Empower students, staff and academics to advance sustainability at your university

rootAbility gUG and the UNESCO Chair Higher Education for Sustainable Development at Leuphana University Lüneburg developed this e-book for students, staff and academics who want to get inspired by the Green Office Model.

Learn everything you need to know about:

- Why your university might need a Green Office?
- What a Green Office is?
- How you can establish your own Green Office?
Why a Green Office?

Sustainable development is the largest challenge of our time, and education plays an important role in its achievement. Higher education, in particular, can make significant contributions by educating future decision makers on sustainability and acting as living laboratories to experiment with innovative solutions.

To achieve the vision of a sustainable university, all stakeholder groups should be invited to contribute. However, the compartmentalisation of universities makes it often difficult for people to collaborate across departmental boundaries. This is a problem, since sustainability efforts remain constrained to small islands of activity.

Platforms need to be established to create bridges across those islands and offer more opportunities for people to contribute.

What is it?

A Green Office is a platform that empowers the wider university community to act on sustainability. It also realises its own ideas to embed sustainability in education, research, and operations.

The first Green Office was established at Maastricht University in 2010. Since then, the model has been replicated by universities across Europe, and won the UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development. The model is open-source – you can adapt and improve it to suit your needs.
Green Offices co-organise sustainability events, conduct overviews of sustainability courses, co-design new courses, lobby for waste separation and solar cells, or advise student groups and staff who want to act on sustainability.

The average Green Office consists of 5 student employees, who work 14 hours a week, and one staff member. Some Green Offices also engage students as volunteers. The average funding for a Green Office is €60,000, to pay for project expenditures and salaries. It is made visible through permanent office space and an online presence.

How to establish yours?

Every establishment process is different in its own way, but students and staff share similar challenges they need to overcome. Based on existing lobby efforts, we compiled five steps that these had in common. You don’t need to exactly follow these five steps, but they provide you with inspiration:

1. Form a team of like-minded people
2. Discover your organisation and the Green Office Model
3. Design your Green Office
4. Write the funding application
5. Pitch and submit your application

Establishing a Green Office is not easy, but dozens of students and staff have already done it. Dozens are doing it right now. You can do it, too.

If you succeed: Congratulations, you have taken a significant step to advance sustainability at your institution. If you don’t, you will have learned a lot, raised powerful questions, and that may trigger something else. Change processes are often messy and unpredictable.
Read this e-book to get inspired

Students

You care about big problems happening in the world and you want to make a difference. But does your university support you in creating a positive change? A Green Office can help you empower more students to realise sustainability projects at your university or in your community.

Sustainability staff

If you are like most sustainability staff we’ve met, you’re working hard to advance sustainability and are always looking for ways to improve your impact. A Green Office can help you make existing sustainability efforts more visible, improve collaboration between initiatives, and engage more students.

Academics

You know how deeply satisfying it is to work with students, and you genuinely care that they learn about sustainability and how to advance change. But are you also looking for innovative ways to improve their learning opportunities? A Green Office can embed sustainability within the curriculum better and offer extra-curricular learning opportunities on sustainability.

Neither student, nor staff?

We invite you to work with us to bring the Green Office Movement to your country; to collaborate on research about existing Green Offices; to design a Green Office for your company, municipality, school, or NGO; and to share our story by writing a newspaper, article or blog post.
For more information

Case studies

You can find great examples of existing Green Offices at: www.greenofficemovement.org/cases

Map

Visit a map of all existing Green Offices and Green Office Initiatives, here.

Online course

Follow a free online course to establish your Green Office step-by-step on www.greenofficemovement.org

This digital learning infrastructure on the Green Office Model was developed by rootAbility gUG and the UNESCO Chair Higher Education for Sustainable Development at Leuphana University Lüneburg. The development was financed by Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt.
Get in touch with us

We are happy to:

- Answer your questions via email or in a 30min initiation call.
- Give you feedback on your funding proposal.
- Establish contact with existing Green Offices near you.
- Send you an excel sheet that makes it easier to design your Green Office.
- Send you examples of successful funding proposals.

Kindly send us an email, and we will get back to you.

