

**Food for Thought: A pilot study exploring the use of cultural recipe and story sharing to enhance belonging at university**

Practitioner Research  
In Higher Education  
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University of Cumbria  
Vol 14(1) pages 60-71

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**Abstract**

The global shift to online teaching and learning in response to the pandemic was potentially deleterious to sense of belonging and connection to the institution. Food is important in all cultures and has multiple functions, including making connections and welcoming others, in addition to specific cultural and religious meanings. The Cultural Food Stories project, a recipe and story sharing initiative, aimed to explore whether food could be used to enhance feelings of belonging within a higher education institution during the Covid-19 pandemic. Staff and students at a large widening participation university were invited to share a personally meaningful recipe as well as the story of why the recipe mattered. In addition, participants completed a short demographics questionnaire, including levels of agreement with statements on belonging derived from the literature. Optional online interviews were held. A total of 45 participants contributed 49 recipes and stories, and 12 online interviews were held. Participation increased sense of belonging in 73.8% of participants with no differences by demographic characteristics. Recipe stories commonly evoked people, places and emotions, maintaining connections through physical separation. This small project suggests that food may be used as a mechanism to enhance sense of belonging within higher education.

**Key words**

Belonging; connection; food; people; sharing.

**Introduction**

Developing a sense of connection or belonging within higher education contributes to student engagement and retention (Hausman et al., 2009; Freeman et al., 2007). Belonging is recognised as having multiple aspects, including social and academic dimensions, surroundings and personal space (Ahn and Davis, 2019). Belonging and engagement overlap, since those who feel they belong are more likely to engage with the institution and their work, and engagement enhances belonging (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Both belonging and engagement include emotional aspects; if the subject and how it is taught links to student experience and interests, it is more likely to engage them emotionally (Kahu et al., 2015), while social aspects of belonging include the development of relationships with both peers (Meehan and Howells, 2018) and staff (Dwyer, 2017). However, for a variety of reasons both belonging and engagement may be more challenging for some students than others, particularly those considered to be non-traditional. These include commuter students, those with caring responsibilities or disability, those from ethnic minority groups, first-in-family to university and mature students (Reay et al., 2010; Waite, 2013; Wainwright and Marandet, 2010; O'Shea, 2016; Southall et al., 2016; Wong, 2018).

In most UK institutions teaching in higher education occurs face-to-face, so the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in an unprecedented shift to online learning, was of concern not least from the perspective of relationship-building. In the wake of the first UK lockdown (from March 2020), when all teaching moved online virtually overnight, a questionnaire-based survey of 71 staff and 208 students at our widening participation institution showed that for both groups, their sense of belonging fell and physical presence on campus was identified as important to belonging (Mulrooney

**Citation**

Mulrooney, H. (2021) 'Food for thought: a pilot study exploring the use of cultural recipe and story sharing to enhance belonging at university', *Practitioner Research in Higher Education Journal*, 14(1), pp. 60-71.

and Kelly, 2020). This finding fits with 'place-belongingness', which describes belonging in terms of the relationship between self and space, encompassing both affective and spatial links to places and spaces (Antonsich, 2010). A number of factors have been suggested to contribute to 'place-belongingness', including autobiographical factors (such as personal history, experiences and memories), personal and social ties attached to places (for example relationships with staff and students in the case of the university), cultural factors (like traditions and practices which invoke a sense of community), economic factors and legal factors (e.g. citizenship) (Antonsich, 2010). A follow-up study carried out in the new academic year (from October 2020 to June 2021), found that with the continuation of online learning, both staff and students expressed concern about relationships within and between their groups (Abu et al., 2021). Students missed social interactions both with their peers and staff but this also impacted on their learning since they lost opportunities for informal academic and peer support. Staff expressed concern particularly about developing relationships with new students, as well as with each other (Abu et al., 2021). Our institution was not alone in this. The UN suggested that from April 2020, an unprecedented 94% of learners globally were affected by the loss of on-campus teaching and learning (UN, 2020), recognised as potentially deleterious for sense of belonging (OECD, 2020).

