

Sustainability within Faculty of Social Sciences



FSS aims for environmental sustainability in line with the new VU strategy. Learn more about our efforts to reduce our carbon footprint and optimize resource usage through sustainable work routines and best practices.

Part 1 Introduction

Sustainability within FSS

The FSS aims to make its activities sustainable in an environmental sense. This is in line with the new VU strategy (see the text box below), where sustainability is promoted in a broad sense.

The guidelines for sustainable work routines presented in this document brings together policies and best practices collected from different departments. Within FSS, we focus on sustainability in an environmental context; our focus is thus on reducing our carbon footprint and reducing a waste of resources.

Sustainability (3.0) in the VU strategic plan

Our society is facing major challenges and far-reaching issues. These include climate change and the depletion of natural resources, along with issues such as increasing divisions and polarization. Then there is the information society - which is putting great pressure on personal privacy - and the dilemmas presented by robotization and artificial intelligence. To say nothing of health challenges, too little exercise, the levels of stress to which people are exposed, and the large numbers of people who feel that their lives lack meaning. We need sustainable solutions for each and every one of these important themes. As a university, we feel that it is our responsibility to help find these solutions. This will involve addressing present-day issues without compromising the future. That is in keeping with our mission - taking responsibility for people and the planet. We feel that the term 'sustainable' has very wide-ranging significance. Sustainability is about more than just the environment, it also extends to economic, human, cultural and societal aspects. After all, natural resources are not the only things that are in short supply. Sustainability is also a vital issue for VU Amsterdam itself. We are making every effort to ensure that the life of our university, our community, our staff and our students is both sustainable and healthy. At the same time, we are focusing on the sustainable and efficient use of scarce resources. Being located very close to a major train station, we encourage our employees to opt for public transport rather than driving to work or using air travel for longer journeys. We measure our success in achieving our sustainability aspirations in terms of our contribution to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). [VU Strategy 2020-2025]

Vision and mission

Tackling climate change by reducing greenhouse gases poses a major challenge for the world, and every individual. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam tries to contribute its share as well, amongst others by establishing the Amsterdam Society Institute (ASI) in May 2019. However, true to Goffman (1959) and Brunsson (2002), front stage initiatives as evidenced by formal policy initiatives are not necessarily in sync with what is happening backstage. In fact, there is frequently a 'difference between words and deeds, the eventuality that organizations may talk in one way, decide in another and act in a third' (Brunsson 2002: xiii).

The climate crisis is one of the most pressing issues facing humanity. Our vision is that universities have a key role to play in helping to secure a sustainable future, and our approach to research, teaching and other actions, should reflect this. The problem requires immediate action rather than endless discussion and suggestions.

As time is running out, we need to adapt rapidly. To adjust behavior rapidly, effective policies are required. This means that every sector, institution and organization in society has to invest time, creativity and money in finding ways to reduce its ecological footprint while striving for global (gender, class, racial, and cultural) justice in the process. This translates in the FSS mission:

To maintain a sustainable work ethic and to reduce our carbon footprint as an organization in a way that serves the interests of our employees and students within the faculty.

In achieving this overall aim we developed three instrumental objectives:

1. creating awareness on the urgency of the climate change amongst employees and students,
2. introducing concrete measures that help reducing our carbon footprint as an organization, and
3. monitoring and securing the implementation of these measures in our organization.

Part 2 Policy

Reducing our carbon footprint and our waste of resources requires us to have a close look at all relevant rules, regulations and measures in place, with regard to national and international travelling, and our use and waste of food, energy and other resources.

Below, we first specify some definitions and then introduce our policy measures per topic.

Important definitions

Rules: An accepted principle or instruction that states the way things should be done.

Incentives: Something that encourages staff to do something a certain way.

Recommendations: Advice on what the best thing to do is.

Traveling internationally

Rules

Prior to going on a business trip, the employee will consider whether the business trip is necessary and how it can be done with the least possible damage to the environment. In concrete terms, this means that, as a rule, the business trip will only be approved by the supervisor and the travel and any accommodation expenses will only be reimbursed by the VU if:

- It concerns an international meeting which lasts more than 3 hours and the trip - in case of a travel time by public transport of up to 6 hours - is made by public transport.
- It concerns an international meeting which lasts more than 3 hours and the trip - in case of a travel time by public transport shorter or as long as the duration of a flight - is made by public transport.
- It concerns one intercontinental flight per two years for the employee.

