

The future of higher education today

Episode 3: Students and drugs – Transcript

Kat Starczewski: Hello. You're listening to The future of higher education today.

We bring people together to talk about the big questions facing higher education. Today, we're talking about student drug use.

Universities often take a zero tolerance approach to drug use or drug abuse, which threatens students with suspension or exclusion. But there's not much evidence to show that fear or threat of getting kicked out of uni works, and it can do a lot more harm than good.

So what should universities do to tackle student drug use? Can their drugs policies be different to better support students who need help?

Today on the show will be asking Universities UK's John de Pury, what are the biggest challenges for universities with students and drug taking? We'll also be speaking to PhD student Hannah Head, whose PhD focuses on evolving approaches to policing drugs.

And to Professor Nic Beech, the Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University and chair of Universities UK's Taskforce on Student Drug Use.

John de Pury: We're starting to understand the harms that drugs can bring to student users and non-users.

Hanna Head: I think the easiest thing for universities to do is to just acknowledge it as a problem. Just say, like, 'students are taking drugs and we want to talk about it.'

Nic Beech: I think there's never been a more important or better time to deal with this.

Kat: I'm joined here with John de Pury, who is University UK's Assistant Director of Policy.

So, John, what do we know about student drug use? How common is it?

John: We don't know as much as we should know. There have been several surveys over the last few years and then Dame Carol Black's really significant independent review. From the surveys, we understand that there may be significant use among students. Some surveys, for example, US surveys have suggested actually lower rates than we might have expected. Around 13% of students from a recent survey suggested they were using drugs.

From Dame Carol's review, she really identified by age group that there were really significant increases, in particular in powder cocaine use, but also ketamine, MDMA, ecstasy and cannabis use. And she really deduced from that that this was likely to be driven by some increases amongst student users. But the short answer is we need to know more. And this research and policy work is part of that.

Kat: So we need to find out more about what students are using and how common is. But what are some of the problems universities are finding among students in relation to drug use?

John: Yeah, we need we need to know more. We also need to know more about why they're using drugs so we don't make assumptions. We do understand a lot about the problems, the harms that may come from drug use and in particular from our work on mental health. We know that drug use can be a really significant component of mental health difficulties.

We know also that there are really significant difficulties in, for example, fitness to study and fitness to practice procedures around students and drug use. And we hear also from accommodation partners across the sector that there is something like a normalisation occurring around drug use, again with harms both for users and non-users. So with that kind of range of evidence, we really sought to bring this together with some early stage research to look at how we can help universities to address this issue.

Kat: I was wondering if you speak a little bit more about how mental health of students does relate to drug use.

John: I think it's a two way relationship, actually. There's a characterisation of student drug use as recreational. We need to understand more about motivations because we also understand that students are using drugs and experiencing harms which may

be mental health harms around increased anxiety, depressive illness and so on. But we also understand that students are self-medicating with drugs.

In some of the recent surveys, we've understood that social anxiety may have been driving drug use, stresses around their academic life or their wider life, actually. We should really be mindful of what the cost-of-living crisis is going to be doing to students more generally, but in this case, specifically around the use of drugs. So important that we understand that this doesn't all fall within a recreational motivation, that there is a strong element of self-medication.

Kat: And universities are facing a lot of challenges. And you just mentioned one now, the cost-of-living crisis for students. Why do we need to tackle this now?

John: So I think part of why we need to tackle it is around what we've just been describing, which is the relationship with mental health. This has been something of an unspoken issue for universities. It has potentially difficult reputational consequences, but we're starting to understand the harms that drugs can bring to student users and non-users.

The other particular spur to this work was then Carol Black's review, which really did suggest this sharp rise in powder cocaine use and cannabis use. And we were really keen to understand and address this, not least because we know that universities have a real variety of approaches to this. There are some who adopt zero tolerance approaches, and there are others who are somewhere else on the spectrum. So we wanted to support our members to be confident about what they were doing with this issue.

Kat: You've spoken a little bit about what evidence there is around student drug use, and also some of the harm that it can do. But what do we know about how students get drugs?

