University Food Policies

DESIGNING SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS ON CAMPUS

Edited by
Davide Fassi

DESIGN FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

FrancoAngeli
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1. Guidelines for University Food Policy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the *Guidelines for University Food Policy*, developed as the third deliverable of the PPP-URB project within the *OnFoods – Research and Innovation Network on Food and Nutrition Sustainability, Safety and Security*. The guidelines aim to support higher education institutions in promoting healthy, sustainable, and inclusive food systems by leveraging public and private procurement and short food value chains. Building on earlier research phases – including the mapping of ongoing university-based initiatives related to food, and a comparative analysis of best practices through both qualitative and quantitative desk research (ranging from local to international case studies, including those developed by the research teams involved) – the chapter provides universities with a strategic and operational framework to reconsider their role as living laboratories for food transition. Drawing on perspectives from design, management, and sustainability studies, the guidelines define shared goals, principles, and areas of action that connect campus food services with education,

research, and community engagement. Particular emphasis is placed on co-design approaches involving students, faculty, staff, and external actors, ensuring that food policies are context-specific, inclusive, and measurable over time. In doing so, the guidelines contribute to positioning universities as key actors in urban food system transformation, in alignment with the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy, and the Food 2030 agenda.

1.1 Universities as Territorial Food Environments

Food systems have increasingly become a crucial area for public policy, addressing concerns related to health, environmental sustainability, social fairness, and local economic growth (Lang, Barling, & Caraher, 2009; Mason & Lang, 2017; Willett *et al*., 2019). In this context, public and private food procurement has gained recognition as a significant policy instrument that can affect production methods, consumption trends, and governance structures at various territorial levels (European Commission, 2008; Kunzlik, 2013; Rejeb *et al*., 2023). Universities, being significant public entities with considerable purchasing power and well-defined food environments, are particularly suited for the evaluation of novel and integrated food policies (Doherty, Cawood, & Dooris, 2011; Newton, Dooris, & Wills, 2016). Universities can be seen as multilayered environments where food is bought, served, and distributed every day (Kretschmer & Dehm, 2021). Campus food systems include different types of food stations, both formal and informal. These include canteens, bars, vending machines, catering services, and self-production programs like community gardens. Each may be run through different – and sometimes not integrated – governance and procurement procedures. These factors together affect the academic community's eating habits, the impact of the overall system, the work/study environment, and the way people get along with each other (Tam *et al*., 2017; Martinez-Perez *et al*., 2022). From a policy perspective, university campuses represent meso-scale arenas where public objectives meet the implementation capacity of private actors. Public-private

partnerships often provide food services, which means that procurement is a key link between institutional and market goals. Universities are also part of local and regional food systems, where they work with growers, suppliers, municipalities, and civil society organizations. This positioning allows campuses to serve as territorial hubs for testing short food value chains and alternative food networks, while staying closely connected to the urban fabric and communities surrounding them (Forno & Maurano, 2016; McKeon, 2019). In fact,seeing universities as territorial food ecosystems means moving from sectoral approaches to systemic governance models. In these models, food policies look at production, distribution, consumption, and waste management as parts of a whole. This viewpoint aligns with integrated food policy frameworks that prioritize multi-level governance, stakeholder engagement, and contextual adaptation, offering a conceptual foundation for perceiving universities as proactive participants in food system transformation rather than merely as venues for food consumption (Harper *et al*., 2009; Curtabbi, 2025). This perspective aligns with the PPP-URB project (Public and Private Procurement and Short Food Value Chains in Urban Areas) objectives and final results, presented in this chapter. It is one of the flagship projects in the OnFoods research and innovation network, which is sponsored by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). PPP-URB looks at how food procurement tactics and short food value chains may be used to make the food served in places like university campuses more sustainable, affordable, and of higher quality. This project takes a systemic and multi-actor approach to food governance and integrated food policy. It looks at food systems as socio-technical and territorial structures instead of just sectoral supply chains (McKeon, 2019; Curtabbi, 2025).

