

**‘You have to be prepared to drink’. Students’ views about reducing excessive alcohol  
consumption at university**

**Authors:** Emma L. Davies, Cara Law, Sarah E. Hennelly

Department of Psychology, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, OX3 0BP, United Kingdom

**Corresponding author:** Emma L Davies 01865 484056 [edavies@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:edavies@brookes.ac.uk)

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Many existing interventions to reduce excessive drinking in University students attempt to target individual cognitions, which ignore the wider contextual features that drive excessive drinking and mark it as an important aspect of university life. The overall aim of this study was to explore students’ views about preventing excessive drinking at university, specifically by using frameworks that take into both account individual and social influences.

**Methods:** Twenty-three young adults aged 20-30 (12 females;  $M$  age = 22.91;  $SD$  = 2.57; 18 students, 5 recent graduates) took part in semi-structured interviews to explore their views about drinking and measures to reduce excessive consumption. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Findings:** There were three themes identified in the analysis. These themes were named ‘the role of alcohol in student life’, ‘drinking transitions’, and ‘prevention challenges’ and each had related sub-themes.

**Practical implications:** Targeting students before they commence their course and highlighting aspects of university life that do not involve alcohol may help to reduce the pressure often felt to drink in social situations. Providing novel, credible alternative socialising options that do not involve alcohol should be explored to determine their acceptability, and their potential to reduce excessive drinking.

**Originality/value:** Few studies explore what students themselves think about reducing alcohol consumption, and most interventions focus on changing individual cognitions rather than features of the social environment. This study highlights that changing social practices related to drinking in combination with targeting individuals may be more fruitful approach to reduce excessive alcohol consumption.

**Key words:** alcohol, university students, interventions, qualitative interviews, social practices,

**Article classification:** Research paper

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the United Kingdom (UK) young adults aged 18-30, and particularly university students, tend to drink at hazardous levels (Craigs et al., 2012, Davoren et al., 2016) and to drink more than young people who do not attend university (Kypri et al., 2005). Students are at risk of a number of harms from drinking including experiencing blackouts and hangovers (Burns et al., 2016). In addition, drinking may impair academic performance (Thombs et al., 2009), which could impact on future success. A recent systematic review of student drinking in the UK and Ireland found that two third of students could be classified as hazardous drinkers and that 20% reported alcohol problems (Davoren et al., 2016).

Traditional health campaigns with educational messages about the consequences of drinking (e.g. liver disease) are ineffective in this population (Logan et al., 2015). It is also possible that they might even be counter-productive, and individuals may maintain or even increase their drinking (Quick and Stephenson, 2008, Ogden, 2016). Social norms interventions have been a popular approach to combatting excessive drinking in students. Social norms interventions could be more effective than educational interventions because they acknowledge the importance of peer influences on drinking behaviours and avoid providing information about health consequences, which young people might feel are too far in the future to warrant their concern. This method aims to provide accurate information about what other people drink in order to correct the misperception that heavy drinking is the norm (Campo et al., 2003). In recognition of a need to address the harms associated with alcohol consumption, in 2014 the UK National Union of Students (NUS) launched a campaign that aimed to 'create a social norm of responsible drinking' (NUS, 2015). This scheme involved seven UK universities signing up to achieve a number of criteria (e.g. promoting a student identity based on responsible alcohol consumption, and preventing alcohol-related initiation ceremonies). Throughout the pilot year, the participating institutions put a number of measures in place, such as providing alcohol free spaces to meet before nights out, showing films about responsible drinking, and providing

alcohol free events. An evaluation of the pilot year suggested some positive impacts on alcohol consumption (NUS, 2015). However, it was also found that those students who reported having been involved in any of the intervention components were more likely to strongly agree that they do not need alcohol to have a good night out than those who had not been involved (NUS, 2015). In other words, interventions aimed at changing the social norms around drinking may not be appealing to students who are most at risk from harm. Furthermore, while the social norms approach appears to have worked on some American college campuses, on the whole, reviews have concluded that these social norms interventions are not effective in reducing alcohol misuse (Foxcroft et al., 2015).

In order to develop more effective interventions, it is first important to understand what drives and maintains excessive alcohol consumption in the target population (Michie and Prestwich, 2010). It is then imperative to explore what intervention approaches are likely to be acceptable to the target population (Yardley et al., 2015). While there are a great many studies that have explored the determinants of drinking, there appears to be less research which specifically addresses what types of interventions might appeal to this group, or what they themselves think could be done to reduce excessive consumption.

