

**Enhancing the Role of Green Offices in Promoting Sustainability at Dutch Higher
Education Institutions**

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Abstract

As the climate and environmental crisis intensify, the role of higher education institutions is becoming increasingly important in leading a transition towards sustainability. In the Netherlands, many Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences have adopted Green Offices - which are independent sustainable initiatives with the aim of anchoring sustainability in everyday university life, promoting environmental awareness, coordinating initiatives, and influencing institutional policies. This thesis examines the key challenges and opportunities faced by Green Offices in promoting sustainability within Dutch higher education institutions. The research combines semi-structured interviews with members of ten Dutch Green Offices with a survey among students and staff of higher education institutions in the Netherlands. The findings indicate that, although Green Offices contribute to raising awareness and initiating sustainable activities and events, their long-term impact often depends on institutional support, the continuity of personnel, financial resources, and integration into broader governance structures of the institution. Collaboration, both within institutions and external networks, also emerged as a critical but undeveloped area. Despite these constraints, Green Offices hold significant potential to promote institutional change when embedded in formal decision-making processes and supported with sufficient resources. This research concludes with strategic recommendations to strengthen the work of Green Offices. It also identifies directions for future research on the role of Green Offices in educational institutions.

Keywords: Green Offices, Higher Education Institutions, Netherlands, Education for Sustainable Development, Sustainability

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Abbreviations

ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
GO	Green Office
GOM	Green Office Movement
HBO	Higher Vocational Education (Hoger Beroepsonderwijs)
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
MBO	Secondary Vocational Education (Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs)
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SHE	Sustainability in Higher Education
SOS	Students Organizing Sustainability
SvM	Studenten voor Morgen (Students for Tomorrow)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
WO	Scientific/Academic Education (Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs)

Introduction

Sustainability in Education Institutions

With wildfires raging, glaciers melting, and extreme weather events becoming more frequent, the urgent need to address climate change is clear. The rise in global temperatures due to greenhouse gases has intensified the need for sustainable actions. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), human activities have caused temperatures to rise by about 1.1°C compared to pre-industrial levels. This warming significantly impacts human development, including food security, health, and economic stability (IPCC, 2021). Sustainability as a guiding principle for addressing these challenges, emphasizes the need to balance environmental, social, and economic priorities in a manner that supports long-term resilience (IPCC, 2021). This research refers to sustainability as defined by the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission¹, which states “*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability for future generations to meet their own needs*” (Adapted from WCED, 1987).

In realizing a sustainable world, educational institutions should play a crucial role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through education, research, and community engagement (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Educational institutions make significant contributions to a more sustainable future by fostering innovation, educating future leaders, and promoting responsible practices (Cortese, 2003). Given educational institutions’ position, they are well-equipped to address global challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and resource management (Lozano et al., 2015). Within this context, educational institutions are expected to align their activities with SDGs, including responsible consumption (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13), while advancing quality education (Goal 4) (European University Association, 2018). As a result, many educational institutions have developed sustainability initiatives and frameworks to support these efforts.

Students are key drivers of sustainability efforts at higher education institutions (Filho et al., 2024). As a result, student-led sustainability initiatives, such as Green Offices, have emerged as an

¹ The Brundtland definition was chosen because it provides a clear, ethical foundation for balancing environmental, social, and economic priorities in long-term climate solutions.

important component of the broader sustainability strategies of higher education institutions. These initiatives provide students with the opportunity to become actively involved in sustainability efforts, helping to shape institutional policies and advocate for long-term environmental stewardship within their academic communities (Filho et al., 2019; 2024).

The Emergence of the First Green Office

The concept of Green Offices (GOs) as a sustainability initiative is a relatively recent development; Maastricht University established the first Green Office in 2010. A group of students pioneered this innovative approach to sustainability, seeking to integrate environmental consciousness into university structures (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024). Before the introduction of GOs, higher education institutions (HEIs) primarily implemented sustainability initiatives through one-day events and behavior change programs (Lehnhof & Nolan, 2016). However, Felix Spirda, one of the founders of the first GO, highlighted a significant challenge with these traditional approaches, noting that:

“Many sustainability committees lacked the resources to implement real change ... and the biggest downside is the students are not sufficiently involved” (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024).

The founders of the first GO also emphasized the fact that it was often challenging for a single sustainability coordinator to make a significant impact in a large institution with thousands of students and staff. Therefore, the GO Model addressed this issue by creating a mixed team of five to eight students and at least one university staff member (Lehnhof & Nolan, 2016). For example, the Green Office at Maastricht University has persevered despite initial resistance from the university, primarily due to its student-led nature. The team went on to publish an annual Sustainability Report, introduce organic and sustainable food options, initiate waste sorting, and install solar panels. Their efforts were formally recognized in 2012 when the university approved the UM GO's draft sustainability policy, the Maastricht University Sustainability Vision 2030, which involved more than 200 students and staff members in the creation of a long-term vision for sustainability (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024). Since then, visions of sustainability have become an integral part of education institutions, guiding institutional policies and embedding a responsibility for the environment in the academic and operational framework (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Given the growing existence of

GOs, they are shaping sustainability practices within HEIs, and it is needed to explore their current impact and operational dynamics.

Research Objective and Scope

This research examines the current role of GOs based on key challenges and opportunities they face when promoting sustainability within their respective institutions. Prior studies have highlighted the emergence of GOs, but few have systematically examined their institutional embeddedness and perceived legitimacy across HEIs in the Netherlands. Based on the results, I identified emerging patterns of GOs in supporting the sustainability of educational institutions and informed future sustainability initiatives and research. Thus, the research answers the research question: *“What are the key challenges and opportunities faced by Green Offices in promoting sustainability in Dutch higher education institutions?”*

To answer this research question, I conducted interviews with members of ten GOs in the Netherlands. Additionally, I distributed a survey among students and staff members of HEIs in the Netherlands to gain a broader insight into their perceptions. The scope of the research is limited to GOs in HEIs in the Netherlands.

Literature Review

Sustainable Strategies of Dutch Higher Education Institutions ²

Broader European policies, such as the Green Deal Roadmap for universities, further reinforce the sustainability initiatives by providing guidelines for integrating sustainability into higher education. Dutch HEIs are actively aligning their policies with this framework, demonstrating a collective commitment to fostering sustainability at both national and global levels (EUA, 2023). However, the implementation of this framework remains voluntary. The involvement of GOs in these strategies highlights the importance of collaboration and student engagement in shaping sustainable institutions.

² Since Green Offices are relatively new emerging and evolving institutional bodies, I supplemented the limited academic literature by incorporating information from higher education institutions' websites. This approach allowed me to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Green Offices and sustainability, given the scarcity of scholarly sources. The institutions mentioned in this section were selected based on the accessibility of their sustainability strategies.

Dutch HEIs have increasingly prioritized sustainability in their strategic plans, aligning their efforts with the SDGs. Most educational institutions have developed sustainability roadmaps³ currently spanning from 2021 to 2026, incorporating sustainability into teaching, research, business operations, and institutional governance. These plans aim to measure progress in sustainability and assess their contribution to the SDGs, with many institutions involving the GO in formulating and executing their sustainability strategies.

Many universities emphasize a holistic approach to sustainability, integrating it into their curricula, research agendas, and operational structures. Institutions such as the University of Groningen and Radboud University have structured their strategies around specific sustainability themes, ensuring that their academic and institutional policies contribute to environmental and social well-being. The University of Groningen, for example, has set ambitious goals, including becoming a CO₂-neutral university by 2035 and increasing engagement among students, staff, and external partners in sustainability initiatives (University of Groningen, 2024; n.d.). Radboud University has similarly recognized the urgency of contributing to sustainability, embedding SDG principles into its yearly planning through the involvement of the GO (Laurijsen & Klomp, 2021).

Leiden University and VU Amsterdam have placed a strong emphasis on creating a sustainable work and study environment while integrating sustainability into their teaching and research. Some Dutch HEIs suggest that their policies reflect a commitment to embedding sustainability into the institutional culture, aligning closely with the SDGs as a framework for evaluating progress (Universiteit Leiden, n.d.; Green Team Sustainability VU Amsterdam, 2020). VU Amsterdam's approach includes measuring its sustainability aspirations through SDG contributions and structuring its initiatives around four key institutional functions: education, research, organization, and knowledge transfer. The GO plays a vital role in shaping and implementing these strategies, particularly by engaging students in decision-making processes (Green Team Sustainability

³ A sustainability roadmap is a strategic plan in which an organization outlines its goals and actions to support sustainable development. It provides a framework for implementing a sustainability strategy and tracking measurable progress. Such a roadmap can be developed at various levels, such as corporate leadership or business units. They often address multiple dimensions of sustainability, including environmental, social, and economic factors (Ahlrichs, 2025).

VU Amsterdam, 2020).

Maastricht University's strategy follows the European Union's key societal challenges, focusing on climate, circularity, and community as central themes in its sustainability efforts (Maastricht University, n.d.). Utrecht University places sustainability at the core of its strategic plan, utilizing the SDGs to guide institutional development and foster collaboration among different faculties (Universiteit Utrecht, 2022). Wageningen University positions itself as a leader in sustainability-driven knowledge and innovation, ensuring that its education and research contribute to solving global sustainability challenges (Wageningen University & Research, n.d.).

Eindhoven University of Technology (TU Eindhoven) (n.d.) has outlined long-term sustainability strategies that extend beyond 2030. Students participation played a central role in refining the institution's sustainability vision, which focuses on seven specific SDGs. The approach of the university addresses key themes, including social sustainability, renewable energy, smart mobility, circular resource management, and environmental restoration. Similar to other institutions, TU Eindhoven's roadmap extends toward 2050, reflecting its commitment to long-term sustainability goals (Kerkhof, 2021).

Higher Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) integrates sustainable principles, values, and practices into all aspects of the educational process. This integration is crucial for promoting sustainability in HEIs (Ramísio et al., 2019). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (n.d.), ESD empowers individuals with the competencies needed to contribute to a sustainable future, aligning with SDG 4.7 (United Nations, n.d.). Over the past decade, HEIs have introduced sustainability programs (Wiek et al., 2011) that focuses on five key competencies: systems thinking, anticipatory, normative, strategic, and interpersonal. Despite this progress, critics argue that ESD often remains overly theoretical and disconnected from practice (Uggla & Soneryd, 2023), pointing to the need for more applied and systemic approaches. Higher education institutions engage with global sustainability initiatives, embedding sustainability principles into institutional policies and educational frameworks (Wals, 2014), thereby contributing to changes in education, research, operations, and community engagement. Still, uneven implementation, limited

resources, and institutional inertia remain barriers (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021).

