Sustainable, climate friendly catering

University of Basel (Switzerland)

Background

With 12,000 students and more than 5,000 employees, the University of Basel makes a considerable impact in terms of environmental, economic and social aspects in its region.

In response to an initiative from a group of the University’s students (from the Master of Sustainable Development and the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy), the University of Basel’s Rectorate decided to start the programme Nachhaltige Universität Basel (Sustainable University Basel) in 2010. The programme was steered jointly by the university administration, members of the existing Programme Nachhaltigkeitsforschung (Sustainability Research) and a student representative. Its aim was to develop a long-term sustainability strategy for the University of Basel, with specific implementation measures and recommendations to be put forward to the Rectorate.

As a result of the Programme, the University set up a Sustainability Office (in January 2012) and in 2014, sustainability was integrated as an important aspect of the University’s overall strategy. By doing this, the University has shown its commitment to implementing sustainability across all areas of the organisation - research, teaching and outreach.

One of the immediate goals of the University was to reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 20% by 2016. The Sustainability Office decided to address this issue primarily by developing a climate friendly catering concept for the University’s canteens. The main aim was to offer healthy and varied catering services, which would at the same time meet high environmental, climate friendly and social requirements, such as by:

- Reducing the consumption of resources, such as energy and water,
- Reducing food waste,
- Reducing CO\textsubscript{2} emissions, and
- Integrating fair trade products

After researching different options, the University decided to implement the climate protection programme for catering ONE TWO WE, developed by the SV Group and WWF Switzerland. The programme involves the cooperation of suppliers and customers and focuses on three main aspects: the procurement of products, meals on offer and operational processes.

Sustainable, climate friendly catering services

The University of Basel have introduced a number of concrete measures and developed various criteria to achieve their goals. These include:

Reducing 20% of the GHG generated over the next four years (5% a year):

To achieve this, the University has opted for reducing the amount of meat served by increasing the proportion of vegetarian meals on offer, and by introducing vegan meals in its weekly menus. In practice, this means that half of the meals on offer (on a daily basis) should not include any meat, and at least one vegan meal is served weekly.

Further selection criteria includes: greenhouses (for fruit and vegetables) sourcing their energy from renewable energy sources, and goods that are transported by land are preferred to those transported by air (excluding herbs).
Consideration of standards for sustainable production:

- Exclusion of endangered fish species in all meals/menus. Fish served should be listed as green in the list provided by WWF.
- At least 10% of vegetables purchased must stem from organic agriculture.
- Increase of fair trade products by including at least seven fair trade products that are used in high amounts (such as drinks) in weekly menus.

Reducing waste:

- Food waste generated through the University’s canteens should be less than 42g per main meal served. In order to monitor this, the caterer committed to measuring the amount of food thrown away by clients and the amounts wasted in assembling meals over the course of one month a year. Depending on the figures, meals offered and portion sizes are adjusted.
- Reduction of packaging waste through the project Refiller-friendly, which enables customers to get drinks and coffee refills in their own bottles or cups.

Main results

The programme ONE TWO WE was launched in spring 2013 with a communications campaign called Biss für Biss ein Klimagenuss (every bite benefits our climate). The campaign aimed to inform customers about the relationships between nutrition and climate protection and encouraged them to change their behaviour to be more climate conscious.

Following its first year, the amount of vegan and vegetarian menus sold increased by 44% and accounted for a quarter of all meals sold. During the period 2012-2015, it was possible to save already 155 tons CO₂-equivalent greenhouse gases; approximately 55 tons per year, which accounted for a reduction of 12% comparing to the values of 2012. Meat consumption was reduced by 15% and food waste was reduced to less than 27g per main meal.

By implementing the programme ONE TWO WE, the University of Basel has achieved reductions in the following (to date):

- Environmental impacts derived from the use of certain fertilisers and pesticides,
- Wet waste generated and total amount of packaging waste,
- GHG emissions derived from meat production, and
- Goods transported by air

Main lessons learned and next steps

The communication campaign launched before the start of the Sustainable University Basel programme also included communication about the University’s new sustainable catering concept, and was received well. It was followed by a survey that aimed to find out more about the eating habits of its users/customers, in order to be able to tailor what was on offer accordingly. A good and attractive offer is vital and staff at the University have realised that it is important to make gradual changes instead of radical ones. For instance, gradually incrementing the vegetarian and vegan meals on offer has had good results, whereas enforcing a vegetarian only day would not be so well accepted.

Achieving a 20% reduction of CO₂ equivalent emissions at a University proves to be a challenging goal. About 2/3rd of the guests at the canteens are students. Inherently, they stay at the University only for a limited time and the learning effect over time is limited. Consequently, continuous communication and awareness campaigns would be necessary in order to reach the goal.

One of the goals of the sustainability strategy for the catering service was to achieve a reduction in the consumption of non-seasonal produce. However, difficulties were experienced when putting this into practice, particularly in the colder months where the seasonal offer is scarcer. Originally, the intention was to award extra points to suppliers that were able to provide seasonal fruit and vegetables listed as green or yellow in the WWF seasonal calendar. Putting this into practice, however,
proved difficult and a decision was then taken to put together a ‘blacklist’ of products with the highest environmental impact when eaten out of season and to provide it rather as a recommendation to suppliers.

Another important issue is to monitor performance. Without proper systems in place, it is impossible to define long-term sustainability strategies which work effectively for canteen consumers. The caterer is in charge of monitoring current consumption patterns and waste produced, and providing feedback to the University for the longer-term strategy.

In order to achieve a reduction of 20% in CO₂ emissions, further measures require implementation. Operation of the canteen requires general improvements; the seasonality aspect needs strengthening as do the number of vegetarian meals by offering more variety. In terms of the latter (and as part of the Sustainability Office), the University’s Student Council decided to create a working group called “Kommensa”, which is open to students and staff and aims to come up with further suggestions for vegetarian and vegan meals. Vegetarian and vegan meals will also be more easily identified, by providing appropriate labelling.

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For more information, please see European GPP criteria for Food and Catering Services and the Technical Background Report (both currently under revision).