

EXPERIENCES OF SLOVAK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH ON CAMPUS ALCOHOL POLICY

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Abstract: The vast majority of studies focusing on alcohol consumption among university students are based on US and Canadian samples and employ a quantitative approach. Universities from the US and Canada also have a longer tradition in implementing alcohol policies. The alcohol policies at universities in Slovakia are mostly non-systematic and often not implemented in practice. The objective of this study was to explore Slovak university students' experiences towards alcohol policy on their campuses using a qualitative approach. Eight focus group discussions were conducted among university students (n=64; 38 female; 2011; Slovakia). The key questions were (1) "Is there a policy concerning alcohol on your campus and what are the consequences of not complying with it?", and (2) "How should an on-campus alcohol policy be developed and what should it include?" The students knew of few, if any, rules concerning alcohol. Student participation was considered important in policy development and implementation. Slovak universities should be more active in forming alcohol policies. A preventative policy which actively involves students was emphasized as optimal.

Key words: alcohol policy; alcohol consumption; university students; focus group discussion

Introduction

Binge drinking is associated with problems, such as arguing with friends, unplanned/unwanted sexual activity, drinking and driving, getting into trouble with the law, and academic difficulties (Abbey 2002; Cooper 2002; Perkins 2002; Vik, Carrello, Tate, Field 2000; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Lee 2000), as well as with much more severe consequences such as unintended injuries, assault, and death (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, Wechsler 2005). There is an extensive body of knowledge about social and personal risk and protective factors, due to the extensive international research on alcohol use in a population of college students during last two decades in the US and Canada (Dumas, Kane, Navarro, Roman 2011). It has been found that heavy drinking represents a significant problem on college and university campuses in the United States, "with over 30% of students meeting criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse" (Knight et al. 2002). According to the findings of O'Malley and Johnston (2002), derived from National survey data, 80% to 85% of US college and university students report drinking and according to Wechsler et al. (2002), 40% to 45% of college and university students report a heavy drinking episode every two weeks.

For Europe, as well as for Slovakia (Bačfková et al. 2011), alcohol policy is a relatively new, but growing field of research. While the UK has a longer tradition of research into university students (Gill 2002), in most other countries considerably less research using student samples as representative for the university or country has been conducted. To address this absence, more nation-specific research is needed (Wicki, Kuntsche, Gmel 2010).

Alcohol policies in Slovak universities

Many US and West European universities have developed detailed and precise programs relating to the regulation of alcohol in the university environment and the ways these rules are communicated and followed (Hunter Fager, Mazurek Melnyk 2004; Larimer, Cronce 2007; Moreira, Smith, Foxcroft 2009; Toomey, Lenk, Wagenaar 2007). US and Canadian universities also have a longer tradition of implementing preventive programs concerned with alcohol-related consequences. According to Turner et al. (2008, 85),

Since the mid-1980s, administrators tried many initiatives, including enhanced enforcement, elimination of community-wide celebratory drinking events, implementation of parental notification, deferred Greek rush, restaurant and bar server training, and a multitude of alcohol education events for students. Throughout the '90s, unpublished student surveys and anecdotal observation by medical professionals, student affairs colleagues, and police demonstrated little if any change to the vexing problem of repeated and serious consequences related to students' heavy episodic drinking.

These authors further indicate that

What became clear from campus surveys, focus groups, and students' anecdotal feedback was that several misperceptions regarding alcohol use and misuse existed on this campus. Students consistently overestimated the general student population's amount and frequency of alcohol consumption, a finding that is consistent with results observed nationally (*ibid.*).

Alcohol consumption is generally associated with the deeper aspects of the cultures. The very term "culture of drinking", is used in the context of specific communities. The subject of our interest is the "culture of drinking" among college students. The specifics of the "drinking culture" among undergraduate population reflect the university environment where education itself is carried out, the environment of halls of residence or students' houses and the general role of alcohol consumption in students' lives. Putting research findings into practice in a particular environment is possible only with sufficient knowledge of a particular terrain and the cultural specifics of drinking as well as the explicit and implicit rules of regulation. This creates an optimal opportunity to combine an extensive body of knowledge gained from research based on quantitative research with studies based on qualitative approaches. Qualitative research using the focus group discussion method is very appropriate in exploring opinions, attitudes and experiences. It allows for a deeper understanding of the problem while comparing the experiences of individuals. It is suitable for initial mapping, and could provide further potential for the investigation.

