

“Setting the right precedents is vital to achieving a more responsible drinking culture...”

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## YOUTH DRINKING IN TRANSITION

Ian Wybron



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As ever, any errors or omissions remain my own.

Ian Wybron  
September 2016



# Executive summary

This report explores the drinking habits of young adults in Great Britain. It seeks to contribute evidence to explain some of the shifting trends in these drinking habits as reported in the official statistics – including the decline in binge drinking and rise in teetotalism. And it looks in particular at the drinking habits of students, those in work, and those not in education, employment or training (NEETs), as three major case studies. While we have sought to highlight where positive steps have been made – following our earlier work *Character and Moderation*<sup>1</sup> – we have also sought to present a balanced view, identifying outstanding challenges for those concerned with excessive alcohol consumption.

The research methodology includes analysis of the Understanding Society dataset, focus groups with young adults (n = 28), original surveys of students (n = 511) and young workers (n = 517), and a policy roundtable held in Westminster with key stakeholders.

## The big picture

The report begins by outlining the official statistics on the drinking habits of those aged 16–24. These show that the amount of excessive drinking being reported by 16–24-year-olds is declining over time, at a faster rate than is the case with other age groups; and there is an increase in the proportion of 16–24-year-olds not drinking. However, the age group remains most likely to be drinking harmfully compared with the rest of the population. Furthermore, our analysis of Understanding Society suggests that the government may be quite severely underestimating the amount of excessive drinking going on –

giving some urgency to calls for better data gathering, while not disputing that the positive trends exist.

## Understanding the trends

Chapter 2 turns to consider what may be driving the trends in young people's drinking, exploring some of the themes that were identified in *Character and Moderation*. In that report, young people themselves most commonly stated that they thought greater awareness of health consequences was driving the trend towards moderation, alongside lower affordability of alcohol, and alcohol being less easily available to under 18s.

On the first point, our new research found that communication of health messages around alcohol over the last ten years may well have been effective, but there is still much progress to be made – including understanding of units as a practical tool to moderate consumption. Fairly low proportions of students (47 per cent) and young workers (51 per cent) surveyed said that they actually thought about the longer-term consequences of drinking.

On the second, affordability of alcohol does seem important to a fairly financially conscious generation, with more students (66 per cent) and young workers (58 per cent) we surveyed thinking about how much they spend on alcohol. Our analysis of Understanding Society found that more financially conscious young adults are in general more likely to be moderate consumers of alcohol. However, our qualitative research also suggests that the social drivers of excessive drinking in particular contexts can often outweigh considerations of price.

Other explanatory variables come with their complications, including the third – the availability of alcohol to underage drinkers. Although fewer shops are failing test purchases for underage sales, we know that this is rarely where young people are getting alcohol from. Poor data on the availability of alcohol to 16–17-year-olds in particular undermine efforts to better understand what is going on.

We also consider the central importance of parents in setting precedents for drinking, with evidence showing alcohol

abuse frequently passing from parents to their children, and ‘tough love’ parenting – combining warmth with strong discipline – being a protective factor for children against future problematic drinking. It appears from the wider literature that parenting in relation to alcohol may indeed be improving.

In contrast, while by no means a clear relationship, our new analysis of social media use and alcohol consumption using Understanding Society suggests that young adults who drink more are spending more time on social media than those who drink less. In our qualitative work we found that social media – especially sharing images of fun nights out – can have an encouraging effect on consumption, particularly for students, though it really depends on the context and type of social media being used.

There is limited evidence to suggest that other factors, for example immigration and movements towards a ‘healthy is the new cool’ culture, can explain much of the change in drinking habits. In sum, we are improving our understanding of these trends, but slowly.

### **Case studies: students, young workers and NEETs**

The three case studies provided a deep-dive into the drinking cultures of different groups of young adults, with a particular focus on the social drivers of drinking in each.

#### **Students**

Our chapter on students identifies a shift towards more moderation and a ‘coffee shop’ culture on campus – acting as a microcosm of the bigger trend among young adults – but also finds that an excessive drinking culture remains very commonplace in many universities. Powerful social norms and expectations drive student drinking, often reaffirmed with aggressive drinking on arrival and during the first year, with alcohol being the natural social glue for many. Eight in ten (78 per cent) of the students we surveyed thought drinking culture was important at their university, while two-thirds

(65 per cent) thought not drinking alcohol is a barrier to integrating socially.

Social media, societies and sports clubs, drinks promotions and cheap booze, as well as poorly enforced rules around serving to people who are drunk, all play a part in driving excessive consumption at university. While options for teetotal students are growing, in many social circles it is still 'weird' when people choose not to drink, unless it can be explained by religious reasons – and there appears much to do to fully legitimise this choice.

Alcohol policies at universities appear patchy in quality, but we highlight the positive efforts being made to promote responsible drinking and healthy choices among students at many universities. This includes through the Alcohol Impact Programme of the National Union of Students (NUS), with backing from the Home Office, which promotes local partnership working, as well as other campaigns on particular issues related to alcohol such as sexism and 'lad culture', and measures on pricing taken by some universities. However, the reach of these initiatives appears fairly limited to date, with the key involvement of on-trade (eg pubs and clubs) and off-trade establishments (eg local shops) in partnerships under-developed.<sup>2</sup>

A further striking finding of our work with students is that while there is recognition in our polling that students may be drinking too much (51 per cent of students thought so), many students who do drink are fiercely protective of the drinking culture as a 'rite of passage'. In our qualitative research we found this sentiment coupled with a notion that the excesses of university are something one grows out of, and therefore policy makers should not interfere (what we call the drinking maturity hypothesis).

### Young workers

Our chapter on young workers begins with analysis using the Understanding Society dataset, which looks for the first time at the drinking habits of the different occupations that young

people are moving into. Broadly speaking, we found that manual occupations (for example, construction and manufacturing) have the highest rates of excessive drinking, followed by service jobs (such as law and finance), with the public services jobs (eg those working in the police, education and health) having the least excessive drinking. High rates of excessive drinking tend to be associated with lower rates of teetotalism and vice versa.

The relationship between the workplace and drinking is complex. While it is known that employees drink more than those out of work, we found that drinking culture at work is not seen as all that important by the majority of young workers (60 per cent of those surveyed thought not). We found that most commonly, young workers drink with friends from outside work (67 per cent), rather than with colleagues or people directly related to work such as with clients (44 per cent and 10 per cent respectively). It is with non-work friends, perhaps where old norms and expectations reign, that much of the excessive drinking is taking place.

Nonetheless, for many young workers drinking more directly related to work is also important. The fear of missing out on bonding opportunities with colleagues – in parallel to university students – may be a reason to drink more, and peer pressure from colleagues to drink was an issue for a quarter of those we surveyed. Furthermore, in some occupations – business, law and finance, for example – drinking appears to remain quite powerful social currency, helping with achieving business objectives through networking, and even potentially leading to better promotion prospects. This can be at the expense of teetotalers who do not access these same networks through alcohol.

Drinking to deal with stress is no minor issue – a quarter of young workers surveyed gave this as a typical reason to drink.

As with universities, across the board employer policies on alcohol are variable in quality. However, our research found some gathering momentum towards more responsible drinking cultures in the workplace – for example with related pledges that employers can sign up to in the Public Health Responsibility Deal. Take-up so far is relatively low, though, and the Deal appears to have stalled with a change of government. In general,

much more work is to be done to create more open discussions between employers and employees about drinking. It is, after all, in everyone's interests – a third (32 per cent) of young workers we surveyed said their work had been negatively affected by drinking, adding to mounting evidence of the economic costs of drinking in the workplace.

### NEETs

While official statistics show that unemployed people are less likely to drink excessively than people in employment, there is a known link between experience of alcohol-related harms and worklessness. Our third group – young people not in employment, training or education – is a particularly complex one for policy makers, often presenting co-occurring problems, including educational disengagement and wider social exclusion, mental and physical health issues, and problems at home. The small amount of research available on NEETs and alcohol shows that drinking is both a risk factor for becoming NEET, and that being NEET increases the likelihood of developing problems with drink.

Being among friends and seeking autonomy from structures of authority – including from the family – can be key motivations to drink excessively among this group. Harmful drinking patterns are passed on between parents and children. There has been research into how changing circumstances, such as getting a job, or new partner, can help to break harmful drinking cycles for some within this group; however, for others, drinking careers progress into being ever more harmful.

Our discussion focuses on the role of preventative solutions in tackling the harmful drinking and wider factors that may contribute to becoming NEET. In particular, there is growing evidence that developing self-control strategies and resilience in school-age pupils can reduce participation in risky activities, and we outline some evidence-based approaches. It is worth stressing that wider preventative work with families remains a priority – to help model responsible parenting around alcohol and other substances.

## Transitions

We found some striking commonalities between these groups – including the importance of alcohol as a social lubricant, the operation of peer pressure and the fear of missing out as a reason to drink, as well as the social challenges faced by those who choose not to drink.

As a report about transitions (both in national trends and between key life stages), one of the themes we were interested in is the notion of maturity in drinking habits – particularly as students move to working life, though a parallel can of course be drawn with NEETs moving into work. While the majority may grow out of some of the excessive drinking of youth, it appears that for others this type of behaviour sets up a precedent that does not shift so easily. Drinking patterns change, yes; but it also seems that drinking maturity is occurring later and later for some.

## Recommendations

Following on from this research, we make the following key recommendations.

To improve evidence on the drinking habits of young adults and others:

- **Recommendation 1: Official surveys on drinking habits should be trialled with self-completion questionnaires only, and a detailed methodological review undertaken to establish whether reported drinking is indeed much higher than that reported in face-to-face interviews.**
- **Recommendation 2: The government should commission a survey to capture the drinking habits of 16–17-year-olds – a current blind-spot in official statistics – helping to explore the drivers of underage drinking and accessibility of alcohol to this age group.**
- **Recommendation 3: Researchers should explore opportunities for longitudinal analysis of the drinking habits of young people to test the drinking maturity hypothesis, establishing**

how many grow out of excessive drinking, who does and when, and how many do not.

To further the positive trends towards moderation:

- **Recommendation 4:** New official guidance, campaigns and drinks labelling should foreground commonsense language on recommended drinking limits, rather than relying on messaging around units, which evidence shows has a limited impact on behaviour.
- **Recommendation 5:** Responsible drinking campaigners should trial an approach appealing to financial responsibility, including total money saved from modest cut-backs each year.
- **Recommendation 6:** Researchers should undertake a detailed review into the role of social media in encouraging excessive drinking, and pilot schemes to help readjust norms online (eg Facebook quizzes to compare consumption with the wider age group).

