UNSW SYDNEY

Food Security @UNSW

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This is a joint intiative between Arc and UNSW

Introduction

In a country as resource-rich as Australia, it's concerning that many students still face uncertainty about where their next meal is coming from. Yet for many students in higher education, food insecurity is a daily reality that undermines their academic success, mental health, and overall wellbeing.

UNSW and its student organisation Arc are partnering for impact, co-creating food security solutions that address immediate hunger relief, build sustainable access pathways in the medium term, and drive long-term systemic change to ensure no student goes hungry.

This strategy sets out a bold, coordinated approach to addressing food insecurity—acknowledging its complex roots, listening to lived experiences, and committing to systemic change that supports every student to thrive.

57%

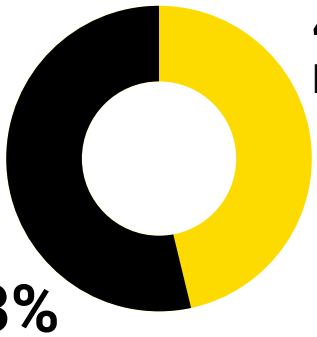
fulltime students experience moderate to severe food insecurity
(Foodbank Hunger Report 2022)

62%

students skip meals due to financial stress
(National Union of Students (NUS) 2023 Student Wellbeing Survey)

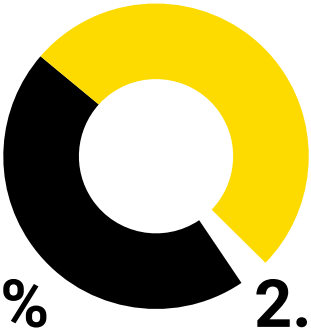
UNSW Student Community

82,412 enrolled students



46.7% International

53.3% Domestic

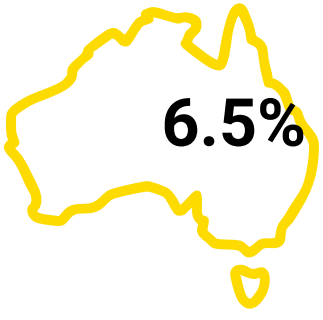


51.5% Undergrad

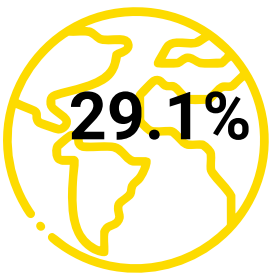
45.6% Postgrad

2.9% non-award

students at great risk of experiencing hunger



6.5% of UNSW domestic students are from low socio-economic backgrounds



29.1% of UNSW cohort are international Postgraduate students

The Issue

Complexity Of Hunger

Food insecurity at a university is a multifaceted challenge influenced by social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Students may face food insecurity due to financial constraints, unstable housing, limited time, and lack of access to affordable, nutritious food. International students, first-generation students, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are particularly vulnerable. Moreover, food insecurity often remains hidden, as stigma and shame prevent many students from seeking help. This invisibility makes it difficult for institutions to fully understand the scope of the problem, let alone address it effectively.

Hunger Is A University Wide Problem

Compounding the issue is the fact that food insecurity intersects with academic performance, mental health, and overall wellbeing. Hungry students are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating, all of which can negatively affect retention and success. Addressing food insecurity requires coordination across all levels of the UNSW community —from student services to campus food providers—and collaboration with external partners, such as food relief organisations and local governments. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective; instead, solutions must be systemic, inclusive, and adaptable to the diverse and evolving needs of the student population.

Tackling The Issue

In alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 2 – to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture – UNSW recognises that this global challenge demands a multifaceted response for its own student population that are impacted by this issue at scale. Presently UNSW focuses on addressing immediate need ("rapid relief"). This strategy proposes a multi pronged approach to embed more systemic sustainable change alongside immediate relief.

Rapid Relief

Delivering immediate access to food and essential items to students in urgent need. The strategy aims to expand on the current delivery of access to basic food, to ensure no student goes without additional basic necessities

Sustainable Skill Building

A medium-term strategy focused on equipping students with the knowledge and practical skills to prepare basic meals and manage food budgets more effectively. This initiative aims to empower students to make informed, cost-effective choices in food purchasing and preparation.

