

## **New Eating Habits of NU Students**

Mark Agzamov

School of Sciences and Humanities, Nazarbayev University

SOC 499: Capstone Seminar II

Professor Dana Burkhanova

4 May 2025

## **New Eating Habits of NU Students**

### **Introduction**

The capstone project studies new eating habits and the transition process regarding the food consumption of NU students' lives, who moved from NIS and BIL dormitory life with five times free, healthy meals into NU dormitory life where all responsibility and accountability are on student's own shoulders.

Moving from these kinds of greenhouse conditions into the real world setting is often not a smooth process for many young people. This process of moving from school to university definitely brings a lot of changes into an individual's life and it takes some time to adapt and accept these new changes. Transition becomes transition when a person starts to accept and perceive this stage of life as a state of change, or starts making actions towards dealing with new reality (Bridges, 2004; Selzer, 1989, as cited in Blichfeldt & Gram, 2013). The project focuses on the experience of adapting to new conditions and exploring what are the new eating habits of NU dormitory residents, who previously lived in NIS and BIL dormitory, which provided them with five free healthy meals a day. NU dormitory students, who had previously lived in NIS and BIL dormitory, were interviewed to answer research questions. The sample population consists of 9 people with more or less equal distribution by gender and year of study. Taking into account division of domestic labor in Kazakhstan, considering both genders will provide additional insights. Also, taking students in their first year of study may help to get more information as they still have fresh memories of the previous semester. Semi-structured interviews will be the most suitable way to obtain more information and more of the information, which students wanted to share themselves.

First of all, it usually takes some time for students to understand that they are now on their own and that they have to create strategies to live on their own as responsible adults. During these times students may face many challenges before they hopefully adapt to this new life. The capstone project tried to understand the general experience of adaptation of students, who had healthy and nutritious food being prepared for them for the past five years and which then disappeared. Main research questions were what are the new eating habits of NU students, how they formed them and how they went through the transition process.

As a sample population NU dormitory students with NIS and BIL dormitory background are chosen because they might be considered as privileged students,

who presumably may not be adapted to adequately supporting their nutritious needs. Their life changed dramatically in terms of their nutrition regime in the span of three months after senior year of school, therefore their transition experience is expected to be not so smooth. The nature of the research pushed towards using qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews, with a set of questions and offers some freedom for students to share their stories.

As discussed above the study centers around the concept of transition. The focus will be on how students passed, passing or if some disagree are rejecting the transition between school and university in terms of food preparation. The study shows how NU freshmen students take on the new responsibility of preparing food for themselves. We wanted to know how students were able to form or why they failed to form their current eating habits. This research may help future generations of students to better understand the challenges of transition from school to university and have better preparation for university life in terms of food preparation.

## **Literature Review**

### *Students' Eating Habits*

Entering university walls freshmen students suddenly acquire a lot of new responsibilities upon them from day one. Basic needs like food, water and shelter are also now freshmen's own responsibilities. If the shelter is sometimes provided by university or some other ways, the food consumption may become an everyday challenge for students if they will not be able to form an established diet. And before eating any food for freshmen students have to make another additional step of choosing what to eat that they mostly did not have to do in the past. The food was already chosen and prepared by parents and school which dropped the dilemma of choosing food for each day. In university the choice is usually limited and determined by some internal and external factors. According to Deliens et al. (2014) Belgian students choose their food based on their individual factors, social networks, physical environment and macro environment. Individual factors include students' taste preferences, time and convenience of food preparation; social networks are friends and peers, parental control and lack of it; physical environment means the availability, accessibility and price of the food; and macro environment is media and advertising. Wills (2005) also confirms that new social context contributes to change of eating habits among young people after leaving school. The study was conducted in South East England and students of this region

tend to pick up new eating habits from their social environment and peers. Another study conducted on this topic recently by Li et al. (2022) emphasizes the significance of individual preferences, price and accessibility too. It might be noticed that for freshmen students, food being healthy is not the primary concern. From this can be expected that students may adapt unhealthy eating habits. Li et al. (2022) concludes that focusing on availability, accessibility and price of the food may contribute to health issues, including weight gain especially among freshmen students. Eating habits adapted by first-year students are not always targeting nutrition, balance and health protection which consequently may result in some unhealthy eating practices.

Academic stress is also a contributing factor that shapes students' eating habits. Almoraie et al. (2024) reported that busy schedules and academic stress can make students skip meals, increase late-night snacking, fast food and convenience store snacks consumption. Students tend to replace proper meals with snacks because they offer quick solutions and are easily available in nearby stores and automatic machines. In such critical situations and under stress students do not really prioritize nutrition. Students interviewed by Sogari et al. (2018) said that they used to stay active, do sports and eat more balanced and healthy food when they were staying at home with their parents. But after moving to the college they explain that it became harder to maintain healthy eating habits and stay physically active due to their studies.

