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Feeding Hungry Students: Geographies of On-Campus Free Food Provision Across England

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ABSTRACT

In 2023, one in four UK universities was reported to be operating a food bank for their students amidst a 'cost-of-learning crisis'. With nearly half of students facing financial difficulty, student food poverty has become a vital issue in contemporary higher education, with food banks marking an important addition to on-campus student support. This paper adds to the growing extant literature on food banks by empirically and conceptually examining the geographies of on-campus free food provision across English universities. We define free food provision for university students as food that is free at the point of collection and consumption and is based on presumed and/or evidenced student need. The paper draws on qualitative and quantitative data from a survey administered to all English universities to map provision across institutions and explore on-campus geographies of free food. It makes two important contributions to existing research. First and empirically, it moves the discussion of food poverty and educational institutions beyond a focus on schools and families with children. Second, and conceptually, it extends understandings of food poverty alleviation beyond food banks to consider a broader set of mechanisms through which support is given to those in need, with universities vitally positioned to tackle food poverty given their role in anchoring students in place. The paper concludes by questioning the longer-term commitment and sustainability of free food provision across universities in England at a time of financial uncertainty.

1 | Introduction

After a decade and a half of austerity and the recent cost-of-living crisis, the United Kingdom has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people experiencing food poverty. In 2023/2024, there were 7.5 million people, or 11% of the UK population, in households experiencing food poverty, including 18% of children. For the same year, Trussell, a charity and network of food banks for the provision of emergency food and related support, supplied 2.89 million emergency food parcels (Francis-Devine et al. 2025).

Food poverty and food insecurity are often used interchangeably and are variously defined. Here we primarily use the former term, recognising its economic positioning, to refer to "the insufficient economic access to an adequate quantity and quality of food to maintain a nutritionally satisfactory, socially acceptable diet" (O'Connor et al. 2016, 429). As a pressing socio-economic issue impacting an increasing proportion of the population, widespread food poverty has led Trussell and the campaigning group, Independent Food Aid Network, to operate and/or support 1646 and 1173 food banks respectively (Baker 2023).

Educational institutions, notably schools, have become central to the operation of food banks and alleviation of food poverty (Bradbury and Vince 2025). In an extrapolation of figures, Baker et al. (2024) suggests there are 4000 school-based food banks across England, which equates to one in every five. He further

posits that there are more food banks inside schools than outside in England. While increasing consideration has been paid to the role of schools in supporting children and families, little scholarly attention has been given to food needs among young adults, including the role of universities in supporting their student cohorts.

In 2023, one in four UK universities was reported to be operating a food bank for their students amidst a 'cost-of-learning crisis' (Freeman 2023). With narrow financial margins, dependence on loans and parental support, students have been especially vulnerable to inflationary cost rises. According to the Office for Students (OfS) (2023), nearly half of students are facing financial difficulties, leading to student food poverty becoming a vital issue in contemporary higher education (HE), with food banks marking an important addition to on-campus support. However, little is known about the wider free food provision that universities have implemented to support their students.

Through research funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme, this paper explores the geographies of on-campus free food provision across England. We define free food provision as that which is free at the point of collection and consumption and is based on presumed and/or evidenced student need. Therefore, this work extends the focus on food banks as a marker of food poverty to consider wider food provision to support HE students' basic needs across English campuses (McHugh et al. 2026). In so doing, we add to the growing geographical readings of food poverty and food banks, their spaces, subjectivities and contestations (Strong 2020; Cloke et al. 2017; Williams et al. 2016) that have deepened understandings of food poverty in contemporary Britain (May et al. 2018; Smith and Thompson 2023).

