



university of  
 groningen 2014 | 400 years

for infinity

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***Award Ceremony Honorary Doctorates Celebrating  
400 years of University of Groningen  
Martini Church Groningen, Friday 13 June 2014***

***Opening Speech by professor Elmer Sterken Rector Magnificus***

*for infinity*



Your excellencies, Commissioner of the King, Mayor of the City of Groningen, dear and honoured colleagues and guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my privilege to welcome you at the public meeting of the Senate of the University of Groningen. Today we celebrate the 400 years anniversary of the University of Groningen. It is wonderful that we can convene on the same location in this magnificent Martini-Church as four hundred years ago in 1614 to commemorate the start and history of our lovely University. On May 15th of this year our King Willem-Alexander officially opened the lustrum celebration. Since May 15 we have enjoyed a range of wonderful activities during more than four weeks. Today we will commemorate the 80th lustrum in this official meeting of the Senate by awarding ten Honorary Doctorates.

It is a great honor to welcome so many representatives of our international partners at this ceremony. I express my gratitude to the Rectors, Presidents and/or other representatives for coming to Groningen in order to share this important and historical moment with us. The members of the Coimbra Group, our partners in the U4 network, our friends of the Verbund Nord-Deutscher Universitäten, our partner institutions in China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Qatar, Russia, and Saudi-Arabia, and many others, we enjoy and value our long-lasting relationships. And of course, welcome also to our Dutch colleagues! I can express on behalf of the Groningen academic community that we love to see you all here today.

The University of Groningen is very proud of its long history. The foundation of our University is rooted in the history of the Northern Provinces of the Netherlands. In the early years of the Seventeenth Century the Province of Groningen, as part of the young Dutch nation, felt the need to establish a university to educate young professionals. The establishment of freedom in the Dutch Provinces was crucial. Political freedom is a necessary condition for the establishment of intellectual freedom, an issue I would like to stress today. In 1614 the German scientist Ubbo Emmius became our first Rector Magnificus and wrote his initial plans for our university in his Eternal Edict. In the four centuries after, many students have



experienced the academic atmosphere of the University in its lively surroundings. Going back to 1614: 82 students were enrolled and of those 82, 30 were foreign students. We were an international university right at the start! And this international position was steady in the first 75 years. Of the 6231 students enrolled in the first 75 years 2642 students were non-Dutch. And then I don't count the students from Brabant and Limburg, now Provinces of the Netherlands, who were considered to be 'foreigners' in those days! And of the 52 professors appointed in the seventeenth century, 34 were foreign. These facts illustrate how international academic habits in Europe and therefore also in Groningen were in the seventeenth century.

A university is an institution where young and bright people come and enjoy their academic training by experienced researchers. This university model has brought cities and nations an enormous value added in terms of wealth and welfare. It is nowadays hard to imagine a world without universities, but this must have been different four centuries ago. So what are the main conditions required to found a university? In my view there are three basic preconditions:

- Political stability and trust;
- The availability of financial capital;
- Willingness to invest in human knowledge.

All these three basic necessities were available in Groningen in the early Seventeenth Century. Political stability returned to the region, trade started to increase, financial capital became available, and the willingness to invest in knowledge and training of high-standard professionals increased. The emerging Dutch society felt a large demand for clergymen, medical doctors and lawyers.

So on August the 23d 1614, on the same location as we are today, the Council of the Province Groningen and the Ommelanden, as the current province of Groningen was then known, founded the Provincial College, later on our University, of Groningen. The six professors present at this inaugural session were so popular that they needed an escape-route to leave the church after the meeting had ended! And at night the Board of the Province of Groningen hosted a festive banquet, which lasted – in multam usque noctem! In the next centuries the University of Groningen had periods of growth and showed resilience in times of recession. Just to give you an example, in 1714 the Provincial College only had five professors and an inflow of 24



students. The centennial festivity of our university was even cancelled! But I like to emphasize that, even though times were difficult, the Groningen Academia has always safeguarded freedom of thought. After having been a branch of the Imperial University of Paris for a short period, from 1812 to 1813, the Provincial College was named State College. The second centennial in 1814 was celebrated by a four-hour session here in the Martini Church! Trust me, we won't torture you that long today! The New Law on Higher Education in 1876 was the basis to rename our institution into State University, Rijksuniversiteit. And I am convinced that the three basic requirements for a university to start: political stability and trust, the availability of financial capital, and the willingness to invest in human development, are still valid today to explain growth of academic institutions like the University of Groningen.