One UK study that explored what young people aged 13-25 thought about alcohol interventions revealed some important insights (de Visser et al., 2013). Interventions were often viewed as patronising or preaching, and as providing information that the recipient already knew. While they often distanced themselves from being at risk of most negative consequences of drinking, young people may be more receptive to messages about personal safety. One suggestion from this study is that intervention messages should be provided at the time of drinking in order to be relevant, for example showing films about alcohol safety. However, it is acknowledged that campaigns targeting individuals may be insufficient in a drinking culture (de Visser et al., 2013).

Some theories assume individual cognitions are important, and that targeting attitudes and intentions will lead to behaviour change (Cooke et al., 2016). Furthermore, in general, theory

based interventions can be more effective than those without an underpinning theoretical framework (Prestwich et al., 2014, Webb et al., 2010). Thus, it may be important to consider a theoretical framework that takes into account the social context of alcohol consumption at universities in order to build effective interventions for this population.

One theory that takes the social context of drinking into account is The Prototype Willingness Model (PWM) (Gibbons and Gerrard, 1995). Alongside attitudes and intentions, the important constructs in the model are prototype perceptions and willingness. Prototype perceptions are evaluations of the typical person who engages/ does not engage in health risk behaviours such as drinking alcohol. When drinker prototype perceptions are favourable and the prototype is perceived as more similar to the self, then an individual will be more willing to engage in drinking behaviours should the opportunity arise (Gerrard et al., 2008). The implications of understanding drinking behaviours from this perspective are that health interventions need to target individual perceptions of drinkers. For example, by encouraging less favourable views of drinkers and more favourable views of non-drinkers, and ensuring people view themselves as more similar to a non-drinker (Gerrard et al., 2002).

As acknowledged by the PWM many health behaviours tend to take place in a social context for young people (Smith et al., 2017), and this is particularly the case for student drinking (Hepworth et al., 2016). This means that researchers may need to look beyond targeting cognitions, such as attitudes, norms and prototype perceptions, and identify the wider contextual, as well as individual, factors that influence excessive consumption. For example, students' positive drinking expectancies are higher, and their drink refusal skills are lower, when they complete measures in a bar setting compared to a classroom setting (Monk and Heim, 2013). Thus, more recently, there has been a call for researchers to acknowledge the wider social practices that operate in drinking contexts in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of health behaviours (Blue et al., 2016).

A social practice perspective on health behaviours such as drinking alcohol recognises that they are not single behaviours, but are bound in broader domains of social practice transmitted through different possible performances (Blue et al., 2016). For example, for students, drinking alcohol at home before going out will involve different practices compared to drinking with a meal with family members, or drinking in a nightclub setting. Thus, attempts to change this behaviour via individual cognitions may fail because not all drinking behaviours are the same (Blue et al., 2016). Subsequently, researchers in Australia sought to apply this notion to student drinking to identify the components of drinking practices in this population (Supski et al., 2017). The researchers identified key elements of student drinking that were repeated over time to contribute to the social practice of drinking in this population. These elements are *materials* (such as the bars they went to and the social media they arranged their nights out with), *meanings* (such as expectations and social pressure), and *competencies* (such as knowing what and how much to drink). These elements are related, each shaping the others and contributing to the transmission of drinking practice to new students when they start university (Supski et al., 2017). The implication of understanding drinking in this way is that rather than solely targeting individual cognitions, health promotion efforts also need to focus on disrupting materials, meanings, and competencies. For example, removing alcohol from events, which could change the bar environment, expectations about events, and the type of knowledge needed at such events (Supski et al., 2017, Blue et al., 2016). Disrupting social practice in this way could, in theory, result in further opportunities for individuals to identify as more similar to non-drinkers because they are able to experience a greater number of social events that do not involve alcohol. Furthermore the favourability of non-drinkers should increase as this behaviour becomes more acceptable. Thus, in line with the PWM, this increased similarity and favourability should reduce willingness to drink and alcohol consumption.