UNESCO's (2024) roadmap for ESD highlights its integral role in achieving socio-emotional and behavioral learning dimensions, with climate change education promoting environmental action. While HEIs promote interdisciplinary learning and SDG-related research, sustainability research has been criticized for being fragmented (Parry & Metzger, 2023; Lah, 2025). Nonetheless, HEIs can drive transformation by mobilizing students, supporting sustainability careers, aligning governance with SDGs, and engaging in long-term societal changes (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). HEIs reinforce the role of education in climate action by aligning with international sustainability frameworks, such as the UN Decade of ESD (2005-2014) and the Global Action Program (2015-2019), and participating in advocacy forums, including the Conference of Parties (UNESCO, 2020). To maintain relevance and impact, HEIs must move beyond symbolic gestures, overcome resistance, and adopt adaptive and transformative strategies. One way to achieve this would be to implement Green Offices.

Green Offices

Given the relatively recent development of GOs, academic literature on this subject is still scarce. In this section, I also draw on my experience with Studenten voor Morgen and Green Offices in the Netherlands outside of this research. This dual position is reflected in the positionality statement (Appendix E).

Green Offices originated as a student-led initiative but now exist in various forms within educational institutions, often receiving structural and financial support from the institution. A GO informs, connects, and supports students and staff to learn about sustainability. The initiative is built on four key pillars: research, education, operations, and community (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024), and aims to embed sustainability holistically within their institution. Each GO determines its own precise goals and areas of responsibility (Filho et al., 2019). Green Offices initiate projects, campaigns, and organize lectures on sustainability and environmental topics, providing concrete suggestions for change (Filho et al., 2019).

Recognizing the potential for broader impact, the founding group established the social enterprise “rootAbility” in 2012 to promote the GO Model across Europe. By providing GOs with a formalized structure and a university-supported mandate, HEIs ensure an ongoing and structured

approach to sustainability goals (Lehnhof & Nolan, 2016). Since the implementation of the first GO, the movement has expanded rapidly, with more than 100 GOs established worldwide by 2025, of which around 30 are located in the Netherlands (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024; Greenjobs.nl, 2023). Thus, not every Dutch educational institution has a GO yet. Many are still exploring the establishment of a GO but face resistance from the institution's board.

Core Characteristics

The Green Office Model balances institutional support with student-led initiatives, combining a structured approach with adaptability. One of the core characteristics of GOs is that they should consist of student-led teams with staff support. These teams have a core team, usually consisting of five to eight students and at least one staff member who leads the initiative. Additional volunteers can contribute to specific projects, making the model more dynamic and participatory than a single sustainability coordinator (Lehnhof & Nolan, 2016). Second, GOs should have a dedicated office space to show physical presence on campus, which enhances its institutional legitimacy and visibility. Third, GOs should have a formal mandate from the educational institution. Such a mandate means that educational institutions officially recognize them and are responsible for promoting sustainability within their institution. Lastly, GOs should receive financial support from the educational institution, ensuring the continuity of operations and enabling project implementation (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024). Although the establishment of GOs varies from institution to institution, they should all be grounded in the fundamental four-pillar approach. This holistic strategy aims to integrate sustainability into the operations of all educational institutions, ensuring a long-term institutional commitment (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024).

The Role of Green Offices in Education Institutions

The Green Office Model has been developed to address the fragmented nature of educational institutions sustainability efforts. Unlike many traditional sustainability departments, GOs are characterized by active student engagement, fostering a bottom-up approach that complements top-down institutional policies (Kirkpatrick & Langenhuizen, 2024). The Green Deal Roadmap for Universities states, based on examples such as the Green Office Movement (GOM), that engaging students directly can enrich an institution's green transition (European University Association, 2023).

As central hubs for sustainability on campuses, GOs play a central role in driving sustainability initiatives within universities, coordinating policies, facilitating cross-departmental collaboration, and engaging both students and staff (Filho et al., 2019). Green Offices actively translate institutional commitments to sustainability into concrete actions by raising awareness, implementing green policies, and measuring sustainability performance (Gamage & Gunawardhana, 2022). Additionally, they bridge elements of traditional university-led sustainability initiatives and grassroots student organizations, ensuring a comprehensive approach to sustainability in higher education (SHE).

National and International Networks

Green Offices often operate within a broader sustainability ecosystem, which includes international and national networks, as well as collaborations with different stakeholders. The two key actors are the Green Office Movement (GOM) and Studenten voor Morgen (SvM), both of which play a central role in supporting GOs and SHE. Most Dutch GOs affiliate themselves with either the international network or the Dutch national network.

The leading international network is the GOM, which serves as a platform for knowledge sharing, best practices, and professional development. Since 2019, it has been under the lead of Students Organizing for Sustainability International (Green Office Movement, n.d. b). The GOM connects sustainability professionals, activists, and alumni to exchange ideas, discuss sustainability issues, and share job opportunities (Green Office Movement, n.d. a). Through its initiatives, the GOM ensures the longevity of sustainability efforts, promoting continuous learning and improvement.

As a key national actor, SvM supports SHE serving as a student-led network that empowers students to get involved in sustainability initiatives by providing them with events, resources, and opportunities to collaborate with like-minded individuals (Studenten voor Morgen, n.d.). By acting as a bridge between student-led sustainability organizations, GOs, educational institutions, and policymakers, SvM plays a crucial role in amplifying the impact of GOs and other student-led sustainability initiatives, and fostering a more cohesive sustainability movement within Dutch higher education. Together with the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, both organizations started setting up a GO Learning Network for GOs, which is currently focused mainly on Dutch GOs. The network aims to facilitate the exchange of experiences, overcome challenges, and strengthen the

work of GOs. These networks, along with partnerships with educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and municipalities, provide the necessary resources and support systems that enable GOs to advance sustainability initiatives effectively (rootAbility, 2015a).

Methodology

Study Design

This research aims to understand the role and impact of GOs on implementing sustainability at Dutch higher education institutions based on the research question: *“What are the key challenges and opportunities faced by Green Offices in promoting sustainability in Dutch higher education institutions?”* To collect data for this research, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method because of their flexible nature, which allows for the exploration of topics that arise during the interview (Ruslin et al., 2022). In April 2025, ten interviews ranging from 45 to 60 minutes were conducted with members of different GOs in Dutch HEIs, both online and in person. All interviews were recorded using the iPhone’s default recording option. The recordings were stored on a private drive and will be deleted after this research is completed. The questions were designed to explore challenges and opportunities, long-term impact, institutional support, and the role of governance in shaping the GO’s efforts while also assessing perceptions, engagement levels, and areas for improvement. The interview guide of this research can be found in Appendix A: Interview Guide.

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, a survey was distributed. This method was chosen because it allows for a response from a broader group of people enabling a general understanding of GOs among individuals in educational institutions to be gained (Jones et al., 2013). The survey was distributed at various institutions throughout the Netherlands, including institutions in Friesland, Groningen, and Utrecht, with the majority of institutions located in Friesland, as the researcher is based there. In total, 65 people started the survey, with 42 respondents from HEIs in five different provinces in the Netherlands sharing perceptions of GOs regarding engagement,

effectiveness, institutional support, sustainable impact, and future directions. The survey questions used in this research are presented in Appendix B: Survey Questions.

Data Analysis

Data collection for this research included both qualitative and quantitative methods. To ensure accuracy and efficiency, interviews were transcribed using TurboScribe, and all personal identifiers were removed to maintain confidentiality. The qualitative data collected from these interviews was analyzed using a thematic coding process in Atlas.ti to uncover the most important insights and recurring themes. In addition to the predefined themes, the transcript coding process was used to identify broader and emerging themes that are influencing the role of GOs. These themes were chosen based on the frequency with which they were mentioned by interviewees, suggesting that they were not isolated opinions but rather were reflections of broader, systemic patterns. The survey results were visualized using data models, such as graphs and pie charts, to highlight patterns in the responses and support actionable recommendations. Then, the survey responses were compared with the interview answers to determine whether the general understanding of GOs aligns with the internal perspective of those working in them.

Ethical Approval

The ethical review of this research was conducted by the thesis supervisor at the University of Groningen based on a checklist completed by the researcher. To ensure informed participation, the researcher provided participants with an information sheet and a consent form (Appendices C and D: Information Sheet and Consent Form) that outlined all relevant aspects of their involvement. By signing the form, interviewees gave their informed consent for data collection. It was explicitly stated in both the survey and the interviews that participants were not obligated to answer any questions they preferred to skip. Additionally, they were informed that they could ask questions about the research at any time - the same procedures applied to survey participants (Appendix D: Consent Form). Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Positionality Statement

Before presenting the research results, I would like to clarify my role in this study. Given my current role as a Student Network Coordinator at SvM, I conducted this research as an insider within

the Dutch national network. This dual positioning had important methodological implications, which I address in detail in Appendix E: Positionality Statement. There, I reflect on how this involvement influenced the research process and outline the measures taken to maintain objectivity and ethical integrity.

Results

This section presents the results of the survey and semi-structured interviews conducted with members of GOs at Dutch HEIs. The aim was to assess the role of GOs in their institutions based on the challenges and opportunities they face in promoting sustainability.