Felix Spira
rootAbility gUG

Co-founder of Maastricht University Green Office and rootAbility. Delivered 150 talks and workshops on sustainability in 11 countries and supported the establishment of 25 Green Offices in 6 countries.

Felix.Spira@rootAbility.com

Anselm T. Grahl
Leuphana University Lüneburg

Developed the University Sustainability Assessment Framework and worked on sustainability reporting at Maastricht University.

Anselm.Grahl@leuphana.de
Why a Green Office?
Sustainable development is the largest challenge of our time, and education plays an important role in its achievement. Higher education, in particular, can make significant contributions by educating future decision makers on sustainability and acting as living laboratories to experiment with innovative solutions.

To achieve the vision of a sustainable university, all stakeholder groups should be invited to contribute. A critical mass of students, staff, and academics need to be engaged. However, the compartmentalisation of universities makes it often difficult for people to collaborate across departmental boundaries. This is a problem, since sustainability efforts remain constrained to small islands of activity, rather than mobilizing a critical mass of change makers.

Platforms need to be established to create bridges across those islands and offer more opportunities for people to contribute to sustainability. Such a platform could take the form of a working group, sustainability committee, open forum, or a Green Office.
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The largest challenge of our times is to create a sustainable and just world

80% of humanity still survives on less than US $10 a day. For them, development along with an equitable distribution of resources is a way out of poverty. But as societies and economies develop, the natural resource base — like rivers, air quality, and forests are often destroyed and the benefits of development aren’t shared equally. This is a problem since ‘business-as-usual’ development undermines human and animal well-being.

Sustainable development emerged to a new paradigm for human development. It tries to solve the question of how we can guarantee well-being and decent living standards for billions of people while preserving and restoring the natural support systems on which all life depends.
When you think about sustainable development, you might believe that we primarily need changes in our energy, agriculture, and transport sectors. The education sector rarely comes to mind. But, why care? To realise sustainable development, a critical mass of people need to understand sustainability challenges, find creative solutions, and implement those in their communities and organisations. Education is essential if we want to achieve this.

20% of all EU citizens (106 mio people) attend an institution of formal education — from kindergarten to school, college, and university. That’s a lot! Their knowledge, skills, and values are shaped for life through classes, friendships, teachers and the institutional environment.

However, to what extent do these institutions enable pupils and students to become future change makers and empower them to contribute to sustainability in their communities and institutions today? To what extent is the catering, energy, transportation or waste management of these institutions sustainable? Is it creating a learning environment that emphasises sustainability choices in its daily operations?

These are important questions to ask across the education sector.
Educational institutions can contribute by re-orienting the curriculum towards sustainability. (Photo: UvA Green Office)

Practicing sustainability in daily operations creates an institutional environment that values sustainability (Photo: ULB Green Office)

Pupils and students should be empowered to contribute to the institution’s sustainability transition (Photo: rootAbility)
HIGHER EDUCATION

Your university can contribute to sustainability in unique ways

We specifically care about universities because they can play an important role that other institutions cannot. By educating future decision makers and using its campus as an experimentation ground, your university can make two unique contributions to sustainability that other organisations cannot easily make.

First, through its Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D. degrees, your university awards the highest degrees in the education sector. These degrees often present the entry ticket into well-paid positions of middle or higher management. The question is thus, to what extent does the university prepare these future decision makers to lead the world into a sustainable, more promising future?

Secondly, your university is a place of teaching and research. This gives it a unique opportunity to act as a living laboratory to experiment with sustainability. For example, facility services can install solar cells on buildings. Researchers can study how much electricity these solar cells produce. The lessons learned can then be shared with students and with the local community through on-site visits and lectures. Hence, it is important that universities actively engage with the sustainability agenda.
Universities can act as living laboratories where solutions to sustainability are implemented, researched and taught. In this case, students and staff are preparing plans for a sustainability garden on campus.

(Photo: Green Office Ghent)
ENGGAGEMENT

Every stakeholder group should be invited to participate

The democratic culture of most universities makes it difficult to implement sustainability from the top. On the contrary, people need to lead, collaborate and work with each other. This is why it is important that every stakeholder group contributes. Here are some ideas:

Educators could enable students to explore societal issues through real-life projects and from an environmental, economic, and social perspective.

