

# Breastfeeding Knowledge and Attitudes Among Students: Insights for Future Education and Community Support in Rural and Coastal Wessex

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## Introduction

Breastfeeding provides substantial benefits for individuals, families, society and the environment, yet rates in the UK remain lower than in comparable countries. Rural and coastal areas, including Wessex, may face additional challenges in sustaining breastfeeding. Initiation is around 69–74% across Southampton, Portsmouth, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, but continuation falls to around 52–58% by 6–8 weeks. Similarly, in Dorset, initiation ranges from 75–89%, while continuation declines to around 55–58% by 6 weeks. Sufficient knowledge and positive attitudes strongly influence infant feeding practices, increasing the likelihood of initiating and continuing breastfeeding. University students are a key population, not only as future parents but also as societal influencers. Promoting positive attitudes and adequate knowledge among students of all disciplines and genders helps create a supportive infant feeding culture, encourages safe and healthy practices, and enables timely, effective promotion and support of breastfeeding, directly aligning with the regional infant feeding strategies and its core aims.

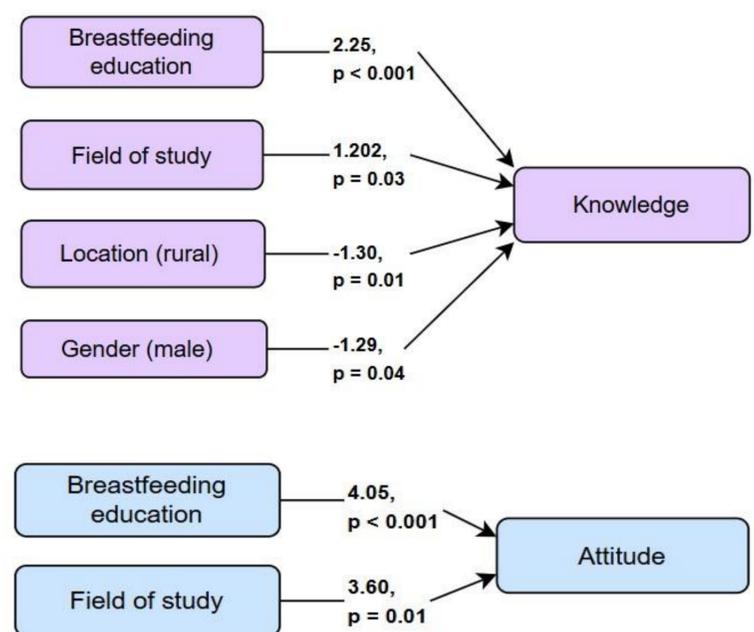
## Objectives

This research aimed to assess Bournemouth University students' knowledge and attitudes toward breastfeeding, compared these across health and non-health disciplines, and identified factors associated with them, with consideration of their relevance to future community and workforce support in rural and coastal areas.



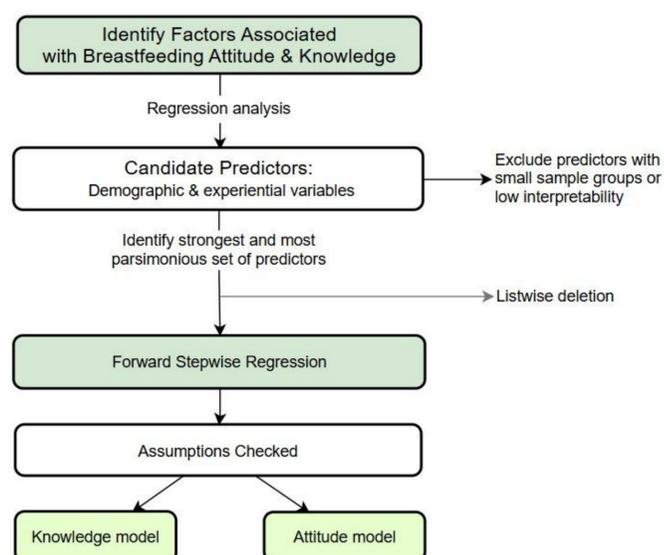
## Results

Intention to breastfeed was high in both groups; however, overall attitudes were neutral, and knowledge levels were intermediate. Health students demonstrated significantly greater knowledge and more positive attitudes than those in non-health disciplines ( $p < 0.001$ ). Regression analyses identified prior breastfeeding education and field of study as the strongest predictors of knowledge and attitudes, whereas male gender and urban residence were associated with slightly lower knowledge.



## Methods

A cross-sectional survey of students was conducted using an online self-administered questionnaire. Knowledge was measured using the Infant Feeding Knowledge Test Form A (AFORM) and attitudes with the Iowa Infant Feeding Attitude Scale (IIFAS). Data were analysed descriptively and inferentially, with regression analyses identifying predictors of knowledge and attitudes.



## Discussion

Despite strong intentions, students showed limited knowledge and attitudes toward breastfeeding. These gaps may reduce future support, particularly in rural and coastal communities with fewer services and social networks. Targeted interventions emphasising breastfeeding education and practical exposure could improve knowledge and attitudes, supporting confident, informed breastfeeding practices. The study highlights modifiable factors in a population crucial for shaping future breastfeeding support and informs strategies to strengthen social, cultural, and community networks.

## Impact – What if it works?

Universities can enhance knowledge and attitudes towards breastfeeding by engaging beyond health disciplines.

BU has been recognised for this, achieving an UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative Gold Award. However, further work is needed in non-health disciplines. Taking an institutional approach could have an impact on population health by fostering a positive breastfeeding culture in Wessex's rural and coastal areas.