Beasley et al. (2004) says that young people who recently moved out of their parents' house are at risk of adapting harmful eating habits. According to participants of this study, 42% of them felt that their eating habits are more unhealthy than eating habits they practiced during their stay at parents' house. Later this research concludes that with time students usually adapt more healthy eating habits. But as we can see there is a period of some turbulence in food consumption when students poorly manage their eating habits. Papadaki et al. (2007) also reported that students who moved away from home to dormitory developed more unhealthy eating habits compared to students who continue to live with their parents. At least in the sample of Greek University students it shows that more drastic changes like change of living place may lead to even more changes in eating habits and not always healthy ones. The transition from home to university dormitory and from home food to university food seems to imply more changes into eating habits of students. As it was slightly mentioned in the previous

paragraph such unhealthy eating practices result in weight gain and in some cases obesity. According to Wengren & Moncur (2009) the first semester in college is usually associated with significant weight gain for almost 25% of newly admitted students. New both healthy and unhealthy eating habits are emerging during transition and some of them lead to adverse health effects. All these findings show how crucial is transition from high school to university life in many aspects of life, including food consumption.

Trying to explain the phenomenon of unhealthy eating among freshmen and higher year students, some may think that students are just unfamiliar with proper nutrition and what types of food are the best for them. However, research by Abraham et al. (2018) shows that students actually are aware and have moderate knowledge about nutritional characteristics of food they consume but it is their choices that make their diet unhealthy. Again it is convenience and taste that students favor when choosing their food. But there is still some positive correlation between nutritional knowledge and diet, Kolodinsky et al. (2007) says that mostly students who eat better indeed have better nutritional knowledge and their diet is close to what is described in Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005. This means that better eating students are more likely from those people who possess better nutritional knowledge. So, potentially increasing students' knowledge regarding food, food preparation to a higher level may help them form healthier eating habits.

### *Transition*

Transition is a state of change from one stage of life to another stage of life and it becomes transition only when the individual perceives, accepts and acts towards dealing with the new reality (Bridges, 2004; Selzer, 1989, as cited in Blichfeldt & Gram, 2013). The life in school and university contrasts in many aspects. Finishing school and getting accepted to university is a big change for many individuals, thus this start of new life in university after graduating from high school is one of the major transitions in people's life.

The transition has three stages, first is ending, before starting a new stage of life, one has to accept and close the previous chapter. After ending, people find themselves in a state of confusion and distress, this is called a neutral zone. In the neutral zone people already let go of their previous life stage and accepted new changes but are still trying to adapt to them. Only after successfully adapting to new roles and changing themselves a new beginning fully begins (Bridges, 2004). Students starting their new independent, half-adult life, first of all, have to accept

that their old school days are now over and from this point they have to take responsibility for their life. Accepting this new life is not easy and many students will experience a different spectrum of feelings throughout the adaptation period. Terenzini et al. (1994) describes transition from high school to college as a highly complex process, which is influenced by very many external and internal factors. It is common to be confused and distressed during this transition. After this period of trials and errors students get used to a new stage of their life and fully start a new beginning.

Newly admitted students acquire a number of new responsibilities, which includes the most basic need of preparing food. For their studies at university many students move from their home to a new place and there usually they do not have parents or guardians who provide them with fresh and prepared food. So, freshmen have to adapt to their new life and learn new eating habits. This is not always a smooth process for many students. As it was mentioned, students and people in general may feel confused and distressed during the transition and develop some unhealthy eating habits, which also may lead to some health issues. To partially prevent this and get through a smoother transition students need to understand that this is a state of change and they need to act accordingly.

Schlossberg et al. (1981) explains that adaptation to transition depends on 4S factors: situation, self, support and strategy. The characteristics of transition from high school to college are usually the gain of new responsibilities and roles. It is not easy to immediately accept them. Situation as the name suggests is about the situation of individuals during the transition. Students find themselves in a situation where they suddenly lose an invisible hand that was feeding them for the past five or six years. Next S, which stands for self, is about the person's own skills and abilities during transition. If the student already possesses required skill for cooking and independent food management, his transition experience will go smoother. Unfortunately, in most cases students' are not prepared by any institution for upcoming changes in their nutrition and it is up to the students themselves to prepare themselves mentally and skill-wise for the upcoming changes. Third S - support suggests that a person's supporting environment of friends, family and peers can help with transition experience. In this research, it would be helpful to see what kind support students get from their families, peers, and maybe even from institutions to perform a successful transition. The last S that Nancy Schlossberg includes in her theory is strategy, she highlights how important it is to choose a

strategy to upcoming or ongoing transitions. During the transition from high school to university it is important to stay strong and work towards solving all the problems. Students have to implement problem-solving strategies for their food management to not get lost in this transition.

### *Methodology*

This capstone project will use qualitative research methods, namely, semi-structured interviews as the primary research method. Works on transition used in this literature review also use interviews and other qualitative research methods for obtaining information and conducting interviews was present in all of them. So, it is already an acknowledged method in research of this topic and choice of this research method can also be justified with the nature of this research. The nature of this research requires the opinion and voice of freshmen students regarding their transition from high school to university and their new eating habits, and this can be accomplished through conducting semi-structured interviews with freshmen.

