

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# A survey of nursing students' experiences and accessibility to non-educational support services at a regional university campus

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and objective:** Higher education students face considerable financial hardship during their university life. Many resort to seeking paid employment to subsidise their living arrangements. For a select few this is not always sufficient, especially those from a low socioeconomic backgrounds. Nearly 40% of university students live below the poverty line. This has important implications for academic success and student health and wellbeing. The aim of this study was to review and identify the “non-educational” services nursing students are accessing to support academic success in the undergraduate nursing programme.

**Setting and methods:** A total population sample of 243 nursing students from all three years of the undergraduate nursing programme at a satellite campus in regional Australia were invited to participate in an online 25-item survey. The survey questions consisted of student demographic data and questions addressing access and use of non-standard university services which incorporated multiple choice questions, Likert and open ended questions. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and inductive content analysis.

**Results:** Student demographics suggest that more than 30% of students in the sample are living below the poverty line, 55% of students come to university hungry, and the majority of students were frequently accessing free foodstuffs. Two themes emerged from the open-ended questions—accessibility and being grateful.

**Conclusions:** Student poverty places students in a very stressful and difficult situation when prioritising between attending university or seeking paid employment. The students in this study identified that food insecurity and financial hardship were major issues that they often experienced on a daily basis despite access to other income streams. The needs for these types of services are growing as students feel the burden of achieving a university education and the debt that accompanies it.

**Key Words:** Student poverty, Food insecurity, Low socioeconomic status, Financial hardship, University student

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Australian government's Widening Participation Programme was developed in order to allow capable students from economically deprived areas the opportunity to access higher education.<sup>[1,2]</sup> However, this has created an environment where the ability to procure the necessities of daily

living may have disadvantaged some nursing students. As a result additional services have now become common place in most universities to support low socioeconomic status students (LSES). Financial constraints placed on tertiary students is frequently recognised as a need for these additional services, services such as Foodbanks and breakfast clubs.

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Food insecurity, for example is becoming one of the more prominent problems faced by university students during their university life.<sup>[3]</sup>

Food insecurity, defined as the inability to access and procure foodstuffs capable of supporting an active and healthy lifestyle, ranges from insecurity without hunger or insecurity with hunger.<sup>[4]</sup> Both equally contribute to substandard academic performance, poor cognitive functioning, malnutrition and obesity.<sup>[5-7]</sup> Reports to date show that approximately 21%-72% of university students face one form food insecurity or another.<sup>[6,7]</sup> However, what is not clear is whether this phenomenon is generalisable across all university students or focused on one particular socioeconomic group. This becomes problematic of course for students from LSES as they are particularly vulnerable to food poverty, financial hardship and not completing higher education.<sup>[8]</sup>

Given the expense and the criteria for entry into Australian higher education it is not uncommon for students from LSES areas to be excluded because of price and academic achievement at secondary school.<sup>[9]</sup> It has become common place for universities to offer services which support some of these living expenses as well as supporting the student in accessing university and retaining them when admitted. Services such as food banks,<sup>[4]</sup> textbook loan schemes,<sup>[10]</sup> breakfast club's and "Second Bite"<sup>[11]</sup> are now being offered by some universities. These services supplement, including nursing student's with some of the necessities of university and family life. For example, the high price of nursing textbooks is such that they are often not a priority for some nursing students especially where financial hardship often means the difference between eating and going hungry.<sup>[12]</sup> Therefore, these services such as the textbook loan scheme, for example enables students to borrow the required unit texts for a semester. In some cases, the students clinical practice uniforms are included for when a clinical practice unit is part of that semesters study plan.

Promoting food security is an increasing challenge and using services such as Second Bite, a national food recovery initiative to provide fresh, nutritious food for people in need that would otherwise go to waste, together with the Foodbank and Breakfast Club ensures some nursing students are at least able to access some food items and at times to supplement their weekly shopping. The Foodbank for example is often funded by a university's student services and amenities fee and provides a range of canned and dry goods as well as frozen foods. The Breakfast Club offers free breakfast for students once a week during term time. The aim of these services is to ensure that these students are able to complete their studies with less worry around issues like food insecurity or

access to textbooks.

