‘Courage’

Speech by Heleen Herbert,
Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate,
at the opening of the academic year
at the University of Twente

Enschede, 31 August 2026

(alleen het gesproken woord geldt)

- Today we’re not only starting a new academic year.
- We’re also celebrating the 65th anniversary of a university that has always chosen courage over comfort.
- A university that is enterprising and groundbreaking. Choosing the path that makes the difference.
- That phrase – ‘courage over comfort’ – describes precisely what has made the University of Twente so special over those 65 years.
- Many congratulations on this anniversary.
- I myself first came here in 1990.
- That year, I started as a student at this university!
- I chose Industrial Management and Engineering. And during our introduction week, exactly on this date - August 31 - I celebrated my 18th birthday.
- I felt ready and excited for a new phase in life. So as you can imagine, being here today feels like a trip down memory lane. And it is an honour to celebrate my birthday here among you!
- Welcome, everyone, to the opening of this anniversary year.
- And a special welcome to my mother, who is also here today. She waved me goodbye 36 years ago when I set off on this wonderful adventure.
- I think she probably remembers even better than I do how thrilling it was.
- I felt like my new life was beginning.

- I left home and moved into a student flat on Calslaan, right on campus.
- Everything was new and unfamiliar, but Twente and the university immediately gave me the feeling that everything would be okay.
- A feeling of safety that was largely down to what we call *Twentse Noaberschap*.
- In one sense, that means ‘neighbourliness’. But it’s about more than that.
- It describes a community in which people look out for each other and help each other.
- In the knowledge that we can’t do without one another.
- And that’s something that I’ve always believed myself.
- That we <u>need</u> each other. <u>Especially</u> when we look at the current challenges facing the Netherlands.
- And before I discuss the strengths of this university and Twente’s contribution to this country, I’d like to briefly outline those challenges:

- First, we need to make our economy and industry more competitive and future-proof. And make our energy supply more sustainable.
- Second, we need to seize the opportunities that come with digitalisation and artificial intelligence, without losing sight of our security, privacy and independence.
- Third, we need to reduce our dependence on other countries for critical technologies and raw materials.
- At the same time, our population is ageing, and we have a shortage of talent, space, water and energy.
- These are major, complex issues that we can't resolve overnight.
- Especially in this time of geopolitical tensions and growing international competition, we're going to have to come up with innovative, unorthodox solutions.
- And so my key message is this: it can be done, but only if we work together and show courage.
- The courage to collaborate across boundaries. To share knowledge, to take risks and to invest in solutions even if they won't pay off immediately.

- Ladies and gentlemen, Twente demonstrates that kind of courage, leading the way, and showing us that nothing's impossible.
- And this university plays a key role in that.
- It's the driving force behind the powerful Twente ecosystem.
- For decades now, this university has excelled in bringing together people, knowledge, innovation and enterprise.
- Consistently showing the courage to blaze new trails.
- So it's entirely fitting that 'Courage' is the central theme of your anniversary celebrations.
- Courage is more than daring to innovate.
- It also takes courage to work with others.
- To look beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines.
- To unite research with enterprise.
- To make use of knowledge, instead of leaving it on the shelf. So we can find solutions that help us move forward:
- In other words, 'High Tech, Human Touch'.
- That is this university's key strength.
- And it's exactly what students here learn: to develop technology, but also to always take people and society as your point of departure and arrival!
- One great example of this is the CLEAR project, which last year was awarded the highest Dutch honour for innovation in education.

- In this project, students from different disciplines are working together on solutions to major issues facing society.

- That combination of technology, social engagement and enterprise makes Twente immensely valuable to the Netherlands.
- This is where knowledge is translated into practice. Where new companies are emerging that will help find solutions for society and boost economic growth.
- There are some great examples of this at Kennispark Twente.
- There, 400 high-tech companies are collaborating with hundreds of spin-offs.

  1. They're working on new medical technologies that will ease the pressure on healthcare services and help patients find the right diagnosis more quickly.

  2. They're working on the next generation of semiconductors, the chips that are so vital for our economic resilience and technological independence.

