

13 JULY 2023 – MEDIA STATEMENT

Reopening of The Ref to Run Food Hub Initiative: Addressing Food Insecurity Among UTAS Students

The Tasmanian University Student Association (TUSA) is thrilled to announce the reopening of The Refectory (Ref), which will now serve as a Food Hub Initiative aimed at addressing the pressing issue of food insecurity among UTAS students. The Food Hub Initiative is part of a three-year Food Resilience Program that seeks to create an equitable secure food system, provide food relief and access to affordable food, and offer student employment, learning, and volunteering experiences, and made possible thanks to the substantial support of the University and their staff.

Food insecurity has become an increasingly urgent concern, particularly among tertiary students. Research conducted by UTAS has revealed that 42% of UTAS students experienced food insecurity, with 17% identifying as severely insecure. Risk factors for food insecurity were found to be higher among certain groups, including international students, LGBTQI+ students, and first-year students. Shockingly, half of the students surveyed identified as food insecure, and one-third reported cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals due to a lack of money for food.

To combat this issue, TUSA implemented the Freshie Bags scheme in 2021, a short-term food relief program in partnership with Loaves & Fishes Tasmania and Gateway Life. This successful pilot program has been distributing 250kg of free rescued fruits and vegetables to approximately 55 students on a weekly basis. However, the demand for such services has far outweighed our current resources, calling for a more comprehensive solution.

The Food Hub Initiative aims to address these urgent food insecurity concerns and reduce food waste within the Tasmanian food system. The project will deliver a range of services and initiatives, including the collection and distribution of food by Loaves and Fishes and Gateway Life, culturally appropriate and nutritional education, events and workshops, and the development of strategic partnerships. The overarching goal is to create a secure food system that not only provides students with access to affordable and nutritious food but also fosters a sense of social connection and community.

"Our mission is to ensure that no student at UTAS goes hungry or faces barriers to their education due to food insecurity," said Liam McLaren, President of TUSA. "By reopening The Ref as a Food Hub, we can expand our food relief services, provide valuable food education, and create employment and volunteering opportunities for students. This initiative aligns both our purpose and our profit, as we strive to address a critical issue while also nurturing the potential of our student community."

The University of Tasmania has provided significant in-kind support for the Program, allocating the Ref lease, furnishings and equipment, and providing a substantial donation of \$20,000 from the University-staff giving program, showcasing the care and understanding that the staff have for the situation students find themselves in.

The Ref, located on the Sandy Bay Campus, serves as a central point for students to access food relief services, attend workshops and events, and engage with community. By establishing strategic partnerships and involving students in all aspects of the program, TUSA aims to demonstrate how student-led initiatives can positively impact community food systems.

About TUSA:

The Tasmanian University Student Association (TUSA) is an independent collective for student-driven change. We are a student-led non-profit organisation that advocates for the welfare, support, and empowerment of University of Tasmania students. Our purpose is to be the independent voice of students at UTAS, effecting change through leadership and community building.

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