

The University of Groningen in the World

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A Concise History

Klaas van Berkel & Guus Termeer

PALLAS  PUBLICATIONS

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Preface

Before you lies a publication that is the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream of the University of Groningen (UG) to have an up-to-date, concise and smoothly written book on the history of this university. It is an interesting read for anyone who is connected with the UG, but it has been written in particular for international students, staff members, visitors and other interested parties.

When getting to know and understand someone, an effective method is to learn about important details from their past. This is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, with regard to organizations and institutions. How and why has something become what it eventually is? What makes something unique? What are its red flags, idiosyncrasies, achievements and failures? What elicits pride but perhaps also shame? Can an essential core be identified?

The authors Klaas van Berkel and Guus Termeer have succeeded outstandingly in answering these questions. The task could not have been fulfilled better by anyone else. Van Berkel is a renowned Dutch historian and professor. As the author of a three-volume standard work on the history of Groningen's university, he is the expert par excellence on this subject. Termeer, who wrote the sections on the university's twentieth-century history, is uniquely equipped to provide his vision on UG's most recent decades given his involvement as a former editor-in-chief of the university newspaper the *UK* and a coordinator/organizer of *Studium Generale* activities.

I find the most valuable historical works to be those that conjure 'a historical experience' for me. I have always enjoyed absorbing interesting facts and intelligent interpretations – in brief, the story that has been composed. But what I also look for is insight, often in the form of epiphanies, that shows that I've understood something fully. This 'eureka' moment came for me in this book when I realized: Of course, now I understand it! That is why the centre of a beautiful, medium-sized city in the northern Netherlands houses such a venerable, old and classic university that belongs among the top 100 universities worldwide! That is



why so many international students and researchers choose to pursue their academic interests here! That is why there is so much interdisciplinary collaboration and why the university is characterized by such short lines of communication!

I wish you many similar insights but also just as much pleasure as I had reading the text and looking at the beautiful illustrations.

Prof. Jouke de Vries

President of the Board of the University of Groningen

Introduction

History matters. Who and what we are is in part determined by our history. This is also true of universities. The buildings, the degree programmes on offer, and the way a university is administered all bear traces of the past: nothing ever appears in a vacuum, and there is nothing that comes from nothing. Anyone who comes into contact with the University of Groningen and wishes to understand something of its character and purpose is therefore well advised to also explore the university's history. How did the University of Groningen grow from a provincial institution established for religious reasons into a national university with 36,000 students, of whom 25% come from abroad, and an academic staff, of whom 45% come from outside the Netherlands?

The leitmotif in this book is our thesis that the University of Groningen has been an international university not only since the last decades of the 20th century but since its foundation in 1614. The first professors formed a rich international community, and many students came from outside the Republic of the United Netherlands, especially from areas now belonging to Germany. Internationalization, a slogan that has been all the rage in recent decades, is therefore nothing new for the University of Groningen. Its meaning, though, has changed over time. Sometimes it has referred to the proportion of international students among the Groningen student population, sometimes to the international standing of Groningen science, and sometimes to the safe haven that Groningen offered to students and scholars who no longer felt safe in their own countries. Even in the late 19th century, when the national character of the university was most emphasized, when Groningen had almost no international students and nationalism was in its heyday, the international significance of Groningen scholars was perhaps at its peak and internationalism blossomed like never before. History therefore also gives us some food for thought.

Can a journey through the history of the University of Groningen also teach us something about its character and identity? In many ways, the university's

history followed that of other Dutch and European universities. Neither its blossoming in the 17th century nor its subsequent decline in the late 18th century is unique to Groningen. And yet, in one respect at least, Groningen history differs from that of other universities in the Netherlands in one important way, namely the university's location in the extreme north of the country, close to the German border and far from the cultural and economic hubs in the west and centre of the country. Its proximity to Germany was an advantage in the 17th century, while its remoteness was often problematic, especially from the 19th century onwards. The fact that Groningen was so far removed from the political and economic centre of the Netherlands – and therefore remained small for a relatively long time – sometimes compelled the university's administrators to take unconventional steps. Groningen could not afford to think only in terms of existing frameworks and was forced at times to take unorthodox measures. It is not a complete coincidence that Groningen was the first Dutch university to appoint a Jewish professor, to welcome a female student or to appoint a female lecturer. It is also interesting to note that once their international reputation was secured, scholars often chose to settle at this relatively small university, where they were less burdened with administrative and teaching cares than at larger universities. Examples include the astronomer Jacobus Kapteyn, the philosopher and psychologist Gerardus Heymans, and the professor of comparative religion Gerardus van der Leeuw. Whether this is sufficient to claim a unique Groningen identity is something we leave to the reader to decide.

Klaas van Berkel
Guus Termeer

