



UNIVERSITY OF
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Double Degree
Programme



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**Menzas as Change Arenas: Understanding Sustainability and Actor Influence in
German and Czech University Food Systems**

Master's thesis

by

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Submitted
in September 2025

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Extended Abstract

Universities are increasingly recognised in the literature on agri-food transformation for their strong purchasing power in the procurement of food for the catering services they offer on campus (e.g. in menzas, canteens or cafeterias). If public universities were to introduce sustainability indicators into their food offerings, this would represent a direct investment in alternative food networks. For such innovation to occur, universities needed to overcome long-standing path dependencies linked to the most advantageous tender approach. A first step is for different university actor groups to find common ground on what sustainable food means to them and then, individually or collectively, to put pressure on the university socio-technical system to reflect these visions in practice, potentially including them in procurement contracts. This thesis, therefore, aimed to understand how university actors conceptualise sustainable food, to identify the main commonalities and differences between them, and to examine their perceived agency to initiate sustainable food change at their universities.

To address these aims, an inductive, qualitative, comparative case-study design was used. Two agricultural universities were selected: the University of Hohenheim (UHOH) in Germany and the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU) in the Czech Republic. In both cases, the analysis distinguished four categories of actors: students, academic staff, administrative personnel, and menza staff. In total, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted during the data collection period, which started in April 2025. The data were analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and discourse analysis. Thematic analysis identified core constructions of sustainable food and perceived agency, while discourse analysis showed how narratives were shared within and across the two universities. A conceptual framework supported the analysis by focusing on supply - and demand-side actors, their individual discourses, and their potential to alter the existing socio-technical regime.

The results showed that across both universities, sustainable food was mainly understood as local sourcing and waste reduction, with strong price sensitivity shaping what changes seemed feasible. A persistent gap appeared between personal ideals and current menza practice, driven by low transparency and the perceived low sustainability of convenience foods. At UHOH, students and academic staff formed a coalition around the three pillars of sustainability and value-chain transparency, while menza staff focused on pragmatic steps such as portion control and reusing ingredients. At CZU, inclusion and clear communication (e.g., English labels, icons, nutrition information) were central to how sustainability was defined. Administrators in both settings took a procedural, compliance-oriented view rooted in system constraints. Although perceived individual agency was low, it was reframed through collective or everyday routes: at UHOH via intermediaries like the Green Office, at CZU through exit to alternative outlets, and among menza staff through micro-agency in daily operations. Where actors shared a narrative, such as waste reduction at CZU, practical innovations (e.g., a reusable box system) were easier to introduce. Overall, local transitions require support from actor-specific understandings, collective channels for agency, and discursive spaces where consensus could be built.

These results could guide place-specific actions and inform practical policies for more sustainable university food systems. In practice, institutions could use simple nudging techniques, strengthen two-way communication between consumers and menza staff, align procurement with flexible performance targets, and include affordability safeguards. Such policies could lower barriers to change while keeping legitimacy high. The findings also suggested a potential follow-up research agenda on how living-lab approaches could build shared discourse, how menzas' social role could be leveraged, how operator governance shapes bottom-up initiatives, or whether pragmatic kitchen practices boost perceived sustainability without formal labels. Overall, the study pointed to combining procurement reform with communication, governance, and behavioural design to enable feasible, context-aware transitions.