For this research there should be asked some certain questions in structured order to obtain needed information from all students. This is called an interview guide, and Kallio et al. (2016) in their paper introduced five phases of creating an interview guide. Five phases are: determining the prerequisites for conducting semi-structured interviews; gathering all previous knowledge on the topic; write a tentative interview guide for interviews; conduct a pilot test interview; and finally polish and present completed versions of the interview guide. Thus, the interview guide will be created using knowledge on the topic from sources and experience, then after conducting one pilot test interview, the complete version of the interview guide will be used for real interviews in this research.

Also during the interview there would appear opportunities to ask participants to share their stories about unique aspects of their transition and formation of new eating habits. Adams (2018) explains that in semi-structured interviews after creating an interview guide and asking these questions, follow-up questions like “Why is that?”, “Why...?” can be used to get broader answers and will add some new insights into your research. So, this and other similar techniques of conducting semi-structured interviews would be beneficial for studying transition and new eating habits of NU students.

### **Research Design**

The capstone project uses qualitative methods to study new eating habits of NU students. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with NU freshmen students regarding their former eating habits, new eating habits, process of transition from high school to university and challenges in managing independent food preparation. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, analyzed using thematic analysis to draw conclusions and present findings.

Qualitative research methods seem to be the best method to study eating habits and transition from high school to university. During the interviews freshmen students were asked questions from the interview guide regarding their past and current eating habits and about their transition experience.

### *Sampling*

The sample population was drawn from NIS and BIL graduates because their experiences are similar and the transition from high school to university might be dramatic. The number of interviewees is nine with almost equal distribution by their high schools and by gender. Five students from BIL, three male students and two female students, four students from NIS, one male student and three female students. Other factors like race, ethnicity are not important, so they were not considered in participants recruitment. Selection criterias were as follows: freshmen NU students, including both Foundation Year Program students and first year undergraduate students, living in university dormitory who graduated from NIS or BIL, who also lived in their school's dormitory.

Recruitment was conducted using researcher's personal networks and then through snowball sampling. Researcher contacted freshmen students from personal networks like student clubs and then asked if they could participate in the interview or if they had someone who might help with this research. After getting contacts of new potential participants, the research goal and their privacy and safety measurements were explained. On the day of the interview they were given a written consent form and also researcher explained that their participation is purely voluntary and they can leave at any point without explanation orally.

Research is feasible because it discusses simple, mundane, everyday activities that all people do. Getting respondents for this research did not cause a problem as the researcher has established connections with many BIL graduates and with NIS students who are present at NU in high numbers.

### *Data Collection Methods*

This study employs semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Before conducting the interviews, a research guide consisting of 12 questions was constructed, which aimed to ask students about their past and new eating habits, transition process and difficulties with food preparation. 9 freshmen students were interviewed and these interviews were audio recorded with their consent. Semi-structured interviews allowed us to explore students' past and new eating habits, personal experience of transition and challenges with food management. During the interviews students were asked questions that directly concern research questions according to the interview guide and also were given an opportunity to share their personal stories. Using semi-structured interviews both needed information regarding research questions and students' voices were heard.

#### *Analysis Techniques*

After all the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed in the simplest way in Google Docs. From all the software available this one seemed the most suitable and easiest. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Certain words and phrases were assigned to codes, and all emerging codes were divided into specific themes. Using thematic analysis allowed us to identify common and unique patterns in eating habits, transition experience and struggles with meal preparation among NU freshmen students.

#### *Limitations*

Students are a very big group of people to be studied. That is why this research focused only on NIS and BIL students. This group of students lived in dormitories and were fed by the school system. There are also a lot of students, who were raised at home and probably adapt differently to independent living. So, there is a direction for future research to study. The sample population of this research somehow managed to grasp north, south, west and east regions of Kazakhstan but since it was snowball sampling in the interviews some participants were from the same school and some even had the same profile. So, the limitation of this research is that the sample population consists of people from the pair of students from the same school.

#### *Ethical considerations*

The research adheres to all ethical norms and rules. In January researcher received approval from the School of Sciences and Humanities Institutional Research Ethics Committee to conduct this study. They reviewed research aims,

research questions, interview guide, sampling process and data collection method. After the approval from this institution, we started the data collection process.

Prior to the interview, students were notified about the recording of the interview, short description of research goal and research topic. On the day of the interview they received a paper based written form of consent and offered to sign it, if they agreed. They were also explained that they can skip questions and leave the interview at any moment without explanation. To maintain confidentiality of the participants' mentioning of their names and other personal information were cut from the audio. Also, their names were changed to nicknames. Audio recordings of the interviews are stored on the personal computer of the researcher and copied on the USB flash drive, both are protected with passwords. Thus, the research ensures voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and minimal risk for participants.