One way that this is currently being supported is through the existence of the Low Income Support Contact Officer whose role is to coordinate these services in addition to liaising and running other services offered from the metropolitan campus – such as cultural awareness programmes. However, to date there has been no evaluation of the services offered by the LICSO, how nursing students access these and the student's perceptions of the services. Therefore the purpose of this study was to evaluate and to develop a clearer understanding of the impact of these "non-mainstream, non-educational" services such as Breakfast Club and the Foodbank.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Aim

The aim of this study was to review and identify the "non-educational" services nursing students are accessing to support their studies in the undergraduate nursing programme.

### 2.2 Sample

A total population of 1-3rd year nursing students (n = 243) were sent an email through the university student email system inviting them participate in the study. Contained within the email was a participation information sheet outlining the aims and objectives of the study along with a link to the online questionnaire. Student anonymity was assured using this format as there were no student identifiers used. The online questionnaire was live for 4 weeks. A repeat email was sent at the end of week 2 to remind students of the study. Once the student completed the questionnaire they were prevented from re-submitting a new or alternative questionnaire. 60 nursing students from all three years of the nursing programme completed an online survey (25% response rate). Six students were withdrawn for failing to complete the survey leaving a sample of 54 students.

### 2.3 Data collection

A 25 item online survey was developed that incorporated Likert scale, multiple choice and open ended questions. Eight questions identified demographic data in relation to age, gender, family income, marital status and dependants. The remaining 17 questions related to accessing the food bank (n = 3), Second Bite (n = 4), the textbook loan scheme (n = 5) and breakfast club (n = 5). The questionnaire was reviewed independently by three academics with experience in questionnaire design and a number of changes to wording were incorporated as result of this feedback.

### 2.4 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to identify the commonly used services. In addition, the open-ended questions were

coded which were then formed into content specific categories and analysed using inductive content analysis.

## 2.5 Ethics approval

Ethics approval was sought from the University Ethics Committee but was waived based on the premise that this was a quality improvement initiative. Consent was also waived on the basis that completion of the online questionnaire was an indication of the participant's interest in the study. Participants were informed in the online questionnaire pre-amble that their answers would be anonymous and no individual identifiers would be used.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Student demographics

Overall the results of the student demographics provide a mixed view of service access as a university student at this campus. Whilst over 50% of the students in this study are considered mature aged, 81% students are living on less than A\$1,000 per week and 20% on less than A\$250/week (see Table 1). What is most noticeable is that 75% of students have children engaged in preschool, primary or secondary school education. However, what this data does not explain is the percentage of students in this cohort who are single parents. It was naturally assumed that identifying marital status would distinguish this group from the total cohort.

### 3.2 Food security

In terms of accessing those services that provided supplemental food, this data identified that students frequently accessed food from the Foodbank (44%) and the Breakfast Club (72%). However, what is not clear is if students declared as to whether they accessed other food programmes outside of the university such as those supported by local charities. What was also surprising is that only 12% of students accessed Second Bite (see Figure 1). Students were asked how they related to the food services that were offered at the campus. Overall the Foodbank and the Breakfast Club were well received by the students, though there was a strong majority that felt other students were "more" deserving of some of these services (the Foodbank in particular) to the point that they did not access the service (see Figure 2). The opposite can be said of the breakfast club where students found this activity to benefit them in a number of ways. First it allowed them to socialise with other students (63%) and second it enable those students to have some form of breakfast before starting classes (57%). Interestingly 55% of students report coming to University without having breakfast in the first place (see Figure 3). When students were asked to comment on the

statement "Having a free breakfast provided for me by Uni makes me feel..." the majority of students felt thankful (see Figure 4). Remarkably, 14% of students felt awkward, guilty or embarrassed. More alarming is that 4 students felt by accessing Breakfast Club they gave the perception that they were poor.

