



Home away from home through food environments: Pacific students' experiences of food environments in an Aotearoa New Zealand University

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Abstract

Research on tertiary food environments has largely focused on affordability, dietary quality, and individual health behaviours, often overlooking the cultural and relational meanings of food for Indigenous and Pacific students. This

study addresses this gap by examining how access to culturally meaningful foods shapes Pacific students' sense of belonging, wellbeing, and academic engagement. A qualitative approach employing individual talanoa sessions, a process of sharing ideas, experiences, and narratives through dialogue, was used with 13 Pacific students studying in Dunedin. Talanoa were transcribed verbatim and analysed reflexively using the Pacific holistic lens of the Fonua Model, which emphasises the interconnectedness of people, culture, land, and wellbeing. Findings include traditional foods as central to identity, spiritual and emotional wellbeing. In contrast, limited availability, high cost of living, and the absence of culturally inclusive spaces created forms of cultural food insecurity that contributed to isolation and affected academic engagement. Participants recommended increasing Pacific food visibility on campus, strengthening partnerships with Pacific communities and vendors, and supporting traditional food practices.

Keywords: cultural identity; health and wellbeing; academic excellence; Pacific students; food environment; talanoa; Fonua Model.

Introduction

The campus food environment plays a critical role in shaping student well-being and academic outcomes. For Indigenous and ethnic minority students, including Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand, limited access to culturally appropriate foods may intensify experiences of marginalisation and reduce engagement with university life (Wright et al., 2021). Food insecurity is also more prevalent among minority groups, reflecting structural inequities such as financial constraints and cultural exclusion (Amataiti et al., 2025; Odoms-Young & Bruce, 2018). Inadequate availability of familiar foods can compel students to purchase costly or nutritionally suboptimal alternatives, while restrictions on cultural food practices within institutional spaces may weaken cultural identity and belonging (Keat et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2021). As these factors are closely associated with retention and academic persistence, the inclusivity of campus food provision represents an important determinant of educational success (Anae & Peterson, 2020; Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023).

The campus food environment is a critical yet often overlooked determinant of student well-being and educational attainment. Universities function as primary living environments where daily routines, social relationships, and identity practices are enacted, with eating patterns forming a central component of this experience (Li et al., 2022). Research consistently demonstrates that reliable access to affordable and nutritious food supports concentration, cognitive functioning, and academic engagement (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023), whereas constrained access contributes to fatigue, psychological distress, and diminished performance (Raskind et al., 2019). Within this context, food provision is not merely a welfare issue but part of the broader educational infrastructure shaping student success.

Global higher education scholarship shows that food insecurity affects a substantial proportion of tertiary students and is patterned along socioeconomic and ethnic lines (Hege et al., 2025; Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023; Wright et al., 2021). Students from lower-income households are more likely to experience inconsistent food access due to financial demands such as housing, transport, and tuition costs. For Indigenous and minority populations, these pressures intersect

with institutional environments historically organised around dominant cultural norms, positioning food insecurity within a wider framework of structural inequity rather than individual hardship (Lemke & Delormier, 2017; Odoms-Young & Bruce, 2018).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Pacific students may encounter additional pressures shaped by collective cultural obligations and interdependent family structures. Commitments to family, church, and community can intensify financial pressure during study and influence everyday food decisions (Amataiti et al., 2025; Anae & Peterson, 2020). Food practices within Pacific worldviews are relational and symbolic, reinforcing kinship, reciprocity, and cultural continuity (Akbar et al., 2022). The absence of familiar foods in university settings therefore carries social significance, limiting opportunities to enact cultural identity through routine practices. Literature on student belonging identifies cultural recognition in everyday spaces as a predictor of motivation, retention, and achievement, suggesting that institutional environments signal inclusion through material conditions as much as through policy or curriculum (Anae & Peterson, 2020; Johnson, 2022).

