

Evaluation of Drinkaware's Alcohol Education Programme by
Maynooth University - Year Two

Commentary (2020)

DRINKAWARE

Background

As the national charity whose mission is to prevent and reduce the misuse of alcohol and tackle underage drinking, Drinkaware launched its Alcohol Education Programme in post-primary schools in 2017.

The Alcohol Education Programme is an evidence-informed manualised programme for junior cycle that is informed by best practice national and international researchⁱ and by research with parentsⁱⁱ, teachers and studentsⁱⁱⁱ.

The need for a primary prevention programme to delay the age of first drink, is further evident in Drinkaware Index data (2019), which shows that Irish children are having their first drink at an increasingly younger age.^{iv}

In keeping with the charity's commitment to evaluation and evidence, Maynooth University's Centre for Mental Health Research is conducting an independent three-year longitudinal study on the effectiveness of the programme; this report outlines the findings from Year Two. The student sample on which the Year Two study was based, comprised of 493 mainly 14-year-old young people (49% boys, 51% girls) from 19 schools located in various parts of the country including Dublin, Galway, Laois, Leitrim, Limerick, Longford, Mayo and Tipperary.

This evaluation is led by Professor Sinead McGilloway^v, Founder/Director of the Centre for Mental Health and Community Research at Maynooth University's Department of Psychology, in collaboration with Dr John Weafer of Weafer and Associates.

The Year One evaluation report is available at drinkaware.ie

Note: Students were approximately 13 years of age at Year One, and 14 years at Year Two.

Objectives

As with Year One, the Maynooth University Year Two evaluation has three objectives.

1. Assess the nature, extent and experience of alcohol use amongst a sample of Second year students (circa 13-14 years)

There is considerable data already available regarding underage alcohol consumption, but capturing teens' experience by exploring the 'how', 'when', 'where' and 'why' of alcohol consumption, and indeed of abstinence, provides more holistic insights into their experiences, and therefore into how they can be best supported and enabled to make good choices. Three key findings emerged in this respect.

Firstly, with regard to consumption, approximately six in ten pupils (59%) said that they did not drink alcohol. This is almost identical to the proportion who, at baseline one year earlier, responded in a similar way (60%), thereby indicating very little change over time. Likewise, the proportion of non-drinking students who said they intend to delay drinking for as long as possible, also remained fairly consistent from Year One to Year Two (although with a slight reduction from baseline).

In Year Two, four in ten pupils had drunk alcohol at some stage, albeit only lightly for the most part: 6% had drunk alcohol at least once a month and 30% said they drank rarely or had done so on special occasions.

The vast majority, at 59%, said they don't drink. This was down from 65% in Year One, which is arguably inevitable as the students moved closer - from 13 to 14 years of age - to the average age at which Irish children have their first drink (15 years).

Secondly, more than half of these students (57%) had their first drink in their or a friend's home. The fact that underage drinking is being initiated in the home setting is consistent with other international research (including the recent HBSC report)^{vi}, and signposts a clear need for parents and adults to act as appropriate role models.

Thirdly, it is encouraging to note that a similar proportion of students in both Year One (24%) and Year Two (25%) said that they intend to delay drinking for as long as possible, whilst approximately half indicated that they do not know when they will start drinking. Intentions to drink are an important factor in subsequently influencing drinking behaviour.

Of the 59% Year Two students who said they did not drink, three main reasons were reported:

- 'No interest' (47% in Year Two - up from 30% pre-programme)
- 'Too young' (29% in Year Two - up from 23% pre-programme)
- 'Alcohol is bad for you' (24% in Year Two - down from 27% pre-programme)

Overall, the results in relation to the patterns of alcohol use, suggest that the AEP played an important role in 'stabilising' the proportion of students who do not drink alcohol and those who intend to delay drinking for as long as possible. This highlights the importance of the programme in empowering young people over time to develop sustained knowledge and understanding around alcohol consumption (a key aim of the AEP).

2. Investigate the students' attitudes and beliefs toward, and knowledge of, alcohol

The importance and the interplay between attitudes, beliefs and knowledge is a key factor and significant with regard to addressing influencing the emotional, cognitive and awareness aspects of underage alcohol consumption. All have a part to play in influencing current and future behaviour, and as a primary prevention programme, Drinkaware is focused on how to encourage and enable positive behaviour with regard to alcohol.

Overall, the Year Two findings indicate sustained levels of healthy (negative) attitudes towards alcohol. For example, identical proportions of students (39%) at both Year One and Year Two students agreed that *"It's a good feeling to refrain from drinking alcohol"* and approximately one in five (19%) of both cohorts agreed that *"Irish law should not allow the sale of alcohol to under 18s"*.

For any primary prevention programme, it is critical to know what the students believe, and to this end the findings regarding reasons why young people (U18) should not drink are valuable:

- 46% of students said that alcohol *"...is bad for their mental and physical health"*, representing an increase of 4% from Year One and a 10% increase from before programme delivery

- One in 10 consistently across both Year One and Year Two findings said alcohol consumption can “...affect school performance” and “...affect brain development” - both substantially higher than pre-programme of 6% and 4% respectively.

Knowledge in terms of alcohol is not just awareness, but also familiarity with and understanding of the facts regarding alcohol. The findings from Year Two indicate sustained levels of students’ knowledge and understanding of alcohol when compared with Year One findings, as well as substantial improvements when compared with the pre-programme (baseline) levels:

In particular, the evidence of the positive effect of the Alcohol Education Programme on student’s knowledge of the negative impacts, harms and consequences of alcohol consumption, is especially relevant. After completing the first and second years of the programme:

- 50% of students said they “know a lot about the consequences of underage drinking”, reflecting a 32% increase on the baseline (pre-programme) 38%
- 43% of students said they “know a lot about the impact of alcohol on individual’s mental health”, which is similar to the first year finding (44%) and is almost double the baseline 23%
- 43% of students said they “know a lot about the impact of alcohol on overall health & wellbeing”, similar to the first year finding (42%) and is almost double the baseline 22%
- 28-30% of students said they “know a lot about the facts about alcohol”, three times higher than the baseline 10%.