Within PPP-URB, research endeavors have been organized into a series of project deliverables aimed at incrementally enhancing knowledge and developing operational tools for sustainable food governance. The first deliverable concentrated on the mapping and analysis of public and private food procurement case studies, focusing attention on understanding their systemic impact on their local food ecosystems, especially on university campuses, and providing a conceptual basis for the formulation of strategic food policy

for university campuses (Fassi *et al*., 2024). The second deliverable served to the definition of strategic options, contextualized methods, and priority areas to help universities make food policies that work in different places and for different groups of people. Building on this basis, the third deliverable, detailed in this chapter, turned strategic directions into operational guidelines and tested them through prototyping and experimentation inside the contextual contexts of partner universities.

1.2 From Strategic Variants to Operational Guidelines

1.2.1 Strategic Variants and the Role of Case Studies

Moving from strategic frameworks to policies that can be effectively implemented represents a major challenge in food policy development. While strategic visions are essential for defining long-term objectives and guiding principles, they often remain abstract unless supported by tools that enable their translation into action within specific institutional and territorial contexts (Howlett, 2018). The second deliverable of the PPP-URB project addressed this challenge by developing a set of strategic variants grounded in empirical evidence and informed by the multidisciplinary expertise of the project partners, spanning design, management, agriculture, economics, and biological sciences.

Within PPP-URB, the strategic variants are conceived as a set of complementary thematic and operational contributions, each focusing on a specific dimension of university food systems. Rather than representing alternative strategies to be selected, the variants identify key areas that require coordinated policy attention, including participatory spatial and service design, procurement management and monitoring tools, legal and biodiversity frameworks, alternative food networks and social farming, life cycle assessment and eco-design approaches, sustainable public procurement models, and territorial impact indicators. Together, these variants articulate different ways of addressing shared food system challenges, such as sustainability, affordability, inclusiveness, and governance, by

combining policy vision, areas of intervention, and implementation logics. In this sense, the strategic variants function as modular components of a broader policy architecture, providing a structured yet non-prescriptive basis for informing priorities and guiding the subsequent development of operational guidelines across diverse university contexts.

The definition of the strategic variants was further informed by an extensive analysis of food policy case studies, spanning both city-level policies and those developed within universities – which often operate independently from municipal strategies.The comparative review revealed recurring areas of intervention, including nutrition, procurement, food service organisation, waste management, education, and participation, alongside significant differences in governance arrangements and degrees of stakeholder involvement. Rather than converging towards a single model, the case studies showed how universities have developed context-specific food policies aligned with their institutional missions and long-term sustainability strategies.

Table 1.1 synthesises a selection of these best practices, illustrating how different policy focuses and governance configurations contributed to shaping the PPP-URB strategic variants. Overall, the case studies indicate that University Food Policies tend to converge around a limited number of strategic dimensions, such as procurement standards, nutritional quality, sustainability criteria, participation, and monitoring, while differing in terms of governance models and levels of institutionalisation. These recurring patterns informed the definition of the PPP-URB strategic variants, which were designed to be transferable across contexts while remaining adaptable to diverse organisational structures, territorial food systems, and policy priorities. Consistent with contemporary perspectives on food policy as a dynamic and iterative process rather than a fixed set of rules, the strategic variants are intended to support multiple policy pathways rather than prescribe universal solutions (Lang, 2013; Sonnino, 2018). As emphasised in design-for-policy literature, their effectiveness ultimately depends on their capacity to be translated into situated actions through adaptive and participatory processes (Bason, 2014; Junginger, 2013).

