## EXPLORING STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF AND EXPERIENCES WITH ALCOHOL DURING THE TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY AND ACROSS THE FIRST YEAR

Background: Recent studies suggest binge drinking rates are high among university students in the UK. It has been suggested that though many students arrive at university with established drinking patterns, freshers’ week (FW) serves as an introduction to the university drinking culture, and there are many non-drinkers who may feel excluded from this. The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which students’ views of and experiences with alcohol change as they transition to university and across their first academic year.

Methods: First year undergraduates entering a large UK university in September 2016 who completed an online Students’ Union welfare survey in August 2016 were invited to participate in a set of three interviews across the academic year. Thirty-two students (16 drinkers, 16 abstainers) were randomly selected to take part. 28 interviews were completed in the two weeks following FW, 26 at the end of the first semester and 20 at the end of the second semester. Equal numbers of drinkers and abstainers were interviewed at each stage. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using the Framework approach.

Results: Most drinkers came to university with the view that getting drunk was acceptable; some already had an established pattern of regular binge drinking. Upon arrival at university drinking became a more frequent feature for all, for some occurring on a near-daily basis during FW. Most students reported drinking in higher quantities. This in part appeared to be driven by students’ expectations that university socialising is centralised around drinking, as well as the provision of daily nightclub events by the Students’ Union which received more promotion over non-drinking focused social opportunities prior to and during FW. Alcohol remained a frequent part of socialising after FW, with a continued emphasis on drinking opportunities over alternative activities. Several abstainers reported feeling socially excluded due to the dearth of non-drinking focused social opportunities across the year, although some were able to quickly form friendships with other non-drinkers. Both drinkers and abstainers highlighted a need for there to be less emphasis on drinking throughout the year.

Conclusion: Although many students come to university with established drinking patterns and expectations, the environment fosters binge drinking at the start of and throughout the academic year. Although this study was based on one university, the findings corroborate those found at others. They will be used to create recommendations on how to reduce problematic drinking in this population.

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