

# Barriers and facilitators to vegetarian menu choice among university cafeteria users

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## 1. Background

- Meat consumption in Switzerland is too high for everyone, especially for young people and men with higher education. It threatens the sustainability of our food system and the health of individuals.
- Reducing meat consumption is a win-win measure for improving public health and reducing the environmental impact of our food system.
- Choosing the vegetarian menu more frequently is a sustainable option with a positive impact on individual health.
- Interventions in company or school cafeterias can change consumers' eating habits by offering easier choices and encouraging them to try new practices.
- The aim of this study was to explore the barriers and facilitators to choosing a vegetarian menu in a university cafeteria, in order to design an intervention adapted to the cafeteria users.**

## 2. Methodology

The study was carried out on **HEPIA**, the School of Engineering, Architecture and Landscape (HES-SO Geneva), in collaboration with **ELDORA SA**, the company managing the HEPIA cafeteria at the time of the study. HEPIA was chosen because of the mix of men and women who use the cafeteria.

At the time of the study, the **price of the vegetarian menu** was CHF 5.- for students, following a political decision to reduce food insecurity among students.

An **online survey** was sent to all cafeteria users to identify barriers and facilitators to choosing the vegetarian menu.

After analysing the survey results, **focus groups** were conducted to understand the findings further.

**Frequencies and percentages** were calculated to quantify barriers and facilitators, and Fisher's exact tests were used to compare men's and women's responses.

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and subjected to **thematic analysis**.

Of the 1,518 cafeteria users who received the survey, 376 (25%) responded. Thirteen participants were available for the focus groups.

## 3. Survey results

Table 1 shows the main barriers and facilitators to choosing the vegetarian menu in the HEPIA cafeteria. For 121 (34.9%) participants, there were no barriers to choosing the vegetarian menu.

Table 1. Main barriers and facilitators to choosing a vegetarian menu in the cafeteria

Barriers (>10% of responses)	Facilitators (>10% of responses)
Not enough vegetarian options (35.7%, n=124)	To eat more fruit and vegetables (48.1%, n=167)
Tastes less good (25.9%, n=90)	Less environmental impact (43.5%, n=151)
Insufficiently satiating (20.5%, n=71)	Price of CHF 5.- (36.3%, n=126)
Enjoy meat or fish in the cafeteria (16.7%, n=58)	Allows you to spend less money (32.9%, n=114)
High price related to energy provided (13.3%, n=46)	Animal rights and welfare (24.8%, n=86)
Worry about deficiencies (12.1%, n=42)	Helps to improve health (24.5%, n=85)
Worry about lacking protein (12.1%, n=42)	Doing something for the planet (23.1%, n=80)
Meat/fish affordable in the cafeteria (11.5%, n=40)	Fat quality is better (20.7%, n=72)
Don't have the habit (10.4%, n=36)	Disease prevention (18.7%, n=65)
	Improvement of food security (15.9%, n=55)
	Nothing makes that choice easier (15.0%, n=52)
	Allows you to control your weight (12.7%, n=44)
	Helps you to stay fit and full of energy (11.0%, n=38)

Moreover:

- Women were more likely than men** to report no barriers to choosing a vegetarian menu ( $p < 0.001$ ). **Men were more likely than women** to think that the vegetarian menu tasted less good ( $p = 0.004$ ) or was not filling enough ( $p = 0.002$ ), to worry about not getting enough protein ( $p = 0.043$ ) or losing muscle ( $p = 0.008$ ) and were also more likely to feel tired of being told what to do ( $p = 0.026$ ).
- Lack of knowledge or misinformation about balanced diets and plant protein were common.

## 4. Thematic analysis

Five themes identified in the focus groups (Table 2). The focus groups highlighted that the environmental cause was not a motivator for menu choice and that the issue of meat reduction was sensitive.

Table 2. Five themes identified in the focus groups

	Themes
1.	Spontaneous menu selection
2.	Predefined menu selection
3.	Influence of opportunity on menu selection
4.	Influence of environmental sensitivity on menu selection
5.	Threat to identity in the menu selection

## 5. Verbatim

"If we are given a vegetarian dish and then we only have the starch and the vegetable, we will say that something has been taken away from us. We are missing something."

"I think it can very quickly lead to polarization, that's clear. It can very quickly actually give the feeling that we are trying to impose a way of doing things."

"When I choose a menu, it's not so much for the environment as it is for me."

"Because there is the menu at 5 francs for students, 5 francs, and generally it's vegetarian. So the students will eat vegetarian. Again, we are not attracting them by quality, but by price."

"I find that here there is a difference in the appeal of the non-vegetarian menu and the vegetarian menu just in the presentation, in the apparent quality of the dish."

## 6. Key messages

- Health** was a better motivator for change than the environment, but the participants had misconceptions about dietary balance.
- Women** had fewer barriers to choosing the vegetarian menu.
- The environmental impact of meat consumption was **poorly understood**.
- The attractiveness** and variety of vegetarian menus on offer are essential and represent a **lever** that could be used.
- Segmentation** of the population could help to better target interventions.
- Surveying the target audience before taking any action will help to avoid **missteps**.
- Nudges or financial measures can tilt the choice in favour of vegetarian options, but tasting, **education and information** should complement these measures.

Podcast



16'33" in French



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