Alcohol policies in Slovak universities are mostly regulated by two laws (Act No. 219/1996 Coll. on The Prevention of Alcohol Abuse and Act No. 147/2001 on Advertising) as

well as the additional internal regulations of each university. According to Act No. 219/1996 Coll., it is illegal to sell alcohol or enable persons younger than 18 years to consume alcohol. According to the same law it is illegal to sell alcohol or allow alcohol to be consumed at public cultural events or public gatherings, with the exception of beer and wine. It is illegal to sell alcohol or allow alcohol to be consumed in healthcare facilities, with the exception of spas. There are no other physical/geographical restrictions on the selling of alcohol (Act No. 219/1996) or advertising it (Act No. 147/2001). All in all, if there are no additional internal university regulations, then it is legal to sell or to consume alcoholic beverages and promote alcoholic beverages within university premises. It is even legal to sell beer and wine during events organised by universities.

According to the findings of Bačíková et al. (2011), formally there is a ban on alcohol on Slovak university premises. Even though it is officially forbidden to consume alcohol in halls of residence, according to students, alcohol is available and widely consumed in halls of residence. Alcohol is also sold in some cafeterias and snack bars.

Hence the objective of this study was to explore Slovak university students' experiences towards alcohol policy on their campuses using a qualitative approach.

Methods

Study context

In this particular study we present results from the Slovak part of oCAP (on Campus Alcohol Policy). This is an international informal initiative by research teams which focuses on alcohol consumption prevention in an academic environment and involves researchers from Slovakia, Belgium, France, Hungary and Denmark. The participating groups are members of the wider international network (16 European countries), which has already conducted research activities among university students (e.g. SNIPE—Social Norms of Polydrug Use in Europe, SLiCE—Student Life Cohort in Europe), mostly using quantitative research approaches. Thus the aim of the oCAP initiative is a cross-national comparison of experiences of university students with on-campus alcohol policies using a qualitative approach. As at this time oCAP is not funded at an international level, the participating countries are those which were able to gain resources for the study at national level. The Slovak part of the initiative was conducted within a wider project funded by the Government Office of the Slovak Republic. In this project, in addition to focus group discussions, which assessed the experiences of Slovak university students with on-campus alcohol policy, there was a 16 hour workshop focusing on the general role of universities in alcohol consumption prevention (Bačíková et al. 2011).

Participants

Sixty-four university students (38 females) from six different faculties of two universities in Slovakia (Košice) participated. Students were informed about the project during their regular university courses and were asked to participate in focus group discussions and the workshop. Those who agreed to participate were interviewed briefly and a database

of potential participants was created. Focus groups were then created on the basis of the following criteria to achieve as much balance as was possible:

- experience with alcohol (occasional drinkers, moderate drinkers, binge drinkers),
- type of accommodation during studies (halls of residence, parental home, own apartment, shared apartment),
- gender,
- type of university (technical, arts, humanities, sciences),
- and the involvement of students (in student government, the students' union, not involved).

The age of participants ranged from 19 to 25 years. Based upon participant responses to the CAGE questionnaire (Bernadt, Mumford, Taylor 1982), none of the students abstained from drinking and less than 15% were problem drinkers.

Procedure

Eight semi-structured focus group discussions (8 participants per group) were conducted during winter 2011. The key questions were (1) "Is there a policy concerning alcohol on your campus and what are the consequences of not complying with it?", and (2) "How should an on-campus alcohol policy be developed and what should it include?"

The English script for the focus group discussions was provided by our Belgian counterparts. This was translated as follows: two forward translations of the English version were conducted by independent translators. Each translator provided notes, where relevant, highlighting uncertainties as to how the text should be translated. Then a third independent scrutator compared the translations. A synthesis was then produced of translations 1 and 2 by the translators and the scrutator together, discussing the issues.

The discussion interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed inductively using a thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006). This inductive method primarily involves finding themes and categories in the transcriptions, constructing a working schema for preliminary cases, and then modifying and validating themes (Goetz, LeCompte 1984). The validity of the results was achieved through triangulation of the observations of the researchers who moderated the focus group discussions and subsequently analysed the transcripts (Miovský 2006).