Institutions have made valiant efforts to engage their students and to try to develop and maintain a sense of connection between them and their institutions. Much of this related specifically to teaching and learning e.g. the use of interactive and collaborative technologies such as quizzes and breakout rooms (Crawford et al, 2020). However, outside the lecture theatre are there more innovative ways of developing a sense of connection? Food is universal and has multiple meanings including personal, cultural, religious and health-related (Lupton, 1994; Rozin, 2005; Williams et al., 2012). Although food is intensely personal, it is not neutral. Food and eating behaviours tell us a great deal about society and relationships (Julier, 2013). Food can be used to build connections with each other, to explore new cultures through the medium of their food and to denote acceptance of others. Eating together has social, communal and networking functions (Dunbar, 2017). During the pandemic and within education, the food focus has largely focused on the needs of the most vulnerable (for example those in receipt of free school meals, as schools closed) (OECD, 2020). However, within the rich cultural diversity of the higher education institution, it is possible that food may be used as a means of enhancing belonging while simultaneously honouring cultural diversity. Bourdieu's theories have previously been used to explain food-related issues (Power, 1999). His sociological theories considered the practicalities of everyday life, and while food is both personal and transactional (i.e. contains specific nutrients required for life), it also links with symbolic aspects of human life, such as our social practices (Power, 1999). According to Bourdieu, habitus (how we perceive and react to our social surroundings), encompasses all past experiences, but it is not stagnant (Bourdieu, 1990). Primary habitus is formed by family behaviours and norms, while secondary habitus are affected by multiple aspects of everyday life including the workplace, income and social class (Woodhall-Melnik and Matheson, 2016). Food primary habitus would be formed by family food behaviours and experiences, and secondary habitus formed by wider exposure such as friends, peers, workmates, environment, income and cultural norms among others. Thus, it could be supposed that food represents a potential mechanism by which individuals may feel a sense of connection with each other, even while physically separated. The Cultural Food Stories project aimed to explore whether or not this could be the case in the context of the pandemic and a culturally diverse higher education institution, through the medium of sharing a personally meaningful recipe and its story. Collaborative learning opportunities within the classroom have been shown to enhance openness to diversity among college students (Loes et al., 2018). Both collaborative learning and fostering relatedness among students were identified as important components of strategies encouraging inclusivity in higher education (Awang-Hashim et al., 2019). However, this pilot project is collaborative in a limited sense, since each participant shared the recipe and story only with the researcher. It sought to identify whether the participant felt a greater sense of connection with the institution by sharing this personally significant information, and to

identify the main themes identified from recipes and stories submitted. The next stage of the project, when the recipes and stories are shared widely within the institution, will explore responses to the recipes and stories and will be used to identify common ground between diverse groups.

### **Data collection**

The project was a recipe and story sharing initiative, to which staff and students were invited to contribute via university email lists. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected by questionnaire and optional interviews. Ethics approval for the project were received from the Faculty Research Ethics committee. Although food can be used to identify membership of different social groups (Reilly and Wallendorf, 1987), with the potential to 'other' and to be used as a mark of difference, the risk in the context of this project was considered low. Recipes and stories shared within the project could be submitted under a pseudonym chosen by participants if they wished, and they will be shared with others through an online folder, which will be made available after July 2021 when the resource is ready to share. Those accessing the resource can choose which recipes and stories they wish to explore and try out, but this will be done privately. The stories, providing context for the recipes, will, it is hoped, help build understanding between different groups, of the meaning of specific dishes, reducing risk of 'othering'. However, this will be explored in the next stage of the project.

### **Questionnaire**

Participants were sent a recipe template and a short demographics questionnaire which included personal and study demographics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age group, length of time at the university, staff or student status). They were asked to rate their level of agreement with six statements related to belonging derived from the literature (Yorke, 2016; Ribera et al., 2017), using a five point Likert rating scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. They were asked to explain why the recipe was significant to them, where it originated and whether it had any cultural and/or religious significance. Finally, they were asked whether participation in the project impacted on their sense of belonging to the institution. Additional qualitative data were collected using open text boxes.

### **Interviews**

Optional interviews were held online using Teams and were audio-recorded. Participants were asked whether they felt food played a part in belonging, whether the role of food had changed in the pandemic and their views on the roles of food for individuals.

