Food Cultures and Practices

A Transdisciplinary Impact Network

CAPABILITY STATEMENT 2024/2025

RMIT UNIVERSITY

Let's Connect

Our network of researchers spans several disciplines, from food technology to the social sciences. To learn more, please contact our Food Cultures and Practices Network leads:

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For further information, visit our website or scan the QR code:

https://www.rmit.edu.au/research/our-research/enabling-impact-platforms/eip-networks/food-cultures-practices

The Enabling Impact Platforms (EIP) supporting the Food Cultures and Practices Network include:

- Sustainable Technologies and Systems Platform
- Biomedical and Health Innovation
- Advanced Materials, Manufacturing and Fabrication
- Social Change
- Urban Futures

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather and work, the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation, and pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. We recognise the profound connection that Indigenous communities have with the land and their traditional food systems, which have been sustained for thousands of years. The practices of gathering food, fishing and cultivating native plants not only provide nourishment but also reflect a deep and enduring understanding of ecological balance and sustainability.
We honour the cultural heritage embedded in these practices and strive to incorporate Indigenous perspectives on food sovereignty into our work. By acknowledging and learning from these traditional food systems, we aim to foster a more inclusive approach to food culture and practice, enriching our understanding and commitment to sustainable and equitable food systems for all.

Contents

Our Origin Story

In 2023, a group of food researchers from RMIT University, spanning the food, health and social sciences, came together to host ‘Food for Thought’, an Enabling Impact Platform-led event.

Hosted by Professor Gary Rosengarten *(Sustainable Technologies and Systems Platforms EIP)*, Professor Xavier Mulet *(Advanced Materials, Manufacturing and Fabrication EIP)*, and Distinguished Professor Magdalena Plebanski *(Biomedical and Health Innovation EIP)*, ‘Food for Thought’ brought together food researchers and external partners, all invested in a better food future.

Following the success of the event, which raised thought-provoking questions about ‘good food’, ‘healthy food’ and ‘sustainable food’, many of those involved felt that RMIT’s food story was only just beginning. Wanting to continue the momentum the event generated, and to turn our meaty conversations into positive, real-world impact, the Food Cultures and Practices Enabling Impact Network was born.

Why ‘Food Cultures and Practices’?

