# NUS/HEFCE Students' Green Fund

# External Evaluator's End of Fund Report: 'Three Ways of Looking at SGF'

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December 2015

## 'Three Ways of Looking at SGF'

### Introduction

The Students' Green Fund has been an innovative two-year programme of support for student-led change activities in HE (and FE) institutions across England. The SGF was funded with £5m from HEFCE, which was distributed as grants to 26 students' unions to run 25 projects, following a rigorous selection process which required students' unions to lead collaborative bids supported by their whole institution (students, academics, and managers). The Fund requirements could be described as 'rigid yet flexible': projects must be student-led, reaching beyond the usual suspects; they must aim to achieve pro-environmental behaviour changes, and produce measurable outcomes; and they must result in the further embedding of sustainability into every aspect of university life. Beyond this, students' unions had freedom to focus on the changes they most wanted to see, by the means they thought most effective. In many instances, they handed on this devolved control to their whole student body, setting up grant schemes which any student could bid into to run their own change activities, with students themselves choosing what got funded. In essence, SGF has been a two year experiment (a meta-pilot, if you will) in what happens when students lead on sustainability in their own institutions.

As this summary report and the full End of Fund Report demonstrate, the SGF has overdelivered against all its main targets – and has consistently done so from the outset. 120 applications were received from 105 unions (NUS' original target was for 50 applications), each of whom worked up viable plans in collaboration with academic and management staff: many of these plans will have gone on to be realised, and to have delivered benefits – but all of these are beyond the view of the evaluation (we might debate how much of their impacts could be attributed HEFCE's investment to the programme, and the wider question of how much they are part of the programme).

Looking back on the two years' of activity, the obvious realisation is how hard it is to see the whole of the SGF at once. Its activity has been vast and diverse (even just that in the funded projects). Various devices have been designed in to the programme to increase the visibility of its elements: for instance, each project submitted monthly progress reports, which were then encapsulated in more reflective quarterly reports, which were then synthesised in an End of Year One Report, and now an End of Fund Report (guided by a lengthy template from NUS). There have also been five Support Days which served the purpose of helping projects to see each other (aka. network) as much as to receive guidance from the NUS team. The challenge in saying anything about the whole programme (or trying to bring learnings together in a final summary note like this) is that the SGF has many projects (25), each with many nested components (to the point where the majority of projects do not even have a single overarching theme – they are "*patchwork projects*" as Leeds' union describes theirs). Just handling this volume and diversity is hard to do (especially in summary – hence the little icons used in the full Report to make the topic focus of each project quickly visible, but even they simplify by picking the main theme and overlooking the rich overlaps eg. between food and waste (eg. junk food activities), or waste fashion and entrepreneurship (eg. upcycling schemes)). Furthermore, not only is each project nested (with multiple components) but many of them are also 'granted' – ie. including student-led grant schemes. These add more complexity by nesting another set of activities, but they also add emergence: in these cases it only became clear what a project comprised once the nested grant schemes had been set up, the round of grants distributed, and the funded students' projects delivered – often somewhere well into Year Two, with impacts still becoming apparent at time of writing this note.

In short, what you can see of SGF depends on where you are standing, and what you are looking for. Rather than attempt to synthesise or aggregate the impacts of the programme (for reasons which should become apparent), this note will proceed to look at SGF from three different perspectives, each representing an interested party: a funder, a researcher, and a student. Having done that, it will arrive at some closing observations, about the SGF and how best to understand its full value.

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**i)      The Funder's Perspective**

A funder will tend to look at a programme in terms of its effectiveness: has it achieved its objectives, and to what degree has it hit the targets set for it at the outset. This is based on the premise that the funder knows what change is needed, has designed the programme to meet those needs, and if the programme achieves its side of the bargain, the longed-for benefits will flow. These kinds of assumptions underpin all kinds of evaluative endeavours: indeed the funder will often commission an external evaluation to answer these questions authoritatively. In most cases the funder is ultimately concerned about bang for buck: 'what return did I get on my investment?'.

Even based on the outline above, SGF is clearly not that kind of programme (it is nested and granted, and ultimately student-led – control having been devolved – and the NUS acts as managing agent, supporting the funded students' unions as they plan and deliver) and, happily, HEFCE was not that sort of funder. But it is still important to ask these questions as they provide the background (or backbone) to other ways of understanding impact.

The SGF had four main objectives, and beneath them a set of targets; these were written in to NUS' bid to HEFCE, and measuring the programme against them is prerequisite in demonstrating that NUS have made good on the investment from HEFCE. In terms of the targets, it is clear that SGF delivered value for money in the sense that it exceeded all its main commitments (and if these were deemed good value when the programme was 'sold in', HEFCE has got even better value for money as the programme concludes). A cut-down version of the findings on 'reach' data is given here (for the detailed table, see the full Report):

| Fund target | Fund achievement |
|---|---|
| 50,000 students engaged across the funded projects over the two years | At least 121,738 students engaged at some level with SGF project activity |
| 5,000 staff engaged across the funded projects over the two years | At least 7,670 staff engaged at some level with SGF project activity |
| 100% of English higher education students' unions engage with the Fund | At least 130 institutions have engaged with the SGF |
| 125,000 unique page views across the funded projects over the two years | 370,239 unique page views |
| 20,000 social media followers of funded projects over the two years | 21,862 new social media followers |

These data are vital because they give us a fix on the scale of the project (though doubtless not a definitive answer, more 'definitive looking'). An evaluator needs these either if s/he is minded to aggregate benefits which can be measured securely in individual projects, or if s/he is trying to understand better the size of the programme and its boundaries (and eg. concluding that it will be hard to aggregate the inputs and impacts of 120,000 participants).