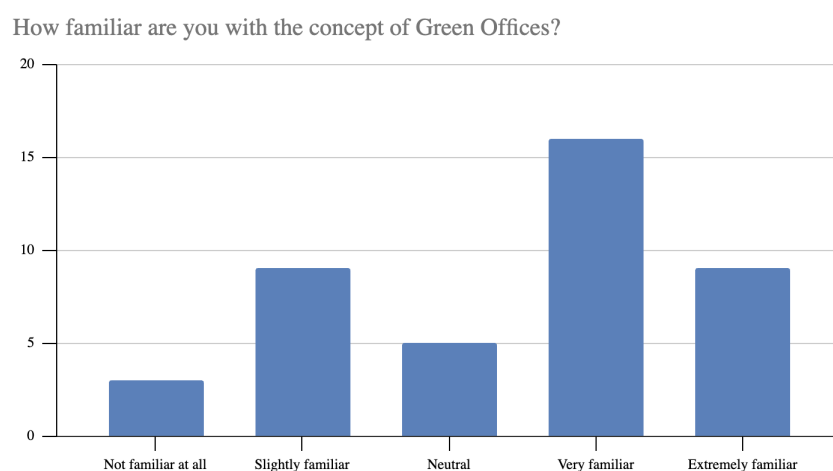
Survey

General Information

A total of 42 participants completed the survey questions. The survey first asked about respondents' role within their educational institution. The majority (80.9%) identified themselves as students, while 14.3% identified themselves as staff members. Only two respondents (4.8%) selected "Other". It was further also asked how long they had been affiliated with their HEI, with most respondents having been there for a minimum of one to three years (52.4%) or more than three years (23.8%).

Figure 1

Familiarity with the Concept of Green Offices.



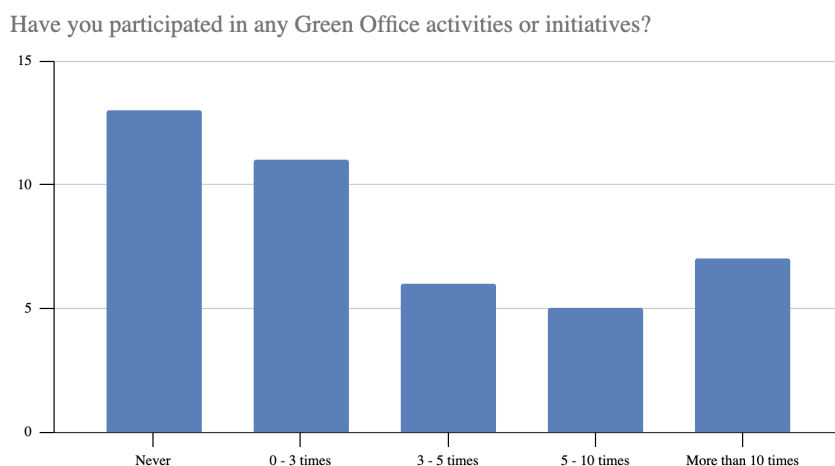
In terms of region, most respondents were based in Friesland (57.1%), followed by Zuid-Holland (21.4%) and Groningen (16.7%). Limburg and Utrecht each had one respondent. To assess

their familiarity with GOs, the survey asked about their knowledge of the concept. Over half (59.5%) said they were very or extremely familiar, and only 7.1% were unfamiliar (Figure 1).

Green Office Engagement and Effectiveness

Figure 2

Participation in Green Office activities.



Engagement in GO activities and initiatives was mixed among the survey participants. Most (69.0%) had attended a GO event at least once, while 31.0% had never attended any activity (Figure 2).

Figure 3

Effectiveness of the Green Office in promoting sustainability.

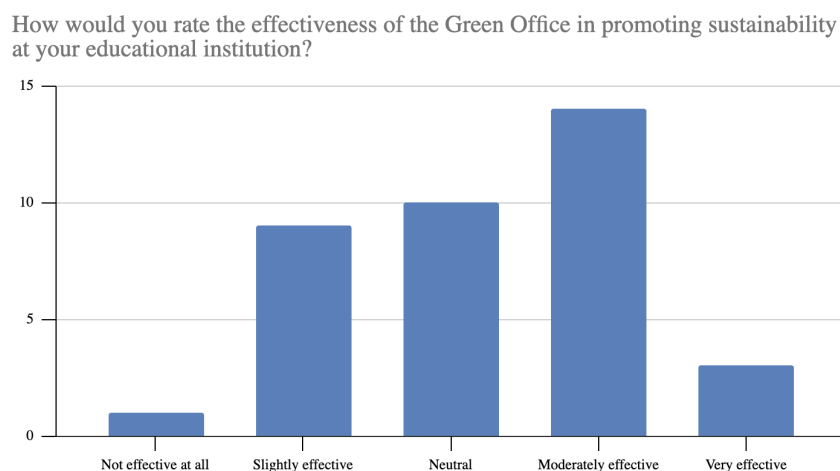


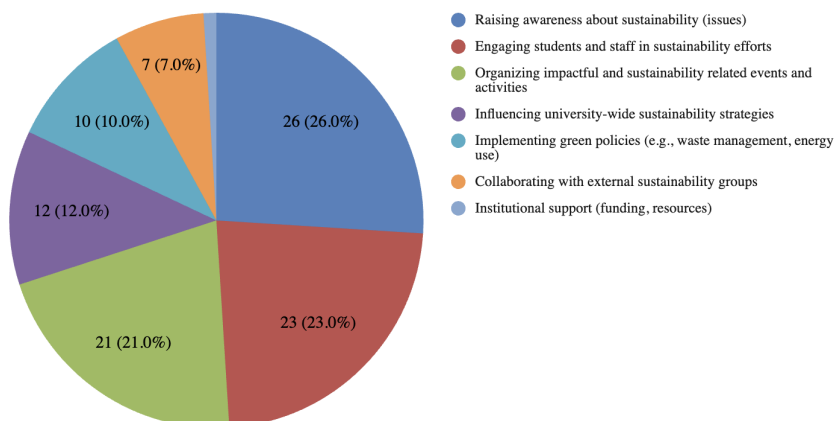
Figure 3 illustrates respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the GO in promoting sustainability at their institution. Most respondents viewed GOs as "Moderately effective" (37.8%),

followed by “Neutral” (27.0%) and “Slightly effective” (24.3%). Few considered them “Very effective” (8.1%), and only one respondent mentioned “Not effective at all”.

Figure 4

Strengths of Green Offices.⁴

What do you think are the biggest strengths of the Green Office?

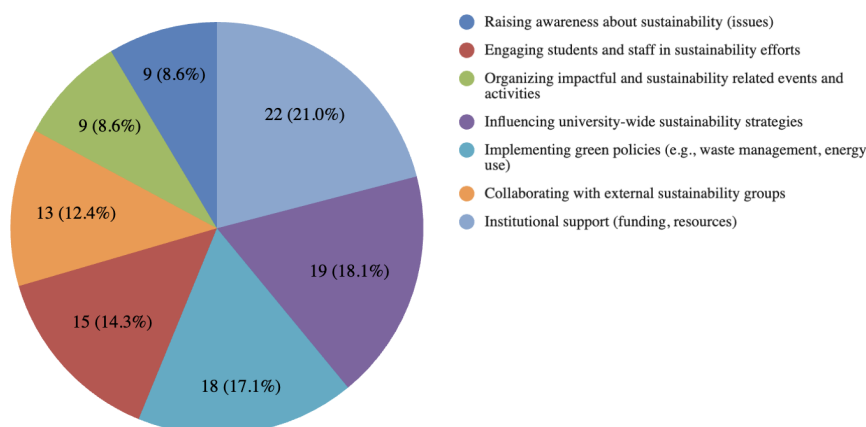


The survey identified the following as the most significant strengths: raising awareness about sustainability and sustainability issues, engaging students and staff in sustainability efforts, and organizing impactful and sustainability-related events and activities (Figure 4).

Figure 5

Challenges of Green Offices.⁴

What challenges do you think the Green Office faces in implementing sustainability initiatives?

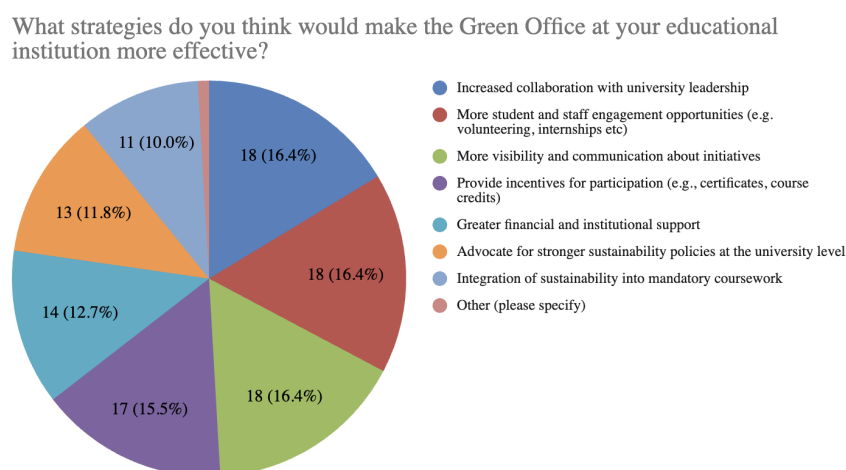


⁴ The answer options were given in the survey, with an option “other” to include other strengths or challenges.

The main challenges revealed in the survey are related to institutional support, students and staff engagement, the implementation of green policies, and influencing university-wide sustainability strategies (Figure 5).

Figure 6

Strategies to improve effectiveness.⁵



Regarding strategies to improve impact, the top three, each selected by eighteen people, were “More collaboration with university leadership,” “More student/staff engagement opportunities,” and “More visibility and communication” (Figure 6). Only one respondent chose the other option and mentioned “Increased pressure with societal groups on University boards and mobilization for societal causes outside of university (for example, protests, research projects, living labs).” Survey respondents further mentioned that real support should come from the bottom up and that it would be most effective when engaging students and lecturers.

Institutional Support and Awareness

The main challenges GOs are facing, according to respondents, is institutional support. The main obstacles remain those of budget and securing support to facilitate activities. One points out that GOs should be part of the decision-making process, such as in discussions with the Occupational Health and Safety Service (ARBO), and in yearly planning. Another mentioned: *For example, we do*

⁵ The survey provided answers for this question based on the answer of the strength and challenges of GOs.

have a budget, but we do not have the freedom to use it. For everything we do, we need to ask the uni. This takes a lot of time and takes away a lot of energy. So, an allocated budget with rights would help.

In contrast, a few mentioned that *“the institution appears to be fairly supportive, promoting the Green Office’s events and seemingly taking its concerns into account.”* Besides the current situation regarding institutional support, GOs stated that institutions play a significant role in the effectiveness of GOs and should provide them with support. Furthermore, sustainability should be a strategic goal of the institution, which the GO can support.

