



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Melbourne Social
Equity Institute

TALKING HUNGER

**UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING
FOOD INSECURITY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

PROJECT SUMMARY REPORT
JUNE 2021

TALKING HUNGER UNDERSTANDING FOOD INSECURITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

There is a very high level of food insecurity amongst university students in Australia and around the world, yet the precise extent and nature of the problem in Australia and at the University of Melbourne has not been extensively studied.

This project aimed to shed light on the extent and nature of student food insecurity by employing four student ‘co-researchers’ — each with lived experience of food insecurity — to interview other university students about their experiences of food insecurity.

This project was funded by a University of Melbourne Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) grant and a USA Social Science Research Council (SSRC) grant as well as being hosted and supported by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI).

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“Food insecurity is such a normalised thing. It’s almost expected to be part of a student’s culture and you know not having enough food to eat shouldn’t be normalised. As a student, you have so many things to do and you rely on energy to get you through the day. And if you don’t have enough energy, whether that be because you can’t afford the food or maybe the food wasn’t healthy, then there’s no way you will be able to survive university.”

Interviewee, Talking Hunger Podcast

BACKGROUND

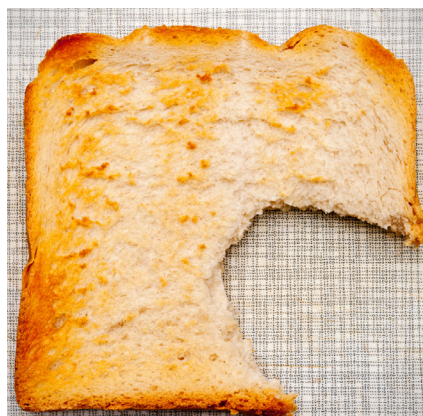
STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY IN AUSTRALIA

Food insecurity is defined differently in different studies, but most research in Australia is consistent in pointing to alarmingly high rates of food insecurity among students. A 2014 study in Queensland estimated that 26% of students are food insecure (Gallegos 2014); a 2014 study of Victorian Universities reported 48% of students as food insecure, including 30% who were experiencing 'hunger', which was defined in terms of inadequate and skipped meals (Micevski et al 2014); a 2020 study of University of Newcastle students put the figure at 48% of students food insecure, (Whatnall et al 2020); and a recent study at the University of Tasmania found a total of 38% of students surveyed were food insecure, defined in this study as running out of food occasionally or frequently (Murray et al 2021).

Student food insecurity manifests in several forms, from running out of food, skipping meals and experiencing hunger, to the more

common and widespread experience of compromising on the nutritional quality and diversity of foods consumed. There are both financial and physical contributors to university students' food insecurity. Financial factors relate to poverty and a lack of disposable income, particularly in the context of high living expenses, such as housing, as well as high university fees.

Because university students spend a considerable amount of time on campus, the campus food environment is an important physical enabler or constraint on access to affordable and healthy food. University campuses in Australia typically have private food outlets, rather than university run and subsidized cafeterias, as is common at universities in many other countries. Other contributing factors to food insecurity include inadequate cooking facilities in the home and a lack of cooking skills and access to fresh foods.



FOOD INSECURITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

There have been no dedicated studies conducted of food insecurity amongst students at the University of Melbourne. There were — prior to Covid-19 — no dedicated programs run by the University to address food insecurity or the affordability of food on campus. However, University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) has for a number of years funded and operated a Free Breakfast for students, which has been well attended. The program has only been provided during the teaching weeks of the

two semesters, with up to several hundred students availing themselves of the free breakfast. There has been no screening or surveying of the food needs of those students attending. UMSU also provides a basic dry foods pack to students who request it, essentially a very simple ‘food bank’. The student-run Food Co-Operative in the Student Union Building also sells relatively affordable vegan meals during semester.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN 2020

Covid-19 had a considerable impact on the nature and extent of student food insecurity in 2020. Some domestic university students were able to access the more generous government welfare payments, leaving them in a better financial position, which appears to have somewhat alleviated their food insecurity. For other domestic students, and especially for international students, the loss of access to paid employment led to a severe deterioration in their finances.