**Table 1.** Student demographics

	N (n = 54)	SD
<b>Current year of program</b>		
Yr1	18 (33.3%)	.744
Yr2	24 (44.4%)	
Yr3	12 (22.2%)	
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	49 (90.7%)	.293
Male	5 (9.2%)	
<b>Current Age</b>		
18-25	20 (37%)	1.970
26-30	5 (9.2%)	
31-35	6 (11.1%)	
36-40	7 (12.9%)	
41-45	6 (11.1%)	
> 46	10 (18.5%)	
<b>Weekly Family Income</b>		
< A\$250	11 (20.3%)	1.128
< A\$500	14 (25.9%)	
A\$500-A\$1000	19 (35.1%)	
A\$1000-A\$2000	7 (12.9%)	
> A\$2000	3 (5.5%)	
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single/never married	21 (38.8%)	1.423
Defacto	6 (11.1%)	
Married	16 (29.6%)	
Separated	5 (9.2%)	
Divorced	5 (9.2%)	
Widowed	1 (1.8%)	
<b>Number of Dependents</b>		
0	18 (33.3%)	1.295
1	8 (14.8%)	
2	12 (22.2%)	
3	7 (12.9%)	
4	2 (3.7%)	
5	2 (3.7%)	
> 5	0	
<b>Dependents Age Group</b>		
Kindy/day care	12 (22.2%)	1.267
Primary School	19 (35.1%)	
High School	10 (18.5%)	
TAFE/College	2 (3.7%)	
University	3 (5.5%)	
Working	1 (1.8%)	
Retired	1 (1.8%)	