John: So we understand that students get drugs, access drugs via a real variety of means. Some of them, if you like, through those very high risk, hyper-violence county lines routes, which bring significant harms and risks with them – including, for example, issues around cuckooing, where student accommodations might be taken over by county lines related dealers, but also other forms of exploitation, financial and other exploitation.

But actually we also understand a need to evidence better. There are many other routes, including, for example, students purchasing through the dark web or through social media. And this, again, is a subject for our research that we're doing.

Kat: Has the pandemic had an impact on student drug use?

John: There may have been an increase in use through the pandemic. We know that there were certainly some deaths related to student drug use during the lockdown.

Some of this may be about the settings where students were using drugs and the fact that they were doing this within accommodation, rather than potentially as part of the nighttime economy, where they might have been testing facilities available to them, there might have been security staff who had recognised the signs of an overdose, for example, and acted on it. So some of that may be about settings and lack of awareness.

We also think that as the pandemic and the lockdowns lifted, there may have been, if you like, a cohort of students who were coming out of a period of social isolation and were encountering drugs for the first time with less awareness, less understanding of the potential harms and risks.

Kat: Universities UK has set up a taskforce to look into how to introduce. What are we hoping to achieve?

John: We understood that universities were taking many different approaches to this and we wanted to give them a framework to act with confidence, that really looked at a public health approach to the issue rather than a reputational approach to the issue. So it's not for universities to act as part of the criminal justice system, but it is our responsibility to look after the safety and wellbeing of our students and staff.

And it's very much through that lens, an evidence-based lens around a public health approach, that we started to address this work.

Kat: Thank you, John, and thank you for your insight into some of the challenges that universities are facing with this.

I'm going to introduce our second guest, today, Hanna Head. Hanna is a PhD student at the University of Birmingham. Her research focuses on reducing the harm that drug policies can have. She also chairs the student advisory panel on the Universities UK taskforce on student drug use. Thank you for joining us Hanna.

What is the challenge for universities in balancing discipline over illegal activity with supporting their students?

Hanna: Yeah, that's a really good point and I think John touched on some of the difficulties around reputational risk. But in terms of discipline for activities that may be illegal, I think the first thing to point out is that a lot of universities may not understand the legal framework that they're existing in.

When we did the NUS and Release Taking the Hit survey, a lot of the universities that we you know, we examined their policy documents, a lot of those were taking disciplinary action for things above and beyond what was currently illegal at that time.

So I think in terms of balancing that responsibility, already we're seeing quite a punitive approach in places because of a misunderstanding of the legal context and the legal obligations that universities have, especially when it comes to activity in their halls of residence and the role of needing to report that to the police.

But I think there's also a very important kind of moral issue here. And that's what led us to having these zero tolerance approaches that, you know, we've had 50 years of that being international policy as a zero tolerance approach, which has had very little impact on the amount of people who use drugs and the harms that they're facing.

So universities aren't alone in trying to adopt that approach, but hopefully they will be able to see that the international, national and local evidence says that it's not going to work and support should be that focus.

Kat: You've taken a role on as the student advisory panel. I wondered if you'd be able to share any of the examples of stories from students.

Hanna: So I work as a board member for Students Central Drug Policy UK as well, and we get inundated with requests from students for support. You know, be that them being uncertain as to the harms of their drug use, but we also talked to a lot of students who are receiving disciplinary action for that drug use in halls of residence especially.

And one of the key things that we see that students don't know the policies very well at all. So quite often we're giving quite basic advice in terms of people being allowed to take someone with them to disciplinary meetings and advising them on the support that they should be able to get from their students' union, for example.

And it's really just, I think, a huge piece of work to be done in terms of making sure students know what help there is for them if they are going through that process as well.

Kat: We also talked a little bit about how a zero tolerance approach and punitive approaches don't necessarily work – there's no evidence to show that they're working. So what what's the alternative?

Hanna: Zero tolerance has been kind of the norm for so long that it's really hard to try and think about moving away from that, because as soon as we start talking about policy shifts, then we think about how we're going to see if that's had a positive impact. And it's really difficult to do that around drug use, and especially around some of the less concrete harms, harder to measure harms.