### **Analysis**

Statements on belonging, cultural/religious significance of recipes and whether participation affected sense of belonging were analysed by demographic characteristics using Kruskal Wallis tests adjusted for ties with posthoc Dunn's analysis, and Bonferroni adjustment. The groups of statements on belonging were analysed for reliability using Cronbach's analysis. Basic thematic analysis was carried out on interview data and qualitative questions to identify key themes which arose. I-poems were constructed for interview questions on the importance of food in the pandemic (Gilligan et al., 2003).

### **Data findings**

#### *Demographics of participants*

A total of 49 recipes were submitted by 45 participants. The overall response rate to the invitation to participate cannot be ascertained since all those invited to participate were asked to forward the invitation to their own contacts, thus the total number contacted is unknown. A total of 12 interviews were held. The majority of participants were females, 60.0% were white and 33.3% were staff members. One in three had been at the university for at least 5 years. Demographic details of participants are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographics details of the participants (n=45). Data are expressed as numbers (%).

Gender					
Male	Female	Other	PNS		
6 (13.3)	37 (82.2)	1 (2.2)	1 (2.2)		
Ethnicity					
White	Black	Asian	Mixed		
27 (60.0)	3 (6.7)	14 (31.1)	1 (2.2)		
Age					
18-21y	22-25y	26-29y	≥30y	PNS	
13 (28.9)	10 (22.2)	4 (8.9)	17 (37.8)	1 (2.2)	
Are you?					
Staff member	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	PNS		
15 (33.3)	18 (40.0)	10 (22.2)	2 (4.4)		
Length of time at the institution					
1 <sup>st</sup> year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	4 <sup>th</sup> year	≥5 years	PNS
4 (8.9)	5 (11.1)	13 (28.9)	5 (11.1)	15 (33.3)	3 (6.7)

Statements on aspects of belonging at university were analysed by demographic characteristics of participants (Table 2). Significantly older (26-29 and ≥30 years) than younger (18-21 years) participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt at home at the university (100.0%, 100.0% and 69.0%,  $p=0.04$  &  $p=0.02$  respectively). No effects of gender or ethnicity were seen.

Similarly, significantly more participants aged at least 30 years agreed or strongly agreed that being at the university was an enriching experience, compared with younger participants aged 18-21 years (100% vs 69.3%,  $p=0.03$ ). No other significant differences were seen.

Significantly more female than male participants agreed or strongly agreed that the university respected their ethnicity and gender (86.5% vs 33.3%,  $p=0.03$ ).

No significant differences by length of time at university or staff/student status were found for any of the statements (data not shown). A good level of reliability for the statements on belonging was found (Cronbach's alpha 0.79).

**Table 2.** Response to statements on sense of belonging at the university by demographic characteristics. Data are expressed as Kruskal Wallis tests with posthoc Dunn's analysis adjusted for ties and Bonferroni adjustment.

Statement	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
I feel at home	H (4) = 15.31, $p=0.00$ 18-21y vs 26-30y, $p=0.04$ 18-21y vs ≥30y, $p=0.02$ 18-21y: 31.6; 22-25y: 26.6; 26-30y: 12.0; ≥30y: 17.6	H (3) = 1.85, $p=0.61$	H (3) = 2.88, $p=0.41$
Being at this university is an enriching experience	H (4) = 10.15, $p=0.04$ 18-21y vs ≥30y, $p=0.03$	H (3) = 2.51, $p=0.47$	H (3) = 6.01, $p=0.11$

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Statement	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
	<b>18-21y: 31.1; 22-25y 20.9; 26-29y: 20.1; ≥30y: 18.5</b>		
Welcoming	H (4) = 7.99, p=0.09	H (3) = 5.55, p=0.14	H (3) = 4.58, p=0.21
I am shown respect	H (4) = 7.12, p=0.13	H (3) = 2.42, p=0.49	H (3) = 5.00, p=0.17
Sometimes I feel that I don't belong	H (4) = 6.51, p=0.16	H (3) = 1.12, p=0.77	H (3) = 1.65, p=0.65
This university respects my ethnicity & culture	H (4) = 6.47, p=0.17	<b>H (3) = 9.38, p=0.03</b> <b>Female vs male p=0.03</b> <b>Female: 21.0;</b> <b>Male: 35.50</b>	H (3) = 7.77, p=0.05

Those aged 26-29 years were significantly less likely to contribute recipes with religious and/or cultural significance compared with those aged either 22-25 years or ≥30 years (0.0% vs 80.0% & 82.4% respectively). No other differences by demographics data were found (Table 3; data for length of time at university or staff/student status not shown).