It is also necessary to know the extent and nature of the activity that all these participants and projects have been engaged in. Given the nested granted and emergent nature of the programme this is a much harder task, but the full Report also includes some aggregated measures of the extent and nature of the activity, highlights of which include:

- The delivery of approximately 1,700 audits of businesses, homes, schools and other organisations;
- The design of 26 websites and social media campaigns (including NUS central efforts) that have received hundreds of thousands of visitors and tens of thousands of followers;

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- The funding of 193 student-led projects;
- The development of 10 student-led social enterprises;
- The embedding of Education for Sustainable Development in formal curricula in 11 institutions;
- The organisation of at least 500 events.

These data bring the scale and diversity of the programme into view (we couldn't say much about it overall without them) but they also keep some things hidden – for instance the nested activity in the student-led grant schemes (another aggregation of the activity within the 193 grant-funded projects would be required here). They also point up the near (or total) impossibility of knowing on a national scale precisely what has happened everywhere: eg. at the *"at least"* 500 events.

Other metrics become even harder to calculate and aggregate – although they are needed if the evaluation is to report against some of its key targets. For instance, the project specification targeted "*an increase of between 10% and 15% in the adoption of pro-environmental behaviours*". At the level of the 25 individual projects, this target appears to have been met – albeit that the data capture required to assess it was found to be extremely laborious for many participants, on whom the responsibility of counting largely fell. There are also reported to be problems with surveying (many universities are clamping down on the number of surveys the student body are exposed to each year – and increasingly so across the life of SGF, such that there are far fewer Year 2 than Baseline or Year 1 surveys, so it is hard to show year on year change). There are also well-founded reservations about the validity of self-reported measures of behaviour (aware of this, using objective measures – eg. smart meter data - became a mini-project in itself for some participants). However, some projects have managed to produce reliable data in certain areas of their activity, which imply that, at least in some places, the behaviour change targets for the student population as a whole have been met, for instance:

- A 12% increase in recycling instead of throwing away (Bedfordshire)
- A 17% increase in recycling in Halls (Bristol)
- A 16% increase in students 'rarely/never' leaving the heating on when they go out, with a reduction of 12% leaving it on daily/weekly (Cumbria)
- One student house which was audited and supported by a student Energy Advocate achieved a reduction of 56% in energy consumption (saving £700 on bills) (Worcester)
- A 12% increase in students buying local produce on a daily/weekly basis (Cumbria)
- A 13% increase in students 'usually/every day' choosing to use sustainable transport (Brighton)

A further technique for aggregating behaviour changes is by profiling the participants and the change in their reported repertoires of behaviour, rather than tracking the uptake of individual behaviours. In SGF, this method was encouraged from the outset by the NUS team, who promoted the use of Defra's Pro-Environmental segmentation model, which classifies people into different subgroups based on their level of engagement with roughly a dozen pro-environmental behaviours. The final Report includes data from six students' unions, who report increases (up to 17%) in the proportion of 'Positive Greens' (the most engaged segment) across the two years of SGF, and decreases (up to 11%) in the proportion of 'Honestly Disengaged' students (the least engaged segment). However, when averaged across the six universities who collected this evidence, the changes are much slighter (a point or two each way). These data are at best a proxy for pro-environmental behaviour change, and they are only available for a minority of projects: but they have the advantage of being pre-aggregated, and thus remove the ongoing obligation for project co-ordinators of striving to measure behaviour all the while as they are trying to encourage positive changes.

Calculating the carbon savings from all these activities and changes could be considered the final piece in the metrical jigsaw; it is certainly required, in that the specification committed to savings of 4,000 $t/CO_2$ across each of the two years of SGF (8,000 tonnes in total). As well as being the final piece in the jigsaw,

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in terms of the monitoring and evaluation asks of participating students' unions, carbon counting could also be seen as the final straw. Some students' unions achieved it, and at time of writing the calculations are still ongoing, as behaviour change data are submitted and validated, then converted into carbon measures (notably with the help of experts – Energize – the team from Worcester students' union). To date, 4,608 tonnes are calculated to have been saved. While this appears to be below target, it is an important figure because it enables the contribution of SGF to the targets for decarbonising the HE sector to be calculated. This in turn would enable HEFCE to calculate a simple 'Return on Investment' ratio for the £5m they invested in SGF in terms of its carbon impact – although to do so would be a simplistic use of RoI methods, when SGF was conceived as cutting carbon but also contributing so much more to student action for sustainability. Quite reasonably, it can be anticipated that there are other cheaper ways of cutting carbon – whatever final total of $CO_2$ savings the Energize team arrives at – and this further underlines the importance of capturing the other value in SGF which falls outside this calculation (which would simply equate £ and $t/CO_2$).

We could also observe that the calculation is likely to be a round estimate at best, given what we don't know about all the nested and granted activity in the programme, and the extent of behaviour change attributable to the programme. Furthermore, some activities will only have reached maturity in terms of carbon impact towards the end of the two years' funding: they have kept on generating impacts beyond the term of the Fund, and of this evaluation. (Meanwhile, other activities have become self-funding and continue to generate carbon savings up to – and beyond –the time of writing; it is interesting to speculate whether these savings should also be captured and attributed to SGF.) Above all, what carbon counting particularly shows is the tension between what the participants need to know, and what the funder wants to measure. Carbon counting can seem a total imposition on participants, unless they happen to be carbon-literate to the point that carbon savings is how they understand their own effectiveness. But as we shall see below, most participants were not in SGF for the carbon.

The attraction of reporting against targets is they provide ostensibly simple and meaningful read-outs of the impact of a programme, which can be conveyed quickly and ostensibly unambiguously through numbers. However they also have some widely-observed side-effects, including that they can distort priorities in the actual delivery of programmes. In SGF, they are particularly inimical because they represent an element of top-down control in a programme which is designed to be student-led. Happily, rather than impose them rigidly, the NUS team chose to be flexible and did not oblige participants to stick to their carbon counting duties above all. Moreover, the targets were concealed beneath the four headline objectives for the Fund, as follows:

> **SGF OBJECTIVES**
> - Initiate a step change in student engagement in sustainability issues
> - Enable students to become meaningful agents for change on sustainability issues
> - Ensure sustainability remains an institutional priority within the sector
> - Put English higher education on the map for its sustainability efforts.

