Students and alcohol

Student attitudes and behaviours towards alcohol consumption in higher education
Research from Alcohol Impact pilot partnerships
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Summary

Background
This report presents research completed as part of NUS’ Alcohol Impact programme in its pilot year (April 2014 – April 2015). The programme is a whole-institution approach, involving action by local partnerships of students’ unions, universities and external stakeholders, with the aim of creating a positive culture of responsible consumption of alcohol by students, changing attitudes towards alcohol, and building healthier, safer, more productive student communities.

Evaluating the pilot involved the completion of three online surveys (one per term) along with focus group and diary study research. The research was completed at the following seven institutions:
- Liverpool John Moores University and Students’ Union
- Loughborough University and Students’ Union
- Manchester Metropolitan University and Students’ Union
- Royal Holloway University of London and Students’ Union
- Swansea University and Students’ Union
- University of Brighton and Students’ Union
- University of Nottingham and Students’ Union

The surveys were also promoted by the University of Central Lancashire Students’ Union as a control. A total of 12,505 survey responses were achieved across the three waves. The research aimed to benchmark the culture of alcohol consumption in higher education, with future research planned to enable tracking of changes in alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours.

Key findings include...
- Approximately a third of respondents reported drinking alcohol 2-3 days a week and in total around two thirds report drinking alcohol at least once a week.
- 1st year respondents are significantly more likely than all other year groups to say they drink 2-3 days a week.
- There is a preference for spirit-based drinks, with survey respondents indicating spirits in single and double measures to be the most common drink of choice in the week prior to the research.
- 10% of respondents said they don’t currently drink alcohol.
- The cost of alcohol can be seen as a major influence on a range of factors related to alcohol consumption, from what students drink, to when and how. Cost can be seen as a major driver of the practice of ‘pre-drinking’.
- The surveys showed the popularity of ‘pre-drinking’, with approximately three quarters saying it is something they do regularly.
- Just under half of respondents said they drank alcohol with the deliberate intention of getting drunk at least once a week.
- Around a quarter said they inadvertently got drunk at least once a week.
- Approximately 90% of respondents agreed to some extent that drinking and getting drunk is part of university culture.
- Three quarters agreed that ‘students’ drink in order to fit in with their peers.
- Over 80% agreed that few university students worried about how much alcohol will damage their health.
- A third of survey respondents worried about things they had said or done whilst drinking alcohol.
- Half noted taking risks with their personal safety (such as walking home alone) as a result of drinking alcohol.
- Half of survey respondents report missing a seminar / lecture / class at university as a result of drinking alcohol.
- Around 10% of respondents reported being a victim of crime. Of these respondents, half identified being the victim of verbal abuse, a third had experienced physical abuse, and 10% report experiencing sexual assault.
- Three quarters report that ‘nowadays they think more about their behaviour when they drink than they used to’.
- Two thirds agree that ‘pacing themselves when drinking (e.g. drinking soft drinks in between alcoholic drinks) allows them to have a better night out for longer’.

Further information
Please visit alcoholimpact.nus.org.uk for more information about the programme, including a report on the outcomes and impacts achieved in the pilot year.

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Background and methodology
Background and methodology

Alcohol Impact
Alcohol Impact, managed and delivered by NUS, is a whole-institution approach to responsible consumption of alcohol by students. It is a strategic framework, and supported accreditation mark, designed to bring the students’ union and its partner institution together to create a positive culture of responsible consumption of alcohol by students, changing attitudes towards alcohol, and building healthier, safer, more productive student communities.

The programme offers a mix of an innovative, institution-wide behaviour change approaches and interventions encompassing policy, procedure, campaigns, retailing, and accommodation. To achieve this, the programme encourages strong links with local stakeholders, extending the potential for impact and legacy. These approaches form the basis of the strategic framework for action, with achievements in these areas resulting in accreditation.

The programme initially ran as a pilot, from April 2014 to April 2015, funded by the Home Office, in seven partnerships:

- Liverpool John Moores University and Students’ Union
- Loughborough University and Students’ Union
- Manchester Metropolitan University and Students’ Union
- Royal Holloway University of London and Students’ Union
- Swansea University and Students’ Union
- University of Brighton and Students’ Union
- University of Nottingham and Students’ Union

Methodology
To evaluate the programme, and to build an evidence base on the relationship between students and alcohol, the pilot partnerships took part in a range of research activities (see figure 1).

Figure 1 | Research methodology

Surveys
Three surveys were carried out over the course of the year:
- Baseline: May 2014, prior to the programme activity commencing;
- Mid-point: October 2014, mid-way through the pilot year; and
- Follow-up: February 2015.

