

Sustainability Perception Findings Report

University Food System of the
Czech University of Life Sciences Prague

The Menza Collective

November 2025

Menu for Change Challenge



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1. Toolkit for the Identification of Sustainability Preferences in University Food Systems

This chapter describes the toolkit adopted to explore how different university actors perceive sustainable food in the context of university menza at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU). Given the project's focus on meaning-making and perceived agency, a qualitative and inductive. The project is grounded in a social constructivist perspective and aims to capture the diverse epistemologies and perceived agency of key stakeholders: students, menza staff, teaching and non-teaching staff within two selected universities in the Czech Republic. To achieve this, data collection involved semi-structured.

The selected actor groups include: students, academic staff, non-academic staff, and menza staff.

The student group consists of currently enrolled bachelor's and master's students in agriculture- or life sciences-related degree programs. Due to the heterogeneity of the student population, steps were taken to make the sample more manageable. Ph.D. students were excluded from this group and instead considered as academic staff. Where possible, students were further segmented by dietary preference, such as vegetarian and vegan, or omnivore, to enable better comparisons. In addition, at least one student participant per university was selected from an international background with dietary habits that differ significantly from the European mainstream.

The academic staff group includes university employees engaged in teaching and research in agricultural or life science disciplines. This includes full-time professors, postgraduate researchers, and Ph.D. students actively involved in research and teaching.

The non-academic staff group refers to university employees involved in administrative, technical, or service roles not directly connected to teaching or research, such as study office personnel, library staff, or facility coordinators.

Finally, menza workers represent actors employed in university food service operations. This includes kitchen staff, service personnel, dishwashing staff, and others involved in the daily functioning of the menza. Their inclusion is crucial for capturing the supply-side perspective on sustainable food procurement and preparation.

1.1 Collecting Responses

A common set of five questions was used for the demand-side actors - students, academic staff, and non-academic staff, who are positioned similarly in the conceptual framework. A slightly adapted set of six questions was posed to the supply-side actors, the menza employees, reflecting their different roles and relationships to the university food system. After each main question, respondents were given time to formulate their thoughts and respond freely. In cases where participants struggled to articulate their answers or were not following the topic, a prepared set of follow-up probing questions was used to guide the discussion and ensure that

responses remained relevant to the project objectives. Table 1 lists the main interview questions in bold, while the probing questions are listed below them in non-bold. Additionally, Table 1 links the asked question to its main rationale.

During interviews with menza staff, a challenge emerged regarding the formulation and understanding of the key concept of sustainability. Sometimes the term was perceived as too broad or abstract. To ensure the interview remained accessible, a simplified working definition was provided when necessary. The interviewer introduced sustainability with a phrase such as: *“If I say that sustainability means doing things in a way that is good for nature, for people, and for the future can you imagine what kind of food this could be here in the menza?”*

The project focused on understanding how key actors involved in the university food system perceive sustainable food and their ability and willingness to drive change. Two objectives (OBJ) have been formulated.

- **OBJ 1: Examine the differences and commonalities in understanding sustainable food among key university actors.**
- **OBJ 2: Investigate the perceived agency of key university actors to induce change toward sustainable food.**

Table 1: Interview questions

Demand Side Actors – Students; Academic Staff; Non-Academic Staff	
Question	Rationale
1. What role does the university menza play in your day-to-day university life? How often do you eat there, and why do you choose to eat there (convenience, quality, etc.)?	To understand the relationship the respondent has towards the menza.
2. How would you imagine a perfect meal in the university menza? What kind of options would you like to see offered that aren't currently available?	To understand where the “ideal” meal of the respondent fulfils any sustainability characteristics. Question was asked before any sustainability-related questions to reduce any anchoring or leading.
3. How do you understand the concept of sustainability, especially in relation to food? (“What comes to your mind first”) What are the attributes you associate with sustainability in food (e.g., local sourcing, organic, plant-based, waste reduction)? Can you think of examples that reflect these attributes?	To address OBJ 1 The additional “What comes to your mind first” was added at the end of the question to induce an individual understanding of the concept, rather than an academic definition of the term.
4. How would you see yourself influencing the food, which is offered in the menza, towards sustainability? How would you change the food composition in the menza? What challenges do you foresee in making such changes (for you as a change maker)? What is holding you back from starting the change?	To address OBJ 2 The emphasis was put on the individual rather than on the ability of the entire actor group.
5. How do you feel about your ability to have your voice heard? Who would you talk to or involve in the process?	To address OBJ 2 To induce reflection of the respondent towards their perceived position in the institution and the power they hold.