These four objectives represent a succinct statement of what matters to HEFCE and the NUS team, as funders and managers of the programme, respectively. These objectives have also shaped the selection of students' unions to be funded, and guided the approaches adopted – differently – in each of the participating universities. Indeed, they could almost be read as principles for how student-led change for sustainability should be approached in UK HEIs. As such though they are extremely hard to measure, and truly impossible to aggregate (What measures would we use? Would they be in numbers, words, or something else? And if the last two, how would we 'add' them up across the whole programme?). Looking at the end of fund reports from each participating union – even their 2pp. summary reports – it

is clear that every union has contributed to the achievement of every objective (to differing degrees and in different ways). But at aggregate, whole-Fund, level it is hard to bring together that evidence: the full Report runs through highlights of the evidence on each, but it only does so by showing us straight through to the evidence from selected projects. Often this evidence is described as 'anecdotal', meaning it is qualitative, and based on individual (hence subjective, but also not aggregated) views of impact which have no known relationship to the total set of possible views on the matter (hence are not 'representative'). However, some verbatims are more meaningful than others – and one quotation from a senior leader interviewed by the NUS team (notably not by participants themselves) is indicative of the qualitative 'reach' of the programme:

*"There is no other formal project connecting the university, union and external bodies. It has illustrated that the university can work with the students' union, and illustrates that students can take responsibility and are interested in change." **Institutional Leader, Greenwich***

The quotation is more of a testimonial, endorsing SGF wholeheartedly and providing a single instance of how it has delivered (possibly over-delivered, but that's harder to say in qualitative terms) against all its objectives. Further indicative evidence of the programme's all-round success is available in the number and range of awards SGF has gained, whether at whole-programme or individual project level. Again these are detailed in the full Report, but include eg. local press and community awards, national Soil Association and Royal Horticultural Society awards, academic and research awards for best papers and projects, and international recognition through UNESCO work on ESD, and Exeter's Students' Green Unit's win at the International Sustainable Campus Network awards. Such awards provide indicative evidence of the value of the programme, aggregated through the judgments of all the individuals, panels and judging criteria which hand out the awards (a little like the way the Defra segmentation aggregates the behaviour changes made within the people who make them). In the case of the fourth SGF objective – building UK leadership in sustainability in HE – the international awards are almost a direct measure of impact.

Across both objectives and targets then, the Students' Green Fund presents a number of measurement challenges to funders and their evaluation teams, over and above the sheer scale and complexity of the programme. For measurement versus objectives and targets to be meaningful, all these challenges need to be accounted for:

- Reliance on self-reported measures of behaviour – a problem compounded by increasing restrictions on surveying the whole student body.
- Where objective data are available, that these are collected consistently and with minimum effort (especially relevant to energy audits: note for instance Energize Worcester's move to install smart meters and collect the data).
- The question of attribution (for instance, if carbon savings arise from extending Student Switch Off to new audiences, how much of the impact accrues to SGF; or how many of the total hits on all project webpages arise from SGF, or are from passing traffic?).
- Quantifying inputs – if we were to calculate Return on Investment, we would need to know the size of the investment and by whom. HEFCE's £5m could be regarded not as the total cost, but as simply seed funding (or even a sunk cost): it is probably dwarfed by the time costs put in by the 120,000 participants, the vast majority of whom (barring a few paid officers and interns) were volunteers, and whose activity ultimately achieved the impacts which the programme pursued. Add to this the nested granted and emergent nature of the activities in the programme – the End of Year One Report describes the student-led grant schemes as "*an unknown quantity*" – and it becomes increasingly impossible to quantify the resource inputs into the programme.
- Benefits over time: it is a truism that change takes time, on which basis the two-year lifetime of the Fund always looked too short to many in terms of producing measurable outcomes. And so it proved, as one Union commented: "*…two years is a very short time to implement and run a new project. By*

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*Term 1 in Year 2 the team were just getting into the swing of things and then had to start worrying about legacy funding and what was going to happen next"* (Bristol). The full Report concludes that "*much of the impact that stems from SGF is still to come".* Aspects of legacy are discussed in the Conclusions below, but it is worth noting that one of the criteria for project selection was that elements of SGF activity should become self-funding and continue beyond the HEFCE funding term: where students' unions have achieved this, the benefits reported in the End of Fund Report are only the beginning.

### ii)   The Researcher's Perspective

When addressing a programme like SGF, the researcher will be keen to establish what change happened, and how it came about. In the specific context of SGF, this 'external evaluator' is keen to know what behaviour changes happened (because, as already mentioned, aiming for behaviour change was a selection criterion, and a target) and how they happened.

Anticipating those questions, this researcher encouraged participating students' unions to make use of theory from the outset: through reference to theoretical concepts, learnings could be taken from specific projects, and potentially translated to related projects (in this way theory allows practitioners to bridge between contexts). Two particular ways of thinking were introduced to all the participating students' unions (eg. at the first NUS Support Day): the ISM tool for influencing behaviours (see Figure below – and also the full Report p.64ff.), which arranges the factors and influences on behaviour into three domains: the Individual, the Social and the Material.