This captured variations in experiences and behaviours at different points in the academic year e.g. exam period, freshers’/first term. The following survey responses were achieved at each survey point by the partnerships, along
with the University of Central Lancashire Students’ Union, who acted as a control throughout the pilot programme research.

### Figure 2 | Survey samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partnership</th>
<th>Baseline survey</th>
<th>Mid-point survey</th>
<th>Follow-up survey</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Student population 2012/13</th>
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<td>79</td>
<td>604</td>
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<td>242</td>
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<td>564</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>1,630</td>
<td>35,540</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,350</td>
<td>26,585</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>4,857</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,852</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,505</strong></td>
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### Focus groups

To support the survey research, and investigation of the relationship between students and alcohol in more qualitative depth, a focus group was convened at each partnership. Seven groups were run with a total of 51 participants.

### Diary study

In addition to the surveys and focus groups, student participants took part in a week long study, using an online diary; respondents submitted their reflections on their relationship with alcohol each day, along with a photo record of their experiences. 114 participants took part from across the seven partnerships.

### The data and this report

This report presents the findings from the surveys, focus group and diary study research in the following areas:

- Patterns of alcohol consumption;
- Perceptions of alcohol consumption on campus;
- Influences on, and motivations for, alcohol consumption;
- Impacts of alcohol consumption; and
- Reducing impacts through responsible consumption.

When reading the report, it is worth remembering that the data is drawn from the student population at seven universities in England and Wales (plus one control for survey research), rather than presenting a nationally representative picture, and that there are also considerable variations in response rates within these seven institutions.

The data presented in this report will be supplemented with additional data from university and students’ union partnerships taking part in Alcohol Impact in future years, building up a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between students and alcohol within higher education, and tracking changes in attitudes and behaviours over time.

Further information on Alcohol Impact, and the outcomes and impacts achieved during the pilot year can be found at: [alcoholimpact.nus.org.uk](http://alcoholimpact.nus.org.uk)
Patterns of alcohol consumption
Patterns of alcohol consumption

How often are students drinking?
Respondents most commonly reported drinking alcohol 2-3 days a week (e.g. 33%, n=1253 at baseline) and in total around two thirds report drinking alcohol at least once a week (e.g. 65.9%, n=3198 at mid-point).

Figure 3 | How often, if at all, do you drink alcohol?

The data collected from diary study participants supports this finding, with most participants recording 1-2 ‘binges’ of alcohol consumption in addition to a couple of more ‘low key’ drinking events, or no alcohol consumption for the remainder of the week.

What are students drinking?
The primary research has shown a preference for spirit-based drinks, with survey respondents indicating spirits in single and double measures to be the most common drink of choice in the week prior to completing the survey).

Where are students drinking?
At home / in their accommodation is the most commonly reported location for consuming alcohol. Almost half of respondents report that they drink alcohol at home / in their accommodation at least once a week (e.g. 48.4%, n=2012 at mid-point). Within this, just under a fifth report drinking here more than once a week (e.g. 20.1%, n=835 at mid-point).

Reflecting these responses, the surveys showed the popularity of ‘pre-drinking’, with approximately three quarters (e.g. 77.4%, n=2553 at baseline) saying it is something they do regularly. Almost half of respondents also reported that this regularly involves deliberately getting drunk before they go out for the night (e.g. 42.3%, n=1299 at follow-up).

When drinking outside of their homes, respondents most frequently report doing so less often than once a week (e.g. 55.6%, n=1798 at baseline report drinking in local bars less often than once a week). The most frequently visited venues for drinking are local pubs and nightclubs, with approximately a quarter reporting that they drink in these places about once a week (26.5%, n=862 and 26.8%, n=878 respectively).

Respondents do not tend to drink regularly in students’ union venues, either bars or nightclubs, with around 15% reporting that they drink here about once a week, highlighting the importance of a whole campus approach to responsible consumption (e.g. 13.8%, n=451 and 16.2% (n=524) respectively reported drinking at students’ unions bars and nightclubs at baseline).

Non-drinkers
- Approximately 10% of respondents report that they currently do not drink alcohol (11.4%, n=433 at pre-wave and 12.1%, n=589 at mid-wave).
- The most frequently cited reasons for not drinking alcohol were due to a dislike of the taste (22.7%, n=98 at pre-wave and 19.6%, n=115 at mid-wave) or for religious reasons (22.5%, n=97 at pre-wave and 27.9%, n=164 at mid-wave).
- Others had stopped drinking due to concerns about the impacts of alcohol consumption, for example, approximately 15% stated that they did not like the effect alcohol has on them (16.7% (n=72) at pre-wave and 15.8% (n=93) at mid-wave) and just over 10% were concerned about the long term health impacts of alcohol consumption (12.7% (n=55) at pre-wave and 13.6% (n=80) at mid-wave).
- Whilst a third (34.8%, n=150 at pre-wave and 29.9%, n=175 at mid-wave) of non-drinkers do not perceive any expectation to drink from their friends at university, over half of
Students and alcohol

respondents at pre-wave have experienced pressure to drink at least some of the time (59.4%, n=256), rising to two thirds at mid-wave (66.5%, n=389).