(continued)

Table 1: Interview questions (continued)

Supply Side Actors – Menza Staff	
Question	Rationale
<p>1. What role does the university menza play in your day-to-day work life? How do you view your role in providing food to the menza consumers? What value do you think you add to the menza operation?</p>	To understand the relationship of the respondent towards the menza as a work environment.
<p>2. What would be your ideal meal prepared for the menza consumers?</p>	To understand what is understood as the perfect meal that can be offered to the consumer and what (sustainable) characteristics such a meal has.
<p>3. What does sustainability in food mean to you, particularly in the context of your work? What aspects of sustainability (e.g., sourcing, food waste) do you think are the most important when preparing meals? What do you think influences your understanding of sustainability?</p>	To address OBJ 1 Question asked in ration to the work the menza employee is doing. Here, the alternative definition was used in relevant cases to ensure the accessibility of the question.
<p>4. How do you think your work would change when preparing more sustainable food? What would it change about your tasks? What impact do you think this would have on the workload?</p>	To understand whether there is any connection to increased workload or sense of fulfilment when preparing sustainable food.
<p>5. How would you see yourself influencing the food, which is offered in the menza, towards sustainability? How would you change the food composition in the menza? Who would you talk to or involve in the process? What challenges do you foresee in making such changes?</p>	To address OBJ 2 The emphasis was put on the individual rather than on the ability of the entire actor group. To understand the work culture in the menza.
<p>6. What level of freedom (agency) would you like to have when preparing the menus? How independent would you like to be when selecting which food you would prepare?</p>	To address OBJ 2 To understand if the menza staff would appreciate having more agency in the process of menu preparation and how such menu would look like.

2. Findings on Sustainability Perception

The following chapter describes how different actor groups conceptualised sustainable food and identifies broader thematic concepts.

Students

The main results of the thematic analysis from the student actor group from the Czech university are summarised in Table 1.

The menza is rarely used regularly and is influenced by factors like schedule, company, and payment friction. One student went, *"only if other people were going,"* and after classes were over, they stopped. Because charging money on the student card was *"very inconvenient... I ended up paying with my normal card, which costs more than with ISIC,"* the respondent was discouraged from going to the menza. During the first semester, the menza is still regarded as a *"cheap option,"* but this perception changes over time. The menza was occasionally selected because it *"belongs to the campus, so I have trust in the food,"* demonstrating the importance of having confidence in the provider. These trends play a role in the subsequent assessments of agency and sustainability. The visit of menza seems to be highly conditional and is not perceived as an immediate option.

According to interviews, the preferred meal combines *"healthy"* ingredients with regional or foreign flavours. Salmon with potatoes and salad, grilled vegetables with macaroni and cheese, spicy Asian or Mexican foods (like noodles and quesadillas), and regional specialities like chicken biryani were a few examples. Some raised concerns about the quality and satiety of vegetarian food, as demonstrated by the following quote:

"There's always a vegetarian meal, but it's not really fine. Once it was spaghetti with 'olive oil', so basically just spaghetti in oil with a few tiny pieces of something. It is not a filling vegetarian meal."

A well-balanced plate that tastes good and represents more than just Czech staples is the ideal.

Short transportation and local/own production are the most obvious anchors when discussing sustainability. In reference to the on-campus farms and market, one interviewer said, *"The university is well set up to produce its own food."* Another aspect is the value chain: small and medium-sized farms should produce sustainable food so that *"the biggest part of the profit goes to families and not to big corporations."* *"Foods without pesticides"* and *"production practices matter,"* and some highlighted fair-trade sourcing when appropriate.

Table 1: Thematic analysis of CZU students

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Menza as a conditional choice	Use is dependent on the timetable, social plans, and convenience.	<i>"I would go sometimes, only if other people are going."</i> <i>"Sometimes my timetable doesn't allow me to go to the menza and have lunch."</i>	Q1: Role of menza	Contextual
Ideal meal = healthy, tasty and international	Preference for balanced and healthy meals. Desire to include more international dishes.	<i>"Something healthy... fish, salmon with potatoes and salad."</i> <i>"I like food that is culturally more familiar to me, but they are definitely not doing that food."</i>	Q2: Ideal meal	OBJ 1
Sustainability = own/local production	Strong link to local sourcing, small farms and using own produce.	<i>"The university is well set up to produce its own food."</i> <i>"Transportation is a big problem in sustainability. It can be solved by sourcing locally."</i>	Q3: Sustainability understanding	OBJ 1
3 Pillars of Sustainability	Although not specifically named, the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainability were listed.	<i>"Pesticides... sustainable would be foods without pesticides."</i> <i>"Half the time the mains are pork. That excludes a lot of people."</i> <i>"Sometimes it's not a big price difference if I go to a restaurant or the menza."</i>	Q3: Sustainability understanding	OBJ 1

(continued)

Table 1: Thematic analysis of CZU students (continued)