Figure 7

Awareness among students and staff about Green Offices.

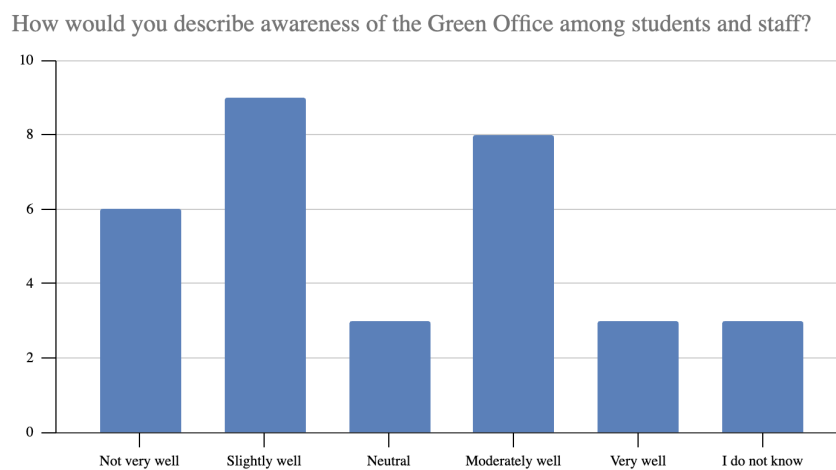


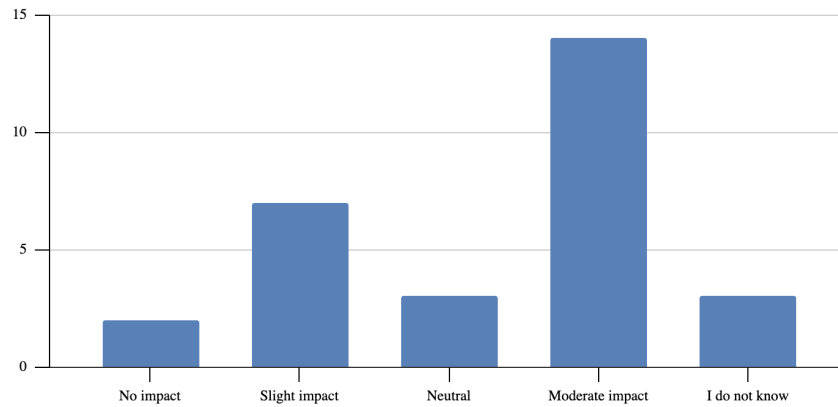
Figure 7 displays the responses regarding the GO’s awareness among students and staff. “Slightly well” was indicated by 28.1% and “Moderately well” by 25.0%, suggesting a general but limited level of awareness. A few people said they were “Very well” (9.4%) or “Not very well” (18.8%) aware.

Sustainability Impact and Future Directions

Figure 8

Perceived impact of Green Offices on institutional sustainability changes.

How do you perceive the impact of the Green Office on actual sustainability changes within educational institutions?

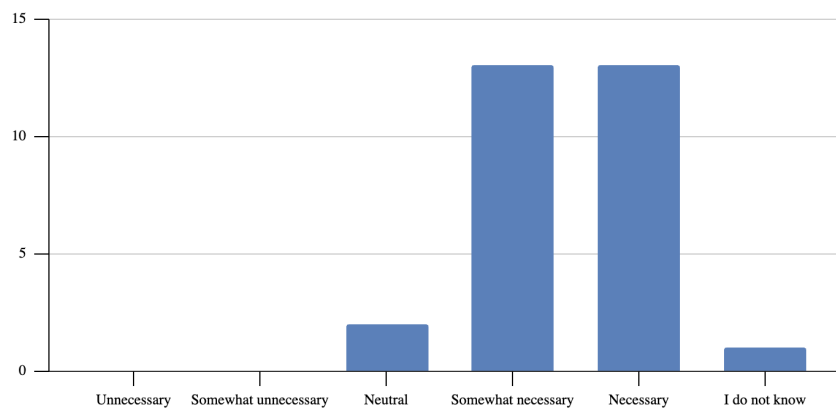


Most respondents perceived GOs as having a moderate impact on sustainability change, while only a small number perceived them as having no impact (Figure 8).

Figure 9

Need for Green Offices to achieve sustainability goals in educational institutions.

Do you believe Green Offices are necessary for educational institutions to achieve their sustainability goals?



Additionally, almost all (89.6%) felt that GOs are “somewhat necessary” or “necessary” for institutions to meet sustainability goals (Figure 9).

Interviews

General Information

To ensure sufficient knowledge, from members of the ten interviewed GOs, all respondents should have been members of a GO for at least six months before this research. The formal role and position of GOs within educational institutions varied. Some GOs were established (ranging from 1 year ago to over 10 years ago) as semi-autonomous entities under student affairs or sustainability departments, while others operated independently or informally. Their visibility and influence within the institution's structure were often dependent on the support they received from upper administration. One interviewee described the GO as a "critical friend" within the institution.

Structure

Most GOs follow a hybrid model that combines student leadership with the support of staff members. In these cases, students contribute energy, innovation, and outreach as part of a student assistant position, working 8-16 hours per week. At the same time, staff provide strategic insights, oversight, and connections within the institution's bureaucracy. One interviewee noted that students are key to maintaining the GO's dynamic and connection to campus life. Staff members, on the other hand, bring stability and the ability to engage with university leadership, highlighting the benefits of having a mix of staff and students.

Yeah, so we have an ideal structure, and I think there is a lot to say about this. First of all, I think it is helpful to have both employees and students in the Green Office because employees can more easily find a way through the organization and bring some stability because most of the time they're there for a longer period. You need students for the student perspective, you need students for creativity, and the accommodation just works well.

Other GOs are entirely student-run platforms, with teams of students taking the lead in organizing events, managing communications, and initiating sustainability projects. These teams are based on a voluntary board and sometimes include a larger pool of volunteers. For example, one GO reported having six student managers organized into thematic teams such as Education, Events, and Communications, with additional volunteers providing support for these teams.

Some GOs mentioned that in addition to their central GO, they also have green teams within

each faculty, which are mainly formed voluntarily, including students and staff members from the respective faculty. These green teams execute smaller projects and activities in a faculty-based environment. One GO mentioned that they operate within a larger department of sustainability at the institution. Therefore, working closely with institutions sustainability teams or advisory councils, aligning them more closely with institutional goals.

Personnel

Many GOs primarily rely on part-time student assistants and have no permanent coordinator or supervisor. One GO recounted that when staff positions were eliminated, they “could really use” the staff member’s guidance but had to continue with only students. A different interviewee described how the loss of a supervisor increased the need for students to manage travel between campuses and event logistics, stretching their limited work hours even thinner. Participants cited shortages of funding, workforce, and time as a primary barrier to expanding projects.

What we saw, because of budget cuts, is that we had to choose, okay, are we going to cut one employee and keep some students, but then we would not have the capacity to support those students, which would mean that they would just be there, and hopefully someone will pick up the organization.

According to one interviewee, the presence of additional team members would facilitate the implementation of more ambitious programs despite sufficient core funding. Another point raised was that visibility and formal integration into university structures are as important as financial support.

Student and Staff Engagement

Interviewees confirmed that engagement in sustainability initiatives differs among schools. Most of the interviewed GOs mentioned having difficulties engaging students and staff in their events and activities despite expressing a broad interest in sustainability. One reason mentioned for the low engagement of students was that they are often pressed for time, balancing paid work with their studies, which leaves them with little capacity for extracurricular sustainability activities. Participants also noted the difference between national and international students. The engagement of international students was seen higher at some institutions, likely because they were in a new environment. In contrast, Dutch students tended to stay closer to their homes and existing friend groups. However, this

observation was not uniform across all institutions.

Attendance at events is also inconsistent across institutions, with some reporting participation rates of 50 to 60 percent, while others face low turnout at their activities. To encourage attendance at events, GOs advertise their activities via social media platforms to reach as many students as possible. Most GOs also provide small incentives, such as snacks or giveaways, during events to increase participation. Another common way is to collaborate with student associations or educational programs to engage students in sustainability initiatives. To encourage students to join the GO team, they often offer paid student assistant positions or internship opportunities. However, recruiting unpaid volunteers remains difficult because many students prioritize their academic responsibilities. Furthermore, some GOs collaborate with the academic programs, allowing students to receive credits for their participation. GOs raised that this low engagement also reflects a limited workforce to execute events.

Regarding staff engagement, interviewees generally described it as limited for their events. In some institutions, staff participate through established green teams or through the work of sustainability coordinators assigned at the faculty level. Staff involvement is also sometimes facilitated by sustainability sounding boards or advisory groups that provide a forum for input and collaboration. Nevertheless, several interviewees emphasized that staff are not typically the primary target group for GO activities.

Collaboration Practices

Several interviewees reported that it is difficult to collaborate with other institutional organs, such as faculty councils and facility services, or secure long-term commitments as sustainability initiatives are not always taken seriously by the institutional leadership. Several GOs mentioned that it is often easier to collaborate with individual lecturers, discuss initiatives in their classes or incorporate their students into other activities within the GO. Some GOs also collaborate with external stakeholders, such as other GOs or the municipality, to facilitate larger projects.

Some interviewees also expressed a desire for increased collaboration between GOs, both nationally and internationally, including better knowledge exchange, strategic alignment, and a shared vision. Participants mentioned SvM as a collaboration partner or a good platform to connect GOs.

However, GOs acknowledged that time constraints and limited contact were barriers to collaboration. Additionally, one GO mentioned that an international or national network organization would help to facilitate contact between all GOs.

Long-term Initiatives

Green Offices have contributed to long-term changes at their institutions, according to several interviewees. One interviewee described integrating sustainability into curricula through a “Sustainability Compass”⁶, which involves multiple stakeholders to assess sustainability at different institutional levels. Another interviewee mentioned that the institutional board supports a comprehensive, integrated sustainability strategy.

A concrete example involved changes in institutions’ catering, such as an increase in plant-based and locally sourced food options. Green Office collaborated with facility services to achieve this. Some institutions have introduced policies such as banning disposable paper cups, to encourage the use of reusable alternatives. Participants also discussed the changes to procurement policies, particularly the potential for collaboration between purchasing departments and research on circular economy. They noted mobility policies promoting public transport, and the appointment of faculty-level sustainability coordinators.

