

Chefs as Downstream Actors in Food Value Chains: Sustainability Competencies and Culinary Education

Francesco Versari

MED.E.A. University, Malta
Francesco.versari87@gmail.com

Abstract

Chefs operate as downstream professionals within food value chains, where routine activities such as sourcing, menu design, and waste management link operational decisions with upstream supply conditions. These activities take place within organisational and market structures that constrain professional action. Governance asymmetries, cost pressures, supplier dependencies, and institutional hierarchies define the decision space in which chefs operate.

Sustainability competency frameworks propose capacities including systems thinking, normative reasoning, and anticipatory competence as foundations for sustainability-oriented action. However, these frameworks are largely profession-neutral and do not specify how decision-making is shaped by structural constraints in particular occupational contexts. In culinary education, sustainability is mainly addressed through operational practices, with limited integration of competency theory or value chain perspectives.

This study examines how chef-instructors, drawing on both professional kitchen experience and educational practice, interpret sustainability-related decision-making within constrained organisational contexts. It investigates which competencies are perceived as relevant to professional decision processes and how they are represented in formal culinary curricula. The research adopts a qualitative design combining semi-structured interviews with chef-instructors from three international culinary schools and structured document analysis of curriculum materials. Data are analysed using a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic approach.

The study contributes by linking sustainability competency theory to the structurally constrained decision contexts of chefs in food value chains and by clarifying how professional competencies are interpreted and transmitted through culinary education.

Keywords: sustainability competencies, chefs, food value chains, culinary education, professional decision-making, downstream actors.