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Language barrier	Limited English descriptions of the offered food.	<i>“Usually, I have to ask someone to translate for me.”</i>	Q4: Barriers to change	OBJ 2
Recognition of operational limits	Students acknowledge high volume constraints (refilling, capacity, equipment).	<i>“There is simply not enough space to sit and feel comfortable.”</i> <i>“The food is made in huge quantities and is probably difficult to manage.”</i>	Q4: Barriers to change	OBJ 2
Perceived low individual agency	Many do not expect a reply to concerns. Change seen as hard without a group.	<i>“Best I can do is to send an email and never get a reply.”</i> <i>“I would form a bigger group to be heard.”</i>	Q4: Barriers to change	OBJ 2
Unclear governance and who to contact	Lack of information about how the menza is managed and who is responsible.	<i>“I don’t know who controls the menza. Is the university or the contractor?”</i> <i>“There is an information gap. I don’t know who to contact.”</i>	Q5: Influence pathways	OBJ 2
Preference for collective and formal channels	Petitions, student senate, or the rectorate are seen as more effective than acting alone.	<i>“I would rather go and ask the university management and rectorate.”</i>	Q5: Influence pathways	OBJ 2

Language barriers and transparency limit trust and make sustainable decisions more difficult, which affects enabling conditions for change. International students frequently requested English menus and labels as well as more transparent sourcing information: "*It's not very transparent, and the source of the food is unknown to me.*" Additionally, daily nudges were requested, such as reminders to cut down on waste. This suggests that some respondents would appreciate a small, non-invasive information campaign coordinated top-down.

Students are also aware of operational limits. When a popular tray of grilled vegetables was set out, there was no way to refill it, so "*when it was gone, it was gone.*" Equipment and space were also mentioned. These limitations interact with prices. According to a different interview, "*Sometimes it's not a big price difference between a restaurant and the menza.*" Some dishes, like salmon, are only found on more expensive menus. Students use these conflicts to argue that the menza approaches may not meet their sustainability ideals (transparent, diverse, and fresh).

Despite low expectations and low perceived individual agency, the interviews offer practical, low-cost improvements that fit within the present system. These include self-portioning/buffet, English menus with clear labels (meat type, halal), staff training for inclusive service, and nudges at the point of use. Menu suggestions focus on diversity rather than on more dishes. These suggestions imply that the student actor group actively reflects on the current menza issues and is ready to offer specific, often sustainability-based solutions.

Overall, proximity (own/local), fair and small-scale supply chains, reduced chemical inputs, and social inclusion are how CZU students define sustainable food for OBJ 1. Taste and cultural familiarity are factors that influence whether or not students choose the meal, they are not viewed as being in opposition to sustainability. For OBJ 2, communication (language, channels of communication) and structure (scale, price limits, unclear governance) limit agency. The suggested plan of action is straightforward but concrete: improve information, labelling, and choice architecture; use collective and formal routes for larger changes.

Academic staff

In addition to the results in Table 2, an overview of the CZU academic interviews is provided textually below.

Rather than being a favourite place to eat, the menza is primarily used as a place for quick, social interactions. Going because "*it is a quick and easy way to get lunch,*" frequently with colleagues, was cited by several academics. However, use decreased as the price advantage decreased. This context is important for OBJ 2 because it lowers motivation to put effort into change if the menza is not the first option.

The two main pillars of sustainable food are waste reduction and ethical/local sourcing. In addition to fair-trade or organic products and clear labels, sustainability was framed by the following quote:

"Meat from here or vegetables from farmers from the area... and the food would be there labelled."

Table 2: Thematic analysis of CZU academic staff

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Menza as a social anchor	Used for quick, inexpensive lunches and informal contact with colleagues; use has dropped for some due to price changes and queues.	<i>"It is a quick and easy way to get lunch. If you want to meet your colleagues and discuss things, you will always meet someone."</i> <i>"I don't want to go there during peak hour and queue with others."</i>	Q1: Role of menza	Contextual
Ideal meal = fresh, balanced and lower carb	Preference for smaller, good-quality portions with vegetables and a clear protein.	<i>"A smaller but good quality portion of protein, with more vegetables."</i>	Q2: Ideal meal	OBJ 1
Desire for international and plant-based variety (done well)	Interest in Mediterranean/Asian sets and better vegetarian/vegan dishes. Call for quality over quantity of offers.	<i>"I would really think of something Mediterranean, because it has everything."</i> <i>"Italian, Vietnamese, or any kind of food, really, but just the plant-based ones."</i>	Q2: Ideal meal	OBJ 1
Sustainability = local and transparent	Association of sustainability with sourcing from local farms, organic/fair-trade options, and visible labelling of origin.	<i>"If it was meat from here or vegetables from farmers from the area... and it would be there as written."</i>	Q3: Sustainability understanding	OBJ 1

(continued)

Table 2: Thematic analysis of CZU academic staff (continued)

