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UCT feeding scheme addresses student hunger

A University of Cape Town (UCT) feeding scheme that was started last year to alleviate the problem of hunger among students on campus is growing in leaps and bounds. The scheme is now serving a total of 600 lunches on UCT's upper campus, the College of Music, Hiddingh campus and the Child Guidance Clinic.

UCT's Department of Social Development's started the feeding programme in April last year when they realised how many students were going hungry because of funding problems or other circumstances.

The lunches are made up, packed and distributed by volunteers from staff, including residence catering and transport staff, students and the public. The lunches contain two healthy sandwiches, fruit and a fruit juice. As a bonus, a Defy double-door fridge was donated from the Department of Social Development's Strategic Fuel Fund (SFF) to keep the juices cool and provide cold storage for perishables.

Speaking at the fridge donation event, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Loretta Feris said: "For the past two years UCT had worked hard on student finance and accommodation. Food was the third element."

Though the Department of Social Development's feeding project did make a dent in the need, more was required. In anticipation of the strenuous year-end exam period in 2018, when students would need to be fed to perform at their best, the Food Security Task Team used the department's existing initiative as a platform. The Food Security Task Team includes multiple stakeholders such as student organisations and staff.

"We wanted to ensure that students were able to perform academically, and to do what they had come here to do," said Professor Feris.

Without a budget, the team relies on donations and people giving their time to ensure it happens. UCT's International Academic Programmes Office (IAPO) provides some funding and the student housing and UCT Food & Connect programme also assist.

The food queue puts a physical face to food insecurity. It also raises questions around viability; how to keep feeding the many in a climate of austerity.

The SFF's Matheko Moshoeshe-Madi says: "We advocate for education, but we are going through issues of poverty. Yet students are willing to come to varsity to learn, not knowing where their next plate of food is coming from. We wanted to help."

Student hunger is a growing national challenge. Last year the National Research Foundation's Dr Stephen Devereux made headlines when he reported that more than 30% of the country's students are food insecure, compared with 26% of the population. He was speaking at the National Colloquium on Access to Food for Students.

The situation is aggravated by the failures of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, particularly the inadequacy of food vouchers, he said. "The overall picture is that campus food insecurity is much higher than we realised."

ENDS

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