Other long-term impacts include the introduction of more vegetarian and vegan cafeteria options, the installation of water fountains, improved product labeling, and ongoing efforts to enhance waste management, however consistent recycling remains a challenge. Community engagement efforts included free period products, vegan weeks, cooking events, clothing swaps, and community gardens that eventually became independent initiatives.

Measuring Impact

Green Offices reported using various methods to measure the impact of their initiatives. Most of them rely on informal, event-based metrics and engagement indicators instead of using comprehensive evaluation frameworks. One GO examines how each faculty or program aligns with

⁶ The Sustainability Compass, as described by one interviewee, is a tool to determine to what extent sustainability topics are integrated into the faculty or programs. It maps the current situation and shows the direction for further steps that can be taken.

the Sustainable Development Goals and uses a tool called “the Sustainability Compass” to monitor faculty participation. Faculties complete this tool on a cyclical basis, usually every one to two years, to raise awareness and motivate individuals to engage voluntarily rather than mandating compliance. Several GOs measure impact by counting participants and noting whether they are new or returning. Social media metrics are key indicators for evaluating reach and visibility; examples include the number of Instagram followers and interaction rates. One GO also facilitates a student survey twice a year to gather more structured feedback. A few offices mentioned conducting post-event reflections as a means of qualitative assessment. One GO creates yearly reports as a part of its process to measure impact. These reports outline the activities and results achieved by the organization over the past year. However, most offices noted that measuring impact remains challenging and that there is room for improvement in developing more systematic and reliable evaluation practices.

Challenges

Interviewees brought up a range of challenges, including engagement in their activities and events, skepticism and expectations from the institution’s departments, collaboration with external stakeholders, implementing (policy) changes at the institution, and budget cuts. Challenges also included skepticism and differing expectations of the institution and its operations, particularly with limited resources, such as finances or personnel. In many cases, the hierarchy of decision-making impedes progress because faculties control budgets. At the same time, the institution’s board holds ultimate authority and is often reluctant to enact changes without broad consensus, resulting in slow decision processes. Reaching and engaging external stakeholders consistently proved another challenge.

Financial Constraints

Many GOs mentioned the financial situation as a challenge, regarding the current budget cuts⁷ in the Netherlands. Only a few interviewees mentioned that they had not yet felt the effect of the budget cuts and viewed their financial situation as good, something they did not struggle with. Several

⁷ At the time of research, the Netherlands introduced budget cuts (bezuinigingen) for higher education and science. More than 1.1 billion has been earmarked for cuts to education in the budget, including around half a billion for higher education (Kersten, 2025).

described the funding as precarious and subject to annual negotiation. One interviewee explained that before recent budget cuts, there had been “quite enough” financial support to run projects. However, since those cuts, the office has struggled to maintain student assistant hours and small project budgets. Another noted that while allocated funds often exist on paper, accessing them can be difficult due to institutional contracts and bureaucratic hurdles.

There is a groundswell, a big groundswell, I would say. But not having the support as in having the financial means to realize that, yeah, that makes it a bit harder. There is money allocated for the Green Office. But as a coordinator, I do not have access to the money. So I need to negotiate with everything we do if I can do that.

Interviewees explained the cuts on GOs with the fact that sustainability is often seen as “a bonus and not a core necessity” by senior management, making it challenging to obtain long-term commitments. Most participants agreed that high expectations for sustainability do not match the resources provided. The interviewees further pointed out that due to the lower allocation of funds for the GOs, they had to eliminate supervisory and staff positions, forcing the GOs to rely extensively on student volunteers. Finally, a few GOs felt financially secure, yet they still identified gaps in workforce and institutional recognition.

Institutional Support

Institutional support beyond funding and staffing was also uneven. While some GOs reported positive collaboration with the institution, such as joint work with Facilities or Mobility Policy teams, others felt isolated and lacked communication channels.

Administrative Support. Several GOs reported that institutional leadership supports their efforts but does not always translate this into concrete action. One interviewee explained that although board members provide reasoned feedback, implementation remains slow. Some GOs are beginning to engage in decision-making processes, such as those related to food and beverage policies, reflecting a growing administrative recognition. Interviewees also described this involvement as gaining trust throughout the GO’s existence at the institution. Conversely, some GOs showed minimal administrative involvement. Some GOs cited budget cuts that eliminated supervisory staff, leaving the GO reliant on students for support. A few GOs reported more robust backing, with one describing an

“open door” policy among professors who volunteer to support and sponsor a sustainability master’s thesis award. Another stated that the administration imposes no obstacles and actively encourages GO activities. Overall, interviewees painted a picture of uneven but evolving administrative support, ranging from active collaboration to rhetorical endorsement without substantive follow-through.

Alignment with Institutional Sustainability Strategies. Interviewees gave mixed responses on how well GOs align with institutions’ sustainability strategies. At some institutions, GOs participate in strategic teams or advisory boards that work toward goals such as integrating sustainability into curricula or achieving climate-positive targets. One interviewee stated that their GO was managed directly by the sustainability officer, who also wrote the institution’s sustainability strategy, aligning the GO activities with the strategy’s three pillars, which are: community, circularity, and climate. Another described involvement in a five-year roadmap that includes mandates like vegetarian catering and academic shifts.

In contrast, most GOs remain peripheral to formal policy development. One interviewee stated that, beyond biweekly strategic team meetings, higher levels of management rarely solicited input from the GO. Another noted that while the institution has a sustainability vision dating back to 2019, it mainly serves as a sounding board without formal agreements. Some GOs reported recent improvements in alignment, including greater trust and involvement in curricular reforms. Therefore, one GO mentioned that they try to implement a basic sustainability policy through the student social organization.

Future Prospects and Effectiveness

Improvements for Effectiveness. Key suggestions focused on organizational structure, institutional positioning, internal capacity, visibility, and external collaboration. Several interviewees emphasized the need to reconfigure their GO to improve internal functionality. They suggested a couple of ideas, such as clarifying the team’s roles and functions and expanding the team to handle more communication and outreach tasks. They saw increasing the workforce as essential to improving operational capacity. One interviewee suggested lengthening board terms for students as a way to ensure more continuity but also mentioned the need to remain effective during longer tenures. Enhancing the visibility of GOs among students and staff was further noted, along with proposals to

integrate GOs into lectures and build ties with study advisors. Interviewees viewed outreach efforts as crucial to increasing awareness and promoting broader participation, particularly through course-related student engagement.

Improving strategic contact with other parts of the university was a priority for several participants, including fostering informal, trust-based relationships with stakeholders, such as facilities departments and recruitment offices. Green Offices also identified the institutional positioning of the GO as an area for improvement. Moving beyond the perception of being a separate or peripheral entity within the university was suggested. Other suggestions for improving effectiveness included strengthening collaboration with other GOs, companies, and governmental bodies.

Future Role. Many GOs envisioned a change in structure, including how they are set up within the institution, how they collaborate with others, and their sense of self. They emphasized the need for GOs to become more formally embedded within their institutions, including treating them with greater respect and legitimacy, giving them a more prominent role in university councils, and operating similarly to established staff bodies, with dedicated office space and access to internal institution systems. Participants wanted more control over the rules and decision-making process.

There was a consistent call for more structured and professionalized GOs. Suggestions included the appointment of part-time students and potentially full-time staff for those GOs who do not have this yet, the operation of a student-led but staff-supported unit, and the formation of project-based rather than team-based volunteer models. Interviewees proposed forming a national GO umbrella organization with representatives present at events and a shared brand to enhance visibility and recognition. Interviewees expressed a desire for increased collaboration between GOs, both nationally and internationally. This includes better knowledge exchange, strategic alignment, and a shared vision. However, they acknowledged that time constraints and limited contact are barriers to collaboration. Several participants envisioned GOs as hubs for creative and student-led sustainability initiatives, including awarding sustainability labels to associations, organizing thesis awards, and launching diverse projects within the institution.

Discussion

This research aimed to explore the key challenges and opportunities faced by GOs in Dutch HEIs. Specifically focusing on the operational strategies, engagement, and contribution to sustainability strategies. Drawing on survey responses and semi-structured interviews with GOs, the study reveals a complex picture, showing that while there is widespread enthusiasm for sustainability within higher education, GOs frequently operate in structurally weak positions that can limit their long-term impact.

A major theme that emerged from the survey was the lack of institutional support, particularly with regard to funding, staffing, and material resources. This perspective aligns with the position of GOs within their educational institution. A second topic that emerged from the interview and survey results was the challenge of engaging students and staff. Interestingly, the survey respondents also identified this as a strength of GOs. A third connection revolved around the limitation of resources, particularly in terms of finances and personnel. A fourth scheme was the collaboration with internal and external stakeholders.

Institutional Support

A central theme emerging from the interviews was the limited institutional support for GOs, particularly in the terms of funding, personnel, and material resources. This aligns closely with the survey findings, where over half of the respondents cited “limited institutional support (funding, resources)” as a significant obstacle to the effectiveness of GOs, and only one person mentioned it as a strength. Some interview participants also noted that institutional visibility and formal recognition are just as critical as financial support. Resource constraints further affected the continuity and long-term vision of GOs. Others emphasized that without strategic institutional backing, people perceived GOs as “extra” or peripheral rather than as core contributors to the institution’s sustainable development. The interview data also points to a broader cultural issue that HEIs not yet fully recognize sustainability as a core institutional value. Respondents called for a deeper institutional commitment, including measurable sustainability goals, integrated departmental collaboration, and the recognition of GOs as essential contributors to the institution’s long-term development. The survey

emphasizes that institutions have a significant impact on the effectiveness of GOs, and as such, they should offer their backing.

Institutional challenges are not only material but also deeply cultural and structural, which makes them particularly complex to address. Despite the growing discourse around sustainability in higher education (SHE), many GOs remain marginalized and often excluded from core governance processes. A recurring issue was the frustrating gap between rhetorical support, where sustainability features in institutional branding or mission statements, and the lack of practical, structural integration of sustainability into the institution's governance. This finding supports prior literature that highlights the need for a formal mandate to be embedded in the educational institution, ensuring the promotion of sustainability within the HEI. The mandate was further stressed as one of the core characteristics of GOs when founded.