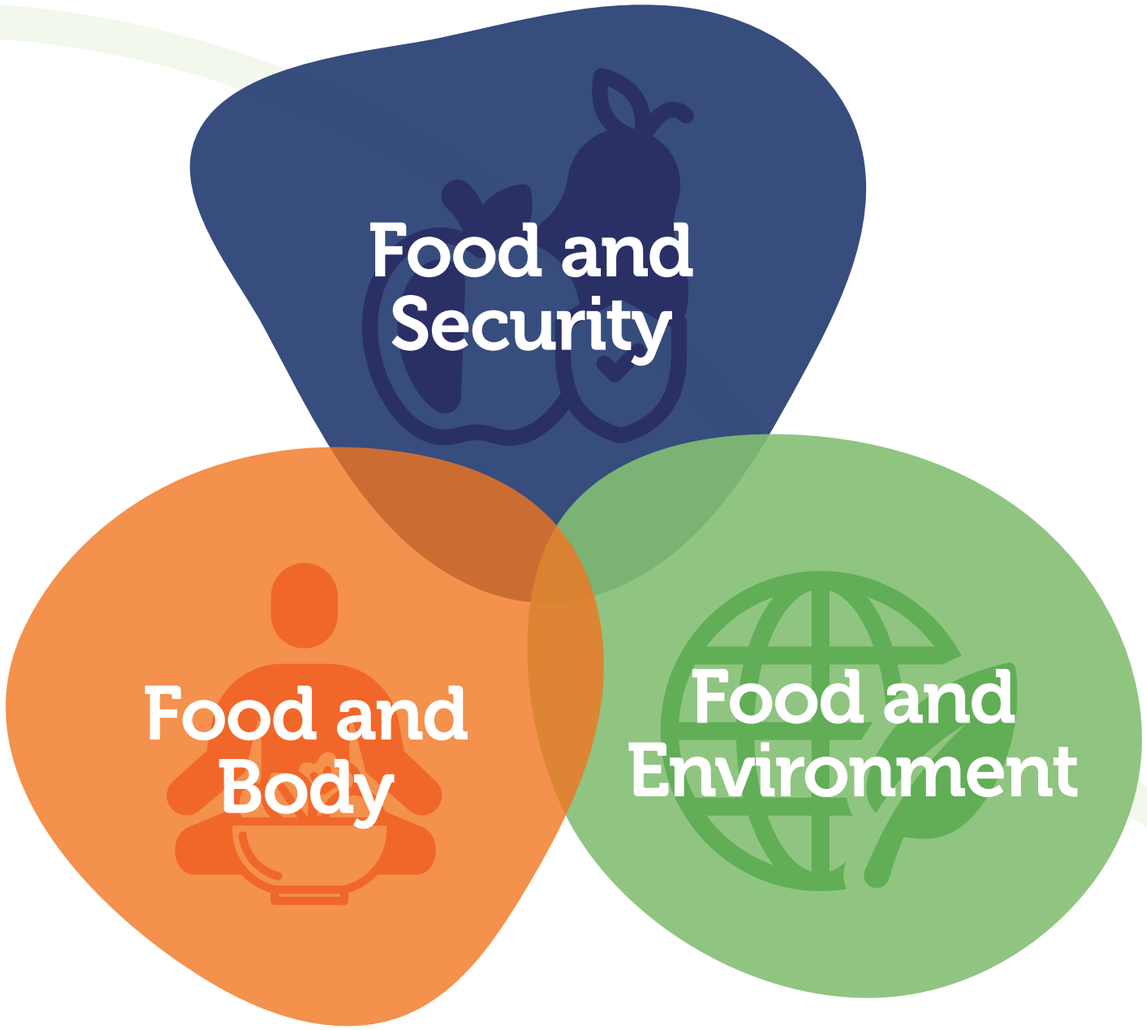
We named the network ‘Food Cultures and Practices’ because of our shared commitment to understanding the connection between our food-related activities (i.e., our practices) and the social and cultural influences that shape them (i.e., our cultures). Everyday food practices, such as growing, processing, buying, cooking, consuming, digesting, and ultimately throwing food away, are shaped by the social contexts in which we live. For example, how do economic factors play a part in shaping our healthy food choices? Or how do we responsibly manage food waste without blaming or shaming people who just don’t have time to manage their leftovers?

Sometimes, however, what we do, say and mean – or our ‘practices’ - can also strengthen certain food cultures. For example, if we keep repeating inaccurate ideas about food and nutrition online through our social media presence, does this lead to the creation of a culture of food misinformation? Or if we stock our universities and workplaces with energy drinks, does this normalise unhealthy ways of working?

In the Food Cultures and Practices Network, we address some of the unquestioned assumptions and inequalities baked into the relationship between food practices and cultures, and vice versa.

Our Vision

At the heart of the Food Cultures and Practices Network is our commitment to bringing together a range of perspectives on food cultures and everyday food practices and partnering with relevant communities and external partners, finding practical ways to solve complex food issues. Our broad vision is to create positive societal impacts in relation to three broad intersecting themes:



In the **Food and Security** theme, we address food provisioning, agriculture and manufacturing for a sustainable planet. In this theme, we ask questions such as:

"How can collaborative networks come together to reduce food insecurity?"

In **Food and Body**, we look at health and wellbeing by focusing on the role of pleasure, play, and the social factors that shape our health practices. In this theme, we ask questions such as:

"How do food, society, and human bodies interact to affect health and wellbeing?"

And lastly, in **Food and Environment**, we explore food in relation to our cities and environment, addressing issues such as food waste, sustainable food infrastructures, and convivial eating spaces. In this theme, we ask questions such as:

"How can we think about the relationship between food and the environment to ensure mutual benefits?"

These three themes are deliberately kept broad to capture the intersecting tensions experienced by people in contemporary Australian society, particularly when their often unquestioned, everyday food practices conflict with their environmental, social and health system(s).