Systemic Support

In recognition of the issue of hunger being a community problem, this longer term strategy aims to connect the University with partners who can assist with more impactful relief for students

Rapid Relief Strategies in Place

Arc Food Hub

Food Hub is a free food initiative funded by Arc, providing nutritious groceries to students across 3 weekly timeslots, with a Food Cupboard available 24/7. The service has no eligibilty requirements and is designed to reduce any barriers or stigmas associated with food insecurity within a caring and supportive environment. Food Hub offers a variety of items, including bread, long-life milk, fresh fruits and vegetables, non-perishable pantry items, and bulk foods like rice, tea, and coffee.

Free Meals On Campus

Free meals are currently available across UNSW through various initiatives, including stress relief during exams (5,000 snacks & meals every exam period), Arc Morning Wellbeing Boosts (500 free breakfasts weekly) and Arc's weekly free food strategy distributed either through their wellbeing warrior program or through Student Club Socs, with the joint initiative of peer to peer connection alongside supplementation of meals.

Emergency Grants

The university provides emergency grants ranging from $500 to $2,000 to support students facing unexpected financial hardship that could jeopardise their ability to continue their studies. These grants are designed to offer immediate relief in times of crisis—such as medical emergencies, housing instability, or sudden loss of income—ensuring that students can remain focused on their academic goals without the added burden of financial stress. By offering this targeted assistance, the university aims to promote student wellbeing, retention, and academic success during challenging times.

Tackling The Problem

635,000+

Free meals provided to students from the Food Hub since it opened in May 2020

60,000+

Free meals provided to students by Arc across campus in 2024

$2,500,00+

Value of free meals provided to students from the Food Hub since it opened in May 2020

Expansion Concepts For Rapid Relief

Food Hub 24/7 Lockers

The installation of electronic food lockers adjacent to the Food Hub, enabling students to 'order' basic food packs online and collect them at their convenience, day or night. Packs would be curated to provide the equivalent of 2 days' worth of meals and assembled by Food Hub volunteers. Although similar international initiatives often use refrigerated lockers, this proposal recommends non-refrigerated units to reduce upfront costs.

Food Hub Pantry Expansion

The expansion of Food Hub's offerings to include a broader range of essential non-food items and core cooking supplies, permanently stocked within the hub. These additions would include toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, personal care items, sanitary products, razors, nappies, and basic cleaning supplies, cutlery, plates, cooking utensils alongside an expanded permanent base of food offerings including cooking oil, milk and baby formula.

Increased Meal Opportunities

Rollout of a structured, co-branded (Arc X UNSW) high-visibility free meal program to provide regular, nutritious meals to students throughout term time. Delivered via a mobile model across campus, the program would strengthen UNSW's reputation as a caring institution actively addressing cost of living pressures.

Tackling The Problem

24/7

Access to 'pre-ordererd' food packs can help reach more students

Enhance Dignity

By providing personal care items in addition to food

UNSW Cares

Creating opportunities to partner with Arc,responding to immediate need in a meaningful way

Sustainable Skill Building Expansion Concepts

Cooking Classes

Introduction of free cooking classes designed to teach students how to prepare substantial, nutritious, and budget-friendly meals using basic cooking appliances. The program would be delivered each term across two days with 10 classes offered across multiple cuisines. Each session would be led by a qualified chef and provide hands-on experience in a group setting. Students would enjoy the meal they prepare together, and each participant would receive a UNSW-branded takeaway kit with the ingredients needed to recreate the dish at home reinforcing learning and extending the value of the class.

This initiative aims to support healthier eating habits, build essential life skills, and reduce students' reliance on takeaway or processed food options. It also presents an opportunity to celebrate cultural diversity through cuisine and create meaningful social connection.

Food Field Trips

A significant number of students rely heavily on food delivery services due to limited cooking skills, which can consume a substantial portion of their finances. This is a particular issue for our international students where there is also the additional barrier of limited exposure and confidence in navigating Australian supermarkets. To address this issue, the concept is to run local supermarket tours where students are given opportunities to learn from staff & students within the UNSW Dietetics program about Australian produce and how to create easy combinations for cheap delicious meals. The shopping trip would be subsidised by the university (with the opportunity to partner with externals) so that students leave the shopping trip with food, recipes and related materials to prepare a minimum of three meals at home.

