



# A Mixed Methods Investigation into the Barriers and Enablers to Healthy Eating in TUS

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# INTRODUCTION

- This study investigated barriers and enablers to healthy eating among students at TUS.
- Universities increasingly recognised as important settings for health promotion through Healthy Campus Framework.
- Healthy eating supports physical health, mental wellbeing, and academic performance.
- Research highlights growing concerns re food insecurity & barriers to healthy eating nationally, but little research on student population in higher education, particularly TUs.



# METHODOLOGY

- Mixed methods study conducted across eight TUS campuses.
- Online student survey (n = 208) explored food purchasing behaviours, perceptions on barriers & enablers to healthy eating, and food insecurity.
- Semi-structured interviews with 3 staff members involved in food related roles.
- Quantitative data analysed using descriptive statistics.
- Qualitative data analysed with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

# RESULTS

## Food Insecurity

- 54% of students experienced Food Insecurity (FI) during their time in TUS.
- Higher rates among females (59%), non-binary students (71%), and urban campuses. 75% of Moylish respondents experienced FI.
- Responses to survey's open-ended question included direct and indirect references to FI:

*“Many of my peers go long periods without eating. Many skip breakfast and do not eat until they go home, myself included.”*

# Barriers

- **Cost:** most frequently reported barrier. 87% wanted cheaper food, 95% called for value for money.
- **Variety:** 81% supported more variety of food.
- **Lack of Provision for Dietary Requirements:** 49% wanted more choices for religious diets. 56% wanted more vegan & vegetarian. 72% wanted greater provision for food intolerances.
- **Inadequate Facilities:** 86% sought greater capacity to heat meals brought from home, particularly on smaller campuses without serviced canteens.

# RESULTS

# RESULTS

## Enablers

- **Availability of Healthy Food:** 74% supported.
- **Incentivising Healthy Choices:** 92% wanted healthier food for lower cost and 90% supported discounts for healthy options.
- **Food Quality & Sourcing:** 61% wanted higher quality food (even at higher price). 63% wanted sustainable, ethically sourced food.
- **Food Literacy:** 72% called for more nutritional detail on menus. 73% favoured visual guides for healthier choices.

# OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Availability, quality and affordability were the dominant student priorities.

Table 3 - Student Responses to Open-ended Question Seeking Recommendations

| Theme                                               | Participant ID | Representative Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Availability and Accessibility of Healthy Food (75) | 47             | "Providing more fresh fruit and vegetables options and more low fat, reduced sugars meals."                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                                     | 221            | "Hot quick meals that are fresh & delicious healthy portion sizes that are healthy & affordable... More colder options that are also healthy & fast..."                                                                                                                                                              |
| Quality, Variety & Nutritional Range (74)           | 81             | "...add a greater variety of dishes, because there are many international students who find it difficult to eat only Irish food or fast food."                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                                     | 194            | "Include more balanced meal options instead of chips and burgers constantly. Have an affordable fresh sandwich deli and include fruit/veg counter for healthy snack options. Occasional roast dinner specials."                                                                                                      |
| Cost of Food (57)                                   | 117            | "Price is a major barrier, so many outside of campus options do better in those terms. Prices are too high on campus, not only for students, but for the quality of the food as well. So a price reduction would be nice to see..."                                                                                  |
|                                                     | 193            | "Slightly increase unhealthy options' price and decrease healthy fresh options' price."                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Education & Awareness (19)                          | 138            | "...please please have calorie information available... Caloric information being available is definitely a necessity for healthy eating! It's very helpful having it on salads and sandwiches, and I'd like to see it on more food."                                                                                |
|                                                     | 187            | "...maybe some information sessions about healthier eating, that include the best foods to eat that give you energy. I try to eat healthy but half the time I feel like I don't know what I'm doing and I'm sure other people probably feel the same so, some guidance classes/sessions would be really beneficial." |
| Facilities & Canteen Experience (21)                | 39             | "Have more microwaves, toaster and hot water station readily available to enjoy prepped food from home."                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                                                     | 146            | "...it would be quite helpful if there was easier access to microwaves to heat up any meals..."                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

# STAFF PERSPECTIVES

Staff perspectives reinforced student concerns while highlighting structural challenges (& opportunities) behind them.

**Table 4 - Thematic Analysis of Semi-structured Interviews with Staff**

| Theme                                                        | Participant ID | Representative Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Socioeconomic Barriers & Food Insecurity among Students (13) | Participant A  | <i>"...I've heard so many stories from students that struggle with limiting what they're eating or not having enough to eat"</i>                                                                                               |
|                                                              | Participant C  | <i>"Some students have money, the majority don't. Their hands are tied like. It's really money is the big thing at the bottom of it."</i>                                                                                      |
| Structural Constraints to Implementation (13)                | Participant B  | <i>"...because we're a public sector organisation... for us to use local suppliers, like local fruit and veg shops, or, you know, local meat suppliers, can be incredibly challenging because of the tendering process..."</i> |
|                                                              | Participant C  | <i>"So, if I go into our ordering site, there's only so many items I can get. It's like they've restricted my shopping basket."</i>                                                                                            |
| Enhancing Food Literacy, Awareness and Skills (15)           | Participant A  | <i>"You can't use what you don't know."</i>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                                              | Participant B  | <i>"...the philosophy in the department is you learn by doing."</i>                                                                                                                                                            |
| Community, Connection & the Joy of Food (15)                 | Participant A  | <i>"...that's one thing I want to change with the kind of capturing, you know, the stories and the experiences of it."</i>                                                                                                     |
|                                                              | Participant B  | <i>"I actually think a healthy eating environment would be that kind of community, local stakeholder involvement. I actually think there almost should be, like a food market, food yard."</i>                                 |

# DISCUSSION

## What do these findings mean?

- Food insecurity emerged as a significant student wellbeing issue (54% prevalence)
- Healthy eating influenced by structural & environmental factors.
- Cost, availability, and infrastructure were the most important barriers.
- Findings support Healthy Campus approach, where universities shape environments that enable healthier choices.
- Students and staff identified broadly similar priorities for improvement.

# DISCUSSION

## Implications for Irish Higher Education

- Expand supports addressing food insecurity and financial hardship.
- Improve food preparation facilities and healthy food availability.
- Increase dietary inclusivity and nutrition/allergen information.
- Deliver food literacy initiatives alongside environmental changes.
- Adopt campus-specific interventions within the Healthy Campus Framework.

# LIMITATIONS

- **Survey sample:** 50% of responses came from Athlone campus.
- **Gender imbalance:** 76% of respondents were female.
- Food insecurity (FI) emerged as significant but wasn't a primary focus in the research design. **Future research needed on FI** and its specific drivers within TU student populations.
- Staff interviews used **purposive sampling**, potentially limiting the generalisability of the qualitative findings.

# TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- Food Insecurity is a significant issue among students in Irish HE.
- Despite barriers, there is strong student demand among students for healthy food. There is not an obvious lack of will / interest in healthy food.
- University needs to take responsibility in ensuring its food environments are health promoting.
- In addition to food provision in canteens, improving access to food related facilities is a key need on smaller campuses without serviced canteens.
- Need to tailor interventions to each campus and align with Healthy Campus goals.

THANK YOU

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