- In general, these respondents feel that not drinking is having a positive impact on their life at university, with approximately a third (30% (n=129) at pre-wave and 32.4% (n=191) at mid-wave) selecting 10; representing the strongest positive impact. The two areas where negative impacts were felt were in meeting new people (21.4%, n=92 at pre-wave and 18.7%, n=110 at mid-wave ranked as 1-3) and their ability to enjoy nights out (26.6%, n=114 at pre-wave and 23.8%, n=139 at mid-wave ranked as 1-3).

- Respondents who said they didn't drink alcohol reported finding university an isolating experience at times, as frequently social events revolved around alcohol consumption. This was particularly mentioned to be the case during freshers' week.

"If 'Fresher’s Week' is anything like it was when I had mine three years ago, then the University definitely needs to offer and actively promote more activities that don’t revolve around alcohol or getting drunk. Having come from a very rural area where nights out were usually reserved for special occasions such as birthdays, exam celebrations etc., coming to University was a huge shock. I had no idea that getting drunk and going out was 'the thing to do', and despite making friends it made me feel really isolated and out of place at the time.”

Survey respondent

Frequency of getting drunk

Just under half of respondents report drinking alcohol with the deliberate intention of getting drunk at least once per week (44.1%, n=1479 at pre-wave and 45.6%, n=1937 at mid-wave). Over 10% (15.7%, n=527 at pre-wave and 14.3%, n=609) report purposefully drinking to get drunk more than once per week (see figure 4).

Approximately a quarter of respondents report ending up drunk without intending to drink to such levels of intoxication at least once a week (e.g. 25.5%, n=1077 at mid-point). Over half of respondents also report this experience, however on a less frequent basis (e.g. 50.7%, n=2142 at mid-point say this happens less often than once per week).
Perceptions of alcohol consumption on campus
Perceptions of alcohol consumption on campus

Pre-university perceptions
Over half of respondents report that prior to starting university they believed that students got drunk most of the time (e.g. 55.6%, n=1647 at follow-up).

A fifth had the perception that students got drunk more frequently, selecting ‘all of the time’ (e.g. 19.7%, n=659 at baseline). This broadly matches the findings of previous research carried out by NUS in 2010\(^1\) where 18% of respondents reported thinking that students ‘got drunk all of the time’ and 62% reported that they thought students ‘got drunk most of the time’ before they started university.

"I always thought that students were just drinking all the time and partying and never doing any work; just drinking."

Focus group participant

Experiences at university
The vast majority of respondents agreed to some extent that drinking and getting drunk is part of university culture (e.g. 89%, n=3800 at mid-point). Similarly, respondents report that it is expected that students will drink to get drunk (84.9%, n=2837 and pre-wave and 74.8%, n=3179) (figure 5).

"I was surprised actually in Freshers’ Week and a few weeks afterwards how few people I’d seen being in a state, lying in the road and being sick and everything...It’s obvious that some people do get in that state and some people may do it regularly, some people may do it occasionally, but when you think about how many students there are here and when you’ve got a city full of students from two universities, actually I don’t feel like I see it that often, people causing problems from excessive drinking."

Focus group participant

A number of participants in the focus groups felt that there is a strong expectation of an excessive drinking culture at universities, being driven by the media inflating individual examples of excessive consumption and undesirable behaviour as representative of the student population overall.

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Figure 5 | Thinking specifically about drinking alcohol at university, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

The focus group research, however, revealed that the preconceptions participants had prior to starting university do not necessarily match up to the reality of student life on the whole.

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\(^1\) NUS, (2010), Behind the headlines: Social norms and student alcohol consumption
Influences on and motivations for alcohol consumption
Influences on and motivations for alcohol consumption

An essential part of changing alcohol-related behaviour is to understand why students are drinking alcohol. A wide range of factors has been found to influence and motivate alcohol consumption; these are discussed in detail here.

Year of study

Analysis of the survey results revealed some differences in alcohol consumption and related behaviours according to year of study.

