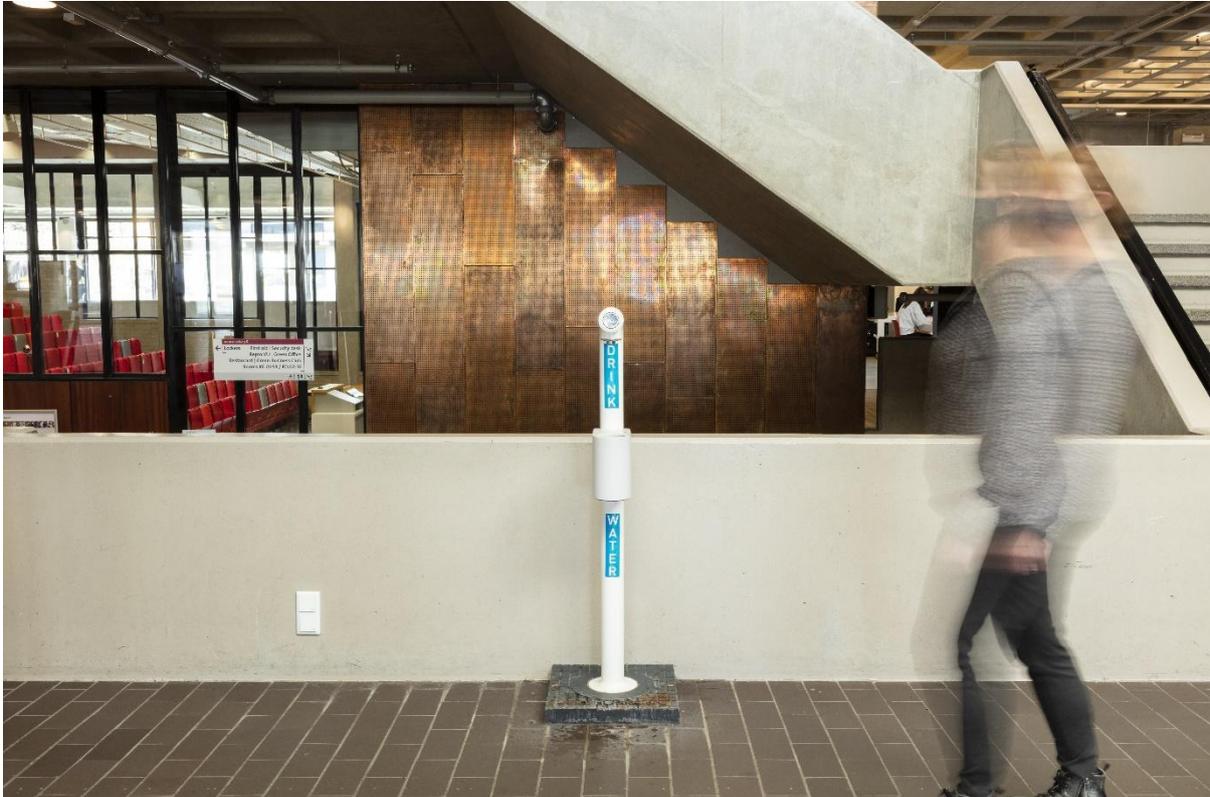


## VU Amsterdam objects and their stories - 140 year Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

### 2015-2020 – The water tap point, the green office and the tradition of sustainability of the VU



Water tap point in the hall of the VU main building, Photo: René den Engelsman 2021

**The Green Office at the VU, founded in October 2014, is part of a European movement of Green offices at universities. It symbolizes the importance of sustainability for students all over the world, and the growing interest of the university boards as well. Starting in 2015 the Green Office (GO) intends to make the VU PET-water bottle free, and joined forces with the Campus Services (FCO) to create free drink water tap points, like the one in the hall of the main building. Rodrigo Zapata, the current manager of the Green Office, tells about their history and their plans. Ab Flipse shows the broader VU-history of sustainability.**

It was in 2010 that the first Dutch Green office was opened, at the [Maastricht university](#). It was an experiment, student-led and staff-supported, to put sustainability higher on the agendas of the university boards. At one point the GO network consisted of 29 established and 19 GO initiatives all over the continent, and it is constantly growing. The different offices yearly come together in the European Green Office Summit (EGOS). During this summit, representatives of Green Offices in Europe take part in an intensive program consisting of workshops, brainstorm sessions and lectures.

