

Reducing Alcohol – Related Harm in Irish Colleges

A Qualitative Evaluation of the College Alcohol Policy Initiative



Introduction

In early 2001, a National Working Group on Alcohol Consumption in Higher Education was convened at the University of Limerick with a view to drawing up guidelines for policies aimed at the reduction of alcohol-related harm in third-level colleges in Ireland. Twenty colleges - all seven of the country's universities and thirteen institutes of technology - were represented on the Working Group, which also consulted with the Union of Students in Ireland and with the Social Aspects Committee of the Drinks Industry Group. The Working Group's report, *Framework for Developing a College Alcohol Policy*, was launched by the Minister for Health and Children in October 2001. An initiative of this kind had been recommended in the *National Alcohol Policy – Ireland (1996)* and was now being attempted against the background of the dramatic increases in *per capita* Irish alcohol consumption which had occurred throughout the 1990s. Its necessity may be also argued from the findings of the College Lifestyle and Attitudinal National (CLAN) Survey which accompany this present report.

Aims and Methods of this Evaluation

This report presents the summarised findings of a qualitative, process evaluation of the college alcohol policy initiative, carried out in 2004 with a view to examining ongoing progress on the part of third-level colleges in their attempts to institute effective alcohol policies.

A comprehensive review of the research and policy literature on college alcohol policies was carried out so as to provide a wider context for this Irish initiative, and the following specific methodologies were then used in conducting this evaluation:

- content analysis of policy documents drafted in participating colleges;
- focus group discussions with college staff who had played a key role in drafting and implementing their own institution's alcohol policy;
- individual interviews with stakeholders representing student interests and a representative of the drinks industry;
- case studies of three different colleges and their alcohol policies which were intended to reflect the spectrum of college experiences in this sphere.

This combination of different data-gathering methods, which is referred to in qualitative research as "triangulation" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998), is intended to provide findings from a number of perspectives, thereby giving the study a breadth, depth and balance which would not be possible using just a single method.

Reviewing the Literature

A review of English language literature on the subject of college alcohol policies reveals that by far the greatest amount of published work on this topic originates in the United States of America, where a majority of undergraduates appear to be below the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) of 21 and where there is a particular concern with drink-driving issues. However, whether emanating from the USA or from countries where the MLDA is 18, the research and policy literature is absolutely and pragmatically clear that, in societies where alcohol consumption is normative for adults, colleges cannot realistically be expected to prevent students from drinking; instead, it is proposed that college authorities should try to reduce a spectrum of both acute and chronic health and social harms stemming from student drinking. Although the term "binge drinking" is ambiguous and of limited value in preventive programmes (Lederman et al., 2003), there is consensus on the particular risks associated with the practice – by no means exclusive to students - of drinking a large amount (conventionally defined as 5 drinks in a row for men and 4 drinks in a row for women) during one drinking occasion, usually with the intention of becoming intoxicated.

Within the research literature (for instance, Roche and Watts, 1999), student drinking is commonly discussed in the context of the major lifecycle transition involved in the move from a second to a third-level educational institution. From this perspective, colleges are not mere education mills where the entire focus is on academic learning, the passing of examinations or the acquisition of qualifications. Instead, college life is widely viewed as providing young people, who are no longer children but who are still outside the workforce, with a unique status and with the opportunity to socialise with peers and have fun; and part of this fun commonly involves drinking. Although most heavy-drinking students can be expected to mature out of this habit as they progress through their college careers and, later still, take on a range of work and other personal responsibilities (Schulenberg and Maggs, 2002), this is not to suggest that there is no necessity for college alcohol policies. On the contrary, the negative consequences of student drinking (which are considered in detail in the accompanying CLAN report) are generally regarded as justifying the drafting and implementation of college policies aimed at reducing this spectrum of harm.

