



How can our work support student belonging?

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Session Overview



- **Introduction & Context, SOS UK**
- **Dr Kimberley Hill**
- **Discussion and Q&A**

Introduction & Context



- Student belonging is often considered in student support services, academic departments and access to higher education
- Important outside of higher education
- Often, conversations on drugs and alcohol are absent from these spaces

What are we seeing?



- Alcohol as a tool for social connectedness
- Students continuing to state that alcohol support them to build relationships
- Increase in non-alcoholic spaces on campus, and students using these spaces

Shifting Student Trends

- Students > high levels of substance-related harm, despite recent declines.
- Direct implications: health, wellbeing, academic performance etc.
- More complex: Normalisation of/ more permissive illicit substance attitudes, private or more discreet drug use, complex polydrug usage.
- Why? Experimentation, stress, workload coping mechanism, misconceptions about enhancement, availability etc.
- Many university approaches: zero tolerance vs. harm reduction.

Case Study: UON's Harm Reduction approach

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HARM REDUCTION AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS

OUR HARM REDUCTION COMMITMENT

Harm Reduction Approach - Northampton Student's Union

THAT IS WHY

UON takes a Harm Reduction approach to protect the wider University community, while supporting students to reduce potential harms from alcohol and/or drug consumption

University Culture

- Bars, clubs, and nightlife spaces structured to promote (increased) alcohol drinking (Hill et al., 2018^{a,b,c}).
- Alcohol prominence: welcome activities, social events, societies, visibility, traditions and rituals.
- Greater health awareness, changing social practices/ desires.
- Despite changing trends remains key part of university life, further impacting adjustment.
- Campus culture mismatch: High prominence vs increased acceptance, more prevalent moderate consumption or abstinence (Hill et al., 2024).

Research Insights: University Cultures

"It's promoted A LOT. Pretty much everything I see...a good 90% of the time it revolves around alcohol club events"

"It's expected that students want to get drunk. That needs to change"

"There are less people that want to have that night life... universities don't cater for the student population"

"I've had a really positive experience...student to student there is no stigma... just an expectation people will be negative and hostile, when in actual fact, people aren't"

Feeling Connected

- University transitions: unfamiliar environments and academic pressures.
- Connections are important: Increase confidence, peer behaviour, belonging etc.
- Belonging = increases engagement, retention, academic success and wellbeing.
- “Fitting in and not missing out”: normalised in social circles, indirect/ direct pressure to join in.
- Belonging must be central to university strategies, policies and communications.

Case Study: UON's Building Belonging Work

Building Belonging at the University of Northampton

Chris Powis, Director of Library, Learning and Student Services

Background/context

The University of Northampton (UON) had been working on initiatives that could be characterised as enhancing a sense of belonging on the Waterside campus in 2018 and, inspired by the Workhe/Pearson research published as Building Belonging in Higher Education, the second wave of the Advance HE Building Belonging Project in Autumn 2023.

The UON Project team was led by Michelle Chodyniecki (Assistant Director of Estates and Campus Services), Kate Coulson (leaving the university in January 2024) and Chris Powis (Director of Library, Learning and Student Services). A wider steering group of professional services and students were also involved over the course of the project.

Our new campus was a great disruptor. The sense of belonging attached to buildings, ways of working, groupings of staff and students...



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How UON creates a sense of belonging

UON joined the second wave of Advance HE's Building Belonging Project in 2023. Belonging remains central to UON discourse, across strategies, plans and links into other projects, such as UON's Drug and Alcohol Impact Project and University Mental Health Charter

Belonging Barriers

- Existing cultures dictate who is included or excluded in student life.
- Disproportionately impacts certain groups.
- Shock at drug/ alcohol visibility, accessibility, normalisation (Hill et al., *in review*).
- “Reputation precedes them”: UK HEI recruitment. Further exacerbated by prevalence in university cultures.
- Alternative social interaction opportunities sought but often lacking.

