

# University students' ability to access and afford food: key findings and recommendations

Food insecurity occurs when an individual is unable to access enough food for a healthy diet<sup>1</sup>. University students are an at-risk population for food insecurity<sup>2</sup>, yet there has been limited research on this issue at UK universities<sup>3</sup>.

This study explored students' experiences accessing and affording food during the cost of living crisis. The project involved eight photo-based interviews with students at the Penryn campus in mid-2023, supplemented by interviews with six members of staff within the University of Exeter, FX Plus, and the Students' Union (referred to collectively as 'the university').

The students interviewed fell across the scale of food insecurity (see below), highlighting the diversity of students' experiences with food. Half of the students were food insecure. These students described negative impacts on their social lives, mental wellbeing, and physical health:

*"I'd definitely say there's been a few occasions, more recently, where...I've not gone out or something because I don't want to go out and spend money, cause I can't justify doing something fun if food is so much more expensive"* [Student 3, Food Insecure]

*"I am constantly anxious looking at the quantity of food...And many times I just don't eat because I am thinking 'oh if I eat this, I won't have it for this weekend.' So I'll stay hungry, I'll have breakfast at 9, 11 and have my next meal at 5."* [Student 2, Food Insecure]

## Recommendations

- 1** Recognise that some Exeter students struggle to access and afford food, which can negatively impact their physical health, mental wellbeing, and social life.
- 2** Understand that a wide range of factors can impact students' ability to access and afford food.
- 3** Ensure that interventions to address student food insecurity go beyond financial measures.
- 4** Conduct further research to understand the scope of student food insecurity on Exeter's campuses.
- 5** Consider alternative suppliers for the on-campus shop in Penryn that would allow for more affordable options.

*"luckily we have enough money to have a fully stocked fridge, and plenty of food, lot of variety. We're not just living off the cheapest things we can find"*

[Student 5, Food Secure]



*"This is just condiments on rice. Plain rice as a meal. I think on my own at the moment, I'm eating less good because I don't have a schedule to make nice food"*

[Student 6, Food Insecure]