For example, at the baseline survey 1st year respondents are significantly more likely than all other year groups to say they drink 2-3 days a week (e.g. 39.7%, n=524, 1st years selected this option compared to 30.8%, n=270, 3rd years and 22.5%, n=58, Masters students) and frequency of drinking with the intention of getting drunk at least once a week significantly decreases according to progression through university, with 1st year respondents more likely than any other year group to report doing this (e.g. 23.9%, n=280 compared to 16.6%, n=130, 2nd year respondents, which is again significantly higher than 3rd year respondents at 11.3%, n=89).

Similarly, focus group respondents reflected that they were drinking less and less frequently than during their earlier years of study. However, others saw their final year as an opportunity to make the most of university life, while others reported using alcohol to relieve stress as academic pressure increases.

“"I'm in my third year. There’s so much work that very few people do go out, and if they do it’s probably for not as long as they might have done in previous years. I know my first year I went out quite a lot more compared to this year.”

Focus group participant

“I thought I would drink more in the first year but I drink more this year. I think because I’m trying to suck it all up.”

Focus group participant

Nationality

Analysis from the baseline survey also showed differences in relationships with alcohol according to nationality. Respondents from the UK were significantly more likely to say that they drink with the intention of getting drunk more than once a week than those from within the EU (e.g. 16.6% n=496 compared to 7%, n=142). They are also more likely to report these intentions than international students from outside the EU, but on a non-significant basis (11.8%, n=17).

Focus group participants from international backgrounds also saw their British peers as having a different relationship with alcohol, resulting in different behaviours becoming acceptable.

“I come from Singapore and, well, in Singapore, uni…I think uni life is not so much drinking as...I heard about drinking on campus in the UK before I came, but... I’m quite surprised like students can really get drunk here and they’re quite rowdy...I’m quite surprised why that is, so maybe it’s something like culture shock because the uni campus in Singapore is...they do drink, but I don’t think they will get drunk or become really that rowdy.”

Focus group participant

The experience however is not universal, with one participant reflecting that students in the UK are more focused on academic achievement than drinking compared to experiences at home.
Clubs and societies

The surveys also highlighted that respondents who participate in university or students’ union sports clubs or groups are significantly more likely than those participating in other types of activity in their spare time (except academic societies) and no activities to report drinking 2-3 days a week (e.g. 38.8%, n=511 compared to 33.1%, n=283 participating in interest clubs and groups). These respondents are also significantly more likely than respondents who participate in other extra-curricular activities to say they regularly start drinking at home / a friend’s house before they go out for the night (82.4%, n=902 compared with 75.9%, n=699 who participate in university or students’ union interest clubs / groups).

“I definitely think people in societies drink more, you’re saying all the socials and stuff. Now most of them relate to drinking, although they’ve tried to not do that because obviously the SU and the uni are trying to not have everything alcohol related. They are trying to like do other things but they’re still based around alcohol.”

Focus group participant

Whilst focus group participants were aware of action being taken by their students’ union to reduce alcohol-fuelled initiations and socials to clubs and societies, some focus group participants reported sponsorship deals, which appear to actively encourage alcohol consumption on an ongoing basis.

“Volleyball club this year is sponsored by ‘Fiction&MYU’ and because of that we have to go there. Well, you arrange it so that you go there every other Wednesday night rather than every week, so it’s every two weeks, and we have to have a minimum of about 30 people turn up. For that we also get free entry to the bar. There might be discounts as well...They’re paying us £1000 so it’s quite a lot.”

Focus group participant

Focus group participants also report that the type of society can influence behaviour, resulting from the types of people that are members. For example, the competitive personalities of sports club members are seen as being transferred to their drinking behaviour. On the contrary, some participants noted that their sporting commitments meant they do not engage regularly in alcohol consumption.

“There’s probably a competitive element to it as well with having so many sporting students at university; that competitive edge and going out and the testosterone that’s around campus generally. They want to...there’ll be a level of I’m going to beat you drinking; I’m going to drink more; no, I’m going to drink more than you.”

Focus group participant

“Volleyball club this year is sponsored by ‘Fiction&MYU’ and because of that we have to go there. Well, you arrange it so that you go there every other Wednesday night rather than every week, so it’s every two weeks, and we have to have a minimum of about 30 people turn up. For that we also get free entry to the bar. There might be discounts as well...They’re paying us £1000 so it’s quite a lot.”

Focus group participant

Conversely, some participants felt that those students who weren’t part of a society or club were in fact more likely to drink more; having less defined activity in their spare time leading to more time for drinking.

“They sort of only thing is either work or they go out. I think people who don’t...aren’t involved in anything, do tend to drink more or go out more.”