Please look around you in this lovely Martini Church. The oldest parts of this church date back to the thirteenth century, the main part of the building is from the fifteenth century. It is the icon-building of the City of Groningen, d'Olle Grieze, and so also important in the history and magic of the university. And here I would like to explain why Groningen is a special. In the first place: the City of Groningen. There are some cities in the World where universities create a 'natural habitat' for an academic community. You all know these beautiful cities and have probably visited those lovely institutions many times. Well, Groningen is such a city. The City of Groningen has this medieval setting that academics like. Groningen is known for its narrow streets, horrible for today's traffic, canals, large and rich old houses, lovely churches, and beautiful university buildings. Bikes are all over the place. The surroundings of the Province of Groningen are so intensely related with the University and also the relationship with the national government has always been favourable. We have local, regional, and national support. This really is magic factor number one.

And what is magic factor number two? The University of Groningen has always been a liberal and open-minded institution. Even in the early days where religious debates were very often a threat to academic life, Groningen has resisted to



limit freedom. The single selection criterion for all decisions has been and is the availability of talent and certainly not opinions or beliefs. And that is the course of history fames names as Johann Bernoulli, Petrus Camper, Sibrandus Stratingh, Jacobus Kapteyn, Gerardus Heymans, Jantine Tammes, Johannes Huizinga, and the first female student in the Netherlands Aletta Jacobs, and Nobelprize-winner Frits Zernike came to Groningen.

Finally one notices the enormous importance of student life. Due to the strong historical roots, student life and student organizations have always been very prosperous. In 2015 one of the student societies will celebrate the second centennial, being the oldest student society in the Netherlands. Today, we have more than 250 organizations where students are somehow involved. The physical presence of students, young adolescents, is key in education and development. Seeing students discuss, meet, and bike, is what Groningen makes a natural student environment. The student organizations adjust to changing circumstances, and it is our task to guide these developments in order to foster this Groningen DNA.

The University of Groningen is proud of its achievements today. The University is a top-100 university in the major international rankings, has a vast international network, almost 30 thousand students (including more than 4000 international degree students), 6 thousand employees and a clear focus on societal themes like Healthy Ageing, Energy, and Sustainable Society. The University is an international research university, firmly rooted in the Northern part of the Netherlands. It is closely related to local authorities, firms, and institutions. Groningen is a really popular student city. The magic works! And I hope that we continue to make the magic work in the future, that we can continue to collaborate with our regional, national and international partners and that we all can enjoy freedom of thought and political stability.

For Infinity is the name of our lustrum celebration and this nicely relates to the Eternal Edict that Ubbo Emmius published in 1614. We can of course look at our past history, but maybe it is more interesting to look into the future. One hundred years ago, my predecessor Rector Magnificus Hamburger, dared to look into the next century ahead. He predicted a strong prosperity and a strong and good relation with the government. Looking back we can conclude that he made an excellent forecast. This week, we hosted the Coimbra Meetings and one of the events was a seminar



on the Universities of the 21st Century. So allow me to follow my predecessor Hamburger and say a few words about the future of our university in about 50-100 years.

In order to make a forecast I first sketch some expected changes in our environment. We will observe an increased competition among universities worldwide, an increase in mobility of people, an improvement of technology and data availability, an ageing population in developed and younger population in developing countries, and an increasingly more important role of finance. The keywords could therefore be: global integration, mobility, technology, and competition. The issue of sustainability is of course overarching. So what can universities do to make use of new technologies in order to make societies survive?

At the same time I expect that typical core academic values and habits will remain unchanged: differences between academic disciplines will continue to exist, universities will continue to be organized as professional organizations, academic traditions will survive, and the need of well-equipped physical academic locations will remain unchanged. I expect that campus-based education will continue to offer the best learning opportunities, but the active use of better technologies will change the way we teach intensively.

So knowing these developments how will the University of Groningen look like in for instance 2064? I can only make a best guess. First of all, like in the past century, the University of Groningen will have an intense relationship with its environment, ranging from institutions in the region, to the national and European government bodies. Secondly, scientific specialization will be more pronounced, requiring both more intense training and a need for collaboration. Thirdly, technological progress will allow us to innovate both learning and continuous quality control of students and researchers. Fourthly, internationalization will have made further progress. Student mobility will return to the seventeenth century Dutch level and the University of Groningen will be part of an international network with different campuses across the globe. Fifthly, teaching and learning will have changed. Due to technological developments, students will need more capabilities to judge the value of information instead of acquiring knowledge alone. We will also see more alumni students coming back to university to re-boost their productivity. And, although I am not sure about this, I expect that social interaction will be different, but hopefully



still present in beautiful Groningen! And I truly hope that our children can enjoy academic education in freedom. With these optimistic words I leave the evaluation of my forecasts to our successors.

Ladies and gentlemen, I arrived at the end of my official introduction. Please allow me go back in history for 100 years and quote my predecessor Rector Magnificus Hamburger by ending my speech with the powerful expression in Latin:

*Floreat in aeternum vigeatque academia nostra!*