

**Pilot project**

Healthy body, healthy mind.  
Hands-on nutrition for  
international students

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Trinity Laban Conservatoire  
of Music and Dance



Pilot project into the  
international student  
experience in the UK  
**2017-18**

**UK Council  
for International  
Student Affairs**

**UKCISA**

**UKCISA GRANTS SCHEME  
FOR INTERNATIONAL  
EDUCATION**

Healthy body, healthy mind.  
Hands-on nutrition for international students  
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

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## Project aims

Our project aims to improve nutritional understanding and practice amongst international students. Guidance around wellbeing and settling in to a new country often emphasises the importance of healthy eating in combatting homesickness and mental health issues. However, academic studies have found that international students face particular barriers to eating well. We wanted to develop a replicable model which can inculcate and facilitate good nutritional habits for international students in the UK and help overcome these barriers.

## Background to Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Trinity Laban is a leading international conservatoire of music and contemporary dance offering higher education programmes from undergraduate to doctoral level in contemporary dance, music and musical theatre. As performers, our students are expected to have some awareness of nutrition as it pertains to their performance abilities. Trinity Laban is a small institution of 1,338 students, 31% of whom are from outside the UK (EU and non-EU). We are based in the London boroughs of Greenwich and Lewisham, which are areas rich in diversity.

## Project outcomes

The project delivered two workshops on nutrition and practical tips on food buying and preparation. Questionnaires were distributed before and after workshops to assess their impact. Results from questionnaires indicate that the workshops had a positive impact on students' awareness and habits.

## Session organisation and timeframe

We hoped to achieve our aims through delivering sessions which combined nutritional information with practical tips ("food smarts") on how to implement good nutrition. We decided to hold two sessions to help cover all of the content and solidify understanding. The sessions were held in January and February of 2018 and were followed up with a final questionnaire in March. The questionnaires were completed before the sessions at timepoint one and two.

**22 January**      **Questionnaire one & Session one (Timepoint one)**

**26 February**    **Questionnaire two & Session two (Timepoint two)**

**26 March**        **Questionnaire three (Timepoint three)**

An email was sent to all international students inviting them to participate with an incentive of a £25 supermarket voucher to attend both sessions and complete all three questionnaires. Selection was based on the time of the response. From an initial group of 20, we ended up with 14 participants attending from Belgium, Canada, Hong Kong, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Spain and Switzerland.

## Session content

**Nutrition.** The nutritional information for the sessions was delivered by a nutritionist who also teaches at Trinity Laban. He was selected as he had given nutrition talks to music students at Trinity Laban in the past. The nutrition part of the sessions tackled the basics of nutrition and what we need to function and thrive. The nutritionist explained the need for fibre, carbohydrates, fats, protein, minerals, vitamins, water and how we get them. The nutritionist discussed types of food and their benefits and answered questions from students. There was also discussion about participant's food and cooking habits and cultures.

**Food Smarts.** This part of the sessions was delivered by the Student Adviser and covered the everyday practicalities of eating well.

**Food Smart session one** covered meal planning and cheap cooking; a broad discussion on why it is good to plan meals was followed by small discussion groups covering what meals they knew how to cook and considered healthy. Meal planners



were distributed to students, consisting of 100 sheets of a day-by-day meal plan and weekly shopping list. Students then filled in a sheet based on the group discussions which were fed back to the whole group. For the cheap cooking activity, students worked in groups to guess the cost of the



ingredients for a Tarka Dhal recipe. This was fed back to the wider group and the true costs revealed. Students were extremely surprised that the total came to just £1. (See the recipe in Appendix 1.)