Related to students:

- **Recommendation 7:** The Home Office should investigate the prevalence of sales of alcohol to people already drunk in the on-trade and off-trade, and should suggest better tools for enforcing the law. This has particular relevance for students, but is a much wider issue.
- **Recommendation 8:** The Home Office should produce clearer national guidelines on irresponsible drinks promotions, rather than emphasising the discretion of local licensing authorities.
- **Recommendation 9:** Universities and students' unions should trial different approaches to freshers' weeks to reduce student expectations of concentrated drinking on arrival at university.

- **Recommendation 10:** Universities and students' unions, at a coordinated and national level, should raise the profile of teetotalism and promote moderate consumption as a positive choice. Sports societies should be encouraged to take a prominent role in these campaigns.
- **Recommendation 11:** Universities and students' unions should place greater emphasis on the involvement of the local on-trade and off-trade in partnerships to tackle alcohol-related harm.

For young adults in employment:

- **Recommendation 12:** Employers should engage employees in an open conversation on drinking and setting workplace alcohol policies, including how to ensure that work-based socialising and events are inclusive for non-drinkers.
- **Recommendation 13:** The Department of Health (DoH) must be transparent about the future of the Public Health Responsibility Deal. It should set out a coherent strategy for engaging a far greater number of employers in health promotion in the workplace, including related to alcohol.
- **Recommendation 14:** The DoH should commission a national web-based portal, which is promoted by employers and enables employees to benchmark their drinking against others, identify risky behaviour, and be signposted to help.
- **Recommendation 15:** Community health workers should approach local businesses to offer identification and brief advice to employees, and advise employers on developing workplace alcohol policies.

For NEETs:

- **Recommendation 16:** The Department for Education (DfE) should continue to invest in trialling and evaluating new programmes in schools tackling risky behaviour (such as alcohol use), but must balance this by providing greater support for successful programmes to scale.
- **Recommendation 17:** Local alcohol partnerships across the country should follow the example of Tower Hamlets Community Alcohol Partnership and facilitate work experience opportunities for young people who are drinking underage and are at risk of becoming NEET.
- **Recommendation 18:** The DoH and other relevant departments should invest further in preventative work with families, including expanding family nurse partnerships and trialling family-to-family mentoring schemes – targeting funding at areas experiencing high levels of alcohol harm.

# Introduction

Year on year, national statistics give us reason to be positive about the drinking habits of young adults in Great Britain, with fewer and fewer drinking to levels considered harmful. The annual Opinions and Lifestyle Survey shows that over the last ten years the proportion of 16–24-year-olds binge drinking has steadily declined from 29 per cent to 20 per cent; while in contrast, teetotalism has increased from 19 per cent to 25 per cent. Our focus in this report is on young adults rather than younger children – but similarly encouraging trends are true for that group too.<sup>3</sup>

## Character and Moderation

In 2015 Demos published the report *Character and Moderation*, which added to the growing evidence of youth moderation.<sup>4</sup> Our nationally representative survey of 16–24-year-olds found that two-thirds (66 per cent) said that alcohol was not important to their social life, and more thought alcohol was of more importance to their parents' social lives than vice versa. Just 3 per cent said that alcohol was an essential part of socialising for them.

*Character and Moderation* provided some suggestions on what might explain the positive trends. The most frequently cited reason among the young people polled was greater awareness of the health consequences of drinking (66 per cent). Also cited were the affordability of alcohol (55 per cent), alcohol being less easily available for under 18s (47 per cent), and negative media portrayals linked to drinking (46 per cent).

The report argued for greater policy focus on building character skills in young people – such as resilience and self-

control – and more cross-departmental working (including between the DfE and DoH) to build a joined-up and preventative approach to alcohol-related harm.

## Challenges ahead

Since the publication of *Character and Moderation* many column inches have been filled trying to explain what lies behind these trends. Beyond growing awareness about health consequences and issues of affordability, to what extent does immigration – and the religious and cultural diversity it brings – play a part? What about the role of social media? Is healthy the new cool? Many other countries are experiencing similar trends in youth drinking habits, and interest among research communities is growing. But aside from the speculation, the evidence base is improving only very slowly.

Newspaper headlines in Britain also run the risk of handing a victory to policy makers – and others working towards tackling harmful consumption – that is undue. There remain significant challenges ahead.

While statistics show positive trends over time, 16–24-year-olds are still the most likely age group to have drunk alcohol excessively in the last week (one in five has done so). While drinking is more polarised in this age group (which includes more teetotallers than any other age group), among those who do drink, a greater proportion of young people are drinking to excess than their older counterparts. In 2014, 40 per cent of 16–24-year-olds who reported drinking in the last week did so excessively (drinking more than eight units for men and six for women), compared with 34 per cent of 25–44-year-olds, 25 per cent of 45–64-year-olds, and 9 per cent of those aged 65 and over.

Other recent research from the Nuffield Trust found that hospital attendances related to alcohol poisoning for young people aged 15–24 are increasing, and are higher than other age groups (though this is not true of actual admittances).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as increasing policy attention focuses on better data gathering on alcohol-related harm – through the strategies

of Public Health England<sup>6</sup> and the Home Office<sup>7</sup> – we are likely to see future increases in these figures.

### This report

This report seeks to take further the research we conducted for *Character and Moderation*, while providing greater balance to the debate. In this report we provide new evidence to help understand the drinking habits of young people in Great Britain. This includes looking at what may explain the positive trends in the national statistics, while seeking to understand the drivers of harmful consumption and how best to tackle them – with particular regard to the social drivers among some key groups of young people: students, young professionals and workers, and young people who are NEET. As the title suggests, a running theme of the report is transitions – both in national trends, and for young people moving between key life stages.

### Research methodology

We have used the following research methodology for this report:

- analysis of Understanding Society
- focus groups with young adults
- surveys of students and young workers
- a policy seminar.

### *Analysis of Understanding Society*

Understanding Society is the largest longitudinal household survey in the UK, covering 40,000 households. The survey is designed to help understand the long-term effects of social and economic change; participants are asked a range of questions on health, work, education and social life – thus providing a rich and detailed source of data.<sup>8</sup>

For this report we conducted a range of analysis of wave 5 of the dataset (data gathered in 2013/14) – the latest wave to

include questions on alcohol consumption. The questions related to alcohol are adapted from the Health Survey for England (chapter 1). Our analysis explored descriptively the relationship between drinking and a range of other variables of interest – for example, age, gender, occupation, through to social media use and healthy lifestyle indicators – as well as performing some more sophisticated analysis where appropriate. Detailed information on Understanding Society can be found in the technical appendix.

### *Focus groups with young adults*

To supplement this quantitative analysis, we held four focus groups with young adults (aged 18–24,  $n = 28$ ) in four locations across the UK – Liverpool, London, Manchester and Newcastle. Focus group participants had a range of economic statuses – unemployed young people, university students and young people in work – and a range of drinking habits, from weekly binge drinkers to people who are teetotal. (We recruited teetotallers whose primary motivation to not drink was for reasons other than religion.) These groups served a dual purpose: to help us understand the drinking habits and cultures of different groups of young people first-hand, and to gain their insight into what they think explains current trends in youth drinking.

### *Surveys of students and young workers*

Using emerging findings from our focus groups, Demos worked with Populus Data Solutions to put into field two polls: one of students ( $n = 511$ ) and one of young workers ( $n = 517$ ) aged 18–34. The questionnaires were similar for the two groups, and were designed to explore the differences and similarities in drinking cultures – including common motivations for drinking and their prevalence – as well as awareness of health consequences and levels of financial responsibility around drinking.

### Policy seminar

Finally, we convened a policy seminar with a range of experts and key stakeholders with an interest in our research in order to gain input for our conclusions and recommendations.

### Structure

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1 provides some further context, exploring the statistics on drinking among young people, compared with other age groups and over time. We also compare official statistics from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Health & Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) with the data from Understanding Society, and explore reasons for discrepancies.
- Chapter 2 focuses on some of the explanations for the trends in drinking among young people, updating our findings from *Character and Moderation*. This includes findings from other recent research published on this topic, new insights from our focus groups with young people, and relevant findings from our survey and analysis of Understanding Society.
- Chapters 3, 4 and 5, explore in detail our findings on the three case study groups: students, young professionals and young NEETs. The chapters consider the distinct issues for each of these groups and their drinking cultures – but we also look at the similarities and the concept of transition through key stages and how this affects drinking, which was a key theme of our conversations with young people.
- Chapter 6 draws together our conclusions and makes a number of recommendations to government and other stakeholders based on our findings.



# 1 Snapshot of youth: who drinks and how much?

In this report we focus on young adults (primarily those in their late teens and early 20s) rather than younger children. Taken as a whole, those aged 16–24 in Great Britain appear to be increasingly moderate in their alcohol consumption – with annual statistics showing decreasing numbers drinking to excess, and more choosing not to drink at all. This chapter outlines some of the official statistics on the drinking habits of 16–24-year-olds, compared with other age groups and over time, and discusses some of the known relationships between drinking and other variables such as gender, ethnicity and economic status.

We also present a surprising finding from our analysis of the Understanding Society dataset, which suggests that more young people (and indeed people of all ages) may be drinking to excess than we think. This raises serious questions about how data on drinking habits are being gathered – and suggests we certainly should not be complacent about the trends.

## The drinking habits of 16–24-year-olds

Official statistics on alcohol consumption for this age group tend to be drawn from two key surveys: the Health Survey for England (HSE) and the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN), which covers Great Britain.<sup>9</sup> Both surveys ask similar, and very detailed, questions on drinking habits, and – despite the geographical variation – have almost identical results.

