

Perception of a Balanced Diet and Food Consumption Patterns of University Undergraduates: The Case of the University of Peradeniya

Bhattarai A. and Kumar S.*

Department of Agricultural Economics and Business Management,
Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

With the prevailing economic crisis, high food inflation was at an estimated 86.4% year-on-year in October 2022. During the crisis, university students are highly vulnerable as they live away from home and have limited funds to fulfil their dietary needs. However, just as the economic crisis can affect their food intake, so can undergraduates' general tendency to be unconcerned over diet. Therefore, the extent to which their diet results from the economic crisis is unclear. This research studies university students' perceptions of a balanced diet and food consumption patterns. The Theory of Planned Behaviour was used as the theoretical foundation to conduct a survey of students attached to the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. A sample of 450 students participated in the study. Results revealed that students with a better financial status were mainly from urban areas and had a higher intention to eat a balanced diet. They also had higher consumption of protein-rich foods, and fruits, which are usually more expensive. Students with low financial capacity had less intention to take a balanced diet and lower consumption of protein-rich foods and fruits. Students staying at boarding places had the highest monthly expenses and monthly food expenses. The fact that food is cheaper at university canteens than outside explains the trend. Students from home had the highest consumption of legumes, meat, milk, and fruits. They had the lowest monthly expenses for food. However, the intention to take a balanced diet did not vary with accommodations. Attitudes and perceived behavioural control were major factors affecting the intention to take a balanced diet ($P < 0.05$), while subjective norms did not significantly affect intention ($P > 0.05$). Furthermore, the research found that the sociodemographic factors of ethnicity, area of residence and gender influenced students' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control ($P < 0.05$).

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*skumar@agri.pdn.ac.lk