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Interview with Wim Van Hyfte, PhD
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Education for Sustainable Investment

CANDRIAM ACADEMY 
INVESTORS FOR TOMORROW

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Wim Van Hyfte, PhD

*Global Head of ESG
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Candriam Academy has recently welcomed its user number 10,000. What is the secret of your success?

First, we launched our sustainable training platform in 2017 when such learning/educational tools were practically unavailable to most investment professions. We were one of the first. Second, education on sustainability was our primary and only goal. Third, Candriam Academy is free to access for anyone, there are no upgrades for a fee or premium membership for which you have to pay. When you join, you get everything there is.

In fact, when Candriam Academy was launched it was the world's first free-to-access accredited training platform for sustainable and responsible investing. Accreditation means high quality resources for learning but in many countries it also allows our users to gain professional learning and development credits in addition to Candriam Academy certificates.

Why does Candriam supports education?

The financial sector plays a key role in allocating capital to those companies and governments meeting the challenges of a transition to a sustainable and inclusive society. By investing in education among financial professionals, we would like to foster a wider understanding of sustainable finance and of how it can change our society and economies for the better.

How did the idea to create the Academy emerge?

Many years ago now we conducted a survey which revealed that financial intermediaries did not think that they knew enough about ESG funds. Clearly, if an adviser lacks understanding about a product then they are unlikely to recommend it to their clients.

As a pioneering European ESG asset manager, Candriam had a case for concern. When the idea of a free online training portal was suggested by one of our colleagues, it seemed to be the best solution. Not only could it provide the required training to intermediaries without charge but could also serve a bigger objective. It could become not only a source of knowledge but also inspiration for all kinds of investors, as global markets focus more and more on building a sustainable economy.

So in 2017 we launched Candriam Academy, initially with just four modules in English and Italian. While the Academy primary objective is education and, as such, is operationally independent from the asset management business of Candriam, and we do not use any personal user information for our commercial marketing activity, our main wholesale market at the time was Italy and we wanted to offer our clients there an opportunity to meet their training requirements in their language. Today, Candriam Academy speaks also French, German, Spanish and Dutch.

So the Candriam Academy has evolved, and now offers content in six languages. Presumably it has created a truly international appeal?

Candriam Academy's content has grown in leaps and bounds, not only in terms of a wide range of subjects and themes that it covers, but also across different and new formats. That said, we would not have achieved such an excellent result if we only had it in English. Candriam Academy is a true pan-European training platform with followers all over the world, which is what you would expect from a leading European sustainable asset manager.

And how did the content itself evolve?

As those of you who have been with us from the start, Candriam Academy offered four modules when it first launched. They covered definitions to key terms such as corporate social responsibility, green investing, fiduciary responsibility and materiality, explained how sustainable investing evolved. We introduced ESG criteria, looked at SRI labels, at different types of strategies and approaches, and their financial performance. From the start, our courses were rich with examples and case studies referring to real life examples with specific companies, regulators and international organisations.



Then we expanded our main course, which we now call “An Introduction to SRI”, to eight modules. We added topics about measuring sustainable impact, influencing companies and shareholder activism, comparing different types of sustainable funds and included a whole chapter of the evolving concept of fiduciary responsibility.

Candriam Academy also offers thematic modules, after completing which you also get a separate certificate. What is their purpose?

In sustainable investing, there are big themes that emerge every now and then and catch the imagination of governments, companies and investors. We want our users to keep up-to-date with all the latest developments and understand the background of relevant concepts and regulatory initiatives. That is the main objective of these modules. We want our training material to be dynamic, have something new and inspiring every year, and offer a variety of opportunities for continuous professional development.

For example, in August 2020, after the European Commission adopted the Circular Economy Action Plan in May that year, we added a special module on Circular Economy. In March last year, we launched our special module on climate change as the world was preparing for the COP26 conference in Glasgow. Also last year we launched a module on ESG analysis of companies. We thought it was important for investment professionals to know the essential steps in this process, given that there are no industry-wide recognised standards on ESG reporting.



Candriam Academy's website is completely separate from the rest of Candriam. Why?

Because we wanted this to be a purely educational initiative. It is financed by our charitable Candriam Institute for Sustainable Development. We wanted to make sure that all personal data of Candriam Academy users stays entirely separate from our commercial activities. So we had to create a brand new website, with its own architecture.

That said, while Candriam Academy enjoys operational independence from our asset management business, it is the Candriam team of investment managers, ESG analysts and our communications team who create content, chair ESG Talks and improve the way Candriam Academy works.

I must add here that we would have found it difficult to build Candriam Academy, as it is today, without the help of our partners. Some have contributed to content, for instance, and some have helped with certifications.

As the result of all the different types of content and functionality, the website has become increasingly complex over the years, as we added additional narrative, various systems to follow users learning progress and update them by email.

The portal now features many videos, small white papers on different educational topics, as well as the new section "ESG Talks". ESG Talks, which is currently available only in English, is an educational webinar series which looks at some of the most pressing economic, social and environmental issues of our time. For example, the most recent talk we held was about ESG factors surrounding agriculture and food companies.

We also talked about sustainable bonds, the US re-joining global efforts on climate change, active ownership, aligning your portfolio with the Paris Agreement, ESG research integration, regulatory initiatives on ESG and Just Transition from renewable energy.

What's next for Candriam Academy?

The biggest new development on the horizon is the launch of a brand new website for the Academy, with upgraded user experience and capacity. True to its main theme, the new website will be carbon neutral. We are also developing a new topical module, which will be unveiled later this year. So stay tuned in!

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**10,000
members**



5 years

Leading the way in
sustainable educating



**+17,000
hours**

of accredited training

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