## **Findings**

### *Challenges*

First pattern noticed from the interview transcripts and analysis was that many students talked a lot about how they lost proper, structured, and balanced meals and missed structured routines. Seven out of nine participants openly said that they miss school meals. Since it is not a quantitative study numbers like seven out of nine does not mean much and are not generalizable but were provided for the context to understand the situation better. There was no question in the interview guide, which asked if they missed school diet or not, it was coming out of them. Mostly they were missing a balanced diet, fixed times of meals, and varying menu of offered meals. Students reported that they struggled with meal planning, planning of balanced diet, and irregular eating patterns. Before they never had to think about what they are going to eat today because school already took care of this but now at university they said that even making a decision about what to eat today whether from the canteen or their own food was overwhelming. This added some stress to their routine and became one new responsibility they acquired becoming university students. One of the students who missed school food system:

“We were well fed at the lyceum... What was convenient at the lyceum, we were called to eat at a certain time, this is what you have to eat for breakfast, this for lunch, this for dinner. There were also snacks (afternoon snack and dinner snack, usually consisting of fruits, yoghurt, bun, etc.), but there is no such thing

here. No one will call you, no one will bring you anything, and the big problem is that the gap between meals has become huge”

BIL, Female, Student 9

One student who did not say that she misses school food openly said that she does not miss it and does not want to go back. In the interview she explained that not only her but also her many other classmates did not like the food provided by the canteen. Canteen food was of low quality and she shared some stories how some days she and her classmates even went the whole day without eating anything. To hear it from her own words:

“We were fed five times, but I am very picky about food, so I ate, at best, once, at worst, I did not eat at all... I know that I can not eat in the morning, it was uncomfortable for me, in general I do not eat in the morning... I could have a snack, but it made me sick, because not all organisms are ready to accept food immediately after waking up. I would not say that our food was really good, I know that in some other schools it is really tasty, but in our school it was not like that, most of the students in our school would probably agree with me.”

BIL, Female, Student 8

It continued for the first two or three years, thankfully, later she and her classmates found a solution and improved their nutrition. They secretly started ordering delivery and had at least something to eat. She started managing her own food since school days, so when she moved to university not many things changed for her, it might have become even easier because now she can openly buy food and choose from many options.

Another major challenge in preparing their own food that students mentioned a lot is time management. Many students complained that they do not have enough time to always cook food and sometimes they do not even have time to eat from the canteen or buy food from the store due to lectures, exams, and other activities. Some students were skipping lunch because they had several lectures in a row and half of the students were skipping breakfast because they have early lectures and do not have time to eat breakfast or because their body does not accept food immediately after waking up.

In the school students were eating only the food they were given and did not have any choice. There was not any canteen which sells other food, convenience store or opportunity to order delivery. School campus was a closed area and only food there was provided by the school canteen. Moving to the university, students

acquired freedom in choosing their own food. But most of the students regarded it not as a positive change because they adapted to this schedule and were happy to not have to think about what they will eat. Now some students said that because they are all by themselves, they have to make choices before eating and control themselves. They often have to choose whether to eat a proper meal or just take a sandwich from the store on the first floor. And as many studies have shown, students tend to choose the second option. One of the students shares her experience about students eating unhealthy food:

“Now, I notice that instead of eating properly, many new students, for example, for dinner they just buy something from the store. I've even seen people who eat sandwiches. And I even saw people who ate chips for dinner, honestly. So I think we should avoid such habits.”

NIS, Female, Student 2

Suddenly acquiring full freedom and independence seems to be not a fully positive change and might even cause freshmen students more damage than benefit at the beginning. But as the students' experience shows, it is a common pattern when students adapt unhealthy eating habits, gain weight and skip meals during the first semester. These kinds of habits probably would be minimized towards the end of the second semester. It is interesting to observe that many students reported that they see how many other students eat only snacks or other processed foods but none of the interview participants said that they regularly eat that kind of food. They explained that most of the time they eat proper meals and only turn to snacks in stressful, busy periods.

Financial constraints were also one of the struggles among freshmen students which played a significant role in forming their eating habits. Six out of nine students mentioned that they have some hardships with managing finances to maintain healthy and proper nutrition. Eating from university canteens is an easy option but for students with limited budgets it is very costly. On the other hand, cooking their own food is cheaper but takes too much time and effort, and some students may not have a good arsenal of kitchen supplies. Thus, students at the beginning of their first semester were overwhelmed by this dilemma of choosing between eating from the canteen and cooking food by themselves. Some students initially started cooking food but because it took too much of their time and energy, they decided to eat from canteens. By comparing and contrasting students by the end of first or by the start of the second semester, they decided what works best for

them, and now some of them cook food by themselves because they managed to kind of automatize and quicken this process, and some students decided to eat from canteens by investing their time into work and studies.

Expanding on the topic of kitchen and kitchen supplies students mentioned this problem several times. There are two problems: kitchen supplies that students bring with them and dormitory kitchen state. Cooking your own food at university also gets more complicated due to these two reasons. Students say that at first they did not have a proper pot and four guys for the duration of one semester just used the same one pan for cooking everything. But after coming back from winter break they reported that they wanted to cook better dishes and bought a pot, slow cooker and other kitchen equipment and their life changed a lot. They recommend each student who cooks their food to buy one because for them it was one of the best purchases. This problem can be and was solved in the first semester for most of the students. But there remains another problem regarding the kitchen that has not been solved for a long time now. According to students, the kitchen state leaves much to be desired. They complain about the kitchen space, kitchen cleanness and storing their items in the kitchen. The university has one kitchen room for one floor, in the case of freshmen students it is eighty four students for one kitchen with three fridges and two stoves. You can imagine that one standard kitchen room is not enough for this amount of students. There is not enough space to store your items and food in the kitchen. One of the students describes it:

“Yes, storing food, yes, of course. Because the fridge is always full, it’s like a Lego set. You always need to do something with it, rearrange something. And these constant thoughts, it’s 10:00 now, I’m going to have breakfast, I’ll have this much porridge left, I need to put it in a container. There’s no room in the fridge, but where to put it. So, I need to eat it all, but I don’t want to eat anymore. And what to do... Where to put the food, my food has already spoiled a couple of times, fruits have spoiled. My bread, buns spoil, because it’s in the room and there’s nowhere to put it in the fridge”

NIS, Female, Student 1

Overcrowded and poorly maintained kitchen factor complicates students’ cooking ambitions and independent food management. Institutions have to note this and work on improving the kitchen state. The kitchen state might not be the key which will solve all the problems with students’ nutrition. But improving the kitchen

condition might help motivate students to cook healthy food and replace processed food and high sugar snacks.

### *New Eating Habits*

Despite all these problems, students are working on their eating habits and are aware of possible consequences. Some students already have healthy eating habits and some students are working to make them healthier. They also managed to form a routine with their food consumption. Three students primarily cook their food, two students primarily eat from canteens, and four students balance with eating from the canteen and cooking. The last group of students are not always choosing between where to eat before each meal, they have already decided what they will do and act according to their plan. Some of them eat only lunch from the canteen and other meals they cook themselves, some of them cook on weekends and eat from the canteen during weekdays.

Losing five times balanced, government-approved meal plans also left some mark on freshmen students' fast food intake. Six out of nine students reported that their fast food, instant noodles, and snacks consumption increased compared to school years. It is explained by the fact that in school this kind of food was prohibited in school, while in the university this type of food is everywhere. Because students struggle with management and have to look for easy and quick solutions, they also tend to consume this type of food. However, most of the students recognized that this is not the best option and they explained that they choose this option only when they have no time and have to quickly solve the situation with a rumbling stomach. This coincides with findings from Abraham et al. (2018) which stated that students are aware of their food choices and that they consciously make unhealthy choices. Half of the interviewed students also said that their consumption of fruits and vegetables decreased. Accessibility, expensive price of fruits, and storing problems were mentioned as the reasons that make it hard for students to continue school years' level of fruits and vegetables intake. Brown (2005) talked about how students' diet usually excludes fruits and vegetables, while campus meal plans provide proper intake of fruits and vegetables.

Students' eating habits also depend on what is important to them in their nutrition. Some students in their interviews revealed that they cook by themselves because for them it is important to know what they are eating and in what sizes. All students who primarily eat food that they cook themselves also explained the

reasons behind it. In the sample population there were 3 students who cooked most of their meals by themselves and only occasionally turned to canteen or other food. Two male students reported that they needed to control their food and portions because at that moment they were going to the gym and gaining mass. So, they cooked their food in bulk to eat a certain amount of calories and support their needs. A female student who cooked her own food explained it by the need to control what is on her plate and a need to know what she is consuming. Because there is a certain level of mistrust towards canteens because of several poisoning cases each month. But she cooks her own food not only because the canteen's food might be poisoned but also because the canteen does not always offer what she needs and cooking her own food is just a better option for her to get balanced and proper nutrition.

### *Transition*

All of this probably answers the question about new eating habits and the question about struggles and hardships during transition. This section will answer the question of how NIS and BIL students manage the transition from high school to university. Six out of nine students explicitly said that transition in terms of managing food was challenging and hard for them. This is what generally students said about transition:

“It was super hard. It was super hard because, for the whole 6 years of my life ... I can say that I was fed by school, everything was planned for me, breakfast was balanced, everything was healthy, everything was great. ... The food was very tasty. ... And when I came here it was a responsibility about what I would eat today and tomorrow. It felt so unbearably hard.”

NIS, Female, Student 1

“I won't say that it was very difficult for me, I sometimes cooked at home, sometimes cleaned. But, I noticeably began to devote more time to cooking, that is, I spent most of my time washing dishes, cooking... Although at the lyceum we didn't even think about it... The fact that I helped my mother, this whole experience helped me. ... After school in the summer I prepared myself mentally, began to study, studied a little, repeated after my mother, gained experience, probably, I think it helped me a lot.”

BIL, Male, Student 5

Students differently managed this transition, most students were feeling all the burden of preparing food for themselves after five or six years of free food, and

only one student, thanks to some preparation during pre university summer, managed to make the transition a little bit easier. This aligns with Schlossberg et al. (1981) transition theory that states that self's skills and preparedness for transition plays a big role. All the students were unprepared and lacked the cooking skills, grocery shopping experience and food management strategies. In the case of Student 5, who was mentally prepared and received help from parents in cooking food during the pre-university summer, it was easier for him to adapt to independent food management as he already had some experience of it. Other students for whom transition was hard said that they did not know how to cook and were not taught about how to prepare food in school, thus, they had to figure it out themselves and it took more time and caused some stress during the initial stages. Also, there was another exception, where a student did not feel anything regarding change in the food management because she already started managing her own food during school.