University/ Institution	Policy focus	Key domains addressed	Governance approach	Relevance for PPP-URB strategic variants
University of Helsinki	Climate-oriented food policy	Nutrition guidelines; sustainability; transparency	Centralised, aligned with sustainability strategy	Integration of food policy within institutional sustainability plans
EPFL	Sustainable gastronomy	Procurement; monitoring; food offering sustainability	Institutional leadership with measurable targets	Use of commitments and KPIs as drivers of change
University of Cambridge	Low-carbon catering	Sustainable menus; training; waste reduction	Decentralised (college-based)	Role of training and procurement in distributed systems
Università Bocconi	Health-oriented food policy	Nutrition quality; food offering variety; communication	Centralised campus services	Alignment between nutritional standards and food services
Harvard University	Food literacy and waste reduction	Education; surplus redistribution; engagement	Hybrid, strong student involvement	Importance of participation and education

Table 1.1.
Comparative overview of selected university food policy best practices. Edited by the authors.

1.2.2 The Guidelines for University Food Policies as an Enabling Framework

Building on the strategic variants identified in the previous phase, the Guidelines for University Food Policies translate these thematic and operational perspectives into a coherent set of categories of action, providing a shared structure through which the variants can be operationalised within University Food Policies. The guidelines represent a key transition point within the research trajectory, translating strategic orientations into an operational framework capable of supporting universities in the definition, adaptation, and implementation of context-specific food policies.

They are grounded in a shared food policy architecture that emerged consistently across the analysed case studies, articulated around four main components: vision, values and principles, priorities, and actions. This structure reflects the way food policies are typically embedded within broader institutional sustainability strategies, while also allowing universities to align food-related decisions with their educational missions, governance models, and territorial food systems (Doherty *et al*., 2011; Newton *et al*., 2016).

Operationally, the guidelines are organised into seven interconnected categories of action, each addressing a key dimension of university food systems: nutritional guidelines; food offering variety; food offering sustainability; spaces and services for food consump-

tion and self-production; surplus food and food waste management; training and awareness for healthy and sustainable eating habits; and assessment, co-design, and feedback. These categories, together with the corresponding sets of actions developed by each research partners according to their areas of expertise, are summarised in Table 1.2, which illustrates how strategic orientations are translated into concrete and actionable policy interventions.

A distinctive feature of the Guidelines for University Food Policies is their explicitly enabling character. Rather than functioning as a checklist of mandatory measures, they operate as a modular and flexible framework, allowing universities to select, combine, and prioritise actions according to their institutional capacities, organisational arrangements, and territorial contexts. This approach reflects a design-driven understanding of policy-making, in which guidelines act as boundary objects that facilitate dialogue among heterogeneous actors, such as administrators, food service providers, students, researchers, and local stakeholders, while supporting iterative learning and adaptation (Bason, 2014; Junginger, 2013; Curtabbi, 2020).

By integrating strategic visions, empirical evidence from case studies, and a structured set of operational actions, the guidelines bridge the gap between policy formulation and implementation. They

Table 1.2. Categories of actions and corresponding policy interventions in the PPP-URB Guidelines. Edited by the authors.

Category of action	Policy objective	Examples of actions
Nutritional guidelines	Improve health and reduce environmental impacts of diets	Nutritional criteria in tenders; supplier training; monitoring compliance
Food offering variety	Ensure inclusivity and dietary diversity	Menu rotation clauses; feedback systems; supplier training
Food offering sustainability	Reduce environmental footprint of food services	GPP criteria integration; monitoring systems; collaborative food services
Spaces & services for food consumption and self-production	Support sustainable practices through space and service design	Hybrid food spaces; informal consumption areas; self-production initiatives
Surplus food and food waste management	Prevent waste and enhance social responsibility	Surplus recovery clauses; redistribution partnerships; impact monitoring
Training & awareness for healthy and sustainable eating habits	Promote behavioural change and food literacy	Educational programmes; workshops; food nudging strategies
Assessment, co-design and feedback	Enable continuous improvement and participation	Food environment assessments; co-design platforms; satisfaction surveys

also create the conditions for experimentation and prototyping, providing a shared reference framework against which actions can be tested, monitored, and refined within specific university contexts.

