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Building community and offering food support to university students: the KingsGate Student Pantry

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University students have high risk of food insecurity (FI)⁽¹⁾. Largely comprising young adults, they often have poor diets⁽²⁾, important given the potential for this life stage to embed healthful eating behaviours⁽³⁾. Having established high levels of concern about their food security among students at a post-92 university⁽⁴⁾, the KingsGate Student Pantry was established in November 2023 as a partnership between university staff and student volunteers, a local food charity and a local church. It includes a weekly social space with free refreshments to encourage belonging, signposting to support, cookery demonstrations and access to a range of food, household and personal hygiene items, including bread, fresh fruit and vegetables. For a weekly payment of £5, customers receive £20-35 of items (estimated). An evaluation of the Pantry to understand its impact on customers and volunteers was carried out.

Bespoke questionnaires for each group collected qualitative & quantitative data about experiences of FI, reasons for coming (or volunteering) and impact of the Pantry on nutrition and belonging. These were administered at the Pantry using QR codes. Optional telephone interviews were held. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes, while quantitative data were used to generate descriptive statistics. The impact of demographics on responses was explored using Kruskal Wallis tests.

This ongoing evaluation currently includes 112 customer and 14 volunteer questionnaires, as well as 3 customer and 5 volunteer interviews. Preliminary results suggest that finances and social reasons are major drivers for customer attendance. Key food items required at the Pantry are vegetables and fruit; cereals, pasta and rice; and milk and dairy products – basic staple foods now expensive largely due to cost-of-living pressures. High levels of satisfaction among both customers and volunteers are apparent, not limited to the goods on offer although levels of satisfaction with these are high. Goods are largely surplus, supplemented with additional items specifically purchased using the £5 weekly customer fee. This ensures a high quality offer in addition to contributing to sustainability of the Pantry. Satisfaction also extends to opportunities to build relationships, including between community and university volunteers and customers, groups otherwise unlikely to meet. The social space and welcome received are highly valued:

'Doesn't feel like support, feels like going out shopping with friends' [customer interview]

'Happy place to be' [volunteer interview]

The Pantry therefore represents a pathway to developing a shared understanding of the meaning of community between diverse groups, to their shared benefit. Built using existing relationships and partnerships, it exemplifies how universities can utilise the skills and expertise of their community stakeholders to mutual benefit.

References

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