This paper starts with developing the conceptualisation of educational anchors for food support, linking to research on the role of schools in alleviating everyday hunger. We then extend this work to consider the shifting role of universities in recognising and supporting students' food needs, embedding this in current research. The project and data set from which our arguments emerge are then detailed. The findings focus broadly on the geographies of free food provision as evidenced through the data. In mapping provision, we look at the macro-scale geographical capture of our data, before looking at on-campus geographies of spatial–temporal free food provision and engagement. This prompts wider questions about the responsibility for and sustainability of provision, and we conclude with a contextual discussion of current and future roles of the HE sector towards students' basic needs.

2 | Educational Anchors for Food Support

In developing our understanding of universities as free food providers, we draw on their conceptualisation as anchor institutions (Fulbright-Anderson et al. 2001; Goddard 2018). This recognises the role universities, along with other institutions, play in mooring and supporting people in place, and is often linked to discussions of what it means to be a civic university, and the role universities play in economic and social development and place-making (Goddard 2018), especially in weaker local economies (Goddard et al. 2014). A more recent conceptual reworking of this to 'just anchors' (O'Farrell et al. 2022) recognises the responsibility universities have in working in socially just ways within and for their local environments and communities. However, questioning the foundational elements of anchor institutions, Harris (2021) notes the often very real disconnections between university and community interests, especially in terms of research priorities.

While much of the anchor institution literature focuses on how resource and infrastructure are rooted in place, universities also importantly root student populations in place through study, housing and regular campus attendance. As such, university campuses are spaces of place-based engagement in terms of both the wider community in which they are located and their large student populations (Smith 2009)—whether on site or commuting in—as they provide "support" and "stability" through depth and weight of their service provision. It is this rooting of populations in place that often gets overlooked in conceptualisations of anchor institutions (McKee 2015), yet it is a fundamental presence.

This notion of universities as socially just anchors is an important one for understanding the immediate needs of students whose lives are tied to campus spaces. This has taken a new inflection with the cost-of-living crisis alongside challenges and inequities of university funding and student struggles (Freeman 2023).

As critical educational institutions, schools and nurseries (Bradbury and Vince 2025; Baker et al. 2024; Gooseman et al. 2020) have led the way in supporting children and their families with food poverty with the establishment of food banks as a main form of charitable food aid (Smith and Thompson 2023). With successive decades of welfare restructuring and diminishment, the education sector and individual educational institutions have broadened their provision of multiple forms of support towards the families and communities they serve (Bradbury and Vince 2025). However, a focus on universities in England has been absent. This contrasts with cross-disciplinary research from North American academic institutions, which is plentiful, as food aid and notably food banks, have a longer and more entrenched history, given different welfare models. This research has tended to link to the physical, nutritional and mental health of students (Payne-Sturges et al. 2018; Peterson et al. 2022). As such, both sectorally and geographically, students' food poverty remains under-researched across England (Shi et al. 2021).

This focus comes at a time when universities increasingly need to consider how student experience is shaped by external socio-economic pressures and how this impacts students' abilities to effectively engage at university (Callender 2022). This is done not only to support students but also to enable retention and completion (Wainwright et al. 2020). The growth of on-campus food banks, along with other forms of free food provision, is one example of the education sector's expanded role as a welfare provider, as universities have become alert to students' basic needs and requirements to extend their practices of care towards their student body (Cloke et al. 2017).

3 | University Free Food Project

This paper draws on a 20-month mixed-methods project, running from September 2023 to May 2025, funded through a small

FIGURE 1 | Institutional survey responses by English geographic region.

TABLE 1 | Free food form.

Free food form	% university responses ($n=41$)
Food banks	63% ($n=26$)
Free food vouchers	59% ($n=24$)
Free meals	34% ($n=14$)
Other	34% ($n=14$)

research grant from the British Academy/Leverhulme.[1] The project was aimed at examining and theorising the use of free food provision within English universities and included a mapping of the different infrastructures supporting free food provision across England. In this paper, we draw on a survey used to map provision across the sector.

