



## FREE HIGHER EDUCATION MUST INCLUDE FOOD

# Student hunger an invisible crisis

Stephen Devereux

**T**HERE is a common perception that students represent the elite, and so cannot possibly suffer from hunger. But this is a myth. In fact, the available evidence suggests that students are more likely to be food insecure than others in the general population.

I reviewed a number of studies conducted at several South African universities over the past five years. These show that, on average, nearly a third of students live with food insecurity. The actual numbers might be even higher since some students may be ashamed to admit that they are poor and hungry.

Official statistics estimate 26% of the country's broader population is food insecure. One obvious reason for students being more vulnerable is that they have left home but are not yet employed, so they have low or zero income and depend on family support, bursaries or loans.

There are several underlying drivers of hunger among students. These include the fact that they come from poor families – poverty stands at 55% nationally – as well as the fact that living costs are high.

But the strongest predictor is race – an unsavoury legacy of apartheid. For instance, 24% of white students but 79% of black African students at the University of the Free State were found to be food insecure in 2013.

Even though South Africa's democracy is 23 years old, there are still no signs of improvement in several key indicators of inequality including racial distribution of hunger.

Studies at several US campuses have found that between 14% and 59% of students are food insecure. The national prevalence is 14.5%. As in South Africa, black students in the US are disproportionately at risk.

The consequences of food insecurity for students can be very serious. Being hungry can impair academic performance or even lead to dropping out. It can also cause mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and even thoughts of suicide.

Hunger reduces the ability to concentrate on studying, to write fluently, or to perform well in exams. Researchers have suggested that not having access to enough nutritionally adequate and safe food could be one of the reasons for almost

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half of South African university students not graduating.

Students respond to food insecurity and hunger by finding alternative sources of food, like eating with friends or relatives. They also ration their consumption by eating cheaper food, only drinking fluids or fasting. They borrow money or seek work so they can afford more or better food. But taking on work reduces their time and energy for studying.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) disburses loans to pay for fees, accommodation and living expenses for poor students. It also provides food vouchers. But it often disburses the funds as well as the vouchers late. In addition, the vouchers aren't enough to ensure students can feed themselves.

Universities, NGOs and students themselves are trying to

help. Many universities have introduced food banks, food gardens, meal vouchers and free breakfasts or hot lunches. The University of the Free State launched a “No Student Hungry” campaign. NGOs such as Stop Hunger Now and Gift of the Givers are feeding thousands of students. One student at the University of the Western Cape set up a Facebook page called “Fairy Godmother”, where struggling students write candidly about financial needs and invite others to contribute donations.

These initiatives provide essential support, but tend to be unco-ordinated and under-funded. They depend on the generosity of staff and the resources of each university – which reproduces pre-existing inequalities between wealthier and poorer universities.

Besides, academics and university staff should not be responsible for feeding students. This is a government responsibility. The right to food is in South Africa's Constitution, but it isn't being upheld. Hunger on South Africa's campuses is an invisible crisis that should be prioritised at the highest policy level. Efficient management at NSFAS is urgently needed to disburse funds to students on time.

The government's commitment to free higher education for poor and working-class students must include not only fees but basic needs, especially food. This might require a new vision for financing higher education: one that takes students' daily realities of hunger and deprivation into account. – The Conversation

● Devereux is a research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. This article is based on the author's keynote address at the National Colloquium on Access to Food for Students in South African Tertiary Institutions on August 14