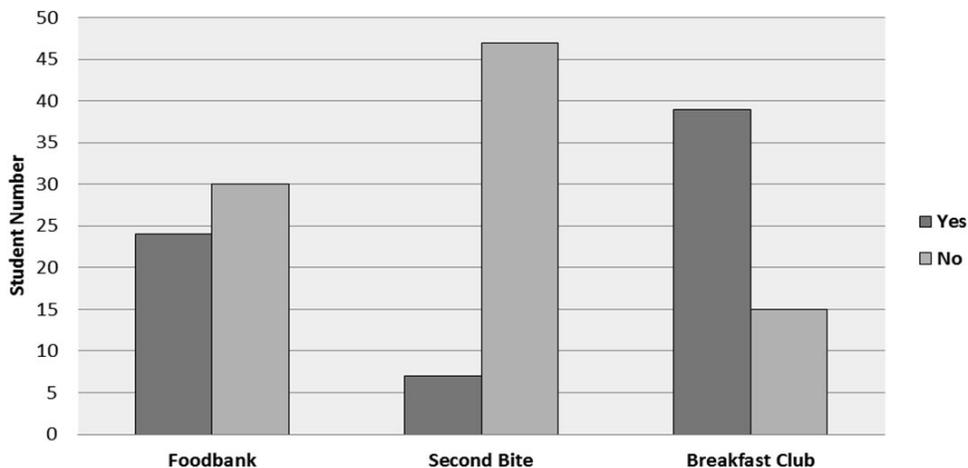


Figure 1. Food services access

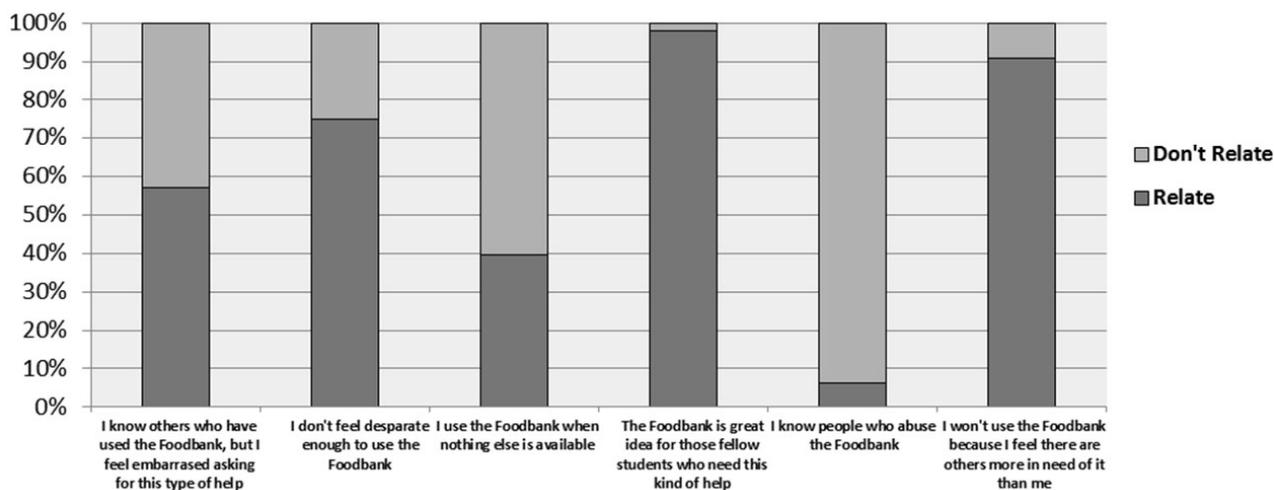


Figure 2. Accessing the foodbank

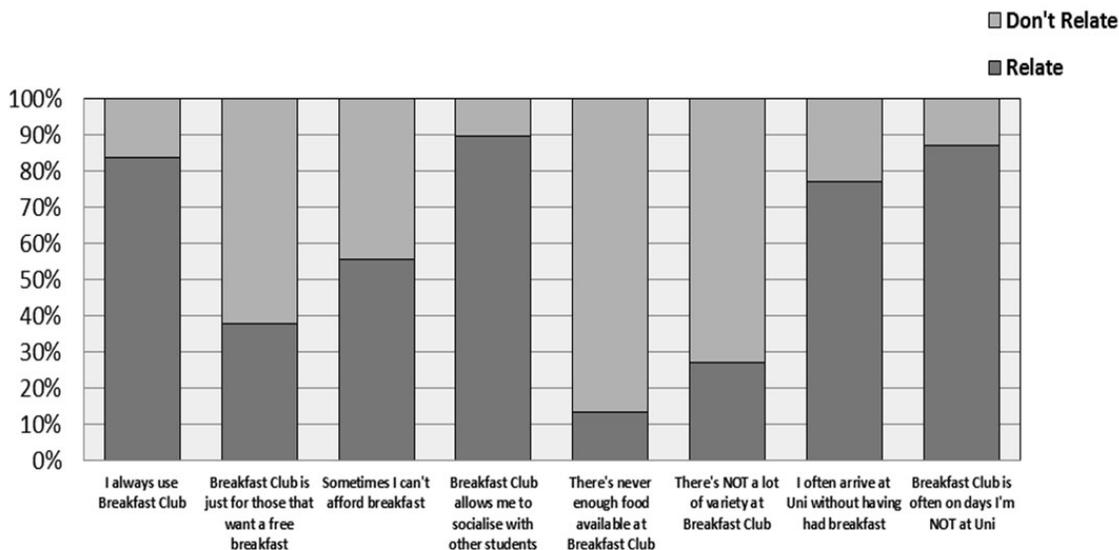
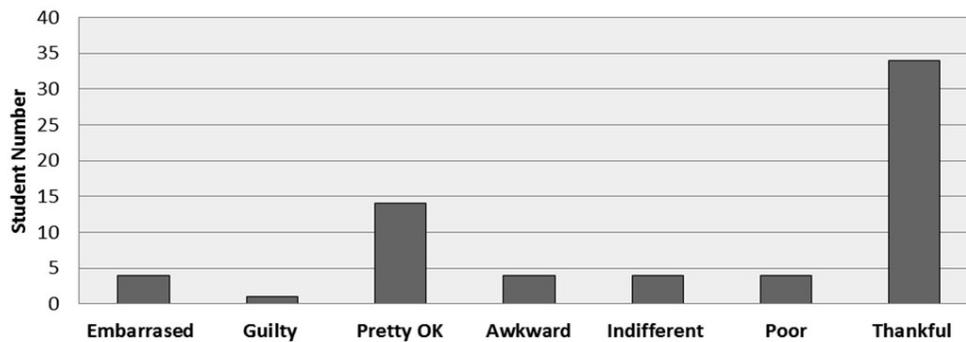


Figure 3. Accessing breakfast club



**Figure 4.** “Having a free breakfast provided for me by Uni makes me feel . . .”

Two major themes emerged from the open-ended questions from this study which highlighted the student’s perceptions of the services the campus provides:

- Accessibility,
- Being grateful.

