

Dancing on the shoulders of giants

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IMPACT

The action researcher cannot claim that every organisation can and will behave like the one studied, which was indeed very much what was observed in practice between the external three cases and the insider one of this project. However, as Coghlan and Brannick advise, you may focus on some significant factors, consideration of which is useful for other organisations; organisations that might be undergoing similar types of change processes. I thus move from this justification to a brief outline of the impacts of my PhD work.

Organisational and Social Impact

The organisational and social impact of this research has probably been most experienced by and within the community of students and staff who work on sustainability in Maastricht University, and the surrounding city outside of the university. Going deeper still, the research, by dint of its action inquiry, was co-researched with the Green Office of Maastricht University. They were impacted by this project in the sense that they participated in its early synthesis of and learnings about what organisational transformation for sustainability actually entails, and that they contributed towards from their own freshly learnt experiential and intellectual knowledge. They also enacted mutually agreed and discussed decisions, projects and initiatives that were either partly or wholly influenced by what the research uncovered as we progressed. There were also backfiring effects to our intervention and inquiries, as a result of unforeseen circumstances and unpredictable relational dynamics.

In essence, the impact of the work is seen in how I have facilitated youth groups, and contributed and advised recent calls for transformative change in and around UM and its institutional architecture, as I was completing the early manuscript revisions for this thesis in late 2019/2020, and after the first internal round of feedback in early 2020. I advised, guided and tried to act as an honest broker for the Maastricht for Climate consortium, which later became the Climate Action Party, whose goals were to orient a truer pathway to sustainability at UM by recognising and learning from the history and context of the preceding change agents I had worked alongside. The outcome was a transformation strategy for UM (of sorts) that formed the basis of the policy brief for UM – which completes the obligation of the project to produce policy recommendations. Without a history or catalogue of events and policies to go on, and without open access to key decisions taken and their effects, this research proved essential to their eventually successful efforts to be voted into the University Council and to table a report outlining their concerns regarding the last four years of sustainability policy at UM. In conjunction to the delivery of this thesis, inclusive workshops will take place to refine the findings, co-create know-how and transfer ownership.

UM Spotlight on sustainability

As this thesis was being completed, an actual community of inquiry formed of several different student organisations for sustainability, operating mostly independent from and in response to the university, approached me to advise them. This occurred during periods of negotiation and protest against UM's sustainability practices, in particular, the polemic centred on the choice to divest from fossil fuels in light of the pension body, ABP, being known to have investments in CO₂-emitting industries. Debates were proposed,

negotiated with UM, delayed, then eventually took place; participatory and open talks were recommended in order to seek a common and constructive path forwards for UM's sustainability actors into the 2020s.

Competencies for Systemic Transformation

Ultimately this thesis outlines a novel methodology for both researching and practicing transformation for sustainability from within the structures and constructs that the modern university institution makes manifest. It puts forward intrinsic competencies for systemic change at the individual, team, departmental and whole-organisational levels, that could be directly translated into practice via talks with bodies that aspire to codify, measure, track and have recognised the rubrics necessary to navigate transformations towards sustainability, thriving and circularity.

Employers, graduates, secondary school students, international organisations, and higher education broadly could all benefit from the further codification and translation of proven skills demonstrated by those researched in this project. The knowledge and know-how interwoven through this work presents an extensive body of other research that could work as a comprehensive scientific 'constitution' or 'codex' of change management for sustainability. By dint of the synthesis of at least five previously fragmented bodies of knowledge, it holistically encapsulates the organisational chemistry that makes sustainability transformation tick, what it is that actors actually do to effectuate, navigate and propagate transformations effectively in organisations, and how to look for these in complex organisations.

Inclusion of participants as coresearchers in the formulation of conclusions

Before the publication of the articles and outputs associated with this work, copies, drafts, working papers, and reports were circulated amongst the stakeholders and participants, in order to maintain authenticity as well as to garner a broad scope of accountability, feedback and validation of assumptions and conclusions. It is hoped that the exemplars and patterns provided in the preceding pages create meaningful interpretations and accounts for the readership of social and sustainability scientists, organisational researchers, managers and leaders, and sustainability professionals, whether in training or as experienced practitioners. The objective of this research, after all, was always impact towards the scaling and implementation of sustainability solutions in various global locations.

Ecological impacts

The positive ecological impacts of this research are not directly obvious in the sense that the coresearch team were a significant factor in affecting the overall ambition of the university's environmental sustainability policy. However, it can be reasonably claimed that the work of the author and the Green Office, coupled with the former environment and sustainability advisor at UM, supported the formulation of UM's environmental sustainability policy and its adaptation to more ambitious ends. For example, our efforts, overviewed in *Chapter 9 Section 9.2.2* focussed on, but are not exclusively limited to: E-waste, waste separation and management, general environmental awareness and literacy raising in the student and staff population.