



**Student Choices and Alcohol Matters (SCAM):**  
A multi-level analysis of student alcohol (mis)use and its implications for policy and prevention strategies within universities, cognate educational establishments and the wider community

### Introduction

Levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol related problems in young people in the Western world continue to cause concern (World Health Organisation, 2010). Research indicates a pattern of 'binge drinking' or 'drinking to get drunk' and a greater risk of problematic drinking in young, especially single, adults generally (Goddard, 2006, Pincock, 2003, Engineer, Phillips, Thompson, and Nicholls, 2003). Students in particular seem to be at risk of harmful patterns of consumption. For example, Gill (2002) found that students who progress to higher education [HE] show an increase in consumption relative to their peers in the general population. In an international study, English female students were found to have one of the highest rates of 'heavy drinking' (Dantzer, Wardle, Fuller, Pampalone and Steptoe, 2006). As the HE student population in the UK has expanded considerably in recent years, any alcohol related issues related to this group are also likely to increase unless positive attempts are made by universities to address harmful drinking patterns. Recommendations for interventions to reduce risky drinking behaviour in college populations in the USA (NIAAA, 2002) and the general population in the UK (e.g. Thom and Bayley, 2007) emphasise an integrative approach which takes account of the context as well as individual behaviour.

Together these findings suggested the need for a systematic, multi-level study focussing on student attitudes to and use of alcohol in order to inform the development of interventions to promote sensible drinking. The aim of this study therefore was to examine the nature and experience of student alcohol (mis)use within an East Midlands university, its partner colleges and its local community in order to determine the nature and perceptions of alcohol usage by students. It would also provide a basis of knowledge on which the university could draw to develop alcohol policies and prevention and intervention strategies for reducing alcohol-related harm to students and secondary harm to the local population and the community.

### METHODS

The research consisted of three strands involving one quantitative and two qualitative studies. It comprised an online survey of students from the university and



its partner colleges, a number of focus groups with students also drawn from across the university and its partner colleges, and a series of interviews with key personnel within the university and its partner colleges, and from partner agencies, organisations and community groups within Northampton with an interest in student alcohol consumption. This tri-partite approach enabled us to examine the contextual environmental and community factors as well as the intra- and inter-personal ones associated with student alcohol use.

#### KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

##### *The Online Survey*

724 higher education students from the university and its partner colleges completed an online questionnaire accessed through the university's internal network concerning a range of socio-demographic and alcohol-related issues; 70.7% were female, 52.1% were aged 21 and above; 83.7% were white; and 44.3% did not have any religious affiliation. The majority (83%) reported drinking alcohol. No significant gender differences were found between drinkers and abstainers, but drinkers tended to be younger than the non-drinkers.

With regard to the students' perceptions of alcohol consumption within the university, differences were found between drinkers and non-drinkers and between male and female drinkers. Compared with drinkers, non-drinkers perceived that smaller percentage of students drank alcohol and that drinkers drank more frequently. Compared with male drinkers, female drinkers perceived more social disapproval from their friends for regular, frequent and excessive drinking. The majority of students considered alcohol consumption to be a problem amongst other higher education students.

In relation to actual drinking behaviour, the majority (62.6%) of the student drinkers reported drinking alcohol at least once or twice a week, with 19.6% reporting drinking more often and 4.2% consuming alcohol nearly every day. Men reported drinking alcohol more frequently than the women. A high proportion drank more than the recommended government guidelines per day, with 44.6% of female students and 30% of the male students drinking more than 3-4 and 5-6 drinks respectively per day. The majority reported 'binge' drinking, assessed in terms of having 6 or more drinks on one occasion, with a fifth doing so at least weekly. Men were



more likely to report binge drinking than women. Nearly half of the student drinkers reported being drunk at least once, and a quarter being drunk 4-10 times or more, in the previous month. Results of the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test [AUDIT] showed that 51.9% drank alcohol at levels considered 'hazardous', and 3.6% drank at levels considered 'at risk of dependency'. Men and younger students were at greater risk.

In terms of where they drank alcohol, most students consumed alcohol in clubs or bars (40.5%), or at home or at a friend's/family member' house (37.2%).

Student drinkers reported experiencing a wide range of alcohol related problems during the previous year with men reporting more problems than the women. Many problems were short lived and comparatively minor such as hangovers and vomiting from drinking. Others were potentially more serious. For example, just over 10% had been a passenger in a car when the driver was over the limit and 5% had driven when over the limit; a third had been separated from friends and 13.2% had got lost; 15.2% had had unprotected sex and 12.2% had had sexual intercourse when they 'ordinarily wouldn't have done'.

In relation to the effects of alcohol consumption on their academic studies, over a fifth of the drinking students reported attending a teaching session after having had several drinks, a quarter reported missing a teaching session after drinking alcohol and a tenth reported performing less well than they expected because of drinking.