**Figure: The ISM Tool (Darnton & Evans 2013[1])**
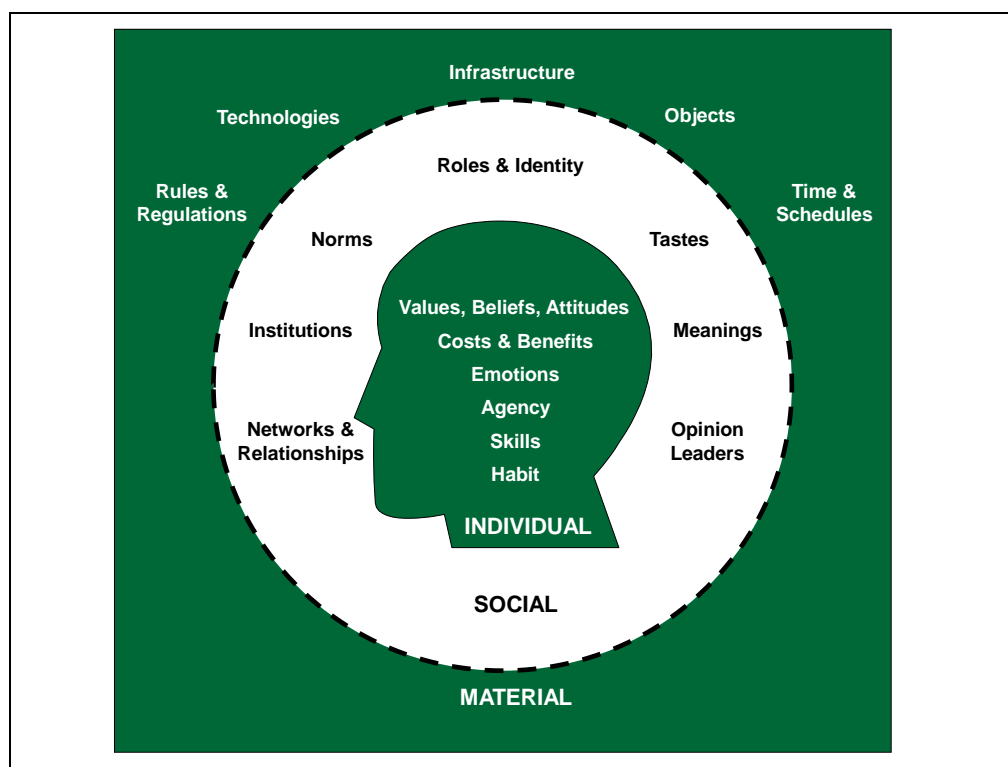


[1] Darnton, A and Horne, J (2013). I*nfluencing Behaviours – Moving Beyond the Individual: A User Guide to the ISM Tool*. The Scottish Government

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A second conceptual framework was provided by the theory of ESD1 and ESD2 (also see the full Report p.70) which shows how both the practising of specific sustainability skills and the acquisition of critical thinking are vital in undertaking Education for Sustainable Development – and in turn can underpin diverse activities stretching across a spectrum from incremental (ESD1) to transformational (ESD2) approaches to change.  At various reporting points, students' unions were also asked to specify their theory (or theories) of change; in the majority of cases these were not explicit, referenced theories, but informal mental models and 'theories in use'.  The ISM Tool in particular proved useful in helping participants think theoretically, and understand the ways in which what they were doing worked – so making change visible, at the project level at least (a task continued in aggregate in the full Report).

The SGF programme was designed to produce two kinds of behaviour change impact, described in the project specification as "*impact on the attitudes and behaviours of participants*" (ie. direct impact) and "*wider impact (eg. skills and personal development)*".  The implication is that the direct impact is the more important, and the more clearly attributable to programme, while the 'wider' impacts are somehow extra, and less clearly linked to the programme activity.  However, reading the findings from students' unions' End of Fund reports through the lens of theory suggests that the direct benefits are the less transformational, and that they are dwarfed in value by the indirect benefits – as this note will explore from here on.

The direct impacts are the behaviour changes in the different pro-environmental domains (energy, water, waste etc) which we have touched on above under the Funder's perspective.  They flow from activities like Student Switch Off, Green Impact and associated events[2].  In ESD1/ESD2 terms, these are ESD1 interventions, in which the required behaviour changes are known and pre-determined, and the target audience's role is to take up and repeat the behaviours.  Where the approach involves extending or refining existing schemes (such as SSO, GI), the means of intervening are also prescribed.  In terms of the continuum of change, these approaches to behaviour change are positioned on the incremental end; if they are achieved across large populations, we will together take small steps towards sustainability.  They work within the existing structures and systems, rather than rearranging them, and they accordingly put the onus on individuals to change.  In this way they can be characterised as change by winning hearts and minds: meeting people where they are at and encouraging them to move to a new place, behaviourally (often with the added incentive of free ice cream or other consumables, not through sustainable benefits per se).  To help both project leaders and participating audiences, workbooks and 'how to' guides are often produced to lead people to the desired outcomes.  There is also informal tuition and the sharing of best practice.  It is notable that, although in ISM terms, these activities focus on Individual-level factors and influences, in practice many of the effective engagement techniques are Social: there is a very useful summary list of practical learnings on engaging audiences in the full Report.

By contrast, the activities that generate the 'wider' indirect effects tend to start from the Material end of the ISM spectrum – whilst also making use of the Social context.  These activities tend to result in the more transformational changes, in the sense that they generate behaviour (and other) changes which are unforeseen, but result from changing the material and social context within which individuals operate.  The full Report gives numerous examples, mapped onto the ISM model, but it is worth highlighting some of the more transformational activities here, arranged against key ISM factors, to understand better the range of approaches and their impacts:

| **Infrastructure** | - Many of the projects (at top level, or thorough nested projects and grant schemes) have involved the creation of **growing spaces**, on and off campus, for student staff and community users.  Once the spaces have been obtained and developed, they can keep generating benefits (produce; wellbeing) for as long as people volunteer their time and effort.  A number |
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[2] For more information on these long-standing NUS programmes, see www.green-impact.org.uk and www.studentswitchoff.org