Tackling The Problem

2,000+

students learning how to prepare affordable and nutritious meals in a community setting

1,500+

students learning how to navigate the supermarket, combine produce and create cheap meals

Systemic Support Expansion Concepts

Basic Needs Hub

As cost-of-living pressures continue to impact students, our approach to student support must evolve. By thinking systemically and creatively about how we can support students, we can free up some of their finances for food.
By transforming the Food Hub into a Basic Needs Hub, a comprehensive, multi-service support centre that not only provides food security but also addresses financial hardship (financial counselling, financial workshops), professional development barriers ("Career Closet" where students can access clothes for interviews), and social inclusion. The centre can also provide an agile space to provide short term solution (ie: pop up barber for free haircuts). This evolution aligns with global best practices from institutions like Harvard, Rutgers, UCLA, and the University of Queensland.

Swipe Out Hunger Program

In both the US and UK, welfare programs exist that provide students with a meal voucher or meal card to access food on campus, helping to alleviate food insecurity and reduce financial stress. These initiatives recognize that the cost of food—particularly on university campuses—can be prohibitive for students, many of whom are already navigating significant financial pressure. At UNSW, student feedback has consistently highlighted that on-campus food prices are often beyond their budgets, affecting not only their nutrition and wellbeing but also their ability to focus and succeed academically. In light of this, it is incumbent upon the university to explore and implement practical, student-centred solutions—such as a meal card or voucher system—that address this urgent and growing need. Such a program would demonstrate UNSW's commitment to equity, inclusion, and the holistic support of its student community.

Tackling The Problem

10,000+

getting access to additional essential services to free up finances for food and other items

80.4%

SSAF Survey respondents rated food prices at UNSW as 'Very Expensive' or 'Somewhat Expensive'.

Systemic Support Expansion Concepts

UNSW Canteen

A subsidised canteen offering affordable meals (e.g. $3-$6) would respond directly to one of the most pressing and evidenced needs of UNSW students, affordable, nutritious food. With a rotating menu built around seasonal produce and inclusive of diverse dietary requirements, the canteen would offer more than just value. It would deliver dignity, choice and nourishment. If operated by Arc, the canteen could integrate with the existing Food Hub, creating a circular food ecosystem that reduces waste and redistributes surplus. It could also provide frozen or microwaveable meals for students to access across UNSW's microwave network, supporting students well beyond operating hours.

Whitehouse Revitalisation

A revitalised Whitehouse has the capacity to transform a key campus artery into a vibrant hub, connecting students, fostering collaboration, and energising student life across the precinct. Delivering a valued food, drink and bar offering focused on affordability. A bookable upstairs space supporting student and UNSW events encouraging collaboration. Meanwhile, the outdoor lawn area will be a lively extension of the space, featuring casual seating, games, pop-ups, and, creating a dynamic and engaging student hub.

Tackling The Problem

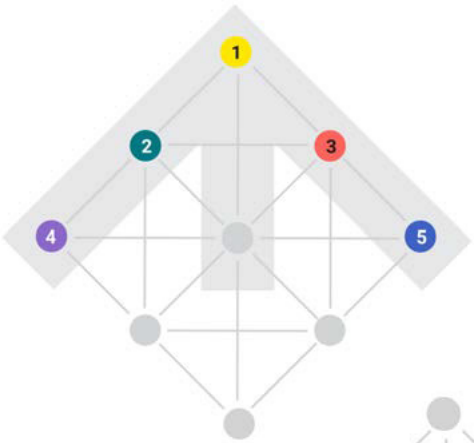
60,000+

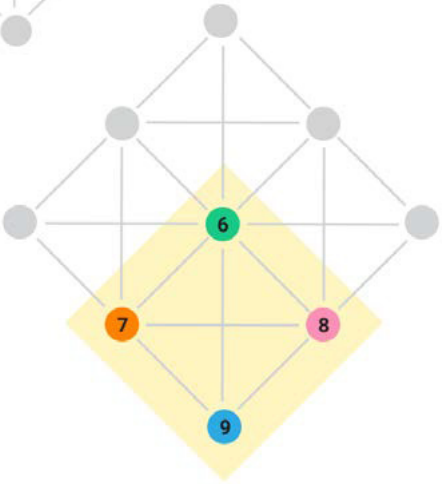
meals could be provided annually through the UNSW canteen

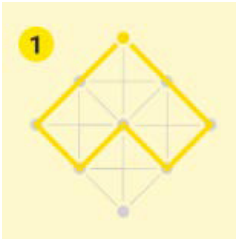
From Strategy To Action

The following section provides a deeper dive into the impacts of the strategy.