The [Green Office VU](#) was founded in 2014, when students and policy-makers agreed on the need for more awareness and initiatives on the issue of sustainability. This means that the Green Office VU was both a bottom-up and as well as a top-down initiative.. The mission of the Green Office VU is to make a sustainable and significant impact by empowering the VU-community. They are the main sustainability platform and network at the university, where students, faculty staff and employees come together to implement joint initiatives, exchange ideas and create alliances. Their activities and projects take a broad approach to sustainability and the areas of focus include education, research, community, and outreach.

The main method of operation is partnerships and ad-hoc projects. The GO works together with services, teachers, researchers, and organisations outside and inside the VU (e.g. caterers Eurest and Sodexo, the bottle maker [Dopper](#), but also the [Green Business Club Zuidas Amsterdam](#)). The GO is formally part of the [Amsterdam Sustainability Institute](#) and collaborates with all levels at the Main services and Faculties, including the [Institute for Environmental Studies](#) (IVM) at the VU, especially in the development of teaching materials.

One of the projects in the last few years was the Join the pipe program, part of the GO's wish to make the VU the first PET-water bottle free campus of Europe by 2018. This has not been fully realized, but serious steps have been made. With FCO several tap points have been set up, and an awareness campaign has been developed. The PET Free action was started together with the other Green Offices in Amsterdam ([Gemeente Amsterdam](#) & [Universiteit van Amsterdam](#)), which was an interesting and useful cooperation, for future actions also.

## **VU Amsterdam and sustainability in historical perspective**

### ***Ab Flipse***

The creation of the Green Office is in line with the current emphasis on sustainability at VU Amsterdam, which is also reflected in the profiling theme '[Science for sustainability](#)'. This theme covers [numerous educational and research initiatives](#), including minors, an honours course and summer school, and institutes such as the [Environmental Humanities Center](#) and the [Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development](#).

The focus on 'going green' has a long history at VU Amsterdam. In 1970, a committee was set up to explore the possibility of studying 'environmental issues'. A year later, on 9 December 1971, the [Institute for Environmental Studies](#) (IVM) was opened. Other universities started pursuing environmental research in the 1970s as well, but VU Amsterdam distinguished itself from the outset with its multidisciplinary and sometimes interdisciplinary approach. All faculties were asked to contribute, as the university realised that environmental issues not only involve the natural sciences, but also have economic, medical, social, political, legal and theological aspects. The IVM's first research projects arose from requests received by the Faculty of Economics (from the Ministry of Public Health and Environmental Protection, and from the World Wildlife Fund) for research on the economic costs of environmental pollution. One such project focused on traffic nuisance near buildings in Amsterdam-West, in which the reduced quality of life was also quantified in economic terms.

At the time of its founding, the institute introduced itself in publications such as *VU Magazine* and drew connections to the identity and origins of VU Amsterdam. Reference was made to Abraham Kuyper, for instance, who in 1879 had already called for government measures to combat air, soil and water pollution as part of the ARP's political programme, stating that research should be conducted into this pollution as well.

In any case, the establishment of the IVM fit with VU Amsterdam's identity in the 1970s, which revolved around service to society. The IVM's research remained closely linked to society in the years that followed: it had a strong focus on concrete policy recommendations and often involved contract research that was financed through external funding. Over the course of the 1970s and 80s, research at the institute branched out in different directions to include economic-technological, chemical-toxological and social-scientific topics.

'Going green' and 'the environment' also remained on the agenda in a broader sense within VU Amsterdam. Rector Magnificus Egbert Boeker, a physicist who specialised in environmental physics, delivered his rectorship address in 1993 titled 'The Earth and its fullness: on the environment and society', in which he emphasised the importance of technical and political analyses while encouraging broader reflection on mankind's attitude towards nature. The latter deserved attention at VU Amsterdam in particular. Boeker cited the thesis of American historian Lynn White, who claimed that the environmental crisis had its roots in Western Christianity, in which man is seen as the ruler of nature and nature as a machine. The religious tradition also had another side, which inspired mankind to care for creation. Boeker additionally mentioned Abraham Kuyper's social criticism and the idea of [environmental stewardship](#), which had been described by VU economist Bob Goudzwaard, among others. Although VU researchers were still contributing (too) little to the international debate, the VU tradition certainly provided avenues to get involved. This appeal from 1993 still seems relevant, especially now that sustainability is one of VU Amsterdam's profiling themes for 2021 (which also happens to be the year in which the IVM will celebrate its 50th anniversary).

- Watch a film about the IVM from 1988: [‘Basis for environmental policy’](#)
- Watch the performance of [‘Het lied der aarde’ \(The song of the earth\)](#) during Egbert Boeker’s rectorship speech at the Dies Natalis in 1993.

To see all the stories in this exhibition, visit [VU Amsterdam objects and their stories | 140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#)