We also conducted analyses of formal documents on the two universities in Košice involved in the project and an additional five documents from randomly selected Slovak universities. The first step was to download the following three documents from the official website of each university: Study Regulations, Housing and Accommodation Regulations and Ethical Code. Next, we searched the official university websites in order to find documents specifically dealing with alcohol policies. The third step was to perform Google searches using the following key words: name of university, alcohol, consumption. The documents were downloaded and the Google search was conducted on 25 July 2012.

Results

Formal rules

We found exactly the same results when analysing the Study Regulations, Housing and Accommodation Regulations and Ethical Code of all seven universities. We found no regulations relating to the marketing or advertising alcoholic beverages in any of the documents. There was no reference to alcohol policies in the Study Regulations or Ethical Code at any of the seven universities. The Housing and Accommodation Regulations of each university also treated alcohol consumption in the same way. There was only one, very short and, strict rule at each halls of residence: "Consumption of alcohol beverages in the halls is forbidden."

We found no document specifically focusing on alcohol policies at any of the seven official university sites. Similarly, no relevant documents were found using the Google search.

Student perceptions on the regulations on alcohol consumption

In line with the focus group discussion script, we firstly asked students about their knowledge of the existing regulations on alcohol consumption at the university they attended, respectively in the halls where they lived. In general, most students had no accurate information as to whether there were any regulations on consuming alcohol on university premises. Although it seemed logical to the participants that regulations on alcohol must exist ("there certainly are," "there must be," "they are written somewhere," or "I read them somewhere"), they were not sure where the rules were/should be published, or what the exact wording might be. An interesting contradiction appeared concerning the prohibition of alcohol in halls of residence. Most of the students were convinced that they were allowed to drink alcohol in the rooms.

So on the board at the reception in the halls of residence it clearly says that entering the halls of residence with alcohol is prohibited. There is a notice like that (8/14).

I don't know whether it is in the university regulations that students are not allowed to attend lectures under the influence of alcohol (2/18).

From the students' point of view, there is a need to raise the visibility of the prohibition notices (via pictorial representation) in the hallways or in rooms, similar to the smoking ban. Students suggested that the university IT system could be used to promote the university alcohol policies. The shortcomings of the formal rules are closely related to non-compliance and monitoring. Monitoring is perceived as inadequate in halls of residence and in fact none is carried out on university premises where teaching and learning take place. Students perceive the existing rules as conflicting with the reality. Inconsistency relating to monitoring may be related to the low awareness: if alcohol consumption is "silently" tolerated, then the rules start to be misinterpreted. At the same time if the formal rules are bypassed, a new system of informal rules is created (see below).

Informal rules

At the centre of the discussion were the rules passed on through experience. Respondents described the “informal” rules that arose out of experience rather than formal regulation. Informal rules primarily concern the implications or consequences of alcohol consumption and restricting the rights of others through the consumption of alcohol.

If you drink, do it quietly, and afterwards clean up all the mess, the empty bottles must be taken to the dustbins outside the building. It was a rule. It was the cleaning lady who pointed this out in case we wanted to drink (2/20).

Unlike the formal regulations, the students were more familiar with informal rules. These rules also have their own monitoring system and specific informants. For example, cleaners on the campus convey the informal rules—for example, circumventing the prohibition of alcohol in rooms. They have instructions “from the top” to report student alcohol consumption in rooms if they find empty bottles in the trash. Circumventing the formal prohibition then becomes a “game” between the students and the cleaner. They inform the students as to “how it works” and enable them to avoid the problem by warning them to dispose of the prohibited bottles before they start cleaning.

Type of academic environment and alcohol consumption

Another aspect found in the students’ statements was how perceptions of compliance with existing rules depended on the type of academic environment. University teaching premises were assessed completely differently to halls of residence.

Halls of residence were perceived as “home”, a private space where it is not appropriate to restrict alcohol consumption. Regulations would interfere with individual personal freedom.

It’s not possible [to ban alcohol] on halls of residence because people see it as being home. Part of the game is that you are not controlled by anyone, like your parents. If you want to live there you must follow some rules, which are minimal, I think. If you lived there, you wouldn’t like to feel constrained, because then (...) it’s just not possible (8/31).