But what we hope to see is a removal of any sort of need to contact the criminal justice systems from institutions, contacting them on behalf of their students, especially in disciplinary policies. I think that's a huge supportive step that can be taken now that doesn't necessarily have to move away from zero tolerance, but that can be kind of removed straight away.

But a harm reduction approach, an approach that acknowledges that students do take drugs – if we look at universities as a microcosm of society, people take drugs out in in the real world and on campus. That zero tolerance approach is just unworkable. And I don't understand the point of having a policy where you can never have success.

Kat: So Hanna you mentioned there the harm reduction approach and moving away from zero tolerance, and I wondered what you think some of the misconceptions, maybe that some of the myths around those approaches are.

Hanna: In every conversation I have with universities or students' unions, the first thing people say is, well, 'isn't this saying that we tolerate drug use?' If we're talking about a harm reduction approach, the first thing people are worried about is that they're saying 'it's okay for you to take drugs, we support you in doing that.' And I think that's probably the biggest misconception that we see.

You're not encouraging drug use by adopting a harm reduction approach in any way. What you're doing is you're acknowledging the reality of the situation that people already take drugs, people are currently taking drugs, but there are ways for you to support them in that and make that safer, not just for the people who are using drugs, but everyone around them as well.

You know, sadly, we've had deaths on campuses, as John mentioned, especially during the pandemic. I cannot imagine what it would have felt like to be in a halls of residence knowing that one of my peers has died in that space, but being in lockdown and stuck there.

Providing harm reduction advice, it won't necessarily stop that from happening, but it's going to make it less likely.

So for me, this is really about protecting students' lives and protecting not just people who are using drugs, but everyone around them as well. So I think trying to have that open and honest conversation, be it between institutions and their students or just between students at a peer-to-peer level, is so, so crucial.

I think we see universities every day talking about alcohol use and the risks around, you know, drinking. You see posters on campus reminding you to drink water and to eat. And all of that leads to people being able to safely engage in consuming alcohol. And we just don't have that same level of open conversation between institutions and students, or like I said peer-to-peer when it comes to drug use.

And that is because of the fact that it's illegal. It's difficult for students to be open about that, especially with their institutions, if seeking support or just needing some general advice, because of the fact that there is that legal framework. And a lot of institutions have policies in place that are likely to lead to disciplinary in that situation.

So being able to have that kind of open conversation, even if it is just, 'oh, I was thinking about buying X and taking it at the weekend', and being able to chat to your friends if they've taken that and they can say, 'oh, make sure you know, make sure you don't do X, Y or Z', and just being able to kind of share that advice and have conversations. I think it's really important.

Kat: Open conversation sounds like it's a really important part of how universities work with students. Is there anything else that universities can do better when they're working with students?

Hanna: Well, if you're talking about universities and anything they do relating to students who take drugs, it's hard for them to do anything worse, honestly, because I think at the moment they're in the most cases doing nothing. So hopefully doing something will end up being better than that!

But yeah, those open and honest conversations, I think upskilling your staff as well to be able to have these conversations is really, really crucial. I love chatting about Bristol and UWE and the approach that they've got there, but one of the things that they have in that city that isn't widespread across the UK is the drug service they have there. It is a harm reduction service and we don't have that specific type of service across the UK. So that's really, really special

But I would hope to see universities, chatting to local service providers and seeing if there is a way that the treatment providers can make themselves helpful and maybe more relevant to students and be a welcoming space for them. I think the easiest thing for universities to do is just acknowledges the problem. Just say, like, 'students are taking drugs and we want to talk about it.'

Kat: So are there different approaches by the police to the ethical in the country and how can universities work better with the police?

There are so many different approaches in policing at the moment. It's been kind of dubbed a postcode lottery in terms of what your outcome will likely be if you're caught in personal possession of a small amount of drugs by different police forces.

This has really stemmed from the creation of police crime commissioners and that kind of different priority setting across local police forces, which means that we have some areas who are really, really heavily invested in diversion schemes, so trying to divert people away from the criminal justice system and towards treatment, if that's what's needed. In Thames Valley, that's the kind of approach they've gone for, working with a local drug treatment provider and that's kind of mirrored in similar approaches in several different other areas as well.