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Sustainability = reduced waste and portion control	Waste management seen as central: self-portioning, use of reusable boxes and using leftovers.	<p><i>“When the portion size is uniform, I often can not finish the whole meal. If I were portioning myself, I could reduce my waste.”</i></p> <p><i>“I started thinking about what is happening to the leftovers. Is there a strategy?”</i></p>	Q3: Sustainability understanding	OBJ 1
Low transparency and perceived mismatch of values	Sustainability messaging is not visible. Offer is seen as convenience-driven and price-led.	<p><i>“I haven’t seen much promotion of sustainability done by the menza. There is, for sure, a huge pressure to offer quick and cheap meals.”</i></p>	Q3: Alignment with menza approach	OBJ 1
Barriers = contracts, costs, governance	Change towards sustainability is perceived as hard due to procurement rules, costs, time limits, and scale of operation.	<p><i>“At the end, the bursar has the final say. If the change is not economic, it’s simply not happening.”</i></p> <p><i>“Every four years, there is a change in leadership; the efforts die with the change.”</i></p> <p><i>“The system is so huge, it seems almost unrealistic to break it.”</i></p>	Q4: Barriers to change	OBJ 2
Strategy-led collective action	Structural and collective routes are preferred. CSR strategic groups, university senate, department channels.	<p><i>“We initiated to introduce at least Fair Trade coffee machines. It was a bottom-up effort, and it worked.”</i></p> <p><i>“They have a working group with representatives from each faculty looking into ways to improve.”</i></p>	Q5: Influence pathways	OBJ 2

However, waste was frequently the initial response to "sustainable food." These testimonies directly address OBJ 1. According to academics, sustainability is a combination of provenance (local, fair, organic), transparency (written, guaranteed), and waste-prevention material practices. Quality and balance in meals are part of that sustainability frame. Academics frequently preferred smaller, higher-quality plates.

Transparency is perceived as being weak, which reduces confidence. Academics, on the other hand, demanded that performance be monitored in terms of environmental, social, and economic aspects as soon. This indicates an information gap for OBJ 1, but for OBJ 2, it indicates a useful lever that requires no drastic alteration of the entire menu.

Academics acknowledged advancements (more fish, better vegetarian options) in alignment with current practice, but they still felt that there was a mismatch. The offer was described as "*price-led and convenience-driven.*" According to one interviewee, a limited offer might be better than "*cheaper but overly diverse options.*"

Perceived agency is highly structured and mixed. Change, according to some academics, should "*go through the university CSR strategy,*" with the university "*actively involved in promoting it.*" Costs, contracts, and governance were identified as the primary barriers. These narratives work on OBJ 2, the leverage lies in budgeting, strategy, and procurement; individual action is insufficient. The importance of sustainability in the university menza is also perceived as having "*lower priority considering everything that is going on at the university.*"

There are credible bottom-up examples. Others pointed to existing channels such as faculty heads, the university senate, and vice-rector working groups as routes for change. This shows that agency is not absent, but it is mediated. For OBJ 2, effective action couples student groups and staff with formal structures that can change contracts and budgets.

Administration staff

Below is a narrative compilation of the five CZU administrative-staff interviews. It complements the summary in Table 3 by explaining how the themes relate to the project objectives.

Across interviews, the canteen is practical, quick, and a place to meet colleagues. Habit formed when meals were subsidised still shapes use. One administrator put it simply: "*It's the fastest way of eating... .*" Another framed lunch as an informal working moment. Frequency depends on workload, prices, and queues. Alternatives on campus are used when there is a desire to express dissatisfaction with the menza. This substitution, rather than mobilisation in cases of dissatisfaction, is important for OBJ 2.

An ideal meal is described as fresh, local and with minimal waste. A concrete suggestion was offered, which was self-portioning and the offer of reusable boxes. This was also articulated using the following quote:

"People start to see what is left on the plate if they actively throw the leftovers away... it helps to be more aware."

Table 3: Thematic analysis of CZU administration staff

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Menza as a fast social routine	Used for quick, inexpensive lunches and informal contact with colleagues, frequency varies with workload, price and queues.	<i>"It's not just about food; you always meet colleagues and can solve things there."</i> <i>"It's kind of a habit from the time when meals were subsidised."</i>	Q1: Role of menza	Contextual
Ideal meal = fresh, portioned and international	Preference for vegetables and clear protein, fewer starchy sides, and smaller but good-quality portions.	<i>"Czech classic is fine, just make it good. They could also prepare some greens to the sides."</i> <i>A comforting vegan dish would be nice; not a salad, but a proper vegan meal."</i>	Q2: Ideal meal	OBJ 1
Sustainability = local and used wholly	Sustainability is described through local products that are minimally wasted.	<i>"The food should be from the local level, and so that it is prepared on the spot"</i> <i>"Sustainable food should be such food that does not create food."</i>	Q3: Sustainability understanding	OBJ 1
Inclusion and labelling gap	Strong request for English names, allergen/meat icons, and basic nutrition info (e.g., calories/macros) so international staff/guests can choose confidently.	<i>Guests who don't speak Czech only see photos; I end up translating everything."</i> <i>"Icons for meat type or allergens would be easy to add."</i>	Q3: Alignment with menza approach	OBJ 1

(continued)

Table 3: Thematic analysis of CZU administration staff (continued)