Limited availability of culturally relevant food options may compel students to select unfamiliar or nutritionally inadequate alternatives or incur higher costs to obtain preferred foods off campus (Keat et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021). Studies across tertiary institutions indicate that students frequently modify eating patterns under financial constraint by reducing meal frequency, relying on low-cost energy-dense products, or sacrificing dietary quality to manage expenses (Gamba et al., 2021). For minority students, unfamiliar food environments may also diminish social participation where shared meals typically facilitate peer connection and support networks (Wright et al., 2021; Zuo et al., 2026). Pacific scholarship emphasises food sharing and cultural food practices as central to wellbeing, collectivism, and relational identity, indicating that restricted access to these practices may weaken students' sense of connection and belonging within institutional communities (Amataiti et al., 2025; Anae & Peterson, 2020).

Methods

Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design informed by Pacific research methodologies. Central to the methodological approach was *talanoa*, described by Vaoleti (2006) as an open and relational process of sharing ideas, experiences, and narratives through dialogue. Rather than structured interviewing, *talanoa* privileges participants’ lived experiences, emotional expression, and the co-construction of meaning within a culturally grounded conversational space. As a cultural method, *talanoa* facilitates appropriate engagement by recognising Pacific values, and collective epistemologies. This approach enables participants to communicate authentically and with minimal constraint, generating depth and contextual richness (Vaoleti, 2006). Accordingly, *talanoa* was employed to capture nuanced cultural perspectives while maintaining methodological alignment with Pacific worldviews.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling through existing community and university networks. Eligibility criteria required participants to identify as Pacific and to be enrolled as university students. In total, 13 Pacific students participated in the study, representing Niuean, Fijian, Samoan, and Tongan backgrounds. The mean age was 19 years, with five women and six men (two participants did not disclose gender). Participants resided in two distinct food environments. Five lived in university residential halls, where meals were institutionally prepared. Food provision in this setting primarily reflected Western, Asian, and Mexican culinary styles, with limited opportunity for personal choice or cultural adaptation. In contrast, six participants lived in shared flats, where food practices were self-managed, including purchasing, preparing, and consuming meals. These contrasting living arrangements provided insight into how structural and social features of campus food environments shape access, agency, and cultural expression among Pacific students.

Participants	Ages	Gender	Residential	Ethnicity
P1	18	Female	College Halls	Tongan
P2	20	Male	Residential Flats	Samoan
P3	18	Male	College Halls	Tongan
P4	19	Female	Residential Flats	Fijian
P5	21	Female	Residential Flats	Fijian
P6	24	Male	Residential Flats	Tongan
P7	18	Male	College Halls	Niuean
P8	23	Male	Residential Flats	Samoan
P9	18	Female	College Halls	Niuean
P10	19	Male	Residential Flats	Tongan
P11	20	Female	Residential Flats	Tongan
P12	18	Male	College Halls	Samoan
P13	19	Male	Residential Flats	Tongan

Table 1: Demographics of participants

Data Collection

Talanoa sessions ranged from 30-120 minutes and were conducted by MK, GV and AA, with support from EF. Talanoa prompts facilitated dialogue about food environments, for example: “How would you describe your food environment on campus?”, “Can you give an example?”, and “Can you tell me more about that?” These prompts functioned as conversational cues rather than prescriptive questions, allowing participants to guide the direction and depth of the talanoa. Participants were first introduced to the concept of food environments, after which the talanoa progressed according to participants’ experiences and reflections. Talanoa were conducted in locations chosen by participants as comfortable and culturally appropriate, including common areas within residential halls and kava gatherings (Fehoko, 2014). Food and beverages were provided as a gesture of appreciation and reciprocity. Within Pacific contexts, the sharing of food represents respect, care, and relational connection, and contributes to trust-building and sustained engagement (Akbar et al., 2022; Fehoko, 2014; Flavell & Cunningham, 2022). All talanoa sessions were audio-recorded via Zoom and transcribed verbatim.

Data Interpretation

Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and verified through member checking to ensure credibility and interpretive integrity. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, guided by an abductive analytic strategy (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This approach enabled iterative movement between participants’ accounts and relevant theoretical constructs, allowing themes to be inductively generated from the data while being sensitised by the Fonua model as a culturally grounded interpretive framework (Tu’itahi, 2007).