**Table 3.** Cultural/religious significance of recipes. Data are expressed as Kruskal Wallis tests with post hoc Dunn's analysis adjusted for ties and Bonferroni adjustment.

Statement	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
This recipe has cultural/religious significance	H (4) = 12.29, p=0.015 22-25y vs 26-29y: p=0.04 ≥30y vs 26-29y: p=0.01 18-21y: 23.6; 22-25y: 20.8; 26-29y: 38.0; ≥30y: 19.2	H (3) = 0.82, p=0.85	H (3) = 1.65, p=0.65

The majority of participants (73.8%) agreed that taking part in the project increased their sense of belonging at the university. None said that participation decreased their sense of belonging; the remaining participants were unsure if it made a difference. No differences by any demographic characteristics were found (Table 4; data for length of time at university and staff/student status not shown).

**Table 4.** Impact of participation in the project on sense of belonging. Data are expressed as Kruskal Wallis tests with post hoc Dunn’s analysis adjusted for ties and Bonferroni adjustment.

Statement	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
Taking part in this project has made me feel more like I belong at this university	H (4) = 2.12, p=0.71	H (3) = 2.53, p=0.47	H (3) = 3.94, p=0.27

Participants were asked to provide three words or phrases that represented their recipe to them. A total of 146 words were given, of which the most common were ‘happiness’ (9.0% of response), ‘family’ (6.2% of responses), ‘tasty’ (5.5% of responses), ‘warm’ (4.8% of responses). ‘Home’, ‘sweet’, ‘delicious’ and ‘comfort’ each represented 4.1% of responses. Words and phrases fell into a number of key themes, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Key themes generated from the three words/phrases used to describe their recipes by participants.

Themes	Examples of words used by participants
Flavours	Sweet, tangy, delicious, flavoursome
Places	Home, Ghana, Bulgaria, England
People	Family, babushka
Events	Party, wedding, Christmas
Emotions	Happiness, gratitude, pleased, proud

### Stories

Stories that participants shared about the importance of their recipes varied from brief utilitarian descriptions to more detailed evocations, many of which encompassed people (e.g. parents, grandparents), places (e.g. family country of origin, special holiday destination) and occasions (e.g. Christmas, parties, festivals). Some were intensely moving. One for example described a grandmother who travelled across Europe largely on foot in the 1920’s to escape persecution and once settled in East London, continued to make her native chicken dish. In this case, the dish functioned both as a reminder of home; of a country and people lost to the individual, and as a link to and means of maintaining cultural traditions. Another story described a small girl in 1930’s Ireland, placed in an orphanage and never taught to cook, who grew up unable to provide home-cooked food for her family as a result. The only dish she learned to cook was donated by her daughter and the significance of that one dish as a symbol of her mother’s love for her family despite the deficits of her own upbringing, was clear. Evocations of place were common. For example, while project participants originated from 21 countries, the recipes derived from 34 countries - often from the family’s places of origin. Specific recipes were used to maintain a sense of connection with those places and with specific people. For example, in one case, the recipe derived from northern Spain, from the same region as that of the participant’s grandfather. Thus, the recipe acted as a link to someone meaningful, at a time that they could not be together.

### Interview data

A total of 12 interviews were held, with an average time of 20 mins 25 seconds (range: 7mins 28 secs to 32 mins 47 secs). All participants agreed that food plays a part in belonging and has become even more important since the pandemic. Multiple roles of food were described, many of which related to

belonging. These can be seen in Figure 1. Food as comfort, a source of enjoyment, a way of sharing and welcoming others, social aspects of food, food as a way of building connections, evoking memories of people, events and places and food as a way of exploring the new were all described. For example, a recipe for Seville orange marmalade, passed down through four generations was described as follows:

‘acts as sustenance, energy, currency and gift now, just as it did then’.



**Figure 1.** Roles of food identified from interviews.

Participants agreed that food, already important, became more so during the pandemic for a variety of reasons. Recipes allow family traditions to be maintained, acting as links to the past and this became even more important during the pandemic, when many families were physically separated. Preparing dishes that reminded them of those they could not be with acted as a link, and some participants described preparing traditional dishes for festivals and sharing them with family online rather than in person, as would be usual. Thus, traditional practices were adapted and maintained, even in extraordinary times, and food continued to link people who were physically separated.