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| | of projects are linking the growing spaces to ESD in the formal curriculum activities, and to entrepreneurship (processing or selling produce). It is worth mentioning some instances (notably, Newcastle) where the spaces are also used as 'green classrooms' for outdoor education activities with the local community (and link schools)<br>- Bradford Union's **Cycling 4 All** project has focussed on infrastructure (both hard and soft) to change norms around cycling at Bradford University and beyond. They have identified a coast to coast cycle route (which they then cycled as a collective of disabled and non-disabled students), they have added electronic bikes to the local cycle hire scheme thus increasing accessibility across the community, and they are leading a consortium to develop a fully adaptable pedal cycle for disabled riders.<br>- **The Hive Café** at Roehampton is the leading (but not the only) example of infrastructural work to develop a market in grow-your-own produce. The Hive Café was to have been a repurposed room on the existing campus, but when the project team were gazumped, they took the chance to build a new (used) café from reclaimed materials, on a prominent part of the site. The Café has been a roaring success: in a campus survey, it is students' and staff's number one place to eat on campus, and it is already self-funding. Plans are in place to expand it, with the aim of continuing to fund the whole portfolio of 'Growhampton' activity beyond the SGF grant. |
| **Institutions** | - A number of the funded projects have developed **hubs**, to act as the focal point as well as the control centre for their activities. In some cases these are physical spaces and bits of infrastructure: Roehamptons' Hive Café serves this purpose, and two students' unions have notably created mobile hubs (Birmingham City; Bedfordshire) to support outreach and community activities, and to bring more remote campuses into the centre of the SGF programmes. In such cases the Hub is as important for its institutional qualities – it effectively becomes a new point on the campus map, and a space for people to come together and plan activities – as it is as a piece of concrete (or freight container, in the Hive's case). Exeter's Student Green Unit makes this virtual aspect apparent – the Unit acts as a decision making body to co-ordinate SGF activities, and in the case of Exeter, to bring students and academic staff together: the Exeter approach to ESD involves promoting the leading sustainability work going on in formal courses, and enacting it as practical projects around the campus and the wider community.<br>- In **Green Impact for Student Housing (GISH)**, Sheffield Students' Union have taken an existing and proven initiative – the NUS' Green Impact – and adapted it for delivery in private student accommodation. Students have been taken on as interns to manage the scheme and deliver training to student householders in how to audit and reduce their energy use, with the aid of a workbook and forty behavioural tips. The scheme also targets students' landlords, who are brought into the scheme by students themselves, and through a partnership with the local student lettings agency propertywithUS. There is also a competition element, with top-saving students and landlords both winning energy saving prizes. In ISM terminology, GISH appears as an institution because it involves collective action among a group of related actors with a common interest, congregated around a set of formal and informal 'rules' for appropriate conduct. If it continues for a sufficient time, it may take on the qualities of |

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| | - a more recognised institution, like the Green Impact programme it has built upon.<br>- Different student unions' were selected to join the programme from different starting points – context which again makes comparisons and aggregation problematic in the final analysis. **Wigan & Leigh College** was perhaps the least advanced, certainly in terms of student empowerment, as it did not have a functioning students' union when it applied to the Fund.  Across the two years of SGF, it has constructed a new union, built on the principles of sustainability and inclusion.  As commented earlier in relation to programme timescales, at Wigan & Leigh, SGF is just at the beginning of generating benefits, many of which are as yet emergent. |
| Rules and Regulations | - All participating students' unions have produced evidence of how they are now more fully included in the **decision making processes** of their universities.  Collaboration between 'common rooms' was prerequisite for applications to the Fund, but across the two years, most students' unions now find they have a seat at the table when significant decisions about the student body, the campus, and sometimes even the curriculum are taken (examples include Sheffield University where the SGF team are drafting a new Sustainability Strategy for the University, and UCLan, where the Union now has input into the whole University Strategy).<br>- The profusion of **student-led grant schemes** brought with them the need to generate new processes for decision making, funding, and reporting, within the student body.  These schemes have effectively formalised debates among engaged students about what constitutes worthwhile activity, and how that can be proven effective.  City University's Green Dragons scheme provides a particularly clear-cut case: here a new electronic interface was created so that students could vote on the funding applications.  It also became a device for leveraging in-kind resources (and drawing in new volunteers) as each voter had to pledge practical support for the proposals they were backing.  The online platform could clearly have applications beyond its initial context.<br>- 11 of the funded projects took action to increase the presence of **Education for Sustainable Development** in the formal curriculum.  In some cases they created standalone teaching modules for staff (Cumbria); in many others they sought to make links between their project work and particular subject areas, and to write sustainability themes into formal curricula of specific courses (the University of Bristol Union is a leading example, starting from an advanced position, but using SGF to make strategic inroads into the formal curriculum and university strategy).  Writing SD into university policy and practice is not directly going to produce behaviour change of the sort that leads to short-term carbon savings – although it does deliver on the SGF objective of "ensuring sustainability remains an institutional priority".  In the words of one union who pursued this agenda, action has involved both "*behavioural and procedural change*" (Exeter). |

All of the above examples contribute to transformational change because they are not simply targeting individuals' behaviour to produce short-term impacts.  Seen from this perspective, the "*wider impacts*" are more significant than the direct behaviour changes.  Indeed the full Report describes the range of behaviour changes it evidences in each domain as the "*first steps*" to wider change, recognising that ultimately it is system change that is required.  Behaviour change can lead to system change (for instance,

as students are encouraged to grow their own, the produce is harvested and processed, and new businesses are developed).  But changes at the social and material level may represent a shorter cut to system change, as illustrated by a few final examples:

- Nested within Leeds University's "*patchwork project*" the Green Exchange, the Real Junk Food Project is a 'pay as you feel' café open to the community, and serving meals made from surplus ingredients diverted from landfill.  This has been a massive success, and one Leeds graduate has gone on to set up a spin-off project in his hometown of Bristol, while other comparable businesses exist elsewhere.  The Real Junk Food Project has received widespread media coverage, and is contributing to change in the food system, and ways of eating out, in the UK.

- Staffordshire Greenpad project combines a focus on infrastructure - creating sustainable, good quality student accommodation - with direct behaviour change work to teach students how to live sustainably in their homes.  In the process they are also changing the local students lettings market: listings through the current Studentpad agency are now drawn up by Greenpad, with promotion and pricing tiered according to the sustainable attributes of the property.  The service is increasingly accessible to the community, with a tenant pack available to everyone online.  The Greenpad model is changing the local lettings market, and can be replicated in other localities.

