

## Food insecurity among students: why does it matter and how should universities address it?

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### Abstract

Food insecurity (FI) is a major concern, particularly affecting those on low incomes, students included. FI may affect student attendance, engagement and sense of belonging to the university. A short survey about the cost-of-living crisis in a large London widening-participation university received 1090 student responses and these expressed high levels of concern. We contend that universities must help alleviate FI among their students. We accept that offering practical help to students may require significant continuing investment. Utilising existing community support within the context of a mutually beneficial relationship could reduce the burden on institutions and, in exchange, could offer in-kind support to the local community.

**Keywords:** food insecurity; support; health; education; community

### Introduction

Zero hunger and quality education are both United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs 2 and 4 respectively; UN, 2015). Food insecurity (FI) is the lack of secure physical, social and economic access to adequate quantities of safe and nutritious food which meets dietary needs and preferences (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 2015). The severity of FI has worsened with the cost-of-living crisis. University students are particularly at risk: full-time United Kingdom (UK) students are more than three times more likely to experience FI than the rest of the population (Yao *et al.*, 2020). One in ten UK university students used a food bank during the 2021/22 academic year (Brown, 2022). This is unsurprising: tuition fees and increases in rent, as well as other expenses such as transport and food, have caused students to struggle financially. Average rent for UK student accommodation increased by 4.4% in 2021/22, compared with the previous year, and has increased by 61% over the decade (Unipol, 2021). Pandemic-related job losses, followed by the rise in inflation, further exacerbated the situation. A survey of 3,500 UK students found that: 96% had reduced their spending; almost one in three were left with only fifty pounds each month after essential bills; and 92% reported consequent detriment to their mental health (National Union of Students, 2022). A 2022/23 short online survey of student cost-of-living concerns at a large widening-

participation university in London received an unprecedented 1090 responses. Students expressed a high degree of concern and a need for support with basic foodstuffs (e.g., pasta), as well as household and personal hygiene items. Those living in private rented accommodation (just over half the sample) were significantly more likely to express concern and to undertake paid work alongside their studies to meet their basic needs (Mulrooney *et al.*, 2023).

In Maslow's theory of motivation, physical requirements (including food) are considered basic needs which must be met before higher needs – including creative and intellectual pursuits – can be addressed (Maslow, 1943). Put simply, if students are hungry, poorly nourished and worried about how to make ends meet, they are unlikely to fulfil their potential at university. FI should be, we believe, a priority for higher education institutions (HEIs) and one that they should be addressing.

### **How does FI affect education?**

FI is bad for mental and physical health. It increases the likelihood of unhealthy diets (Yao *et al.*, 2020), poor general health, obesity and poor sleep quality (El Zein *et al.*, 2019). In students, FI increased the risk of stress, anxiety and depression (Ahmad, Sulaiman and Sabri, 2021). Poverty of any kind is mentally burdensome (Fang *et al.*, 2021) and FI is more likely to occur in those with mental health difficulties and is itself more likely to exacerbate them. Mental ill-health in students is already a major concern (UCAS, 2021). Poverty, including FI, marginalises those affected (Thompson *et al.*, 2018) and causes profound de-skilling (Blake, 2019) – thus it is the antithesis of the resilience needed to succeed academically.

Food helps to develop and strengthen social bonds (Gregersen and Gillath, 2020). This is important, because social connections are considered fundamental to developing a sense of belonging within higher education (Ahn and Davis, 2020a). Social connections also benefit learning and contribute to social capital (Ahn and Davis, 2020b). A strong sense of belonging increases learners' engagement with their studies (Wilson *et al.*, 2015) and engagement correlates with attainment (Pace, 1982; Newman-Ford *et al.*, 2008). FI may therefore, through increasing marginalisation, reduce students' sense of belonging. Students working to make ends meet have limited time on campus, with possible consequent reduction in their attendance, engagement (ONS, 2022a) and opportunities to develop relationships with peers and staff and benefit from peer learning. Campus food may be expensive and unsuitable and, since it's now more expensive to commute to campus and because online sessions are more readily available for access from home, students are choosing not to attend in person. Post-COVID attendance has fallen from previous rates; in a recent global survey reported by the Times Higher, the majority of respondents reported that both attendance and engagement were lower than pre-pandemic (Williams, 2022).

Helping students access healthier foods has immediate as well as future benefits. We contend that there is a clear case for HEIs to offer practical support to students to help them navigate the cost-of-living crisis. To do so would increase corporate social responsibility, but also demonstrate a commitment to reducing inequalities, combating hunger, ensuring a quality education and – by so doing – aligning with the UN sustainable development goals and contributing to a diverse future workforce.

### Options for HEIs

How can HEIs help? Establishing food banks within universities is possible, although this model may be perceived (and experienced) as shameful and stigmatising (Strong, 2022) and there are concerns about the nutritional quality of the offer (Oldroyd *et al.*, 2022). Food banks usually require referrals and limit the number of food parcels that individuals can take (Trussell Trust 2021, 2022). Establishing social supermarkets within universities is also possible. These usually offer surplus and/or donated foods at low cost. They appeal to those concerned about food waste and often neither require referrals nor limit frequency of use (Holweg and Lienbacher, 2011). From a university perspective, both options would require significant investment (e.g., organisation, space and management), which may be challenging in the current financial climate.

Another, and we suggest, preferable possibility involves utilising existing community networks and facilities; positioning universities within their local communities but also ensuring that this is established to mutual benefit. Bi-directional relationships and support networks could offer students in need access to existing local community cafés, social supermarkets and community meals. In exchange, universities could offer expertise, including research, knowledge exchange and practical help to local community groups (e.g., pro bono financial, legal or human resources advice). Universities could also offer a pool of potential student volunteers, which could help build local community capacity. This would benefit students, since volunteering enhances sense of worth, as well as physical and mental health (Tabassum *et al.*, 2016; Yeung *et al.*, 2018). It also offers tangible evidence of experience for students, improving their employability chances, and represents an alternative space of learning and achievement, with the potential to offset marginalisation and 'impostor syndrome' (Murray *et al.*, 2022). This mutually beneficial relationship would help embed universities within their local communities, building capacity and offering opportunities to local groups and students alike, while helping to address the very real burden of FI.

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