An I-poem (Gilligan et al, 2003) constructed from the transcript of one participant sums up the role of food in the pandemic, evoking culture, belonging, emotion and specific people:

‘..food in my culture,  
Feel like you belong to that group and this joy,  
Those I cannot see at this time,  
Reminds me of her’

Taking part in the project was viewed positively, as shown in the following extracts:

‘I was excited to share this recipe as it will allow others from different cultures to gain an insight into new dishes and their understandings to my culture. I also hope that people may look up the recipe and try it out themselves one day’.

‘Food is a big thing where I come from, and it is always nice to share something that reminds me of home’.

‘It is very special to take part in a project that involves both students and staff using the universal medium of food to bring everyone together. Food brings people together in so many different ways and for many different occasions. It is fun to share traditions, recipes and really interesting to hear other people’s stories’.

This suggests that while the recipes and stories themselves evoked significant people, places and occasions, sharing them increased sense of connection with the institution.

### **Analysis and discussion**

Belonging within educational institutions is recognised as important, not just for personal connection and social aspects but for academic reasons, helping to build self-efficacy (Allen and Bowles, 2012). Since part of a sense of belonging is the development of relationships within and between staff and students, the rapid shift to largely online learning in those not used to this way of working had the potential to reduce sense of belonging in staff and students and indeed this has been shown (Mulrooney and Kelly, 2020; OECD, 2020). This project, which is unique to the knowledge of the author, showed that it is possible to enhance belonging in staff and students separated from each other and in many cases, from their families, throughout the pandemic using recipe and story sharing. It is an unusual project from a pedagogic perspective, as it does not relate directly to teaching and learning. Rather, it aimed to use food to enhance belonging to the institution in staff and students physically separated.

Although the project was small, it showed that belonging at the institution was enhanced by participation, regardless of the age, gender, ethnicity, status of the participant or their length of time at the institution. The comments made by participants, expressing their pleasure in being asked to contribute recipes and stories personal to them, suggest that this relates to the nature of the project with the focus on food, rather than an effect of simply taking part in a project. In a sense, this is unsurprising. Food has been used to enhance belonging in refugee families albeit pre-Covid when they could meet, eat and prepare food together (Gerrity and Hardjabuntara, 2021). Consumption of nostalgic food products has previously been shown to help increase sense of connection with others (Loveland et al., 2010). During the pandemic, many participants were unable to be with their families, but their choice of recipes often linked them with the important people and places in their lives. Similarly in the literature, food has been shown to maintain links with countries of origin (Tourigny, 2020); in American second-generation minority ethnic students, the ability to obtain their cultural foods increased their feelings of comfort and safety as well as sense of belonging (Wright et al., 2020). As such, food is ideal for helping to build a sense of community, even when people are physically separated. However, in this project no physical meeting and sharing of food was possible, and participation was limited to sharing meaningful recipes and their stories with others.

Food is not neutral but has associations, evoking people, places and situations. Food can be considered as a cultural construct, in terms of the meanings and emotions it evokes (Azar et al., 2013). Some of the roles of food identified by participants in Cultural Food Stories overlap with social aspects of belonging, such as 'social', 'sharing', 'making friends', 'connections' as shown in Figure 1. Developing relationships with both staff and peers is well recognised as intrinsic to developing a sense of belonging to the institution (Ahn and Davis, 2019), so food represents an important potential route by which belonging may be enhanced. In addition, frameworks of student engagement situate belonging within a wider sociocultural context and it can be used to help understand why some groups of students feel like outsiders within academia (Kahu, 2013). In this context, structural influences (including the culture and policies of the institution) and psychosocial influences (including staff and student relationships) impact upon student engagement (Kahu, 2013; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). The Cultural Food Stories project, offered to staff and students within the university reflects the institutional respect for cultural diversity (fitting under structural influences). Both staff and students were invited to participate and optional conversational interviews with a staff member were offered, with the potential to develop relationships. It could be postulated that the overlap of aspects of the project with a framework of student engagement, as well as the increased sense of belonging found in participants, would impact positively upon student (and staff) engagement, but this was not directly measured. For non-traditional students identified as more likely to have difficulties with developing a

sense of belonging and engagement, food offers a novel approach to reach and engage them. It is possible that the increased sense of belonging as a consequence of participation may translate into better outcomes for staff and students but this cannot be ascertained at this stage. In terms of Bourdieu's *habita*, the importance of primary habitus and in particular the influence of family was clear since many of the recipes derived from family traditions and practices, and in some cases the recipes were obtained from family members.

