

European survey of University student alcohol use: The CALIBRATE project

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Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are proud to support the lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars which showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use. All of the seminars are run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. These events provide the chance for researchers, practitioners, policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol-related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The current theme for the seminars is "Alcohol, Europe and the World". Briefing papers, including this one, aim to capture the main themes and to communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is fully responsible for the contents, which are our interpretation.

Cooke began his talk by outlining the background to the CALIBRATE project. Data on adolescent alcohol consumption includes the ESPAD - European School survey on Alcohol and other Drugs - data and report, which provides information on substance use and misuse among adolescents across Europe and identifies some marked differences and variations across the region. The overall aim of ESPAD is to repeatedly collect comparable data on substance misuse among 15-16 year

old students in as many European countries as possible. However, there is a lack of data specifically on university student alcohol use. As a psychologist, Cooke is interested in why people drink, not just how they drink.

The CALIBRATE project was a study undertaken in eight European countries – Denmark, England, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland – with an initial sample of 2,317 students. The purpose of the project was to identify variables which predict alcohol harm and consumption and to measure student perceptions of alcohol harm-reduction strategies. The study measured demographic and psychometric variables and psychological constructs and also asked about awareness of alcohol marketing and perceived effectiveness of alcohol control strategies. The overall aims of CALIBRATE were to compare results across countries to identify if there were similar motives for drinking, differences in harms experienced, and differences in student perceptions of alcohol control strategies and policies.

To ensure consistency in measurement across countries, the AUDIT tool was used to measure alcohol-related harm. The AUDIT tool classifies drinking as hazardous, harmful or dependent. Overall,

62.4% of the survey sample recorded sensible drinking levels on the AUDIT scale; 29.7% were classified as hazardous drinkers, and 4% as harmful. Cooke explained that England and Denmark were outliers, recording higher levels of hazardous drinking, at 44% and 49.6% respectively. Along with the Netherlands, England and Denmark differed significantly from the other countries in the study. The study showed that Northern European countries had significantly higher AUDIT scores.

In an attempt to understand why people drink, Cooke presented the work of Cooper (1994) who offers an explanation based on four internal versus external reasons for drinking which give either positive or negative reinforcement. The four motivations are enhancement, social, coping and conformity. Cooke suggested that the first two were positive and the latter two negative. Cooke used his study to examine if the results (reasons why people drink), based on these motivations, were the same or different across countries.

The first negative motivation is conformity, which is defined as drinking to avoid social exclusion. Across all countries, the score was low, and this was not really a reason for drinking. England displayed a significantly higher score than other countries. Cooke argued, that as

an external factor, the higher score among English students may be explained by a perceived social norm of drinking. For the second negative motivation – drinking to cope - there were again no significant differences between the countries examined, with the exception of Italy. The survey showed that overall drinking is not being reported for negative reasons. At the positive end of the scale, both England and Denmark were significantly different/higher compared to the others when drinking for enhancement and drinking for social reasons. Social motivations scored the highest in all countries. Where differences in motivations for drinking across countries arose, Cooke suggested a number of reasons to explain this. Patterns of consumption differ across the countries studied. For example, in Portugal the common pattern of consumption is frequent, light drinking whereas in England, infrequent, binge drinking is more the norm. This influences an individual's motivations to drink. Perceptions of alcohol-control policies may also differ across countries.

When discussing alcohol-control strategies, Cooke outlined the work of Anderson (2009) who divides these strategies into two categories – educational and restrictive. Education strategies are information giving policies such as educational campaigns, and teaching refusal skills to servers, and are dependent on the will of the individual, whereas restrictive strategies are policies designed to restrict and change behaviours. These include policies around price, availability and marketing and it is these policies which Anderson believes are most effective.

At odds with this, among the student sample across all countries, there was a clear preference for educational strategies. Treatment was viewed as significantly more effective than all other strategies. When broken down to country level, England and Norway differed in that educational strategies were perceived as slightly less effective than in other countries.

Overall, Northern Europeans were less positive about the (perceived) effectiveness of educational strategies relative to their Southern European neighbours. Although viewed less positively than educational strategies, Cooke believes that we can still be optimistic about student perceptions of restrictive strategies. Policies to increase the price of alcohol, to reduce the number of outlets, and to ban sports sponsorship were all perceived more positively than negatively in the majority of countries. However, raising the legal drinking age was perceived as the least effective policy in all countries.

Discussants began the conversation by stressing the importance of ensuring cross-cultural understanding. The example of drunkenness was raised. In some countries this is frowned upon and would have an important impact on the choice of policies in these countries, and implications for the perceived effectiveness of such policies.

An audience member raised the issue of drawing conclusions from the study – how can we do so if the students are recommending policies known from research to be ineffective? Cooke stressed/reiterated that the purpose of the study was to establish which strategies university students felt were effective rather than which strategies/policies would make them drink less. Another discussant questioned how we can prevent the findings from being misrepresented e.g. the study being used to show that educational strategies and policies are effective. In response, Cooke pointed to the study finding which showed that, although less popular, a significant majority still viewed some restrictive policies positively and as effective. Cooke believes it is important to stress the interaction between education and enforcement strategies; they should be viewed as being supportive of one another rather than as mutually exclusive.

Educational strategies were discussed further. One discussant raised the

issue of determining which educational initiatives students were exposed to as this is likely to alter their perception of the impact of such initiatives. There are likely to be large scale variations in the level and type of education across countries.

Cooke concluded his talk by clarifying that his results provide findings from a sample of students at a particular point in time. He would like to extend this study to other universities and to other countries.

Forthcoming Occasionals

Our next events in the current series of Alcohol Occasionals will be:

What's not on the bottle?: Alcohol labelling in Europe

Mariann Skar, Secretary General, Eurocare (European Alcohol Policy Alliance)

Tuesday, 1st March 2016

Additional Occasional: Advising pregnant women about alcohol – experiences from cross-cultural research

Lisa Scholin, Institute for Social Marketing, University of Stirling

Tuesday, 5th April 2016.

Adolescent binge drinking in Chile: Does it matter which school they go to?

Francisca Maria Roman, University College, London

Tuesday, 14th June 2016

These events are popular and places are limited. We need you to confirm if you would like to attend. You can do this by registering via EventBrite through our website at www.shaap.org.uk/events.html