

# THE LITTLE BOOK OF GREEN NUDGES



**40 NUDGES  
TO SPARK  
SUSTAINABLE  
BEHAVIOUR ON  
CAMPUS**

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# FOREWORD

Students around the world want the places in which they study to reflect their values. Increasingly, that means taking a firmer stand on environmental issues and the climate crisis.

We have seen this in a recent National Union of Students survey that found 86 per cent of first-year students in the UK want their higher education institutions to actively incorporate and promote sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> This was further reinforced in a Princeton Review survey that found two-thirds of student

applicants (or their parents) would like to take a college or university's commitment to the environment into consideration when choosing where to study.<sup>2</sup> Calls for divestment from fossil fuels are showing how students are pushing their universities to make major changes to address the climate crisis. And this drumbeat calling for action is only getting louder.

Change is clearly needed, but change doesn't have to mean radical upheaval per se.

Behavioural science shows that a simple “nudge” towards everyday greener decisions is a powerful spur to environmental action for students and other campus community members. Techniques such as gentle persuasion, changing the framing of choices, resetting default options or harnessing social influence can all lead towards sustainable conduct and an eco-friendly campus.

Now is the perfect time for trying green nudges, as higher education institutions are redesigning systems and routines in the wake of the emergence of COVID-19. This is a timely moment when students and staff can be encouraged to consider new behaviours and higher education leaders can consider how to build back better.

Nudges can not only be effective, but also are often cost-effective and time-efficient. They focus on new behaviour, not new equipment, and can succeed by shifting existing systems and processes rather than creating new ones. Nudges that save energy and resources help save the planet, but they also save money for universities and students.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) is now embracing nudging as a strategy to help meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and protect the global environment, with support from the Behavioural Insights Team. We can see that when we nudge people away



from overconsumption and waste, and towards energy efficiency and lower-impact lifestyles, we are playing a part in fighting climate change as well as preserving the natural world in which we live and on which we rely.

Nudges are not the only tool we have – and shouldn't be used at the expense of strong policy and regulation – but they are an important part of the solution.

A key tenet of a successful nudge is the timing of the intervention. When better to intervene than during students' formative years on campus? Higher education institutions are the incubators of our future entrepreneurs, decision-makers and trend-setters, and of their increasing consumer power. Nudges on campus are particularly powerful because it is here that students – often away from home for the first time and able to find themselves – are forming new routines and new identities. We hope that sustainable habits and environmentally conscious behaviours that are developed during this period can last a lifetime.

This little book shares inspiring, evidence-based examples of nudges, many of which have been proven to work on university and college campuses. But more importantly, it provides the practical information needed to create and test new nudges, tailored to different and specific campus communities.

Whether student or staff, in Africa, Asia, the Americas or anywhere else, if you want to create positive change on campus, this book is for you. We hope it will inspire, challenge and influence, and its ideas and the experiences it triggers will be shared far and wide.

The potential to make our universities and our societies greener is enormous, and we don't have time to waste. A small nudge can go a long way.



**Inger Andersen**  
Executive Director  
UNEP



**David Halpern**  
Chief Executive  
Behavioural Insights Team

## JOIN UNEP IN MAKING AN IMPACT ON CAMPUSES THROUGH NUDGING

The higher education community has unique opportunities to influence the citizens of tomorrow and to test nudges in real-world laboratories.

“The Little Book of Green Nudges” offers a practical framework and 40 nudges that can be adopted by colleges and universities, from the small-scale to the large, depending on your resources and context. By embracing this approach, leaders and activists on campus can facilitate more sustainable decisions and help reduce the approximately 75 per cent of personal emissions that come from what we eat, how we travel and the homes we live in.<sup>3</sup> This book does not contain all the answers on how best to change behaviour in every circumstance. Nudging projects will play

out differently in different parts of the world, on different types of campuses, and among different genders and cultural groups. But everyone can learn from insights gained along the way.