In contrast to halls, university teaching premises are perceived as a place where you do your “job”; it is a professional environment or public space. It was implicitly clear that alcohol absolutely does not belong here.

But it’s like in the workplace. This is exactly the same to me. When a person is drunk at university, it’s like being drunk at work (8/25).

Participants strictly distinguished between teaching premises and halls of residence. Hence to some extent they distinguished also the time and place where they do not expect alcohol consumption to be regulated. While according to participants the rules applied on university teaching premises are appropriate, similar rules for halls of residence are just a formality; non-compliance is more or less tolerated by all parties within this environment.

Systems of control

Two major themes emerged from the interviews regarding the control of problematic drinking, the current situation and prospects for change: the people who control (drinking, binge drinking) and methods of control.

The primary, if not the only, person who deals with problematic drinking in the teaching context is the teacher. Students who are drunk in lectures are commonly suspended from lectures. However, this punishment is meted out very rarely and teachers tend to ignore drunken students. Checks are carried out for drink in the halls of residence by a number of people: management, student wardens, security, janitors, and cleaners.

The methods used to monitor student possession and consumption of alcohol varied from simple warnings; bag searches at the entrances to the halls of residence; CCTV in corridors; financial penalties—for damaging equipment; and even exclusion from the halls of residence or university.

So once they and some girls went through the lodge and they were carrying it (bottles of alcohol) in a bag. But the bottles clinked in the bag and it (the alcohol) was also completely visible. A janitor asked: 'Girls, what do you have there?' – 'Oh nothing, just some bread.' – 'Oh, don't tell.' So he just warned them to be quiet that night (2/20).

Student wardens

The “student wardens” is a special organization, which operates in the space between the formal and informal rules. This informal/formal system monitors and provides assistance in alcohol-related incidents, deals with noise at night or damage to university property. It exists only at some halls of residence (particularly at the Technical University in Košice) and is part of the students’ union. It operates to varying degrees depending on the hall of residence concerned. At some sites it has very formalised competences, job management, and a system of recruitment while at other sites arrangements are less formal. The essence of the student wardens’ work is to monitor those entering and leaving the building at reception, handle complaints of noise and disturbances in the rooms and corridors of the halls of residence. As the members belong to the student community, they know the students very well. Therefore the student wardens work effectively on the basis of their informal authority. This informality is also reflected in the negotiation of rules, for example, the extent to which a person is punished or exempted from punishment. Communication takes place through informal channels and information is spread mainly by the students or through the sharing of personal experiences.

After ten in the evening you have to be quiet. When a social event is announced, it may be tolerated until midnight. But if there's a big mess, it will be finished earlier. Those student cops. And it is dealt with by removing accommodation points (5/18).

They are well respected. They come to the room and no one dares to run away, because you have nowhere to escape. If they catch you while you are running, you will have a much bigger problem. They take your accommodation card away and the next day you have to go to the student council. There are about 12 people there and they wonder what you did (3/231).

Control which is based on the existence of friendly links enables a more human approach to be taken when dealing with the problem. On the other hand, informal relationships often act against the formal rules. Some students complained about student wardens' corruption or abuse of their position.

But those in the Student Council, or the wardens they do not respect them (the rules). There is nobody to punish them. They can also have parties until one o' clock in the morning, it doesn't matter to anyone. They disturb others, making noise, at any time they want, even after two o'clock or later (5/308).

An interesting aspect of the discussion was the different perceptions of the student wardens depending on whether the university had this organisation or not. In general, at the halls of residence where there are student wardens, students participate in the system and accept it. Although sometimes critical to its functioning, student wardens are mostly assessed positively as a way of dealing with problems caused by alcohol consumption. On the other hand, for students from the halls of residence where there are no student wardens, the idea of introducing them to their halls of residence was regarded with serious concern.

Discussion

According to the analysis of formal documents, Slovak universities are passive in terms of actions taken regarding an on-campus alcohol policy. Previous findings (Bačíková et al. 2011) have also shown that students perceive their university alcohol policies as passive and bureaucratic. On the other hand, when taking into account student self-government, an interesting system of managing the problems connected to alcohol consumption could evolve. But at the end of the day student self-government cannot address the aspects of alcohol policy at university in their complexity. Even though they could produce interesting preventive systems (e.g. student wardens), these in fact only represent students' reactions to a responsibility/competence neglected by the formal authorities. The main optimistic lesson could be that students are not fundamentally against an alcohol policy which would even integrate existing alcohol regulation on campus. A prevention policy which actively involves students was emphasized as optimal. So far, however, alcohol policies at Slovak universities remain unaltered and inconsistent.