## **Aims**

In summary, the evidence shows that excessive drinking is commonplace in UK University students, but interventions to change drinking behaviours in this population often fail. Many existing interventions attempt to target individual cognitions, which ignore the wider contextual features that drive excessive drinking. A social practice perspective would argue for intervening by changing embedded materials, meanings or competencies, such as removing alcohol from student events. Taking these two perspectives together and exploring how they interrelate could be an important avenue to shed light on further methods to reduce alcohol related harms. However, regardless of a focus on individual cognitions or social practices, very few studies explore what students think about reducing excessive drinking. The overall aim of this study was therefore to explore students' and recent graduates' experiences of drinking and their views about preventing excessive drinking at university. Specifically we sought to explore these views using frameworks that take into account both the individual and social practice factors which contribute to excessive drinking.

## **METHODS**

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted as part of a larger study to obtain feedback on the content of two digital interventions aimed at reducing alcohol consumption. Before giving their feedback on these specific interventions, participants took part in a semi structured interview, which consisted of four main questions and a number of prompts. An ice breaker question was devised based on the new alcohol guidelines that had been issued just 2-6 weeks before the interviews: Specifically;

*'The Chief Medical Officer just released new guidelines about alcohol to say that men and women should not exceed 14 units per week - have you heard about the guidelines? What do you think?'*

The first main question was about general attitudes about alcohol; the second, about experiences of drinking at university; the third, about how their drinking compared to other people. The final question asked what the participant would do if they were part of the interviewer's research team in order to encourage students to cut down the amount that they drank and reduce negative consequences from drinking. Participants were prompted to give specific examples, and expand on their answers throughout. The interviewer was a female researcher and the participants were aware that the main research questions were about reducing drinking harms.

### **Participants and procedure**

Participants were directly recruited via adverts on a University electronic notice board and posters displayed around the campus. Recruitment of participants continued until saturation of data was reached, with a lack of new information being identified. The participants were 23 young adults aged 20-30 (12 females;  $M$  age = 22.91;  $SD$  = 2.57), 18 participants were students (11 undergraduate, 7 postgraduate), and five participants were working as interns in their first role since graduating six months prior to the study. These recent graduates were recruited due to their potential to reflect back on their drinking experiences at university throughout their degree programmes. The procedure was granted approval by Oxford Brookes University Ethics committee (Study reference 150944). All participants were provided with an information sheet about the study in advance of the interview, which included sources of support and advice about drinking should they require it, and they were asked to sign a consent form to indicate their agreement to take part. They were offered a £15 Amazon voucher to thank them for their time at the end of the study.

### **Analysis**

The data were analysed using thematic analysis employing the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). We analysed the data inductively, guided by the aims of understanding the



participants' experiences and views about preventing excessive drinking at university. The analysis phase started with all authors familiarising themselves with the transcripts by reading them and making notes. Transcripts were coded line by line, chunking the text into meaningful units. This process resulted in 50 separate codes that related to the research questions. During the search for themes, some codes were combined, and others were discarded as not relevant or not representative of the data. An initial set of themes was generated using a thematic map, and all authors met to discuss their meaning and interpretation. Once the themes had been generated, named and agreed upon by the research team, we revisited the interview transcripts to ensure that the final set of themes and subthemes represented the data set. We present the themes and supporting quotes in the result section. We then used the social practice framework of materials, meanings, and competencies to organise and discuss the results in light of individual and social influences.

## **RESULTS**

We identified three main themes relating to the research question within our analysis. Each theme has related subthemes (see Table 1). The themes and subthemes are presented below with supporting quotations from the transcripts. Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

[Insert Table 1]

### **The role of alcohol in student life**

The first theme was about 'the role of alcohol in student life' and encompasses the positive and socially enhancing aspect of drinking at university, as well as the feeling of pressure to drink that was reported.

*Drinking to socialise and have fun*

Participants suggested that alcohol played a central role in many aspects of their social lives at university. This role had been communicated to them prior to their arrival on campus, through a variety of formats, creating the expectation that they would drink heavily on arrival. This heavy drinking, accompanied by humorous and 'messy' consequences, could be a key signal that one was having fun, as Laura explained:

*You get TV programmes where they just follow students and see them getting really drunk and getting into a mess and people watch that and think that's funny and that's why you're meant to do and I think then that a lot of people who then go into university feel like they have to replicate that, otherwise they're not having a good time (Laura)*

On arrival, they quickly learned that these expectations were a reality, and that social events would tend to involve drinking. This role was accepted by the participants, as demonstrated in their mainly negative views of those who did not drink.

