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Beyond Diet Trends: Fueling the Body and Mind

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Food Literacy for the Future

A few minutes on social media is enough for one to encounter many food rules: 'stop eating meat', 'avoid carbohydrates', 'eat only within eight hours', or 'switch entirely to plant-based foods'. Vegan, vegetarian, pescatarian, ketogenic (keto), and intermittent fasting have become familiar terms, especially among young adults. Yet popularity does not equal understanding. Under the theme *Education for a Better Future*, food literacy matters because our daily choices can shape health, learning, productivity, and long-term well-being.

For students, nutrition education should go beyond asking, "Which diet is best?" Instead, they should consider whether a dietary approach supports their energy, concentration, learning, and overall well-being. The World Health Organization (2026) emphasises adequacy, balance, moderation, and diversity as core principles of a healthy diet. These principles provide a useful lens for understanding popular eating patterns without treating any label as a magic solution.

Five Popular Approaches to Eating

Vegan: Fully Plant-Based Living

A vegan diet excludes meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, and other animal-derived foods. It is centred on vegetables, fruits, beans, lentils, tofu, tempeh, nuts, seeds, and grains. For students, the key issue is not simply eating plant-based foods but ensuring that the diet provides enough nutrients to support both physical and mental demands. Nutrients such as vitamin B12, iron, iodine, vitamin D, and omega-3 fats support normal brain and body function, yet some may require greater attention in a vegan diet (Neufingerl & Eilander, 2022). Poor planning may contribute to tiredness or reduced well-being, making sustained learning more challenging. A well-planned vegan diet, however, can provide a wide variety of nutrient-rich foods while supporting cardiovascular health (Landry et al., 2024).

Vegetarian: Plant-Focused with More Flexibility

Vegetarian eating is broader than vegan eating. Most vegetarians avoid meat and fish but may consume eggs and dairy products (Neufingerl & Eilander, 2022). This flexibility can make it easier to obtain nutrients such as protein, vitamin B12, calcium, and iron. For students, this matters because regular meals with adequate protein, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables can support energy during lectures, study sessions, and assessments. However, being vegetarian does not automatically mean eating healthily. A diet dominated by fried foods, sugary drinks, refined carbohydrates, and ultra-processed snacks can still be nutritionally poor. The lesson for students is simple: the label matters less than what is actually on the plate.



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Pescatarian: Plant-Based Eating with Seafood

A pescatarian diet is mainly plant-based but includes fish and seafood while excluding meats such as beef, chicken, and lamb. From a student-learning perspective, one interesting feature is that it includes fish as a source of protein and long-chain omega-3 fatty acids. These nutrients support normal brain structure and function, making them particularly relevant to nutrition and learning (Gómez-Pinilla, 2008). Combined with fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, a pescatarian pattern can provide a broad range of nutrients needed for everyday physical and cognitive demands. Research suggests potentially favourable health outcomes among pescovegetarian groups, although no single eating pattern should be assumed to be ideal for every student (Abris et al., 2024).

Ketogenic (Keto): Very Low Carbs, High Fat

Keto takes a very different approach. It is a high-fat, very low-carbohydrate diet designed to shift the body towards using ketone bodies as an alternative energy source. For students, however, restricting carbohydrates requires careful consideration because carbohydrate-rich foods are common energy sources in everyday diets. Some people may adapt well to keto, while others may initially experience fatigue, headaches, digestive discomfort, or difficulty maintaining the diet. These effects could be inconvenient during classes, examinations, or long study periods. Although keto may support short-term weight loss and certain metabolic outcomes, it is restrictive and may increase the risk of nutrient gaps if poorly planned (Malinowska & Żendzian-Piotrowska, 2024). For students, following a popular trend should never come at the expense of adequate nutrition and the ability to learn effectively.

Intermittent Fasting: It Is About When You Eat

Intermittent fasting focuses more on when food is eaten than on what is eaten. Popular forms include time-restricted eating, such as eating within an eight-hour window, and the 5:2 approach. For students, timing can become especially important. Skipping or delaying meals may suit some people, but others may feel hungry, have low energy, become irritable, or struggle to concentrate during lectures and study sessions. An eating window also does not guarantee nutritional quality; a student can fast for 16 hours and still eat an unbalanced diet during the remaining eight. Evidence suggests that some forms of intermittent fasting may support weight and metabolic outcomes, particularly among adults who are overweight or obese, but the effects differ between individuals (Sun et al., 2024). The educational message is therefore not simply "*when should I eat?*" but also "*am I giving my body and mind what they need to function well?*"

Feeding the Mind, Not Just Following a Trend

For students, food is part of the learning environment. The brain needs an adequate supply of energy and essential nutrients to function normally, while poor eating habits can contribute to fatigue, hunger, and difficulty maintaining attention. Protein, iron, B vitamins, omega-3 fatty acids, complex carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables, and adequate fluid intake all contribute to supporting normal physical and cognitive function (Gómez-Pinilla, 2008).

Research among college students also suggests that dietary behaviours and overall diet quality may be associated with academic achievement (Burrows et al., 2017). University life can also make healthy eating more challenging. Busy class schedules, assignments, examinations, limited budgets, and easy access to convenience foods may influence what and when students eat. Therefore, choosing a diet should not be about following the most fashionable label. It should be about building an eating pattern that provides the *"ingredients for the mind"* needed to learn, think, and perform at one's best.



Building a Better Future Through Nutrition Education

Nutrition education can help build a better future by equipping students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills to make informed food choices throughout their lives. Understanding basic principles of nutrition may help them evaluate diet trends more carefully, recognise misleading health claims, and choose eating patterns that support both physical and cognitive well-being. In the longer term, these skills can encourage healthier habits, reduce the risk of diet-related health problems, and support better learning and productivity. As students eventually become professionals, parents, and decision-makers, the ability to make sound nutritional choices can also influence the health and well-being of their families and communities (Burrows et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2026).

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