Researchers could work with local NGOs, businesses, and the city government to realise research projects that address sustainability challenges of the local community.

Staff could take care of solar cells, waste recycling or organic catering, as well as provide sustainability data to researchers and work with educators to use sustainability projects on campus as a hands-on learning experience for students.

Students could contribute to the sustainability transition with their ideas, creativity, and energy through student groups, societies, course projects, or internships.

Higher management could provide top-down legitimacy, direction, and support, and take the lead on specific sustainability projects themselves.

This is a vision of how to create a sustainable university through the engagement of all stakeholder groups. Unfortunately, this is the reality in just a few institutions. Why?
If the ambition is to embed sustainability into every aspect of university life, then a critical mass of students and staff need to engage on the topic. Having a group of 15 supporters at a university of 25,000 people is just the beginning.

Ask yourself: How many students, staff, and academics know what your institution is doing on sustainability? Do they know how they can get involved? Are they aware of what sustainability means for their job or studies? If your institution is like many universities, then many people won't have an answer to these questions, but that can be fixed!

The decentralised and compartmentalised build-up of universities often makes it difficult for people to collaborate and engage. As the image below shows, different people might be researching, teaching or working on sustainability already, but don't know each other. Their actions take place in disconnected islands, making it difficult to create synergy effects and take sustainability to the next level. What could be done about this?
“New governance models and decision-making processes must be created to enable effective interdepartmental and interdisciplinary engagement in campus sustainability.”

Leith Sharp (Sustainability professional)
Engaging students and staff to work and act on sustainability is a process that needs to be carefully organised; it would not take place naturally. Ideally, different parts of the community, as well as the management levels, are connected through a sustainability platform.

Such a platform informs, connects and supports academics, students, and staff to engage in sustainability. It is the contact point for everyone who has questions and makes existing sustainability efforts visible. This is illustrated by the graphic below:
There are several ways to organise such a platform. You might have a working group(s), open forum, dedicated sustainability department, or sustainability committee. Each of those has specific strengths and weaknesses. In this e-book, you can learn about a solution that is very dear to us: The Green Office Model.

Depending on your needs, you can adapt the Green Office Model in multiple ways. If you are just starting out on the sustainability journey, you can develop your Green Office as the dedicated sustainability platform for the whole university.

If you have a sustainability team, committee or working group(s) in place already, but want to improve on student engagement, you can use the Green Office Model to develop a student-led sustainability hub that informs, connects and supports students to act on sustainability. Such a student-led hub can work alongside staff-led sustainability initiatives.
What is a Green Office?
A Green Office is a platform that empowers the wider university community to act on sustainability. In a bid to support others, a Green Office realises its own ideas to advance sustainability in education, research, and operations.

The first Green Office was established at Maastricht University in 2010. Since then, the model has been replicated by universities across Europe, and won the UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development.

The model is open-source – you can adapt and improve it to suit your needs. For example, a Green Office can be used to promote awareness, visibility, engagement, or behavioural change.

A Green Office can co-organise sustainability events, conduct overviews of sustainability courses, co-design new courses, lobby for waste separation and solar cells, or advise student groups and staff who want to act on sustainability.

The average Green Office consists of 5 student employees, who work 14 hours a week, and one staff member. Some Green Offices also engage students as volunteers. The average funding for a Green Office is €60,000, to pay for project expenditures and salaries. It is made visible through permanent office space, an online presence, and many events.
“An outstanding project to train young people as transformation agents”

Jury of the UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development

Student participates in sustainability awareness campaign
(Photo by Student Green Office at Canterbury Christ Church University)
2010: At Maastricht University, many student initiatives are working on sustainability. While they raise awareness among students, they have little impact on the institution itself. As for the university, an environmental coordinator and a sustainability committee are in place. Both are necessary, but they lack the energy and resources to make a significant difference.