110 English HE institutions were contacted through targeted emails to students' unions and support services, with an invitation to complete a short online survey. Survey completion took approximately 10 min and asked a small number of quantitative and qualitative questions to get an overview of institutional free food provision at the local level (Smith and Thompson 2023). Responses came from a range of university staff, including Student Union presidents and advice managers, university student advisors and access and participation coordinators, pointing to the diversity of roles tackling the problem of food poverty. The project received full institutional ethics approval.

Quantitative survey responses were categorised and mapped by university location and type. Qualitative responses were coded and themed to develop a geography of provision across a diversity of England's university campuses. In the presentation of data, we broadly differentiate by university 'type'[2] as a means to provide some contextual institutional detail while maintaining anonymity.

Just over one-third (37% $n=41$) of institutions self-selected to respond to the request for survey completion and detail free food needs and their free food provision. Decisions to complete surveys, or not, were made for various reasons (Albaum and Smith 2012). Certainly, the content of and detail offered in the qualitative responses, with long explanatory points—including frustrations and concerns—suggest that many respondents were pleased to have the opportunity to share information. The purposive sample, therefore, offers a valuable data set to provide an examination of food poverty and free food provision across England.

The next section provides a geographic mapping of responses across England, before exploring on-campus geographies—of spatial and temporal location—that elucidate the different mechanisms of free food provision.

4 | Mapping Provision

43 survey responses were received from 40 named and one unnamed institutions, with 67% from students' unions, 21% from student support services, 7% from professional services, one academic response and one 'other' response. The dominance of responses from students' unions points to their activity extension and critical role in shaping campus geographies (Brooks et al. 2015) in relation to student food poverty.

Figure 1 shows the geographic spread of institutional responses, with data from across all regions of England except the East of England. Universities in London and Yorkshire and the Humber are most represented in our sample.

In addition to geographic range, institutional responses came from different university groupings with nine from the Russell Group, 10 from Pre-1992, 21 from Post-92 and one was anonymous. This spread suggests that food poverty is being felt across the sector and is not restricted to one type of university.

Various mechanisms and infrastructures for provision exist, and Table 1 classifies the different forms identified across the institutional responses.

A majority of universities offer multiple free food forms to encourage use and ensure inclusivity. Food banks and free food vouchers are the most common forms, with over half of universities in our sample offering them. The 'other' category includes hardship funding and boxes, free food bags, parcels or 'giveaways', free tea and coffee and food pantries. This data suggest that universities have been responding to student need in multiple and often overlapping ways, with an extension to the traditional modes of food charity—of food banks and parcels—in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Lambie-Mumford 2016).

The findings also suggest some slippage in provision terminology, notably between food banks, larders and pantries, the latter being a term borrowed from North America but increasingly adopted in the United Kingdom. These terms can also refer to differing systems of access, whereby food banks require a referral, usually from student support, and pantries and larders are open to all with the aim of democratising food provision (Cloke et al. 2017):

> The food bank is called a pantry and all students can go (Russell Group).

Other universities offer a more traditional food-banking system requiring referral and regulation, often recognising the cost involved of continuous all-student support:

> We only allow the students to access the pantry a maximum of five times as we cannot afford to continuously feed students, so we direct them to our student support services.
>
> (Post 92)

Over two-thirds of universities (68% $n = 28$) signpost students to external food banks. However, some universities were clear that local food banks do not have the capacity or the responsibility to support students, and universities should not be 'off-loading' a problem to external agencies. As such, free food provision, its existence and forms, is prompting new questions for universities around basic need, duty of care and responsibility towards students, and shifting on-campus practices of support.

5 | Spatial and Temporal Provision

Free food provision is differently located across university campuses as new spaces of free food provision have emerged. This is most clearly signalled with designated food bank rooms which are often discreetly named and located in contrast to provision that is open to all, for example, a community pantry:

> We have a new community pantry and island. The pantry sits within the library and is regularly stocked with food for students to grab if they wish. The island is an area within the canteen where at 5pm all unsold food is placed in there for students to grab for free.
>
> (Post 92)

Contrasting campus visibilities exist, based on the severity of need, with food banks hidden away, often not named as such, and requiring referral and scrutiny for access. This hidden geography of the campus food bank is in contrast to their often very visual framing across wider society, as discussed by Strong (2021).

