



EVALUATION OF THANK GOODNESS IT'S THURSDAY (TGIT)

Why evaluate?

An evaluation of TGIT is undertaken to determine the project's effectiveness (or otherwise) to support evidence-informed practice and drive improvement. This includes analysing the factors that contributed to the success of the intervention, any unexpected outcomes, and the overall value of the intervention.

What is TGIT?

TGIT was an initiative that provided free meals, as well as social activities, at QMU as part of its work to build a strong community and support students during a cost-of-living crisis. The project was planned to run for six weeks only but due to demand and popularity, it continued to take place for 7 Thursdays in Semester 1 and 17 Thursdays in Semester 2. To aid with project planning and evaluation, a logic chain was developed before the first TGIT took place:

TGIT logic chain				
INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT
University funding Staff time to arrange and host events Food provided by the catering service Students' Union SU clubs and societies	Provide free food in a warm, safe environment each Thursday, 5-7pm. Students, staff and members of the local community are welcome to attend. Each session will be hosted by a different SU club/society.	Social events Free meals during a cost-of-living crisis Awareness and participation in SU clubs and societies Meet some of the students' needs as detailed in collected feedback, such as the SU Padlet conducted at the beginning of Semester 1.	Community building results in lower levels of loneliness and isolation among the student body. Higher involvement with clubs and societies, which supports friendship and network making. Alleviates some of the cost-of-living pressures through provision of free food and heating. Local community becomes better acquainted with QMU.	QMU is seen to be a supportive institution. Potentially lower levels of student deferrals/withdrawals.

The intended outcomes of TGIT include:

- Community building, which in turn should lower levels of loneliness and isolation.
- Higher involvement in SU clubs and societies.
- Alleviate cost-of-living pressures.
- Forging stronger links with the local community.

Evaluation of TGIT

During the course of the project, participants were regularly asked for their feedback to take the intervention forward in the best possible way. Data was gathered before, during and after the TGIT events and the intervention developed during the evaluation. The evaluations determined the participants' engagement with the project and whether the intervention met the needs of the student population. The evaluation methods adopted were a mix of quantitative and qualitative data points. Quantitative data included the number of meals served and the number of meal packs distributed.

Qualitative data was gathered via surveys, conducted at the beginning and the end of the 6-week trial period, as well as informal one-on-one and group discussions with attendees. This mixed-methods approach towards evaluation of TGIT worked well and the following were implemented as a result:

- More vegetarian, vegan and GF options offered as numbers of attendees increased and a wider population of student came.
- Dessert was offered regularly, although not consistently, due to food costs.
- Social activities were designed in response to student suggestions, including a reduction in formal social activities in the second semester because the main focus shifted to eating and student-led socialising.
- TGIT ran an 'Exam Edition' each semester in response to student feedback asking for that additional support.
- Additional support was offered in response to cost-of-living pressures, such as clothing swaps for formal wear in the second semester in advance of end of year celebrations.

Project findings, outcomes and impacts

Initial funding was secured from the University Secretary of £1,000 for a 6-week pilot. This was based on costings of £150 for hot food for 100 students per event and £100 for 50 take home meal kits to be provided to students across the 6-week pilot. Funding was increased after the first week due to the popularity of the event showing there was a demand for the support TGIT offered. After the 6-week pilot, an exam edition TGIT took place in response to student feedback, and TGIT continued in Semester 2 with 17 further sessions scheduled.

There was an increase in funding to £10,000 to allow this and a further economising of food materials from Baxter-Storey, the catering contractor at QMU.

In total, 5,600 hot meals were served, and 2,100 take home meal kits provided. By semester, 1,400 meals were provided in S1 (an average of 200 per session), 4,200 in S2 (an average of 250 per session), 700 take home meal kits were supplied in S1, 1,400 in S2. As illustrated by the above numbers, the numbers of attendees increased in Semester 2 and, although not formally evaluated, staff reported there was a significant increase in international students attending.

Staff across the university were invited to volunteer their time. To make this manageable we asked staff to arrive for 4:45pm and most staff were then able to leave at 6:15-6:30pm. There was a core group of 10 staff that would regularly be at TGIT, with a further 10 staff coming semi-regularly, and a small number of staff who volunteered at least once during the entire TGIT programme.

The catering staff were responsive to student feedback and observed what food options were requested more frequently during the service, what food was less likely to be left on plates at the end of the meal, what food was popular for second helpings, etc. This resulted in certain foods being more likely to feature on the TGIT menu (i.e. hearty casseroles – both meat and vegetable based - or a firm favourite, such as mac'n'cheese). The catering team also provided desserts in response to student feedback, and this proved very popular on the nights it was offered.

During the 6-week pilot, a formal social event was arranged each week, some proving more popular than others. The students particularly liked the quiz, bingo and boardgame activities. Due to the amount of additional preparation work and volunteer staff required, as well as the increased numbers of attendees as TGIT became established, it was decided not to run events weekly in the second semester, instead running one social event per month, with the final event being cancelled due to a lack of staff volunteers.

The SU was a consistent partner supporting every aspect of TGIT throughout, including promoting the intervention to the student body. Although there was a desire from QMU and the SU to involve the SU clubs and societies, particularly around the social events that were offered, practically this proved too difficult due to the existing commitments on students. The SU, however, delivered other events that addressed the cost-of-living concerns, such as the clothes swaps, and provided a student to run yoga sessions in Semester 1. The yoga sessions did not have many attendees, so were discontinued in Semester 2.

Although it was initially expected that members of the local community would attend TGIT, it was not possible to extend the service due to the unanticipated demand and uptake from the student body.

The project aims were community building to reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation, whilst also alleviating some of the cost-of-living pressures through the provision of free food and a warm space. Given the number of meals and meal packs provided, in addition to the feedback gathered, both via survey and anecdotally about the supportive nature of TGIT and QMU and its influence on campus culture, this objective was met. Furthermore, the impact of TGIT was far-reaching with the benefits recognised via its nominations for three national awards:

- [Whatuni Student Choice Awards 2023](#): Cost of living submission award nominee
- [The Herald Higher Education Awards 2023](#): Supporting Student Wellbeing Award winner
- [2023 CUBO Awards](#): Innovation in student experience nominee

As stated above, the intervention developed in direct response to student feedback during the ongoing evaluations, which included informal surveys, with questions enquiring:

- Why did you choose to come along to TGIT?
- What's working well with TGIT from your perspective?
- How could we improve future TGIT evenings?
- Do you have any ideas for future TGIT evenings/events/initiatives?
- Which aspects of TGIT did you get involved with tonight?
- Did you join QMU as a new student in the Jan 2023 cohort?
- What type of accommodation do you stay in whilst studying at QMU?
- Do you have any caring responsibilities?
- Which of the other TGIT evenings have you come along to?
- Do you have any other comments you'd like to add?

The responses were overwhelmingly positive - the students especially appreciated the good quality, free meals and the chance to socialise. They also valued the organisation of the initiative in response to the cost-of-living crisis that enabled community-building and commented on the friendly and welcoming atmosphere of TGIT:

- *"I feel so grateful to be a part of such a great uni".*
- *"Good food which helps me to save money & ensure I get a cooked meal. Also good opportunities to socialise".*
- *"Great initiative!"*
- *"The living cost is higher than before. I hope QMU may offer more free dinner days and food packs".*

Dr. Kat Lord and Heather Hartley

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

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