However, some institutions offer promising examples, such as a supportive environment, providing funding, infrastructure, and staff capacity and incorporating the GO into sustainability strategies or inclusion in high-level advisory bodies. These examples indicate that more integrated and mature models are possible, especially when leadership promotes sustainability from the top down and links it to the institution's academic mission and operational planning. Still, the overall picture suggests that many GOs continue to operate at the margins of the institution's structures or that the support does not always translate into concrete actions. Often resulting in the absence of the strategic or operational backing needed to be effective. One of the most commonly cited barriers was a lack of autonomy. This suggests, as the survey and the literature support, that the top-down approach of institutions should be complemented by a bottom-up approach that involves, above all, active student engagement.

In addition, the absence of formal recognition of GOs within institutional hierarchies often results in a deficiency of long-term vision and strategic continuity. When sustainability efforts are led exclusively by students who rotate every year or semester, there is an inherent risk of losing institutional memory and momentum. In contrast, institutions that have embedded GOs within broader sustainability frameworks are better positioned to ensure continuity and strategic alignment.

Therefore, a more structured institutional framework that provides continuity and authority is essential for the success of GOs.

Influence on Sustainability Strategies

This research found that GOs can influence institutional sustainability strategies through complicated and inconsistent processes. Survey and interview data consistently highlighted that GOs often struggle to move beyond project-based work to more systemic influence. While respondents view policy-level engagement as an important goal, they also acknowledge it as one of the most persistent and difficult challenges they face.

This discrepancy stems from the structural positioning of many GOs within their institutions. Although some GOs are formalized entities, most remain outside the core strategic decision-making spaces of their universities. Interviewees described a sense of being “on the sidelines”, often involved in awareness-raising or event coordination but rarely consulted on high-level decisions. Their involvement in meetings with facilities or catering services was usually lacking in continuity, formal authority, or clear outcomes, although when invited to join.

These findings raise an important question for discussion: Should universities rethink the positioning of GOs within their organizational structure. To make a meaningful contribution to sustainability transformation, GOs need more than motivation and ideas; they also need access, legitimacy, and decision-making power. Without these, their potential remains largely neglected. An openness to change can accelerate official proceedings. Sustainability efforts are often driven by enthusiastic individuals rather than embedded systems, meaning that progress is temporary and vulnerable to changes in staffing or student turnover.

Student and Staff Engagement

Student and staff engagement emerged as a central problem in both the interviews and the survey. A notable finding was that this was identified as the second biggest strength of GOs and, at the same time, also as the fourth most significant challenge. Interviewees identified a discrepancy between the level of engagement by students and staff in events and activities and their engagement with the GO team. According to the literature, active student engagement in particular can enrich the transition toward sustainability.

Engagement in Activities and Events

Most respondents focused on student engagement when discussing participation in activities or events, as these are their primary target audience. The discrepancy between expressed interest and actual participation was a recurring theme, as evident in the research findings. Many students reportedly care about sustainability issues, but competing priorities, such as academic responsibilities, jobs, and a general lack of time limit their ability to participate in GOs. The survey responses suggest a similar trend, with most students indicating that they had never attended or had only participated in one to three GO events over time. Engagement was seen as higher when the activities were social or lifestyle-oriented events, such as plant-based cooking nights or clothing swaps, rather than formal lectures or information-heavy sessions. Additionally, some GOs have experimented with incentives, such as free food and certificates, but these efforts have mixed results. While short-term incentives and creative event formats can help boost participation, they do not address the underlying institutional dynamics that shape engagement.

These findings suggest that the event format and framing matter. When closely tied to academic goals, such as when they are integrated into coursework or offered credits, students are more likely to engage as they receive something in return. This suggests that incorporating sustainability into the curriculum could be a promising approach for both education and engagement. Green Offices found partnerships with other student organizations or faculties helpful, particularly in reaching a broader and more diverse audience.

Despite the strategies, low attendance persisted, pointing at deeper structural or visibility issues affecting engagement. Some GOs admitted that they did not reach many students beyond the interested niche, largely due to poor communication and struggles to define their role on campus, especially with a lack of institutional support, which was not sufficient to attract widespread engagement. The institution's lack of support and recognition causes people to view GOs as extra projects instead of a key part of the institution working towards sustainability. As a result, students may consider them as optional or non-essential, particularly when balancing academic and personal commitments. Survey results indicate that GOs are perceived as essential for institutions to achieve their sustainability goals and that GOs currently only have a moderate impact on sustainability

changes within their respective institutions. Green Offices need to establish a clearer identity and purpose on campus if they want to be involved in the long term. This means they need to be formally recognized and structurally integrated as key strategic partners in the institution's sustainability. Future efforts should clarify their operational role within the institution's system, improve communication channels, and embed sustainability more deeply into academic and administrative structures. What becomes clear through this research is that engagement requires more nuanced terms, not just as attendance at events but also as active participation in the GO teams themselves.

Engagement in the Green Office Team

In contrast to general participation, recruiting students into the GO teams themselves was often more successful, as these positions are often paid or connected to academic rewards, such as credits, certificates, or internships. Survey respondents also viewed this strategy as beneficial to improve GOs. Additionally, several interviewees emphasized the value of compensating students for their time and commitment, as volunteer roles were more challenging to fill and sustain. Financial constraints may impact on the engagement strategies of GOs. Interestingly, some GOs reported that international students were often more active and willing to volunteer than Dutch students, which could reflect different levels of familiarity with sustainability work, different academic cultures, or varying motivations for extracurricular involvement. Exploring this demographic trend further could help tailor outreach and recruitment strategies. This is especially crucial when considering the inclusivity and diversity of GO teams.

Students are also often drivers of change, and as the literature suggests, they are essential for a sustainable transition. Therefore, GOs should involve students in running projects, coordinating events, and engaging with stakeholders. Without such support, GOs usually depend on a small group of intrinsically motivated students. These students often drive significant progress but face limitations in terms of their capacity. Volunteer positions were challenging to fill and retain. When roles were unpaid and loosely defined, students intended to disengage quickly. The importance of providing volunteers with meaningful, well-scoped tasks to ensure long-term involvement was stressed by several interviewees.

As for staff involvement within GO teams, it was generally minimal. While some institutions had staff sustainability coordinators or advisors, most lacked a formal mechanism for faculty or administrative staff to contribute meaningfully. The absence of defined staff roles reinforces the perception of GOs as student-only initiatives, limiting their integration into broader institutional structures. The GOs appeared to gain greater legitimacy and strategic alignment when staff engaged directly with them, offering mentorship, co-leading projects, or bridging to institutions' leadership.

Structure and Resources

Interviewees indicated that the senior management of the institution often sees the GO as a bonus rather than a core part of the institution. Consequently, GOs often operate with minimal support, particularly in terms of funding and personnel. Although the GO Model conceptualized that GOs have a core team of students and staff supported by financial resources, interviewees consistently highlighted that the current budget cuts already resulted in reduced or eliminated key staff positions, such as supervisors and coordinators. Consequently, many GOs are now heavily reliant on part-time student assistants, which significantly limits their capacity to plan, execute, and follow through on projects.

Finances

Despite the formal allocation of funds to many GOs, interview data demonstrate significant challenges in accessing these resources, largely due to bureaucratic processes and institutional constraints. According to several GOs, there is a discrepancy between the allocated budget and the practical usability of that budget. This discrepancy often requires coordinators to negotiate with multiple departments for each expenditure and access. This limitation in financial autonomy was a recurring theme and had a significant impact on the GOs' capacity to plan and implement projects efficiently. Secure financial resources can prevent personnel overload and reduced responsiveness.

Before the recent budget cuts, certain offices reported having sufficient financial support to sustain projects and student employment. However, the prevailing economic climate has led to a reduction in project budgets and student assistant hours, thereby constraining operational capacity. Consequently, these constraints often compel GOs to curtail initiatives or to place greater reliance on unpaid or part-time student labor.

The extant literature on the subject lends further credence to these concerns. According to the GO Model, institutional financial support is a fundamental characteristic intended to ensure the continuity of operations and the feasibility of student-led sustainability initiatives. The discrepancy between this ideal and the practical experiences of many GOs underscores a misalignment that hampers the GOs' potential.

While a few GOs reported feeling financially secure, they still faced challenges related to staffing and institutional recognition. This suggests a more extensive structural problem concerning the integration of GOs. Financial resources alone are not sufficient to ensure effective functioning, they also intersect with personnel issues, as constrained funding diminishes the capacity to recruit and retain qualified staff. This matter is explored in greater detail in the subsequent section.

Personnel

Personnel configuration closely influences the effectiveness of GOs. There are different ways how a GO is structured in terms of students and staff, while some rely only on students, others also include staff members as supervisors or coordinators. When solely relying on students it can limit institutional operations, strategic continuity, and the ability to collaborate with the administration. One GO recounted that they "could really use" the guidance of a staff member but were compelled to continue operations with students alone.

Interviewees consistently highlighted the benefits of a diverse team comprising students and staff. Students contribute creativity, energy, and a direct connection to campus culture, which are essential elements for maintaining a dynamic and relevant sustainability agenda. Concurrently, staff members contribute their institutional knowledge, fostering stability and providing access to internal structures and decision-making processes. The integration of these two factors has proven to be highly effective, resulting in notable enhancements in creativity and innovation within the educational environment. Literature on the GO Model further supports this, advocating for a core team structure consisting of five to eight students and at least one staff member to lead and sustain the initiative. The model's founders have acknowledged that a single sustainability coordinator often struggles to achieve a substantial impact within the extensive and intricate environment of a higher education institution.

The lack of dedicated and permanent staff, especially when paired with financial constraints, limits the institutional embeddedness and long-term impacts of many GOs. It is essential to address this personnel gap to empower GOs to operate as strategic units driving sustainable change within their educational institutions.

Collaboration

Collaboration, whether internal or external, plays a crucial role in the effectiveness and visibility of GOs. This could enhance the strategic alignment, facilitate implementation, and support institutional recognition. However, the interviewees indicated that collaborations are limited, primarily due to time constraints, lack of capacity, and limited institutional support.

