

## **Nutrition of University Students in the UK: A Case in Point to Demonstrate Nutritional Vulnerability in Emerging Adulthood**

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Early adulthood is often associated with poor dietary habits [1].

Several national diet and/or nutrition surveys have demonstrated that young adults have poorer dietary habits compared with their other older adult counterparts. For example, this can be seen in inadequate fibre intake of young adults in British National Diet and Nutrition Surveys or in low fruit and vegetable consumption of young adults in the Australian Health Survey. These poor dietary habits seem to associate (or at least coincide) with transition to independence and taking responsibility for food choice [2,3].

Within the Higher Education setting, numerous studies have shown that students do not meet the dietary guidelines and recommendations [4,5]. This does greatly matter because the poor dietary habits of university students have adverse physiological consequences and can lead to overweight, obesity, CVD and type-2-diabetes in later life; and this produces major cost for the National Health Service [6,7].

Within the UK, there is no nationally representative data to show the nutritional status of our university students; while we also do not have a national health promotion programme to improve nutrition of our students [8].

We have worked on nutrition of the university students since 2009 and our approach in studying this phenomenon has been a collaborative approach. In this approach together with our students, our colleagues and I produced a systematic research protocol to investigate different angles of the nutrition of the student population as part of their dissertations [9].

Apart from literature, most of my understanding of the field is from the experience of several projects on health and nutrition of young adults:

The project 'Diet, Health and Lifestyle of University Students' included diet history, physical measurements and several questionnaires. The other project called 'Collaborative Investigation in Nutritional Status of Young Adults'; which we briefly called it CINSYA has been going on since 2013. CINSYA uniquely has 3 day diet and physical activity diary, physical measurements such as body composition and blood pressure, laboratory measures such as fasting blood glucose and lipid profile, questionnaires and more than 500 participants with fully productive data. Our previous smaller collaborative work looked at the association between parenting styles, motivation orientation and eating habits of young adults, and our qualitative *Loyal tongue*, *Liberal mind* project investigated the impact of dietary acculturation amongst international students [9,10].

### **What do we really know about the diet of university students?**

First of all, poor quality of diet. We can confirm that students do not meet the dietary guidelines and we have seen that repeatedly in our projects. Secondly, a high degree of underreporting, especially amongst participants who have higher body weight and percentage body fat. Thirdly, we have seen a variation in nutritional status of students based on demographic and socioeconomic factors. For example, we have seen gender differences in nutritional status of the university students and we have seen variation in nutrient intake based on the living arrangement such as the type of accommodation i.e. rented accommodation, hall of residence, living with parents and so on.

We have also noticed an association between dietary habits and cardiometabolic risk. For example, we have seen higher waist circumference, total dietary fat consumption and percentage body fat amongst participants who skip breakfast.

Nutrition is part of a bigger picture of the holistic health of the students and we have seen an association between nutritional status and other health behaviours such as physical activity smoking and drinking habits. The nutritional status also seems to be associated with stress, sleep quality and psychological wellbeing and characteristics such as perceived body image and/or motivation orientation. We do have a rather large dataset on all of the above and we are gradually publishing our findings.

### **How to improve the diet of students?**

There is a very recent systematic review by Deliens., *et al.* [7] on interventions that are likely to work to improve the nutrition of the university students. The authors considered range of potential interventions and concluded that with confidence, nutrition education, enhancing self-regulation of dietary consumption, and point of purchase messaging strategies are initiatives proven to be successful [7].

To give you some examples on the above strategies, we produced 'a student's guide to Nutrition' that is actually produced by our first year nutrition students for other students at Liverpool Hope University under supervision of my registered nutritionist colleagues. I think this was a successful example of nutrition education. We have also recently opened a healthy eating café on campus called Zest café with particular attention to point of purchase strategies for improving nutritional status. But despite all these, I believe we need a national nutrition and health promotion programme for the higher education sector; and for me that is of the highest priority.

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