Applying other 3S from 4S that support the transition, we see that students find themselves in a hard situation where they lose 5 times meal structure, have no plan and skills on how to tackle this problem. The situation was difficult and students had to learn new skills in a short period of time to be able to sustain themselves in a new environment. Another S, strategy, was played in students' favor, students themselves accepted transition and all attempted to form some system whether by cooking themselves, eating from the canteen or balancing these options. Students were aiming for problem-solving strategies and towards the second semester most students managed to form a routinized diet that fits to their busy schedule and life rhythm. The last S, support, also was supporting students transition and helped them with adapting to university life. As it was mentioned above, Student 5 was prepared by his parents both mentally to be ready for the challenges and taught basic food management skills, which made his transition experience easier. Support can be received not only from family but from friends, peers and group mates too. This type of support was frequently mentioned during the interviews. Half of the students explained that they had someone in their circle who had good and sometimes exceptional cooking skills. So, they were around them when they were cooking and by helping them our participants learned how to cook. It is interesting to mention that this type of learning from friends was mentioned by all male students and only by male students. Sometimes there was involved even competitive aspect to it:

“You have to try to cook something yourself little by little, at first you can do it with a friend who knows more than you. That's how it started for me, the desire to become better also started. Because my close friend, he cooks, he cooks very tasty food. And you wonder why I can't cook, I have everything, all the dishes and all the products, but he cooks better”

NIS, Male, Student 4

It was not a separate question in the interview guide that asked about if the student learned to cook from someone, these stories were told by students themselves and can show how crucial friends' help was for them at the beginning. Some female participants mentioned that they learned about healthy food, nutritional properties and other theoretical knowledge in school workshops.

Bridges (2004) transition model in case of students transitioning from high school to university was also tested. The first requirement to perform transition was to let go and accept that there will not be free meals anymore and students have to manage their food by themselves. In the interviews most students talked about how they miss their school meal system but they are fully aware that this stage of their life is over and they have to move on with their lives and learn independent food management skills. All students passed this phase and moved to the neutral zone. Neutral zone is a period when students are in the middle of big changes, they already know their new responsibilities as students of university and try different approaches and attempt to form a routine meal structure. It is usually a period in the first semester when many students try to cook their own food but get demotivated after a few attempts because it takes too much time and nerves for cooking, doing dishes and buying groceries for each time they want to cook it. Many students during the interviews mentioned that they tried to cook at the beginning but due to the busy schedule and time consuming nature of cooking they left it and started to eat from canteens. All students (two students) who now primarily eat from the canteen explained that at the beginning they tried to cook but quickly understood it is not working for them as they wanted and decided to invest their time in studying, working and other activities. So, after this uncertainty, trials and errors stage passes students form their eating habits. All nine students said that they now have a formed routine and plan of when and what they will eat. This means that students successfully managed to perform transition. Their new beginning now fully began. Some of the students in the end of the interviews said

that they might wanna change something, maybe include more fruits, vegetables or other products in their diets but still they were content with their eating habits.

## **Discussion**

Findings from this study align with already existing literature on eating habits of students and transition from high school to university. Some of the literature results were applicable to higher extent and some only partially. For instance, Wills (2005) said that students' eating habits change in a new social context when they enter university and may be adapted to social environment and peers. NU students also reported that their eating habits changed compared to school days and that they cook, eat at a canteen with their friends. Another study which was mentioned in literature review by Li et al. (2022) was not applicable in case of NU students, study suggests that for students food being healthy is not first priority and that they would choose their food mostly on the level of accessibility and price. Indeed, NU students do not choose their food based on healthiness and try to eat something that is easily accessible but only during critical times like midterms, finals period. All other times they try to stay loyal to their formed routine diet. More relevant source in this situation is Almoraie et al. (2024) which stated that academic stress results in skipping meals and increases consumption of snacks and fast food. This kind of pattern of skipping meals among NU students is not surprising because adjusting to a new routine takes some time and students feel especially lost during the chaos caused by deadlines and exams. Food and its quality moves to the background.

Also many sources in the literature review shared concerns and warned a lot about students' unhealthy eating habits. Beasley et al. (2004) found that 42% of students considered their diet at college unhealthy compared to their diet at home. Papadaki et al. (2007) observed that Greek students living away from home developed poor eating habits compared to their peers who lived with their parents. These two studies coincide with our findings only to some extent because NU students indeed developed some unhealthy eating habits compared to their school years. Their fast food, snacks, and processed food intake increased but these items did not become part of their diet, they are just occasional guests in their food diary. Students reported about the increase in consumption of these products only because in school they did not have any access to instant noodles, sandwiches, chips and other types of food. Intake of unhealthy food increased but it increased only because before it was almost 0% in school, where everything was controlled

and they were not allowed to eat food from the outside, now it is still low and most students reported and told about their healthy diet.

Wengren & Moncur (2009) study concluded that during the first semester in college newly admitted students significantly gain weight. This pattern was noticed by NU students as well but luckily for some students it was a desirable outcome of their efforts to gain mass and for one female participant it was a favorable outcome that helped her to gain weight that is normal and makes her feel comfortable. Also, for one male student it was a disturbing sign that made him take serious control of his nutrition and make a more healthy diet. The statistics are three positive results against one negative result of weight gain, in this small sample it is unreliable to draw some conclusions from numbers, so this information will just remain as it is but it was definitely confirmed that freshmen students often gain weight during their first semester for various reasons.