**Food Smart session two** covered time management, budgeting, smart shopping and habit change. A large group discussion was held on making time for cooking and shopping, the students who had a set time for activities found it easier to also make time for cooking. A large group discussion around budgeting was held with the aid of a handout of the *Trinity Laban Money Guide* (link available at end of the report) which includes a budget sheet and further information. Small group discussions on tips for “smart shopping” fed back into the wider group. This was followed by a quick “deal breaker” challenge, asking students if they would go for particular “deals” they might find in the shops. Students were then presented with the cumulative cost of food habits such as buying coffee or lunch from a shop every day. Students were introduced to the idea of habits being a cycle of cue, habit and reward. They were given slips to complete in private where they could identify a habit/routine they want to replace with the cue and reward remaining in place. (See notes on the activities in Appendix B.)

## Challenges and changes

- Our initial timeframe of starting in November and catching students early in the year had to be pushed back. This was in part due to difficulties in securing a nutritionist who could commit to the sessions.
- We brought a Dance Science researcher into the project to help develop the research methodology and advise on delivery. She found that some of our original plans were not sufficiently outcome orientated and would over-complicate the project. This led to several changes to the original plan:
  - We removed a planned transport subsidy to local cheap supermarkets and a planned pot luck event. Instead we focussed on the delivery of sessions.
  - We dropped the idea of creating an international food map. Once the project started we realised that students were aware of where they could find international foods locally. (Prior to the project, we had identified difficulties with finding international foods in the research review but perhaps this was specific to location of the study (parts of the USA) and time of the study (when less retail information was available online).
- We were concerned that students might drop out or not complete all of the sessions and surveys so we incentivised completing all elements with a £25 supermarket voucher.

## Measuring the impact of the pilot project

A 35 item questionnaire was designed with the aim of capturing participants’ nutritional knowledge, current nutritional and cooking behaviours, and perceptions of barriers to healthy, nutritious eating. The questionnaire items provided a combination of pre-defined responses, utilising a sliding scale, for example from ‘never’ to ‘rarely’ to ‘sometimes’ to ‘always’, and multiple choice answers. The questionnaire was created to evaluate the pilot project’s efficacy of encouraging and supporting international students’ healthy eating behaviours to improve their general wellbeing alongside their psychological wellbeing, with a focus on concentration and mood.

Previous research informed the questionnaire development<sup>1</sup>, allowing for the construction of appropriate questions which would endeavour to capture the effectiveness of the pilot projects’ ability to meet set aims, and also to ensure that the variety of pre-determined responses provided were in line with previous findings. Participants were provided with an ‘other’ option should the question possibly require an alternative response.

The questionnaires were distributed to the participants at three separate timepoints, the beginning of the first session, the beginning of the second session and then at a follow up timepoint of one month. The questionnaires were the same at each timepoint and once completed they were collated, coded and analysed by the Dance Science researcher.

You can view and download the questionnaire using the link at the end of the report.

## Questionnaire main findings

The results of the questionnaire revealed a number of findings related to the participants’ eating and cooking behaviours and displayed trends suggesting that the pilot project was in part successful.

## Eating and cooking behaviours

The participants’ responses suggested that they perceived their cooking and eating habits to have altered since coming to university, with the majority stating that it had changed for the worse. The common factors which were reported to bring about this change were money, time management, and the availability of produce. There were a small number of participants who stated that since coming to university they had tried to include more vegetables into their diet and had made a conscious effort to cook more healthily, however on average, the majority of participants felt that their dietary habits had become more unhealthy overall.

Following the first nutrition session, a trend in the data suggested that more participants were likely to plan their meal preparation a few days in advance as opposed to on the day, which was found pre-session. More were likely to prepare meals with fresh ingredients on a regular basis when compared to the initial questionnaire responses. These findings were maintained at the one month follow-up suggesting the effectiveness of the first session.

The food groups which were reported as being consumed in the largest quantities at timepoint one were vegetables and carbohydrates which is in line with the UK Government's 'Eatwell Guide' (2016)<sup>2</sup>. At timepoint two, these findings remained stable, however there was also a reported decrease in the consumption of other convenience foods and sugary foods which demonstrates healthier eating behaviours (see figure 1).