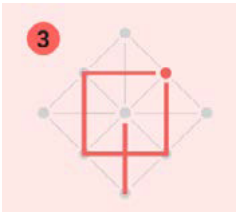
It presents the key deliverables associated with each initiative, including specific engagement goals, success measures, and priority cohorts. This deeper dive aims to clarify how each initiative will be actioned and evaluated, while also demonstrating clear alignment with the University's Societal Impact Framework. Through this approach, the strategy moves from intention to execution, ensuring accountability and measurable progress.



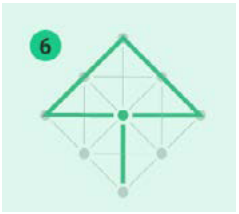




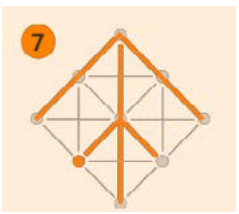
Continually improve in student satisfaction and education experience and belonging



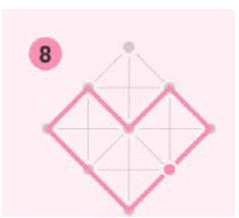
Expand and deepen our partnerships and networks for societal impact



Reduce waste generation by 30% through prevention, recycling and reuse



Reduce at least half of the proportion of all the peoples living in poverty



Improve health equity for priority populations

Food Hub: Pantry Expansion

Expansion Concepts For Rapid Relief

The Concept

The expansion of Food Hub's offerings to include a broader range of essential non-food items and core cooking supplies, permanently stocked within the hub. These additions would include toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, personal care items, sanitary products, razors, nappies, and basic cleaning supplies, cutlery, plates, cooking utensils alongside an expanded permanent base of food offerings including cooking oil, milk and baby formula.

The Student Impact

Reach

30,000

students annually

Targeting

international students

Targeting

equity cohorts

Measured by

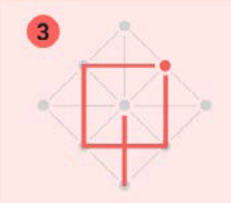
metric reported annually (Arc)

The Societal Impact

We aspire to Continually improve in student satisfaction and education experience and belonging

Through building a diverse and connected community and fostering and outstanding sense of belonging

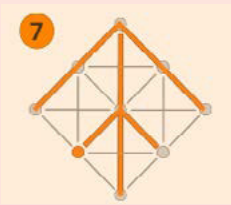
Measured By Annual Belonging Survey



We aspire to Expand and deepen our partnerships and networks for societal impact

Through Partnering with local, regional and global communities to help solve pressing challenges

Measured By Arc Annual Report



We aspire to Reduce at least half of the proportion of all the peoples living in poverty

Through Being an open connected and accessible university that takes responsibility for improving lives

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey

Food Hub 24/7 Lockers

Expansion Concepts For Rapid Relief

The Concept

The installation of electronic food lockers adjacent to the Food Hub, enabling students to 'order' basic food packs online and collect them at their convenience, day or night. Packs would be curated to provide the equivalent of 2 days' worth of meals and assembled by Food Hub volunteers. Although similar international initiatives often use refrigerated lockers, this proposal recommends non-refrigerated units to reduce upfront costs.

The Student Impact

Reach

2,000

students annually

Targeting

international students

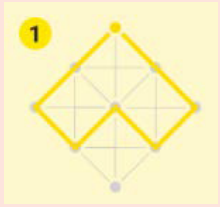
Targeting

students not typically on campus during the day

Measured by

metric reported annually (Arc)

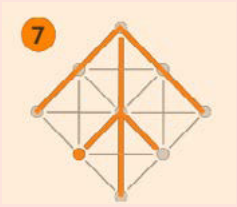
The Societal Impact



We aspire to continually improve in student satisfaction and education experience and belonging

Through building a diverse and connected community and fostering and outstanding sense of belonging

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey



We aspire to reduce at least half of the proportion of all the peoples living in poverty

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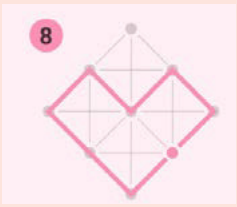
Measured By Arc Annual Report



We aspire to improve health equity for priority populations

Through work with local and global communities to advance better health and wellbeing

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey

Increased Access To Free Meals

Expansion Concepts For Rapid Relief

The Concept

A structured, high-visibility free meal program to provide regular, nutritious meals to students throughout term time. Delivered via a mobile model across campus, the program would strengthen UNSW's reputation as a caring institution actively addressing cost of living pressures.