Research Insights: Drinking Cultures and Spaces of Belonging

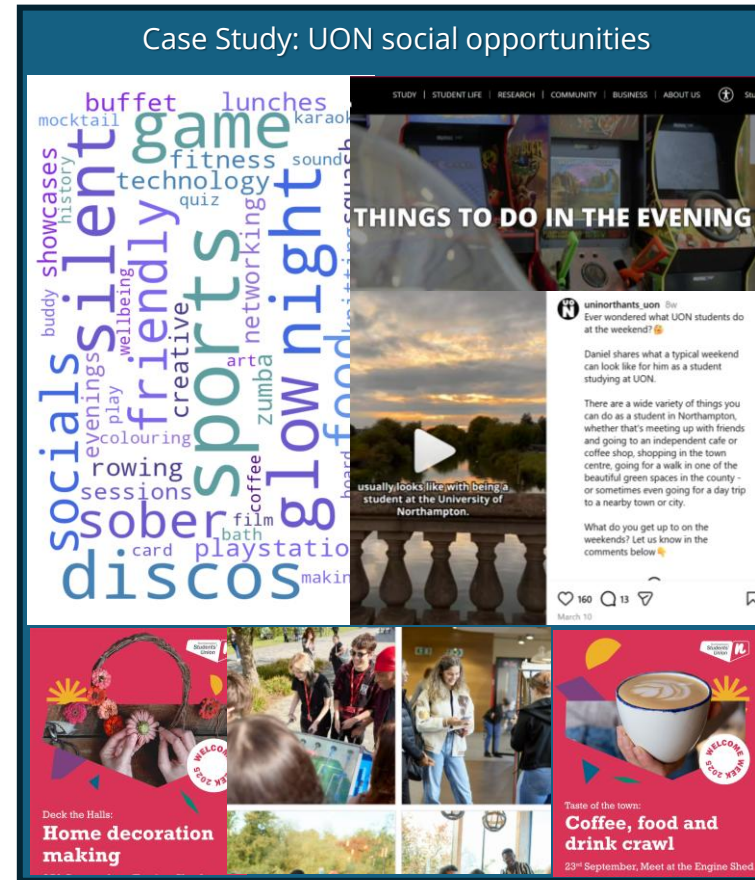
“Heard stuff about University drinking and UK drinking...I was really reluctant to go.. I thought if I go there I’m not going to have anything to do not drinking.... I had those expectations that this is what uni is all about”

“I remember speaking to my friend in the Islamic Society...he was very off-put by the smell of alcohol in there. Not a space everyone felt welcome in”

“I was basically excluded and I found it very difficult to fit in”

Inclusive Social Spaces

- Rethinking social activities: Games nights, mocktail making classes, glow sports...
- Reframing social spaces: Social belonging and wellbeing focus (not alcohol).
- Renaming club events, societies etc. (e.g., Insane Tuesdays, Sober Squad).
- Considering comms: images used, available resources, event advertising.
- Collaborative approach with university, SU, local organisations, venues etc.
- Student voice > social media takeover and student stories.



Connecting through Dance

- Credible alternative away from consumption pressures (Hill et al., 2022).
- Fosters strong belonging, shared enjoyment, connection and community (also beyond the event).
- Health benefits, profound transformational experiences, self-discovery, personal growth and authentic social connection.
- Inclusive: drug/ alcohol recovery, identity expression, those avoiding nightlife contexts.
- Student feasibility (Brown et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2019), but participatory and facilitatory barriers.

Research Insights: Conscious Clubbing

“Always a doubt whether it was a real connection or influenced by alcohol or some other substance...not here”

“I go there and I dump anything that is not working out for me...dance it off. I go out feeling like I’ve left it there”

“Two hours on the dancefloor turned tears of despair into tears of joy, done more work than six years talking therapies”

“Let’s get these people while they’re still developing, save them some years. They might be able to choose an alternative path”

“I couldn’t ever go back to taking drugs now....I can get to that place without it”

Alcohol-Free Halls

- Enhance study conditions, reduce alcohol and/ or drug issues, meet likeminded people (Hill et al., *in review*).
- Home from home: valuable social connections.
- Most had not shared - personal, not relevant, avoiding unnecessary assumptions or misinterpretation.
- Remains unfamiliar: more work to normalise and increase awareness.
- Monitoring but balance: overwhelmingly positive feedback.
- 92%: should be offered at other universities.



Case Study: UON Accommodation

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- Quiet accommodation
- Alcohol-free accommodation
- Single-sex accommodation
- Mature accommodation
- LGBTQ+ friendly accommodation

UON offers a range of accommodation which can be selected during the application phase. Alcohol-free halls stipulate that no alcohol is allowed in the accommodation, including bedrooms and shared spaces. Visitors under the influence of alcohol are kindly discouraged from entering the building

Conclusions

- Alcohol remains normative and synonymous with campus social life, contrasting with shifts in student consumption trends and changes in attitudes/ beliefs.
- Creates social belonging barriers, disproportionately impacting some students who feel completely excluded from campus social life.
- Dominant zero-tolerance approaches increase harm and undermine trust between students and their universities, whereas harm-reduction approaches strengthen students' sense of community and inclusion.
- Alternative belonging spaces offer meaningful social connection (e.g., games nights, dance events, alcohol-free halls), but a reframe of university social life required, designed *with* students, not just *for* them.
- Whole campus collaborative approach required: Building inclusive campus communities by embedding belonging in university strategies, policies and communications.

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**Thank you
Questions?**

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