Combining Food Research and Real-World Impact:

The Role of Transdisciplinarity

As a network comprised of many different scholarly perspectives on food, ranging from health researchers who focus on gut health and nutrition, food scientists and technologists who look at food processing for sustainability and better health, and social scientists who unpack the social factors that shape our relationships with food, eating and bodies, we value what happens when our minds come together. But we also value the work of community groups and external parties, like local councils, health promotion organisations, and the non-for-profit sector in co-shaping positive social change. The novel product of these worlds coming together is called **'transdisciplinarity'**.

Transdisciplinarity is a collaborative approach that brings together a range of groups interested and invested in food issues to address complex real-world problems. It transcends traditional academic boundaries to address problems by integrating knowledge from different disciplines and involving stakeholders from outside academia.

In a nutshell, transdisciplinary work involves:

1. Creating new approaches to solving complex social problems [2]
2. Combining knowledge from across academic disciplines with the knowledge of non-academic groups [1][3]
3. Focusing on real-world, socially relevant issues [1]; and
4. Working together to define and understand problems [1][3]

The impact of transdisciplinary research can be profound, influencing a wide range of areas, from scientific innovation to social policy, and fostering sustainable solutions to our complex societal challenges.

Food as a field of study is complex, involving a wide range of disciplines from agriculture, economics, and environmental science to public health, sociology, and policy studies. Challenges related to food—such as food security, sustainability, malnutrition, and climate change—are deeply interconnected. In fact, we argue that the only way to challenge these complicated food issues is by bringing people together; integrating knowledge from various fields and communities, and actively engaging diverse stakeholders using decolonised methodologies and concepts.

We look to existing examples of transdisciplinary food research and impact, in order to plan what to prioritise and achieve in our network:

1

Prioritising community voice

Our work is only relevant if it positively impacts the communities we serve and honours their voices. We will use participatory and/or co-design methods to prioritise community needs, and work to involve community members from the point of conceiving a project, all the way through to how it is translated to the world [3]

2

Solving problems through collaboration

Looking at a complex problem through one lens limits the way we address it. Transdisciplinary food research focuses on bringing together different voices and producing outcomes through collaboration with stakeholder groups. For example, a previous project by Knerr and colleagues developed sustainable urban food systems by uniting the perspectives of city planners, public health officials, local farmers, and community organisations; creating an urban agriculture initiative that improved food security, reduced environmental impact, and enhanced community wellbeing. [4]

3

Innovating how to communicate important findings

Being able to communicate food research in a way that is mutually beneficial to academics and the general public is critical. In the past, transdisciplinary food impact work, such as Future Earth, a United Nations program for societies to transition to global sustainability, has focused on several ways – some traditional (e.g., research papers) and some more non-traditional and aimed at multiple audiences – to convey their work to different people. [5] While common approaches to transmitting knowledge involve publishing work in academic journal articles and books, other approaches, like hosting public debates, running workshops in schools, or appearing in the media, are equally as likely to create impact.

In brief, transdisciplinary research methods can contribute to a dynamic and robust food practices and cultures conversation by providing a more holistic, participatory, and action-oriented approach to understanding and addressing complex challenges to our often ingrained food cultures. These methods help bridge the gap between research, policy, and practice, potentially leading to more effective and inclusive policies and relevant strategies for positive societal transformation.

These themes represent some of the pressing and contentious issues around food cultures and practices nationwide. However, they are by no means exhaustive fields of study. This network envisages that a convergence of these themes within a transdisciplinary approach will bring about a much-needed transformation in current understanding of issues related to food. With that understanding a more holistic solution to address some of these pressing issues is possible as we move away from a siloed research approach. By coming together in partnership with diverse stakeholders, we want to create meaningful solutions for real life food issues.

Big Bite: Tackling Complex Food Issues

RMIT researchers have spent years tackling some of the most complex food issues that Australians face.

Our intersections across three broad examples – food waste, food access and affordability, and ultra-processed foods – demonstrate why our network is leading the way in producing innovative, impact-driven solutions to complex food issues.

