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What's for lunch? Eliciting preferences for food on university campus

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Background. Being both a place of education and work, universities act as 'anchor institutions' within a food system and have a responsibility for providing a healthy environment for their staff and students. Yet, there is a paucity of evidence on food provision in university settings. Understanding the drivers of students' and staff preferences for food can provide valuable evidence for informing university food policy. This study aimed to identify the factors that influence food choice for lunch served on university campuses, and to compare the preferences of university staff and students, and across different country settings.

Methods. We conducted a discrete choice experiment with university staff and students in six universities in France, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. An online survey was designed based on a comprehensive literature review, a focus group, and a series of pilot interviews. In addition to campus lunch preferences, we collected data on demographics, dietary preferences, eating and drinking habits, physical activity, food insecurity, and body composition. Data on-campus food preferences were analysed using random parameter logit and latent class models to capture preference heterogeneity.

Results. In the presentation, we will provide a descriptive overview of the data as well as insights into the preference data. We will discuss overall preferences in the sample, and then present a more detailed analysis of how preferences vary by country, type of respondent (staff vs student), and other characteristics, including diet and physical activity habits.

Discussion. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the drivers of university students' and staff preferences for lunch on campus contributing evidence to inform university food system policies. Incorporating their preferences in how food policies are developed can offer a new perspective to decision-makers and help enhance the satisfaction and well-being of university students and staff.