### 3.3 Accessibility

While the services provided by the campus are easily accessible to all nursing students, there are some like the Textbook Loan Scheme and the Foodbank which are accessible to students on a “self-diagnosed” need. At times students may have to prove financial hardship in order to access them and if this access is ongoing, they are referred to a welfare officer. Others like Second Bite and Breakfast Club are open to all and students who are free to help themselves. However, while students were grateful these amenities were available to them, there was real sense of trying to maintain anonymity when accessing food for example from Second Bite. It was evident that some were concerned about the openness and the publicness in which food items are displayed to the extent that one student commented:

“ . . . somewhere that you could use it without having to go out the main doors and other students seeing you leave with food. I just find it a little embarrassing that I am struggling financially at times.” (R20)

Others felt that Second Bite for example should be held outside of the University campus to reduce their anxiety of being seen taking food. Yet this sense of embarrassment was not always a problem for some students. Many resigned themselves to their current financial difficulties and saw being able to get food as a means of surviving; one student forthrightly stated that “*I don’t have to prove I need it*” (R50). Others purposely arrived at university early to ensure they got what they needed for the day or in some cases the week. While most of the food provided is perishable such as bread, fruit and vegetables, students did want more of a variety such as dried goods.

Throughout all the comments made about the non-mainstream services provided, students were very socially minded in their approach to the plight of others; some felt that even though they were struggling personally they were more inclined to allow others access to services before themselves. Students who had transferred into the university from the metropolitan campus or indeed from other universities found the atmosphere at the “*campus unique, friendly and comforting*” (R12).

### 3.4 Being grateful

Being grateful for the support the campus provided the students was evident in a majority of the comments made. “*Pretty damn awesome*” (R26) certainly puts into perspective the feelings some students felt at being cared for by the campus staff, but also the nursing faculty as well. Being reminded that some are struggling to meet the demands of the nursing programme as well juggling the pressures of family life, identified for some students that pride usually had to take second place. One respondent replied “*That it is OK to ask for help*” (R27). For a lot of students this was difficult to reconcile considering their previous and sometimes ongoing life experiences; experiences of physical and emotional abuse, dysfunctional families, mental health issues and single parenthood. But being in an environment that cultivated a sense of belonging, “*feelings of being looked after*” (R20) and inclusivity ensured the nursing students were being supported to succeed and perhaps for some lift them out of the desperate cycle of poverty and despair – something some student’s commented on did not readily happen at the metropolitan campus – “*You were a number lost in a crowd of faces*” (R36).

The Textbook Loan Scheme proved invaluable to some and even the envy of others:

“This is a fantastic resource, as a single parent I don’t have more than \$500 per semester to use on textbooks and it is stressful trying to borrow them from the library

as course texts are always in demand. [The] Textbook Loan Scheme has been such a blessing over the past three years, [it] has made Uni achievable, and has my friends over at [the metropolitan campus] are stunned that we are so lucky up at our campus, and that they wish they could access such a service too.” (R51)

It is worth remembering that the textbook loan scheme is available to students at the metropolitan campus as well. Although data does suggest that students appear not to be accessing this service, the reasons why are difficult to ascertain and perhaps one reason is income. In others words the threshold for accessing the loan scheme is set low and as such a majority of students may not qualify for the scheme.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The aim of this descriptive exploratory study was to evaluate the services managed by the Low Income Support Officer aimed at supporting student retention in an undergraduate nursing programme. Much of the literature around supporting low income university students appears to focus on a broad spectrum of students and in some cases does not take into consideration the intricacies of course specific or professionally accredited programmes such as nursing. As such there appears to be very little literature describing the effects of LISCO type services for nursing students. The work that has been done has been integral to understanding the needs of low socio-economic students in general in meeting study success.<sup>[7,13]</sup> For example Tones *et al.* in supporting mature aged students identified some of the barriers that negated this student cohort from seeking support, one of which was finances.<sup>[14]</sup> There was often little explanation or guidance for mature aged students as to what the expectations of university life generally meant. While this is a very real concern for the students in this study; the smallness of the campus and the diversity of student demographics often meant that students collaborated more effectively with each other — the social mindedness and the collective success that nursing students in this study certainly portrayed. Yet in Tones *et al.*’s study they also recognised that accessibility to services was not always forthcoming to their students or they were ineligible for some services such as financial support more so when compared with non-LSES students.<sup>[14]</sup> It would seem the younger the student the more eligible they were to seeking financial support, which was evident in this study.