Big Bite #1
Food Waste

Food waste remains a massive issue in Australia; from household food waste to industrial-scale food loss. Each year, Australia wastes 7.6m tonnes of food, which is costing households $19.3 billion. Retailer specifications and cosmetic standards are also key drivers of food waste in the supply chain, costing the horticultural sector $1.7 billion and wasting perfectly nutritious food. Supply-chain disruptions due to extreme weather events and power cuts further exacerbate the problem. What has been done to minimise the impact of waste? And what are we planning to do? As a network, we are committed to exploring food waste through different lenses. Here is just a glimpse of how our researchers are tackling or planning to tackle the issue.

"I have studied the production, sorting and disposal of food waste in high rise apartments, in people's homes and in cafes. I research how meanings such as convenience, freshness and hygiene shape social practices across space and time, leading to food waste"

Dr. Bhavna Middha, Environmental Geographer

"My research considers the systemic implications of 'wicked problems' such as food waste. Food waste is not only an environmental problem. It creates financial stress for farmers, a key driver of poor mental health in farming communities."

Dr Kelly Donati, Social Scientist

"I research how to reduce plant-based protein waste, and how to increase the value of underutilised plants"

Dr Mahsa Majzoobi, Food Scientist

"My research aims to facilitate a gradual behavioral change in relation to domestic food waste through innovative multisensory design solutions that reimagine one's food storage and consumption, and help form new and better habits"

Dr Rohit Ashok Khot, Designer

"My research on waste reduction focuses on finding ways to cut down on waste during food production and using leftover materials to make new, useful food products or ingredients. I have extended my research to looking at how we can reduce food waste from homes and restaurants going to landfill by repurposing it or turning it into creative ingredients that can be reused "

A/Prof Jayani Chandrapala, Food Technologist & Food Chemist

"My research focuses on turning food waste, like discarded carrots, into dietary fibre that can be safely eaten or added to other food or health products. We use a new wet extraction method to do this, which keeps the nutrients from the waste intact."

Professor Rajaraman Eri, Molecular Biologist

"Through media contributions, I enhance public understanding of nutrition and food waste issues, such as clarifying 'use by' versus 'best before' dates so that people are educated on when they can still eat food safely."

Dr Jessica Danaher, Nutrition Scientist and Dietitian

"I look at how ideas of cleanliness, purity, health and good taste, and their dynamic intersections with race, class, gender, and sexuality, drive what we consider to be 'waste' and what we consider *good food*"

Dr Helen Addison-Smith, Chef, Researcher and Relational Artist

Big Bite #2
Food Access & Affordability

According to the Foodbank Hunger Report 2023, 3.7 million Australian households experienced severe to moderate food insecurity. The rising cost of living was cited as the most common reason. Many people live in areas where affordable access to fresh food is an ongoing issue, while others are not able to feed themselves nutritional meals due to a combination of financial and temporal constraints. Over the years, our researchers have addressed issues surrounding food access and affordability in the following ways:

"I research how our bodies respond to food and dietary patterns to design more person-centered nutrition options. At the heart of this work is ensuring that care is holistic, affordable and there is equity in use and access."

Dr Kaitlin Day,
Nutrition Scientist

"Driving sustainable nutrition initiatives in the Oceanic region and Uganda, I develop capabilities and innovative food solutions that support health and the environment. I help to tackle food poverty in Uganda by contributing to locally-led research on the role of climate-smart legume, tuber, and insect flour composites in enhancing nutrition and food security."

Dr. Jessica Danaher,
Nutrition Scientist and Dietitian

"I am interested in the impact of food poverty and insecurity on migrant communities, particularly those who are transient in Australia such as international students and backpackers."

Professor Catherine Gomes,
Ethnographer

"I am mapping the shape of student food insecurity at RMIT, to drive effective, timely and delicious food relief programs at the University."

Dr Helen Addison-Smith, Chef,
Researcher and Relational Artist

"My clinical experience has shown how systemic factors, such as economic constraints and limited access to healthy options, can make it challenging for individuals to maintain a balanced diet. I am dedicated to advocating for community initiatives that improve food access and empower individuals through education and support."

Dr. Sharayah Carter,
Nutritionist and Dietitian

"I research how structural factors, such as welfare reforms, can negatively impact low-income people's relationships with food. Currently, I am exploring how the concept of 'healthy eating' is viewed by low-income groups. Understanding how people are viewed by others for their food practices – especially those deemed at risk of being 'unhealthy' due to their social position - is central to my work."