*It's just everyone's way of socialising. Pretty much goes hand in hand with socialising in almost any way. Um, yeah so I think it's not odd, but odd is probably not the right word, not normal to not drink. Yeah, most people do, and it's odd not to rather than odd to drink (Mark)*

Not only were non-drinkers denigrated, so was going out and not drinking oneself.

*I wouldn't go out and not drink [why] it's just no fun is it really (Fraser).*

It was not simply the case that social occasions had to involve alcohol per se. It appeared that there was a higher status conferred on those who went to extreme measures to signal how much fun they were having.

*Heavy drinking is kind of like a badge of honour, like someone who is known for like drinking a lot or like being like fun and going out all the time (Clara)*

Thus, increased socialising meant increased consumption, and higher status among one's peer group. On the other hand, heavy drinking was only sanctioned when it took place in the presence of others.

*Well student drinking is always going to be the central part of student life usually.*

*Personally I'm a social drinker so I never drink on my own or anything (Eva)*

#### *Drinking to change mood/state*

Alcohol had another role alongside its social function for these participants. On many occasions, they spoke about alcohol providing them with the confidence to open up in social situations or being used to relieve negative mood states. Callum's comment is typical of the other participants, who spoke a great deal about relaxation and feeling confident enough to talk openly to friends.

*I think that's pretty much the main reason that everyone in social situation drinks. It's to sort of loosen themselves up and help themselves relax (Callum).*

From this angle, it appears that the comments under the previous theme are masking the unease felt by many students that they must be seen to socialise and have 'enough' fun. It was also important to have consumed enough alcohol to be confident enough to dance in a nightclub situation.

*Maybe we need to help people be more confident. Cos a few times I remember going out and people would be "no I'm not drunk enough to dance yet" (Isabella)*

The lowering of inhibitions was particularly seen as important in this context, because if you were unable to dance then you would be unable to have fun.

*If you like pre-drink to go clubbing, there's a lot more emphasis on getting drunk. Because I know that if I go to a club sober I'm going to have a really bad time and just stand there being really bored (Lucy)*

Alcohol was also used to change participants' mood states in other contexts.

*People just need an outlet for their life for when things get too much. 'I need to drink today because my day sucked' or 'I need to drink today because my day went really well and I want to celebrate' (Jack)*

### *Feeling the pressure*

There was a sense that the feeling of pressure to conform to drinking expectations, and drink enough to have an acceptable level of fun, was felt by everyone.

*There are some horrible cultures, especially around university, when you come to university and there's like the whole like Fresher's week. There's like a horrible pressure for people to drink, which I think is not great, but yeah, they were all projecting a persona of being like you know "oh yeah I drink all the time and I can drink loads" and all of this, but in reality they were kind of just as scared as I was (Clara).*

Clara's comments suggest that there is perhaps an untapped intervention point pre arrival on campus. If Clara had been aware that those she met were feeling the same way as her, then perhaps as a group, they may have not felt as though they had to drink quite so much. Tilly encapsulates this feeling, highlighting how important it is to make friends and fit in on arrival.

*If you didn't sort of go out with everyone, even if you didn't really like them, or you didn't really know them, you were made to feel very much an outsider and that can be quite difficult in, particularly in your first year at university (Tilly)*

Tilly did not say exactly who made her feel like an outsider, but from the other participants there was a sense that this came about through missing out on certain social occasions. This meant that one was unable to contribute to discussions about the night before, either face to face or online, through the sharing of photos and stories. Seemingly, those who chose to go out and not drink a lot could expect to feel explicit pressure from other people.

*It's funny because you say you don't drink much everyone, it becomes their mission to make you drink more and it's like, I don't know it's a really sort of interesting (Samuel)*

Lucy felt her drinking had changed since the first year of university, where she had felt the pressure to conform to the strong social norms around drinking, suggesting that this pressure may dissipate as longer term friendship groups are formed.

*I think I definitely drink much less than I used to, in the first year when you come to uni there's this whole sub culture and you kind of have to be prepared to drink (Lucy)*

### **Drinking transitions**

As indicated in Lucy's quote under the previous sub-theme about pressure, during the course of the interviews, participants reflected back upon on their initiation into drinking, and forwards to their future imagined drinking selves. There was a sense that past experiences were important in shaping participants' current conception of themselves as a 'good' drinker'. Post-university and further into adulthood, participants imagined drinking less than they did at present.