2014: The university has a sustainability report, sustainability strategy, and roadmap. Ten student initiatives and an official university department organised a sustainability barbecue for 150 people. Eight student research projects provide answers to real-life sustainability issues at the university. The caterer more than triples the supply of organic food (rise from 5% to 17%).

The difference? In 2010, a student initiative came up with the idea to establish a dedicated office that would support students in advancing sustainability at the university. They called it “Green Office.”
Upon graduation, co-founders of Maastricht University Green Office established rootAbility as a non-profit social business to spread the idea.

As the graph below shows, the Green Office Model has been replicated across Europe. Today, you can find Green Offices at universities, universities of applied sciences, technical and vocational colleges, and government organisations in the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Sweden, and Italy.

Each Green Office is invited to connect to this community of students and staff working on sustainability across Europe. Being part of this community makes the work of Green Offices easier, more fun, and more impactful.
The ‘average’ Green Office

Student employees
5 student employees working for 9 hours a week and volunteering for another 5 hours. The average student salary is 425€ per month.

University staff
1 staff member working as a staff contact or fully integrated into the team. In most cases, the staff member is the sustainability coordinator.

Volunteers
50% of Green Offices work with volunteers (mostly students). The average Green Office with a volunteering programme has 20 volunteers.

Funding
On average, a Green Office has 60,000€ in annual funding to pay for projects and wages.

Office space
Almost all Green Offices have a permanent office at the university. Others use flexible or shared office space.

Mandate
All Green Offices are approved by an official university body. In most cases, this is the Executive Board or a commission.

(Developed based on overview of 23 Green Offices.)
Next to her studies, Marta works at a Green Office. Early in the morning, she attends a class; after her lecture, she goes to the Green Office. The office is located in a central room on campus with a large table, some chairs, a printer, decorated walls, and lots of plants.

There is a meeting going on already. Student initiatives are planning a sustainability day. Marta gets a coffee and opens her laptop. She then sends the results of a student research project to the energy coordinator. As part of the project, a team of engineering students did a feasibility study for solar panels on the university’s rooftops.

Then, Max walks in with a large smile on his face, announcing that the dialogue round table about education for sustainable development among students and educators was a success. Participants decided to form a working group to determine the number of courses that are already dealing with sustainability topics.

The afternoon is reserved for the weekly meeting of the Green Office. The students and sustainability coordinator meet to share their updates. Topics include an induction workshop for student volunteers, a staff engagement pilot, a sustainability lecture series, and waste separation. Some team members ask for advice on how to address specific challenges while others assist with these challenges.
In the evening, the whole team and volunteers get together for their semester drinks in a cafe. They celebrate the achievements of the semester. Combining studies and work hasn’t always been easy for the students, and there have been some bumps along the road. But overall, it was a very successful semester, and Marta is looking forward to what they’ll be up to next.

Working in a Green Office can be fun
(Photo: Leiden University Green Office)
IMPACTS
Advancing sustainability, one project at a time

**Education and research**
- Created a new sustainability minor and an honours course for 50 students (VU Amsterdam)
- Got an online course accredited as an additional sustainability qualification students can take (Konstanz)
- Conducted a sustainability assessment of 127 study programmes (Greenwich)

**Operations and campus**
- Handed out 1800 bottles and installed four water refill stations (VU Amsterdam)
- Initiated a local food pickup station with 300 members and 25 weekly orders (VU Brussels)
- Increased vegan meals from once a week to having vegan options every day (Utrecht)
- Contributed to gaining the Fair Trade Certification for the university (TU Eindhoven)

**Policy and assessment**
- Co-created a sustainability vision, roadmap and policies (Maastricht)
- Integrated sustainability as one of the core priorities in the university’s Strategic Plan (Kaiserslautern)
- Developed the first official sustainability report (Magdeburg)

**Community**
- Organised 20 events for 400 participants in one year (Groningen)
- Organised a sustainable business battle, where 30 students developed sustainable business cases for five organisations (Leiden)
- Supported 40 students to run 11 long-term projects and organise 27 events (Exeter)
“This approach can increase the visibility of sustainability efforts amongst students, improving the potential for wider student engagement and learning, as well as enabling students and staff to collaborate on sustainability issues.”

Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges

River cleaning action in Ghent, Belgium
(Photos by Green Office Gent)
Since we are here to educate, we also want you to be aware of the risks associated with the Green Office Model:

**Student turnover:** Student stay a minimum of one year. Knowledge, contacts, and continuity of projects can get lost if transitions aren’t organised well.

**Recruitment & training:** Working in a Green Office is unlike other student jobs. Students have significant responsibility and opportunities, as compared to, for example, sorting out books for the library. If Green Offices don’t manage the recruitment well, they risk recruiting students who are not up to the job. Once employed, the students also need to be trained.

**Limited authority:** A Green Office doesn’t have any formal authority over courses, research or buildings. If the team doesn’t manage to find teachers, researchers, and facility managers who want to work with them, the institutional impacts of a Green Office will be limited.

**No golden bullet:** A Green Office is not *the* solution to all your sustainability challenges, it is a step along the journey. If institutions think that they are sustainable once they have a Green Office and that a Green Office is enough to change a whole university, they will be mistaken. It is one solution that has its unique strengths and is compatible with other solutions which may have other strengths.

A Green Office needs to be carefully designed, well-supported and managed to address these challenges.
ORGANISATIONAL FIT

Before establishing your Green Office, check if the model meets your needs

**For those just starting out:** What is your institution already doing on sustainability? If there isn’t much yet, you might want to start with a smaller project before establishing a sustainability platform. For instance, you can start with a sustainability day, report, or podium discussion.

Alternatively, you could establish the position of sustainability coordinator. A Green Office may also make sense to kick start sustainability, but in the long term you will need to make sure that you have both students and staff working on sustainability.

**For those already active:** If you have many sustainability initiatives at your university, but you feel like your existing efforts could be more visible, better connected, and with a more stable and consistent student engagement, then a Green Office could be a good fit for you. The Green Office can then be the central platform to inform, connect, and support people.

**For the advanced:** If you already have a central sustainability platform and enough implementation capacity, you might *not* need a new Green Office. You could use the model as an inspiration to improve existing efforts and connect to our international network. However, if the existing sustainability efforts are mainly led by staff, and you miss student engagement, then you might use the model to establish a dedicated student-led sustainability platform.

If you would like to receive specific advice tailored to your institution, simply contact us.
How to establish your GO?
Every establishment process is different in its own way, but students and staff share similar challenges they need to overcome. Based on existing lobby efforts, we compiled five steps that those lobby efforts had in common. You don’t need to exactly follow these five steps, but they provide you with inspiration:

1. Form a team of like-minded people
2. Discover your organisation and the Green Office Model
3. Design your Green Office
4. Write the funding application
5. Pitch and submit your application

Establishing a Green Office is not easy, but dozens of students and staff have already done it. Dozens are doing it right now. You can do it, too.

If you succeed: Congratulations, you have taken a significant step to advance sustainability at your institution. If you don’t, you will have learned a lot, raised powerful questions, and that may trigger something else. Change processes are often messy and unpredictable.
1. TEAM

Form a team of like-minded people

It helps if you have a team to design and lobby for the Green Office. You can exchange ideas, support each other, draw on a wider network, and even have more fun. Your team doesn’t need to be big if its members are committed. But how can you find like-minded people?

**If you are a student:** Find out if there are sustainability student groups on campus. In case you are not a member yet, organise a meeting with the sustainability coordinator, student representatives, professors or lecturers working on sustainability. Present the idea of a Green Office and its benefits and see if they want to develop it together with you.

**If you are a sustainability coordinator:** You can meet up with sustainability student groups and student representatives to see what they think of the Green Office Model. You could also get in touch with a sustainability professor to see if they can commission a student research project to investigate the feasibility of a Green Office for the university.

**If you are an academic:** See if you can find a group of students or an individual student who want to do a course project on the Green Office Model. Of course, also reach out to the likeminded colleagues, the sustainability coordinator — if your university has one — and sustainability student groups or representatives.

