

Opening of the 2024–2025 Academic Year
Monday 2 September 2024
Theme: ‘Academy and freedom’
Martinikerk, Groningen

Dear guests, dear colleagues and students,

It is wonderful to be able to welcome you all here at the opening of the 2024–2025 academic year and our 410th Dies Natalis. After all, we have formally existed since 23 August 1614! It is great that we are all gathered here again, in this traditional ceremonial moment after the summer. The moment when we gather again, hopefully well-rested and safely returned from our holidays. The moment when we see each other again in a familiar place, filled with expectations for the coming year.

For me, it is also a time to reflect on the past academic year; the first one in which I was the Rector of this wonderful University. One year ago, when I received the chain of office around my neck for the first time, I could not surmise what would happen at our University in the months that followed: protests about social security, occupations, a tent camp on the Harmonie square, anonymous vandalism, and, on national level, unacceptable government cuts.

But, also with many great happenings and events, such as our very successful lustrum celebration in the Spring with for example impressive honorary doctors that aligned with our interdisciplinary Schools for Science & Society, who completely unplanned held their speeches as if they had prepared it together. Or the Festival of Imagination, where we could see some fantastic science we do at this university.

It has been an interesting year. A year that significantly moved me and that taught me a great deal.

For example, how difficult it can be sometimes as an administrator to deal with opposing interests and opinions. I was suddenly confronted with online petitions, a resource that I did not fully understand and that sometimes brought doubt: Why don't we just have a face-to-face conversation with each other? It was also a year in which I struggled with the absolute firmness of points of view, at times where all nuance was lost, at times where parties stood diametrically opposed with an unwavering belief in their own truth.

The polarisation of society and the increasing grimness of the societal and political debate in the Netherlands has not escaped the attention of our universities. This is also one of the conclusions of the impressive report *Krachtig en kwetsbaar, Academische vrijheid in de praktijk* [Powerful and vulnerable, Academic freedom in practice], in which Janka Stoker, Carel Stolker, and Berteke Waaldijk make recommendations to strengthen and protect academic freedom.

‘This grimness,’ the author’s write, ‘that can sometimes be downright intimidating to lecturers, students, researchers, and administrators, could hit academic freedom in the heart and lead to undesirable self-censorship or other forms of unwanted reticence among researchers, lecturers, and students.’

That is exactly what I saw happening around me in the past year. The ferocity and vitriol of the protests made people scared to speak out, and the people who are well-informed on the matter chose to drop off the radar, leaving their expertise and knowledge unused. A terrible shame, because they are able to fuel the debate.

Among other things, academic freedom is about having free choices in teaching and research in the interest of the development of knowledge, where various perspectives and angles should be included. A lot is possible but there are frameworks, professional codes, and behavioural codes involved. Freedom of speech sometimes clashes with academic freedom; a lecturer may have a specific strong opinion. However, academic justification, critical reflection, and various academic angles also need to be brought forward in teaching. This entails a certain responsibility of lecturers towards their students, we cannot lose sight of that.

This academic freedom is the responsibility of the entire university community, of administrators like me, of colleagues and students, of all of us. Collegiality and respect for one another are the basic conditions.

Criticism and clashing opinions are part of it, also when it comes to the course and expressions of the University and its administrators, where the line between academic freedom and freedom of speech becomes somewhat blurry. I encourage everyone to talk to each other about this. In the new year that is ahead of us, I hope to find less black and white opinions and more room and respect for the other person.

As an administrator, I want to know what is going on, the Concerns students and colleagues are having, and what your opinion is on our University's course. I want to contribute to making sure that all voices are being heard, for example by initiating and organizing debates. It is crucial that everyone - every staff member, every student - dares to speak out. Over the past years, we have taken quite a few steps in the right direction with our social security policy. Discussing a healthy working environment and pleasant study environment has been initiated and should be continued.

At the same time, I of course realise the work is not done yet. We will use the coming period to create the proper preconditions and we will continue to work together on a culture of inclusion and respect. A culture in which we value each other's opinions and make room for deviating insights. A culture in which we hold each other accountable when that does not happen and where we also discuss the more difficult topics.

Let's not forget: Since 1614, Groningen has been the place where we deal with differences of opinion in a productive way. Over 410 years of academic freedom are a foundation *and* an assignment.

In the way that embracing different perspectives on academic developments ultimately progresses science, so that the room for different opinions and perspectives will contribute to a better world. Let the University of Groningen - ***let us*** - be an example of that.