Internally

Green Offices have identified internal collaboration with their respective educational institutions as a crucial factor in facilitating events and activities. However, interviews reported that the establishment of such collaborations often encounters significant challenges. These are closely linked to the broader issue of insufficient institutional support, as discussed in a previous section and reflect concerns regarding visibility, legitimacy, and structural integration.

The issue of low visibility on campus was a recurring theme in the interviews, this not only affects the engagement but also the perception of GOs among institutional stakeholders. This results in a perception of extracurricular activities rather than a strategic priority. As one GO noted, collaboration with institutional bodies, such as faculty councils or facility services, posed challenges due to the lack of a clear understanding of GOs as a core component of the sustainability mission. Collaboration with academic departments further proved to be challenging and was often hindered by bureaucratic structures and competing agendas. Though, individual lectures were more accessible and willing to support specific initiatives, such as integrating sustainability into their teaching or offering academic credits. This personal connection can occasionally be seen as an entry point for more extensive collaborations.

Interviewees expressed frustration about the challenges they face in obtaining long-term commitments from other departments, particularly in the absence of clear mandates or shared sustainability goals. Consequently, most of them underscored the need for enhanced communication

and collaboration with various departments, especially senior management, policy units, and facility services. To move beyond causal collaborations, GOs require stronger institutional embedding, more explicit recognition as a strategic actor, and access to platforms that enable cooperation with other institutional bodies.

Externally

Many GOs adopt an outward-focused approach, engaging with national and international networks for support, inspiration, and strategic alignment. This approach often stands in contrast with the fragmented and limited internal collaborations. Interviewees expressed a desire for enhanced connections with other GOs on a national or international level with organizations like GOM and SvM, as they underscored the value of collaborative learning and collective recognition. A recurring challenge is the limited workforce and time scarcity of GO teams, which makes it difficult to find time to also engage outside of the daily operations. As a result, GOs often cannot fully engage despite their recognition of the networks. This further hinders GOs from benefiting from the opportunities presented by the networks.

Despite the constraints, there was a clear interest in more systematic and accessible forms of cooperation. There is a focus on the potential of a structured collaboration, including conferences, shared online platforms, and joint support for initiatives. Therefore, these networks should consider closer collaboration that enhances the work of GOs. One promising approach is to strengthen the GO Learning Network, which was initiated by national and international organizations in November 2024. This network offers a valuable platform for GOs to learn with and from each other, thereby strengthening their impact. This reflects not only the connectivity but also the recognition that existing external networks need to be more connected and resource-focused. The role of external networks has been demonstrated as a critical component of GOs, complementing institutional support. Furthermore, being part of a broader network can help establish recognition within their respective institutions, reinforcing their strategic value. Strengthening and systematizing these collaborations is essential to build a more resilient and impactful GO movement across HEIs, while also addressing the resource constraints that limit the full potential of GOs.

Conclusion

The research has explored how Green Offices in Dutch higher education institutions work and which challenges and opportunities they face in promoting sustainability. Drawing from interviews and a survey, it reveals that GOs are seen as change agents for a sustainable transition, their impact remains highly dependent on the institutional context and internal capacity. The findings show that GOs have a positive impact on sustainability within their institutions; however, in reality the current implementation within these institutions limits their effectiveness. They often operate with limited institutional support, limited financial resources, and low capacity in their teams. Despite these limitations, GOs have successfully raised awareness through their events and activities. This paradox reflects a broader structural issue. There are opportunities to make a long-lasting impact in their institutions. Opportunities lie in further embedding them in the institutional context, closer collaboration with internal departments and senior management, and enhanced use of external networks. When supported through funding, staff members, and formal order, GOs can play a key role in making sustainability an integral part of the educational mission and operations of HEIs.

Future Research and Recommendations⁸

Building on these findings, future research should investigate the financial situations in relation to the evolving uncertain situation of budget cuts in the Netherlands. This research should focus on the potential switching from paid to unpaid models and what this means for the respective GO. Additionally, a comparative analysis across countries could reveal alternative institutional models and support structures to enhance the work of GOs - further helping Dutch GOs to adopt best practices and raise their sustainable impact. The potential of external networks, such as the GOM and SvM, warrants further research. These networks offer valuable platforms for knowledge exchange and peer support however the interactions remain limited. Therefore, these networks should explore further into how they can enhance the work of GOs and the support they can provide.

In terms of recommendations, this research underscores the need for institutional integration of GOs. Higher education institutions should formally recognize GOs as a strategic actor within their

⁸ A strategic overview of these recommendations can be found in Appendix F: Strategic Recommendations for Green Offices.

structures, this includes involving them in advisory bodies, planning, and policy development. This change would enhance the work of GOs, as well as their visibility, access, and legitimacy, enabling them to make meaningful impacts and further strengthen internal collaborations. In addition to this stability, GOs also require financial autonomy to execute events and have the necessary resources for personnel. Institutions should also ensure that GOs have enough funding and give them the authority to use it effectively, reducing administrative burdens. It is equally important to have sufficient personnel, a hybrid structure, including students and staff, could help GOs become more resilient. By strengthening internal and external support, GOs can become a more central figure in creating a more sustainable academic environment.

In summary, the future of Green Offices at Dutch higher education institutions depends on many factors. Through institutional change, network collaboration, and improving internal and external support, GOs can play a central role in creating a more sustainable academic environment. It is crucial to continue investing in and exploring these areas in order to achieve this goal.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

General Questions

1. How long have you been involved with the Green Office, and what motivated you to join?
2. Which position does the Green Office have within your institution? Please describe it.

Operational Strategies

3. How is the Green Office structured? (Qua students/staff, paid/voluntary)
4. What strategies/methods does the Green Office use to engage students and staff in sustainability initiatives?
5. How does the Green Office collaborate with different university departments and external stakeholders?

Effectiveness and Challenges

6. How do you measure the impact of the Green Office's initiatives? (feedback mechanisms?)
7. What challenges does the Green Office face in implementing sustainability programs?
8. Do you feel the Green Office has enough resources (funding, staff, institutional support) to achieve its goals? Why or why not?
9. Have there been any cases where the Green Office's initiatives led to long-term (policy) changes at the university?

Governance and Institutional Support

10. How does the university administration support or hinder the Green Office's efforts?
11. How does the Green Office align with the university's broader sustainability policies? Do they even align?
12. Are there any formal agreements or policies that institutionalize the role of the Green Office within the university?

Future Prospects and Best Practices

13. What improvements could be made to enhance the effectiveness of the Green Office?
14. What lessons have you learned from other universities' Green Offices?
15. How do you envision the role of the Green Office evolving in the future?

Closing Questions

16. Is there anything else you'd like to add about the Green Office towards higher education sustainability efforts?

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Section 1: General Information

1. What is your role in the university? *(Please select one)*
 - Student
 - Faculty/staff
 - Green Office member (student)
 - Green Office member (staff)
 - Other (please specify)

2. How long have you been at the university? *(Please select one)*
 - 0-1 year
 - 1-3 years
 - 3-5 years
 - More than 5 years

3. In which region in the Netherlands are you studying/working? *(Please select one)*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Noord-Holland ● Zuid-Holland ● Zeeland ● Noord-Brabant ● Limburg ● Utrecht ● Gelderland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flevoland ● Overijssel ● Drenthe ● Friesland ● Groningen
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4. Do you have a Green Office at your educational institution? *(Please select one)*
 - Yes
 - No
 - I do not know

5. How familiar are you with the concept of Green Office? *(Please select one)*
 Likert scale: 1 = Not familiar at all, 5 = Extremely familiar

Section 2: Green Office Engagement & Effectiveness

6. Have you participated in any Green Office activities or initiatives? *(Please select one)*
 - Never
 - 1-3 times
 - 3-5 times
 - 5-10 times
 - More than 10 times

7. How would you rate the effectiveness of the Green Office in promoting sustainability at your educational institution? *(Please select one)*
 Likert scale: 1 = Not effective at all, 5 = Very effective

8. What do you think are the biggest strengths of the Green Office? *(Please select all that apply)*
- Engaging students and staff in sustainability efforts
 - Organizing impactful and sustainability related events and activities
 - Influencing university-wide sustainability strategies
 - Institutional support (funding, resources)
 - Implementing green policies (e.g., waste management, energy use)
 - Raising awareness about sustainability (issues)
 - Collaborating with external sustainability groups
 - Other (please specify)
9. What challenges do you think the Green Office faces in implementing sustainability initiatives? *(Please select all that apply)*
- Engaging students and staff in sustainability efforts
 - Organizing impactful and sustainability related events and activities
 - Influencing university-wide sustainability strategies
 - Limited institutional support (funding, resources)
 - Implementing green policies (e.g., waste management, energy use)
 - Raising awareness about sustainability (issues)
 - Collaborating with external sustainability groups
 - Other (please specify)
10. What strategies do you think would make the Green Office at your educational institution more effective? *(Select all that apply)*
- Increased collaboration with university leadership
 - More student and staff engagement opportunities (e.g. volunteering, internships etc)
 - More visibility and communication about initiatives
 - Greater financial and institutional support
 - Advocate for stronger sustainability policies at the university level
 - Integration of sustainability into mandatory coursework
 - Provide incentives for participation (e.g., certificates, course credits)
 - Other (please specify)

Section 3: Institutional Support & Awareness

11. How would you describe the institution's administration's support for the Green Office?
What role do you think they should play in enhancing its effectiveness? *(Please explain in up to 5 sentences)*
12. How would you describe awareness of the Green Office among students and staff? *(Please select one one)*
- Not very well
 - Slight well
 - Neutral
 - Moderately well
 - Very well
 - I do not know

Section 4: Sustainability Impact & Future Directions

13. How do you perceive the impact of the Green Office on actual sustainability changes at the educational institution? *(Please select one)*

- No impact
- Slight impact
- Neutral
- Moderate impact
- Significant impact
- I do not know

14. What specific sustainability improvements would you like to see the Green Office work on? *(Please elect all that apply)*

- Energy efficiency & carbon reduction
- Waste management & recycling
- Sustainable food & catering
- Green spaces & biodiversity on campus
- Sustainable transportation options
- Policy and governance changes at the university
- Other (please specify)

15. Do you believe Green Offices are necessary for educational institutions to achieve their sustainability goals? *(Please select one)*

- Unnecessary
- Somewhat unnecessary
- Neutral
- Somewhat necessary
- Necessary
- I do not know

Section 5: Additional Feedback

Thank you for participating in this survey.