Dr. Natalie Jovanovski, Health Sociologist

"I use a social practice theory approach to study how people tackle multiple vulnerabilities such as food and energy security by looking at the intersection of supply chains, energy provisioning and the use of small appliances in homes like fridge, freezer and microwave use."

Dr. Bhavna Middha,
Environmental Geographer

"I have undertaken extensive research and community engagement on food insecurity with local and state government. Because the right to food is recognised in international law, I help identify strategies for embedding food as a public good in food systems policies and practice based on the principle of affordable access to good food for all."

Dr. Kelly Donati, Social Scientist

"I measure urban food production from the average Melbourne backyard and investigate the premise that urban backyard food can be one simple solution to addressing the access and affordability of fresh, healthy food".

Dr. Zainil Zainuddin, Project
Researcher

Big Bite #3
Ultra-Processed Foods

Ultra-processed food is controversial. Nutrition, public health, sociology, economics, and environmental science all have varying perspectives on the benefits and harms of this technological innovation. Some see ultra-processed foods through a positive light: as having the potential to reduce food waste and contribute to the pleasure that people experience around food. Others, however, are concerned about its potential long-term effects on health. As a cohort of researchers, how do we reconcile these tensions? Here are some examples how we tackle ultra-processed foods, and where we might come together to create impact.

"I research 'diet culture' and why so many women engage in disordered eating practices, such as yo-yo dieting, food restriction and binge eating; placing them at risk of developing eating disorders. Part of the difficulty of studying ultra-processed foods from this perspective, however, is the tendency to avoid asking critical questions about its production and potential impacts on health if consumed in excess. How do we balance avoiding the moralisation of foods and food choices but still discuss the potential material harms of ultra-processed foods on the body?"

Dr. Natalie Jovanovski, Health Sociologist

"I create recipe books backed by decades of rigorously peer-reviewed research into the Mediterranean diet, a way of eating with very low levels of UPFs. This diet has been proven to increase longevity, drive sustained weight-loss, and prevent heart disease and dementia."

Professor Catherine Itsiopoulis, Nutritionist and Dietitian

"I am concerned about the health implications of UPFs. My work focuses on understanding dietary patterns and preventing chronic diseases, with a passion for mitigating the adverse effects of UPFs on health and developing strategies to reduce their consumption, particularly among vulnerable populations".

Dr. Sharayah Carter, Nutritionist and Dietitian

"I create relational food events that investigate how sensory pleasure is activated in UPFs, and how such pleasure can be fulfilled in ways that do not rely on the quest for profit of multinational corporations".

Dr. Helen Addison-Smith, Chef, Researcher and Relational Artist

"It's difficult to make healthy choices in the absence of an effective regulatory environment to limit the dominance of UPFs in our everyday lives. My research and advocacy work engages with the structural and policy factors that enable our retail environments to become saturated with UPFs."

Dr. Kelly Donati, Social Scientist

"My research focus is on producing UPFs with extra nutrition. I am interested a transdisciplinary approach to explore how these processed foods are perceived by people, in order to understand the impact of consumption frequency of UPFs on human health."

A/Prof Jayani Chandrapala, Food Technologist & Food Chemist

"I research how UPFs affect human health. I am especially interested in how these foods influence the body's pathways that are connected to the microbiome (the helpful bacteria and other microbes in our bodies)."

Professor Rajaraman Eri, Microbiologist

"I have extensive research experience in UPF and have developed several commercially available products. I specialise in starch and fibre modification and grain processing."

Dr. Mahsa Majzoobi, Food Scientist

"I am interested in the relationship between ultra processed food and multicultural migrant communities. For migrant communities such as international students, ultra processed food presents a trusted cheap source of food."

Professor Catherine Gomes, Ethnographer

2025-2027 Event Map

March 2025 Event Launch

At the launch of this report, we will prioritise the three Big Bite themes and open opportunities for collaboration with community and industry:

How can our network develop actions to halve food waste by 2030?