#### *Learning from experiences*

Almost without exception, the participants interviewed in this study appeared to view themselves as responsible, social drinkers who rarely transgressed. One male participant was a little more open and admitted to being one of the heaviest drinkers in his social group. However, despite feeling many negative effects, he portrayed himself as having more sophisticated tastes in terms of the brands of alcohol he chose, and described seeking out particular drinks related to works of literature or films. The other participants suggested that they rarely exceeded their personal limits, and had often learned these through making mistakes in the past.

*I've definitely had nights when I've gone way past the limit and I've ended up you know, but not in hospital or anything but, you know, throwing everything up, and it's just unpleasant. Um, but that's just, learn from your mistakes really and then you gauge how to have a good and successful night and not overdo it (Eva)*

Although, as Dhruv alludes to, learning one's limits may be insufficient because it is almost inevitable that they will be exceeded.

*Personally I know where my limit is, and of course I've gone over my limit (Dhruv)*

These experiences were seen as vital ways to discover what kind of drinker you were and how much alcohol you could consume without becoming a burden on others. When reflecting on drinking at university, the first year was viewed as an acceptable time to make mistakes.

*When I was in first year I drank a lot because it was my first chance at being in an environment where I didn't have any parents and I wasn't in somebody else's house, I was in my own house, I could do whatever I wanted and it was my own responsibility. And...that's freeing so you do whatever you want in first year (Nikki)*

During these earlier drinking occasions, it appeared that negative experiences could put the participants off drinking, but mainly in the short term. Reflecting back on them, participants appeared to be negative about their former selves

*But er me and my housemates to you know get so bad that you'd have to be put to bed in all your clothes or you'd throw up in your handbag in a taxi and that type of thing you know, quite unpleasant I suppose. Now we look back on it with complete horror. You know you kind of laugh at it but there have been a few occasions where I suppose it's been almost dangerous (Tilly)*

Tilly appeared shocked at her past behaviour, and reflected on the negative consequences that she and her friends were fortunate to escape.

### *Imagining future drinking self*

One of the points that most participants were keen to make about their current levels of alcohol consumption was that they felt this would reduce as completed their studies, left university, and as they got older.

*Drinking is not usually the sort of thing you carry on, you do it for a few years when you're at uni and you can and then when you leave that's, that's it pretty much. Yeah, I mean we'd go to the pub every now and then, but you know they wouldn't go to the clubs two or so times a week. It'd just be tamer, I'd say (Paul)*

*I think it just gets to the age where you sort of realise hey, like what is so good about this, why, why are we so into doing this, it just became a thing that like I don't know a fallacy, something you thought was going to be better than what it was and then you get older like, well the novelty wears off I guess (Samuel)*

This could explain why these participants were not aware of how many units they were consuming, or about what low risk drinking entailed. This kind of information was seen as directed at older people who wanted or needed to cut down.

*So I, I'm vaguely aware of them, but I've never sort of kept count because I've never been worried about my drinking (Henry)*

Participants also thought they might change the main location of their socialising, and that this would impact on the amount of alcohol consumed. They also felt that the frequency of social occasions would reduce.

*Yeah, I think that I only really drink once a week and that's again at the pub and it's quite civilised rather than going to a club and having a full session. So I'd only do it on special occasions really. So I think that what I'm doing now is acceptable (Molly)*

It seemed that these changes would come about because of work or family commitments.

However other participants thought that getting a job might mean that patterns of drinking would change but overall consumption might be similar.

*Well less so in the week, but equally then you've got your weekends when you don't have any uni work to think about or anything so maybe more so, probably the same amount in total, but on the weekend and not in the week. At uni it doesn't really matter what day of the week it is, whereas [in the future] it will just be weekends (Mark)*

Because for most participants excessive drinking was viewed as a transitional stage, it appeared that participants were unconcerned about any possible longer term health harms, and may be resistant to change, as the final theme suggests.

### **Prevention challenges**

The theme 'prevention challenges' encapsulates some key issues that intervention developers may wish to consider when designing programmes for this population. The participants suggested that there is a lack of alternative means of socialising. Perhaps because of this, a clear message emerged to suggest that student drinking was resistant to change. However, there were some factors identified that might lead participants to reduce their consumption.

#### *Lack of alternatives*

The key role of alcohol in student life seemed to have left many of the participants feeling that there was a real lack of alternatives in terms of socialising. Going to a nightclub was explicitly associated with drinking and, as highlighted earlier, drinking was important to facilitate dancing. Samuel elaborated on this point, referring to the type of music, as well as the lack of other activities.

