On-campus food poverty – what can and should universities do?

Growing numbers of students on campuses across England are experiencing food poverty. New research shows that universities are recognising this as a problem and are attempting to alleviate it in multiple and overlapping ways. While this matters for students' everyday campus engagements, it also raises questions about universities responsibilities at a time when the higher education sector is experiencing its own financial crisis.

Student hunger

Student finance in England is coming under renewed scrutiny with concerns over the costs of a university education and the increasing burden of student debt. With the recent cost-of-living crisis, and its threatened re-emergence, many students across England are facing day-to-day financial struggles while undertaking their degree.

This is clearly demonstrated through the number of university food banks aimed at supporting those students who are most in need. In 2023, one in four UK universities was reported to be operating a food bank for their students amidst a "cost-of-learning crisis". Our recent survey with 41 universities across England showed that 63% ran a food bank.

Complementing our survey data, qualitative interviews with staff from eleven institutions and students from three institutions gives a detailed picture of the extent of student food poverty which has been compounded by increasingly tight financial margins, alongside a challenging labour market with limited part-time paid employment opportunities to fit alongside the demands of full-time studying. As one staff member remarked, food poverty is the "biggest issue" on-campus at the moment, affecting student engagement and mental health.

On-campus free food

However, food banks are just one form of free food provision that universities are using to alleviate on-campus student hunger. Campus food banks, which typically require a referral from student support and a level of student disclosure, are considered a final resort for those most in need. With concerns around referral as a means of surveillance, alongside feelings of embarrassment and shame in accessing food banks, universities have been developing more "stigma-free" and inclusive spaces for students to access free food.

For example, free meals (such as, "bring a plate" lunches) and free food markets are open to all students with no or minimum registration for access have been seen across campuses. These newer "event"-style free food provisions are welcomed by students and complement more traditional forms of support such as student hardship funds and food vouchers.

Uneven provision

Looking across the sector, while student need is persistent, universities are not aligned in their response to food poverty. Underscoring our findings is the very real cost of providing free food as universities across England experience severe financial challenges. Funding and provision for food banks, free meals and free food events comes from different sources, varying from one institution to another—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 well as what is affordable: provision that is accessible to and inclusive of all students, or provision that focuses on those most in need but, potentially, stigmatises that need. 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, though to varying timeframes and extents of campus coverage.

Free food as "quick fix"

What is apparent is that free food provision is not sufficient to deal with the broader structural issues causing student poverty. As Kayleigh Garthwaite 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 higher education at the national level that can shift a seemingly entrenched funding model that individualises students' capacities to support themselves through their studies. Providing free food is a "quick fix" rather than a long-term solution to deep underlying problems of student poverty. As one staff interviewee noted: "In an ideal world we wouldn't have to provide a food voucher at all because students should have enough money and be able to sustain themselves while they're at University".

Future provision and questions of responsibility

There is a lack of public and political acknowledgement of food poverty as a critical issue affecting young people across England. 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.

Despite the evidenced need to address student hunger, our findings indicate that the provision of free food is under threat at some institutions, given the current financial precarity of the sector. Notable among a small number of survey responses and staff interviewees were comments explaining that specific cost-of- living support, which has included free food, will be or already has been cut as universities are facing severe

financial constraints and unsteadiness. From our data, it is those newer universities, where need is perceived to be greatest, that are operating in more exposed financial environments.

This raises questions on the future of free food provision, its long- term financial viability and sustainability, and of what happens when it is withdrawn. More fundamentally, it poses questions about the scale and scope of universities' responsibilities to provide free food for students, reflecting broader ambiguities around their duty of care. While a broad portfolio of student support currently exists across many campuses, should free food provision now be an entrenched component of institutional care, even in the face of the sector's ongoing financial constraints? These are questions that require fuller consideration at sector and institutional level, with their responses further examined and accounted for.

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