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Low transparency and lacking marketing	Sourcing and waste practices are unclear. Sustainability efforts are not communicated.	<i>“After I put my plate on the tray belt, I don’t know what happens to leftovers.”</i> <i>“If they do anything, there isn’t any information. They can’t sell it.”</i>	Q3: Alignment with menza approach	OBJ 1
Agency bounded by structure, time and alternatives	Individual agency is bound by time constraints, work priorities, and structural barriers. Dissatisfaction is shown through easy-to-access food provider alternatives.	<i>“Employees won’t engage because we know solo actions won’t have much effect.”</i> <i>“When the new restaurant opened, the stamp card appeared—competition triggers change.”</i>	Q4-Q5: Barriers and influence pathways	OBJ 2
Dining space design: integrate rather than segregate	Split student staff lines/areas are perceived as outdated. Interest in more flexible, jointly used space.	<i>“No need to separate staff and students.”</i> <i>“It feels strange to visitors that the lines are split.”</i> <i>“You know how huge the eating space is in our menza, right? And it is used only for lunch and dinner. There is so much one can do with it.”</i>	Q5: Influence pathways	OBJ 2

Although not always labelled “*sustainability*,” inclusion and labelling were explicitly connected to it in one interview:

“Sustainability is not only about not wasting resources; it is also about inclusion... to be helpful.”

This puts OBJ 1 beyond procurement to the social dimension of access and informed choice.

Several interviews described a communication vacuum. Sourcing and waste handling are unknown. A reusable-box initiative was praised, then criticised because it was not made the default. Thematic cuisine weeks were noticed, the request was to announce them earlier and clearly, not just on site. Staff cannot evaluate alignment with sustainability because evidence is not visible. It also matters for OBJ 2, since without clear signals, staff interpret sustainability as low.

Most interviewees did not plan to initiate changes. Reasons were limited time and higher-priority work, uncertainty about the responsible actor, and a sense that individual action has little effect. This is central to OBJ 2. Perceived agency is low, structural features define the feasible options. Alternatives on campus function as an “exit” option rather than a voice mechanism.

Spatial separation of staff and students was called outdated. It shed a bad light on the university menza when international visitors asked about the purpose of the staff-student separation. A call for a more usable open space menza was made, where there is no outdated separation of people. This helps to answer OBJ 2 since it suggests that some staff members do not distinguish between students and staff, and sharing one space could potentially create new discursive spaces where these two groups could exchange ideas and views.

The tension between price and quality was brought up, but not as a motivating factor for change. Instead of calling for change, the usual reaction to dissatisfaction was to visit another establishment (Ledňáček, restaurant Na Farmě). This supports OBJ 2 “exit over voice” pattern.

Menza staff

The following narrative insights from the two CZU menza-staff interviews are summarised in Table 4 by showing how each theme links to the project objectives.

According to both employees, the menza is more of a social area with close relationships both within the team and with visitors than it is a place of employment. Contact with visitors on a daily basis is regarded as both demanding and significant. Because it demonstrates a type of agency that is operational and caring (keeping the team cohesive, calming lines, and immediately resolving minor issues) rather than primarily functional (changing menus), this relational framing is significant for OBJ2.

Table 4: Thematic analysis of CZU menza staff

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Workplace as a family-like, customer-facing community	Work is described as more than employment. The team feels like family, and contact with guests is part of the everyday satisfaction and challenge of the job.	<p><i>“For me, this place is not just about work... it’s a part of life... I come here because I want to.”</i></p> <p><i>“The communication with the customers... the customers are nice too. A difficult customer... becomes a challenge.”</i></p>	Q1: Role of menza	Contextual
Ideal service = speed first, menu anchored in Czech classics	The “perfect meal” is less about a specific dish and more about fast, well-coordinated service during peak times. Demand centres on traditional Czech dishes.	<p><i>“Once the place reaches full capacity, the speed of service becomes priority number one.”</i></p> <p><i>“Students... overwhelmingly prefer traditional Czech cuisine: svíčková, goulash... roast pork with dumplings.”</i></p>	Q2: Ideal meal	OBJ 1
Sustainability = full use, locality and efficiency under cost constraints	Sustainable food means regional sourcing, using whole ingredients (peels, stalks), and energy-efficient equipment. Economy is a core lens.	<p><i>“From buying ingredients—regional ones—to using up everything, like kohlrabi peels or broccoli stalks.”</i></p> <p><i>“How good is your dishwasher? Is it energy-efficient?”</i></p> <p><i>“Absolutely, it’s about economy. It starts with money.”</i></p>	Q3: Sustainability understanding	OBJ 1

(continued)

Table 4: Thematic analysis of CZU menza staff (continued)

