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2025-07-24

Deposited version:

Publisher Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Souza, C. & Prada, M. (2024). Students' perceptions of food offer in Portuguese canteens and adherence to mediterranean diets. In Ricardo Mexia, Sónia Dias, Charlotte Marchandise (Ed.), *European Journal of Public Health*. Lisboa: Oxford University Press (OUP).

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1093/eurpub/ckae144.516

Publisher's copyright statement:

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Abstract citation ID: ckae144.516
Students' Perceptions of Food Offer in Portuguese Canteens and Adherence to Mediterranean Diets

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Adherence to healthy eating behaviors, as in the Mediterranean Diet, is related to a better quality of life, better educational performance, and reduced risk of physical illness among higher education students. The provision of good quality and sustainable food is imperative in university environments. Nevertheless, the availability of healthy options tends to be limited across campuses (e.g., affordable fast food; the convenience of high-sugary foods in vending machines), including university canteens. Understanding students' views on canteens and the factors that prevent them from embracing healthy eating habits may help to improve the food supply on campuses. In the present study, we aimed to examine students' perceptions of canteen services and its food supply and to verify students' knowledge and promptness to comply with a Mediterranean Diet menu. A large sample of academic students from Portuguese universities answered an online survey with a mixed approach. Specifically, participants were requested to characterize their dietary practices and report their perceptions about food services and offers in campus canteens. Additionally, students were asked about their knowledge, perceptions, and adherence to Mediterranean Diet. Our findings allow us to map perceptions and attitudes regarding food offered in university canteens and to identify the potential to adhere to more sustainable and healthier food patterns according to individual. Moreover, we identified the main psychological and environmental barriers to adhering Mediterranean Diet. Correlational data indicated a relationship between health-related measures and food-related factors. Advancing data about modifiable factors associated with better adherence to healthy dietary habits in the university context informs the development of actions/interventions to prevent unhealthy food choices and overcome limited and unhealthy food offers in canteen campuses.