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Decision making in institutional food systems: Insights from university canteens on plant based menus and sustainability

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Abstract

Transforming food systems is an integral part of efforts to address climate change, public health, and animal welfare. Current diets rely heavily on animal based products, thereby contributing substantially to greenhouse gas emissions and land use change. They are also closely associated with diet related non communicable diseases and animal welfare concerns. For this reason, shifts toward more plant based diets are increasingly seen as an important strategy for reducing environmental and animal welfare impacts, while improving dietary quality.

Existing research has largely focused on agricultural production or individual consumer behaviour. Less attention has been paid to the institutional decision makers who shape everyday food environments and determine what food is actually offered. This study fills this gap in the literature by focusing on German university catering, an influential but under researched part of institutional food systems. Operated by 57 Studierendenwerke, university catering in Germany comprises 893 dining halls and cafeterias nationwide and reaches millions of consumers each year.

Using Q-methodology, this study takes a systematic exploratory approach to examine how decision makers in university catering prioritise and balance decisions about whether and to what extent to offer more plant based meals. We collect primary data through a structured Q sorting exercise administered to catering managers and equivalent decision makers across Germany. The analysis identifies shared decision making viewpoints, illustrating how sustainability and nutrition objectives are weighed against cost pressures, operational feasibility, and concerns about student's sense of autonomy.

The study makes three contributions. First, it provides empirical insight into an under researched area of institutional food governance. Second, it helps explain why sustainability ambitions are unevenly translated into practice by highlighting the role of economic and organisational constraints. Third, the findings offer policy relevant insights for designing support mechanisms that enable institutional caterers to contribute more effectively to sustainable and nutrition sensitive food system transformations. Although grounded in the German context, the results are relevant for institutional food systems in other regions, including low and middle income countries where collective food provision plays an important role in shaping diets.

Keywords: Decision-making, large-scale caterers, plant-based diet, q-methodology, sustainability

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