In line with the broader public health approach to alcohol-related problems (Edwards et al., 1994; Babor et al., 2003), it is suggested that colleges can only hope to be successful when they employ a *policy mix* which combines a range of individual and environmental prevention strategies. Perhaps the most commonly used individual strategy is that which aims to prevent alcohol-related problems by educating drinkers about the risks involved in alcohol consumption and urging them to be moderate in their drinking habits; these educational approaches are philosophically attractive in that they are not paternalistic but instead respect the right of adults to make their own decisions. Such strategies would seem particularly suited to third-level colleges where students are expected to be more autonomous and self-directed than would be the norm in primary and secondary educational systems. However, research on the outcomes of education of this kind (Interim Report of the Strategic Task Force on Alcohol, 2002; Larimer and Crance, 2002) has consistently found that while it may increase knowledge and influence attitudes, it is largely unsuccessful in changing actual drinking practices, and that it is unrealistic to expect it to counteract other environmental forces which normalise and facilitate regular, heavy drinking. *Social norms marketing* (Perkins, 2003) is a relatively new form of alcohol education devised in the USA and aimed at fostering less risky drinking in colleges by educating students about how moderate peer drinking norms actually are. Although its proponents claim considerable success for social norms marketing, the results of the first national evaluation (Wechsler et al., 2003) did not support these claims. Public health advocates (American Medical Association, 2002) generally tend to view drinks industry involvement in third-level colleges as being based on commercial

motivation, and they are particularly sceptical of social norms marketing in view of drinks industry support for this new approach to alcohol education. The other major individual strategy which features in the literature refers to the use of health and counselling services for screening and identifying students already involved in hazardous or harmful drinking habits; there is now consensus on the value of brief or opportunistic interventions with such students (Dimeff et al., 1999).

In the micro-environment of third-level colleges, as in the wider society, environmental strategies for alcohol problem prevention are those which focus on the way in which individual decision-making is influenced by promotion, price and availability of alcohol. In a college context, the aim of such strategies is to create an environment which facilitates the making of sensible drinking choices by students. The most commonly advocated strategies (Toomey and Wagenaar, 2002) include: controlling drinks industry sponsorship of student societies and events, particularly when such sponsorship comes in the form of free product; restricting alcohol promotions which encourage rapid or heavy drinking; limiting alcohol advertising on campus; providing Responsible Serving of Alcohol (RSA) training for serving staff in college bars; providing social and recreational facilities which do not involve alcohol on campus or in student residences; and creating and enforcing a disciplinary code which does not accept intoxication as an excuse for aggressive or destructive behaviour on campus or in residences. Research support for the effectiveness of environmental policies is generally much stronger than that for any of the individual strategies but, since they involve social controls and are aimed at all students rather than at a sub-group identified as being high-risk, they cannot be expected to gain automatic support from either students or staff (Snow et al., 2003). It is also recognised within the health promotion literature that without the mobilisation and maintenance of broad support networks – including academics, student unions, student service systems and senior managements – for such environmental policies, they are unlikely to succeed in reducing alcohol-related problems on campus (Tsouros et al., 1998; De Jong and Langford, 2002).

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College Alcohol Policy Documents — A Content Analysis

Content analysis, as the name implies, is a documentary method aimed at producing a qualitative and/or quantitative analysis of the content of written text, pictures, films or other media. It utilizes a methodological approach and standards and principles similar to those found in all methods of social research (Sarantakos, 1998). In this instance, the documents for analysis are the written alcohol policies produced by colleges in response to the publication of the national framework document. The number of colleges involved had now increased to 22, of which 18 provided written alcohol policies for analysis. Of those, 13 policies had received full official approval within their institutions and were described as being fully operational, while the remaining five were either in the process of being completed or were awaiting formal institutional ratification.

The Policy Formulation Process

Almost without exception, individual policy documents contained little or no detail on how these policies had been produced. Just one document described the policy formulation process as having gone through a number of different phases. Generally, these documents mentioned the policy formulation process in a rather cursory way, with only four of the 18 documents analysed commenting specifically on the work which had been done to create partnerships, either within campuses or with external groups.

Just four of the policy documents gave an explicit commitment to carrying out research on the drinking habits of their students so as to develop a profile against which policy success might be evaluated, while a fifth presented the findings from a completed qualitative study of staff and student attitudes towards alcohol. Other documents contained somewhat less definitive suggestions as to how student drinking habits might be monitored.

Policy Content

Analysis of the content of these 18 documents clearly demonstrates the extent to which they were influenced by the guidelines laid down in the national framework document. All contained measures aimed at controlling the advertisement and marketing of alcohol on campus, and at curbing the role of the drinks industry in sponsoring student societies or specific student events. Most contained references to the importance of alcohol education and awareness but, with the exception of seven colleges which listed specific educational initiatives, these references seemed vague and aspirational. Amongst the specific educational proposals were the following:

- publicising of the college alcohol policy and promotion of low-risk drinking through student handbooks, the student press or student radio stations, email, poster campaigns and notice boards;
- advertising of the alcohol policy during orientation / freshers' week or during welfare week;
- provision of study skills and alcohol awareness programmes for students;
- training college tutors in alcohol awareness.