Support also varies across campus estate, with free food primarily concentrated on main campus locations, indicating cost-utilisation decisions:

> We provide free meals twice a week at our main campus, and once a week at our two smaller sites.
>
> (Post 92)

Beyond food bank rooms and community pantries, provision is further marked by a changing infrastructure through which free food is accessed:

> The Students' Union has a community fridge where students are given free food from the University's cafes once or twice a week, depending on availability.
>
> (Russell Group)

> We had a garden shed being used as a 'sharing shed' which was completely inappropriate for the huge demand in need of student food bank request. Luckily the SU has taken this over and we now have a Student Pantry in an indoor space with better access.
>
> (Post 92)

In addition, free food provision moves beyond the immediate campus in two distinct ways. First, and as already noted, universities direct students to external community food banks that can offer additional support. Second, universities are either formally or informally connecting with external and often charitable food providers:

> We are working with [charity] to provide a cultural food bag – one that gives spices and other ingredients.
>
> (Post 92)

> Our university has partnered with the [charity] who provide almost the complete majority of the free food provisions available on our campus.
>
> (Russell Group)

This is done for a number of reasons, including ensuring a culturally-sensitive food response, as this post-92 institution notes. The Russell Group quote is an example of an institution with a less diverse and more affluent student intake that minimises its own free food provision through partnering with a food aid charity with a long and formalised history of offering free meals to those 'in need' (Power 2022).

Free food provision is also temporally contingent, concentrated at certain times or times of perceived greatest need, and is marked by seasonal and academic rhythms:

> We offer free fruit (weekly) and breakfasts (daily) periodically throughout the year in the food outlets for all students, particularly around exam times and during the colder months. Occasionally the food outlets offer free hot meals at weekends. This is not targeted, and any student is eligible.
>
> (Pre 1992)

A majority of universities also offer free food provision on a more ad hoc basis when need is perceived greatest:

> We have occasional free food giveaways and we have run a couple of days of free soup.
>
> (Post 92)

This is often considered to be exam time, and aimed at particular student groups, for example medical students, with a higher burden of examinations.

University finances—and differential financial positions—determine free food provision, across and sometimes within universities, as this Russell Group university explains:

> As a collegiate university, some of the colleges provide free meals for students. This is often framed as being for the time poor to avoid or limit stigma of being in need. This is not the case across all the colleges, and it is normally the older, more financially endowed colleges which are able to do this.
>
> (Russell Group)

Underscoring these survey findings is the very real cost of providing free food as universities across England experience severe financial challenges (PWC 2024). Funding and provision for food banks, pantries and free food events comes from different sources—with purchases made through designated cost of living and student support budgets, along with staff and wider community donations, and offset discounted canteen food.

This raises vital questions about how best to provide support: as accessible to and inclusive of all students, or with a focus on those most in need and therefore, potentially, stigmatising need (Strong 2020). The majority of universities in our sample attempted to balance provision with concentrated food bank and voucher support, alongside food events and meals for all students, as this university explains:

> Food vouchers are available through a referral scheme via the University Fruit and veg bags are available to anyone via the Union.
>
> (Russell Group)

Financial cost also shapes the temporalities of short- and long-term support and flags the issue of where, and with whom, the burden of support should fall:

> We provide a food bank service for students on a short-term basis (a week's worth of food) whilst help is put in place to resolve their financial difficulties, or whilst they are waiting for a grant/loan to come through. We do not support students on a long-term basis and will direct them to local food banks if their situation is likely to be a long-term issue. Student Support and the Student Union (occasionally) refer students to the food bank whilst working on their cases so it is usually an emergency measure to ensure they have food.
>
> (Pre 92)