1.3 Prototyping Food Policies in University Campuses

Once defined, the Guidelines for University Food Policies do not represent an end point, but rather a shared reference framework to be tested, adapted, and refined through situated experimentation, opening the way to a phase of policy prototyping within university campuses. Within the PPP-URB project, prototyping represents a core methodological component for translating the guidelines into situated and testable actions. Rather than being conceived as isolated pilot projects, the experimental initiatives implemented by the project partners can be interpreted as policy prototypes: partial, reversible, and context-sensitive interventions designed to generate evidence, foster learning, and inform future institutional decisions (Bason, 2014; Junginger, 2013; Mortati *et al*., 2016).

Across the different university settings involved in PPP-URB, prototyping has taken diverse forms, reflecting the specific expertise of each partner and the territorial, organisational, and cultural conditions of the campuses. Despite this diversity, the experiments share a common orientation: they operationalise the guidelines by activating concrete actions within one or more of the seven categories of intervention, while simultaneously testing governance arrangements, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and monitoring tools.

A first cluster of prototyping activities focuses on food waste reduction and surplus food management, highlighting the role of universities as responsible food service providers and social actors. At the Politecnico di Milano, an experimental surplus food recovery programme was developed within departmental catering services, accompanied by the design and testing of a dedicated monitoring framework (Quaglia, Borsani, & Caniato, 2025). This experimentation was closely connected with a broader co-design process aimed at testing and refining the *Polimi Food Policy*, where food waste and

surplus management were addressed alongside issues of food offering, spaces and services, and training and engagement, through the active involvement of students, academic staff, and administrative actors (Corubolo & Bassi, 2025).

A second cluster of experiments addresses campuses as living labs for behavioural change and environmental impact reduction, with a specific focus on everyday consumption practices. At the University of Milan, prototyping activities centred on understanding food-related behaviours and testing the environmental implications of alternative practices through Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) (Narote, Guidetti, & Giovenzana, 2025). By comparing single-use bottled water with refillable solutions supported by campus infrastructure, this experimentation illustrates how small-scale behavioural shifts, when supported by appropriate facilities, can generate significant cumulative environmental benefits.

Other prototyping activities place strong emphasis on participatory governance and stakeholder engagement as enablers of sustainable food policies. At the University of Naples Federico II, experimental actions were designed to institutionalise participation through the creation of a permanent listening forum for university catering services, complemented by focus groups, surveys, and student-led awareness initiatives (Del Gaudio, Lupolo, & Sepe, 2025).

A further set of experiments explores short food supply chains and sustainable procurement beyond on-campus consumption. The UNIPR Bio Bag initiative at the University of Parma represents a prototype aimed at facilitating access to local, organic, and agroecological products for the university community through collaboration with local associations and farmers (Arfini *et al*., 2025). Although the pilot revealed significant challenges related to logistics, pricing, flexibility, and user engagement, its value lies in exposing tensions between sustainability ambitions and everyday practices.

Finally, some prototyping activities focus on knowledge production, education, and the definition of best practices as foundational elements of long-term policy development. At the University of Bari Aldo Moro, experimental research activities informed the development of a Manifesto of Best Practices for sustainable university canteens (De Boni *et al*., 2025). At the University of Catania, text mining and curriculum analysis

were used to assess how sustainability and nutrition are integrated into educational programmes, highlighting fragmentation and the need for more systemic approaches (Privitera *et al*., 2025).

Table 1.3 provides a comparative overview of the prototyping activities developed within PPP-URB, highlighting how different universities tested specific categories of action from the Guidelines and contributed complementary insights to the overall policy framework.