Although 14 of the 18 documents reviewed contained reference to the provision of alcohol-free alternatives for students, again just a few had concrete proposals for how this might be done; these included proposals to arrange lunchtime, evening or late-night entertainment in alcohol-free venues such as juice bars, or simply the provision of television to allow for viewing of major sporting events outside a pub setting.

Finally, most policies reiterated the importance of providing support services for students who are beginning to experience difficulties with their alcohol consumption, and allocated primary responsibility for this function to student health and counselling services, and to chaplaincies.

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College Alcohol Policies – Focus Group Discussion Data

Two focus groups were held with college staff who had been involved in writing their own colleges' alcohol policies and who, in many instances, had also served on the Working Group which drafted the national framework document. A total of fourteen college staff – including student service administrators, nursing and medical staff from student health centres, health promotion workers, chaplains and academics – participated in these focus groups, each of which lasted for an hour and a half. The aim of the focus group in social research (Bloor et al., 2001) is to create a group dynamic so that participants do not just respond as individuals to issues raised by the group moderator but spark off one another spontaneously, thereby generating richer and more detailed data than might be forthcoming from individual interviews. In this instance, the focus group worked well in that participants were happy to have an opportunity to discuss their own individual and institutional experiences in creating college alcohol policies and to compare notes with colleagues from other institutions. Again, analysis of transcribed data from these discussions is guided by the main themes of the framework document.

Drafting and Formally Approving College Alcohol Policies

Focus group data revealed that there was no single or uniform process for drafting and formally approving a college alcohol policy but that different colleges had approached this task in different ways, both procedurally and in terms of staff involved in this process. It was reported that the initiative in creating college alcohol policies had been variously taken by student service administrators or student service professionals (including doctors, nurses, counsellors and chaplains), by health promotion groups or by members of academic staff – almost always in collaboration with Student Unions. What also emerged from these groups was a clear sense that the process of drafting the alcohol policy had generated an energy and enthusiasm which was seen as important in its own right, whether the policy was formally ratified by college authorities or whether there was a delay in this process. The diversity, and complexity, of approaches to devising college alcohol policies is illustrated in the following quotes:

The Director of Student Affairs actually wrote the policy, and various people from student affairs – including counselling, careers, retention, chaplains and access services, and of course the Students Union – had an input, but he wrote the policy.
[Student Affairs Administrator]

I came to it slightly by accident... I looked at some of the policies in the different colleges and I drafted one for [name of college] and passed it along to the Student Services, the Sports Officers and the Students Union; so I went to each individually and got their opinion.
[Academic]

Student Participation in Drafting & Implementing College Alcohol Policies

In general, focus group members reported that the student population had agreed with and supported the drafting of college alcohol policies; no coherent or sustained opposition by students to this process was reported, and such objections as were made were largely concerned with the threatened withdrawal of drinks industry funding for student societies or specific student events. These quotes are broadly representative of the overall tone of group discussion on student participation in the policy process:

Students were happy to be part of it and didn't object to any of the elements of it; [there were] no issues, the Ents Officer also participated and was happy enough.
[Student Services Manager]

After each drafting, we gave it out to students and said: “come back”, and they would come back with ideas. It was interesting; we found that they didn’t mind too much about the alcohol as such; it was the finance and where they were going to get it.
[College Chaplain]

Alcohol Control Strategies and Alcohol Education

The national framework document, in line with evidence-based public health approaches to the reduction of alcohol-related harm, advocated a range of environmental control strategies, as opposed to traditional, individual alcohol education strategies. For college staff charged with the responsibility of devising policies incorporating such control strategies, there are perhaps two main difficulties which arise. The first of these is that it cannot be assumed that in the broader college communities there is much familiarity with or understanding of the evaluative literature on alcohol harm reduction or problem prevention – a literature which is unequivocal in its conclusion that education or persuasion has only a limited role to play and in its support for environmental control strategies. The second difficulty is that, lacking this grasp of the research evidence, college staff are intuitively likely to favour educational strategies, and to regard control strategies which challenge the accessibility and normality of alcohol on campus as being of a kill-joy or paternalistic nature. On the whole, focus group discussion revealed some ongoing policy controversy on these themes but no major rejection of control strategies; as the following quotes show, staff criticism of environmental strategies tended to be based anecdotally on reminiscence of their own student days rather than on the research literature:

Sometimes we get negative feedback, probably in a humorous way, from academic staff talking about their college days and the amount of drink they drank – and that we [now] have a police state You know: “ what harm did it do them; you have to have excess time and then move on”.
[Student Health Service Nurse]

Just to comment on the academics who drank when they were in college: [they] were just a couple of pints of Guinness drinkers and not really into the Alcopops , and they’re not really aware of the Smirnoff Ice on draught thing; and if you said any of that to them, they would be shocked to hear of the quantities students are drinking now – they have more money now.
[Student Services Administrator]

Focus group discussion also revealed that, in the main, participants accepted that, despite its popularity, alcohol education had only a modest impact on reducing harm and, furthermore, that they were prepared to challenge colleagues, student leaders or opinion-formers who argued that the only necessary or appropriate prevention strategy was to inform or educate students about the nature of alcohol-related harm. It was also acknowledged that educational programmes – whether concerned solely with alcohol or with broader health promotional matters – did not appear to interest students or attract large audiences. Discussion on the relative popularity of these two contrasting approaches to problem prevention was, as may be gathered from the following quotes, lively:

The student press people have a great belief in education, and that came out in the initial alcohol policy: the phrase that “they are adults” and we should just give them the information and let them [get on with it]; ... And I have given them [college authorities] data and, being academics, they have to accept scientific evidence.
[Student Health Service Director]

Now I’m not saying education on its own [works], but I think it needs to be a component of it, if it’s to be successful.
[Student Service Administrator]

Our health promotion week: the actual number of students who attended were few and far between. ... It was embarrassing; we had to round up students to attend, and they weren’t interested. The majority of our students are working on average 10 to 20 hours a week, [including] their Saturdays and Sundays.
[Academic]

However, while agreeing that traditional lectures and awareness-raising seminars were largely unattractive to students, respondents still expressed some belief in the value of education and described a range of alternative educational strategies – such as poster campaigns, information stands and various other “gimmicks” – which might have a greater appeal to students:

The students won’t generally come to something directly about alcohol or drugs...so we sneak it in...they’ll pick up stuff and read it as long as nobody sees them.
[Health Promotion Officer]

Although respondents conceded that educational programmes on their own had little effect, they still suggested a number of new ideas for future educational and informational initiatives; these included text messaging, use of screensavers and health promotion websites, and the provision of information through lifestyle seminars, study skills, stress management and alternative therapies and fitness regimes.

Encouraging Alternatives, Non-Drinking and International Students

The provision of alcohol-free social and recreational alternatives was one of the major themes discussed in the national framework document but, as already pointed out, almost none of the individual college policies gave any indication of concrete commitment to this ideal. Not surprisingly, therefore, focus group discussion largely confirmed that more effort and funding was needed within colleges to provide students with venues and events outside of a drinking environment. It was reported that some colleges had common rooms which did not serve alcohol, but all felt that more could be done in this regard. There were reports of isolated initiatives - for instance, one college had banned alcohol on campus for Rag Week, while another had provided dance lessons one night a week. – but by and large discussion on this topic was discouraging:

We still can't give them an alternative ... in the evenings, in an alcohol-free area.
[Student Services Administrator]

It was felt particularly that international students (and to some extent Irish students who were either total abstainers or moderate drinkers) were in danger of being excluded from social and recreational activities which tended to revolve around heavy drinking scenes, and it was reported that some colleges had begun to hold "International Week" or "International Days" which largely consisted of alcohol-free events and were aimed at including international students in the social life of the college:

I think there is probably a huge pressure on international students because they are excluded.
[Student Health Service Director]

We have three days of international student days and they show our students different cultures and that, without alcohol.
[Student Services Administrator]

Drinks Industry Links with Colleges

Focus group discussion confirmed that staff who worked on college alcohol policies had invariably accepted the public health position and viewed the relationship of the industry with students as being predatory rather than benign or altruistic. Some participants described offers from the industry to support campus alcohol education programmes (including the controversial social norms marketing programmes referred to above in the literature review) which they contrasted with offers of support extended to them from the Health Promotion Unit (HPU) of the Department of Health and Children. Perhaps of all the themes discussed this was the one on which participants were most emphatic and unanimous, as indicated in the following quotes:

I think all we have done is reclaim our colleges from the drinks industries, and we're back to where we started ten or fifteen years ago; and we're almost on a level playing field.....But I think the drinks companies are out there fighting back, and saying to students "we'd love to sponsor you".

