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The implementation and evaluation of a recipe box scheme to help ease the cost-of-living crisis in university students

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The recent ONS survey reported that 92% of students had been affected by the cost-of-living crisis with 46% revealing their overall mental health and well-being had worsened⁽¹⁾. London Metropolitan University has a unique diverse student population: in 2020-21, 82% of students were mature, 64% of students identified as female, 55% of students were from a minoritised background and 13% had a known disability⁽²⁾. Furthermore, at least 50% of our students, many of whom have caring responsibilities, reside in the most deprived wards of Islington or other impoverished London boroughs. It has been documented that those students with families, who come from a low income and a minority background are more vulnerable⁽³⁾ and are more likely to be disproportionately affected by the cost-of-living crisis and at risk of food insecurity. We sought to ease the burden of the cost-of-living crisis with a recipe box scheme, BRITE Box⁽⁴⁾ and evaluate its acceptance.

BRITE Box provides a complete set of pre-weighed ingredients for a healthy nutritious meal with an easy-to-follow recipe guide. Each box typically contains two servings of vegetables, meat, bread and dairy, as well as spices, dried and tinned goods to feed a family of five people. We distributed 300 boxes over a period of five months to students primarily with families who had accessed the university hardship fund. Student volunteers and the academic staff pre-weighed the ingredients, prepared and distributed the boxes. The scheme was advertised through Student Services who administer the hardship fund, the Student Union and the intranet. The recipients of the boxes were provided with a QR code linking to a 20-item online survey on demographic characteristics, number of children, acceptability of the box and perceived advantages and disadvantages of the scheme. Ethics was approved by London Metropolitan University.

Thirty-three participants completed the survey, 42% of the recipients identified as female, 55% were from a minority background and 30% had children. The responses showed that students agreed and strongly agreed that the recipe box introduced them to new flavours (52%), and new foods (42%). The majority followed the recipe and will use again (67%). Most importantly, 73% students agreed and or strongly agreed that it helped with the food budget and helped foster a sense of belonging to the university (85%).

The scheme has proved to be popular among the students: “a really cool concept”, “it helped me cook”, “the box provided food for 3 days” and created a buzz around campus on distribution days. It has enhanced the feeling of community and belonging within the university, whilst also alleviating food insecurity and tackling the cost-of-living crisis.

Acknowledgments

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References

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