When asked why they drank alcohol, the students reported that they were most likely to do so for positive social reasons such as socialising or celebrating with friends and because it made them feel good and generally enhanced their experience. They were least likely to report that they drank alcohol to fit in with others or avoid social disapproval.

When asked what effects they expected from drinking alcohol, students most frequently reported that it increased social expressiveness and social and physical pleasure such as being more open and confident and feeling greater warmth, positivity and enjoyment when socialising with others. They also thought alcohol would affect them negatively, such as by reducing their ability to concentrate or



becoming more clumsy. Men expected more general positive effects and women expected more sexual enhancement and greater impairment.

Overall, the responses show considerable diversity in the student experience and attitudes towards alcohol consumption. There is an evident need to address the heavy and potentially abusive drinking of a minority of the students and the excessive, binge or episodic drinking of a sizeable proportion of the students through appropriate interventions which raise awareness and support behavioural change. More structural changes, such as increased provision of opportunities for meeting students' social and affiliative needs without undue dependence on alcohol, especially for first years, could meet the requirements of non-drinkers as well as reduce the risk of alcohol-related harm.

#### *The Student Focus Groups*

In total, 143 students (35 men and 108 women) aged 18-53 took part in 20 focus groups. The majority, 120, were single with the remainder either married or cohabiting and 4 were divorced. In terms of living accommodation 37 lived in halls of residence, 33 lived with their parents, 45 were in shared accommodation in the locality, and the remaining 26 lived in their own home either on their own or with a partner. The majority, 110 were white with the remaining 31 drawn from various ethnic groups, predominantly black. Most, 123, were based at the university and 20 were in the partner colleges; 40 were in their first year, 59 in their second year and 43 in their third or final year of study. Some, 15.9%, did not drink alcohol or drank hardly at all, 22.3% drank a little, 39.6% drank a moderate amount, 19.4% drank quite a lot and 2.9% drank quite heavily.

The focus group data was analysed using thematic analysis. Seven major themes on alcohol use, each with a number of sub-themes, were derived. The main themes concerned students' motivation for drinking alcohol, student drinking patterns, home drinking, negative aspects of drinking, safety and security whilst drinking, effects of drinking on academic study, and changing attitudes and behaviour and they are covered in detail in the main report.

In general, students had quite varied approaches to alcohol consumption that reflect those within society more generally. Thus, student drinking ranged from total abstinence to excessive and potentially harmful amounts. They reported drinking for a variety of reasons, including enhancing social situations, to cel-



celebrate and for relaxation or escapism. Many gave the university culture as a reason. Students largely perceived the university culture to be a drinking culture, often interpreted as one of excessive consumption. Those who adhered to this drinking culture viewed drinking large quantities of alcohol and being intoxicated as normal. Those who did not drink alcohol, or only drank in moderation, often reported being excluded from many social activities and sports and felt under pressure to conform. First year students were seen to be at particular risk of participating in social activities involving large amounts of alcohol as they attempted to integrate into university life, and their inexperience was seen to increase the risks attached to heavy drinking. Much of student drinking took place in university accommodation and students often pre-loaded before going out. Those students living in the familial home and those in the partner colleges were less affected by this culture.

Many students were aware of the need to balance drinking and socialisation with academic work, but were not always successful. Both drinkers and non-drinkers spoke of adverse effects of heavy drinking on teaching sessions, studying and performance. A number expressed regrets that they had drunk and socialised so much in their early years of study, missing opportunities to develop academic skills necessary to success in subsequent years.

Most students considered their excessive drinking was a temporary phenomenon to enjoy whilst they were relatively free from responsibilities. They did not feel they would drink in this way for long enough to damage their health. On the whole, students were aware of the negative effects of drinking, remarking on its adverse effects on mood, relationships, finance, academic study and performance, and its associated increase in injuries, aggression and violence, anti-social behaviour, etc. Few perceived the longer term dangers to health, viewing health problems to be a consequence of prolonged heavy and consistent alcohol use over decades. They seldom saw their risky or binge drinking as a health risk.

The focus groups discussed various ways of minimising the potential harm attached to drinking, such as staying together in groups, using transport provided by the nightclubs or sharing taxis, etc. Despite this, many students reported risky behaviour and/or experiencing problems such as walking home alone, sexual activity with strangers, waking up not knowing where they were or how they got there, getting involved in group violence, etc. Such experiences did not neces-



sarily lead to changes in their drinking behaviour; many spoke very casually about such behaviours and the occurrence and retelling of such exploits was associated with prestige and enhanced bonding with their peers.