Focus group participant

Peer pressure

Responses from research participants revealed a somewhat complicated situation with regards to pressure to consume alcohol from their peers; implicit peer pressure appears to be more influential on alcohol consumption and behaviour than explicit pressure from peers.

Only around 10% of respondents reported that they felt the friends they were socialising with expected them to drink alcohol every time they drank over the past term (10.9%, n=364 at pre-wave and 11.1%, n=474 at mid-wave). Around a third of respondents reported that their university friends expected then to drink regularly and get drunk (e.g. 35.9%, n=1055 at follow-up). A far greater proportion felt that students drink in order to fit in with their peers, with three quarters of respondents to the surveys agreeing with this statement (e.g. 74.8%, n=3179 at mid-point).

“I have so much temptations in drinking as most of my friends love the drunk me because I am funny (they said). Sometimes I feel like in order to keep the friendship between me and a group of my friends, I have to drink.”

Diary participant

“I felt less peer pressure than I thought I would to like go out every night. Actually, I was surprised by that.”

Focus group participant
Students and alcohol

Participants reflected that peer pressure can influence individuals differently, for example, participants felt that males were under more pressure to consume alcohol than females.

Others felt peer pressure was more a reflection of individual personalities, with many believing they were able to withstand pressure from their friends and peers to drink, or drink more, but recognising that others were not able to do the same.

"I think if you’re a lad there’s a bit of a gender difference like you can’t really go for a night out and be like I’ll just sip water."

Focus group participant

"We’ve got a girl in our flat that…she doesn’t drink and actually all the girls quite respect her for sticking to her guns a bit and just having fun not drinking."

Focus group participant

"It’s all…it’s partly the other person as well in terms of how easily they give into it, which I think is forgotten sometimes, so it’s a two-way thing."

Focus group participant

Another element of peer pressure revealed by participants is pressure to live up to expectations of a heavy drinking culture which is seen as being part and parcel of student life in the UK. Some participants also saw a relative lack of responsibility during their time at university as an opportunity that should be taken advantage of in terms of drinking and getting drunk.

"I think there’s a lot of pressure at university, like if you don’t drink as much as other people then you’re not having the proper university experience."

Focus group participant

"After uni you have to be responsible so you know you can’t be going out and getting drunk three times a week so people do it now because it’s like their last chance."

Focus group participant

On a more individual basis, fear of missing out, the pressure to make friends and to have a good time also contributes to feelings of pressure to consume alcohol.

"I feel pressurised when I...and I feel bad when I say no. Do you get what I mean? It’s like next time they’re not going to ask me anymore."

Focus group participant

Drinking games and practices

Survey respondents report participation in drinking games to be a frequent occurrence, with over a third reporting taking part either every time or most of the time they drink within the last term (37.6%, n=1262 at baseline).

Focus group participants also revealed almost universal participation in drinking games, which were described as a standard and necessary part of a night out. For some, drinking games add a much needed element of fun to a night out.

"I think you have drinking games because it’s a bit boring just to sit there like with your glass just drinking and socialising. I think that’s the point. Because it’s like fun, you’re like playing, but you’re drinking at the same time."

Focus group participant

Others identify the games as an outlet for peer pressure to consume alcohol.

"With the drinking games as well there’s the pressure there. It’s like why aren’t you playing? You need to play."

Focus group participant

Other practices, such as purchasing drinks in rounds have also been revealed as influential on survey respondents behaviour, with approximately 40% of respondents reporting taking part in the practice at least some of the time (e.g. 42.8% (n=1436 at baseline). This practice is seen as contributing to difficulties in limiting the amount of alcohol consumed with 42.2% (n=615) of those who find it difficult not to drink too much on a night out, at the baseline survey, recognising the impact of purchasing rounds of drinks between friends.

"When someone else is buying drinks...because like someone is buying, of course I’m not going to refuse."

Focus group participant

Costs and money

The cost of alcohol can be seen as a major influence on a range of factors related to alcohol consumption; from what students drink, to when and how.

Over half of respondents also report taking advantage of offers to reduce spending on drinks, for example, through offers such as happy hours (e.g. 59.9%, n=1465 at mid-point) or buying larger measures because they
are on offer (e.g. 59%, n=1429 at mid-point). Focus group participants also report taking advantage of offers at pubs, bars and clubs.

"Because like in some cases you get like 5 Jägerbombs for £5. It’s like yes.”

**Focus group participant**

Focus group participants report needing to take into account the full costs of the night, for example, transport as well as the cost of alcohol, due to limited student finances.

"We just wait for the student nights and make sure there’s at least five people going so that the taxi is cheaper... I guess money is an issue so we don’t go out on Saturday night usually because it’s normal prices for everything.”