[Academic]

Diageo had contacted the student health service committee looking to give them money for health promotion and, at the same time, we were aware that there were approaches to other colleges, as well, from similar groups. I felt strongly that the health promotion group shouldn't be influenced by the alcohol companies.

[Student Health Service Director]

I wanted to mention that I was approached by one of the drinks companies and offered money to conduct a pilot project on the social norms [approach]; and the drinks industry is very keen on promoting the social norms marketing, which makes me suspicious straight away.

[Health Promotion Officer]

There were also suggestions that students and colleges as a whole, especially student union representatives, had become sceptical of the drinks industry, and that attempts by the industry to insinuate itself back into a central position as sponsor of student activities would be successfully resisted:

I don't see the drinks companies coming back in the future, even if there is a vacuum...because of a more progressive, enlightened view.

[Student Services Administrator]

Yes; the initial shock of students not getting their easy sponsorship, once that dies down, they actually work to get other sponsorship.

[Student Services Administrator]

Yes, our own student welfare officer went to the MEAS conference and she could see [what the industry is doing].

[Student Health Service Director]

Off-Licences and Off-Campus Pubs

Despite this perception that college policies were successfully tackling aggressive alcohol promotion on campus, many focus group participants believed that external alcohol retailers had responded by devising new marketing strategies aimed at the student population. It was believed that there had been an increase in the number of off-licences in the vicinity of colleges, and that both off-licences and local pubs and clubs were advertising vigorously and effectively at the student market. This somewhat fatalistic view that colleges could never counter the marketing capacity of external retailers is reflected in the following quotes:

The only problem really is the local pub owners ... I've noticed that many of the students are getting text messages from the local pubs, so this is far more efficient and the information is being relayed directly to the students.

[Academic]

The number of off-licences that have sprung up around the place, the cheap deals and that's something that's hard to monitor....

[Student Services Administrator]

Institutional Ownership of College Alcohol Policies

The final, but obviously important, question to be looked at here is whether or not colleges have accepted full and ongoing corporate responsibility for these policies, as opposed to a mere nominal responsibility which really consists of leaving this issue to the relatively small and peripheral student services sectors. None of the colleges had yet carried out surveys to determine the level of awareness of the policy among staff and students, although a number had plans to do so. However, focus group participants expressed themselves as pleased with the extent to which their institutions had taken on this responsibility and were uniformly positive in their discussion of this question. It was reported that the advertising code and the sponsorship and promotion guidelines contained in the framework document – which had resource implications as well as the potential to create tensions between colleges and the drinks industry - had been enforced and adhered to in all colleges. One participant, whose college was still in the process of ratifying its alcohol policy, commented:

We still don't have a written document but there's a belief in the college that we do have a policy, which is very interesting ... it's generally accepted that there is no alcohol promotional advertising. [College Chaplain]

It was also acknowledged that colleges had adhered to the new codes governing drinks company sponsorship even when it was clear that this had led to funding problems:

I think that there's a very serious problem where funding has dropped...its clear to everybody that we need to fund the teams and the clubs.

[Academic]

Finally, with regard to institutional ownership, participants expressed themselves as satisfied that both students and college authorities had accepted responsibility for the new policies:

*We found it invaluable to have the President of the Students' Union [involved]; nearly every year [the Presidents] have taken responsibility.
[Student Health Service Nurse]*

*I think to a large extent the [college] community has ownership and I think the Board is behind it.
[Student Health Service Director]*

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College Case Studies, Student Union and Drinks Industry Perspectives

It would be unwise to form a judgement on the success of the college alcohol policy initiative solely on the basis of the views expressed in these focus groups, since these were the views of those most involved in and committed to this process. This section presents somewhat different perspectives, consisting of case studies of this process as it has evolved within three different colleges, as well as the views of two other important stakeholders, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and MEAS, the "social aspects organisation" established in 2002 by the Drinks Industry Group in Ireland.