Most groups were pessimistic about ways of modifying the drinking culture and reducing excessive alcohol consumption and its associated harms. Many questioned the need for change. Those drinking excessively did not see themselves at risk and challenged government guidelines on 'safe' levels of drinking, viewing them as unrealistic. They perceived 'risk' or 'excess' in terms of the impact of alcohol on the individual, related to physiological effects such as passing out or experiencing adverse consequences, rather than in terms of units of alcohol. However, in discussing ways of changing such behaviour, strategies considered more likely to succeed involved advertising and promotional campaigns based on social messages and 'shock tactics', the provision of additional activities to reduce the emphasis on social events linked to drink and/or licensed venues, and drawing on the direct experience of others to inform of the dangers. They considered that the university had a role to play in raising awareness of the dangers of alcohol especially among incoming first year students.

One main point to emerge from the focus groups concerned the needs of students who do not drink alcohol or drink only moderately and who often felt excluded from many social or group activities. Given the patterns of heavy drinking reported, it is tempting to focus all the concern on the drinkers in the desire to change behaviour, to reduce the harmful effects of excessive consumption and promote more sensible approaches to alcohol. However, the needs of the abstainers or light drinkers also need to be addressed if the university society is to be one of fairness and equality. In addition, their insights and experiences provide an alternative perspective to use in attempts to change the culture and persuade those who drink excessively to act more sensibly.

#### *Interviews with Higher Education and Community Informants*

In total 29 participants were interviewed. Purposive sampling was used and interviewees were drawn from university and/or college administrative departments, student services, estates and facilities, a number of academic departments and the student union. External interviewees were drawn from the public sector including the Northamptonshire constabulary, NHS, county council, a specialist



alcohol service in the not-for-profit sector and representatives from the licensees in the private sector. The data was subjected to thematic analysis.

Seven main themes were identified relating to the perceptions of student alcohol use, general perspectives on alcohol related problems, problems associated with students' alcohol use, alcohol related issues of diversity and equality, the involvement of external agencies in student alcohol use, addressing alcohol related problems, supporting students with alcohol related problems, and changing drinking behaviour and are covered in detail in the main report.

In general, there was considerable similarity between the views of those within the university and its partner colleges and those in the external organisations. Interviewees viewed student drinking as part of a university culture where much of student socialisation was organised around alcohol consumption. It was considered to be a temporary phase, which would end when students graduated and gained work and family responsibilities. The culture was seen against a present day background of a general youth culture of excessive alcohol consumption, and thus not solely a university phenomenon. The interviewees concern was not to stop the students drinking alcohol but to reduce excessive alcohol consumption and the problems associated with it. Many considered that the students were still learning how to be an adult, that they were likely to make mistakes and that the role of staff and others in the community was to be supportive, providing that the student stayed within acceptable boundaries and did not cause harm to others.

All interviewees recognised how excessive alcohol consumption could harm the students and referred variously to a range of problems, including poor academic performance, health issues, finance, relationships, crime and violence and aggression associated with it. Those in welfare and alcohol-focussed services drew attention to the level of individual harm experienced by those who drank alcohol excessively and from incidents arising from others' drinking. They also noted that existing physical and mental problems were exacerbated by alcohol consumption. In relation to broader issues such as alcohol related abusive, aggressive and disruptive behaviour which affected the university and its locality more generally, both internals and externals reported that problems were not usually serious, would seem to have reduced on campus in recent years, and compared favourably to the scale of disorder and injury seen in the town centre when the general populace went out drinking at the weekend. The exception seemed to be when social events or night-clubs involved both local young people and students. However, community agencies were not always able



young people, and problems experienced by students in the community or living off campus did not always come to the attention of university staff.

Some interviewees drew attention to the harm of a drinking culture for those who did not drink, and raised issues of equality and diversity for the university, its partner colleges and student union. They highlighted that alcohol related problems were not restricted to alcohol abuse that could be addressed on an individual basis, but encompassed alcohol-related issues that involved a much broader base and have implications for strategic, procedural and operational issues within the HE community. In addition, many of the matters raised in conjunction with student alcohol use confirmed the need to focus on environmental and structural factors within the local community and society at large. They show that issues of alcohol use within the university cannot be separated from the issues that affect alcohol use within society more broadly. Attempts to deal with the adverse aspects of student alcohol use require an integrated approach, with the university working with organisations in the community to support students with alcohol-related problems and to develop appropriate intervention strategies.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Whilst this research has shown that not all students misuse or abuse alcohol, a sizeable proportion of them do, at potentially significant costs to their health, education and finances in both the short and the long term. Such behaviour also incurs costs for the university and for society as represented by the local community. The research has also shown that student alcohol (mis)use cannot be considered in isolation from the community in which the university sits. It adds support to the need for a multi-level approach to dealing with alcohol (mis)use involving action at the level of the student, the university and the community to develop policy and practice designed to encourage sensible drinking and reduce alcohol associated harm.

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#### Contact

Dr Gillian N Penny  
and Sarah Armstrong-Jones

School of Social Sciences  
University of Northampton

#### ALCOHOL INSIGHTS

*Alcohol Insights* are brief summaries of the findings made from research or development grants.

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