At timepoint one, prior to the session, participants reported drinking on average 1 litre of water per

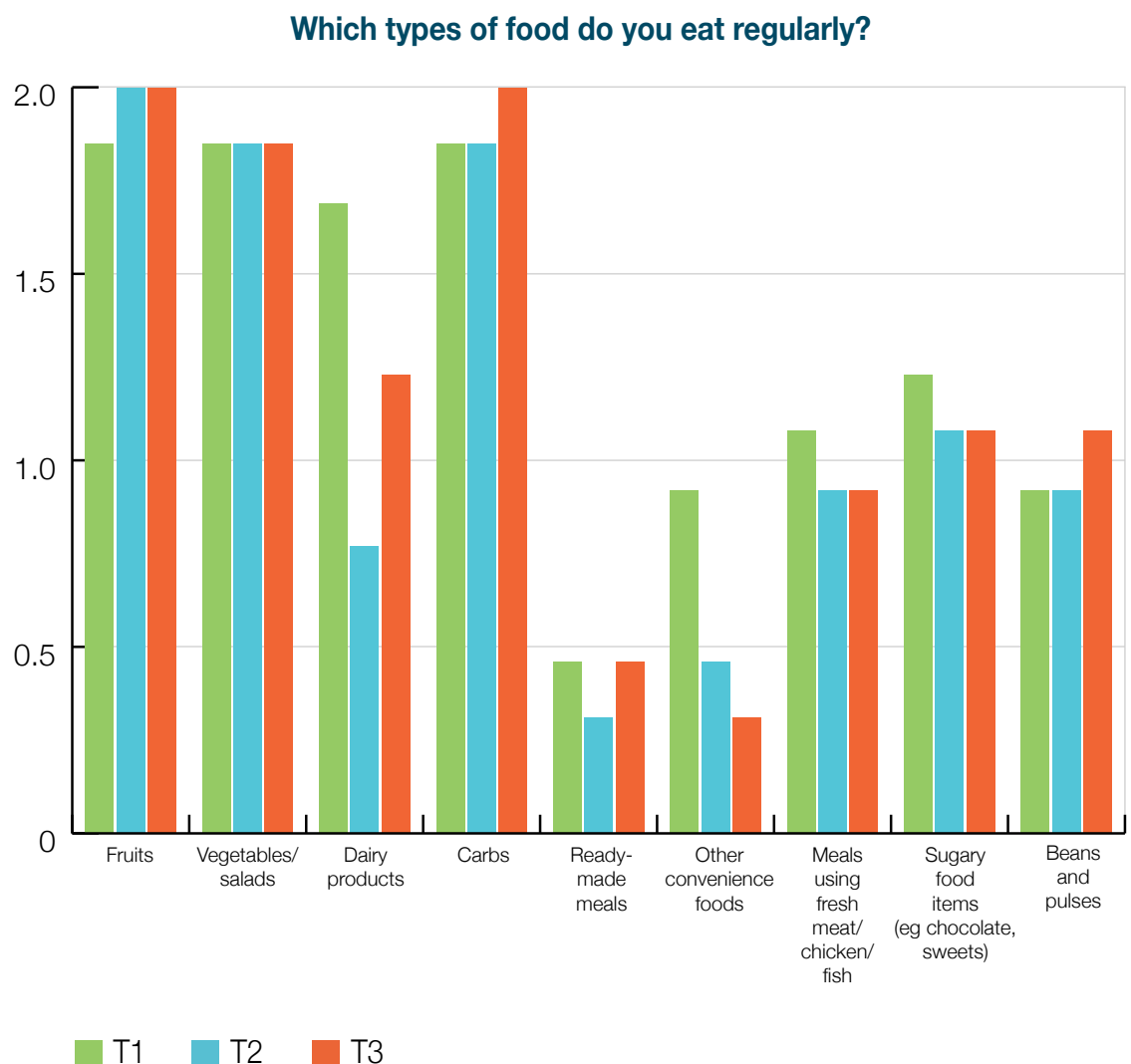
day, a month later there was a reported increase to 1.5 litres on average per day (see figure 2). This suggests that as a result of the project, participants increased their water consumption, improving their health behaviours.