However, there is some evidence that whilst those who participated in the programme had overwhelmingly healthy (negative) attitudes toward alcohol, a small but increasing proportion of the 40% who indicated at baseline (pre-programme) that, at some stage, they had consumed alcohol, appear to be engaged in more frequent and potentially harmful drinking at Year Two (e.g. consuming more drinks in one sitting) and were beginning to develop less healthy attitudes.

3. Assess the perceived effectiveness, experience and acceptability of the AEP in the second year of its delivery in participating schools

The positive shifts in the data highlighted above offer a measure of Drinkaware’s Alcohol Education Programme’s effectiveness and suggest there is value in incremental education and awareness, at a key age for post primary students.

In addition, the marked increase from 36% to 84% in student’s understanding of ‘*The relationship between alcohol and wellbeing*’ indicates a crucial attitudinal and knowledge shift attributable to Drinkaware’s Alcohol Education Programme. This is a pre-requisite for future positive behaviour - the ultimate end goal of this programme:

“Being able to realise your potential, has resilience to deal with everyday stresses of life, takes care of his/her physical health and has a sense of purpose, belonging and connection to a wider community” (WHO definition of ‘Wellbeing’)^{vii}

The programme was created to address a clearly identified need for alcohol education, as flagged in research with teachers, parents and students themselves. Their voice and views were, and are, hugely important to the programme and the Year Two findings include their views and experiences of the programme:

Consistently across the two years, two-thirds of students rated the programme as “good”, “very good” or “excellent”. The structure of the programme and its content evidently strikes a chord with students as the elements they liked most were the information (19%), the consequences/dangers (14%) and the group activities (9%).

The fact that two-thirds of students stated that they would recommend the programme indicates its acceptability and positivity as a learning experience, and mirrors the views expressed by teachers in the evaluation.

As with Year One’s findings and feedback, students made suggestions that included more interactive activities, visual materials and information on the law regarding alcohol. These findings are being used to inform the ongoing development of the Alcohol Education Programme.

After parents, teachers are the adults with the most influence on students, and the adults who witness the impact of alcohol on students. For this reason, and in line with **The Department of Education (DES) Circular 0043/2018**^{viii}, the programme is delivered by teachers, all of whom receive comprehensive training in advance.

An overwhelming 90% of teachers who participated in the Year Two evaluation rated the programme highly or very highly, with the remaining 10% giving it a moderate rating. There were no “low” or “very low” ratings. When asked to explain why they were so positive towards the programme, teachers mentioned the following:

- ‘...excellent resources’
- ‘It is a well-thought out programme, which has a lot of topics that students would not have connected with alcohol (e.g. social skills, communication, resilience etc.)’
- ‘It is a practical programme that is well researched and presented’
- ‘...incorporates a refreshing approach; the videos are very useful’
- ‘It is one of the best training programmes around.’

The reasons they expressed a need for the programme was Ireland’s harmful culture on underage drinking, young people’s low level of awareness and the importance of educating young people on alcohol.

Evidence of progress but caution still required

The evaluation highlights the important role of alcohol education and this programme in seeking to influence behaviour and challenge social norms and attitudes while increasing awareness around the negative impact of underage drinking. This is in line with the Department of Health’s prevention and early intervention strategy on alcohol and drug use in Ireland.^{ix}

However, the findings did show attitudes towards alcohol changing in a negative direction in a small minority of students and it must be acknowledged that there is still much to do with regard to delaying the age of the first drink as evident in findings such as:

- Students who said they would never start drinking dropped from 11% to 7% between years one and two, possibly indicating their progression from 13 years to 14 years (i.e. the typical age of first drink in Ireland is 15 years)
- The main reasons why students said young people drink (both of which have increased since prior to programme) are “peer pressure” and “for fun”.

It is widely acknowledged that we need a culture shift away from the normalisation of underage drinking, which requires a change in attitude, knowledge and behaviour, all of which can be supported by effective alcohol education.

The need for Drinkaware’s Alcohol Education Programme as a primary prevention to delay the age of first drink, is evident in the Index data that shows that the trajectory of the average age at which Irish children are having their first drink is getting younger.

There is no place for alcohol in childhood, and through the collective efforts of Irish society, from educators to parents to charities such as Drinkaware, we can make a difference to the next generation’s relationship with alcohol. What years one and two of Maynooth University’s independent evaluation of the Alcohol Education Programme suggests, is that this Drinkaware programme has a positive and relevant contribution to make to that change.

ⁱ School Prevention Programmes and Alcohol: An Overview with Recommendations by Professor Mark Morgan (2016)

ⁱⁱ National Parental Attitudes Towards Underage Drinking in Ireland 2015-2017. Available at drinkaware.ie

ⁱⁱⁱ Alcohol Education: Is it Meeting the Needs of Junior Cycle Students? Available at drinkaware.ie

^{iv} The Drinkaware Index 2019: Analysing Hazardous Drinking in Ireland. Available at drinkaware.ie

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^{vi} The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2018. Available at nuigalway.ie

^{vii} Referenced in Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023 (Department of Education and Skills). Available at gov.ie

^{viii} Dept. of Education and Skills, Circular 0043/2018. Available at education.ie

^{ix} Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery - A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025. Available at gov.ie

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