### Current state of play

We know from these sources that:

- Around four in ten people aged 16–24 are drinking alcohol weekly (39 per cent in the HSE), with the majority drinking less frequently or not at all.
- 16–24-year-olds are less likely than other age groups to be very regular drinkers (drinking five or more days a week).
- However, 16–24-year-olds are more likely than other age groups to drink excessively (typically defined as drinking six units for a woman and eight units for a man in one session<sup>10</sup>), with one in five drinking excessively in the last week (19 per cent in the HSE). This suggests they are drinking more heavily in more condensed periods (eg at weekends).
- Alongside being more likely to drink excessively, 16–24-year-olds are also more likely than any other age group to be teetotal (more than one in five are – 22 per cent).<sup>11</sup>

### Trends over time

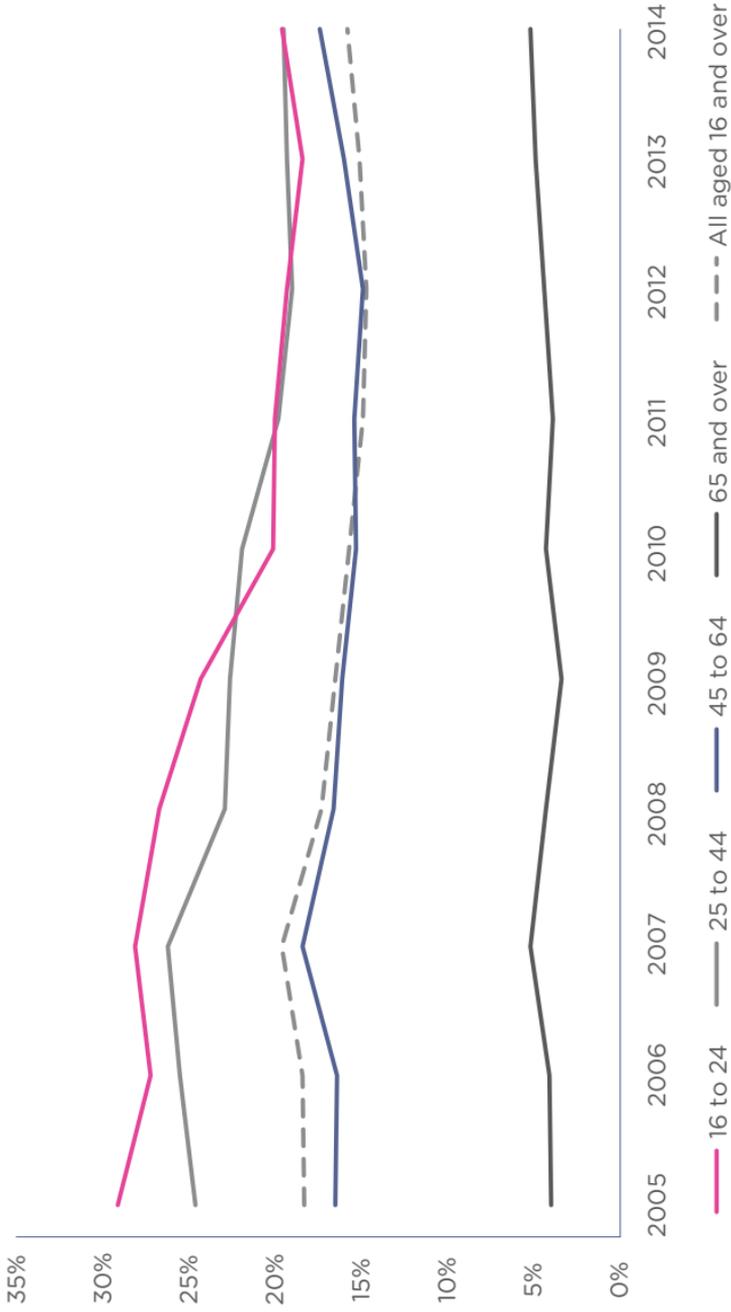
The ONS publishes a time-series on drinking, including the proportion of people drinking excessively and the proportion who are teetotal. The data show that the proportion of 16–24-year-olds reporting excessive drinking in Great Britain reduced from 29 per cent to 20 per cent between 2005 and 2014; while the proportion who are teetotal increased from 19 per cent to 25 per cent. These changes have been more noticeable for 16–24-year-olds than for other age groups, as figures 1 and 2 show.

### Underlying factors affecting drinking habits

Within the 16–24 age group, habits will of course vary according to a range of factors, not least age (more people above the legal age drink than below, for example).

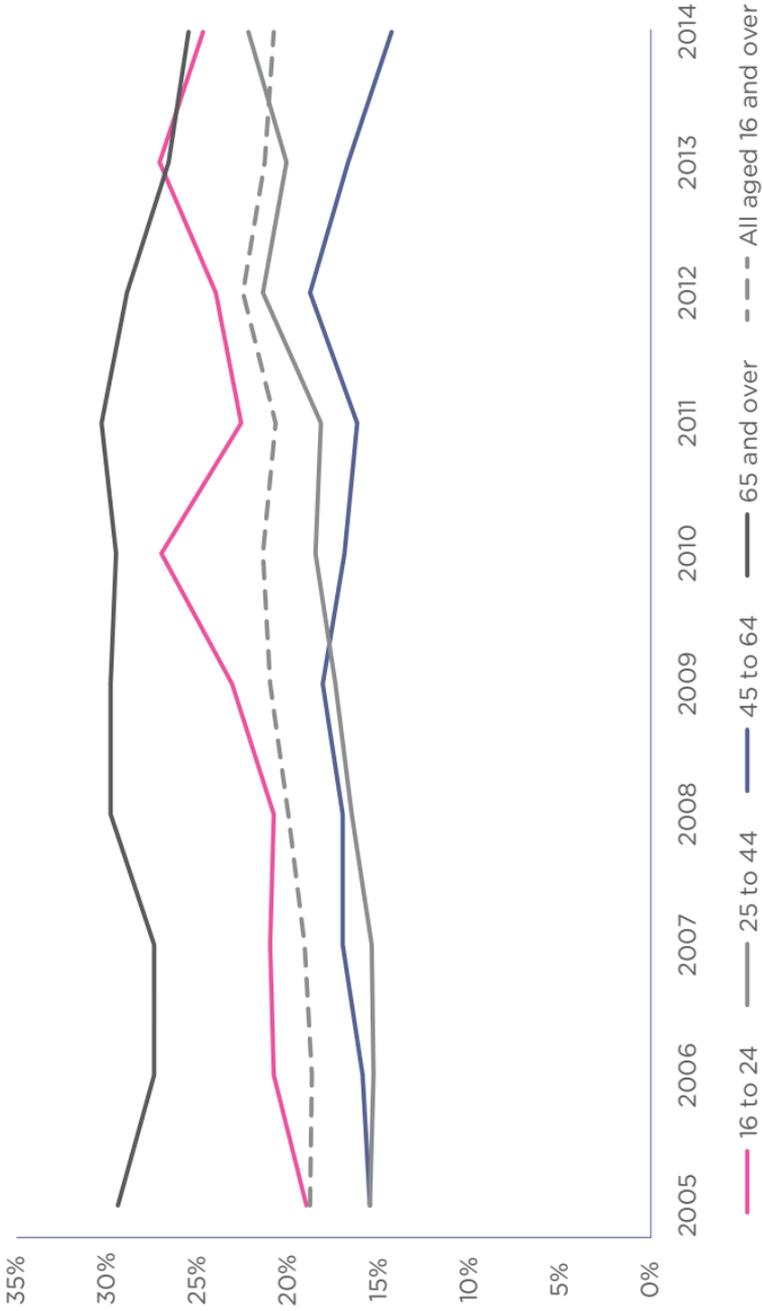
There is a range of literature on factors which influence drinking habits, and participants of our roundtable were keen to stress the importance of communicating the ‘social patterning’ of harmful consumption in particular. Our review of literature suggests that explaining the drinking habits of young people is extremely complex,<sup>12</sup> though table 1 provides a brief summary of some relevant findings.

Figure 1 The proportion of 16-24-year-olds drinking more than 6/8 units on the heaviest drinking day in the last 7 days (Great Britain)



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey 2014<sup>13</sup>

Figure 2 Time-series for the proportion of 16-24-year-olds who are teetotal (Great Britain)



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey 2014<sup>14</sup>

Table 1 **Key variables and their relationship to drinking habits**

Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Across all age groups, women drink less frequently than men, and more men than women drink excessively.</li> <li>• 22 per cent of men aged 16–24 drank excessively in the last week compared with 17 per cent of women of the same age.<sup>15</sup></li> </ul>
Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most minority ethnic groups have higher rates of teetotalism and lower incidence of excessive drinking.<sup>16</sup></li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There appears to be a positive relationship between drinking and education (the more educated drink more), with higher educational attainment associated with a higher probability of problem drinking in later life.<sup>17</sup></li> <li>• However, as our chapter on NEETs discusses, there is also a relationship between underage drinking and poor educational outcomes at school, and between binge drinking and poorer attainment at university.<sup>18</sup></li> </ul>
Economic status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those in work are more likely to drink to excess than unemployed people; and there is a positive relationship between drinking and income (higher earners drink more).<sup>19</sup></li> <li>• However, serious health harms appear more commonly experienced by people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (routine and manual workers have the highest incidence of alcohol-related mortality, for example).<sup>20</sup></li> </ul>
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• London has the lowest rate of binge drinking and the highest rate of teetotalism. Regionally, the picture is complex (it is not simply the case that northerners drink more, for example).</li> <li>• Those in work are more likely to drink to excess than unemployed. There is some evidence linking neighbourhood deprivation to a higher incidence of binge drinking and alcohol harms.<sup>21</sup></li> </ul>
Early experience of drinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower ages of first having a drink and of first being intoxicated are linked to more problematic relationships with alcohol in later life.<sup>22</sup></li> <li>• Parenting approach to alcohol has a significant influence on the drinking habits of children and adolescents, with 'tough love' parenting reducing the likelihood of later problems with drink (see chapter 2).<sup>23</sup></li> <li>• Peer group norms – particularly the drinking habits and attitudes of close friends – also have a significant effect on underage and later drinking habits.<sup>24</sup></li> </ul>

## The importance of tackling binge drinking

Of particular interest to policy makers are the one in five 16–24-year-olds who are drinking excessively, many of whom are ‘binge’ drinking in an obvious and wilful sense. Tackling the ‘scourge’ of binge drinking was a key target in the government’s 2012 Alcohol Strategy, and the evidence is clear on the harms this type of consumption can cause – to the individual, the communities in which they live, and to society more broadly.