In qualitative social research the case study method is most commonly used to provide detailed information on individual "cases"; such case studies are not as a rule presented on the basis that they are typical of the total class of institutions or individuals being studied, nor is it argued that information gleaned in this way is necessarily generalisable (Stake, 1998). In the present instance, it was thought useful to supplement information already presented on college alcohol policies - gathered by reading and analysing written policy statements and by conducting focus group interviews with those most responsible for them - with a small number of case studies. Time and resource limitations confined this to just three colleges: one of which was selected because it perceived itself to be "a drinking college", one which had no such view of itself but participated as part of the national initiative, and the third which entered the process quite belatedly in the wake of negative publicity concerning student drinking during rag week. Individual interviews with student service personnel were conducted and allowed for the gathering of in-depth and detailed information on the policy process within their own colleges. In addition, interviews with student union officers provided a student (or at least a student union) perspective which was otherwise missing. These three case studies will be presented here in summary form, following which the views of the USI and MEAS will also be presented.

College A (Case study compiled following interviews with: President of Student Union, Welfare Officer of Student Union, the Student Services Manager, and College Health Promotion Officer)

- This is a large university which sees itself as having a reputation for heavy student drinking and as being set in a “party town”. Anecdotal evidence from student health and counselling services, as well as a review of the takings from the college bar and a survey of student spending, would tend to support this view. There are specific worries about risky sexual behaviours and sexual assaults linked to student drinking, and attendance at Friday-morning lectures is reckoned to be poor because of Thursday-night drinking.
- Reaction to the college alcohol policy (which is closely modelled on the national framework document) is varied. Student services make the point that senior management, while nominally supportive, is too preoccupied with mainstream academic affairs to play an active and ongoing role in its implementation; this being the case, responsibility for the policy lies – and will continue to lie – with student services. Both the student union and student services note that management has not allocated adequate funding for the policy, which has meant, amongst other things, that there has been no development of alternative, alcohol-free facilities on campus.
- Student union officers participated in drafting the policy but believe its broad outlines had already been laid down at national level. While acknowledging that students drink heavily, both on and off campus, the student union is somewhat ambivalent about the new alcohol policy which, it suggests, patronises students. The student union also wonders whether closer monitoring of drinking on campus has had the effect of increasing off-campus drinking, some of which involves high-risk patterns – such as drinking spirits or tonic wines, bought relatively cheaply in off-licences and consumed at home, prior to going to pubs or clubs.
- Some student union and student service personnel still think that education and awareness-raising can play a major role in reducing related harm, while others disagree with this. It is not clear what awareness students have of the detail of the college alcohol policy. It was generally agreed that there are difficulties in changing drinking patterns which in many cases have been established prior to coming to college, and which are not unique to college students. Similarly, there are disagreements as to the wisdom of entering into partnerships with the drinks industry in the cause of prevention.

College B (Case study compiled following interviews with: President of Student Union, Welfare Officer of Student Union, and Student Service Manager)

- This is a medium-sized university which has not traditionally had a reputation for heavy student drinking. The college was represented on the national working group and subsequently drafted and formally approved a brief alcohol policy document, which is mainly concerned with restricting the number of free drinks which student societies can provide at functions within college, as well as the way in which such functions are advertised. Takings from the college bar have been down over the past few years and, anecdotally, there is much less day-time drinking in college than there used to be; this, however, is primarily attributed to the introduction of semesterisation and to the fact that a much greater proportion of students are now pursuing their first-choice academic options than previously, rather than to the introduction of the college alcohol policy.
- No serious opposition has been raised to the policy, which was drafted by student services in consultation with student societies and the student union, even though decreased profits from the college bar have resulted in substantial losses of income for student societies. A new common room which is to be alcohol-free is currently being built, but otherwise there are no plans for college investment in alternative events or facilities. Some alcohol awareness is carried out, but neither student services nor the student union seem convinced of its value.
- It was unanimously believed that local bars and off-licences had taken commercial advantage of the curtailment of drinks promotions on campus by targeting the student market, and there were fears that this might lead to riskier student drinking off campus, both at house parties and in pubs and clubs.

