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Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Success Stories

The Green Office Model: Making universities more sustainable

By Roman Lehnhof and Cathy Nolan



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Social enterprise rootAbility is on a mission to make sustainability integral to universities and other higher education institutions. The creators of the innovative Green Office Model won the 2015 UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

One day in 2012, four students were brainstorming their futures in the Green Office at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. The Green Office is a sustainability hub developed by students at Maastricht University in 2010, in close collaboration with administrative and teaching staff and funded by the university.

The four students came to a bold conclusion. What was working so well in Maastricht could work just as well in universities everywhere. In September 2012, Felix Spira, Valentin Tappeser, Ulrich Scharf and Arian Meyer (Ragnar Martens later joined the founding team) started a social enterprise called rootAbility, aiming to spread their Green Office Model across Europe. All were studying in different Bachelor programmes at Maastricht University, including Liberal Arts and Sciences, Infonomics, European Studies and International Business.

Fast forward to 2016 and there are 23 Green Offices operating in six European countries with the respective

universities providing funding, positions, office space and mandates. More than €1.1 million has been raised in funding for these GOs, and numerous other Green Office initiatives across Europe are lobbying for funding and support from their own universities as a result. It was in recognition of these achievements that



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rootAbility received the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD in November 2015.

What's so innovative about the Green Office Model?

More and more universities are introducing sustainability programmes. These can take the form of small-scale projects – like sustainability days or behaviour change programmes – or a specialized sustainability coordinator, even an entire committee. What distinguishes the Green Office Model? Felix Spira explains: *“Many sustainability committees lack the resources to implement real change, while a single sustainability coordinator can quickly go under in an institution with thousands of employees and students. With traditional sustainability management, the biggest downside is the students are not sufficiently involved. This is where the Green Office Model comes in. It sets up a mixed team of five to eight students and at least one university staff member. They then work with many volunteers to instigate a dynamic sustainability process.”*

Each Green Office works independently, but all must follow the Green Office Model's six principles. These require each team to comprise a mix of university students and staff, to have an official mandate to drive sustainability issues at the university. The Green Office must be funded by the university, be part of its organizational structure and collaborate with internal and external stakeholders, such as student groups, facility services, research institutes, the city administration and local civil associations. The sixth and last principle dictates that Green Office members should be trained by rootAbility. The principles ensure robust structures in which everyone works hand in hand.



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Green Offices then develop projects, including sustainability lecture series, solar cells on rooftops and more student-led sustainability research. They also support and connect existing sustainability initiatives by students, staff and



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faculty, and can help to develop and implement sustainability strategies.

“We want to make universities greener and more sustainable”

The founders of rootAbility cite four reasons why a Green Office can effectively drive a dynamic sustainability process in universities and other institutions of higher education. First, students work with university staff and researchers, combining innovative ideas with the necessary level of experience. Second, the Green Office Model follows a holistic, whole-institution approach and integrates sustainability into the university's teaching, research, operations and daily life in general.

Third, the model is extremely flexible and open to further innovation. It can be adapted to suit various university environments and can thus be integrated into existing structures and activities. And finally, each Green Office can communicate and collaborate with other offices, making it an integral part of the Europe-wide movement. This fosters the internationalization of higher education.

Open source change-making

Like all start-ups, rootAbility faced a number of setbacks, the most discouraging of which was that the model did not spread as quickly as hoped. The team

tried consulting universities and then switched to offering workshops but neither approach brought the success expected in 2013.

Then, just as funds were running out, they found the idea that would turn the Green Office Model into a grassroots movement: *“Open source change-making was the approach we needed to adopt,”* says Spira.

The six principles were developed, which could be adapted to the context of different educational institutions, and were backed by open-source materials in the form of videos, handbooks, research reports, case studies and presentation slides, vastly increasing the project’s reach. Rather than selling the model, knowledge was now freely available for students, staff and faculty on rootAbility’s website.

And rootAbility still managed to stay in business. Spira explains: *“We started to develop a freemium business model. A freemium business model puts some content for free on the web, whereas other services are paid for. That means that we inform university students and staff about the Green Office Model via Skype or on the telephone, but we charge a fee for workshops, presentations and intensive support services.”*

New partners and tailored solutions

Now rootAbility’s is entering into its first non-university collaboration with the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), a national institute for strategic policy analysis. PBL is using the six Green Office principles to develop a sustainability programme that is tailored to its particular needs.

“We will also be seeking to expand the reach of the Green Office Movement by working with universities of applied sciences, as well as technical and vocational colleges,” says Spira. *“With this, the team is staying true to its original field of activity. “Working with students and universities is a subject very close to our hearts.”*



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