**Focus group participant**

Cost can also be seen as a driver of the types of alcohol consumed, as well as the quantity. Focus group participants told of a preference for spirits, due to the relatively high alcohol percentage for a low price, compared with other drinks such as wine.

"I go to Home Bargains. They have like a cheap version of vodka but it’s like the schnapps, it’s the Volakof stuff and it’s 22% but then if you have it with cranberry juice you can’t actually taste it and it’s lethal but it’s cheap, it’s like a £5, it’s like two bottles of wine in one isn’t it, 22%.”

**Focus group participant**

The costs of alcohol and going out for a night is also described by some focus group participants as a limiting factor which reduces their alcohol consumption overall.

"If I had the disposable income, I literally probably would be drinking like 5/6 times a week without even realising.”

**Focus group participant**

For others, the relatively low cost of alcohol compared to other activities is a driver for consumption.

"And I think sometimes it does come down to money as well. If there’re like other activities that you could go and do, but they’re going to cost you more than just going out, people will be like, well, no, because I can just go out and spend less and probably have more fun.”

**Focus group participant**

The practice of ‘pre-drinking’ is common amongst survey respondents, with three quarters reporting that this is something they do regularly (e.g. 77.4%, n=2553 at baseline), and a further 20% respondents reporting that they consider doing it (e.g. 19.2%, n=633 at baseline).

Cost can be seen as a major driver of the practice of ‘pre-drinking’, with focus group participants reporting that purchasing drinks from retailers is significantly cheaper than licensed outlets, such as bars, pubs and clubs.

"The whole point is you buy cheap alcohol that you can drink before you go out, so then you don’t have to buy as much when you’re out...You can pay £3 for a little thing or you can pay a tenner for a whole bottle of vodka and then, you know, that’s it; you’re sorted. With like a £1 cheap lemonade sort of thing, you’re like...you know, you’re done. But yes, I think that’s just a student thing.”

**Focus group participant**

The desire not to spend any money also influences when pre-drinking starts and goes on to.

"I don’t start that early because I’m really into pre-drinking quite late so that I spend absolutely no money when I go out. So I sometimes won’t end up drinking until like ten o’clock and then go out at one.”

**Focus group participant**

Many participants in the focus group research revealed pre-drinks to be the part of a night out that they found most enjoyable.

"The intent isn’t to get drunk. It’s just to be together and have fun. Yes, that’s how it generally starts, pre-drinking, event, go home.”

**Focus group participant**

Relaxation and socialising

The focus group participants commonly see alcohol as a normal part of socialising with their friends and peers.

Participants also reveal that they often use alcohol as a means of increasing their self-confidence, enabling them to develop social relationships that they may not have done otherwise.

"I don’t want to say confident when I’m drunk, but if I saw somebody I’d probably have a chat to them and it doesn’t matter. If they look a bit dodgy then maybe not, but if I meet people in
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the SU I’m not going to dance to the music if I haven’t had a drink because I don’t enjoy that kind of music normally, so it helps me enjoy a night out more and it leads to funny situations.”

Focus group participant

Within the survey research, further questioning with those who specifically identified that they found it difficult not to drink too much on a night out revealed that for almost two thirds, the reasoning behind this behaviour is to help them to relax / socialise (e.g. 62.8%, n=914 at baseline).

For some, alcohol is seen as a necessity to be able to participate in activities associated with a night out, to carry out activities that they do not enjoy when sober.

“I couldn’t go...I wouldn’t go out if I wasn’t drinking like it just...I would hate it.”

Focus group participant
Impacts of alcohol consumption
Impacts of alcohol consumption

The research also considered a wide range of impacts that can result from alcohol consumption.

**Impacts: Health and social wellbeing**

Looking at experiences of and attitudes towards alcohol consumption, the majority of respondents agree that consuming too much alcohol too quickly can negatively affect their night out with friends by cutting it short (e.g. 83.5%, n=2792 at baseline agree to some extent).

Three quarters of respondents also agree that they don’t have to get drunk to have a good night out (e.g. 75.2%, n=3187 at mid-point), however, contradicting this belief, almost two thirds of respondents also report that they think ‘getting drunk means they will have a good night out’ (e.g. 61.3%, n=2052 at baseline) (figure 6).

Figure 6: To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Respondents also hint at a lack of concern about the impacts of alcohol consumption, with over 80% (e.g. 85.2%, n=2508 at follow-up) agreeing that few university students worry about how much alcohol will damage their health. Focus group participants unpicked this finding, stating that even though they may have concerns about the health implications of alcohol consumption when sober, after a few drinks their concerns are not heeded.