The program will involve regular breakfasts, lunches and dinners to students during peak periods of term.

The Student Impact

Reach

30,000

students annually

Targeting

all students on campus

Measured by

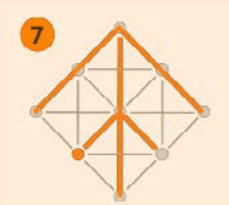
term based engagement numbers

The Societal Impact

We aspire to continually improve in student satisfaction and education experience and belonging

Through building a diverse and connected community and fostering and outstanding sense of belonging

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey



We aspire to reduce at least half of the proportion of all the peoples living in poverty

Through being an open connected and accessible university that takes responsibility for improving lives

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey

We aspire to improve health equity for priority populations

Through work with local and global communities to advance better health and wellbeing

Measured By Annual partnerships reporting

Food Education: Cooking Classes

Expansion Concepts For Skill Building

The Concept

Introduction of free cooking classes designed to teach students how to prepare substantial, nutritious, and budget-friendly meals. Students would enjoy the meal they prepare together, and each participant would receive a UNSW-branded takeaway kit with the ingredients needed to recreate the dish at home reinforcing learning and extending the value of the class.

This initiative aims to support healthier eating habits, build essential life skills, and reduce students' reliance on takeaway or processed food options.

The Student Impact

Reach

900

students annually

Targeting

international students

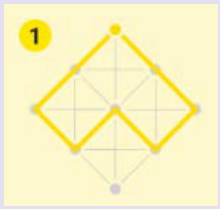
Targeting

equity cohorts

Measured by

Annual participation metric

The Societal Impact



We aspire to continually improve in student satisfaction and education experience and belonging

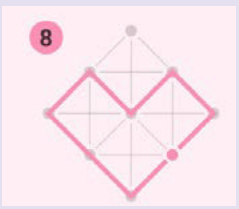
Through building a diverse and connected community and fostering and outstanding sense of belonging

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey

We aspire to reduce waste generation by 30% through prevention, recycling and reuse

Through scale our contributions in addressing climate change and sustainability challenges

Measured By Annual engagement numbers



We aspire to improve health equity for priority populations

Through work with local and global communities to advance better health and wellbeing

Measured By Annual engagement numbers

Food Education: Food Field Trips

Expansion Concepts For Skill Building

The Concept

A significant number of students rely heavily on food delivery services which can consume a substantial portion of their finances. This is a particular issue for our international students where there is the additional barrier of limited exposure and confidence in navigating Australian supermarkets. The concept is to run local supermarket tours where students are given opportunities to learn about Australian produce and how to create easy combinations for cheap delicious meals. The shopping trip would be subsidised by the university (with the opportunity to partner with externals) so that students leave the shopping trip with food, recipes and related materials to prepare a minimum of three meals at home.

The Student Impact

Reach

500

500 students in pilot for 2025

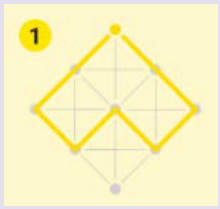
Targeting

international students

Measured by

term based engagement numbers

The Societal Impact



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Through building a diverse and connected community and fostering and outstanding sense of belonging

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey

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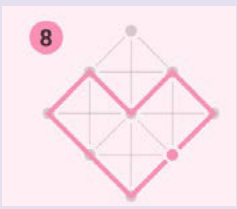
Through Scale our contributions in addressing climate change and sustainability challenges

Measured By Annual engagement numbers



We aspire to improve health equity for priority populations

Through work with local and global communities to advance better health and wellbeing

Measured By Annual engagement numbers

Basic Needs Hub

Expansion Concepts For Systemic Support

The Concept

Transforming the Food Hub into a Basic Needs Hub, a comprehensive, multi-service support centre that not only provides food security but also addresses financial hardship (financial counselling, financial workshops), professional development barriers ("Career Closet" where students can access clothes for interviews), and social inclusion. The centre can also provide an agile space to provide short term solution (ie: pop up barber for free haircuts).