Indeed, while the statistics on the trends suggest that some progress is being made towards this policy objective, it is worth a reiteration of why it matters so much – in both the long and short term. For young people, academic research and national statistics show that binge drinking can lead to a number of short-term harms including poorer academic performance, accidents, hospital admissions, violence and unwanted pregnancies.<sup>25</sup> And sustained heavy drinking over the longer term increases the likelihood of suffering cognitive impairment (for younger drinkers it may lead to issues with brain development, including learning and memory functions), and of developing a range of serious health conditions including types of liver disease, a large number of cancers, and an increased risk of suffering a heart attack or stroke.<sup>26</sup>

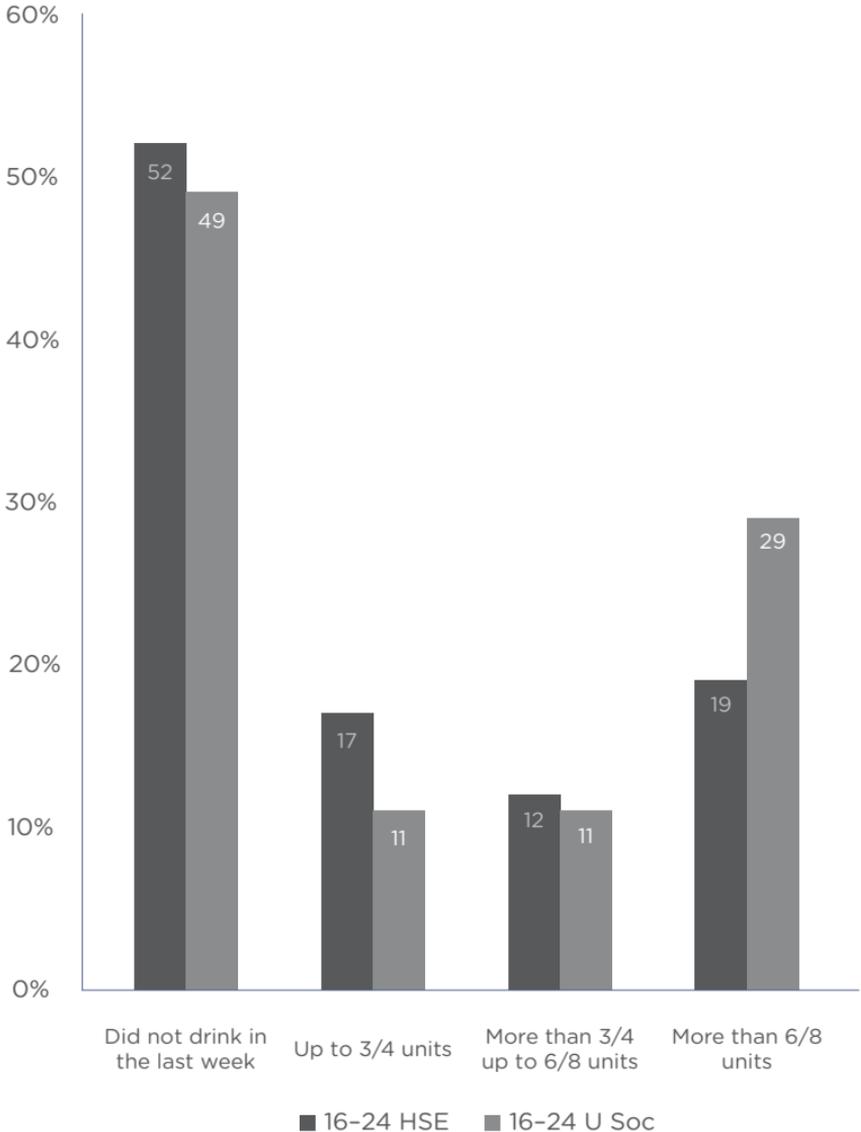
For society, the burden of binge drinking is borne primarily through spending on health services, policing and lost productivity – previously estimated by government at around £21 billion per year.<sup>27</sup> There are around a million hospital admissions related to alcohol each year, and it is estimated that half of violent crime is related to drinking.<sup>28</sup>

## Are more young people drinking to excess than official statistics suggest?

The government knows that the statistics it quotes on drinking are likely to be underestimating the amount of alcohol people actually consume – in part because figures on the sales of alcohol suggest a higher rate of consumption than is shown in the surveys.<sup>29</sup>

Our research using Understanding Society (a nationally representative survey with a very large sample) may provide an

Figure 3 **The proportion of 16-24-year-olds binge drinking on the heaviest drinking day in the last week: Understanding Society compared with the HSE (England only)**



Source: HSE 2014 and Demos analysis of Understanding Society dataset

indication of the extent to which the government is underestimating true consumption levels. We found a substantially greater rate of reported excessive alcohol consumption than is found in the official statistics, which may be explained by survey methodology (see below). Indeed, the rate of excessive consumption for all adults (ages 16+) found in Understanding Society is nine percentage points higher than that of the HSE: 24 per cent compared with 15 per cent. For 16–24-year-olds, it is 29 per cent compared with 19 per cent in the HSE (figure 3). (See appendix for a detailed technical explanation. Note that we use the HSE because the questions in Understanding Society are adapted from it.)

This demands attention and further investigation. While a methodologically complex finding, it potentially has huge implications for judging how effective policy has been in this area. For example, it would increase the number of excessive drinkers in England aged 16–24 from around 1,194,000 to 1,822,580 (by more than 600,000). And for the total population (ages 16+) it would increase the number of excessive drinkers from 6,448,000 to 10,318,000 (a difference close to 4 million).

There are two likely causes of the discrepancy worth flagging here. The first is the method of survey administration. Understanding Society uses a self-completion questionnaire as standard, while the HSE and OPN rely more on face-to-face interviewing (though there are self-completion components for younger participants in those surveys). This could mean respondents answer more ‘honestly’ in Understanding Society. The second is the comparability of survey questions, as Understanding Society simplifies some of the questions from the HSE (see technical appendix).

The Understanding Society findings will of course be more powerful if the discrepancy is explained most by the first cause noted above – mode of survey administration – and would lead to a fairly urgent recommendation to improve data gathering in order to understand the binge drinking problem. Older research from NatCen suggests this may in fact be the case;<sup>30</sup> and our analysis of the 2013 HSE dataset found that the small number of survey respondents who self-complete also appear more likely to

report excessive drinking than those who are interviewed face to face (see appendix). Nonetheless, we present the results with considerable caution, and in an effort to open a conversation.

It is important to note that while our analysis of Understanding Society suggests that there may be more young people drinking harmfully than suggested in the official statistics, this does not provide evidence against a trend of declining consumption.<sup>31</sup>



## 2 Exploring the trends

Our 2015 report *Character and Moderation* sought to begin to understand the drivers behind the declining drinking trends among young people in Great Britain. Understanding these drivers is an important task: it will help to build momentum towards encouraging a more responsible drinking culture. And, as statistics quoted in the introduction on alcohol harm show, there is much progress still to be made.

In *Character and Moderation* we tested a range of theories in a poll of 16–24-year-olds. We found that young people felt that greater awareness of the health consequences of drinking too much, the lower affordability of alcohol, and alcohol being less easily available to under 18s, likely contributed most to setting the trends. Other common theories were posed, including the rise of the internet and social media (giving young people more things to do), and immigration. Broader social and economic realities – as the costs of education and housing increase – also play their part.

In this chapter we report on new insights gathered through this research relevant to this discussion – and discuss some of the common beliefs about youth drinking culture with the evidence available.<sup>32</sup> This includes feedback from four focus groups – held in Liverpool, London, Manchester and Newcastle – with young people from a range of economic backgrounds and with a range of drinking habits, including weekly binge drinkers and teetotallers (n = 28). These findings are supplemented in places with findings from our new surveys of students and young workers, and further quantitative investigation using the Understanding Society dataset. Note that in the case of the latter, as we found discrepancies in drinking behaviour between Understanding Society and official statistics, described in the previous chapter, we present the results with some caution.

## Is there growing awareness of the health consequences of drinking?

*Character and Moderation* found that two-thirds (66 per cent) of 16–24-year-olds thought that greater awareness of the health consequences of drinking alcohol was a reason for the decline in binge drinking in the national trends.

In our focus groups we asked participants to reflect on how much they felt they knew about the health consequences of drinking, including how, and the extent to which, this informed their drinking habits; and to reflect more broadly on whether health messages are reaching young people and indeed could be having a strong impact on youth drinking culture.

In line with the polling from *Character and Moderation*, the health consequences of drinking were widely discussed in our focus groups – both as one of the most salient personal reasons for choosing to moderate consumption (or not to drink at all among the teetotallers we spoke to), and as an important reason given by participants for explaining the national trends. We found that heavier drinkers in our focus groups (notably the students we spoke to), often chose to drink heavily despite feeling well informed about the potential longer-term consequences. (In this case participants articulated a fairly clear prioritisation of short-term rewards – fitting in and not being ‘boring’ – over worrying about the longer-term health consequences of drinking.)

While participants did not single out any particular examples, commentators have pointed to the success of information campaigns and education over the last ten years in laying the path towards more sensible norms around drinking.<sup>33</sup> One focus group participant thought that the health consequences of drinking are more ‘drilled into’ young people these days – whether they heed the warnings or not. It is worth noting, of course, that far more information than ever before is now at young people’s fingertips online – including Drinkaware’s unit calculator<sup>34</sup> and other information on alcohol-related harm – for those who choose to access it.

However, the picture from our research suggests much more progress can be made in informing young people about the risks of excessive drinking. While there was awareness

of the health consequences of drinking alcohol among focus group participants, this tended to be at a fairly generic level. Echoing the findings of other European research,<sup>35</sup> few of our participants expressed concerns about any serious health risks beyond damage to the liver – the various cancers and diseases also associated with drinking, for example, nor risks to brain development when drinking at younger ages. Some participants observed that the health risks attached to smoking are communicated much more clearly to young people in this country.

It was striking – especially with the attention often given to improving labelling on alcoholic drinks – that participants in our focus groups had a poor understanding of units as a measure of alcohol consumption (‘I don’t even know what it means’). This suggests that while there is a good understanding of some of the risks associated with drinking heavily, young people are not necessarily being given effective tools to monitor their drinking. Until this knowledge gap is reduced it is likely that the new weekly guidelines will have less impact on behaviour than intended.<sup>36</sup> One participant said: ‘Just use a language that someone will understand rather than “two units”.’