“The thing is as well though you might think about these like health consequences when you’re sober and think this is really bad, but then once you start having a few drinks, that just goes out the window and you just want more.”

Focus group participant

The main impact experienced by respondents in terms of their health is vomiting (e.g. 70.5% (n=2349) at baseline), either whilst drinking or the following day. This experience was also reported by focus group participants, with an effect of limiting future consumption, though for specific drinks related to the experience.

“I got alcohol poisoning...well, nearly, from drinking vodka and red wine and I’ve never drank it since. I never would again. It was horrific. Like I spent the whole next morning throwing up all day until about 5 in the evening and I would never want to feel that bad again. It was horrible.”

Focus group participant

Respondents also report impacts on their social or mental wellbeing, with approximately a third either feeling embarrassed about things they had said or done whilst drinking alcohol (e.g. 68.7%, n=2287 at baseline), or being unable to remember what had happened the night before (e.g. 64%, n=2139 at baseline).

Focus group participants reported concerns over particular kinds of drinks that they believed to have more severe health implications.

“I think one thing that not many people know too much about is your heart because especially like with Jägerbombs you drink alcohol which slows down your heart rate and then you’ve got Red Bull which is speeding it up, so it doesn’t know what it’s doing. Slowing down. Speeding up.”

Focus group participant

Potentially as a result of news articles\(^3\) at the time of the focus groups around the calorific value of alcoholic drinks, participants also

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\(^3\) For example: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-29821860
raised concern over the high number of calories a night out could potentially involve.

“There were some implications of health when you were drinking as well, because you were more likely to be eating fatty food and calories...”

**Focus group participant**

Just over half of respondents also report taking risks with their personal safety (such as walking home alone) as a result of drinking alcohol (e.g. 54.1%, n=1800 at baseline), and approximately a quarter of respondents revealed having unprotected sex following consumption of alcohol (e.g. 26.9%, n=895 at baseline). 29.9% (at baseline, n=994) also reported regretting a decision to engage in sexual activity.

Focus group participants elaborated on the risks they had taken with their personal safety as a result of alcohol consumption.

“I walked home like through Canal Street like through all these like dark alleyways by myself like falling all over the place like anything could have happened and it wasn’t until the next day that I realised just like how dangerous it was. It was crazy.”

**Focus group participant**

**Impacts: Study and paid work**

Respondents to the surveys reported an impact on their educational experience, with over half of respondents to the pre-wave survey reporting to have missed a seminar / lecture / class at university as a result of drinking alcohol (e.g. 56.2%, n=1638 at follow-up).

Coupled with this, the focus group participants reported that alcohol consumption has an impact on their academic performance beyond the formal teaching requirements, due to being hungover and unable to study:

“I’ve had it where I knew the next day I wouldn’t have a lecture. I’ve tried to do work and my brain is just so slow and dopey and the concentration level is so bad, it’s just like…it’s pointless.”

**Focus group participant**

For the focus group participants, concern over missing academic commitments was a major influence on limiting their alcohol consumption. Indirect consequences of alcohol consumption were also identified, for example, over-spending on alcohol meaning fewer funds available for course books. Others, however, were motivated to drink as a means of stress-relief due to course commitments and requirements.

“If I drank, I’d worry that I’d miss lectures. It’s a bit more important than just getting drunk. What’s the point of paying so much money if you’re not going to show up or not...”

**Focus group participant**

**Impacts: Crime and antisocial behaviour**

The research was also designed to gain an assessment of levels of experience of crime and anti-social behaviour, either as a victim or a perpetrator.

From the perspective of a perpetrator, the majority of respondents reported that they had not experienced any of the consequences of alcohol consumption identified (e.g. 63.1%, n=2031 at baseline).

For those that did identify as a perpetrator of crime, the most common experience reported was getting into fights and arguments, either with people they know (e.g. 23.5%, n=758 at baseline) or with strangers (e.g. 19.9%, n=642 at baseline). Almost 10% (9.7%, n=311 at baseline) also reported causing damage to where they live.

A low percentage of respondents report that these experiences had translated into getting in trouble with the police (e.g. 2.6%, n=74 at follow-up) and even fewer have resulted in respondents gaining a criminal record (e.g. 0.8%, n=24 at follow-up).

From the perspective of being a victim of crime, around 10% reported being a victim of crime (e.g. 8.2% (n=274) at baseline).

