

Prof. Jasper Knoester Knight in the Order of the Netherlands Lion

On Thursday 3 March, Prof. Jasper Knoester was awarded a royal decoration on the recommendation of the UG. The decoration was presented to him by Mayor of the Municipality of Groningen, K. F. Schuiling, during his farewell event. Knoester has been appointed as Knight in the Order of the Netherlands Lion.

Jasper Knoester (Hoensbroek, 1958), is a Full Professor of Theory of Condensed Matter, and Dean and Deputy Rector of the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE) at the University of Groningen. Since his appointment as Dean in 2010, he has played an extraordinarily important role in the development of the University in general, and his Faculty in particular. A multi-talented pioneer and visionary, he is also a unifying administrator whose exceptional leadership has raised the faculty to a world-class level.

He is prominent among a selected number of monumental leading scientists who have succeeded in being leaders in the areas of both science and administration. On 1 January 2022, he became Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences at Leiden University.

Highly successful scientist

In the scientific field, Knoester has more than earned his stripes with high-quality research and remarkable discoveries. He started his career at the University of Groningen in 1989 as an independent Huygens Fellow and rapidly developed into a successful and creative scientist. In 1993, he was appointed Full Professor of Theory of Condensed Matter. His theoretical research concerns the electronic and optical properties of molecular materials, which are used in cameras, TV screens, and solar panels, amongst other things. He has authored or co-authored around 195 peer-reviewed articles, and he is a highly sought-after speaker at international conferences and colloquia at other institutions. He was also a founder of the current top research school Zernike Institute of Advanced Materials (ZIAM), where he was the scientific director from 2003 to 2009. As a full professor, he has created a climate within which high-level science can flourish. As a result, the Faculty has been able to attract many leading scientists, and it has received important awards and successes, including Spinoza Prize and even a Nobel Prize. He has always combined his scientific and administrative work with enormous dedication. For example, in addition to his demanding job as Dean, he has managed to publish some 80 scientific papers in leading journals.

Unifier with great dedication and professional commitment

Since his appointment as Dean of FSE in 2010, Knoester has chaired the three-member Faculty Board, led 10 research institutes, and supervised a total of 1,600 PhD students along with scientific and support staff members. Under his leadership, the Faculty has grown into a modern and diverse organization with many English-taught programmes and an open, inclusive atmosphere. This helped Knoester to attract the best scientific talents from all over the world to Groningen. The Faculty currently has more than 70 nationalities, and the number of students has doubled from 3,500 in 2010 to 7,000 in 2021.

Fundamental and technical scientific profile

As Dean, Knoester was closely involved in the implementation of the sector plans for physics and chemistry, which were aimed at increasing student intake, improving success rates, and sharpening the research profiles of these disciplines. As a result of his commitment and vision, the Faculty now has a strong profile in both fundamental and technical science, with results including new research groups in Biomedical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering. Like no other, he sought connections with science faculties at other universities, as well as with other scientific disciplines, especially social sciences and humanities within and outside the University of Groningen. For example, under his leadership, FSE has become a very good partner to UMCG in both research and teaching. The fruits of these efforts include the initiative for the Health Technology Research & Innovation Cluster. In addition, FSE and UMCG are collaborating in the field of medical imaging research, and the number of students opting for courses including Biomedical Sciences and Biomedical Engineering has increased significantly.

Multi-faceted administration

Knoester has served in a variety of administrative positions within the University. For example, he has been Deputy Rector and Chief Diversity Officer, and he is a member of the University's Steering Committee for Recognition and Rewards, where he plays an important role in discussions concerning the (re)structuring of academic careers. To this end, he has taken the lead at his own Faculty with a pilot project on academic careers. As chair of the National Conference of Science Deans, he proved to be an exceptional unifier, which greatly improved the consultation between universities. With his great dedication and professional commitment, he has made an excellent contribution to the flourishing of Dutch science in the broadest sense.

Attention to women in a bastion of masculinity

As a full professor, Knoester was involved in the introduction of the innovative tenure-track career policy, which gave every scientist the opportunity to develop into a full professor in 10 years' time. As Dean, he further strengthened and modernized this policy, and he has always paid attention to women within the faculty, which has traditionally been a bastion of masculinity at higher levels. He strived to achieve an equal distribution, including amongst full professors, and he has brought about a substantial increase in the number of women at the top of the Faculty. For example, he has created more than 30 positions for Rosalind Franklin Fellows. His policy of increasing gender diversity and modernizing the recruitment culture and Appointment Advisory Committees is now widely supported. The Faculty currently has a higher percentage of female full professors than other science faculties in the country. Because of these efforts, he received the first Diversity Award of the Dutch Physical Society on behalf of the Faculty in 2018.

Gifted lecturer and excellent supervisor

Before becoming Dean, Knoester was named Best Physics Lecturer three times and Best Lecturer of the entire Faculty once. He is especially talented in explaining highly complex information and helping students to develop a deep understanding of the material. Even throughout his full-time appointment as Dean, he continued to give lectures. In addition, he has supervised 29 PhD students, serving as the primary supervisor for 28 of them. Students,

PhD students, and postdocs praise him for his excellent, inspired, and committed guidance. He opens doors for students at international universities and leading institutes, and he remains personally involved with them even after they leave Groningen. In this way, he has helped to shape a new generation of scientists.

International impact

Internationally, Knoester engages in intensive collaboration with leading universities around the world, with the goal of contributing to the solution of major scientific and social problems, including the climate crisis. For example, he has established several innovative programmes that have allowed scientists to set up research projects together with foreign colleagues. As a result, 120 international double PhD programmes have been started at his Faculty since 2013. He has also been a Visiting Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a Guest Professor at Jilin University. He collaborated closely with Nanyang Technological University in Singapore to establish a joint PhD programme.

Empathetic and approachable

In addition to being praised for his exceptional scientific and administrative qualities, Knoester is lauded for his exceptional personal qualities and the respectful way in which he deals with people. He is a good listener, he is calm and modest, empathic and approachable. He combines these qualities with outstanding vision and managerial courage, and he knows how to bring people and interests together for a common goal. It is exceptional that he always managed to combine his more than full-time work as a full professor and Dean with research, teaching, and other administrative activities.