working on.’

As for the cuts, what is that going to entail for our University’s staff?

'If cuts of more than two billion across the entire education sector are going to be implemented, it will have a devastating impact. I hope that the amount will be lower, and in that case I believe we can handle the cuts. At the same time, we will have to specify what we are going to invest in. We'll also need to undertake new projects again. For instance, we see that many academics within the University of Groningen are developing initiatives in connection with artificial intelligence. If we can bring this together effectively, new combinations will arise, which may be eligible for funding. I'm convinced of that.'

'That means that the University will have to be flexible and that people may sometimes be required to do different tasks than the ones they carried out in the past. I think we need to start looking very carefully at what competences our staff might need. But if you make the strategy very clear, outlining the new points we are focusing on, then you will be able to offer some perspective. In that case, I believe we will be able to overcome this difficult time.'

Understandably, there are many concerns among international colleagues and students. What's your take on that?

'I understand those concerns very well. Just imagine: you just arrived here, you moved into a house, you may have had your partner join you, you've sent your children to school, because they too, need to learn Dutch. And then, all of a sudden, you get the message that internationals are no longer welcome here. I find that incredibly unfortunate. Of course, I understand that we are facing a number of problems, for example on the housing market. These issues mainly affect the Randstad, but we must now largely solve them in the region. I do believe we can make slightly higher demands on internationals than we did in the past. You may expect our staff to have some command of the Dutch language and, in time, to be able to teach in it as well. But for now it's just a blunt message: you're not welcome.'

It has been quite an intense year. The holiday period will start for you as well soon. What will you be doing?

'I find the holiday period challenging, because my mind is always busy, and that includes reading books, which is largely where I get my ideas from. So, I am not a big fan of holidays, also because I usually catch a bad cold. You see, my academic career involved public administration, and now my work mainly involves public administration, and in that sense, my work is also my hobby. Being a president is a great job. You are faced with a lot of things. But it is also an exciting task to overcome them. These problems can sometimes be very complicated, and then I am very pleased when we can all come up with solutions again and get things done.'