The Student Impact

Reach

30,000

students annually

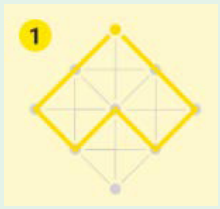
Targeting

all students on campus

Measured by

term based engagement numbers

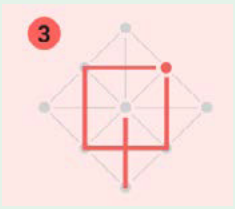
The Societal Impact



We aspire to Continually improve in student satisfaction and education experience and belonging

Through building a diverse and connected community and fostering and outstanding sense of belonging

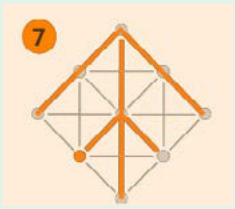
Measured By Annual Belonging Survey



We aspire to Expand and deepen our partnerships and networks for societal impact

Through leveraging networks to cultivate opportunities for societal impact

Measured By Arc Annual Report



We aspire to Reduce at least half of the proportion of all the peoples living in poverty

Through being an open connected and accessible university that takes responsibility for improving lives

Measured By Annual engagement numbers

UNSW Canteen

Expansion Concepts For Systemic Support

The Concept

A subsidised canteen offering affordable meals would respond directly to one of the most pressing and evidenced needs of UNSW students, affordable, nutritious food. With a rotating menu built around seasonal produce and inclusive of diverse dietary requirements, the canteen would offer more than just value. It would deliver dignity, choice and nourishment. The canteen could integrate with the existing Food Hub, creating a circular food ecosystem that reduces waste and redistributes surplus.

The Student Impact

Reach

90,000

students annually

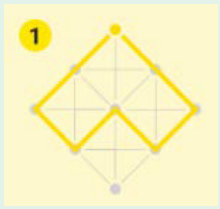
Targeting

all students on campus

Measured by

term based engagement numbers

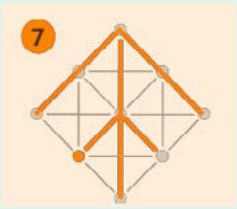
The Societal Impact



We aspire to Continually improve in student satisfaction and education experience and belonging

Through building a diverse and connected community and fostering and outstanding sense of belonging

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey



We aspire to Reduce at least half of the proportion of all the peoples living in poverty

Through being an open connected and accessible university that takes responsibility for improving lives

Measured By Annual Belonging Survey

We aspire to Reduce waste generation by 30% through prevention, recycling and reuse

Through Scale our contributions in addressing climate change and sustainability challenges

Measured By Arc Annual Report

Swipe Out Hunger

Expansion Concepts For Systemic Support

The Concept

In both the US and UK, welfare programs exist that provide students with a meal voucher or meal card to access food on campus, helping to alleviate food insecurity and reduce financial stress. At UNSW, student feedback has consistently highlighted that on-campus food prices are often beyond their budgets, affecting not only their nutrition and wellbeing but also their ability to focus and succeed academically. It is incumbent upon the university to explore and implement practical, student-centred solutions—such as a meal card or voucher system—that address this urgent and growing need..

The Student Impact

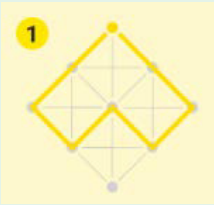
Reach

Concept requires more investigation from EM and IT before moving to implementation

Targeting

all students on campus

The Societal Impact



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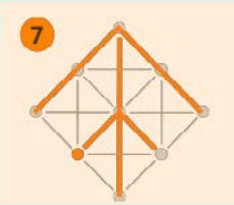

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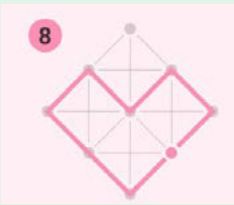

We aspire to Improve health equity for priority populations

Through Work with local and global communities to advance better health and wellbeing

Measured By Annual partnerships reporting

UNSW
SYDNEY