



Felix Spira - Germany

In order to achieve a sustainable world we need lots of innovation, we need renewable energy, we need to find bio plastics, we need to find ways in order to educate people on sustainability. So, what I am especially passionate about is education for sustainable development, especially educating students that are within universities. My name is Felix Spira, I am working for an organization called RootAbility, and we operate mainly within Germany, Netherlands and Belgium. What we focus on is to make sure that the students that are going to university, so the future leaders, the teachers, the ones that are going to run corporations, the ones who want to be engineers and product developers, that they, as part of study, have a critical touch point with Sustainability.

So, it is quite a difficult thing, because if we look at some of the data right now, the situation looks relatively poor. In Germany, for instance, only 4 per cent of universities actually have a sustainability report, only 4 per cent of study programs deal with sustainability, and only 4 per cent of universities have an environmental management system. So, most of the 2.7 million students within Germany do not get in touch with sustainability as part of the education, which is a big problem. So, the solution that we developed is the idea of student-led Sustainability Hubs. So, in some universities you have an environmental manager, or you have a sustainability committee, and in some universities you do not have any of those, just a couple of students running around and clubs and societies, organizing relatively small scale events. There is no dynamic from the side of the university and no dynamic from the side of the students, because they do not have access to the institution.

Our innovation is focused around three things. First, that we bring together a team of five to eight students, who get paid at least one day a week for their work, together with someone, a staff member from the institution, who has at least three days a week to work together with the students. So, they form the core of the Sustainability Hub, and there are lots of opportunities for students and staff to volunteer, to work together with them. The second thing is that this is not a voluntary initiative, but it has a mandate from the higher management. They have resources, they have office space, they are getting trained. That's the top-down support that comes in order to enable that bottom-up engagement. The third thing is that those Sustainability Hubs are connection points for external actors that want to work together with the university and sustainability issues.

This is a model that we started to pilot in 2010 at Maastricht University, when I was a Bachelor student there. So far we have brought this model to four countries, to 25 universities and universities of Applied Sciences, creating over 100 paid jobs for students to work on sustainability and mobilizing 1.2 million euros in funding by those universities, to enable that action. So, what are some of the projects that those Sustainability Hubs focus on? We just have an analysis running and it looks like that over the last years they implemented over 250 projects, mainly focused on the SDG of Responsible Consumption and Production. Some of the examples: they are writing sustainability reports for universities, in order to increase transparency of what the organization is doing; trying to lobby for solar cells on rooftops; trying to lobby for more organic food in the cafeteria. So that is focused mainly at the institution, as well as a lot of student engagement. It is very difficult to implement sustainability within the curriculum, because you need to convince professors to actually change the curriculum. So, what a lot of them are doing is they first make an overview of all the different sustainability programs that are at the university, in order to start a discussion around that. As well as they implement lots of extracurricular education on sustainable development, through lectures, through workshops, you know the stuff that is also happening probably at your institution. So, this is what we've been doing and so far we scaled the model to the Netherlands, Germany, UK and Belgium. We mainly did this through an open-source approach, so we have lots of materials on our website that are free for people to access, they're all under Creative Commons License and we support a grassroots lobbying of students. Sometimes it takes one year, even two years, to get that funding from the institution, because you not only need to convince them that sustainability is important, but also that students should be engaged, and they actually need to spend some money if they want to engage in transition. So, that is the grassroots lobbying and also building a movement. Right now we're busy trying to connect these different Sustainability Hubs that exist in different countries.

So, this is mainly the beginning, and why I'm here is because I am quite curious to see if that model can also work in other countries. I am trying to see if we can adapt it to lower and middle-income countries, or to bring it to Eastern Europe. If any one of you is interested in trying to start something like this at your own institution, then just come to me and of course vote for me so we can continue to work on this tomorrow. Thank you.