Take Me Out: An Easy-Read Summary

Here's the problem: UBC's campus food outlets are meant to follow the Zero Waste Food Ware Strategy, but nobody had a clear, campus-wide picture of how well they actually comply or what gets in the way. The study finds that simple rules, such as what outlets buy, are followed well, while daily habits like sorting waste and encouraging reusables slip because of busy shifts, staff turnover, missing training and unclear systems.

Here's what we can do: Sorted can close these gaps for your business without relying on good intentions alone. We start with an on-site waste audit: we sort and weigh your actual waste, give you a Sorted Score out of 10, and deliver a clear report that puts waste spending and savings first. That report recommends the right bins and where to place them, flags restricted products with compliant alternatives, and suggests changes to your hauler service. Our advice is independent because we don't sell bins or collection services.

Then we help the right habits stick. You get custom signage and a one-page staff reference guide that shows exactly what goes where, plus optional short staff training and follow-up checks as your team changes. The payoff is smaller waste bills and fewer disposal-ban surcharges, more confident staff, and a sustainability story you can stand behind, all while your business is better placed for rising Metro Vancouver waste fees.

A plain-language summary of a University of British Columbia (UBC) student research report about how campus food outlets handle waste and single-use food ware.

Original report: Ali, M., Ismail, M., Lam, Y., Li, O., & Trenton, I. (April 15, 2026). *Take Me Out: Assessing and Understanding Food Outlet Compliance with the Zero Waste Food Ware Strategy at UBC Vancouver.* UBC SEEDS Sustainability Program. Read the full report

> *This is a summary written by The Sorted Waste Company, not the original report. The original is a student project from UBC's SEEDS Sustainability Program and is not an official UBC document. For full details, methods and data, please read the original.*

Why this study matters

UBC has a set of rules for its campus food outlets called the Zero Waste Food Ware Strategy. In short, outlets are asked to:

- Charge a small fee for single-use cups, bags and take-out containers
- Hand out single-use items like cutlery and napkins only when customers ask
- Offer and encourage reusable options
- Sort their waste into the right bins
- Explain all of this to customers through signs and trained staff

These rules support UBC's goal of cutting the waste it sends to landfill in half by 2030.

The report points out why this matters. Single-use items are a major source of litter. Swapping plastic for "compostable" plastic doesn't fully solve the problem either, because those items often end up in landfill in Metro Vancouver anyway. Using fewer single-use items in the first place makes the biggest difference.

An earlier UBC student study, from 2024, had already found that most food vendors in one campus building were missing most of the requirements. This study set out to get a clearer, campus-wide picture.

What the researchers did

The student team worked with UBC's Zero Waste team and used three approaches:

1. **Site visits.** They visited 11 food outlets during the busy lunch and dinner rushes and checked each one against a simple yes-or-no checklist. The checklist covered four areas: waste sorting, how staff interact with customers, single-use rules and fees, and the types of products used.
2. **A survey.** Managers and staff answered an online survey about how well they knew the rules and what made them hard to follow.
3. **Interviews.** The team spoke with 7 outlet managers about their biggest challenges and what kind of help they wanted.

What they found

The simple rules were followed well

Rules about *what outlets buy* were followed closely. Plastic straws and plastic cutlery were gone, and cup fees were being charged. The researchers noted that outlets stuck to these rules even when customers didn't like them, which suggests that clear, concrete rules work.

Rules that depend on daily habits were much harder

Rules that rely on *what people do every shift* were where outlets struggled most:

- **Waste sorting was the weakest area.** Bins were usually labelled, but staff often weren't putting items in the right bin.
- **Reusables were rarely encouraged.** Very few outlets promoted reusable containers, and few accepted customers' own clean cups.

Managers believed they were doing better than they were

Managers were keen and supportive of the rules. But the site visits showed gaps they hadn't noticed, such as missing organics bins or single-use items left out on display.

Most front-line staff had never been trained

Most staff who serve customers said they had never received training on the strategy. Many knew roughly what it was, but very few knew it well.

