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

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Background and Motivation

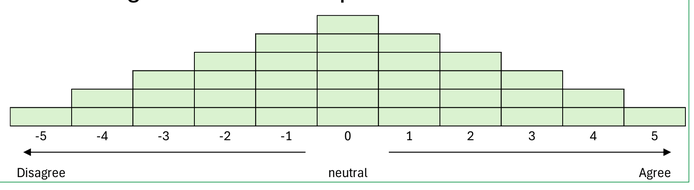
- A shift towards plant-based diets is necessary for mitigating climate change, improving public health, and promoting animal welfare
- Little is known about large-scale institutional caterers who are central to everyday food environments
- We present the first nation-wide study of German university catering, an influential sector operated by 57 Student Services Organisations, across 893 canteens nationwide, reaching millions of consumers annually
- This study investigates the motives underlying institutional protein choices to uncover the 'why' of decision-making, providing insights for the targeted implementation of measures aimed at creating sustainable food systems.

Method

- Using Q-methodology, we identified shared viewpoints on plant-based menu provision
- 28 out of 57 decision-makers from German Student Services Organisations, each in charge of their university's catering department, participated
- Participants sorted 36 statements capturing the motivations behind animal versus plant-based protein decision on a forced quasi-normal distribution ranging from -5 to +5
- Factors were extracted using Principal Component Analysis. Factors retained based on eigenvalues > 1 and scree test, with Varimax rotation applied to maximise variance. Loadings ≥ |0.49| were considered statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Distribution of participants

Sorting exercise into a quasi-normal distribution



RESULTS

Profile 1 – Choice-oriented protein decisions

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Centred on student autonomy and freedom of choice

- Balanced menus over strict vegan defaults
- Driven by actual student demand
- Supports cautious meat reduction
- Rejects restrictive measures (e.g. Veggie Days)
- Values operational autonomy

"Our role is to provide choice, not to steer behaviour."

Profile 2 – Responsibility-oriented protein decision

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Centred on active shaping and institutional responsibility

- Actively influence dietary decisions
- Prioritise reduction of animal products
- Broad vegan/vegetarian offering
- Cost and feasibility secondary
- Embrace institutional leadership

"Our role is to actively shape protein choices."

Profile 3 – Balanced protein Decision-making

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Centred on balanced implementation and practical feasibility

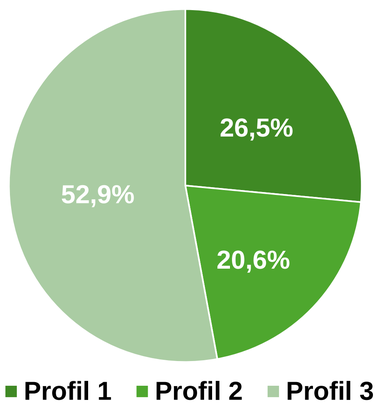
- Balances cost, demand, and feasibility
- Supports meat reduction, rejects elimination
- Communication over restrictions
- Plant-based as one component
- Practical feasibility sets limits

"Change is welcome, but must be gradual and feasible."

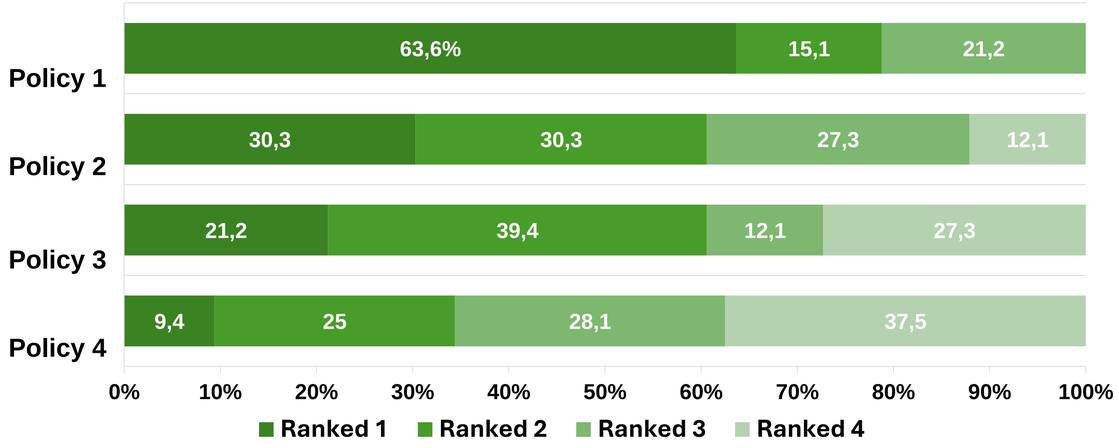
Post-survey Workshop: Triangulating profiles

- To triangulate the findings and assess their practical relevance, the three profiles were presented to 34 participants at a national university catering conference
- All participants identified with one of the profiles, thus supporting the relevance of the identified viewpoints
- Notably, while Q-method identified Profile 1 as most prevalent, workshop participants predominantly identified with Profile 3
- Participants were also asked to rank following policy recommendations:
  - Policy 1: Strengthen financial viability
  - Policy 2: Build regional procurement and supply chains
  - Policy 3: Enhance staff competencies
  - Policy 4: Secure skilled employees

Do participants feel represented?



Ranking of Policy Recommendations by Workshop Participants



Key Takeaways

- Institutional (university) catering is a significant factor in moving towards sustainable food systems
- Three distinct decision-maker profiles emerged: (1) Choice, (2) Responsibility, and (3) Balanced.
- All participants, in a post-survey workshop, identified with one of these profiles, supporting that these views exist in practise
- Improved financial viability of plant-based menus is a top priority amongst workshop participants
- Tailored interventions (nudges, training, subsidies) are essential; one-size-fits-all fails.

View poster:

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