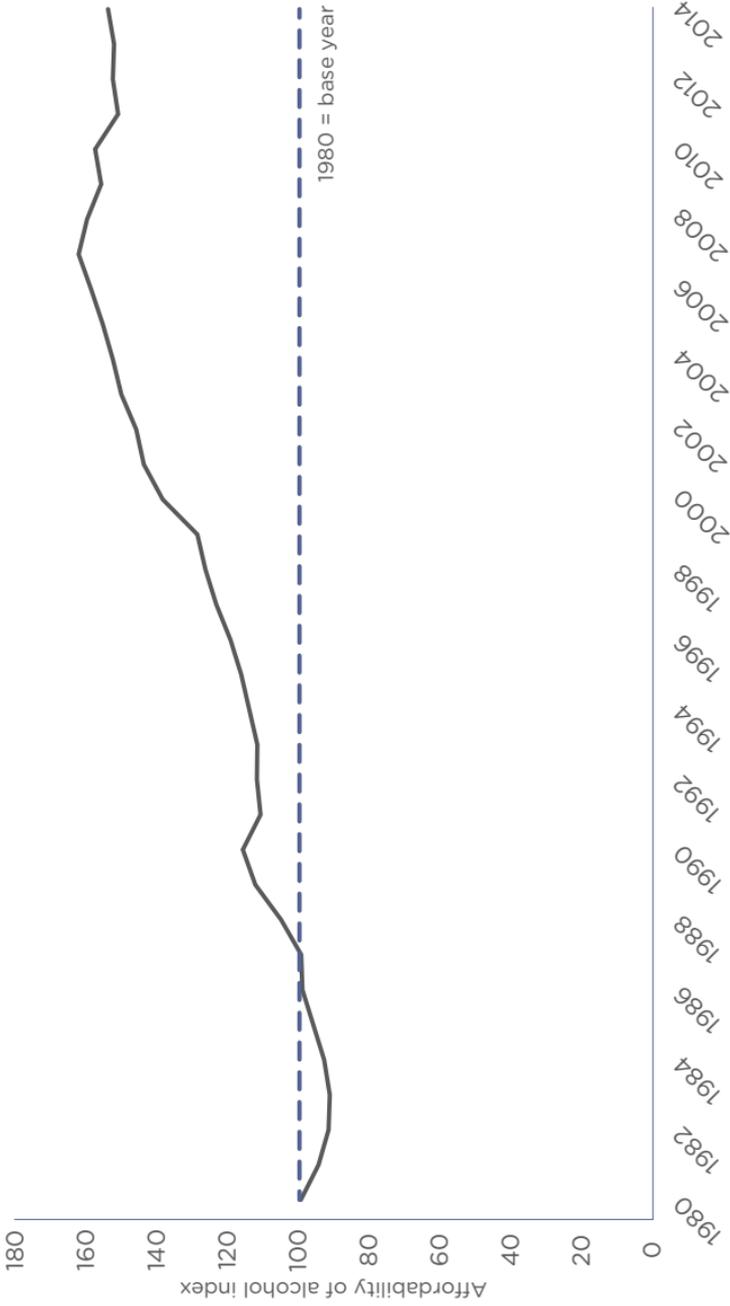
The findings from our surveys demonstrate that considerable progress has yet to be made among two groups of young adults in particular. Less than half (47 per cent) of the students we surveyed said that they think about the longer-term consequences of drinking, while only 51 per cent of workers aged 18–34 did. Getting health messages across to young people must therefore remain a priority.

### **What about the affordability of alcohol?**

In our survey of 16–24-year-olds for *Character and Moderation*, the second most widely cited reason for the decline in binge drinking was the lower affordability of alcohol (55 per cent thought this).

The picture on affordability is complex. In fact, the HSCIC reports that alcohol has become steadily more affordable over the last 30 years as increases in real household income have outstripped the rising price of alcoholic drinks (figure 4).

Figure 4 Alcohol affordability in the UK since 1980



Source: replicated from HSCIC, *Statistics on Alcohol, 2015*<sup>37</sup>

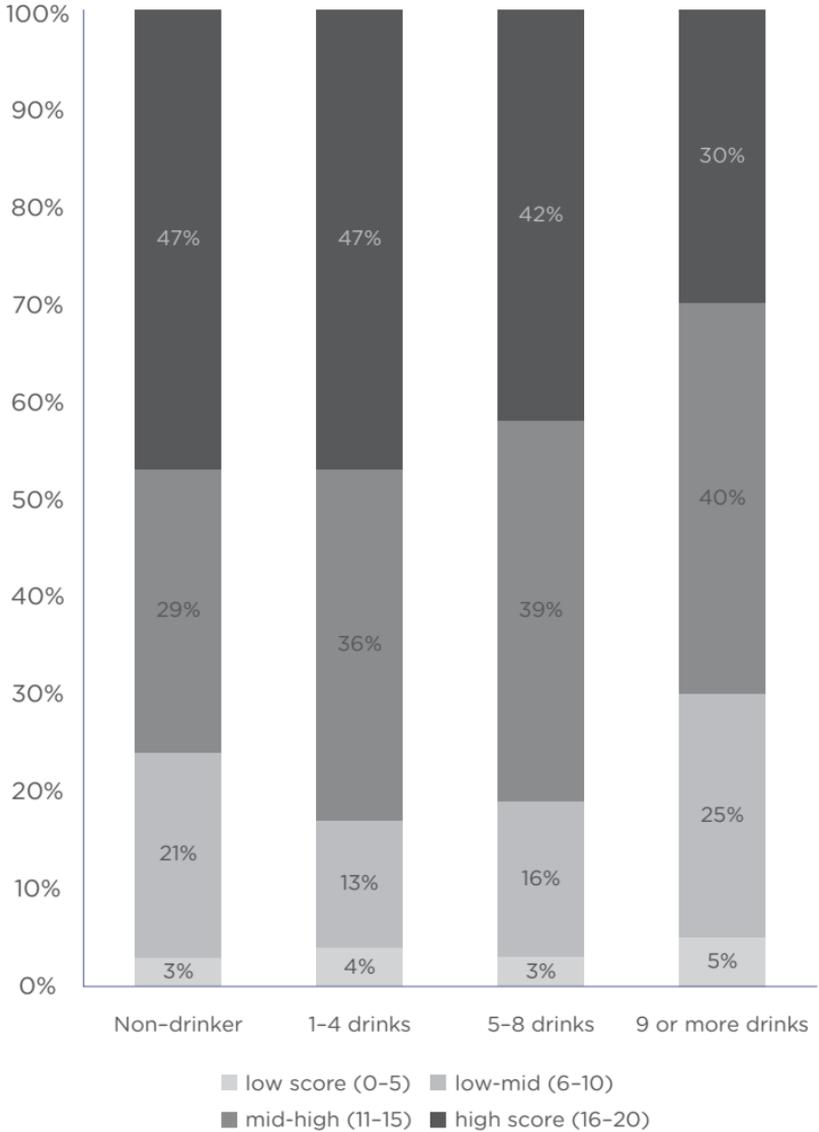
Looking specifically at the last ten years, though, there has been a levelling off in alcohol affordability. According to the HSCIC, alcohol was less affordable (though only slightly) in 2014 than it was in 2005, with a small peak in between. Analysis by the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS) has focused on affordability for underage drinkers – using the national minimum wage for under 18s as a benchmark – and found the price of alcohol outpacing the increase in the minimum wage since the 2008 recession, in part spurred by the government’s alcohol duty escalator.<sup>38</sup> The IAS has suggested this is a key driver of reduced underage drinking – though the choice of benchmark is controversial.

Many of our focus group participants reported they had noticed a rise in the price of alcohol in the last few years. As many of the drinkers described a culture of pre-loading at home before going out, they will likely have been impacted by the government’s decision to introduce a ban on selling at below cost (alcohol duty plus VAT) in 2014 – ending some of the cheaper deals on drinks available at supermarkets. In general, evidence suggests that higher prices do lead to lower consumption (including among this age group).<sup>39</sup> Broader political narratives around financial belt-tightening and rising rents and costs of education for young people may also in part explain why cost features prominently in explanations for declines among young people – with alcohol perhaps seen as more of a luxury in this context.

There were three relevant observations on this to emerge from our new research. The first is that moderate drinkers appear to be more financially responsible in general than heavier drinkers in this age group. Understanding Society has an index on delaying gratification, which includes two questions to assess financially responsible behaviour. Our analysis found that moderate drinkers aged 16–24 were more likely to score highly on these measures than heavier drinkers, as figure 5 shows. (In this analysis we have used the number of drinks reported rather than converting drinks to units – see technical appendix for further detail.)

The second observation is that – while we cannot comment on the trends – the majority of young adults do appear to be

Figure 5 **Financial responsibility scores by number of alcoholic drinks consumed on heaviest drinking day in the previous week (16-24-year-olds in the UK)**



Source: Demos analysis of Understanding Society dataset

reasonably financially conscious when it comes to alcohol. In contrast to the lower figures on health-consciousness quoted in the section above, three-quarters (74 per cent) of the students we surveyed who drink said they thought about how much they were spending on alcohol when out with friends either a great deal or to some extent, as did 63 per cent of young workers. Focus group participants also spoke about money, and the impact of alcohol ‘on their pocket’ as a key reason to be moderate, though other participants emphasised that this does not mean spending on alcohol is always carefully planned: ‘Maybe like one in ten people think “right, I’m gonna put that money aside”.’