  3. They're developing robots and smart manufacturing techniques that help companies do more work, more effectively, with fewer people.
- That's especially important with such a tight labour market.

  4. They're also developing new materials that are lighter, stronger and more sustainable.

- Which is essential for the energy transition and the circular economy.

  5. What's more, here in Twente the major Dutch high-tech companies are working closely with educational institutions and the Ministry of Defence to develop intelligent and unmanned systems.
- Together, they're creating ground-breaking defence and security solutions, for example at Demcon at Kennispark Twente.
- Also great is how researchers at the MESA+ NanoLab are working on the technologies of tomorrow: new chips, photonics and medical applications.
- The amazing thing about this lab is that it's also accessible to start-ups, SMEs and big firms that conduct research or develop new technologies.
- And that's not only leading to scientific breakthroughs.
- It's also generating solutions that make our healthcare better, our economy stronger and our country less dependent on foreign technologies.
- Isn't that what it's all about?! Making an impact!

- In this way, the University of Twente and the wider region are showing what can be achieved if you have the courage to blaze new trails.
- And I admire that.
- And I'm willing to build on that! Because - as I said before - we need each other.
- And with that in mind, let me tell you what the government is doing to support the region.
- The first step is our new industrial policy, which enables us to make clear choices.
- And that takes courage.
- Because you can't tackle everything at once. We've tried it in the past, and it simply doesn't work.
- With this new policy, we're focusing on a limited number of growth markets, like AI, biotechnology and semiconductors.
- The very technologies in which Twente is already leading the way.
- To maintain that lead, we need one thing above all: talent.
- And that's why, in early July, the government presented its new Talent Strategy.
- And this too demands the courage to make choices.
- Because, with our ageing population and personnel shortages, we need a much more targeted approach to finding talent.
- We're focusing on four areas:

- digitalisation and AI;
- energy;
- security; and
- life sciences.

- And here too, this region is a leading player. For years it's been demonstrating the added value of the 'Twente approach'.
- Take the 'Hospital of the Future' project, which involves researchers, healthcare professionals and companies all working together on medical technology to help patients recover at home, while being monitored remotely.
- That's not only better for the patient. It also helps keep healthcare accessible as the sector grapples with staff shortages.
- Over the next 10 years, the government will invest 102.5 million euros nationwide in the Dutch medical technology sector.
- Of that, tens of millions will be going to this inspirational project in Twente.

- And that brings me to another step the government is taking, on top of its new industrial policy and the Talent Strategy.
- If we opt to explore certain technologies, we also need to make sure that good ideas can develop into successful applications.
- That researchers, entrepreneurs and investors are able to connect with each other.
- That we can scale up more quickly when we find an innovation that can truly make a difference.
- This is the goal of the National Agency for Disruptive Innovation, or NADI, an initiative the government is developing.
- NADI will invest in ground-breaking and high-risk technological innovations.
- The government is also launching a national investment institution.
- This should ensure that promising companies and projects find it easier to access capital.
- Especially when private investors are reluctant to invest because the risks seem too high.
- That's precisely when the government needs to show courage and stick its neck out.
- Here at this university, we can see why that's necessary.

- This is where ideas are created, talented people are trained, and start-ups grow into companies that offer solutions to the challenges we face.
- So we need a system which – instead of losing track of those innovations – will make sure they can move forward.

- Ladies and gentlemen, I've already mentioned *Twentse noaberschap*.
- The habit of looking out for each other and working together for the common good.
- The big challenges we face in the Netherlands can only be solved through collaboration.
- The ultimate goal is not just economic growth.
- We need to look beyond that, to what economic growth actually means for people.
- Fostering healthy lives. Presenting more opportunities. Providing a sense of security, and confidence in the future.
- Around here, that's known as *Bruto Twents Geluk*. And it's marvellous!
- That's the kind of impact I'm talking about.
- To get there we will need your courage. And we will need each other.
- So stay curious and open-minded. And keep choosing the path that makes the difference.
- Thank you.