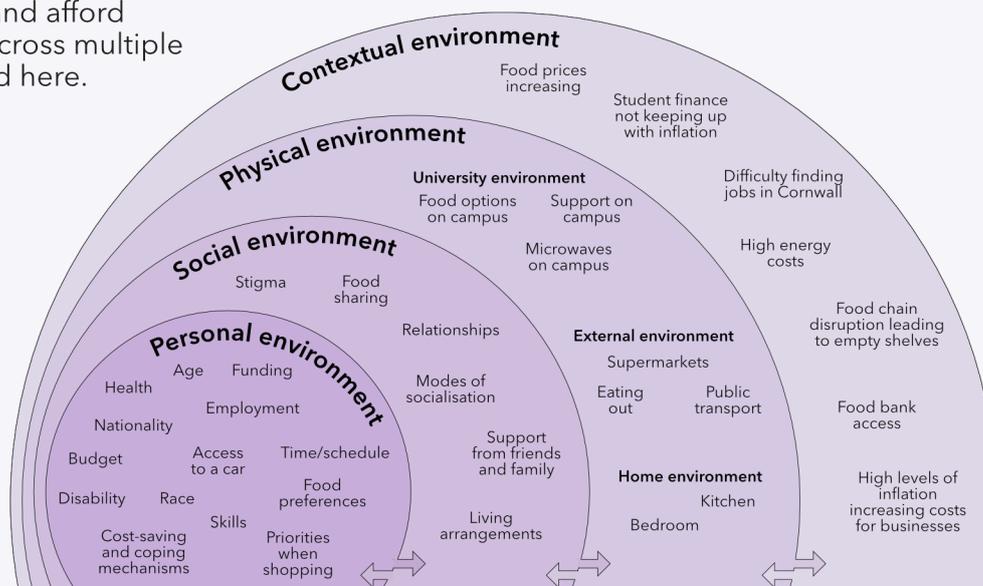
FOOD SECURE

FOOD INSECURE

## What affects food accessibility and affordability for university students?

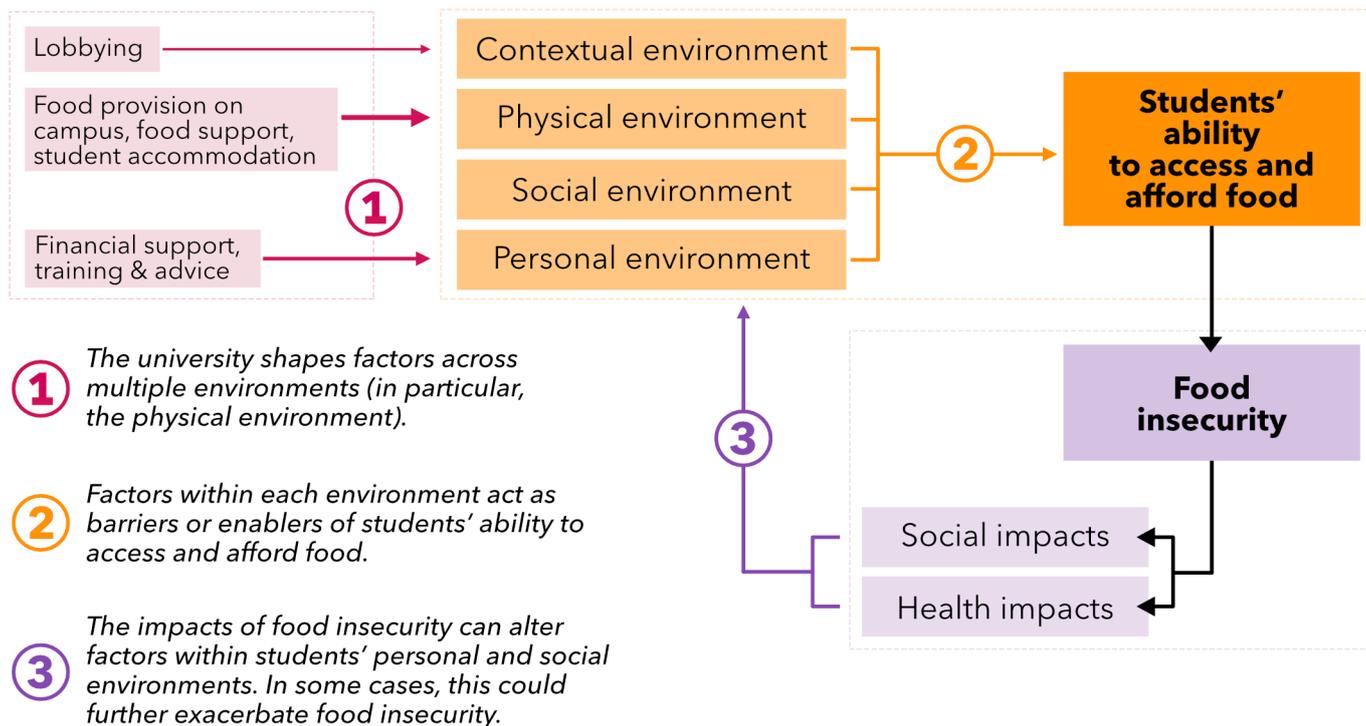
Students' ability to access and afford food is shaped by factors across multiple 'environments,' as visualised here.

While some factors act as barriers to food access, others are enablers - this is, however, highly specific to each student. Furthermore, factors interact across environments in ways that can mitigate or exacerbate issues of access.



## What is the role of the university?

Through providing services and support, the university shapes factors across different environments, and thus plays a role in students' ability to access and afford food. While the university is responsible for shaping the university food environment, it can also shape students' personal environment, through the provision of advice, training, or financial aid. These relationships are visualised below:



For a more detailed look at this study, including photos and quotes from student participants, please request the longer summary report at [vmw210@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:vmw210@exeter.ac.uk). I am happy to answer any questions or discuss further!

### References:

1. FAO, 2017. *The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2017*. Rome: FAO.
2. Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022. A Decade of College Student Hunger: What We Know and Where We Need to Go. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 837724.
3. Aldubaybi et al., 2022. The prevalence of food insecurity among UK university students. In: *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*. Presented at the Nutrition Society Summer Conference 2022: Food and Nutrition, pathways to a sustainable future, 12-15 July 2022, Sheffield Hallam University.