However, what this study identified is that the non-mainstream services are as integral to supporting students as the library services or other services associated with supporting financial hardship and academic achievement. This is evident in the data around accessing supplemental food services such as the Foodbank and Second Bite in an attempt

to reduce the potential for food insecurity, sometimes on a day by day basis. It is well documented that the inability to access suitable or sustainable foodstuffs does impact on student retention and attrition. Evaluating a campus-based Foodbank in Canada for example, Azurdia *et al.* found that as a hypothetical consequence of withdrawing this type of service, students would become severely affected both emotionally and physically. But more importantly increased debt, quitting school and working longer employed hours meant having the service improved a student’s financial situation and as such reduced student attrition.<sup>[6,8,15]</sup> While this study did not specifically look at attrition data against food security, it does indicate that food insecurity may well in the future become a major contributing factor alongside financial hardship for student attrition. Yet, while access to food is an important consideration there is clearly the need for more easily library accessible learning materials that are cost neutral to the student such as ebooks or other forms of digital media<sup>[16]</sup> given the increase in web based learning technologies.

Many of the students (81%, see Table 1) in this study were earning well below the national weekly average income of A\$1,300/week.<sup>[17]</sup> This could be explained by the large number of students less than 25 years of age (37%) who were potentially living in the family home and working part-time to supplement their life style. However, what is possibly more alarming is that the remaining 62% of students are committed to the financial responsibility of childcare and family duties living on average income of less than A\$1000/week. What this means in real terms is that these university students, young or mature, are often living on an income that is considered to be 20%-39% below the poverty line.<sup>[10,18]</sup> Earlier work by Turale and Newton in reviewing student poverty found that students employed a number of coping strategies to ensure their academic success. For example students were selling essential items to pay bills, reduced their daily food intake, did not buy textbooks, reduced their study load, increased their part-time work and in extreme cases engaged in illegal activities.<sup>[19]</sup> This did create further problems more notably to do with academic performance. The need for paid employment often distracted students in this study from their studies or regular absences from lectures and tutorials because of the pressure of child care affordability meant that students were frequently psychologically and physically stressed.<sup>[20]</sup> This was further echoed in Lewis’ *et al.*’s study where regional and rural based students often found the additional costs of attending university crippling to the point that some were living in cars because of accommodation costs or were unable to eat a balanced meal; concerning is that 36% of these students sometimes went without food, meals, or groceries as a result of financial constraints, similar in

many respects to the students in this study.<sup>[21]</sup> Combined with being unable to afford medical or dental care or suitable accommodation, often forced students into desperate situations.<sup>[22]</sup> This last point was particularly concerning for the self-disclosed single parent students in this study where accessibility to non-payment general practitioner services often meant travelling outside of their catchment area to visit a doctor.

### Limitations of the study

One considerable limitation to this study is the sample size. Whilst we only managed a 25% response rate, it identified for us one of the pitfalls of using an online questionnaire format. We concede that students may have not received the initial and repeat email invitations and as such we could have tried other methods to increase student participation such as using an incentive given the student demographic. However, we adopted this approach to ensure and maximise student anonymity and confidentiality.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is evident the financial security of the average university student is often challenged by tuition fees, the high cost of text books and the costs of daily living. Many see university as stepping to stone to a brighter future with good career prospects and an increased spending potential. This may be the case in some situations. However, for those individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds attaining a university qualification may be their only hope of climbing out of the cycle of poverty. Whilst nursing is not seen as a highly paid

career choice when compared with business, medicine or law for example, it does offer financial security and stability. It is well documented elsewhere that there is a global shortage of nurses. For those individuals identified from this study the need for a career that offers a steady income, career advancement opportunities or a sense of self purpose, it is easy to see the willingness of committing to a substantial debt.

What is problematic is the often hidden cost of higher education. The initial outlay of tuition fees does not take into account the cost living over the life the programme, which can be substantial. Therefore the original cost of merely attending university can be doubled or in some case tripled<sup>[21]</sup> if living costs are then included in the decision to attend, something many students are at times not acutely aware of especially the younger students. This then leaves some students no alternative but to seek paid employment at any opportunity to help subsidise their university experience. At times this is not always enough and as a result some students sacrifice basic needs such as food or the necessities of being a university student for example buying required texts or in the case of nursing practice uniforms. It is common place in some universities now to offer non-mainstream services such as foodbanks and breakfast clubs with easier and affordable access to programme specific materials such those already mentioned. In more socioeconomically deprived areas, such as the one described in this study, these services become an alternative and added source of subsistence.

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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