- One of the successes of Falmouth and Exeter's Green Living Project has been the creation of a new currency for local business with environmental and ethical credentials.  The FXU New Currency (FXUNC) is paid out to students and staff who volunteer in GLP activities, which they can then spend in local businesses.  £14,458 has been paid out to date (the 'Waster' compost collection volunteers have earned the most).  The Union has now joined the Guild of Independent Currencies to explore ways to make local currency for Falmouth a reality, post-NUS funding, and there are on-going discussions with local businesses to continue and expand the scheme.

These kinds of innovative and integrated activities have come about because of the student-led nature of the Fund: through starting with a clean sheet, and working in collaboration with many local partners on and off campus.  But such innovations are not without risk, and there are also numerous examples of failed and aborted activities across the funded unions – though it is notable that these are easily lost when the programme is looked at in aggregate (and only impacts, not learnings, are counted).  Each project has learnings to share from what didn't work well, but particular examples drawn from their full End of Fund reports include Bristol's attempts to adapt Green Impact for use in private rented accommodation, Liverpool's considerable attempts to set up a loan scheme (rather than a grant fund) for student business plans (it transpires students are unwilling to take on more debt – a finding not unique to Liverpool), and Lancaster's travails running energy competitions in halls (building on Student Switch Off).  However, these less successful activities are clearly of great value to the students' unions who experienced them, as they have delivered considerable learning.  One of the realities of a programme which devolves control to actors on the ground ('change agents') is that it is devolving the power to fail as well as the power to succeed – and this is one of the obvious senses in which SGF can be understood as an experiment in what happens when students lead on sustainability.  The Lancaster team, mentioned for their struggles with energy competitions but also notable for their successes in pioneering an edible campus concept (where growing food is central to campus life – including campus design) have highlighted the capacity of the programme to allow for, and even value, failure as one of SGF's outstanding attributes:

*"The student staff leading this project have been the energy ensuring it has been the successful project it has been. Related to this is the ownership that any student has the opportunity to take. This and the space to let students fail are what we are most proud of achieving over the last two years."* **Project leader, Lancaster**

### iii)    The Student's Perspective

The verbatim from a Lancaster project leader above underlines the distance between what funders tend to look for and what participants value. While success measures can reveal the scale and impacts of a programme, they make no assessment of the value of those outcomes (in fact, the question of value is not usually raised). To understand value we need to get close to the participants, and see the activity from their point of view. In this way detailed achievements and learnings are revealed which get lost (or were never visible) at whole programme level, and at the same time we can explore why those achievements and learnings are important to the people who revealed them.

Like some of the measurements attempted in the Funder's section (eg. behaviour change), adopting the participant's perspective on the Students' Green Fund is easier said than done. Again, this flows from the sheer scale and complexity of the programme. The metrics report that there are over 120,000 people involved, spanning students of all kinds, staff in many roles, and diverse community members – each having their own unique relationships with the programme and its parts. The full Report includes a good spread of these voices; for example, there is extensive testimony from HEI staff about the ways in which SGF has transformed the relationship between the university and the union – including by challenging assumptions about the student body held by the staff (see for example the verbatim from a Greenwich staff member on p6 above). The research tells of benefits to students and staff alike, and most tellingly, to both at once:

*The SGF project has moved student union activity to a new level, raising the level and profile of student action and also transformed the union. The achievements of our students through SGF support are now one of big stories university leaders tell. It has been instrumental in revolutionizing understanding of what our students can achieve.* **Institutional Leader, University of Bristol**

The overarching objectives of the Students' Green Fund focus on increasing student engagement, thought staff at all levels feature in subsidiary targets. For the purposes of this summary note, we will focus on the priority audience of students – the most numerous of all the actors in the programme. We have already looked at the behaviour changes undertaken by them; to get a picture of the all-round impact of the programme, we also need to consider the benefits of the programme to them.

In so far as it is a question pursued in the monitoring and evaluation on SGF, qualitative evidence from across the 25 projects reveals that each individual student has their own reasons for participating, and has experienced their own set of benefits (to mix perspectives, what we might call their 'return on investment'). The overwhelming motivation seems to be to make a difference: as one Institutional leader commented, SGF has shown that "*students are interested in change*". SGF explicitly calls on students to lead, to try things out, and go with what works. In so doing they also accumulate experience and lifeskills, which both directly and indirectly make them more employable, and better equipped for life in the wider world. Students want this, and pursue this through SGF, in a way which is an extension of (not in tension with) the higher education they are undergoing. And if their efforts are successful, their universities will adapt their all-round provision and leave students better able to handle the emerging challenges of the twenty-first century.

The evidence on what students personally get from the programme, and how they value it, is mostly found in qualitative findings, including verbatims like the Lancaster Union team leader's above. Each is not representative of any larger population, though the examples brought together below exemplify the wider range of responses, where that evidence is provided by projects.

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- **Agency**
All the funded projects explicitly aimed to create a cohort of change agents, in response to the NUS' second headline objective for the SGF to "*enable students to become meaningful agents for change on sustainability*".  Some unions tackled this directly by setting up 'change academies'; Brighton and Liverpool are good examples but UCLan's 'Stand Up Stand Out' academy was the most prominent, running half day training sessions on "*giving you the skills to lead*".  However, all project activities provide opportunities for participants to try things, succeed, and thereby develop a sense of 'personal mastery', which appears in behavioural theory as the source of agency (the sense that you can attempt something, achieve it and gain the benefits – which then encourages you to go on and attempt the next thing).
*"The greatest impact that I've seen through the H4C project is the increased confidence in the students that I've worked with. Many are very shy initially when they arrive at the growing space or won't even approach you at an event. I witness big changes in student's behaviour not only with myself but also with other students and staff. They also start to work under their own initiative and stop asking all of the time."*
***Leicester***

