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Stakeholders' perspectives on promoting sustainable and healthy dietary behaviours within the university setting: qualitative insights from the PLAN'EAT study

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Evidence indicates that diets are suboptimal and unsustainable, and thus, dietary interventions are needed to reverse these trends and optimise both health and environmental outcomes. The university setting is receiving increasing attention as a promising environment to intervene and promote positive dietary change; in particular, among those in 'emerging adulthood' who are experiencing increasing independence and autonomy over their dietary decisions and are susceptible to a decline in dietary quality⁽¹⁾. This study aimed to explore stakeholders' perspectives on the factors influencing students' dietary choices on campus and identify potential solutions to promote improved sustainable and healthy dietary behaviours within the university setting.

A purposive sample of stakeholders on or connected to University College Dublin (UCD), Belfield Campus, were invited to participate in one-to-one interviews. Stakeholders included policymakers, academic, healthcare and food industry professionals, local researchers, and food service providers. Interviews were conducted from August to November 2023 and a semi-structured topic guide was used to facilitate discussions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were coded on NVivo20 software and analysed via an inductive thematic approach⁽²⁾. Sub-themes were then mapped to each level of the socio-ecological model, namely individual, interpersonal, physical environmental and policy, where applicable⁽³⁾. Ethical approval was granted by UCD's Research Ethics Committee and informed consent was obtained prior to conducting the interviews.

Twenty-two stakeholders (n = 9 male; n = 13 female) took part in the interviews. Preliminary analysis identified several sub-themes at the individual (convenience and time constraints; personal preferences; sensory appeal; financial concerns (e.g., price, satiety value, portion size, value for money)), interpersonal (social influences (e.g., peer influence; home eating habits)), and physical environmental (food availability/accessibility) level that may influence students' dietary choices. Proposed solutions to promote improved sustainable and healthy dietary behaviours in the university setting were identified at each level to include: individual (educational strategies and awareness campaigns (e.g., resources, talks/webinars)), interpersonal (student involvement in initiatives), physical environmental (improved physical and financial access to appealing sustainable and healthy options; improved campus facilities to accommodate students cooking or consuming their own meals; food environment manipulations (including nudge strategies, e.g., labelling schemes)) and policy (whole-campus collaborative approach; support at university level) recommendations.

Several influential factors on students' dietary choices and how the university could potentially facilitate the transition toward improved sustainable and healthy dietary behaviours on campus were identified and could be considered in the design of future dietary interventions targeting the university population. The next step is to compare the stakeholders' perspectives with students' perceptions. These findings will aid in informing the development of tailored sustainable and healthy diet intervention strategies that will be delivered and evaluated in UCD throughout 2024 to 2026 as part of the UCD PLAN'EAT Living Lab.

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