University	Prototyping focus	Category of action	Main objective	Key contribution to PPP-URB
Politecnico di Milano	Surplus food recovery and monitoring	Surplus food and food waste management; Assessment and monitoring	Reduce food waste and test monitoring tools	Demonstrates how procurement criteria and data collection support circular food practices
Politecnico di Milano	Co-design of university food policy	Assessment, co-design and feedback; Spaces and services	Test participatory governance mechanisms	Validates co-design as an enabling process for food policy implementation
University of Milan	Behavioural change and LCA-based evaluation	Training and awareness; Food offering sustainability	Quantify environmental impacts of consumption practices	Shows how evidence-based metrics can inform food policy decisions
University of Naples Federico II	Stakeholder engagement and participatory governance	Assessment, co-design and feedback; Training and awareness	Institutionalise participation in food services	Prototypes governance structures rather than single services
University of Parma	Short food supply chains (UNIPR Bio Bag)	Food offering sustainability; Alternative food networks	Improve access to local and sustainable food	Reveals constraints and conditions for scaling SFSCs in university contexts
University of Bari Aldo Moro	Best practices for university canteens	Food offering variety; Nutritional guidelines	Identify shared criteria for sustainable catering	Supports the formalisation of operational benchmarks
University of Catania	Education and curriculum analysis	Training and awareness for healthy and sustainable eating	Assess integration of food sustainability in education	Highlights the role of knowledge production as a policy lever

Table 1.3. Overview of prototyping activities within the PPP-URB project.

Taken together, these experiences show that prototyping within PPP-URB functions as a learning ecosystem. Prototypes generate situated evidence, reveal constraints and opportunities, and feed back into the refinement of guidelines and strategic priorities. In this sense, prototyping becomes an integral part of the food policy cycle, reinforcing the conception of University Food Policies as adaptive, iterative, and context-sensitive processes (Curtabbi, 2020; Sonnino, 2018).

1.4 Conclusions

The PPP-URB process shows how universities could be used as test beds for new ideas in public-private food governance. Universities may change food systems both on and off campus by using their position as institutions, their buying power, and their ability to do research. The Guidelines for University Food Policies helped create an operational framework that shows how strategic visions may be turned into policies that people can follow through flexible, participative, and context-sensitive processes.

Importantly, the framework is meant to be used in other places. Although rooted in academic environments, the highlighted categories of action and methodological principles, co-design, prototyping, and monitoring, can influence food policy initiatives in other public institutions and urban situations. This adds to the continuing discussions about how integrated food policies can support addressing complexity through collaborative governance models (Sonnino, 2018; Marino & Mazzocchi, 2019).

This chapter has shown the third deliverable of the PPP-URB project to be an important step in the growth of University Food Policies. PPP-URB moves forward both academic discourse and policy practice in the realm of sustainable food systems by turning strategic frameworks into flexible guidelines and putting them into processes of prototyping and testing. The guidelines put universities in the role of active players in changing the food system. They can connect public goals with private resources in different areas, and they help improve, transfer, and scale up University Food Policies as a way to support sustainable urban transitions.

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Universities are increasingly recognised as key actors in the transition towards more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient food systems. As complex socio-technical environments, where food is variously produced, procured, distributed, consumed, and embedded within spatial, organisational, and social practices, university campuses can be understood as *cities within the city*, offering unique opportunities to connect policy, design, and everyday life.

This book presents the results of the *PPP-URB* project, developed within the PNRR OnFoods research, and explores how universities can design and implement integrated food policies by acting across multiple dimensions, including procurement, services, spaces, community engagement, and short food supply chains. The volume introduces a set of guidelines for university food policies and investigates their application through prototyping activities carried out in different Italian institutional contexts. Bringing together contributions from multiple disciplines and universities, the book shows how campuses can function as living laboratories for food system innovation, where strategic visions are translated into concrete actions through participatory and design-driven approaches. By linking research, experimentation, and policy-making, it offers both a conceptual framework and practical insights for scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers engaged in food system transformation.

FrancoAngeli
La passione per le conoscenze