Some Universities in Australia responded by introducing direct food relief programs. The University of Melbourne partnered with SecondBite to provide free cooked-frozen meals, beginning in April 2020, with the program due to end in July 2021. The meals were available to all students who signed up for the program, with no qualifying criteria. With the University campus closed, the UMSU Free Breakfast program was suspended for most of 2020 and semester 1 of 2021.

THE SSAF AND SSRC RESEARCH PROJECTS

This research project on student food insecurity was initiated by a working group of the Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI). The group successfully applied for a Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) Grant for a project that involved University of Melbourne students interviewing other students of their experiences of food insecurity, and to produce a podcast based on these interviews. While the project was conceived in early 2020 to address the ongoing problem of student food insecurity, by the time the grant was awarded Covid-19 had come to Australia, and the interviews addressed student experiences of food

insecurity both in the pre-Covid period and during Covid. Four students who had themselves experienced food insecurity were employed as co-researchers to conduct the interviews, and 40 University of Melbourne students who identified themselves as food insecure were interviewed by these co-researchers. A one-hour podcast based on these interviews was launched in March 2021. The group also received a grant from the USA Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to extend the project and interview an additional 50 students from five other Victorian universities.



Image: Frozen meal packs distributed through the University's Free Meals program.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

GENERAL EXPERIENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Our research pointed to alarming levels of persistent food insecurity among students and high levels of hardship, frustration and anger within the student body at the University of Melbourne and more generally across Victorian universities. The primary causes of food insecurity noted by students was a lack of income, particularly from access to adequate paid employment, especially for students living away from the family home and for international students.

Some students reported having to skip meals as a way of saving money and several discussed skipping meals and losing or gaining weight as a result of a lack of access to health food.

Students reported having to compromise on the quality, diversity, healthfulness of food, and of being denied their preferred food choices. One student stated that they had become “vegetarian out of necessity”, another noted: “God I miss fruit”.

Students often need to meticulously plan their meals in advance to be able to remain within their budgets. Students discussed lacking cooking skills, which limited their ability to eat well on a budget, and to rely more on eating out at the cheapest restaurants and take-away meals. To afford this, they often sought discount offers and subscribed to text alerts promoting daily specials. In some apartments and shared houses there was also a lack of clean and adequate cooking facilities.

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ON CAMPUS EXPERIENCE (PRE-COVID)

Most students reported that the food choices on campus were very limited given their tight budgets, and that there was a lack of affordable and healthy foods on campus. International students expressed a great deal of disappointment about the lack of a healthy campus food environment, and, in this respect, compared the Australian university in which they were studying negatively with universities in their home countries. Students would often bring a prepared lunch from home as a way of saving money, though this wasn't always practical, and was dependent on adequate preparation time.

Students considered the cost of food at many private food outlets to be far too high, particularly for the healthier options. This was exacerbated for students with specific dietary restrictions or preferences, such as vegetarian, halal or with food intolerances. There was instead a dependence on cheaper and more filling foods, such as pizza and fast/fried foods. A few students were aware of the student-run Food Co-Op that serves relatively affordable vegan lunch food, but most were not aware of this outlet or didn't find the type of food to their liking.

Many students left the campus and walked to nearby off-campus food outlets to find more affordable options, but they complained about the time this entailed, the disruption it caused to their studies and their capacity to socialize with others.

Some students regularly used and appreciated the free-breakfast program run by UMSU during the teaching months, although the offerings weren't always considered to be highly nutritious. However, attending the breakfast required being on campus quite early in the morning.

The interviews pointed to many forms of resilience and agency among young people. A common theme was that students sought out events where free food was being served, such as lunch-time barbeques run by student societies or catered public events. Students regularly organised their lecture and tutorial timetables around these free food offerings, and they would share information of free food with each other on social media and through word-of-mouth. This often required students having to wait for long periods to receive the free food, however, and many discussed the damage that such waiting caused to their studies. Students were generally appreciative of this free food, but they also recognized that the most common foods available — such as sausages or pizza — were unhealthy.