Theme	Description	Relevant quotes	Related interview question	Linked objective
Labour and capacity implications of “deeper” sustainability	Using whole vegetables and more scratch cooking would require training, more time and more staff, which is difficult at the volumes served.	<p><i>“Using everything down to the last stalk... would require training... definitely more work, more labour-intensive.”</i></p> <p><i>“Here we have really large volumes... whatever we want to do, we need people, and... there’s no money.”</i></p>	Q4: Impact on work when cooking sustainably	OBJ 1
Demand-led menu; limited appetite for vegetarian; portion control as a micro-lever	<p>Menu planning follows observed demand.</p> <p>Vegetarian share is small.</p> <p>Small actions could cut waste but collide with service-speed pressures.</p>	<p><i>“We made tomato sauce with beef and the same with vegetarian meatballs... people just don’t want the vegetarian version.”</i></p> <p><i>“A customer can... ask for just two dumplings... maybe it needs to be posted on the door.”</i></p> <p><i>“At the lunch rush it’s so fast that... I can’t even tell if it’s a girl or a boy I’m serving.”</i></p>	Q2; Q4; Q5 (ideal meal; impact and agency)	OBJ 1 and OBJ 2
Existing steps and change pathway = top-down collaboration and logistics reality	<p>Current measures include daily meat-free dishes and reusable takeaway containers. Procurement is centralised with one supplier.</p>	<p><i>“We already work on some of these things... vegetarian meals, meat-free dishes... reusable containers.”</i></p> <p><i>“We have one supplier who delivers everything. From carrots to cookies... even cleaning supplies.”</i></p>	Q5: Sustainability and agency	OBJ 2
Preferred level of agency (implicit) = changes within demand and operations	Willingness to expand plant-based options and to nudge portion flexibility. Shifts are seen as unrealistic without staff and unchanged demand.	<p><i>“I won’t make huge amounts of vegetarian dishes that people won’t eat.”</i></p> <p><i>“Maybe it just needs to be officially written... ‘If you want less, just ask.’”</i></p>	Q6: Preferred agency in menu planning	OBJ 2

Staff members emphasise the service process rather than a particular dish when discussing the "ideal meal." Because long lines cause people to leave, it is crucial that cashiers, dishwashers, and servers coordinate. Speed is constantly tracked:

"I walk among them. The worst wait time, according to my measurements, was twelve minutes. You don't want to wait that long!"

Demand is characterised as being very conventional. This demonstrates how familiarity and speed are associated with the local definition of a "good" meal for OBJ1. A broad yet practical definition of sustainable food is provided. Kitchenware is included in the definition. The economic perspective is prominent and central. The are direct concerns connected to greater sustainability in the kitchen, which are labour and finance capacities.

Attempts to shift choice patterns meet low acceptance. Because of this, the menu follows demand. A small operational lever is portion flexibility to reduce waste. Yet this collides with the speed imperative. For OBJ 2, perceived agency sits in these micro-adjustments rather than in large shifts of the menu.

A less visible but strong form of agency is the active management of rush times. Staff monitor the line, calm first-semester students and try to keep the flow. Even "*moms call to ask what we'll be cooking,*" which illustrates the emotional labour around student transition. This operational agency contributes to a more stable system.

Both employees are open to nudges like portion requests and more plant-based meals, but only if demand is sustained and the production model is not broken. Clearer information, more reuse, and more meatless dishes, but not "*huge amounts of vegetarian dishes that people won't eat.*" This approach explains the perceived limits of feasible change for OBJ2 and is a logical response to the mentioned constraints (demand, labour, and cost).

2.1 Discourse analysis – Case of Czech University of Life Sciences Prague

The following chapter reports the results of the discourse analysis in CZU, focusing on storylines, metaphors, discourse hegemonies and discourse coalitions.

Storylines

This part of the analysis showcases several identified storylines that are linked to the objectives of the project. Each storyline will have a clear structure with a beginning, a middle and an end. Additionally, each storyline has actors such as villains, victims and heroes.

In Table 5, sustainability is framed beyond ecology. Inclusion and access to information are seen as part of doing food sustainably. The storyline also signals weak perceived agency, since people cope individually with the lowered inclusion via translations and cooperation with administrative staff, rather than changing the system.

Table 5: Storyline of CZU administration staff

Structure	Beginning	International colleagues arrive on campus for meetings, the menza shows only photos and Czech names.
	Middle	Guests cannot understand the meals or allergens, a staff member must stand next to the counter and translate even basic dish names.
	End	To avoid confusion, the whole group chooses another lunch place off-campus, the menza loses thirty potential customers for lunch.
Actors	Villains	Actors responsible for missing English labels.
	Victims	International guests and their CZU hosts.
	Heroes	No real heroes, the staff member plays an ad-hoc interpreter.

Staff define sustainability in practical, efficiency terms, such as full use of ingredients, and energy efficiency, as seen by the illustrative storyline in Table 6. Service speed and demand rule menu decisions. Change is seen as possible only when it does not threaten the flow of menza. “*Good-tasting food*” is considered an automatic standard, and therefore, the image of a perfect meal is built on top of this assumption.