Most of the students reported that they try to eat three times a day with proper breakfast, lunch and dinner. This is very similar to the nutrition model used by their schools before. In school students were provided with three proper meals and two mini meals, where they are given fruits, yoghurts, pies, samsa and something like that. From students' reported new eating habits we may notice that there might be unintentional or even intentional attempts to recreate the meal structure that they have in school. On the other hand, this is the most basic and default meal structure that people use, so this might not be really connected to having this before at school.

However, it can be said that students remember and learn something about food and nutrition from their school meal structure just by observing and eating food. So, if institutions would introduce some training, workshops, programs to aid students in learning about food and nutrition, this might significantly increase students' knowledge and understanding about the future life without 5 times a day free meals. Gaining theoretical and practical knowledge about independent food management would help students to easily adapt at university and prevent some issues that arise with unhealthy eating habits, which are common during the first year of study.

The findings from this study highlight the importance of assistance from outside for freshmen students in managing independent food preparation. The challenges and hardships students experienced after moving to university was not an unexpected outcome. As some students mentioned in the interviews, at the

beginning of their freshman year they did not know how to cook and were not bothered by anything connected with food consumption during the school years. So, it leads to the conclusion that students should come prepared to be able to manage their food independently after they graduate from high school.

One of the students, who reported that his transition was not so hard, said that he was mentally preparing for this and learned from his parents to cook and clean. It is only one example that was in the population sample of this research. Thus, the author does not claim that it would be the most efficient way to help freshmen students but as it was in this case, it really helped this student to know what he should expect from independent food management and basic skills facilitated transition. Overall, S which stands for support in Schlossberg's theory showed its efficiency in helping with transition from high school to university in terms of food preparation. S which lacked and complicated the transition was self and situation. Students' were in a hard situation with no preparation and skills were trying to manage their food. So, it is obvious that students need to come prepared and be in a better situation when they move to university to be able to perform a smooth transition in terms of food management. The most efficient way to help with coming to university with better self is to prepare students in high school with basics of food preparation. If students will get some preparation before coming to university, both their situation at the moment of transition and self skills for transition will improve. At this moment it is very difficult to imagine how it will be realized because it is considered as something very basic and natural skill that people learn by themselves. But in reality we see that students go through some confusion and stress at the beginning, feeling too many responsibilities and new roles at the same time. Teaching students these kinds of basic skills will greatly help them in their life and prepare them for adult life. Also many students in the interviews were saying phrases like "I did not know what to do because at school we were not taught how to do this", "We were not prepared for this at school", which shows that students would like to learn these skills at schools and be ready for upcoming challenges of adult life.

The statistics which says that three students primarily cook, two students primarily eat from the canteen and four students balance two options, also says that there is almost no difference between schools. Both NIS and BIL school's students are cooking their own meals and eating from the canteens, school seems to be not the factor that determines new eating habits. Before proceeding with the

interviews, it was interesting to analyze results by gender because in Kazakhstan division of labor is traditional and it might have been reflected in students' eating habits. However, the study reveals that division of labor by gender is not really demonstrated in interview results. From three students who primarily cook by themselves two are males and one female, from the two students who primarily eat from the canteen two are females and students who balance these options balance distribution by gender as well. Initial expectations regarding the traditional division of labor disproved at least for students from this population sample.

The NU community by many people, its students, professors, by the public is perceived as a bubble, which is completely different from the outside world. This might be one of the reasons why traditional gender dynamics of Kazakh society, where females usually cook food and organize everything coming with food, is not displayed in this study. Both NU female and male students are cooking their meals and both genders are eating from the canteen. For the future research it will be interesting to see what results of the similar study will be in the other universities of Kazakhstan.

### **Conclusion**

Students struggled with meal planning, often feeling overwhelmed by the need to make everyday decisions and actions that they did not have to do before to acquire food. Time management also rises as an issue that led to skipping meals, skipping breakfast or lunch due to lectures. Financial constraints played their role in regulating students' eating habits. Students had to choose if they wanted to spend their money and eat from the canteen or spend their time and cook by themselves. Some students decided to dedicate their time to work and buy food from the canteen, some students are cooking their meals by themselves to allocate their finances and some students balance two options.

Despite all the hardships and stress at the beginning students demonstrated their adaptiveness to big changes. Students who try to cook all their meals by themselves expressed that they need to control what they are eating. Students who primarily eat from the canteen, explained that they do not want to waste too much time on cooking and doing dishes, so they decided to invest their time into studying or work and eat from the canteen. Almost half of the students from the population sample balance both cooking food by themselves and eating from the canteen. They eat from the canteen due to the busy schedule and eating from the canteen allows them to free up some time.

Nevertheless, students suffering with independent food preparation at the beginning is proven to be real and something should be done to fix it. Because it is a new type of stress for students who are already experiencing many difficulties trying to settle in at university. Probably food preparation workshops should not be done in university but before entering university, cooking training, effective strategies and nutritional knowledge should be taught to students. Freshmen students' eating habits in the beginning of their studies and at this point of the academic year are very different. They learned a lot during that period about managing their own food, but they had to learn it all by themselves with trial and error methods.

