Factors influencing food preferences among international students in Universiti Putra Malaysia

Nurunnisa KE, Norhasmah S and Gan WY

Department of Nutrition, Faculty of Medicines and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Food preference related studies among international students are carried out to understand and emphasize their needs and their issues on food and the roots of these issues including availability, accessibility and affordability of food. This study aimed to determine factors influencing food preferences of international students in Universiti Putra Malaysia. This was a cross-sectional study and a total number of 649 respondents were recruited by using random sampling method. A twenty-minute online questionnaire that consisted of seven different sections was used to determine socio-demographic characteristics, physiological factors, food environment, general acculturation, food choice motives, general nutrition knowledge and food preferences. The food preference questionnaire required participants to rate their preference of 77 individual foods on a Likert scale, ranging from dislike a lot to like a lot. Pearson and Spearman Correlation, one-way ANOVA, Mann Whitney U test and multiple linear regression were applied to the research objectives. The number of subjects recruited in this study was higher in males (60.7%) than females (39.1%). They were mainly Arap (37.2%) and Asian (33.8%) and marital status of respondents were mostly single (67%). The results showed that gender (β=-0.125, p=0.002), household composition (living with friends or family) (β=0.090, p=0.023), food availability (β=0.182, p<0.001), food affordability (β=-0.165, p<0.001), nutrition knowledge about diet/ill management (β=0.257, p<0.001), price (β=0.179, p<0.001), weight control (β=-0.149, p=0.001), health (β=0.159, p=0.002) and natural content (β=0.250, p=0.001) were significantly influenced on food preferences among international students in Universiti Putra Malaysia. In conclusion, there were several unique issues including the limitation in the food availability and affordability, the motives and low level of nutrition knowledge specifically related to international students’ food preferences as a result of adjusting Malaysian culture. This study can help to identify challenges to improve the food environment on university campuses. During orientations, universities could raise the consciousness of international and ethnic food stores in addition to local grocery stores. The results of this study can also be used by the ministry of agriculture and food industry. The ministry with the collaboration of food industry might put fresh fruit stalls in university campuses all over the country to enhance fresh fruit consumption. However, a more comprehensive study among all international students throughout Malaysia is recommended.