Table 6: Storyline of CZU menza staff

Structure	Beginning	Lunchtime peaks create long lines, students wait in the queue and a menza staff stops the time.
	Middle	To keep the line moving, service speed and standard portions are prioritised.
	End	Sustainability ideas are filtered through this operational lens, portion flexibility is possible, but is not actively promoted because it can slow the line.
Actors	Villains	Time pressure during peak time.
	Victims	Menza consumers.
	Heroes	Line coordination, cashiers, and efficient kitchen devices that help to speed up the process.

In Table 7 agency is re-located to recognised structures and personal initiative is seen as ineffective unless allied with the institution. This is a re-occurring pattern which shows that plenty of actors see some problems in the sustainability of the menza but feel like the environment is not enabling enough to proceed the initiation of change. Additionally, due to the workload of their occupation, the actors do not have the capacity to initiate sustainable changes, even though there seems to be some intrinsic motivation to do so.

Table 7: Storyline of CZU academic staff

Structure	Beginning	Individuals see problems (waste, poor vegetarian quality, broad menus).
	Middle	The menza is imagined as a big system with procurement, costs and leadership turnover, individual agency feels pointless.
	End	The sensible path is collective, through the senate or a sustainability rectorate office otherwise, “ <i>almost impossible</i> ”.
Actors	Villains	Menza system size and bureaucracy.
	Victims	Individuals with ideas and time-poor staff.
	Heroes	Formal bodies, assuming they take up the cause.

Table 8 illustrates that indirectly; nearly all university actors are involved in the food system. The decision of one actor can directly affect the ability of another actor to access lunch provided by the university food services. This suggests that if some students are limited in accessing the menza because of timetables, they do not have the possibility to engage with the environment and possibly think of sustainability initiatives or reflect upon them. If one does not engage with the environment, it directly limits the agency by lowering interest.

Table 8: Storyline of CZU student

Structure	Beginning	The student enrolls in a full-time study programme with a vision of free time during lectures.
	Middle	The timetable does not allow for a sufficiently long lunch break, and the student is occupied.
	End	The student adapts by preparing lunch boxes and bringing them to the university, eating lunch during shorter breaks whenever time allows.
Actors	Villains	Actors responsible for timetable creation who do not consider lunchtime. Inflexible lecture staff who create pressure on the timetable planner.
	Victims	Students and, potentially, staff members responsible for teaching during lunchtimes.
	Heroes	Adaptable lecturers who adjust lecture times in a way that would allow for sufficient time spent on lunch. Students who raise concerns about the issue and reach out to the lecturer.

The narrative shown in Table 9 highlights that change is driven more by market signals than by sustainability ideas. Agency is associated with management reacting to competition, not with staff or users. Therefore, many actors across the institutions describe that their agency path in by either not purchasing any meal in the menza at all or directly supporting an alternative food provider. This is a strong economic lever which all the actors using menza services have. However, this approach leaves little place to provide the menza with active feedback and suggestions. This may result in lower relation-based solutions.

Table 9: Storyline of CZU administration staff

Structure	Beginning	A new restaurant opens on campus.
	Middle	The menza reacts with a stamp-card promotion ("every tenth meal for 50 CZK").
	End	When the promotion proves costly or ineffective, it is dropped; the system returns to normal.
Actors	Villains	Price pressure and short-termism.
	Victims	Longer-term sustainability upgrades, which are not the lever of change.
	Heroes	Market competition, not internal strategy.

The listed storylines show that sustainability and agency are closely linked.

Metaphors

The metaphors help to understand how individual perceptions shape opinions. It is a way of describing something using an example of something else. The identified metaphors are interpreted in relation to the project objectives.

Family / mom / sister (menza staff)

Describes internal relations and care for guests. It frames service as relational and emotional, not just technical. For OBJ 1, sustainability includes care (e.g., making sure "no one goes hungry"). For OBJ 2, the "family" metaphor can empower local problem-solving in daily operations but may also mask structural limits.

Big moloch (academic staff)

Suggests a heavy, slow system that resists change. It normalises low personal agency and shifts solutions to collective routes. The metaphor also shows how the system is viewed by some, and that this image can directly influence the willingness to initiate changes. Therefore, informing and suggesting easy-to-integrate sustainability changes may help to break down the perceived complexities of the system.

90s-type food (administrative staff)

This highlights a perceived outdated menu. Although this metaphor does not suggest that 90s-type food may not be sustainable, it still shows how the path-dependency and inflexibility of the system are perceived by the menza consumers. It positions menu diversification (plant-based meals, minimally processed foods) as overdue.

Document for document / paper for paper (academic staff)

A metaphor describing that even though sustainability efforts are observed at the university, they are mostly done to support other documents. Suggesting that it is not the primary objective to implement a sustainable change, but to include it in a report-type document as an activity. This is a great example that outside forces demanding sustainable measures are being

acknowledged, but the real outcomes are often hard to reach due to limited resources. This is perceived by some actors, and it limits trust in the sustainability efforts of the university.

