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Food insecurity among university students, professional and academic staff at the University of Tasmania

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Preliminary research has examined the prevalence and demographic characteristics associated with food insecurity in university students[(1)] and their perceptions of the on-campus food environment.[(2)] However, assessment of the severity of food insecurity within both university staff and student populations is lacking. A cross-sectional online survey in March 2022 aimed to characterise the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in a sample of students, professional and academic staff at the University of Tasmania (UTAS). The Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) 6-item short form assessed food security status in addition to seven demographic and education characteristics for students, and six demographic and employment characteristics for staff. Prevalence was reported for food insecure and marginal, low and very low food security groups, and multivariate binary logistic regression utilized to compare food secure (high food security) and food insecure (marginal, low and very low food security) groups. Among student respondents ($n = 1257$; 42% aged 18–24 years, 69% female; 45% first year enrolled; 55% on campus; 84% domestic enrolled), the prevalence of food insecurity was 41.9% comprising 8.2% marginal food security, 16.5% low food security and 17.3% very low food security. Students aged 18–24 (AOR = 2.22, SE = 0.26, 95% CI [1.32, 3.74], $p = 0.003$) and 25–35 (AOR = 2.14, SE = 0.26, 95% CI [1.31, 3.61], $p = 0.004$) were at higher risk of food insecurity than students aged 55+ years. Students who identified as non-binary were at higher risk compared to male identifying students (AOR = 3.45, SE = 0.38, 95% CI [1.63, 7.30], $p = 0.001$). First year enrolled students were at higher risk (AOR = 1.43, SE = 0.140, 95% CI [1.08, 1.87], $p = 0.011$) compared with students enrolled in their third year or higher. International students were at two-times increased risk of food insecurity compared to domestic enrolled students (AOR = 1.93, SE = 0.18, 95% CI [1.36, 2.75], $p < 0.001$). Among staff ($n = 560$; 28% aged 45–54; 56% female identifying; 59% professional staff; 64% tenured/permanent contract; 38% employed 10 years or more at UTAS), 16.3% were food insecure comprising 3.8% marginal food security, 5.5% low food security and 7.0% very low food security. Professional staff were at higher risk than academic staff (AOR = 1.82, SE = 0.27, 95% CI [1.06, 3.12], $p = 0.031$), and casual staff experienced over two-times increased risk compared with tenured/permanent staff (AOR = 2.33, SE = 0.559, 95% CI [1.17, 5.11], $p = 0.017$). Those employed for less than a year (AOR = 3.63, SE = 0.395, 95% CI [1.67, 7.86], $p = 0.001$) or between 1–3 years (AOR = 2.83, SE = 0.37, 95% CI [1.36, 5.88], $p = 0.005$) were at higher risk of food insecurity compared to staff employed for 10 years or more. Our findings suggest the university community faces high rates of food insecurity, and most food insecure students and staff experience severe food insecurity, indicating they are regularly running out of food and experiencing hunger. Our findings have important implications for efforts towards reducing food insecurity at university campuses and indicate that strategies must advocate for equitable access to sufficient, safe, healthy food for all their students and staff members.

References

1. Murray S, Peterson C, Primo C, *et al.* (2021) *Int J Sustain Higher Edu* **22** (4), 731–746.
2. Kent K, Visentin D, Peterson C, *et al.* (2021) *Sustain* **13** (21), 11928.