## References

- Abraham, S., Noriega, B., & Shin, J. (2018). College students' eating habits and knowledge of nutritional requirements. *Journal of Nutrition and Human Health, 2*, 13-17. <https://doi.org/10.35841/nutrition-human-health.2.1.13-17>
- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. In J. S. Wholey, H. P. Hatry, & K. E. Newcomer (Eds.), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (pp. 492–505). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>
- Almoraie, N. M., Alothmani, N. M., Alomari, W. D., & Al-amoudi, A. H. (2024). Addressing nutritional issues and eating behaviours among university students: a narrative review. *Nutrition Research Reviews, 38*(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954422424000088>
- Beasley, L. J., Hackett, A. F., & Maxwell, S. M. (2004). The dietary and health behaviour of young people aged 18–25 years living independently or in the family home in Liverpool, UK. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 28*(4), 355–363. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2004.00394.x>
- Blichfeldt, B. S., & Gram, M. (2013). Lost in Transition? Student food consumption. *Higher Education, 65*(3), 277–289. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23351697>
- Bridges, W. (2004). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes* (2nd ed.). Da Capo Press.
- Brown, L. B., Dresen, R. K., & Eggett, D. L. (2005). College students can benefit by participating in a prepaid meal plan. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association, 105*(3), 445–448. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2004.12.030>
- Deliens, T., Clarys, P., De Bourdeaudhuij, I., & Deforche, B. (2014). Determinants of eating behaviour in university students: a qualitative study using focus group discussions. *BMC public health, 14*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-14-53>
- Duma-Kocan, P., Barud, B., Glodek, E., & Gil, M. (2017). Assessment of nutritional habits and preferences among secondary school students. *Roczniki Państwowego Zakładu Higieny, 68*(1). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28303707>
- Harris, D. A. (2017). Just the “Typical College Diet”: How College Students Use Life Stages to Account for Unhealthy Eating. *Symbolic Interaction, 40*(4), 523–540. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90015655>

- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 72(12), 2954-2965. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>open in new
- Kolodinsky, J., Harvey-Berino, J. R., Berlin, L., Johnson, R. K., & Reynolds, T. W. (2007). Knowledge of current dietary guidelines and food choice by college students: Better eaters have higher knowledge of dietary guidance. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 107(8), 1409-1413. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2007.05.016>
- Li, X., Braakhuis, A., Li, Z., & Roy, R. (2022). How does the university food environment impact student dietary behaviors? A systematic review. *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 9, 840818. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2022.840818>
- Papadaki, A., Hondros, G., Scott, J. A., & Kapsokefalou, M. (2007). Eating habits of university students living at, or away from home in Greece. *Appetite*, 49(1), 169-176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2007.01.008>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 9(2), 2-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100008100900202>
- Sogari, G., Velez-Argumedo, C., Gómez, M. I., & Mora, C. (2018). College Students and Eating Habits: A Study Using An Ecological Model for Healthy Behavior. *Nutrients*, 10(12), 1823. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10121823>
- Terenzini, P. T., Rendon, L. I., Lee Upcraft, M., Millar, S. B., Allison, K. W., Gregg, P. L., & Jalomo, R. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in higher education*, 35, 57-73. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02496662>
- Wengreen, H. J., & Moncur, C. (2009). Change in diet, physical activity, and body weight among young adults during the transition from high school to college. *Nutrition Journal*, 8(1), 32. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-2891-8-32>
- Wills, W. J. (2005). Food and Eating Practices During the Transition from Secondary School to New Social Contexts. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8(1), 97-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260500063728>

## **Appendix**

### *Interview Guide*

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your background? (Age, year of study, gender, major, etc)
2. Which school did you graduate from? (Can you describe your life there, especially living in the dormitory?)
3. What were your eating habits like when you lived in the NIS/BIL dormitories? (How did that routine work for you?)
4. What was it like transitioning from high school to NU in terms of managing your meals? (What new responsibilities did you acquire after becoming a university student? And how was the adaptation to these new changes?)
5. How would you describe your diet at NU? (For example, how often do you eat in a day, and is this routine something you've established over time?)
6. How do your eating habits fit into your daily life and schedule at NU? (Do you have enough time for cooking, planning food?)
7. What changes have you noticed in your eating habits since moving to NU? (Maybe preparing food takes a lot of time and student may struggle with preparing proper meals)
8. What challenges have you faced in managing your food here? (Maybe financial, maybe time, maybe lack of abilities to cook, manage food preparation)
9. How do you feel about your current eating habits at NU? (Are you satisfied, or would you like to make changes?)
10. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to new NU students about managing their meals? (Maybe something you wish you knew before entering university and something you could have learned during pre-university summer?)
11. Overall, how do you feel about your transition from high school to university in terms of food responsibilities? (Was it hard to accept food and other things as a new responsibility?)
12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with food and eating habits during this transition? (Own, unique stories, facts that were not asked in my questions)