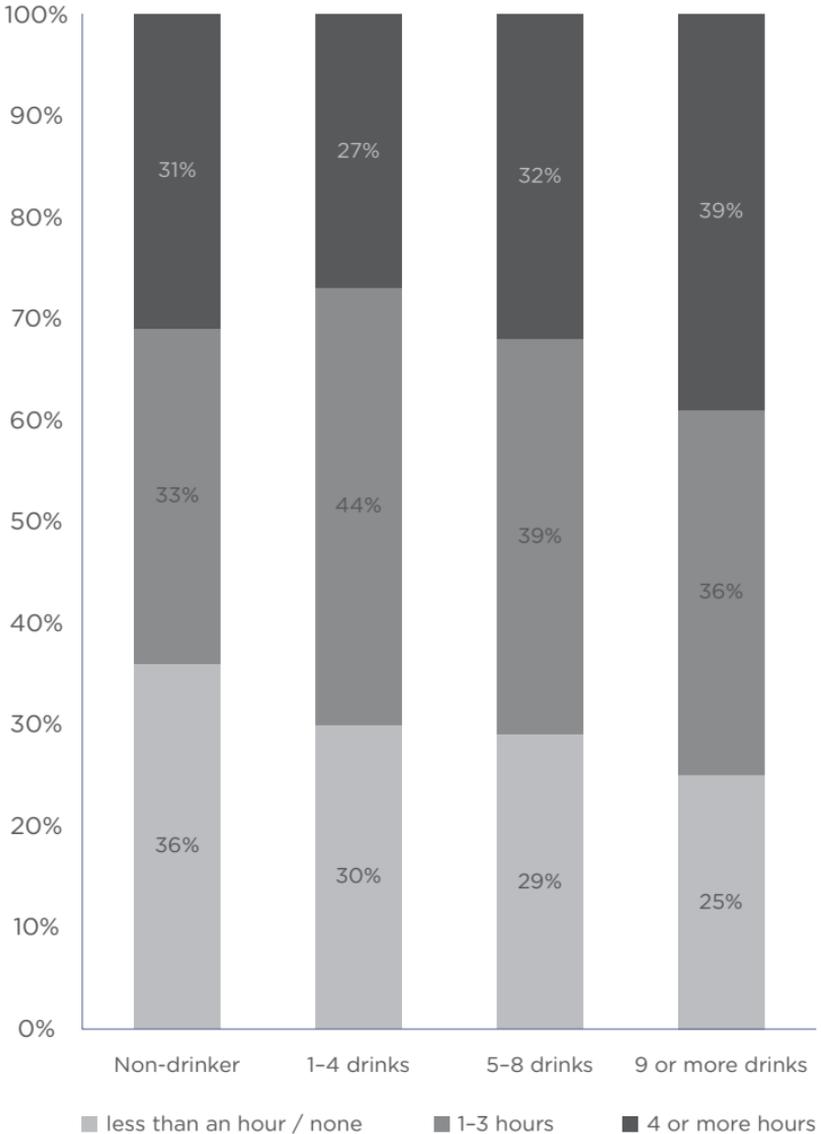
The third observation, however, is that social norms at different life stages and in different social groups are likely to have a significant impact on how the cost of alcohol is perceived. Students who drank, in particular, often gave the impression to us that they would always find the money for alcohol (‘even if now it got even more expensive I’d still go out and try and save money somewhere else’) – though of course they were also in an environment of cheaper drinks (see next chapter). This type of sentiment was echoed by one of the NEEtTs we spoke to, who described putting money together with friends to see ‘what they could get’, and then planning to go out to cheaper student club nights. In contrast, workers who drank tended to talk at greater length about the pressure of competing priorities for spending and the need to be more responsible. Teetotallers thought that spending on alcohol among their peers who drank was often wildly frivolous (‘stupid amounts’).

### **What is the role of social media in explaining drinking habits?**

The rise of social media has been of significant interest in debates on the declining drinking of young people, though there is disagreement about their likely effect on drinking habits.

Some commentators think that social media provide distraction and so young people are less likely to drink. As one article put it: ‘Some social lives have partly migrated online. You

Figure 6 **Hours spent on social media on a typical weekday by number of alcoholic drinks consumed on heaviest drinking day in the previous week (16-21-year-olds in the UK)**



Source: Demos analysis of Understanding Society dataset

don't need to drink to hang out online.<sup>40</sup> In *Character and Moderation*, we found that 42 per cent of 16–24-year-olds thought that in giving people more things to do the internet and social media may have contributed to the decline in young people's drinking. Additionally, social media increase the connectedness of young people to news and thus some of the negative media stories about drinking – thought by close to half (46 per cent) of 16–24-year-olds to have contributed to drinking declines.

Understanding Society does not offer much scope to explore this issue – but it does ask respondents aged 16–21 how many hours they spend interacting with friends through social websites on a typical weekday, as well as about their drinking habits. In fact we found that drinkers who drank in greater volumes were more likely than those who drank moderately or little to be spending more hours on social media (figure 6).

Indeed, other commentators have suggested that social media may be having an encouraging effect on consumption, as a new conduit for alcohol advertising, with poor regulation.<sup>41</sup> (In our research, this was most pertinent in the case of student drinks promotions, discussed in the next chapter.) More straightforwardly, social media may simply provide more opportunity to share glamourised images of fun, drunken, nights out. Research from the USA found that teenagers who saw images of friends partying and drinking online were themselves more likely to drink.<sup>42</sup> At a more extreme end, viral crazes such as Nominations have led to large numbers of young people sharing videos of themselves downing drinks with an increasing pressure to out-do those who made the nomination.

The majority of young people we spoke to from all backgrounds described frequently seeing drunken photos of friends on Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat that gave an impression of fun (although those in work were more likely to have a culture of self-censorship, as they were generally careful about their online profiles). These images of fun were seen far more commonly than images portraying healthy behaviours (for example 'gym selfies'; see the section 'Is healthy the new cool?' below). Most participants – especially the students we spoke to – felt that seeing these images encouraged drinking, and was

helping to perpetuate a now widely reported on culture of ‘FOMO’ – fear of missing out:

*I think it influences people to go out more because if you go on social media it's largely pictures of people going out with their friends, and that's what social media portrays you as.*

*They end up drinking a lot as well because they are too busy trying to show off the bottles they have and the shots they're taking*

What seems most important from our focus groups, however, is the context in which social media are being used (for example, by students compared with those in work), and the type of social media being used. Online identities were powerful social currency, especially for students we spoke to; it appeared that decisions about who to socialise with were often made in an instant based on their Facebook profile and whether they looked ‘fun’. It was suggested that more immediate forms of social media such as Snapchat – with images shared in the moment of a fun night out – may be the worst offenders for encouraging heavy drinking, and feelings of not wanting to miss out. Non-drinkers we spoke to were also often part of these Snapchat conversations, and most spoke disparagingly about this trend (‘trying to be cool’).

Research on the relationship between social media and drinking is under-developed – particularly thinking about practical solutions in contexts where social media are shown to encourage harmful consumption. An Australian pilot study shows the potential of social norms interventions using social media, finding that delivering personalised messages to students through Facebook, which compare their consumption with that of their peer group, helped to reduce consumption significantly.<sup>43</sup>

### Is healthy the new cool?

A distinct issue, but related to both health concerns and the rise of social media, is the idea of a broader cultural shift towards

healthier lifestyles among 16–24-year-olds that may explain shifting drinking habits – that ‘healthy is the new cool’. As one article puts it: ‘To be healthy has become its own card-carrying status symbol; a cultural semaphore for discipline and success.’<sup>44</sup> This is the gym-going, clean-eating generation, into health fads and ‘physical perfection’, and sharing it – rather than excessive drinking – on social media.<sup>45</sup>

This is an extremely difficult concept to measure, especially over time. In the first instance our research was interested in looking at whether there is a noticeable convergence of certain healthy behaviours among groups of moderate drinkers and teetotal young people, captured in both hard data in Understanding Society and the lived experience of some of our focus group participants. Are those who are moderate in their drinking actually showing moderation in other ways?

Using data from Understanding Society, we were able to produce descriptive statistics on how drinking habits correspond with a small range of other healthy lifestyle factors – principally respondents’ dietary and exercise habits. However, we did not find any convincing evidence to lend weight to the idea that alcohol choices were linked to choices in these areas. (This was to some extent surprising – previous analysis of a younger age group had found correlations between low alcohol consumption and healthy eating and sports participation.<sup>46</sup>) Focus group members were also asked how choices about drinking interacted with decisions about their wider lifestyles, and we similarly found little obvious connection between moderate consumption and healthier habits in other areas. (Though in a wider sense, self-discipline and ‘staying in control’ were more common themes among teetotalers than drinkers in our focus groups.)

When asked explicitly about the hypothesis that healthy was the new cool, many focus group members recognised the idea (‘in our generation, we have organic food and stuff like that... that wasn’t there before’), but suggested that ultimately it really ‘depends on who your friends are’. Perhaps, too, it depends on where you live, as there is an impression that ‘healthy is the new cool’ may be a fairly London-centric trend.

None of the focus group participants said that they would identify themselves as falling into that highly health-conscious category – none even among teetotallers in London.

### What about the role of parenting?

Arguments about the role of parenting in explaining the declines in youth drinking tend to take one of two forms. The first – as recently argued by the IAS – is that parenting around drinking is now more responsible than in the past, leading to more moderate consumption among children as they grow up.<sup>47</sup> The second is that those in this generation of young people are more moderate because they are consciously seeking to avoid the drinking excesses of their parents' generation. As one article puts it: 'People just don't want to look like their parents.'<sup>48</sup>

The importance of parenting in shaping drinking behaviour is widely accepted. Recently, a study using an earlier wave of the youth Understanding Society dataset (11–15-year-olds) found that children whose parents drank weekly were nearly three times as likely to report binge drinking in the past month.<sup>49</sup> Demos' previous research has also shown that parenting can play a key role in predicting – and preventing – harmful alcohol consumption among young people. For example, in our reports *Feeling the Effects* and *Under the Influence* we conducted a range of analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study and found that a disengaged parenting style had a significant effect on a child's future alcohol consumption. We found:

- Disengaged parenting at age 10 makes a child twice as likely to drink excessively at age 34.
- Disengaged parenting at age 16 makes the child over eight times more likely to drink excessively at that age.<sup>50</sup>

Our report recommendations have therefore often prioritised interventions that inform parents and help to build parenting capability – with particular focus on the 'tough love' approach. Tough love parenting, combining high levels of emotional warmth (particularly in the early years between 0

and 5) with strict, consistent discipline (especially at ages 15 and 16), reduces the likelihood of drinking excessively in adolescence and adulthood.<sup>51</sup>

While it is unclear whether there has been a growth in tough love parenting in recent years, it is an encouraging finding of wider research that there appears to have been an increase (captured in a range of surveys) in parents' modelling of more responsible drinking behaviour, as well as better monitoring of their children's drinking behaviour – both of which may have contributed to a decline in harmful consumption.<sup>52</sup> (It is worth noting, though, that a 2016 survey by Churchill Home Insurance found that half of parents allow their child to drink in the home before age 14.<sup>53</sup>)

We heard a range of views in our focus groups on how influential parents were in setting drinking habits, ranging from 'not at all' through to 'very strong' – for example, two participants had chosen to be teetotal because a parent was alcoholic. Interestingly, chiming with findings noted above, the two young people whom we spoke to who were NEET said they often drank excessively and both described somewhat laissez-faire parenting approaches, and there emerged fairly clear parallels in parental and child substance abuse. We return to this in more detail in chapter 5.