What gets in the way

The interviews brought out several practical barriers:

- **Customer pushback.** Some customers resisted the fees and saw them as a way for businesses to make extra money. Others complained about the quality of the alternatives, such as wooden spoons that splinter and paper straws that fall apart.
- **Missing or damaged signs.** Managers relied on official signs to explain the rules, but older signs had been damaged or taken.
- **Busy shifts and staff turnover.** With constant new staff and rush-hour pressure, it was hard to train people, enforce rules or sort waste properly. Staff also lost motivation when they saw others sorting badly.
- **Other people's waste.** Shared bins were filled with waste from other outlets and nearby buildings, adding to staff workload.
- **Cost and quality of alternatives.** Some items weren't available in a compliant version, and some alternatives cost a little more or didn't perform as well.
- **Franchise limits.** Managers of franchise outlets often had no power to change suppliers, signage or policies without head-office approval.

What's already working

The interviews also pointed to some bright spots:

- **Discounts for reusables.** One outlet offered a small discount to customers who brought their own container, and around a third of its customers now do. Managers felt a discount made fees feel fairer.
- **Clear, tailored signage.** Managers believed simple visuals would help customers understand fees and sorting, and would show the rules come from UBC rather than the outlet.
- **Help with suppliers.** Managers who hadn't yet switched away from plastic were willing to, but wanted help finding alternatives that didn't sacrifice quality.
- **Short, simple training reminders.** Managers said the existing guidelines felt complicated. They suggested quick sticker reminders behind the counter and more visits from the Zero Waste team.

What the researchers recommend

In the next month or two: Create a simple guide or poster that explains how UBC's waste sorting works and why sorting at each outlet still matters. Managers can share it with staff and include it in onboarding.

In the medium term: Add quick prompts at the till, such as asking “for here or to go?” or “did you bring your own container?”, so staff remember the rules during busy service.

In the long term: Set up regular check-ins with each outlet, roughly every three months. These would share how the outlet is doing, provide signage suited to that outlet, and offer advice on choosing compliant products.

The Sorted Waste Company's take and what it means for your business

The main lesson is that the gaps weren't caused by a lack of goodwill. Managers wanted to do the right thing. The problems came from busy shifts, staff turnover, missing training and unclear systems. That applies well beyond a university campus. For any restaurant, café or shop, a few practical steps make a real difference:

- **Make the right choice the easy choice.** Clearly labelled bins and simple signs in the right places.
- **Train every new hire, and keep it short.** A five-minute walkthrough and a reminder behind the counter beat a long manual nobody reads.
- **Check rather than assume.** An outside look at how waste is actually handled often reveals gaps that are easy to miss from the inside.
- **Reward, don't just charge.** A small discount for reusables can shift customer habits and make fees feel fair.
- **Get help with suppliers.** Good, affordable alternatives exist, but finding them takes time most owners don't have.

How we close these gaps

The study shows that good intentions aren't enough on their own. Businesses need simple systems, clear guidance and staff who know what to do. That's what The Sorted Waste Company provides:

- **An on-site waste audit.** We sort and weigh your actual waste to see what's really going into each bin, not what you assume is happening. You get a Sorted Score out of 10, so progress is easy to track.
- **A clear, practical report.** It leads with what matters most: what you're spending on waste and where you can save. It recommends the right bins for your space and where to put them, flags restricted products along with cheaper compliant alternatives, and suggests changes to your hauler service. Because we don't sell bins or collection services, our advice is fully independent.
- **Custom signage and a one-page staff reference guide.** Made for your business, so staff know exactly what goes where, even during the busiest shift or on a new hire's first day.
- **Optional staff training and follow-up checks** to keep standards from slipping as your team changes.

What it means for your business

- **Lower costs and better margins.** Less waste in the garbage means smaller waste bills and fewer disposal-ban surcharges passed on by your hauler. Those savings go straight to your bottom line.
- **More confident, knowledgeable staff.** Simple tools and short training help the right habits stick, even with staff turnover.
- **Environmental stewardship you can stand behind.** Less of your waste goes to landfill, and you have a genuine story to share with customers.
- **Better outcomes in the long run.** Waste fees in Metro Vancouver have been rising. Businesses with good systems in place now are better prepared for whatever comes next.