The most frequently reported experience amongst those who identify as victims of crime is verbal abuse (e.g. 55.7%, n=152 at baseline). Two fifths also report having personal items such as a wallet or phone stolen (e.g. 40.3%, n=83 at follow-up). Over a third of respondents also reported experiencing physical abuse (e.g. 38.2%, n=121 at mid-point) or harassment / intimidation (e.g. 39.2%, n=107 at baseline). Over 10% report experiencing sexual assault (e.g. 14.2%, n=45 at mid-point).

The female focus group participants reported a greater sense of vulnerability whilst drinking alcohol. Participants commonly reported unwanted attention from males in settings such as nightclubs and bars, requiring action to be...
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taken. In some cases these experiences included sexual assault and attempted rape, and were linked to increased vulnerability as a result of alcohol consumption.

“One of the times I got really drunk, you could say I was sexually assaulted. I didn’t know at the time, but I was. I definitely made an effort not to get that drunk again because I was paralytic and I couldn’t walk for myself. I’ve never been that drunk again because I know that I don’t want that to happen to me again.”

Focus group participant

Just under half of respondents identifying as victims of crime stated that they reported these experiences to the police (e.g. 47.9%, n=123 at baseline), however, a similar proportion (e.g. 44.7%, n=115 baseline) did not report their experiences to anyone.

Participants in one focus group reflected on the increased likelihood of being a victim of crime when under the influence of alcohol, but also on the difficulty being under the influence may cause in terms of reporting their experiences to the police.

“Yes, if something happens to you the police wouldn’t take you as seriously because they see you’re drunk, and you might not be able to recollect every single detail, and they might think you’re making up something.”

Focus group participant
Reducing impacts through responsible consumption
Reducing impacts through responsible consumption

Personal coping strategies

Survey respondents reported taking steps to limit their drinking, with almost three quarters (e.g. 75.8% (n=2249) at follow-up) reporting that ‘nowadays they think more about their behaviour when they drink than they used to’, and two thirds agree that ‘pacing themselves when drinking (e.g. drinking soft drinks in between alcoholic drinks) allows them to have a better night out for longer’ (e.g. 62.2% (n=1847) at follow-up).

The two most common practices amongst respondents include making sure they eat before or when drinking (e.g. 83.1% (n=2753) at baseline), and having one or two nights off drinking in the week (e.g. 78.8% (n=2604) at baseline), respectively stating that this is something they do regularly. Over two thirds of respondents (e.g. 72.1% (n=3028) at mid-point) report that they have taken into account their course activities when planning a night out, however, the success of this approach should be questioned, with almost 60% reporting to have missed university commitments as a result of drinking alcohol.

Respondents also revealed using financial mechanisms to control their drinking, such as setting a spending limit (e.g. 63.4%, n=2669 at mid-point) or leaving cash cards at home (e.g. 41.2%, n=1735 at mid-point).

“Like I take out…if I take out my bankcard, I’ll just go crazy, but I just take out like 20 quid and then how pissed I get is how pissed I get.”

Focus group participant

There is also evidence, however, of participants in the focus groups specifically avoiding actions believed to limit the chance of getting drunk.

“I have to eat before. I’ll get too drunk and I’ll be so bad.”

Focus group participant

“It depends though because it makes the night a bit cheaper though as well if you can get drunk quicker by not eating. You don’t have to buy as many drinks.”

Focus group participant

Promoting responsible consumption

The research has also sought to gain insight from students at the pilot partnerships on the elements which could contribute to successful behaviour change, with the aim of understanding how interventions can be designed and delivered.

Respondents overwhelmingly agree that those who are drinking are responsible for safe drinking at university (e.g. 94.4% (n=3568) at baseline). Approximately a fifth of respondents see a role for students’ union staff and officers to promote safe drinking. Some focus group respondents identified a stronger role for the university, seeing the need for sanctions to be enforced to limit irresponsible alcohol consumption and its associated behaviours. Suggestions for appropriate interventions by research participants include:

- Increased number and frequency of events and social activities not based around alcohol consumption.
- Developing alcohol-free spaces on campus, for example, through a café-culture, avoiding the use of the word ‘alternative’ and ‘non-alcoholic’ in advertising these spaces.
- Avoiding drinks promotion.
- Considering tools such as breathalysers.
- Enabling students to develop an awareness of the volume of alcohol they’re consuming.

“Like I take out...if I take out my bankcard, I’ll just go crazy, but I just take out like 20 quid and then how pissed I get is how pissed I get.”

Focus group participant

“Like I take out...if I take out my bankcard, I’ll just go crazy, but I just take out like 20 quid and then how pissed I get is how pissed I get.”

Focus group participant

“A pint of water and two paracetamol before you go to bed.”

Focus group participant

“A pint of water and two paracetamol before you go to bed.”

Focus group participant