

# Vegetarian campus canteens – a welcome change or too much of a green thing?

Findings from a repeated choice experiment



Photo: Wicked Rabbit, Thorvaldsensvej. Credit: Green Solutions Centre

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In collaboration with Compass Group

On the campuses Frederiksberg and Taastrup of University of Copenhagen the transition to a more plant-based food system is taken seriously: Two out of three canteens have been entirely vegetarian and very vegan-friendly as of September 2023. This goes beyond the recommendations of the Danish Climate Council, which say that public kitchens ought to follow the 2021 Official Dietary Guidelines and serve food with a *reduced* content of animal source foods to normalize a climate-friendly diet. It is therefore relevant to investigate if the change is welcome or “too much of a green thing” for the students and staff.

In this project, a choice experiment survey is developed, and two survey rounds are

conducted – one before and one after the transition. Thereby it is possible to investigate what people prefer regarding canteen meat content – and if preferences change after the shift. Further, it is assessed which behavioral, attitudinal, and social factors explain these preferences, and thereby who are likely to increase or decrease their canteen use with the shift.

## A flexitarian system is preferred

Survey results from 367 completed questionnaires indicate that overall sales are likely to decrease following the transition, since people in general – and frequent users in particular – prefer the system before the shift to a fully vegetarian canteen system. On average, people on campus are willing to pay DKK 1.5 less per 100 grams for fully vegetarian canteen food compared to the

previous canteen system. Nevertheless, the canteen meat content level generally preferred the most is the one that serves meat except beef 2-3 days a week, corresponding to a *reduced* meat content. Furthermore, a small increase in willingness to pay for both flexitarian and vegetarian canteen food over the project period points to the fact that people are slightly more positive towards the idea of plant-based food after having tried it.

### **A gradual transition may be advisable**

Preferences are heterogeneous, however, with diet as the main predictor. The many pescatarians, vegetarians and vegans on campus generally have positive preferences for a vegetarian canteen system, while the equally large group of people who eat meat daily are likely to significantly decrease their canteen use after the shift and perhaps stop using it altogether. Therefore, a more gradual transition to a more plant-based canteen may be advisable so opportunities of normalization of climate-friendly food are not missed among those with largest meat reduction potentials.

The data on actual sales provided by Compass Group contradicts expectations from the choice experiment as actual sales rise for the transitioned canteens. This discrepancy may partly be explained by intentions of meat reduction combined with habitual behavior, but some degree of hypothetical bias and/or sample frame bias may also be at play.

### **The research method**

The choice experiment survey is developed informed by choice experiment guides, literature on meat reduction, and personal interviews and focus groups. Survey validity depends strongly on the input from pretesting participants, which is analyzed using thematic analysis and used to iteratively improve the survey. Survey data is analyzed using multinomial and random parameter logit models, and through use of OLS estimation on the conditionals from a random parameter logit estimation. The expected effect on sales from stated preferences is compared to actual sales data provided by the company Compass Group, that currently runs the canteens.