The Fonua model was employed to support analysis of participants’ accounts through a Pacific holistic lens. Rather than treating health as an individual or biomedical matter, Fonua positions wellbeing as shaped through interconnected spiritual, mental, physical, collective, and environmental dimensions, operating across individual, family, community, national, and global levels (Kapeli, 2021; Tu’itahi, 2015). This analytic process enabled the

identification of themes extending beyond material access to food, encompassing relational, cultural, and spatial dimensions of identity, belonging, and wellbeing (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tu’itahi, 2007; Vaoleti, 2006). The analysis illuminated the ways in which students’ cultural identities intersect with, shape and are shaped by, the university food environment.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritised to ensure respect, safety, and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood their right to withdraw at any time (Patton, 2022). All participants were given and approved their pseudonyms. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee 24/0529.

Results

The findings are organised around three overarching questions that reflect the central concerns raised by participants: (1) How does food shape Pacific students’ cultural identity, wellbeing, and academic engagement? (2) What barriers limit access to culturally responsive food environments? And (3) What changes could strengthen inclusion, connection, and belonging for Pacific students? These questions structure the three themes presented below and highlight how the article moves from lived experience to institutional barriers to participant-led recommendations.

How does food shape Pacific students’ cultural identity, wellbeing, and academic engagement?

Majority of participants commented on the critical role of culturally affirming environments in Pacific students’ academic success. Being surrounded by Pacific cultural symbols and practices, particularly through food, provides continuity between home and university, reinforcing identity and belonging. Food is positioned not merely as sustenance, but as an embodied expression of cultural integrity. Cultural responsiveness within university food and learning spaces supports equity and student achievement. For example, P2 emotionally shared the impact of limited Pacific cultural presence on her academic studies.

The more surrounded you are with anything and everything related to your Pacific cultures, the better chance I had in passing my academic studies...eating the foods allows me to stay true to my cultural identity...It is something I have experienced in my three years at university so far. (P2)

Some participants noted that academic difficulty was not primarily cognitive but relational and affective, highlighting the centrality of belonging to academic engagement. Culturally sustaining food practices may directly influence students' presence, peer connection, and study behaviours, thereby shaping academic persistence beyond formal curriculum spaces. As P1 shared:

I didn't struggle academically because the work was too hard. I struggled because I felt disconnected. Eating the food I grew up with grounded me mentally, it reminded me why I was here and who I was doing it for. Without that, I went straight back to my room after lectures. With it, I stayed, studied with others, and felt like I belonged at university. (P1).

Similarly, P10 reflected that familiar food functioned as an enabling mechanism, while reinforcing his motivation to succeed in honour of his parents and wider family.

Back home food just happens, you don't think about it. At uni I suddenly had to think about every meal, and it made me realise how much it connected me to who I am. When I couldn't get our food, I didn't just feel hungry, I felt out of place. On days I ate familiar food, I stayed on campus longer, talked more in tutorials, and actually focused on study. (P10)

What barriers limit culturally responsive food environments?

All participants identified the limited availability and high cost of Pacific foods as a significant barrier within the university food environment. While Pacific food stores were accessible in larger cities such as Auckland, similar foods in Dunedin were often more expensive and not affordable for students. Some participants relied on the food options available on campus or in local supermarkets, which were often culturally unfamiliar. For example, P5 highlight how cost, geographic context, and limited access shape Pacific students' everyday food experiences.

In Auckland, there are Pacific food shops, but down here it's doubled in price, which is not student-friendly. It's a barrier. (P5)

You just eat what is given to you, but it is not food that we are used to. Compared to being at home you eat traditional foods and stuff that you are used to, so when you come here you have to try new things but sometimes it's like out of our comfort zone to eat these foods. (P9)

A majority of the participants reflected on how limited Pacific presence in Dunedin contributed to feelings of cultural disconnection, noting that some students lost touch with aspects of their cultural identity after relocating for study. However, the small size of the Pacific student community also created opportunities for collective cultural practices that helped re-establish these connections. For example, Pacific student associations organising activities like preparing an 'umu (Polynesian earth oven) off campus, recreating traditional food. These initiatives functioned as important cultural reconnection spaces, allowing students to maintain cultural continuity, strengthen social bonds, and reproduce practices. As P10 commented:

I know a handful of students who have kind of lost touch with their culture since coming down... Because we're such a small group, we've been able to reconnect those dots (by building an 'umu off campus) where their parents couldn't do it. (P10)

For some students, limited food access became part of a wider experience of cultural invisibility:

Coming from Auckland where Pacific food is everywhere, moving to a place with very few Pacific families was a shock. Supermarkets didn't stock what I needed, and there weren't many community spaces where our food was normal. It made me realise how invisible we are here. That invisibility carried into lectures and campus life too. (P5)

What changes could strengthen inclusion, connection, and belonging for Pacific students?

Orientation was identified as a key point where food could signal university care.

Orientation is when you're most vulnerable. If there were culturally familiar meals during that first week, it would ease the transition. It would tell new students that their identity is valued from day one. Food could be part of pastoral care, not just a commercial service. (P7)

This positions culturally familiar food as part of transition support, rather than only as hospitality or catering. Participants also mentioned that local

Pacific communities, elders, and churches as important partners in creating a “home away from home”:

Although it is a small Pacific community in the city, collaboration with our Pacific elders and churches who are the community should strengthen the ties with our people and also it creates home away from home environments that students outside our comfort zones need, especially when we feel isolated from our homes.

A recurring sentiment was the desire for stronger university recognition of Pacific students' experiences. Culturally responsive initiatives would signal that the university acknowledges the presence and needs of its Pacific student community. Such gestures were perceived as meaningful indicators of care and support, particularly for students navigating university life without familial and cultural networks. As P14 commented:

If they could even just consider it, considering how many Pacific students they have and knowing that they're away from home and there's no one here for them, it would help to show that they actually care about the Pacific students here. (P14)

Participants also emphasised the need for systemic and policy-level responses rather than relying solely on student-led advocacy. Food was positioned as an important component of student wellbeing and belonging rather than simply a service provision. Universities citing diversity and inclusion as strategic priorities should reflect in everyday environments such as campus food systems; otherwise, institutional messages about diversity risk appearing symbolic.

It shouldn't rely on student advocacy every year. There needs to be policy that recognises food as part of wellbeing and belonging. If inclusion is a university priority, then food environments should reflect that. Otherwise, the message about diversity feels incomplete” (P12).

Discussion

This study shows that campus food environments matter for Pacific students not only in nutritional terms, but also as sites of identity, belonging, and academic engagement. The findings align with research showing that ethnic identity and sociocultural belonging are central to Pacific student success in tertiary education (Anae & Peterson, 2020) and extend

this work by identifying food as an everyday material and relational pathway through which belonging is experienced.

The first theme suggests that culturally familiar food plays an important emotional and relational role in students' university experiences. Further, that academic difficulty was described not only as an intellectual challenge, but as shaped by whether students felt grounded, connected, and able to recognise themselves within the university environment. This supports wider Pacific scholarship that positions food as deeply relational and tied to identity, care, and collective belonging (Akbar et al., 2022; Flavell & Cunningham, 2022). In this sense, culturally familiar food may function as a cultural anchor within university settings, reinforcing students' sense of place and purpose.

The second theme highlights structural and systemic barriers, including the high cost and low availability and accessibility of Pacific foods and the broader invisibility of Pacific culture within the university environment. This resonates with earlier work showing that Pacific students' tertiary experiences are shaped by sociocultural adjustment pressures, culturally grounded support networks, and institutions that do not always reflect Pacific ways of being (Chu et al., 2013). Although students demonstrated social agency by recreating cultural food practices such as preparing an *'umu* off campus, these efforts should not substitute for University responsibility. Relying on students' alone risks placing the burden of inclusion on those already navigating structural and systemic disadvantage.

The final theme points to practical university responses. Culturally responsive food initiatives, especially during transition periods such as orientation, alongside stronger partnerships with Pacific communities, churches, and elders, may help create a greater sense of “home away from home.” These findings support broader Indigenous scholarship showing that culturally meaningful food spaces can contribute to belonging, wellbeing, and inclusion (Wilson et al., 2021). Universities should therefore view food provision not simply as a service, but as part of an inclusive campus environment.

