

ASSESSING THE PREVALENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF RAJARATA UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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University students are vulnerable to food insecurity due to limited financial resources, high cost of living as well as reduced purchasing power. This situation is worsened by the prevailing economic crisis in Sri Lanka. However, data on food insecurity among these students remains scarce. This study assessed the prevalence of food insecurity among students of Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, explored its contributing factors and impacts, and gathered student suggestions for improving food security. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 817 students from six faculties of Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire, which included socio-economic and socio-demographic information, as well as assessments of food insecurity using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) and dietary diversity scores. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 22 and R-studio, employing descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests, and Multivariate logistic regression to identify factors associated with food insecurity. The mean age of participants was 24.4 ± 1.5 years, the majority being females. Among respondents, 91.4% reside in university hostels, 4.7% live with family, and 3.3% live in boarding accommodations. FIES results indicated that 2.7% of students faced severe food insecurity, with 61.2% experiencing moderate insecurity. Dietary diversity score results showed that 11.3% had low, 41.6% moderate, and 47% high dietary diversity scores. Daily food expenditure and engagement in part-time work were significantly associated with the prevalence of food insecurity ($p < 0.05$). Additionally, parents' occupation was significantly associated with dietary diversity score ($p < 0.05$). To enhance food security among students, the following suggestions are provided: cultivating vegetables and fruits on university farms to offer good-quality, nutritious food affordably in university canteens, broadening meal options, and granting permission to cook such nourishing food items in university hostels. Additionally, students emphasized the importance of continued financial support, particularly for those whose parents hold government jobs, and who are typically ineligible for scholarships.

Keywords: Dietary Diversity score, Economic crisis, Food Insecurity Experience Scale, Food security