Our survey for *Character and Moderation* found that a substantial proportion (41 per cent) of 16–24-year-olds thought alcohol was more important to their parents' social lives than to their own (a higher proportion than thought the opposite – 30 per cent). However, beyond some extreme personal examples – such as having an alcoholic parent – most of our focus group participants were puzzled by the hypothesis that they should avoid the excesses of previous generations (many felt they were drinking more than their parents' generation).

### What else may explain the trends?

Below we include some brief observations on some of the other factors that may be influencing declining drinking among 16–24-year-olds.

### Availability of alcohol to under-18s?

Although the 16–24-year-olds we surveyed for *Character and Moderation* commonly ascribed the decline in binge drinking to the reduction of availability of alcohol to under-18s, it remains difficult to know how much availability of alcohol to under-18s may have contributed to the trends because the data on the issue are poor.

Discussions of underage drinking tend to focus on younger children aged 11–15 because of the data available;<sup>54</sup> official statistics report trends for the 16–24 group rather than separating out the drinking habits of 16 and 17-year-olds. This leaves a big blind-spot in what we know about the availability of alcohol to those most likely to access it underage, including where and how they are obtaining alcohol from, and whether its availability has substantially changed over time. The data available at a national level on the success of age-verification policies in pubs, local shops and others selling alcohol – Challenge 21 and Challenge 25 – are also poor. ServeLegal data do suggest there has been a positive trend of better enforcement over the last ten years, but that enforcement is still patchy and the failure rate still quite substantial (a third of pubs and 17 per cent of off-trade retailers failed a test purchase in 2013).<sup>55</sup>

### Immigration?

Immigration of people from traditionally non-drinking backgrounds has been steadily increasing, and the demographic shift is likely to be affecting drinking habits. Nonetheless, our analysis in *Character and Moderation* comparing the 2001 Census and 2011 Census found that the growth in traditionally non-drinking populations could only account for a relatively modest amount of the growth in teetotalism (less than a third, using a generous estimate). Furthermore, the fact that these trends are being seen in countries such as Australia, the USA and Nordic countries – which have very different ethnic and religious profiles – suggests there is much more at play.<sup>56</sup>

### The role of advertising and television?

The best evidence available suggests alcohol advertising has a small effect of increasing overall alcohol consumption, and this includes underage consumption.<sup>57</sup> Alcohol advertising is co-regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority, Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice and the Portman Group, and it remains an extremely controversial topic, with increasing numbers of restrictions coming into place over the past ten years.

However, it is not the case that advertising is on a clear downward trend moving in line with consumption trends. Indeed, while exposure to alcohol advertising among children and young adults fluctuates, and decreased in the early 2000s, the opposite appears to be true in recent years.<sup>58</sup> Media regulator Ofcom conducted research in 2013, which found that viewing habits of children and young adults were changing (with more watching shows targeted at adults), and there had been increased exposure to alcohol advertising between 2007 and 2011.<sup>59</sup> Ofcom then ordered a further review of alcohol advertising in light of this.

Our qualitative research found that more needs to be done to tackle positive portrayals of excessive drinking in the media more broadly. While codes on advertising by industry stipulate a number of rules to avoid encouraging heavy drinking (including downing drinks and drinking leading to sexual success), many of our participants spoke about the way this behaviour still occurs in popular programmes including reality TV shows (for example, *Geordie Shore*). One focus group participant suggested that there was a polarisation in the way alcohol featured in the media in general – either being ‘glamourised’, thus encouraging drinking, or being treated very negatively in discussions about more extreme behaviours and addiction.

### Substitution for drugs?

Some focus group participants thought that more young people were turning to drugs and legal highs instead of drinking. This is not borne out by the statistics. For example, figures from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) show that over the last ten years there has been a steady decline in the

proportion of 16–24-year-olds taking illegal drugs (though there have been increases in the last two years). Around one in five 16–24-year-olds tried an illegal substance in 2014/15.

Furthermore, while use of legal highs is concentrated among 16–24-year-olds, it is still a very small minority who appear to have used them (just 3 per cent in the past year). The CSEW statistics show that those who drink are also more likely to be taking drugs and legal highs than those who take neither – calling into question any substitution effect.<sup>60</sup>

## 3 Student drinking culture

Having explored the trends for the drinking habits of young adults in general, the remainder of the report looks at three key case study groups. This chapter presents our findings on the drinking habits of students at university.

Student drinking culture is an interesting microcosm, appearing to some extent to reflect the general positive trends. Many commentators have pointed to there being different social norms at university from those in the past, with a noticeable shift towards more responsible drinking habits on campus, as well as greater studiousness among cash-strapped students. Yet being a student and drinking to excess still often go together in the popular imagination, with assumptions of heavy drinking, low cost alcohol, free shots in clubs, and so on. As we explore below, many students who do drink are fiercely protective of this drinking culture as a ‘rite of passage’, and this side of university life appears to some extent to be a blind-spot for those worried about harmful drinking – one in need of fairly drastic policy solutions.

Through the course of the research we spoke to many students – drinkers and non-drinkers – about their experience of drinking culture at university, and surveyed students across the country (n = 511). We also reviewed a range of literature and initiatives going on in UK universities, and drew on insights from participants in our policy roundtable.

### Shifts in university drinking culture

There appears to have been a shift in student drinking culture not unlike that we see in the young adult population as a whole.

Recent statistics show that there is a growing teetotal student population, with fewer students drinking excessively

than in the past. The Sodexo Student Lifestyle Survey in 2016 – run in partnership with *Times Higher Education* – found that more than a third (36 per cent) of students now report not drinking alcohol, up from 26 per cent in 2012.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, according to that survey only a quarter (25 per cent) of students now drink more than once a week, with only 5 per cent drinking five or more pints of beer a week. More than four in ten (44 per cent) said they spend nothing at all on alcohol from shops and bars in a typical week. These findings led the Sodexo report authors to conclude that ‘the era of the hard-drinking student party animal has passed’.<sup>62</sup>

The sales of alcohol on university campuses across the UK appear to be in decline. For example, the NUS reports that sales of draught and packaged beer in student unions have fallen for the last three years.<sup>63</sup> In some cases this has made it difficult for university bars to remain profitable. There are examples – such as in Aberystwyth and Huddersfield universities – of student union bars closing down, mirroring broader trends of failing pubs and clubs across the country.<sup>64</sup> (Though this may be as much about the culture of pre-loading among students as decreased alcohol consumption per se – a 2013 Save the Student survey found that a third of a night-out budget is spent on drinks for pre-loading.)<sup>65</sup>

There is much work to do to understand these trends – and the theories discussed in the previous chapter will play their part in explaining them. It appears that the way students socialise may be changing. The authors of the Sodexo study – along with several recent media articles – have suggested that more students are turning away from pubs, clubs and student union bars in favour of a ‘coffee shop culture’, and spending increasing time socialising online. While reining in their spending on alcohol, more than half (53 per cent) of students spend up to £20 a week on tea and coffee from university cafes, and surveys have found that coffee shops and cafes are now the services most used by students – more so than university bars.<sup>66</sup>

Students’ priorities may be changing as they place more emphasis on studiousness and value for money in light of substantial tuition fee increases and rising rents in recent years. Sodexo figures show that many students nowadays are

financially anxious – with almost half (48 per cent) saying they are worried about day-to-day finances – and most expect to come out of university with substantial debt. In this context, socialising may be taking a back seat – both as a motivation for going to university in the first place, and during a student’s time at university. In 2016 only one in five (21 per cent) students said that ‘a good social life’ was an important factor in their decision to go to university, while almost three in ten (28 per cent) reported spending no money at all on their social life. More coursework and lack of money were the two top cited reasons for scaling back on socialising.

As discussed in the previous chapter, our research found that financial consciousness seems to play a role in moderating alcohol consumption among young adults – and featured more strongly in decisions about drinking among students than did health awareness. Far from the reckless spending on alcohol that might be expected from students, our research found that three-quarters (74 per cent) of students we surveyed who drink said they thought either a great deal or to some extent about the amount they were spending on alcohol at university.

The experience of being teetotal at university is also changing, with a growing variety of non-drinking options for socialising, including places to eat out and even dry bars and clubs.<sup>67</sup> As one recent article discusses, freshers going to university now have the option of visiting alcohol-free shisha lounges and dry discos, with the gym ‘the most sociable place on campus’.<sup>68</sup> Several teetotal focus group participants spoke about this through the course of our research, but there was some disagreement about the extent of social activities at university geared towards non-drinkers. Several focus group participants emphasised instead the importance of having nights in socialising with friends rather than going out, while many were still going out to bars and clubs just choosing not to drink.

### **Student drinking alive and well**

Despite this indication of shifting trends away from heavy drinking in university culture, the overall impression from our

research is that drinking is still very much ingrained in university life at most universities. Being teetotal at university is very far from the norm, and our research suggests it can still be socially isolating – especially as a fresher.

There is research that presents a less positive picture about many of the points made in the previous section. For example, there are statistics that suggest there is a high rate of regular and excessive drinking by students at particular universities, and at different stages within university – with higher levels of drinking associated with being a fresher in the first year and living in halls of residence, for example.<sup>69</sup> Figures for 2015 from the NUS, gathered from 21 universities for their Alcohol Impact project (explored below),<sup>70</sup> found that almost six in ten (58 per cent – more than twice the Sodexo figure) students are drinking more than once a week, with one in five students (20 per cent) reporting that they get drunk intentionally more than once a week. It has also been reported that alcohol-related incidences on campus may be increasing,<sup>71</sup> though such incidents may be poorly reported. And it is likely no coincidence that many of the big university cities feature among the worst offenders for alcohol-related harms.<sup>72</sup>

Our own survey of students across the country found that the vast majority thought that alcohol is still an important part of university life, with almost eight in ten (78 per cent) students saying that drinking culture is important at their university. As many as two-thirds (65 per cent) felt that not drinking alcohol is a barrier to integrating socially at university (within the sample, 63 per cent of teetotallers themselves did).<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, while the Sodexo figures suggest there is greater studiousness and concern about value for money among the student body, our survey of students suggests a significant proportion of students are not so concerned. We found the following:

- 23 per cent feel they have performed less effectively than they might in their studies because of drinking alcohol.
- Almost four in ten (37 per cent) had missed a university class or lecture because of drinking.