- **Lifeskills**
Many of the projects report on personal benefits in terms of increased 'lifeskills' for participants – and indeed some students also use the phrase themselves.  Lifeskills are more specific than agency: more ESD1, in the sense of skills that can be practised and applied later in 'live' contexts, and in this sense lifeskills can include some of the behaviour changes which are encouraged in the more incremental interventions.  Students especially value these skills as they appear to be a large part of what one goes to university for in the first place: what we might call 'know how' (as well as the 'know what' which is more formally taught).  Almost at the same time as they are practising the skills, students report the sense those skills will be applicable outside university.
*"It gave me a skill set and exposure to people and places that have had an absolutely tremendous impact on my life."* ***Student project leader, Leeds***
*"I've also gained more skills. And I've learned more around how I could be more environmentally friendly…Yeah, I'm more open minded around sustainability in home, and in my classroom. Instead of chucking anything in any bin, I actually look if it's recyclable and I turn the lights off more. And I vote! Basically, everything I do now is around the different lessons I've learned by being involved with the Students' Union."* ***Student participant, Wigan***

- **Employability**
Yet more specific are sets of skills which are deemed directly transferable to a workplace or career.  Some of these are highly specific and some more generic: lifeskills for the workplace, in a way.  The specific skills often arise in relation to the social enterprises and new institutions that have been created through SGF, and the training and skills needed to run them. Energy auditing would be the prime example here, as it creates and then fills professional roles; one of the Energize auditors notably commented that it has provided "*the most meaningful job I ever had at my age*".  There are other cases of student participants who have effectively created their own careers to move into after they leave university: the Leeds Junk Food Project has already been cited (with its spin-off business in Bristol) and Liverpool's rooftop aquaculture scheme is also becoming a career for its co-ordinator.  Such examples of direct (yet 'wider') impacts on students' lifecourses are ubiquitous in the evidence at local project level.
*"I am currently about to start work as a Graduate Category Buyer at a national food distributor which is directly linked to my role in the project. I was able to discuss in length during the interview project the pitfalls and obstacles we faced in the project…, as well as the successes."* **S*tudent - Sheffield on a Plate***

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- **Health and Wellbeing**
Many of the first-person verbatims present a picture of the stress and pressure under which students operate – perhaps in part because of the need to become employable quickly after university (also apparent in the aversion to incurring more debt than they are already obliged to carry, as mentioned above). Such evidence speaks strongly to the capacity of SGF activities to counterbalance that stress, and make space to feel better about the world. The emphasis on personal wellbeing ties in with efforts at policy level to reconfigure sustainability as the pursuit of alternative prosperity, as seen through the happiness index. But from the perspective of participants, feeling well goes hand in hand with doing good; the food projects in particular seem to reconnect people, mentally and physically, with the earth. Mention should also be made of those few activities which specifically have health goals in mind – most obviously Bradford's Cycling 4 All, which has shown the synergies between work on sustainability, social inclusion, and lower environmental impacts.
*"I think it's a very peaceful place, because otherwise the university's quite hectic and frantic; there's a lot of drinking and stuff, and studying as well … it's kind of nice just to completely forget about something when you're trimming a hedge or something."* **Lancaster student**
*"GLP has provided me with a place to relax and a group of like-minded people to talk to when the stresses of my course have got me down, by giving me a feeling of belonging to a community. I have learnt many transferable skills, such as communication, customer service, team work and leadership."* (FXU Student)
*"I want to thank the Cycling 4 All team for giving me the chance to be good at something and for making me feel welcome. So many groups out there don't consider disabled people but the experience I've had on the coast to coast has changed me. I'm now a cyclist. When doing the coast to coast for the first time since I have been in the chair I have been truly happy".* **Bradford, wheelchair user, mental health issues**

- **Socialising**
It is apparent that some of the qualitative evidence presented here is gathered from those close to the centre of the programme – for instance those who have led activities in their own unions. Their motivations appear close to those of the NUS team who designed the programme: a hunger for change, and for the opportunity to make a difference. However, an effective means of reaching the less engaged students who were the main target audience for the whole programme has been to offer them immediate benefits in the form of entertainment (eg. competitions with ice cream for prizes). Across all student participants, there is a strong sense of the programme as fun; the easiest way to make those benefits visible is through photos and film, and the selected pictures in the full Report are testament to that.
*"This is the best job in the world. I don't think I'll ever have such fun as I've had doing this."* **Student staff, Bradford**

Continuing the theme of socialised activity in SGF, benefits accruing to individuals as groups (not as individual agents, who may even go on to become competitors in the job market) are also apparent.

- **Inclusion**
One of the selection criteria for the Fund was that projects should be designed to reach beyond the 'usual suspects'. At the outset, the NUS team conceived of this as meaning less green students, but it became apparent (eg. through discussion at Support Days) that unions themselves were also interested in reaching those subgroups who don't tend to engage with the union. These two goals became integrated, and the SGF projects have delivered countless wins-wins in terms of reaching these audiences. While this was an explicit objective for most projects, the capacity of green activities to engage diverse audiences is remarkable: the key seems to be providing a meaningful context in which to socialise – as well as an easier context in which to mix for students with English as a foreign language. An additional, and less foreseen, attraction of these activities for many participants is that they are alcohol-free (a learning that links SGF to another current NUS programme, Alcohol Impact).

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Alcohol, students' unions and student life have been very strongly linked (even locked in) and SGF has shown how the sustainability agenda offers new configurations.

*"The project has been successful in engaging hard-to-reach groups that the SU has traditionally struggled with (e.g. international and postgraduate students). The most significant and rewarding impact of the project has been the chance to see students develop confidence and pride in themselves and their achievements."* **Bristol**

*"The Edible Campus has had huge international appeal – wearing wellies doesn't need language skills."* **Lancaster**

- **Cohesion**

    This final benefit brings us back to the initial benefit of increased agency: cohesion is apparent in the way participants talk about feeling empowered to go forward and make the changes they want. This is not just an individualised sense of agency (that they personally are change agents) but a collective one (that they are one of a group, or even cohort, of change agents). While this sense of movement is apparent to many participants at many levels of the programme, it also comes to the fore whenever the funded unions' project leaders come together locally or nationally (ie. a further benefit of networking). For participants, seeing themselves as part of a bigger group of people moving towards a shared goal appears to have an exponential value: they become more than the sum of their parts.

