

Hunger on campus: Confronting food insecurity at SA universities during Mandela Month

By Dr Kgadi Mathabathe, issued by University of Pretoria 15 Jul 2025

Contrary to the stereotype of universities as bastions of privilege, studies show a different – ar often grim – reality for many South African students. At universities across the country, levels o food insecurity [range from 11% to 38%](#), which means a significant portion of our future leaders are trying to study on an empty stomach, or are distracted from their books by worries over where their next meal will come from.



As South Africa and the world commemorate Mandela Month and emulate the spirit of giving that characterised South Africa's first democratically elected president, it is an opportune time to throw a renewed spotlight onto a silent crisis that many of us are not even aware of.

Food insecurity is not just about empty stomachs: it impacts mental health, concentration, attendance, retention and even dropout rates. For those who have enough to eat, the benefits are clear: students who are not hungry are nearly twice as likely to progress academically.

For the up to 38% facing a degree of food insecurity, lack of adequate nutrition deepens the cycle of inequality, especially among African and first-generation students, undermining the very mission of higher education as a ladder for social mobility.



Dr Kgadi Mathabathe, director: Student Affairs, University of Pretoria

Fighting food insecurity on campus

As higher education institutions, in partnership with government, corporate donors and the general public, we need holistic, collaborative and sustainable solutions to help all our students focus on their primary task: gaining the education and skills needed to help steer our country and continent into a brighter future. Some ideas include:

- **Scale up and destigmatise food support:** We should expand programmes like the University of Pretoria's [Student Nutrition and Progress Programme](#) (SNAPP), which includes the distribution of food parcels as well as vouchers for hot meals to bring relief directly to students on campus who need help with access to nutritious food. Research has shown many students are hesitant to apply for help because of stigma attached to food programmes, so we must normalise participation through discreet access and inclusive promotion.
- **Institutionalise campus food systems:** We must establish permanent food gardens, student-run dignity kitchens and farmers' markets to increase access to fresh, affordable food. We should also partner with businesses and NGOs to leverage existing models for coordinated, sustainable delivery.
- **Unlock systemic support:** Urgent reform is needed with regard to National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) disbursements to ensure that allowances (especially for food) are adequate and paid on time. We must also advocate for national policy that guarantees the right to food for students – with dedicated budgets, legislation and accountability.
- **Turn surplus food into nourishment:** We must partner with non-profit organisations whose core business is the re-directing of good quality surplus food (10 million tonnes are wasted annually, yet 30 million South Africans face food insecurity) into nutritious student meals.
- **Monitor, evaluate and advocate:** We should run a national survey to probe student food insecurity, with transparent data to inform targeted interventions and encourage cross-sector dialogue, from learners to policymakers, building on initiatives like the Access to Food for Students Project.

As we commemorate Mandela Month, I make a renewed call to all who are able to help our students, whether through an individual or corporate donation of funds or food, or through your assistance in creating the legislation and/or NSFAS reforms needed to ensure no student goes hungry.

Members of the public who are able to donate can approach a university of their choice and ask about student nutrition programmes and ways of making donations, whether in cash or kind.

By sacrificing food for fees or transport, many of our students lose the focus, energy and dignity essential for learning. As stewards of their futures, we must commit to systems that allow every student to thrive, starting with what they need most: their next meal.

Let this Mandela Month mark the beginning of a movement: each food parcel, scholarship and advocacy effort bringing us closer to the promise of equitable, hunger-free learning spaces.

The University of Pretoria is running its annual UP Giving Month campaign during July to support its Student Nutrition and Progress Programme (SNAPP) and the Vice Chancellor and Principal's Scholarship Fund, which provides scholarships to struggling 'missing middle' students. Click [here](#) to find out more about UP Giving Month and the different ways of giving, or click [here](#) to make a cash donation.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Pretoria.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Kgadi Mathabathe is director: student affairs, University of Pretoria.

▪ **UP 2026 Autumn Graduations: Nearly 40% of 13,000 graduates received financial support from UP** 12 May 2026

▪ **UP researchers innovate handheld detection device that could transform TB screening** 2 Mar 2026

▪ **Bridging the gallery and the classroom: A new art education resource to transform teaching and learning** 12 Mar 2026

▪ **2025 Diabetes Summit focuses on mental health in diabetes care** 5 Nov 2025

▪ **KPMG South Africa and University of Pretoria launch new scholarship** 7 Oct 2025

University of Pretoria



The University of Pretoria (UP) is a seven-campus public university with its largest campus in the heart of Hatfield, the picturesque diplomatic hub of South Africa's capital city. We're proud to stand among the world's leading research universities.

[Profile](#) | [News](#) | [Contact](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [RSS Feed](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>