How do we collaborate with communities and industry to tackle household food insecurity caused through inequitable access and affordability?

How do we bring our voices together to raise awareness about the complexities of ultra-processed foods?

Every year, from 2025-2027, we will be engaging with external partners to develop communities of practice and collaborations, tackling our Big Bite issues through events and discussions.

Please feel free share any ideas you may have for collaborative projects and networking events.

Our Food Network Researchers

You can meet our full list of Food Network researchers here:

Dr Bhavna Middha

Dr Bhavna Middha is an ARC DECRA Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Urban Research in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies. As an environmental sociologist, geographer and social practice theorist, her main area of research is sustainable consumption in the urban context. The focal point of her work is spatiality and just transitions as she investigates contemporary society's food, energy, plastic use and waste practices. She uses qualitative research methodologies, including ethnography, where digital methods have been an important aspect of her empirical work.

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View academic profile

Dr Sharayah Carter

Dr. Sharayah Carter is a nutrition scientist and lecturer in the School of Health and Biomedical Sciences at RMIT University. Her research encompasses a broad range of nutrition topics, with a particular emphasis on dietary patterns and chronic disease prevention. As an Accredited Practising Dietitian with over a decade of clinical experience, Sharayah is dedicated to helping individuals make meaningful changes to their diets and lifestyles to enhance their health and well-being. As a trusted voice in nutrition, she aims to influence public health policies and promote well-being through her media contributions and advocacy efforts.

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View academic profile

Dr Jess Danaher

Dr. Jess Danaher is a nutrition scientist and dietitian. She excels in blended learning, employing experiential gamification and personalised strategies that have significantly shaped RMIT University educational strategy. Jess's innovative teaching methods and curriculum design earned her the Early Career Award for Teaching Excellence in the Australian Awards for University Teaching (2022) and two RMIT Vice-Chancellor's Awards (2021, 2023). Her research explores innovative educational games for nutrition and strategies to combat food waste. Jess is actively involved in the Oceanic Nutrition Leadership Platform, working towards sustainable food security for Oceania.

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View academic profile

Dr Natalie Jovanovski

Dr Natalie Jovanovski is a Vice Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow and an award-winning health sociologist. Her research has focused predominantly on the sociocultural messages that shape people's relationships with food, eating and their bodies, especially women. Her Australian Research Council DECRA project (2020-2023) explored the way that women, activists and health professionals challenge diet culture, resulting in a monograph published in 2024 (Diet Culture and Counterculture: Self and Society in the Anti-Diet Movement; Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). Her current project looks at how 'healthy eating' can be understood from a social equity perspective.

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View academic profile

A/Prof Jayani Chandrapala

A/Prof. Jayani Chandrapala is a food chemist specialising in waste valorisation and ultra processed food development using non-thermal and thermal technologies. Her expertise spans physical chemistry of foods, protein conformation analysis, and interactions between proteins, sugars, and minerals. With a strong background in dairy science and technology, she focusses on advanced membrane processing for component separation and developing value-added products. Her work extends to functional properties of food products, including fermented foods as well as functional food innovations such as emulsions and microencapsulation of bioactives for enhanced bioavailability.

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View academic profile

Dr Kaitlin Day

Dr. Kaitlin Day is a Lecturer in Nutrition Science in the School of Health and Biomedical Sciences at RMIT University. Kaitlin's research predominately focuses on precision nutrition where she uses large scale datasets such as transcriptomics to characterise differences in response to dietary interventions. Her focus to date has mainly been in dietary interventions for chronic disease, in particular obesity. She has a keen interest in trying to understand why current dietary interventions/practises are often ineffective for women.

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View academic profile

Prof Rajaraman Eri

Prof. Rajaraman Eri is a veterinarian turned biomedical scientist who specialises in research investigations into functional foods (dietary fibre), clinical nutrition and gut health. At the Mater Medical Research Institute, University of Queensland, Raj was involved in ground-breaking work on the pathogenesis of bowel diseases. Raj later joined the University of Tasmania as an independent investigator where he established and developed a research laboratory dedicated to gut health, specialising in the complex relationship between microbiome and dietary fibre.