### Nutritional knowledge, food purchasing and organisation

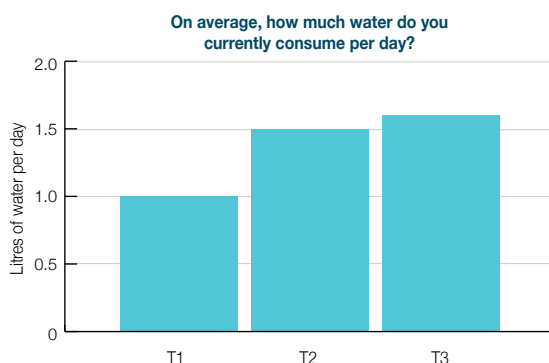
Participants reported that they were more likely to purchase food in line with their budgets when completing the questionnaire at timepoint two, and a trend in the data also suggested that participants were more likely to plan time into their daily schedules to prepare food. Although this was only a small increase from timepoint one to timepoint two, it suggests that the pilot sessions had a positive impact.

Participants reported purchasing the majority of their food items from supermarkets followed by markets at the initial timepoint (see figure 3), at the one month follow up participants were still most

Fig 1: Questionnaire responses for timepoints one, two and three.



**Fig 2: Questionnaire responses for timepoints one, two and three.**



likely to shop at supermarkets, however, there was a reported increase in those who would purchase groceries from markets, suggesting an increased awareness of alternative locations to purchase items.

The main factors considered at timepoint one when purchasing groceries were reported as the price of the food and the quality of the ingredients. Following the session, the taste, the participants' budget and whether they knew how to prepare the food items or not, were also reported as a consideration.

## Barriers to healthy eating

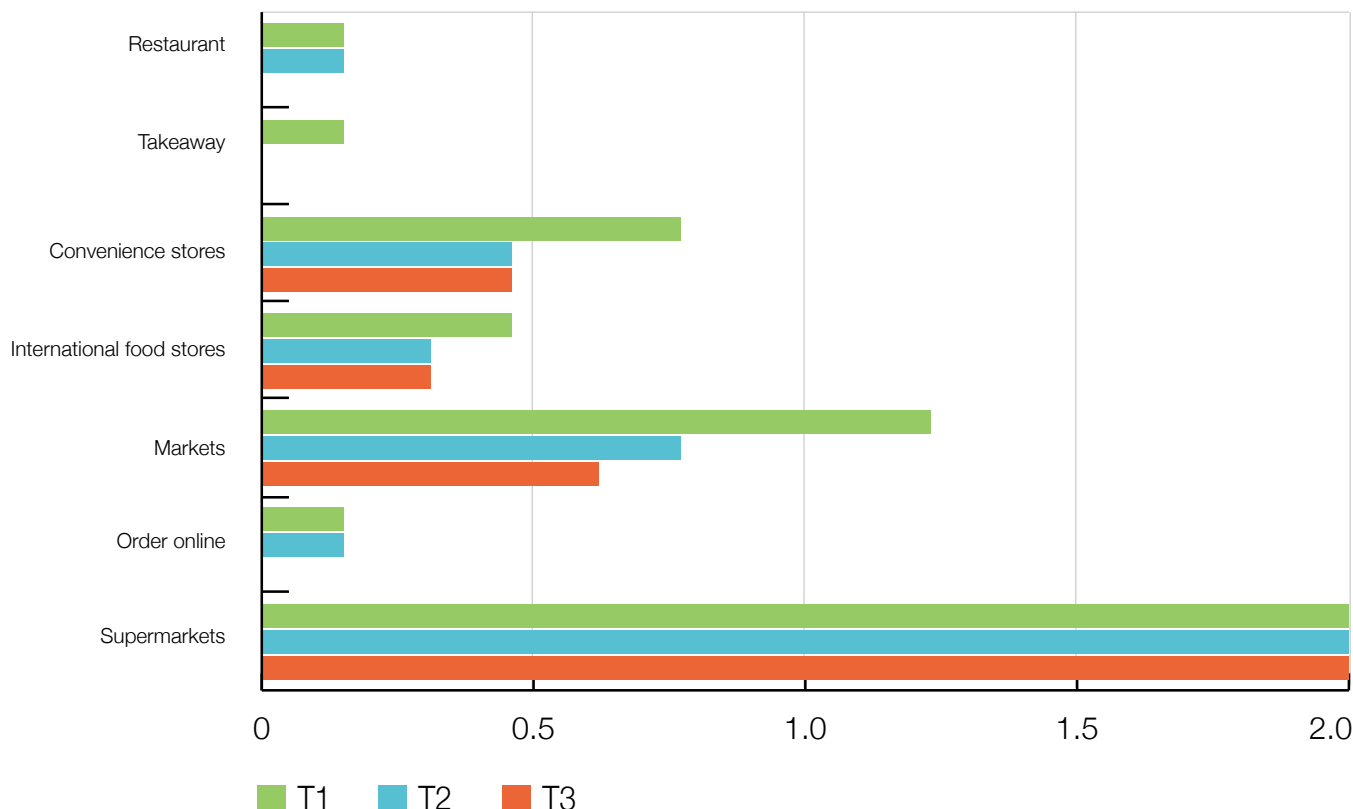
Reported barriers to healthy eating were perceived as being time management, knowledge, cost and the availability of food. This remained consistent across all three timepoints. At timepoint one motivation was the most commonly reported barrier, however at timepoint three a trend in the data suggested that time management was perceived as the greatest barrier. This may indicate that the pilot increased the participants motivation and/or their awareness of time management which was touched on in the sessions.