College C (Compiled following interviews with: the Student Health Service Nurse, the Chaplain, and the President / Welfare Officer of the Student Union)

- This is a medium-sized institute of technology which was not represented on the national working group and was relatively late to draft an alcohol policy; motivation for now doing so appears to have originated in adverse local publicity concerning student drinking during a recent Rag Week.
- A lengthy policy document has now been drafted, following a consultation process which involved academics, student services and the student union, as well as outside consultation with the regional health board and an Garda Síochána. Restrictions on advertising and sponsorship are already in force, although the policy as a whole has yet to be officially ratified.
- While acknowledging that a great deal of work has gone into the draft policy, student union and student service personnel were not convinced that college management has taken ownership of the process.
- Student drinking nights are described as starting with home consumption of drink bought in off-licences, followed by further drinking in a pub, followed – frequently – by yet more drinking in a club. Thursday night is the big student drinking night in this college and is commonly linked to poor attendance at lectures on Friday morning.
- At present this college has no bar on campus but, during the consultation process leading to the draft alcohol policy, there was interesting debate on the merits of including a bar in the college's building programme; while some would see such a development as encouraging student drinking, others have argued that on-campus drinking would be more closely monitored and safer than the drinking which currently goes on outside the campus. It was felt that at least some of the public nuisance problems associated with Rag Week drinking had been caused by irresponsible drinks promotions run by local publicans.
- There are plans to build on existing relationships with the regional health board addiction counselling and health promotion services so as to offer students more alcohol education and awareness.

The USI Perspective (Based on an interview with a senior office-holder with considerable student welfare experience)

- USI represents more than 250,000 students nationally. Its then Welfare Officer was a member of the working group which drafted the national framework document in 2001, and since then USI has been involved in its own health promotional campaigns in relation to alcohol and other student lifestyle matters.
- This USI officer readily acknowledged that risky drinking by students contributes to a range of personal problems, including poor academic performance or college non-completion, sexual risk-taking, involvement in or exposure to violent assaults, and financial difficulties. He pointed out, however, that such difficulties are neither unique to students nor to young people but are broadly reflective of a wider cultural failure to integrate alcohol safely into Irish society. He further argued that excessive drinking during undergraduate years – which he saw as influenced both by the freedom associated with transition to college and the academic pressures of the higher educational system - does not persist, in most instances, once young people assume work and other adult responsibilities.
- He described how USI, in planning its own alcohol awareness campaign in 2003 had contacts both with the Health Promotion Unit (HPU) of the Department of Health & Children and with MEAS, the social aspects organisation of the Irish drinks industry. Its decision to collaborate with MEAS was based pragmatically upon the fact that MEAS was willing to give financial support without dictating the content of the awareness messages in this “Respect Alcohol Respect Yourself” campaign. This USI officer expressed a belief that alcohol awareness should contain a balance between identification of the problems associated with alcohol and its social benefits.
- While supportive of the overall aims of college alcohol policies, he expressed two major reservations about the way in which they have been evolving: the first is that these policies have led to the withdrawal of drinks industry sponsorship of student societies without setting in place alternative sponsorship or providing additional finance from the colleges’ capitation fees; the second is that policies which curb drinking on campus may not reduce harm, if they have the unintended consequence of creating off-campus drinking events which are independent of student unions, less well monitored and somewhat more risky.

The MEAS Perspective (Based on an interview with its chief executive)

- Its chief executive described MEAS, which was set up with drinks' industry funding in 2002, as existing to promote and support industry social responsibility and to work to reduce alcohol-related harm, in contrast to the Drinks Industry Group which has existed for more than twenty years and which is primarily involved in economic lobbying. She said that while similar "social aspects organisations" exist elsewhere, MEAS has not been based on any standard model or template but is intended to reflect the uniqueness of the Irish situation.
- MEAS has identified three problem areas – underage drinking, drinking to get drunk and drink driving – which it hopes to tackle; it fully accepts the recommendations for creating college alcohol policies laid down in the national framework document and is committed to working in partnership with college authorities and student unions on the implementation of these policies.
- To date, MEAS has worked with a number of colleges in implementing "responsible serving of alcohol " (RSA) programmes in campus bars, with USI in the development of its alcohol awareness campaign, and with the University of Limerick and University College Cork in organising subsidised student gigs – known as MEAS events – which, unlike rag week events, are intended to have little or no associated alcohol consumption.
- MEAS is aware of industry support for the use of the social norms marketing approach to problem prevention on American campuses, thinks this approach may have some positive applications here – even on a pilot basis - but at present has no concrete plans for its implementation; it also thinks that social norms marketing should be approached in an open-minded way, and that claims that such programmes primarily exist to make the industry look good merely reflect anti-industry prejudice.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

It is helpful in summarising the findings of this project to revisit the literature which was reviewed in the introduction. Viewed against the background of this literature review, it can be concluded that over the past three years most Irish third-level colleges have participated actively in the college alcohol policy initiative. The policies which have been devised and, in most cases, formally ratified within individual colleges reflect health promotional principles about the importance of “settings-based” strategies, and the process whereby this was done invariably involved the creation of a network of student services staff and student union officers in these colleges. From a health promotional perspective, what is crucial is that colleges demonstrated a willingness to move away from individually-oriented strategies, particularly those concerned with educational or awareness-raising approaches to problem prevention, in favour of environmental approaches which might not have been previously contemplated.

