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## Importance, motivation and confidence of eating healthily whilst at university and barriers UK students face to eating well at university

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Starting university is associated with increased independence for many students, and research shows that this can lead to changes in dietary and lifestyle behaviour<sup>(1)</sup>. These include weight gain and not meeting dietary and exercise recommendations<sup>(2)</sup>. Evidence shows there are many barriers which contribute to adopting unhealthful dietary behaviour at university, including limited budget, nutrition knowledge, and cooking skills<sup>(3)</sup>. As part of a personalised nutrition advice pilot study in UK university students, we explored the importance of healthy eating in this group, their motivation and confidence to eat healthily and the barriers which may prevent them from doing so prior to the intervention.

In this pilot study, 42 University of Reading and Hertfordshire students aged  $\geq 18$  years completed baseline questionnaires. These included the online eNutri food frequency questionnaire (FFQ)<sup>(4)</sup> and questions about their motivation and confidence to make healthy changes to their diet. On a scale of 0 to 10, they also rated the importance of a healthy diet to them and the self-perceived healthiness of their current diet. The students also identified which barriers, if any, may prevent them making healthy changes to their diet.

Of the 42 participants, 76% were female and the mean age was 24 years (SD  $\pm 5.5$ , range = 18–38 years). The mean BMI was 24.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup> (SD  $\pm 5.0$ , range = 18.1–43.1 kg/m<sup>2</sup>). The average rating of importance of a healthy diet was 7.1 out of 10 (with 10 being very important) (SD  $\pm 2.4$ , range = 1–10) and self-perceived healthiness of their current diet was 6.2 out of 10 (with 10 being very healthy) (SD  $\pm 2.0$ , range = 0–9). When asked which barriers would prevent them from making healthy changes to their diet, 43% of students stated that they cannot afford to eat more healthily, 43% had a lack of time to focus on their diet, 23% lacked knowledge about how to eat more healthily and 16% lacked cooking skills.

These results showed that whilst a healthy diet was important to the university students, limited budget, and a lack of nutrition knowledge and cooking skills act as barriers for them to adopt a healthier diet, supporting previous research<sup>(3)</sup>. This suggests university students may benefit from additional support such as nutrition education, advice about how to eat healthily on a budget and cooking classes.

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