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## RISKY DRINKING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A SOCIAL NORMS-BASED APPROACH

The project: Risky drinking among undergraduate university students: a social norms-based approach is aimed at reducing risky drinking among undergraduate university students in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This three year (2017-19) project will involve development of a campaign that addresses misperceptions of social norms around drinking.

The project is a collaboration between the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), the Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Canberra (UC). FARE is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that works with Australian communities and governments to stop alcohol harm.

The project is funded by an ACT Health grant and has received Human Research Ethics Committee approval from both ANU and UC.<sup>a</sup> Dr Melanie Pescud, Research Fellow at the Menzies Centre for Health Policy (School of Regulation and Global Governance), ANU, is the project advisor. FARE is partnering with ANUSA and the ANU Division of Student Life, and is keen for student input and engagement during all stages of this project.

This project will contribute to the limited Australian evidence on university setting harm reduction interventions that focus on alcohol and social norms.

**Why use a social norms approach?** Australian studies have shown that overall alcohol consumption among young people aged between 18 and 24 years is declining.<sup>1</sup> However, those in this age group who are drinkers, drink alcohol at very risky levels placing them at risk of harm.<sup>2</sup> International studies have also shown that university students:

- tend to overestimate the frequency and amount of drinking among peers,<sup>3</sup> and
- generally believe that their peers are more permissive in their personal attitudes about substance use than is actually the case.<sup>4</sup>

A 'social norms' approach to behavioural change recognises that behaviour is often shaped by beliefs about what others do and think; actions and attitudes conform towards the perceived 'norm' of friends and colleagues. Social norms surrounding drinking are commonly misperceived among university students.

Social norms interventions attempt to correct misperceptions by providing information about the true prevalence of the behaviour – in this case, drinking alcohol. A number of studies have found social norms based interventions to be associated with lowered levels of risky drinking among university students.<sup>5 6 7</sup>

The project aims to:

- identify existing norms about alcohol use
- address common misperceptions through implementation of a campaign, and
- increase students' confidence in discussing risky drinking behaviours with their peers.

<sup>a</sup> ANU Asia & Pacific Delegated Ethics Review Committee Protocol 2017/101; Canberra University Human Research Ethics Committee – Project 17-50

## The project will consist of three phases.

**Phase one:** A short baseline survey of a sample of first year students aged 18 years and over in August 2017 to assess social norms and how these influence students' drinking patterns and attitudes towards alcohol. ANU's Planning and Performance Measurement Division will randomly select the sample, with these students invited to participate via university email. If you do not receive an invitation, are within the target population and would like to volunteer to participate, please contact Dr Melanie Pescud at [melanie.pescud@anu.edu.au](mailto:melanie.pescud@anu.edu.au).

Following this, students who complete the survey will be invited to volunteer to participate in focus groups. These will assist the project team to gain a richer, more detailed account of social norms and how these influence students' drinking patterns and attitudes towards alcohol. Lunch will be provided.

**Phase two:** Survey and focus group findings will be used to develop and implement a campaign that addresses misperceptions of social norms about drinking alcohol. The campaign will be developed with input from students, student-led organisations and university health and wellbeing services, and will likely involve a mix of campus-based events and a social media activities. The campaign is scheduled to roll-out in semester 1 2018.

**Phase three:** This phase will involve a follow-up survey of second and third year students to assess any changes in attitudes and behaviours, follow-up focus groups and an evaluation of project activities.

**What will the data collected be used for?** A summary of the data collected during the project will be presented in project reports following each project phase. These reports will be made available to the universities and will be posted on the FARE website [www.fare.org.au](http://www.fare.org.au). The reports may be used to inform policy development, be further developed for submission to peer-reviewed journals, and contribute to improving university services.

**Does this project raise concerns?** If participation at any point in the project raises issues of concern or distress for you, you are encouraged to contact the ANU Counselling Centre located above the ANU Health Service on North Road (Building 18), on 02 6125 2442 or [counselling.centre@ANU.edu.au](mailto:counselling.centre@ANU.edu.au).

24 hour crisis support can be obtained from:

- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- ACT Crisis, Assessment & Treatment Team (CATT): 1800 629 354

**Do you want to know more?** You can find out more about this project by emailing the project's Chief Investigator Amy Ferguson ([amy.ferguson@fare.org.au](mailto:amy.ferguson@fare.org.au)) or Nicole Lim ([nicole.lim@fare.org.au](mailto:nicole.lim@fare.org.au)) at FARE. Amy and Nicole can also be contacted on 02 6122 8600.

<sup>1</sup> National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) 2016 Key findings. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017.

<sup>2</sup> National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) 2016 Key findings. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Stock, C., Mcalaney, J., Pischke, C., Vriesacker, B., Van Hal, G., Akvardar, Y., Orosova, O., Kalina, O., Guillen-Grima, F., and Bewick, B. (2014). Student estimations of peer alcohol consumption: Links between the Social Norms Approach and the Health Promoting University concept *Scand J Public Health* November 2014 42: 52-59, doi:10.1177/1403494814545107

<sup>4</sup> McAlaney, J., Bewick, B., & Hughes, C. (2011). The international development of the "Social Norms" approach to drug education and prevention. *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy*, 18(2), 81-89.

<sup>5</sup> Turner, J., Wesley Perkins, H. and Bauerle, J. (2008). Declining Negative Consequences Related to Alcohol Misuse Among Students Exposed to a Social Norms Marketing Intervention on a College Campus. *Journal of American College Health*, 57:1, 85-94, DOI: 10.3200/JACH.57.1.85-94

<sup>6</sup> DeJong, W., Kessel Schneider, S., Gomberg Towvim, L., Murphy, M., Doerr, E., Simonsen, N., Mason, E. and Scribner, R. (2006). A Multisite Randomized Trial of Social Norms Marketing Campaigns to Reduce College Student Drinking. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. 67:868-879

<sup>7</sup> Wesley Perkins, H. and Craig, D. (2006). A Successful Social Norms Campaign to Reduce Alcohol Misuse Among College Student-Athletes. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. 67: 880-889.