*If clubs had more to do other than just drink, like if they had actually decided had better music that you don't need to be drunk to enjoy (Samuel)*



For those who chose not to drink on a night out, the availability of soft drinks was also an issue, as well as the way you might be perceived for consuming alcohol free drinks.

*[Laughing] And the options for not drinking are pretty poor actually in a pub so what, I don't, I mean coke and things like that are as bad as um as beer really for you, so I'm not going to drink a pint of coke, so what would you drink out of a cordial or something, it's not very exciting. And drunk people are just a bit boring when you're sober as well (Fraser)*

Furthermore, the lack of alternative socialising options may mean that there is little interest in reducing alcohol consumption during term time.

*There's never a good time um in the in the school year to give up alcohol because there are so many social implications (Jack)*

Other participants highlighted the need for alternative activities to be available to students. A really important aspect of this was that such events should be credible.

*Present them with them alternative that isn't seen as that uncool, just to know that there are other options out there (Ellie)*

As Ellie highlights, this would need careful planning in order to not be considered 'uncool'.

Isabella espouses the notion of alcohol free alternatives and suggested a slogan for such events, should the research team come up with any.

*Instead of using alcohol to have a good time, just have a good time (Isabella)*

### *Resistance to change*

Perhaps because of the key role in student life, compounded by the lack of alternative options, many participants suggested that excessive alcohol consumption among students was resistant to change.

*You know university students, they're just not gonna take much on board (Clara)*

*I guess I'd fall in the category that I don't care (Dhruv)*

There was also some discussion about why existing measures aimed at students would be unsuccessful. As Lucy suggests, there may be some level of awareness about the harms of excessive drinking, but this may be ignored or perhaps deemed irrelevant.

*Because deep down people probably know that alcohol is bad for them but I think they don't know the full extent. For example, they just think 'oh it's bad for me but I'll only have like this drink so I'll be fine' (Lucy)*

Moreover, Fraser highlights that even if there were high levels of awareness, this is still insufficient to bring about change.

*One thing that struck me is that information is not really enough, you know you can, we knew about seatbelts for years, we knew about smoking for years and behaviours didn't really change but as soon as you legislate then things change. But I am a libertarian really and, you know, I'm really conflicted (Fraser)*

Callum also highlights the issue with a one size fits all approach, which targets students as if they were one homogenised group.

*It's not like you just take a pin and fix it. It's obviously different for each individual (Callum)*

### *Motivations for change*

Despite the strong feeling that student drinking was resistant to change, participants used a number of ways to monitor how much they consumed, and these factors could be targeted within interventions. The cost of alcohol appeared to be a strong driver for some participants,

who ensured they only took a certain amount of cash out with them when they socialised. Some participants also discussed the regret that they might feel if they had exceeded this limit.

*If you spend far too much money, especially because it gets to the point where the extra drinks that you buy is going to make no difference, it's going to make you worse but it's basically completely pointless..... And that's the kind of thing where I'd wake up and be like 'Didn't really need that' (Reece)*

*I think the money thing is a big factor so I guess try and pay more attention to how much you spend maybe at the end of the week to work out how much you've spent and that's more of a shock factor almost (Mark)*

On the other hand, this overspending had become a bit of a joking point for other participants. This is a particularly pertinent issue when students will be graduating with very significant levels of debt, and therefore small savings from drinking less may not have a great impact on this.

*Money wise, it's definitely a novelty about how much people spend on alcohol as well like even on YickYak's it's like people are like "ah my Student Finance and [name of local club] are going to be best friends, but I'm going to end up poor", or something like that and it's just like oh it's a like people are always like "I spent too much last night", it's a cliché thing that people want to say unfortunately. It's like oh it's almost like a bragging thing like "ah I spent £150 quid last night, I don't know how I spent it" (Samuel)*

The impact of one's behaviour when drinking appeared to be important to some participants. Henry suggested that friendship groups might be encouraged to talk about this together:

*Say that if it's in a group of friends so that they could all be honest with each other and say "I'm sorry, but on this night I thought you were an absolute ass, you really, really pissed me off" and then I think people would take it on board that their friends do notice when they're acting a bit [annoying] (Henry)*

Another suggestion from the participants was that they needed to be able to personally relate to any alcohol harm reduction messages.