The response to wider food insecurity through food aid is often conceptualised as short-term and emergency (Nazmi et al. 2018). Across English universities, there is a sense of ongoing emergency, but one that raises predicaments for the sector and is, arguably, unsustainable, insufficient and unhelpful in the longer term:

> Food banks are a completely inadequate, and in some cases counter-productive, short-term 'solution' to wider systemic issues that require wider systemic changes. The provision of a few days' food is utterly insufficient to meet the vast majority of students' needs, when the real issues they face are that their maintenance loans are far too small; rent far too high and that they are generally excluded from the benefits system.
>
> (Post 92)

Contextualised in England by structural 'systemic' issues of wealth inequalities, underfunding of education and stripping back of the welfare state that gives only very limited support for students (Troschitz 2017), marketised HE leaves no space for student food needs. Whether a one-off intervention or long-term support, free food provision is not sufficient to deal with broader structural issues of poverty. As Garthwaite (2017: 289) notes, 'food aid allows the public to consider that 'something is being done', which then appears to prevent the need to investigate the real reasons for food poverty'. For students, what is needed is an engaged and thorough political discussion about the social and economic value of HE at the national level that can shift a seemingly entrenched funding model that individualises students' capacities to support themselves through their studies. This resonates with the IFAN's 'cash first' campaign to ensure that individuals and families can afford to buy adequate and nutritious food and not have to rely on different forms of charitable food aid (Goodwin and Marshall 2024).

6 | Conclusions: Future Provision

Geographers have argued for the importance of place-based understandings of food poverty and accessibility of food charity for those in need (Smith and Thompson 2023). This paper adds to this work with a focus on university free food provision, tracing this across and within England's university campus spaces, with universities as key anchor institutions for their student communities. Food poverty is reshaping campus spaces as multiple forms of free food provision have emerged—some that are highly visible and accessible to all, others that require referral and are discreetly located for students in greatest need.

There is a lack of public and political acknowledgement of food poverty as a critical issue affecting young people across England (Youth Select Committee 2024). Understanding the scale of the

problem across English university campuses is an important step in raising awareness of, and affecting change for, a cohort of young people facing challenges with everyday basic needs.

Enhanced food needs and everyday hunger are therefore raising new questions about the role of universities towards their students, with the importance of universities as localised anchors for students' basic needs. As our data shows, while there is recognised need for and implementation of free food provision, there are different responses across the sector to an issue caused by the increasingly tight financial margins faced by many students who have, over successive years of welfare cutbacks and austerity, alongside the more recent cost-of-living crisis, become more financially vulnerable.

Our findings indicate that provision of free food—whether through regulated food banks or spaces and events open to all students—is under threat at some institutions, given the current financial precarity of the sector. Notable among a small number of survey responses were comments explaining that specific cost-of-living support, which has included free food, will be or already has been cut. This returns us to the notion of universities as important anchors in place. Seemingly a source of stability and strength against ongoing political and economic currents, anchor institutions remain rooted in and to their place. However, this stability is currently being shaken, most especially over the past two years, as universities are facing severe financial constraints and unsteadiness (OfS 2024). From our data, it is those often-newer universities, where need is perceived to be greatest, that are operating in more exposed financial environments. This raises questions on future free food provision—its long-term financial viability and sustainability—and of what happens when it is withdrawn.

University campuses are political spaces as food poverty and hunger discursively and materially impress upon what universities do and how they respond which impacts the daily lives of students. Spaces of free food provision have increasingly become new and vital points of campus encounter (Andersson et al. 2012) between university services and students' unions with their student body, and we suggest, warrant further critical and place-based theoretical and empirical consideration.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] British Academy/Leverhulme award SRG23\230,408.

[2] The Russell Group of universities was first established in 1994 and now has 24 self-selecting members which promote their research and academic standards. Pre-92 institutions are those universities that were founded prior to 1992 but are not part of the Russell Group. Post-1992 institutions became universities following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.

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