

EVENT

National Colloquium on Access to Food for Students in South African Tertiary Institutions: Challenges of Hunger among Students in Higher Education in South Africa (13–14 August 2018)

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Student hunger on university campuses has gained prominence ever since the #FeesMustFall movement spread across South Africa's tertiary institutions in 2015. Although there are no definite statistics on the extent of the problem, university administrators are paying increasing attention to students' lack of the basic needs of food and shelter.

To sustain the conversation about access to food for students in South African tertiary institutions, the Dullah Omar Institute hosted a two-day national colloquium (13–4 August 2018) in conjunction with the University of the Western Cape and University of Pretoria, with the support of the Ford Foundation.

The colloquium was guided by four questions. First, who has the obligation to realise the right to food of students in tertiary institutions? Secondly, what are the roles of different stakeholders in realising the right in such a context? Thirdly, do non-state actors such as private corporations have any duty to address food insecurity and hunger among tertiary-level students? Fourthly, what is the best approach to addressing food insecurity among these students?

The colloquium brought together a variety of stakeholders involved in enabling access to food for students in tertiary Institutions, among them government officials, policy-makers, student leaders, academics, human rights activists, and representatives of civil society organisations.

In her goodwill message, Prof. Pamela Dube, the Deputy Vice Chancellor responsible for Student Development and Support at the University of the Western Cape, welcomed participants to the colloquium, which was the first of its kind in the Western Cape. She said South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, and because of this, food insecurity among students at universities across South Africa is a very real concern, given that the majority of students affected by it come from a society with a high level of poverty.

Prof. Dube said that, taking into account 'the politics of giving and taking' and 'the challenges of dependency', there was a recognition of 'the need to empower students as part of a comprehensive upskilling programme to address self-dependency'. She emphasised that 'we cannot have students who come to university to learn stressing about not having food to eat and

compromising themselves just so they can have a meal’.

In the keynote address, Dr Stephen Devereux, the South Africa-United Kingdom (SA-UK) Bilateral Research Chair in Social Protection in Food Security (SARChI), based at the Centre of Excellence in Food Security, noted that although the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) plays a major role in the student food insecurity crisis, it had become dysfunctional.

‘If you think about the food part of the bursaries that students at UWC get,’ he said – referring to a retail supermarket voucher for six months, with a total value of R2,000 – ‘it is clearly inadequate in a country which is faced with rapid and high food-price inflation.’

Dr Devereux emphasised that it is a myth that if you can afford to go to university, you can afford basic needs. He said there is growing evidence to suggest that food insecurity among students in universities is indeed even higher than in South Africa’s households. Referring to studies in the United States and Australia on food insecurity among tertiary-level students, Dr Devereux pointed that students are more likely to be food insecure than others in the population.

‘[S]tudents are ashamed and embarrassed to come forward,’ he noted, ‘so the problem is even worse than what we are measuring.’

He recommended thus that the ‘invisible crisis’ of student hunger should be prioritised at the highest policy level.

Testimonials and presentations by Student Representative Council (SRC) delegates from UCT, UWC, Stellenbosch University and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) confirmed that students are often hungry as they have little to no food to eat, and that when they do eat, they have unhealthy eating habits.

This was especially true of those from poor backgrounds, those who are first-generation



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students in their families, and those who in demographic terms are black or coloured – SRC delegates emphasised that ‘race is the strongest predictor of student food insecurity’. They also underlined the importance of factors such as the availability of food, food prices, food quality, and the availability of funds to purchase food.

Discussing the recently revised NSFAS, Dr Diana Parker of the Department of Higher Education and Training said it is clear the government is committed to free higher education for poor and working-class students

In turn, Laetitia Permall, Director of the Centre for Student Support Services, said the effect food insecurity has on students can be very serious. A reduced ability to concentrate on studies can lead to impaired academic performance; poor performance in exams, for instance, could then result in students dropping out. Student hunger may also compound mental health problems such as anxiety and depression and so lead to thoughts of suicide. Mrs Permall observed that there thus is a link between a lack of nutritionally adequate food and student attrition.

As to how the policy space could be influenced to guarantee access to food for tertiary students, Mondli Mbhele, Deputy Director in charge of food and nutrition security coordination at the national Department of Social Development (DSD), said that for the DSD to set up a food bank similar to those in vulnerable communities, it first had to understand the extent of the problem before

appropriate interventions could be devised.

He stressed that while short-term emergency solutions such as food banks and food pantries may be useful, upstream solutions to address the basic needs of vulnerable students are imperative.

On the question of how tertiary institutions can realise the right to food, Prof Ebenezer Durojaye, Dr Bright Nkrumah and Dr Emma Lubaale emphasised the role of advocacy and mobilisation in addressing food insecurity among students, as had happened when the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015–2016 brought the issue of student hunger to the fore. There was also the agreement that NSFAS can play a more significant role in addressing student hunger than just providing a bursary loan for students.

It was noted, too, that non-state actors, among them private corporations, have a duty to address food insecurity and hunger among students in tertiary institutions. In a discussion panel, Nokuthula Zama of the Moshal Foundation, Karuna Singh of Wits Citizenship and Community Outreach, and Enver Moothoosamy of the Foundation for Human Rights, acknowledged that philanthropy has played a crucial role in the tertiary education sector.

As to what is the best approach to addressing student food insecurity, the colloquium concluded that, whatever it is, academics and university staff should not be responsible for feeding their students. Regarding current gaps in research, participants were interested in the gender dimension of food insecurity and whether female students are engaging in transactional sex for financial gain or food products as a coping mechanism.

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About The Access to Food for Students Project

In 2017, the Socio-Economic Rights Project at the Dullah Omar Institute embarked on a project known as 'Access to Food for Students in South African Tertiary Institutions' (Access to Food for Students Project). It tackles food insecurity among tertiary-level students, an issue requiring urgent attention by all stakeholders.

The project is subdivided into an exploratory and implementation phase. The exploratory phase involved taking a fact-finding approach, while the implementation phase involves advocacy to address systemic issues through policy review. The two-day national colloquium was part of this latter phase.

Further reading

Adeniyi O (16 July 2018) 'Food insecurity among students a lingering after-effect of apartheid.' Cape Times. Available at <https://bit.ly/2uHrDEb>.

Devereux S (27 August 2018) 'South Africa's university students face a crisis: Nearly a third go hungry.' The Conversation. Available at <https://bit.ly/2RBxXuo>