It was interesting but also encouraging that significantly older (aged at least 30 years) compared with younger (18-21 years) participants agreed that they felt at home and that being at the university was an enriching experience. Given that older students are identified as a group which may struggle to belong within higher education, this is encouraging. The project also appeared to appeal to this group since they represented 37.8% of participants. It may be that they were already highly engaged with the university and therefore chose to participate. However, against a backdrop of online teaching and learning, an element of online fatigue is likely, so it is possible that food-related projects may offer potential to reach non-traditional groups. It was also of interest that significantly more females than males felt that the university respected their ethnicity and gender, and it is not clear why this was the case. However, only 6 participants were male, so more data is needed before any conclusions can be reached. It is unclear how many individuals were invited to participate in the project and thus the participation rate cannot be identified, which is a limitation. However, overall participation was low, since only 49 recipes were submitted by 45 individuals and in the context of a higher education institution, this is a small number, limiting generalisability of results. This was not unexpected, since all invitations were unsolicited and online, so online fatigue may have been a factor. In addition, some effort was required to submit a recipe and the story; participants were self-selecting and likely to have been those most interested in food already and who also recognised the value of the project. The next stage, where the recipes and stories are widely shared with staff and students, represents an opportunity for collaborative discussions around diversity and inclusivity through the lens of food.

#### **Next steps, and how others may use this approach**

Food is relatable and cross disciplinary, and Cultural Food Stories is a project that could be readily adapted and modified for future use. Taking part in the project was a low cost initiative from the institutional perspective; no specialist knowledge was needed, and the recipes will not date. The recipes and stories will be made freely available via the university website, encouraging staff and students to recognise and value the cultural diversity of the university members, and to try new recipes. We are currently exploring mechanisms by which responses to the recipes and stories may be shared, to help build a food-based community with common interests within the institution, thus enhancing belonging and cultural understanding, more widely.

While in this small pilot project taking part increased sense of belonging among participants, it is not clear whether it will also do so amongst those subsequently accessing the recipes. We will explore the use of the recipes, offering those who access them the opportunity to share their perceptions of the project, whether trying the recipes and reading the stories has impacted upon them in any way, and also offer them the chance to contribute their own recipes. In addition, the project will be incorporated into the summative assessment for first year undergraduate students on nutrition programmes, who will contribute a recipe and story each as part of their study of social aspects of nutrition. Their perceptions of this in relation to belonging as well as social nutrition will be explored.

Exposure to collaborative learning opportunities within the classroom has been shown to enhance openness to diversity among college students (Loes et al., 2018), and the pool of recipes and stories, with the potential that more may be added over time, represents a means by which diversity can be discussed, explored and better understood. How best to do this is currently being explored but a potential mechanism is as a point of discussion within existing initiatives such as the Personal Tutor

Scheme, which aims to develop relationships between staff and students. An advantage of this project is that both staff and students could participate. Many institutions have considerable diversity among their staff and students and inviting them to share significant recipes is a respectful way of acknowledging and honouring this. As a universal medium, food has the potential to be used to build connections even within the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic.

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Student Consultancy Project at Kingston University which funded five Student Ambassadors to work on this project (Lola Mau, Ashley Nabukenya Ndenzi, Chidera Nnadozie, Maya India Jackson and Fatmata Sow). Thank you to the Network of Equality Champions at Kingston University which also supported this project financially, and Julia Sikorski, Claire Selby, Rahmeh Sukhon and Aminah Belkadi who worked on the project templates and logos and nutritional analysis of recipes respectively. Thank you to the Student Equality Consultants who helped collect recipes (Rosy-May Schofield, Tajmit Khaneja and Hiba-Tun-Noor Afshan Mahmood). I would also like to thank all the participants who so generously shared their recipes and stories.

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