This book contains a wealth of ideas and tips, but it's only a starting point. UNEP needs you to take this initiative to the next level. Many colleges, universities and other higher education institutions across the globe have already jumped on board to contribute ideas, test nudges, share experiences and learn from others. Together we can make nudging more successful and have a real impact.

We hope you and your institution will join us! Please visit [unep.org/nudges](https://unep.org/nudges).

# WHAT ARE GREEN NUDGES?

There are many different approaches to behaviour change, from enforcing regulation to providing information. In this little book, we focus on nudges: positive and gentle persuasion to encourage sustainable behaviour on higher education campuses. For example, putting more sustainable food in a prominent position in the student canteen would be a nudge, still leaving students free to eat what they want. So would automatically enrolling students into a bike-sharing scheme, regardless of whether they choose to use it. In both cases, these simple changes would make the sustainable choice a little easier, more salient and seemingly more normal.

Nudging is based on an understanding of the psychology of decision-making. Our brains have limited resources to make sense of a world that is complex and uncertain, which means that we use mental shortcuts that make our behaviour highly context-dependent: for example, “do what everyone else is doing” or “take the easiest option”. Also, a lot of our behaviour is automatic, as we follow ingrained routines or act on auto-pilot. With knowledge of these cognitive processes, we can make changes to the options people have (the “choice environment”) in order to encourage certain choices, or we can explicitly design choices to harness or overcome common cognitive biases.

**POSITIVE  
AND GENTLE  
PERSUASION  
TO ENCOURAGE  
SUSTAINABLE  
BEHAVIOUR**



# WHY USE NUDGES?

## Nudges help people live their values

Many people intend to eat healthily, save money or live more sustainably, but don't follow through with their intentions. This is partly because we prioritize our short-term desires (chocolate cake or a new pair of shoes) over long-term aspirations. It's also partly because our behaviour is unconsciously affected by the physical and social context in which the easy or default choices are often not the most healthy, economical or sustainable. Nudges can make people's lives easier, happier and more rewarding because they help people align their daily decisions with the values they already have.

## Nudges can work better than raising awareness

Because there is a gap between what we intend to do and what we actually do, it is generally more effective to focus, as nudging does, on changing behaviour directly, rather than simply raising awareness. Awareness and intentions still matter, as they make behaviour change easier, but they are rarely enough alone: although many people say they want to consume more sustainably, they don't do so in practice.<sup>4</sup> This means that while a poster campaign on campus about the environmental impacts of driving might help people learn about the issue, a nudge offering more bike parking spaces and fewer car parking spaces has a higher likelihood of reducing car usage.

## Nudges are cost-effective

Nudges are often cheap to implement, as they frequently involve changing the way choices are presented instead of rebuilding infrastructure or buying new equipment. Nudges that help to conserve resources can in fact save universities money. For example, a small university department in the UK could save more than £1,000 per year by turning off its lights every night,<sup>5</sup> and a nudge to help achieve that goal could be very low-cost, such as printing reminder notices to put up at light switches.

## Nudges are needed now

With public concern about climate change and the environment at an all-time high, there is clearly no absence of motivation for sustainability. But it can be hard to move people from motivation to concrete action, especially when sustainable choices are more complicated or inconvenient, or require us to go against defaults and established norms. This is where you can help – your nudges can remove barriers and facilitate everyday sustainable behaviours.

# WHO CAN USE GREEN NUDGES?

If you work or study on a higher education campus, this book is for you!

Nudges tend to be relatively simple to implement, so you don't have to be a policymaker with a lot of influence and resources in order to put a nudge into effect. Perhaps you are ...

- a university leader looking to prioritize environmental responsibility on campus
- a sustainability manager wanting to make an impact on a tight budget
- a student interested in trying out something new and making a difference

This little book brings together a wide range of nudges, well supported by evidence, and many already tested by colleges and universities. The 40 featured nudges are grouped into 12 broad strategies, which can be adapted and applied by different people to different behaviours in different contexts.

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