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View academic profile

Prof Catherine Gomes

Prof. Catherine Gomes is a Professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University specialising in the culture and communication practices of vulnerable culturally and linguistically migrant groups. She is a cultural studies and communications studies scholar whose work contributes to the understanding of the evolving migration, mobility and digital media nexus. As a migration and mobility scholar, she specialises on the social, cultural and communication spaces of transient migrants, especially international students, their wellbeing and their digital engagement. Her work covers the themes of identity, ethnicity, race, memory and gender.

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View academic profile

Prof Catherine Itsiopoulos

Prof. Catherine Itsiopoulos is interim Deputy Vice Chancellor of the STEM College at RMIT University. She is also Associate Deputy Vice-Chancellor Head of Bundoora Campus Precinct. She provides academic, research, professional, industry, and community engagement leadership. She is a recognised expert in Clinical Nutrition and Dietetics, and has international standing as a leader in Mediterranean diet research.

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View academic profile

Prof Andrew Butt

Prof. Andrew Butt is a Professor in Sustainability and Urban Planning in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS) and the Centre for Urban Research (CUR) at RMIT. Andrew is a planning educator and researcher with a focus on rural and regional planning issues. He has a background in planning practice and his current research and supervision is in the area of land use change and planning policy associated with Australian peri-urban and urban fringe regions, including land use change, food systems and social infrastructure.

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View academic profile

Dr Rohit Ashok Khot

Dr. Rohit Ashok Khot is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Design at RMIT University, Australia and he directs the HAFP (pronounced as HAPPY) Research Lab. Rohit is a leading researcher of international repute in the dynamic field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), particularly distinguishing himself as a pioneer in the rapidly evolving realm of Human-Food Interaction (HFI). His innovative contributions not only challenge established norms but also spearhead a paradigm shift in the traditional approach to designing technology for food and well-being, weaving in the worlds of play and multi-sensory experiences within the context of food.

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View academic profile

Dr Mahsa Majzoobi

Dr. Mahsa Majzoobi is a Vice-Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow in Food Science and Technology. She is a food scientist who researchers food components such as starch, fibre, proteins, bioactive compounds, and their functional and health effects in foods. She is internationally recognised for her expertise in nutritional profiling of foods, formulation of functional foods including bakery products, gluten-free products, pasta, noodles, functional emulsions, modified starches and fibre. Her work also includes diversifying human diet with under-utilised and emerging sources of foods. She has previously collaborated with the Australian Defence Force in developing nutritionally dense combat ration packs.

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View academic profile

Dr Helen Addison-Smith

Dr. Helen Addison-Smith is a writer, chef and food researcher who is interested in the cultural and technological construction of food-based pleasures. She has worked extensively with the End Food Waste Australia and the Solving Plastic Waste funded by Australian Governments Cooperative Research Centres. She also teaches food studies at the William Angliss Institute, preparing the next generation of culinary and hospitality staff to become aware of our current food systems.

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View academic profile

Dr Zainil Zainuddin

Dr. Zainil Zainuddin is an urban food practitioner. Her transdisciplinary research areas intersect regenerative food production and distribution, durable urban development and ethical digital media. She develops social media communication performance as a critical inquiry technique to analyse the interrelations between agency and empowerment in the fledging small-scale regenerative farming sector, with the help of digital media. This novel approach delinks the sector from colonial agricultural structures paving a new direction for the future of farming.

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View academic profile

Dr Kelly Donati

Dr. Kelly Donati is Vice-Chancellor's Research Fellow (2024-2028) in the School of Health and Biomedical Sciences where she researches the role of community food infrastructure in creating more equitable, caring and regenerative urban environments. As a co-founder and Chairperson of Sustain: The Australian Food Network, a health promotion charity and social enterprise, Kelly has a strong track record in building the evidence base for meaningful change in food system policy, advocacy and practice. In leading the development of Australia's only Bachelor of Food Studies at William Angliss Institute, Kelly has also significantly advanced food systems education in Australia.

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View academic profile

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Fresh Out of the Oven

Our team have been busy getting their groundbreaking and internationally-recognised research on food published and ready to produce positive social impact. Here is just a taste of our work...

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Let's Connect

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