Beyond academic publication, these findings should be shared with those able to influence tertiary food environments and student support,

including Pacific liaison teams, student success services, residential colleges, campus food providers, student associations, and local Pacific communities. Dissemination could include a short practice brief, presentations to tertiary support networks, and discussions with Pacific student and community groups about feasible food-based supports for students studying away from home.

Although this study is situated within Dunedin and the University of Otago, the findings are likely to have relevance for other tertiary settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly institutions where Pacific students relocate away from larger Pacific communities and familiar food networks. The challenges described by participants, including cultural absence, limited access to familiar foods, and the need for relational forms of belonging, are not unique to one university food environment. Further, that participants point to broader questions about how tertiary institutions materially recognise Indigenous and minority student identities in everyday campus spaces. This interpretation aligns with Pacific tertiary education scholarship showing that ethnic identity, cultural recognition, relationships, and culturally sustaining spaces are central to Pacific student success (Anae & Peterson, 2020; Chu et al., 2013). The findings may also resonate with international contexts where Indigenous, migrant, or diasporic students navigate institutional food environments that do not reflect their cultural practices or relational ways of belonging.

These findings also sit alongside existing Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) approaches to tertiary student support in Aotearoa, while recognising Māori and Pacific peoples have distinct histories, identities, and cultural frameworks. Māori models of wellbeing, such as Te Whare Tapa Whā, similarly emphasise the interconnection between physical, mental, spiritual, whānau (family), and whenua (land) dimensions of wellbeing (Durie, 1985; Ministry of Health, 2023). In tertiary settings, practices grounded in whanaungatanga (sense of belonging), manaakitanga (generosity, hosting, or respecting others), and tuākana-tēina (reciprocal senior-junior mentoring) relationships demonstrate how culturally responsive support can strengthen belonging, care, and academic persistence (Rawlings & Wilson, 2013). The present study extends these conversations by showing that culturally meaningful food

environments may operate as one material expression of such relational support for Pacific students. This does not suggest that Pacific and Māori experiences are interchangeable; rather it highlights shared institutional responsibilities to create environments where Indigenous and culturally grounded ways of being are visible, sustained, and resourced.

More broadly, these findings challenge deficit-oriented framings of Pacific students' food experiences that focus only on financial vulnerability or food insecurity. Although cost and access were important, participants also emphasised cultural meaning, relational connection, and institutional recognition. Economic and nutritional frameworks alone are therefore insufficient; a more relational and culturally grounded interpretation is needed, one that understands food as intertwined with identity, belonging, and wellbeing.

A key strength of this study was the use of talanoa, which enabled rich accounts of students' lived experiences in a relational and culturally grounded way (Vaiote, 2006). The Fonua model also provided a useful framework for interpreting the interconnected relationship between culture, place, and wellbeing (Tu'itahi, 2007; 2015).

However, several limitations should be noted. The study involved a small sample from a single university, meaning the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Nevertheless, the contextual detail may be transferable to other tertiary contexts where Pacific, Indigenous, migrant, or diasporic students experience cultural dislocation within institutional food environments. Participants were also those willing to engage in talanoa, meaning the perspectives of more marginalised or less connected students may be underrepresented. Future research should examine these issues across multiple institutions, including comparative work that considers Māori and other Indigenous student support frameworks, while maintaining attention to the distinct histories, cultural contexts, and aspirations of Pacific students.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of the campus food environment as a cultural, social, and structural determinant of Pacific student

wellbeing and academic engagement. While existing scholarship has largely framed student food insecurity in terms of affordability and nutrition (Keat et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022), the experiences shared by participants demonstrate that food also functions as a site of identity, belonging, and relational connection. For the 13 Pacific students in this study, limited access to culturally meaningful foods in Dunedin shaped everyday experiences of university life, contributing to feelings of cultural dislocation and influencing patterns of social engagement and study. These findings reinforce the need for universities to recognise culturally inclusive food provision as part of the wider educational infrastructure that supports student success.

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