In addition:

- In the event that destinations can be reached within 8 hours by public transport, then public transport is recommended.
- If the travel time by public transport is no more than 2 hours longer than by air travel, then public transport is recommended.

The above can be deviated from by the supervisor by approving the trip and budget in advance.

Exceptions to the one intercontinental flight rule are possible with approval of an FSS Management Team, if the resulting damage (e.g., to the person's career) is not acceptable or in case of necessary field work abroad. In cases of exceptions, the relevant project leader has to make a maximum effort to reduce travelling by plane.

If flights cannot be avoided, carbon dioxide compensation becomes mandatory for flights that should be reimbursed by the department. To compensate you can use:

- Klimaatwijsovakantie.nl, a Dutch initiative by Milieu Centraal that calculates the carbon dioxide emission of your trip.
- Use Atmosfair for carbon dioxide compensation (<https://www.atmosfair.de/en/>).

Incentives

- Take the train (first class is fine) for European visits, even if that means higher travel expenses. The department reimburses the travel expenses if one has no other means to pay for travelling (grant funding, personal fund).

Recommendations

- Take direct flights, even if that means higher travel expenses, since they cause less carbon dioxide emission than flights with transfers. When the cost of a direct flight becomes disproportionately more expensive, sound financial considerations can prevail to choose a flight with a stopover.
- (Young) scientists are encouraged and (financially) supported in undertaking long-term research visits instead of attending multiple conferences or short visits.
- Make more use of the Skype and Zoom facilities and Video conferencing instead of traveling.
- The measures regarding the corona virus have taught us that facilities like Skype and Zoom provide good alternatives for traveling.

Commuting

Incentives

- The university offers free blue VU bikes as a costless and faster alternative to public transportation within the city. The blue VU bikes can be used between 9:00-17:00 o'clock.
- Choose cycling as a way of commuting.

There is an option to lease a bike according to the optional model for terms and conditions of employment. Per 1 January 2020, the fiscal exchange option has been increased to 1.500 euro (including VAT). Besides that, you can use this sum to lease a bike.

If you are considering buying a special e-bike or speed pedelec, QicQ is a great opportunity to lease one. QicQ offers bikes of brands like Stromer and QonQer that are especially suited for longer rides. Their mission: As many people on their bikes, as much as possible, out of their car. This mission suits the green vision which underlies the commuting of the VU. At QicQ, you can buy or lease bikes. They will take care of the service and maintenance. You can rent a bike to test it for a week. QicQ also has a special landing page for VU employees.

Food and food waste

Rules

- All catering ordered via an FSS cost center to facilitate a meeting, drinks, lunch or other social events, must be vegetarian.
- During graduation, catering must be vegetarian.
- There are no water fountains in front of departments.
- No milk is being served during meetings and events, instead it is just juice and water.

Incentives

- Doggy bags are provided via Eurest for leftover food. These will be paper bags to minimize food waste.

Recommendations

- Only order vegetarian options with no or small amounts of dairy for meetings or events.

Waste

Incentives

- Only print materials you use several times. This is stimulated by handing out more VU iPads or laptops and by putting up stickers on the copying machines to create awareness.
- Improve how we separately collect different kinds of waste, for instance by having collection spots for batteries, glass and plastic in each department.

Recommendations

- Use reusable cups for coffee or other beverages. This is stimulated by the FSS handing out reusable cups.
- Ask FCO to stop refilling the non-reusable cups in the department (as was done in the sociology department).
- When printing your materials, print them not only on two sides, but also two pages on one side.

Electricity

Recommendations

- Switch off your computers and other electronic devices before going home.
- Limit data storage. Clean up your mail and directories regularly.

Create awareness

Incentives

- You are stimulated to take part in climate marches and/or strikes. Taking a day leave to attend the meeting (limited to one day per year) is unnecessary.

Recommendations

- Discuss sustainability and climate change in class as part of the curriculum in a way that fits within this curriculum.

Example from the Department of Sociology:

- Explore the sociological meaning of climate change and the role sociology has in combatting this. We will also consider whether we incorporate the theme of climate change into research grants.
- Explore the ways in which the climate crisis, related questions and solutions can become part of the sociology bachelor and master through embedding this into the already existing courses. The Education Director should provide guidance in terms of designing (elements of these) courses in one or our Education meetings

Another example could be:

- Turn one of the classes in SS4S into a class on sustainability.

Appendix 1

Sustainable development goals



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