But it really, really depends. So a student could quite feasibly have grown up in Birmingham and had West Mids Police stop and search them at one point and had quite a favourable outcome, not had huge criminal justice involvement from that as a result, and then have moved to a different city for university and had the exact same thing happen, but have a much more punitive outcome as a result.

So it's not just how universities are approaching this issue, but it's how local police are as well. And it is completely dependent on where you are. And obviously police also have a huge amount of discretion that they can use as well. So it's not even necessarily the local area you're in that will decide that, it may just be the police officer you come into contact with that day.

Kat: And am I right in guessing that students probably don't know about this inconsistency?

Hanna: I think on the whole, yeah, I think that's probably right. My default is 'no, of course students know', but the students I interact with are students who are engaged in these discussions and these debates already, so there is obviously that understanding that you get when this is an interest or an area that you're involved in.

But on the whole, no, students probably don't understand that. And I think actually students probably wouldn't know what the official outcome would be, even if there was a centralised approach that was at the same across the country. So, yeah, it's really, really difficult to manage student involvement with kind of policing in their day to day lives.

And that's why we recommend apps like Y-Stop, so if you are stopped and searched, you can make sure that you're doing everything that you legally need to, but also so are the police officers who stopped you.

Kat: Thank you so much, Hanna, that was really, really interesting to hear about.

So I'd like to welcome to take us to the show today, Professor Nic Beech, who is the Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University and he's also the Chair of Universities UK's taskforce on student drug use.

Welcome, Nic.

Nic: Thank you. Delighted to be here.

Kat: So I wanted to start first by asking, what is the approach that Middlesex University takes to student drug use?

Nic: This is a complex area, but I actually think it is a massive opportunity and the reason I say that is I think it's an opportunity for us to improve wellbeing and outcomes for students, for staff and actually for broader communities.

And so I know Hannah and John have been talking about connectivity. And for us that is one part of the way that we seek to work in co-leadership with our students.

And that means that there are areas of expertise and expertise through experience that students have that we need to be learning from and supporting. And that needs to balance out with the level of care for wellbeing that we can provide and the way that we think about students who use drugs, students who don't use drugs, but also the impact on staff and local community.

So for us, this is a fairly holistic approach that's bound up with the student experience and the student journey and with our approaches to wellbeing more generally.

Kat: We've talked quite a bit about a zero tolerance approach or a punitive approach to this issue. I wanted to know what you think about it. Do you think it works?

Nic: The idea of zero tolerance sounds really attractive, but often to people that haven't been working too directly in the area. And a real danger is that we end up with one of the two zeros, so a zero tolerance approach, or at the other extreme, a zero action approach.

And in reality, I think those two things are quite close together, because a zero tolerance approach means that you're not starting off from a point of analysis or understanding of what's actually happening in supply, demand and use. It gives you the answer before you actually analyse what the particular question is.

The evidence that we have around zero tolerance is that it's unlikely to work, and that's for a couple of reasons. One, that it's first of all, unrealistic. Hannah was talking about this, and we know that drug use in one form or another has existed probably through the whole of human history. And the idea that we could somehow isolate universities and take them out of society, where clearly there is drug use of various sorts going on, I think is unrealistic. But it's also undesirable. We want universities to be part of society, embedded in and contributing.

Secondly, the evidence around the messages that students receive and take on board is pretty clear. And so if we end up with draconian messages delivered, as it were, from on high, what we actually succeed in doing is driving students away from having a dialogue and a discussion with us and with other students, we drive them away from being able to raise issues when there are problems, and we drive them away from being able to support each other. And the peer support I think is crucial in that.

The last point that I think is really important, certainly for me and since we've been running this project, is the more that I hear and listen to the professionals, the people we work with the police, with criminal justice, the variety of health professionals, but also the people who work directly with students and on behalf of students, actually, the view of zero tolerance from that professional group is that it really has not worked and they end up working around that quite a lot. It also comes from the providers of accommodation who say it's a very unrealistic approach.

That sounds very negative, but I think, coming back to my point about an opportunity, I think if we were to drop the 'zeros' and think more about action and interaction, there's a real possibility and a real potential for us to work quite differently with our whole body of students.

Kat: So there is an opportunity for universities here, like you said. But why do you think other universities have been hesitant to take a different approach?