    *"I like these kinds of grass roots projects, and being part of something that will just keep growing. It feels like there are no limits… It's really exciting to be part of a movement"* **Student Volunteer, Lancaster**

The benefits experienced by participants reported above are based on individual testimony; however, the themes resonate repeatedly across the responses of so many of the participants presented in the final reports. The benefits are not unique to SGF – they can be found in all kinds of self-directed activity, especially voluntary work at community level – but the way in which the Fund was designed and subsequently delivered seems to have magnified these effects. It is by being student-led, socialised and networked that these benefits are achieved, and in turn the open-endedness of the Fund has enabled participants to try out different activities, and play different roles, and see what they think is worth keeping. Looked at from the participants' perspective, the process of trying and learning is as valuable as the outcomes their activities achieve.

## Conclusions

The Students' Green Fund is hard to see. The main learning for this 'external evaluator' from working closely with the Fund throughout its lifetime is that you have to adopt multiple perspectives if you wish to build as full as possible a picture of its value (effectively evaluating it from one perspective before moving on to 're-value' it from the next). The different views from each perspective, and the 'values' attached to them, can be summarised as follows:

| [viewer] | [lens] | [what is valued] | [currency] |
|----------|--------|------------------|------------|
| Funder | Return on Investment | Big Numbers, vs. Targets | £, $CO_2$ |
| Researcher | Individual, Social, Material | System Change | Theory, Emergence |
| Participant | People (like me) | Personal Transformation | Experience, Wellbeing |

Having said that all three perspectives are needed, SGF as a social phenomenon (or 'movement') in which decision making is devolved to the grassroots, requires that one gets close to participants in order to be able to see the detail, and therefore establish the full value. At the final Support Day in April 2015, the original HEFCE champion of the Fund, Steve Egan, advised *"I'm not sure you'll see the benefits without visiting*

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*the projects*"[3]. For readers of this summary note, the best equivalent would be to read the full End of Fund reports from each of the 25 projects (while the 2pp. summaries are available online).

Getting close to the actors in a system is the best way to reveal its full value. But the evidence at participant level is hard to aggregate, and in trying to do so the depth, diversity, and ultimately some of the value gets lost. In a social movement, especially one where the participants are volunteers, each actor is constantly making personal 'evaluations' about where best to put their effort (in funder-speak, invest their resources). Researchers can reconstruct these implicit calculations later, although it would be even better if the participants themselves could come together during the process, socialise and come to some agreement on the value of what they have done (the sorts of processes that were squeezed by time pressures in the SGF's short duration, but doubtless took place at least in each students' union as they prepared their End of Fund reports). Such a way of working would be a natural extension of the 'learning through doing' approaches adopted across SGF, and would likely increase the effectiveness and value of the activities as they are being designed and delivered.

These recommendations correspond to the nature of SGF as a student-led programme. If the research is to be true to its programme, the evaluation should concentrate on the value which is perceived by those who take part in, but also effectively own the programme. As such, the actors are at least as much the programme owners as the funders, and the evaluation should answer to them above all. This doesn't mean that the headline metrics, performance against targets, and reach data are not important – without them for instance we have no sense of scale, and no way to situate specific findings in the context of the whole programme – but it does mean that the relative importance attached to the different perspectives should be rebalanced, or even inverted. That would certainly have the practical benefit of making monitoring and evaluation feel less burdensome on participants. Instead of being something done to get the money, this kind of socialised re-valuation would be something done to maximise the value participants get from the programme. As the leader of the Lancaster Union team commented at the final Support Day: "*We were keen to evaluate what it was that was important to evaluate, and not just count how many carrots came out of the ground*". (And in this verbatim is also a riposte to those early critics who said the SGF was just paying students to grow vegetables[4].)

This final note on the Students' Green Fund demonstrates how, on every level, it has overdelivered on its objectives: whether in sheer numbers, in the value received by all kinds of participants, or in its potential to transform universities and the lives that come into contact with them. Nor should this be seen as the final word on SGF, as it will keep working, through deliberate efforts to build a legacy, through the activities that have become self-funding, and through the infrastructural and institutional changes which new cohorts of volunteers will continue to work with. By allowing students to lead, to work together, and to innovate, SGF has set in place changes which will keep developing, and generating emergent outcomes. Prospective funders would do well to learn lessons from the approach HEFCE and the NUS have taken to running a 'programme' which has enabled student-led action on sustainability, and unlocked countless investments of students' own time and effort which dwarf the funds originally injected by the ostensible 'owner'. Together, HEFCE and NUS have unleashed a movement, rather than deliver a set of interventions, and in so doing the money they have invested has gone many times further than they alone could have managed (in both senses of the word). Ultimately, the Students' Green Fund has brought about – and will continue to bring about - change in how everyone who has been involved in the Fund

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[3] For the record, Steve Egan made full-day visits to seven projects. It is also interesting to note his observations on the five main achievements of the SGF as a whole (which belie the orthodox concerns of a funder):
*i) Pride (in ourselves) ii) Moral Purpose (how we can live together) iii) New Relationships (across and beyond HE) iv) National Achievements (ie. whole programme impacts eg. reach, $CO_2$ saved) v) Viable businesses (SD can be self-funding and competitive in the marketplace: is not a cost)*

[4] See eg. the comments of MP Christopher Pincher, reported at http://www.trendingcentral.com/outrage-as-british-taxpayer-funds-student-vegetable-growing-project/

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acts and understands what they do: creating sustainable universities with strong and inclusive unions, working with and for their communities, to build a better future.