



Food insecurity in students; harnessing community and university resources to address it

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Food insecurity is the inability to access or afford sufficient quantities of healthy food to meet requirements⁽¹⁾. Students are identified as a vulnerable group^(2,3,4). Food insecurity could add to already poor diets in young people⁽⁵⁾, and could negatively impact on student engagement and attendance, with implications for life chances. This project aimed to ascertain levels of concern about the cost-of-living.

A short online snapshot survey among students of a large diverse post-92 London university about their food concerns was distributed via university emails in October 2022, receiving 1090 responses by December. All students were eligible to participate. No demographic data apart from accommodation type was gathered. Responses were collated and Kruskal Wallis tests with posthoc Bonferroni used to explore the impact of accommodation type on responses.

Foods that students would most like to be made available at lower cost were fruit, staple foods like pasta, vegetables and dairy products e.g. cheese (65%, 64%, 63% and 48% of respondents respectively). Overall, 83% of respondents were concerned about managing in the academic year, 68% intending to work alongside their studies. Over half (51%) were living in private rented accommodation. Concerns were highest in this group; significantly more expressed concern about how they would manage financially compared to those in halls of residence (87.2% vs. 81.4% respectively, $p=0.001$) and significantly more would value support with their costs compared with those in halls of residence (89.5% vs. 82.4% respectively, $p=0.000$), or living at home with their families (89.5% vs. 86.5% respectively, $p=0.04$).

Given these concerns, actions to support student were taken by this and a partner London university (also a large diverse post-92 institution), as part of a multi-institutional research group exploring cost-of-living and food support. In the first case, existing networks were utilised to offer students access to a weekly community social supermarket, along with limited emergency food at the university. In the second case, an existing weekly community recipe box scheme was adapted to the university setting and offered to students with high needs. This scheme, previously well evaluated with children and families in the community, supplied a monthly step-by-step nutritious recipe with pre-weighed ingredients over five months. Both approaches are currently being evaluated but both demonstrate the potential for universities to mobilise existing community networks at speed, to support vulnerable groups within the university.

Benefits accrued both ways; the multi-institutional team offered knowledge exchange, contributed to local food initiatives, evaluated community projects and hosted events for community groups. In turn, the university was recognised as an integral part of the community, benefitting from pre-existing support mechanisms rolled out to include students. This approach offers value both to the university and the wider community.

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References

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