*To them [other students] you're invincible when you have alcohol so maybe kind of real-life stories and then it might apply to people more. Um, I think yeah I think if you just sort of say about the dangers...everyone knows the problems of alcohol so that sort of thing doesn't really affect them but I think a lot of it is personality based (Laura)*

Participants described how these kinds of stories would be easier to relate to than hearing statistics about drinking harms. They also suggested that this kind of information was not readily accessible.

*And people who've like suffered from alcohol, parents or people who've had friends who've suffered from um alcohol, because I don't think I see many stories like that around. You mostly just seem to see statistics, it's so easy to disassociate yourself with statistics (Lucy)*

Thus, despite the lack of alternatives to alcohol when socialising and the finding many participants appeared to be resistant to changing their drinking habits, there do appear to be some avenues that might provide useful intervention points. It is possible that for some students, a focus on the money they had spent could encourage them to cut down, if the status of having overspent could be reduced within their peer groups. For others perhaps discussing drunken behaviour with friends could have an impact, alongside the use of easily relatable stories about the harms of drinking.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper aimed to explore students' and recent graduates' experiences and views about preventing excessive drinking at university. Specifically we sought to explore these views using frameworks that take into account both the individual factors and the factors related to social practice which to contribute to excessive drinking. We identified three themes related to our

research aims within interview transcripts with current students and recent graduates. These themes related to the role of alcohol in student life, drinking transitions and prevention challenges, and each is now discussed in relation to materials, meanings, competencies, and individual cognitions.

Findings in relation to the centrality of alcohol in student life are unsurprising and echo those of many of studies in the field (Conroy and de Visser, 2014, de Visser et al., 2013). Participants discussed the positive and fun aspects of this, alongside the pressure felt to join in with drinking related events, particularly at the start of university. The participants suggested that they knew what was expected from them in terms of drinking at university even before they arrived. This supports the notion that student drinking is transmitted to new carriers of the practice who are recruited into a set of established routines and behaviour even before they arrive on campus (Supski et al., 2017). It was also apparent that participants needed to consume alcohol to be able to perform the social rituals associated with drinking (e.g. to feel more confident to dance in a nightclub).

From an individual perspective, peer pressure was commonly mentioned, and again this is often discussed in relation to drinking, with prevention efforts focussed on providing resistance skills. However, this type of intervention fails to take that drinking is often driven by the pursuit of pleasure, such as bonding with friends (de Visser et al., 2013) rather by the avoidance of harm (Hutton, 2012). A further problem is the lack of credible alternative socialising opportunities, meaning that people may 'default' to drinking (Herring et al., 2014). Non-drinkers, for example, often feel stigmatised, and may adopt strategies including pretending to drink when attending social events (Conroy and de Visser, 2014). Together, this suggests that there is need to provide alternative socialising opportunities for students, especially during their first weeks at university.

Participants also tended to think that they were in a specific life phase associated with heavy drinking, which means they are likely to be resistant to the need to change. This was also

illustrated in the way that existing measures to reduce harmful drinking, such as information about keeping within specific unit levels, were not seen as relevant at the current time but perhaps might be aimed at older drinkers. Instead, participants appeared to be more concerned with learning what constituted an appropriate level of drinking from their own experiences. These findings chime with others that explore the relevance of health messages such as unit guidelines. In the UK, studies within the adult population suggest that drinkers dismiss unit guidelines as irrelevant (Lovatt et al., 2015). This may be exacerbated in student drinkers, where such guidelines bear little resemblance to their experiences. Thus, the competency element of social practice here relates to how much one is able to consume as a student, and this is unrelated to guideline based information.

The theme related to prevention challenges highlighted the lack of alternative socialising occasions where alcohol consumption was not expected or encouraged. Existing evidence shows that restricting physical availability of alcohol is one of the most effective means of reducing consumption (Babor et al., 2010). This further illustrates how the materials and meanings of drinking are embedded in university culture (Supski et al., 2017). Further to this, the lack of soft drinks, or the relative un-healthiness of those that were available, appeared as an additional barrier, even if the individual could transgress the norm of consuming alcohol on a night out. Findings also showed that many participants felt that it would be highly challenging to change student drinking behaviours, regardless of the approach that was taken, and other studies highlight that young people are quick to distance themselves from the negative consequences of drinking (de Visser et al., 2013). The financial impact of excessive drinking may not be a good target if excessive spending is celebrated, as one participant elaborated. When students are running up considerable debt in terms of tuition fee and maintenance loans, perhaps they feel that the impact of spending money on alcohol is trivial by comparison. At an individual level, there may be some scope in using personal stories, or appealing to friendship groups with a focus on acceptable behaviours to bring about reductions in excessive drinking.