Once you have a team ready, get in touch with us, so we can put you on our map of Green Office Initiatives.
Team of the Green Office Initiative at HU Berlin

(Photo by Nachhaltigkeitsbüro Studentische Initiative – HU Berlin)
Once you have your team, it is important that you understand who is already working on sustainability and what the Green Office Model is all about. This way, you can find out if a GO is needed or not. We will provide you with an excel document which will make it easier for you to conduct this analysis.

How can you identify existing initiatives? Just ask; they could already be on your team, and they might have a good overview of what is already going on. You can also do research on your university’s website for information.

Once you have identified existing sustainability efforts, it is important to analyse their strengths and challenges, as well as the risks and opportunities of the status-quo. You can do this through a student research project that conducts this analysis, by interviewing people yourself, convening stakeholders for a workshop, or sending out a survey.

You can learn about the Green Office Model through one of more of the following means:

- this e-book,
- case studies on www.greenofficemovement.org/cases,
- a short call with us,
- by visiting an existing Green Office near you, or
- by attending a webinar, seminar, or the GO Summit.
Even if you decide not to establish a Green Office, this analysis is helpful for a better understanding of those already working on sustainability and what could be done to take sustainability to the next level.

Once you are done with the analysis, we suggest that you write a 1- to 2-page summary to make your results easier to share.
Once you have decided to go ahead with establishing a Green Office, it is time to design it. To do so, you need to answer the following questions:

- **Rationale**: What are arguments for the establishment of a Green Office?
- **Goals and activities**: What goals should the Green Office pursue? What activities do you need to realise those goals?
- **Organisational model**: How many students and staff should work in the team? How is the Green Office embedded into the organisation? What office space do you need? How would the online presence look like?
- **Budget**: How much does the university need to invest? Where would the funding come from?

It might take some time to answer these questions, but we are happy to help you. For example, we can send you an **Analysis Excel Sheet** that facilitates this process, or discuss your ideas in a short call.

Once you have designed your Green Office, you can summarize everything in a 3- to 4-page concept paper or power point presentation. This makes it easier to present and discuss your ideas. For this, we also have a **Funding Proposal Template** you can use.

If you already identified opportunities for funding and know where to submit your application, you can skip writing such a concept paper and directly start with the application.
Working session to finalize concept paper in Lund, Sweden.
(Photo: Green Office Initiative Lund)
4. FUNDING PROPOSAL

Identify funding opportunities and write the proposal

Your university is a bureaucratic organisation, and without a formal proposal, you won’t get funding for your Green Office. The proposal describes what your Green Office is, why it is necessary, how much it would cost, and what the university gets in return.

There are many ways to fund your Green Office. Funding can come from the Executive Board, the Students’ Union, Facility Services, innovation funds, quality of teaching and learning funds, or sustainability budgets. Once you have identified a funding source, it is time to write the proposal. Don’t waste time writing a detailed proposal, before you are sure about where to submit it.

How to find the money? It is important that you talk to people who understand which funds are available and how you can maximise your chances of accessing them. For example, you could write a 1- to 2-page concept paper and discuss it with somebody from the president of the Students’ Union, a senior person working on university development, or a member of the Executive Board directly.

Green Office proposals vary in length from 2 to 20 pages. It all depends on how much detail your funding body wants you to provide.

Get in touch with us so that we can send you a funding proposal template and examples of successful proposals. We are also happy to give you feedback on your first proposal version.
5. SUBMISSION

Finalise your funding proposal and submit it

Congratulations! You have reached the final step. Now is the time to finalize your funding proposal and submit it.

While doing this, you should take note of the following things:

**Deadlines:** Some committees only meet every couple of weeks or months. Find out when you need to submit your proposal to have it discussed at the next meeting.

**Format:** The funding committee might want proposals to be a particular length or require you to submit a one-page executive summary.

**Pitch:** Find out if you can be personally present at the meeting to pitch your idea and directly answer questions people might have. If you are permitted to give a pitch, make sure that you are well prepared for it.

Once you have submitted your proposal, you will have to be patient. It might take a couple of weeks or months for the committee to get back to you. In the end, they will reject or approve your proposal.
Official opening of the Leiden Green Office in the Netherlands
(Photo by Leiden University Green Office)
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Case studies

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Map

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Online course

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