16. Is there anything else you would like to share about Green Offices? *(Open-ended)*

Appendix C: Interview Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form⁹

Thesis study: Enhancing the Role of Green Offices in Higher Educational Institutions' Sustainability Efforts: A Case Study of the Netherlands

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. This letter explains what the research entails and how the research will be conducted. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If any information is not clear kindly ask questions using the contact details of the researchers provided at the end of this letter.

What is this study about?

This research explores the following research question: *How can Green Offices in the Netherlands contribute to higher education institutions sustainability efforts more effectively?* Green Offices are student-led initiatives that promote and coordinate sustainability within higher education institutions. While they play a key role, questions remain about their effectiveness in driving meaningful change. This research examines their challenges, best practices, and strategies for increasing their impact. To explore these questions, **6–8 participants** will be interviewed. You have been approached because of your direct experience working in a Green Office at a university or university of applied sciences. Your insights provide real-life perspectives that cannot be fully captured in reports. This research is conducted by Charlotte Greve, a third-year BSc student in Global Responsibility and Leadership at the University of Groningen, as part of her Capstone Thesis. The study is independent, with no external funding or third-party involvement.

What does participation involve?

Participation involves a 45- to 60-minute interview. The interview will cover various aspects of your experience working with the Green Office, including your role, background, and the office's structure within the education institution. We will discuss key sustainability initiatives, engagement strategies, challenges faced, and impact of Green Office projects. In addition, the conversation will cover institutional support, future prospects, and insights from national or international Green Office networks.

Do you have to participate?

Participation is entirely voluntary. Participants are free to withdraw from completing the interview at any time without providing a reason and without facing any consequences. Furthermore, you can choose to not answer questions without consequences and or provision of reason.

Are there any risks in participating?

There are no risks in participating. Your identity will remain anonymous, and all data will be kept confidential. Transcripts will be anonymized and only accessible to the researcher and supervisor. They will be deleted five years after the study is completed. No identifying personal information will appear in the final research output.

⁹ The thesis title as well as the research question were revised after all interviews were completed. As a result, the forms in the appendix may reflect an earlier version.

Are there any benefits in participating?

There are no direct personal benefits to participating. However, your insights will contribute to a better understanding of how Green Offices can be more effectively implemented in Dutch higher education, potentially benefiting your university or university of applied sciences.

How will the information you provide be recorded, stored, and protected?

Interviews will be recorded using a phone and later transcribed. Your identity will remain anonymous, and no personally identifiable information, such as your name or address, will be included in the transcript. These recordings and transcripts will only be used for academic purposes, to be specific they will only be used for this research. All data will be securely stored on the University of Groningen's Y-drive in accordance with GDPR regulations. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access. The data will be retained for five years and then deleted.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be presented in June as part of the researcher's Capstone Thesis for the Global Responsibility and Leadership program. The final thesis will be available in an online repository as part of the graduation process. If you are interested, it can also be shared with the interviewees.

Ethical approval

This study has been approved by the Campus Fryslân Ethics Committee and adheres to all relevant ethical standards, including confidentiality and anonymity.

Informed consent form

If you are willing to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete this informed consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time during the process, which also means that this Informed Consent does not make you legally obligated to participate in the study. This Informed Consent is only intended to help protect your rights as a participant.

Who should you contact for further information?

If you have any questions about this study before or after participating, do not hesitate to reach out to the researcher.

Primary contact person:

Charlotte Greve | Campus Fryslân (University of Groningen)

Thesis supervisor:

Efe Cengiz | Campus Fryslân (University of Groningen)

Informed Consent Form⁹

Title study: Enhancing the Role of Green Offices in Higher Education Institutions' Sustainability Efforts: A Case Study of the Netherlands

Name participant:

Assessment

- I have read the information sheet and was able to ask any additional question to the researcher.
- I understand I may ask questions about the study at any time.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that at any time I can refuse to answer any question without any consequences.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

Confidentiality and Data Use

- I understand that none of my individual information will be disclosed to anyone outside the study team and my name will not be published.
- I understand that the information provided will be used only for this research and publications directly related to this research project.
- I understand that data (consent forms, recordings, interview transcripts) will be retained on the Y-drive of the University of Groningen server for 5 years, in correspondence with the university GDPR legislation.

Future involvement

- I wish to receive a copy of the scientific output of the project.
- I consent to be re-contacted for participating in future studies.

Having read and understood all the above, I agree to participate in the research study: yes / no

Date

Signature

To be filled in by the researcher

- I declare that I have thoroughly informed the research participant about the research study and answered any remaining questions to the best of my knowledge.
- I agree that this person participates in the research study.

Date

Signature

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form⁹

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research on Green Offices. This page explains what the research entails and how it will be conducted. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If any information is unclear, kindly ask questions using the contact details of the researchers provided.

What is this study about?

This research explores the following research question: *How can Green Offices in the Netherlands contribute to higher education institutions sustainability efforts more effectively?* Green Offices are initiatives that promote and coordinate sustainability within universities. While they play a key role, questions remain about their effectiveness in driving meaningful change. This research examines their challenges, best practices, and strategies for increasing their impact.

The study will involve approximately 50 participants who are studying or working at a Dutch university or university of applied sciences and are engaging with a Green Office in their respective institution (through being part of the Green Office, attending the events, or previously participating in the Green Office). Participants are selected because they are connected with a Dutch higher education institution, through being a student or their work.

This research is conducted by Charlotte Greve, a third-year BSc student in Global Responsibility and Leadership at the University of Groningen, as part of her Capstone Thesis. The study is independent, with no external funding or third-party involvement.

What does participation involve?

Participation involves completing a 10- to 15-minute online questionnaire about their experiences with Green Offices in Dutch higher education and their impact as well as effectiveness.

Do you have to participate?

Participation is entirely voluntary. Participants are free to withdraw from completing the questionnaire at any time without providing a reason and without facing any consequences. Furthermore, you can choose to not answer questions without consequences and or provision of reason.

Are there any risks in participating?

This study does not involve any physical, psychological, or social risks. All responses will remain anonymous and confidential.

Are there any benefits in participating?

There are no direct benefits for participants. However, the responses will help expand knowledge on the effectiveness of Green Offices and may inform future sustainability initiatives in higher education institutions.

How will the information you provide be recorded, stored, and protected?

All responses will remain confidential and will be anonymized, meaning no personally identifiable information will be linked to your answers. Only the research team will have access to the data, which will be securely stored in compliance with the University of Groningen's GDPR regulations. The data will be kept for five years and then permanently deleted.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The findings will be used for a Capstone Thesis in the Global Responsibility and Leadership program. They may also be presented at academic conferences or included in research publications. A summary of the results can be provided upon request.

Ethical approval

This study has been approved by the Campus Fryslân Ethics Committee and adheres to all relevant ethical standards, including confidentiality and anonymity.

Who should you contact for further information?**Primary contact person:**

Charlotte Greve | Campus Fryslân (University of Groningen)

Thesis supervisor:

Efe Cengiz | Campus Fryslân (University of Groningen)

*Having read and understood all the above, I agree to participate in the research study

Signature

Appendix E: Positionality Statement

While conducting my research on Green Offices in Dutch higher education institutions, I also held a volunteer position as a student network coordinator at Studenten voor Morgen (SvM). In this role, I was in regular contact with numerous Green Offices across the Netherlands, as well as the Green Office Movement. I also collaborated with the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, the Green Office Movement, and a couple Dutch Green Offices to help establish a (national) learning network for Green Offices across MBO, HBO, and WO institutions. These activities provided me with extensive insider knowledge and shaped my understanding of sustainability efforts within the sector.

Given my dual role as a researcher and an active member of this network, situates this thesis as insider research, where the researcher is also part of the social group under study (Fleming, 2018). This positioning provides clear benefits, such as a solid "pre-understanding" of the research environment (Fleming, 2018), increased trust from participants, and more natural and open interview interactions (Greene, 2014). My involvement granted me privileged access to relevant documents, events, and key individuals, enriching the depth and nuance of the collected data. For instance, participating in the Green Office learning network made it easier to understand the differences in ideas like "outcomes" and "impact," which were included in this study's framework and results.

However, insider research introduces methodological challenges as well. These include maintaining objectivity, preserving confidentiality, navigating power dynamics, and managing shifting social identities (Greene, 2014). To mitigate these risks, I implemented several strategies to ensure the integrity and ethical soundness of the research. First, I was transparent with my colleagues at SvM and informed interviewees that their participation was voluntary and unrelated to my role at SvM. Second, I engaged in continuous critical reflection supported by a reflexive journal and regular peer debriefing discussions to identify and address potential biases in data interpretation. Lastly, I sought an external peer review from a researcher unaffiliated with the Green Office network to critique my methodology and findings independently.

Although having a dual role presented challenges, I found that the advantages, particularly improved access and a deeper understanding of the field, ultimately strengthened the research. By acknowledging and actively managing the implications of my positionality, I aimed to maintain transparency and uphold the ethical rigor of this study.

Appendix F: Strategic Recommendations for Green Offices

Table 1

Main Strategic Recommendations for Green Offices.

Recommendations	Justification	Implementation Barrier	Implications
Formal Mandate in Educational Institution	GOs lack decision-making power; embedding them creates long-term legitimacy	Resistance from senior management	Increases GO's legitimacy, access, and visibility; ensures participation to make impact; strengthens internal collaborations
Allocation of Financial Resources	GOs lack autonomy in budget decisions; financial constraints	Budget cuts; access to finances is difficult	Reduces administrative burdens; provides resources for personnel; budget for events and activities
Hybrid Team Structure (Students and Staff)	Ensures continuity and project execution	Budget cuts, lack of institutional support	Improves stability; allows for student creativity and staff support; helps to become more resilient
Strengthen internal and external collaboration	GOs express a desire for a national or international organization for support and knowledge exchange	Time pressure; lack of capacity	Strengthens collaboration and the GO Learning Network; enables them to learn with and from each other; secure participation of all Dutch GOs