According to a recent systematic review (Wicki et al. 2010) of the drinking habits of European university students, four patterns have been consistently reported: 1) male students consume alcohol both more frequently and in higher quantities, 2) students consume alcohol mostly for social and enhancement motives during social gatherings; 3) students living in a "prototypical", less controlled situation and without family obligations are more likely to consume alcohol more frequently 4) students tend to overestimate the extent of their fellow students' alcohol consumption, a bias that is more pronounced among those with higher alcohol consumption. With a focus on these characteristics—gender, drinking motives, living circumstances and social norms—health promotion and prevention efforts which have been successful and evaluated among university students in the US and Canada (Hunter Fager and Mazurek Melnyk 2004; Larimer, Cronce 2007; Moreira et al. 2009; Toomey et al. 2007) may also be very promising for their European peers.

More specifically, heavy drinkers, who are frequently targeted in prevention campaigns, are also often not eager to seek help because they do not consider their drinking behaviour problematic and, moreover, drinking is even seen as normal student behaviour (see Cellucci, Krogh, Vik 2006; Cho 2006; Wicki et al. 2010). When heavy drinkers do seek help, they prefer low-threshold interventions such as computer-based interventions (Moore, Soderquist, Werch 2005). An electronic screening and brief intervention tool can offer several options for constructing such a computer-based intervention with a low threshold (Fraeyman, Van Royen, Vriesacker, De Mey, Van Hal 2012). Compared with the other options, Internet interventions present few barriers and keep the threshold for participation low.

In this context, the decision to implement, as part of on-campus alcohol policies at Slovak universities, social norms based e-health interventions for university and college students, such as project SNIPE (Social Norms of Polydrug Use) in Europe, seems a worthwhile move. Project SNIPE (see Van Hal et al. 2011) offers students personalized social norms feedback on alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use. Students are able to obtain personal feedback by accessing a web portal specific to their institution. The SNIPE portal is currently being tested at universities in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, and the UK.

Limitations

Currently there are 30 universities in Slovakia. Participants in our focus groups were selected only from two universities located in one region of the Slovak Republic (the city of Košice in eastern Slovakia). This could make the generalisation of our results somewhat problematic. Even though we did not control the sample for place of origin within Slovakia, students at the universities which participated in the study are from all regions of the Slovak Republic.

The analysis of formal documents about alcohol policies was conducted only at 7 of the 30 Slovak universities. Documents and information were retrieved only from publicly accessible sources without contacting the decision-makers. Although we do not expect formal policies to be published elsewhere we cannot exclude this. Making such documents difficult to access would not add to the effectiveness of such a policy.

Implications for further research and practice

From information we gained from the students and also from formal university documents it may appear that Slovak universities are passive in forming on-campus alcohol policies. The question is why? The only way to find this out is to ask those who are responsible. Thus further research in this field should focus more on the decision-makers in order to hear their point of view.

The alcohol ban in halls of residences was mostly ignored. Although there is no formal alcohol consumption regulation in teaching premises at universities, this space is perceived as alcohol free anyway. This suggests that students behave in accordance with the wider social norms and any kind of “overregulation” contradictory to these norms is not advised.

According to our findings, students expect universities to have some kind of alcohol policy. Regulation of advertising and marketing of alcoholic beverages has traditionally

been neglected at Slovak universities. According to our other findings advertising of alcohol beverages is very common on university premises in Slovakia (Bačíková et al. 2011). Students think that alcohol advertising is officially regulated or forbidden but not controlled by the university. The current situation creates a window of opportunity for the implementation of alcohol policies, such as regulations regarding alcohol advertising, or at least for opening up the debate on these topics.

Conclusion

Slovak universities are characterized by not having explicitly formulated rules on alcohol consumption on university premises or by not having formal means of enforcing these rules. According to the students, universities should be more active in forming alcohol policies. We also found cases of crucial student self-government systems aimed at managing the problems connected to alcohol consumption. Thus a prevention policy which actively involves students was emphasized as optimal.¹

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