Nic: There's a natural hesitancy around the topic of drugs, and this came out quite strongly, I think, in Carol Black's approach. Also in the really good survey that's been conducted in Ireland, the drug use in HE in Ireland survey that took place last year.

And there's a number of factors why people want to stay away from it as a topic. One – and this might not sound significant, but I think it is – one is that there are so many other pressing issues that are at the top of the policy agenda, at the top of the student agenda, at the top of the agenda more generally, that it's quite easy for these things to end up on the back burner.

So things like drugs – mental health has actually changed its position and UK, I think has been doing a fabulous job on that. But 10 years ago, it was not in the position that it is now as being something we can talk about and we can work on. And I think drugs is the next one along the line that we need to be able to talk about and address more overtly.

Secondly, we have to be honest and say there are reputational dangers or risks potentially around this. So nobody wants to be seen as supporting drug use or to be having a negative image of their university and their students nationally, or indeed to their local policies. And so I think there is a need for us to understand, actually this is a really positive thing for us to be doing, if we do care about making change, we actually have to talk about it and we have to work out which actions are going to work best in our local areas and for the individuals and the groups who are involved.

Kat: As you said, universities are facing quite a lot of challenges, and a lot of different priorities as well. What would you say to the university leaders about why we need to grapple with this now?

Nic: So I think there's never been a more important or better time to deal with this. More important, because it's quite clear that there's a strong interrelation between drug use and mental health and stress, and between drug use in the student population and in the general population. So all the surveys that we've seen, for example, from Student Minds and from others have shown the levels of stress and anxiety and reported mental health challenges have gone up very considerably during the time of the pandemic.

But particularly where people have spent time in isolation, many of the social skills that are built up that help us have not just individual or personal resilience, but social resilience, because we actually connect to others better, all of those things have been negatively affected by our time during the pandemic, and that, I think, can actually feed into a point in which drug taking becomes a more attractive option to people

who are feeling isolated, struggling to fit in, feeling anxious about their studies and so on. So I think it's really important just at the moment.

Secondly, there is a real opportunity, because actually if we look at the student body at the moment, I think it's wonderful to see the strength of opinion and the values that underpin what they're trying to do about climate and the environment, what they want to do about social change and justice, what they want to do actually rather differently, quite often, around economy in the way that economy is part of society.

So I think all of those give us a really fertile ground for a very positive engagement with students, thinking about the positive outcomes for them and how we best fit them for that. And tackling drugs and particularly the harm that comes from drugs, is something that can really enable students across the board to be part of that hugely positive movement of that generation. And that's why I think it's really crucial right now.

And actually the more time that we've spent in this project and the more people that we've listened to and spoken to, what has really impressed me is that there are some geographical areas and some universities in which this has been taken really seriously. I think all of those that are taking it seriously would see themselves as being on a learning journey and that there is progress happening, but we're not at the end of that journey yet. And that I would see as being a good and positive orientation to making change happen.

But the second point is, if we think less about the geographical area, so is it good in area A or B, and take it down a notch to, how are people acting right across the board? Actually, I think there are so many really fantastic examples of people working in students' unions, in health support, in student experience work, in the nighttime economy, in the police – really impressed with a lot of the work that's going on around the police – and in health.

So I think there is fantastic practice scattered across the whole of the country. And part of what we need to do is firstly recognise that and name it, and secondly, draw it together so that we can learn from that and spread it out more effectively. So I think if we look at the university as the unit of analysis, as it were, then I think all of us would be cautious to pick out one as opposed to another.

But if we look at a good practice that is undertaken by all sorts of students and professionals at the layer below that, there's so much for us to draw, to explore and learn from.

Kat: We'll have to wrap it up there. But thank you so much to John, Hanna and Nic for joining us today.

John: Thanks for giving us the chance to talk about this important subject.

Hanna: Yeah, thank you for having us!

Nic: And thank you from me, too. Wonderful to be part of this team, but also thanks to you and UUK for pushing forward this hugely important topic.

Kat: You've been listening to The future of higher education today. If you'd like to find out more about our work on student drug use, take a look at the show notes on our website, universitiesuk.ac.uk. Thanks so much to our guests today, and thank you for listening.