



Application of the Uni-Food tool to assess the University College Dublin food environment

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The food environment (FE) has been defined as ‘the interface that mediates one’s food acquisition and consumption within the wider food system⁽¹⁾. Establishing healthy FEs in third-level institutions, is paramount in promoting lifelong healthy eating habits^(2,3). The aim of this study assess the FE in University College Dublin (UCD) using the Uni-Food tool.

The Uni-Food Tool is used to assess the healthiness, equity, and environmental sustainability of FEs in tertiary education settings⁽²⁾. The tool consists of 3 components: 1) university systems and governance (40% of overall score), 2) campus facilities and environment (40%), and 3) food retail outlets (20%). Scores are assigned for each indicator according to how fully the university complies with the indicator criteria on scales of 0, 5, 10 or 0, 3, 7, 10 with higher scores indicating greater compliance. The tool was applied in UCD between April 2022 and January 2023. To assess the university systems and governance component, university documents such as policies, food outlet tender documents, and minutes of meetings were reviewed for information relating to the campus FE. The campus facilities and environment component was assessed by two researchers evaluating the campus environment including vending machines, opening hours, and availability of self-catering facilities. For food retail outlets each of the 27 outlets was independently assessed by two researchers. Any scoring discrepancies were discussed and resolved. UCD’s scores were calculated using an Excel spreadsheet provided by the Uni-Food project team.

UCD received an overall weighted score of 34% in the Uni-Food tool, suggesting low implementation of best practice in the FE. Scores pre-weighting for each component were as follows: university systems and governance – 24%, campus facilities and environment – 36%, food retail outlets – 49%. A key finding was the lack of detailed policies and strategies relating to food. Strengths of the FE in UCD included a campus-wide restriction on selling taxable sugar-sweetened beverages, reasonable availability of free drinking water in most buildings, the availability of at least one vegan and vegetarian meal option in most food outlets, the use of recyclable/compostable servingware in 20/27 food retail outlets and provision of bins for multiple types of waste. Areas where UCD performed poorly included monitoring and reporting on the FE, prevalence of unhealthy food and beverage advertising, unhealthy food and beverage sponsorship at university events and dependence on ad-hoc activity to monitor the FE and engage stakeholders.

The Uni-Food tool was successfully applied in UCD and was effective in identifying strengths of the on-campus FE and a number of areas of weakness where recommendations to improve could be made. Future work will involve presenting these recommendations to university management to initiate work to improve the FE.

References

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