What is not so clear, however, is the extent to which it can safely be concluded that alcohol policy implementation represents a “whole college” acceptance of this health promotional approach to the prevention of related problems, or that colleges have accepted full corporate ownership of these policies. Academic staff members of third-level colleges are primarily concerned with teaching and research, while senior management is so caught up with a range of administrative matters – usually including financial difficulties – that it can readily be understood that college alcohol policies are not seen as priorities on an ongoing basis. Over the past three years, therefore, it has been the student service sector – consisting of administrators, chaplains, doctors, nurses, counsellors and others involved with student welfare – which has taken the main responsibility for creating alcohol policies within Irish colleges. Despite the vigour and enthusiasm which has characterised this process, it cannot be presumed that it will be sustained; the fear is that with the passage of time, with changes in student service personnel and with the emergence of new priorities for student services, momentum on college alcohol policies may well be lost. The Health Promotion Unit (HPU) of the Department of Health and Children has provided important external support for college staff involved in drafting alcohol policies but, with a few exceptions, support from regional health promotion workers has not been of the same order of importance to this project.

What has also emerged from this research is that the strategies which have been pursued most commonly and with the greatest intensity have been those which deal with controlling the promotion and marketing of alcohol on campus. The findings from the focus groups clearly indicated the strength of participants’ feelings about the role of the drinks industry, feelings which were entirely negative: it was generally believed that, until challenged recently by this college alcohol policy initiative, the industry had been promoting its products on campus in a style which was socially irresponsible and solely driven by commercial motives. This antipathy towards the drinks industry, which is largely supported by the research and policy literature summarised above, is functional insofar as the identification of an external foe creates a positive dynamic and a focal point for college staff struggling to devise appropriate policy responses to this complex social problem. It should be borne in mind, however, that public health literature on the reduction of alcohol-related harm conventionally suggests that if it is to be successful, policy in this sphere should consist of multiple strategies, known as a “policy mix”: this point was made explicitly, for instance, in the national framework document. Given the preponderance of measures aimed at curbing marketing, promotions and sponsorship and the relative dearth of other strategies, it cannot be concluded that college alcohol policies have to date achieved this ideal of a policy mix. While restrictions on industry activities on campus may be necessary, they are not – from a health promotional perspective – sufficient.

Proponents of the college alcohol policy initiative commented in focus group discussion on what they saw as an attempt by the drinks industry to counter this initiative, and it was suggested by student groups that this could lead to even riskier drinking situations off campus. While it cannot be concluded definitively that this is a valid suggestion, it has a plausibility that at least warrants some thought and scrutiny. If, as common sense and the research literature tell us, student life is characterised by regular drinking and frequent drinking to get drunk, then a harm reduction approach to this phenomenon must consider whether safer drinking situations can be created on campus, where student union, student society and college security personnel are likely to be on hand, than would be the norm either in commercial or in private settings.



Recommendations

The findings of this research are broadly positive about what has been achieved to date in the area of college alcohol policies, and the following recommendations are offered with a view to maintaining and strengthening this process:

1. As part of the wider health promoting colleges initiative, colleges should be encouraged to accept full corporate responsibility for their alcohol policies rather than leaving this function to the student services' sector.
2. Bearing in mind the somewhat marginal status of alcohol policies within third-level colleges and the importance of the external supportive role which has been played thus far by the Health Promotion Unit (HPU), this supportive role should be continued.
3. Colleges should be encouraged to work towards a "policy mix"; that is, to implement a wider range of preventive strategies than has been the norm over the past few years where restrictions on industry marketing, promotion and sponsorship have been dominant.
4. Colleges should be encouraged to carry out their own internal research on their alcohol policies – starting with basic research as to how much awareness staff and students have of these policies.
5. The CLAN survey should be repeated every three years.
6. The CLAN findings should be complemented by qualitative research, conducted in a number of different sites, into student drinking patterns in Ireland: such qualitative research might prove particularly useful in clarifying the relative risk attaching to student drinking on and off campus.

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