Food without pesticides (student)

Even though the respondent was aware of the food safety regulations, the metaphor was used to describe food that comes from a low-input production. This adds an important discursive layer which admits that not all sustainability measures can be assured by the menza itself. However, it puts pressure on the menza management by assuming that it knows what inputs were used in the production of the procured food.

Discursive hegemonies

The collective "common sense" that directs individual words and behaviour is known as discursive hegemony. It is easier to understand why some ideas gain traction while others do not when these common assumptions are named.

Menza as a meeting point

Across the CZU actor groups interviewed, the menza is framed as a key meeting hub. This is a strong shared framing: lunch is not only about food, but about quick, informal connection. Any change should protect this role.

The big system decides, individuals cope

The sense that the menza is a big and untangleable system is common. Menza staff point to legal and procurement constraints, administrators describe "*small politics*" and surveys with no outcome, academics move to collective channels or disengage due to time, and students do not know where to begin the change due to the complexities of the system. Sustainability becomes what the system allows, and since the system is complex, implementing it seems unreachable.

Sustainability = local and with minimal waste

The dominant indicators of sustainability were local production and waste reduction. Although both indicators have slight differences in how they are described, the main meaning remains very similar. This is a clear epistemological commonality in how sustainable food is understood, and since it is shared across all the interviewed actors, it has the biggest chance of being acted upon.

Sustainability costs more

Across the CZU interviews, sustainability is tied to money: "*it starts with money*". Because lunch must stay cheap and fast, any proposal has to show how costs will be contained and be frank about trade-offs, otherwise, acceptance will be low and costly sustainability measures will not be considered.

Discourse coalitions

A loose coalition of actors who describe a problem and defend action (or inaction) using comparable language, examples, and narratives is known as a discourse coalition. It is easier to understand how sustainability is perceived, and which change-related possibilities seem realistic or viable when these coalitions are mapped out. When multiple groups have a common language, they are good partners for collaborative projects.

Students + administrative staff = Transparency and inclusion

Both groups want clear information in English, allergen icons, and basic nutrition facts so everyone can choose safely. This supports OBJ 1 by showing that sustainable food also means accessible and well-explained food. For OBJ 2, it suggests an easy action: improve labelling and communication.

Menza staff + administrative staff = Czech classics

Both groups see high demand for traditional Czech dishes. This shapes OBJ 1 by defining what good food looks like for many users. For OBJ 2 it implies that changes must keep speed and core classics, while adding small sustainability steps.

Administrative staff + academic staff = Alternative food places as an agency strategy

When unhappy, both groups simply go to other campus food places. This informs OBJ 2 that personal agency is exercised through exit rather than voice. For OBJ 1 it signals that perceived quality, price and healthiness drive choices more than sustainability labels.

Students + academic staff = collective action pathway preference

Both groups think change should go through formal channels (surveys, senate, working groups) and be done together. This helps OBJ2 by pointing to the most credible route for proposals.

3. Menza Action Recommendations

The **policy and practice** points below suggest low-barrier actions that support sustainability while keeping affordability and trust in view.

- Use light nudges at the point of choice (small posters, digital screens) to encourage smaller portions or skipping sauces.
- Establish (in)formal communication channels between students and menza staff to build dialogue and rapport; share behind-the-scenes stories on social media.
- Publish a one-page quarterly update to make progress visible and keep legitimacy high.
- Turn shared priorities into contractable, tiered indicators (e.g., bronze/silver/gold) to keep flexibility and reduce risk for operators.
- Add affordability safeguards so any sustainability-driven cost increase triggers compensating measures (seasonal swaps, portion flexibility).
- Support well-facilitated democratic spaces for dialogue to build a culture of participation around university food.
- Clarify the role and expectations of external operators and communicate them openly at points of service and online.

4. Concluding Remarks

Results showed that local sourcing and waste reduction represent the core epistemologies of sustainable food. Sustainability efforts targeting these aspects should therefore be the most attainable. Price sensitivity is deeply rooted in these understandings, not just because respondents expect sustainable meals to be more expensive, but they mostly view the process of making the food more sustainable as resource intensive. Limited transparency and perceived low sustainability of offered convenience foods create a gap between individual ideals and current menza practice. At CZU, inclusion and communication, such as English labels, icons, and clear nutrition information, emerge as central to how students and staff define sustainability. Administrative actors show a more procedural and compliance-oriented perspective.

Findings revealed that perceived individual agency is low across all groups, with structural arrangements setting limits. Yet, analysis reveals that agency is not absent but reframed. Students and staff often resort to “exit” strategies, choosing alternative food outlets rather than voice. Menza staff exercise micro-agency through everyday practices of waste reduction, speed of service, and direct interaction with consumers. When actors join on a shared narrative, as in the CZU case of waste reduction, the alignment enables practical innovations, such as the reusable box system, to be successfully introduced. This demonstrates how discursive consensus can lower barriers for concrete change. These insights show that local sustainable transition in university food systems requires not only procurement reform but also attention to actor-specific understandings, collective structures of agency, and the discursive spaces in which consensus can be built.