Students often reported not being able to attend social events and catch-ups with tutors/lecturers where these were held in cafes/restaurants and they were expected to purchase coffee/food.

EXPERIENCES DURING COVID IN 2020

Some domestic students reported being financially better-off due to the enhanced government welfare payments. However, international students dependent on casual paid work were severely impacted when the lock-down led to the unavailability of this work.

Many students appreciated the University's Second Bite program and the free cooked

meals made a difference. They also appreciated the Queen Victoria Market vouchers which allowed them to purchase fresh food.

The pandemic also led to more evidence of students' agency. For example students strengthened and developed peer-to-peer support networks, either informal or online.

SOCIAL IMPACTS, STIGMA AND MENTAL HEALTH

While sharing food and eating with friends is for many people an important part of social life, food insecure students reported that their inability to afford good food or to eat restricted their social interactions and created embarrassment and sometimes shame.

In the type of statement we heard many times, one student said that when eating out with friends, they would bring along their own food from home in a Tupperware container because they could not afford the meal, but they would tell their friends it was because they are "on a diet".

SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY

Students had a lot of important ideas about potential ways of addressing food insecurity. For example, several students asked why universities could not provide subsidized meals and develop university canteens. Many students from Europe or other parts of the Asia-Pacific stressed that these canteens exist in their home countries.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Some possible strategies that address the availability of affordable and nourishing food on campus in particular include:

- Address the affordability of healthy food on campus through the development of a university canteen or canteens offering subsidized food. Many students pointed out that university-run canteens or cafeterias around the world serve as crucial and non-hierarchical social and intellectual hubs for students and staff alike.
- Provide University-managed and funded free and/or subsidized food programs for the most food insecure students. These could include providing free or subsidized breakfasts, lunches or dinners; and a food pantry that provides free or subsidized fresh foods.
- Incorporate food security as a central element in student life and wellbeing programs, recognizing the importance of food security to physical and mental good health, the capacity to study, and the ability to build relationships.
- Develop a Student Food Security Policy within a broader Health & Wellbeing Policy and/or Food Policy for the University.
- Encourage further conversations about how to link the issue of food insecurity to issues of food sovereignty. Several universities in the US have created important new experiments in food provisioning. For example, the University of California has linked the issue of campus food provision to the development of ‘campus farms’ that integrate social, environmental, and food justice aspirations.
- Conduct further quantitative and qualitative surveys of the prevalence and nature of food insecurity at the University of Melbourne.

It is also important that students themselves are actively involved in any initiatives to understand and address food insecurity at the University of Melbourne.

PROJECT OUTPUTS



Website

<https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/projects/talking-hunger-understanding-food-insecurity-on-campus>

Podcast

<https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/projects/talking-hunger-understanding-food-insecurity-on-campus>

Radio Interview

for SYN FM's Panorama: <https://omny.fm/shows/panorama/tackling-food-insecurity-on-campus>

Webinar

Food Insecurity and Mental Health <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/students/news-events/food-insecurity-and-mental-health>

Publications

Jeffrey, C., Scrinis, G. & Dyson, J. (2021) 'God, I miss fruit!' 40% of students at Australian universities may be going without food', *The Conversation*, 16 March.

Dyson, J., Scrinis, G., Jeffrey, C., Edwards, C. Anja, R., Ellis, L., Sriram, A., Zentari, M. & Zoubtchenko, E. (2021) 'Food for Thought', *Pursuit*, 16 March.

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Micevski, D. A., Thornton, L. E., & Brockington, S. (2014). Food insecurity among university students in Victoria: A pilot study. *Nutrition & dietetics*, 71(4), 258-264.

Murray, S., Peterson, C., Primo, C., Elliott, C., Otlowski, M., Auckland, S., & Kent, K. (2021). Prevalence of food insecurity and satisfaction with on-campus food choices among Australian university students. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*.

Whatnall, M. C., Hutchesson, M. J., & Patterson, A. J. (2020). Predictors of food insecurity among Australian university students: A cross-sectional study. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(1), 60.



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