## Psychological wellbeing

When exploring the items of the questionnaire which addressed psychological wellbeing, and more specifically the participants' concentration and general mood levels, it was reported that these factors improved slightly following the first session and this was maintained following the second session. These findings could suggest that the pilot aided the students in improving their nutritional behaviours and this in turn supported an improvement in their perceived concentration and mood levels.

**Fig 3: Questionnaire results for timepoints one, two and three.**

## Where do you usually buy your food?



## Conclusions

The project has demonstrated the ability to improve elements of international students' eating and food organisational habits which is reflected in certain data trends. The session content will continue to be refined in order to ensure that it is also improving the participants' nutritional knowledge as there was no evidence of the impact of this in the results. (This may be due to students already having a good foundation in nutritional understanding.) If the project were to expand there would be further consideration of the most efficient and effective modes of data collection and to perhaps further explore the impact of the sessions on a greater number of both physical and psychological well-being variables, alongside nutritional knowledge and behaviours.

## Recommendations for other UK institutions

Institutions can replicate these sessions relatively easily.

- Meal planners were purchased with grant funds but templates are also available online (although a nice planner may encourage usage).
- Given the main improvements were seen after the first session, it may be that one session will be sufficient to have an impact and will be less resource-intensive.
- The main cost is in hiring a nutritionist; if no funding is available it would be possible to show videos to provide a basic understanding of nutrition and follow up with the interactive Food Smarts activities.
- Much of the Food Smarts element of the sessions will be familiar to Student Advisers and can be easily delivered, time permitting.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Fahlman, M. M., Dake, J. A., McCaughy, N., & Martin, J. (2008). A pilot study to examine the effects of a nutrition intervention on nutrition knowledge, behaviours and efficacy expectations in middle school children. *The Journal of School Health*, 78(4), 216-222.
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dietary habits among international students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 5(2), 104-120.

- <sup>2</sup> Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland. (2016). *Eatwell Guide*. Crown Copyright.

## Further information

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## Appendices

- Cheap meal ingredients and activities for Food Smart session
  - Nutrition questionnaire
  - Money guide
- Available online [www.ukcisa.org.uk/Laban-nutrition](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Laban-nutrition)

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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