## **Implications**

Previous research suggests that although many approaches have been tried, students still tend to drink at hazardous levels (Davoren et al., 2016), which can put them at risk of harming their health and academic performance (Burns et al., 2016, Thombs et al., 2009). Together, the findings of the current study highlight that there is a need to go beyond educational interventions which focus on the health risks associated with excessive drinking, as well as those that focus on changing social norms, as outlined in the introduction. Instead, there are some implications for the prevention of such harms in university students, which relate both to individual factors and social practices.

Firstly, the findings suggest that there is a need to target expectations about student drinking before young people arrive on campus. In other words, there is a need to disrupt the meaning of drinking as a social practice if we wish to change this behaviour, which in line with assertions made by Blue et al (2016) and Supski et al (2017). Comments about pressure to drink during Freshers' week highlight that universities could attempt to advertise other aspects of life on campus during the weeks running up to the start of semester. For example, by showing different ways in which students use their leisure time. In order to disrupt the transmission of drinking practices, it may be important to identify those students who play a key role in setting the expectation to drink, for example sports or social society leaders. Such key figures could be recruited as mentors to newer students and enhance the favourability of non-drinker prototypes, in line with previous findings regarding the influence of popular peers on willingness to drink (Teunissen et al., 2012)

Secondly, our findings show that students need access to alternative events and social occasions that do not rely upon drinking. Participants espoused the view that drinking was an integral part of most social events, and indeed for increasing their confidence in order to enjoy social occasions, for example when dancing. Other studies reinforce the notion that students drink

more when they are with others who are drinking, and this is particularly the case for students with low self-esteem who need to belong (Hamilton and DeHart, 2017). Thus, having alcohol free events may be a means of changing both the materials (events) and meanings (shared pleasure) of this element of social practice. An important aspect of alternative events is that they should be credible and not 'uncool'. Further work is needed to determine the types of events or social occasions that could meet these criteria, especially given that previous attempts to change the culture have ultimately not been successful (NUS, 2015). Such alternative socialising experiences could change non-drinker prototype perceptions by increasing the favourability of non-drinkers, and giving individuals the experience of having fun and not drinking could lead to seeing themselves as more similar to non-drinkers. In summary both changing how the culture of drinking is transmitted and increasing the range of socialising opportunities that do not involve alcohol could, in theory, change individual drinking behaviours and cognitions by altering the environment through which non-drinking and being a non-drinker is rendered more normative and acceptable to students.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted on one university campus in the UK, and although we make no claims for generalisability due to the qualitative nature of the study, we acknowledge that a broader sample may provide different insights. The female interviewer stated her research was focused on reducing alcohol related harms and thus participants' responses may have been influenced by their assumptions about this topic. Social desirability can be a problem within alcohol research, but every attempt was made to ensure that participants felt able to speak openly on the topic. To attempt to reduce researcher bias, we reviewed the transcripts and findings a number of times to ensure that we had fairly represented the views of the participants in the study, but we acknowledge that analysts not engaged directly with alcohol research may have interpreted the findings in a different way. Future research could address these limitations by using peer interviewers, or conducting telephone interviews, and by engaging qualitative



researchers who are not involved in alcohol related research to code/ analyse a subsample of transcripts.

## **Conclusions**

This study explored the need to reduce excessive alcohol consumption on university campuses with young people who were current students, or had very recent experience of the student drinking culture. Participants appeared to endorse measures relating to social practices as well as individual cognitions as potentially effective intervention avenues. While some aspects of this culture may be resistant to change, these interview findings highlight some new avenues which could be explored in order to reduce alcohol harms in students from a social practice perspective. Targeting students before they commence their course and highlighting aspects of university life that do not involve alcohol may help to reduce the pressure that it often felt during Freshers' week. Providing novel, credible alternative socialising options that do not involve alcohol should be explored to determine their acceptability and their potential to reduce levels of consumption in this population.

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### **Statement of contribution**

ED designed the study, conducted the interviews and the analysis, and drafted the manuscript. SH recruited the participants, searched for literature and contributed to the analysis. CL coded the interviews, drafted the method section and searched for literature. All authors contributed to and agreed on final version of the manuscript