- One in four (26 per cent) have gone to a university class or lecture with a hangover in the last four weeks.

Interestingly, just over half (56 per cent) agreed with the statement ‘university students drink too much nowadays’, suggesting there is appetite for further cultural change.

While tight finances appear to be a reason for moderation, expenditure on alcohol fluctuates significantly across the country, and in some locations is likely to remain very high relative to disposable income. The 2015 Student Living Index survey by NatWest estimates that the highest average spend on alcohol is in Newcastle, at £15.27 per week, while the lowest is London, at £7.46 a week.<sup>74</sup> This discrepancy echoes the point made in the previous chapter – that context, particularly the strength of group and institutional drinking norms, shapes how consumption and spending is perceived (for example, some students we spoke to in Newcastle suggested they would always find the money to drink). It is worth noting that the average student in 2015 spent £10.89 on alcohol per week (around 10 per cent of their total weekly spending), working out at £566.28 per year. One of our focus group participants thought that greater awareness of total spend on alcohol – especially among bigger drinkers – might help to further moderate drinking among students.

### Freshers and the ‘social glue’

Student drinking, then, is still very much part of the culture at many universities – with the effects of binge drinking seen on campuses across the country. The next sections explore some of the drivers of excessive alcohol consumption at university.

Unsurprisingly, first year students tend to have the most excessive drinking habits. Likely no small part is played in this by expectations of drinking culture before arriving at university, and early precedents.<sup>75</sup> The NUS survey quoted above found that 55 per cent of young people before going to university thought that students got drunk most of the time.<sup>76</sup> And with freshers’ week on arrival – often characterised by

heavy drinks promotions (see below) – these notions are quickly self-fulfilling for many students. As one of our focus group participants put it: ‘Now it’s just all about getting drunk and partying and not being able to go to your lectures in the morning.’ A survey from vouchercodes.co.uk has suggested that the average student spends more than £200 on alcohol and getting into bars and clubs during freshers’ week,<sup>77</sup> while one of our policy roundtable participants spoke about the worrying rise of ‘re-freshers’ week’ to continue the excess.

Our research suggests there can be substantial social pressure to drink excessively at university when first arriving, and beyond. In our survey of students, 44 per cent said that friends at university encourage them to drink more than they otherwise would, which increases to half (49 per cent) of the freshers in the sample.

Alcohol is the natural social glue for many students. As a fresher, heavy drinking can be driven by understandable insecurity and wanting to make friends, paired with the assumptions about university drinking culture outlined above. One focus group participant commented:

*Being at university, that’s the culture, because everyone goes out together, so [drinking] helps to bring friendships together when you first start out at uni.*

An earlier qualitative study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation also found that students perceive alcohol to be a ‘key lubricant’ for group bonding at university, ‘breaking down barriers’ and ‘improving group function’. In that study students found it ‘difficult to imagine realistic alternatives to alcohol consumption for getting groups of young adults together’.<sup>78</sup>

There are concerning psychological factors in the mix. The student drinkers whom we spoke to in Newcastle suggested that being seen as ‘fun’ rather than ‘boring’ was a key – and seemingly pre-occupying – driver of excessive drinking. Social expectations often resulted in students drinking more than they wanted to. One said:

*I get drunk very easily, but when I go out everyone drinks the same amount, whether it's going to ruin you or not – at pre-drinks, in a pre-bar, and the same type of drink in a club. And if someone buys you a shot or drink, whether you're capable of drinking it or not, you're going to drink it because they've bought you it and that's just what you do.*

Another spoke about anxieties related to social image, and the need for positive social reinforcement that could make it difficult to not drink:

*In that sense it's harmful because you're drinking because you feel like you have to [in order] to be accepted within that group... Even if you go out all the time but you just don't go out one night then you get called boring, and people can be quite horrible. These are your friends and they're calling you boring.*

And indeed the image of being fun and reckless, with a bottle in hand, appears to be perpetuated through social media (as discussed in the previous chapter).

Teetotallers we spoke to in London pointed to the insecurity of many people starting university and the need for a 'confidence boost' that could lead to heavy drinking. We wondered if teetotal students would feel more isolated in this context, and one student spoke about the challenges of fitting in:

*You get looked weird at. When you're out... especially when you're at uni and people go for pre-drinks in their halls and everyone's there with their cans and you're just sitting there. They're all looking at you just weird.*

While another said:

*It's not the norm. People ask me 'Oh you don't drink, why, did something happen?' It's like their first thought is 'Oh something went wrong somewhere.' And I'm like 'I don't like the taste' and [they're] like 'Yeah you get used to that.' Why should I get used to that? I don't get it.*

However, most of the teetotallers we spoke to suggested this was an adjustment period, and they did not feel isolated in

the longer term. Nor was it the case that teetotal students only socialised with other teetotallers – rather their drinking friends just ‘got used to it’.

In general, participants suggested that drinking habits do mellow through the university years – especially as friendships grow stronger, work pressure increases, and the initial thrill dies down. But habits die hard, and our focus group participants frequently did not delineate between first year experiences and others, with many continuing to drink to excess. Tackling the pattern of drinking at the start of university life must therefore be a priority.

### **Societies, sports clubs and heavy drinking**

Our survey of students asked respondents about their reasons for drinking in a typical week. A very high proportion (84 per cent) said that socialising with friends at university was a key reason, but the second most commonly given explanation was being a member of a university society (21 per cent). Although only a minority give this as a reason for drinking, for that minority participation in societies can be a significant facilitator of excessive drinking.

Needless to say, at the extreme end are the notorious drinking societies at some UK universities – particularly at Oxford and Cambridge – which are subject to fairly frequent public criticism. These secretive societies at Oxbridge tend to be characterised in the media by extreme consumption, exclusivity, privilege, raucous initiations and sexism.<sup>79</sup> While university warnings and investigations tend to follow, it is not clear that institutions have a firm grasp on the related problems – and there is a natural tendency within this culture to ‘out-do’ predecessors (though it has also been claimed that drinking societies are becoming more sensible and inclusive).<sup>80</sup>

More commonplace is the drinking attached to university sports societies. Previous research on this topic has identified a relationship between harmful drinking and sports participation. A study by Northumbria University found that students who were involved in university sport drank more frequently and in

greater volumes than those who were not.<sup>81</sup> Sports participants were more likely to have an alcohol use disorder, and showed higher average Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test scores. This was especially true of those playing team sports, where as many as 85 per cent were classified as having an alcohol use disorder. (It is worth noting that in further analysis for this study, sport participation was not found to be an independent predictor of an alcohol use disorder – most important were the institution attended, age and term-time living arrangements.)

Several of our focus group participants were involved in sports societies. Participants discussed the paradox within sports clubs at university that they emphasise training and a healthy diet, and yet drinking to excess is an integral part of their social culture. Hockey and netball players in our focus group in Newcastle discussed the particular excesses of sports nights, with one saying:

*That's a big binge, and it's like anything goes, things that really aren't acceptable become acceptable. You just say 'it's a Wednesday', it's allowed. And that's definitely not a classy night, straight after the game, you go out in your kit you've just played in, and it's just about getting as loose as you can.*

This focus group participant also spoke about the fear of missing out on these events, commenting: 'If you don't go out on a Wednesday, it's like you're irrelevant.'

One member of a sports society explained that it does become more frowned on to drink regularly as sport becomes more serious at a higher level at university. However, the effect of this was to limit consumption to a one-night binge rather than spreading it out over the week ('that night you drink as much as you can because you don't get to go out again').

Another participant in Newcastle thought it was particularly difficult to remain teetotal as a member of a sports club. Referring to members who had arrived as non-drinkers, she said: 'I don't think they lasted a month of not drinking', though there was more understanding for those not drinking for religious reasons.

## Promotions, cheap drinks and serving under the influence

Students tend to drink cheaply – either through pre-loading on cheaper drinks bought from supermarkets, or enjoying student drinks deals at clubs and pubs. The students we spoke to through this research were no exception. One said: ‘When I’m at university and you do a student night, you do it cheap.’

As stated in the previous chapter, the evidence available suggests that in general lower prices tend to increase alcohol consumption. Our research, and that of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation,<sup>82</sup> suggests that promotional activities and cheap drinks at university are likely a facilitator of excessive consumption, helping to reinforce norms and stereotypes, even if some of the social drivers of student drinking – behaviour and attitudes of friends, for example – came through most strongly in our research.

For example, the prevalence of drinks deals and free entry to clubs were described by some focus group participants as reasons to stick to weekday student club nights rather than going out over the weekend, which is ‘a lot more expensive’. Cheap drinks also contributed to the culture of peer pressure around drinking as a student:

*[It’s assumed] you’re going out every week, and it’s not that expensive – you’re getting in free... and there’s loads of offers on. When I was a fresher it was one pound drinks, so you couldn’t be like ‘I’ve got no money.’*

Other participants said they were receiving invitations to club nights with drinks deals on social media.

Promotions of drinks at university – in particular some of the ‘aggressive’ promotion during freshers’ week – was a discussion point at our policy roundtable. An outstanding problem here appears to be the lack of clarity on what counts as an irresponsible promotion, and the seemingly ineffective infrastructure for policing it.

A 2014 order attached to the 2003 Licensing Act does prohibit ‘irresponsible promotions’, including those related to provision of free and discounted drinks, drinking games, rewards

for the consumption of alcohol, and promotional material ‘which can be reasonably considered to condone, encourage or galmourise antisocial behaviour or refer to drunkenness favourably’.<sup>83</sup> This is in line with four key licensing objectives for the sale of alcohol under the 2003 act: prevention of crime and disorder; public safety; the prevention of public nuisance; and the protection of children from harm. It is unclear, though, where the lines are being drawn. The 2014 order states that providing alcohol free or for a fixed or discounted fee are prohibited where there is a ‘significant risk’ to licensing objectives – but this is judged on a case-by-case basis, with fairly loose guidance,<sup>84</sup> and there is poor information on how well it is being enforced.

A further problem noted by one of our roundtable participants is serving to people who are already intoxicated – a natural brake on harmful consumption. Under a vaguely worded piece of legislation, it is against the law to serve to people who are ‘drunk’,<sup>85</sup> but there is poor information available on how this is being interpreted and how well enforced the law is in clubs, pubs, local shops and supermarkets, including in the university context. One academic study has found that drunk actors were served almost every time in pubs and clubs in a small study in the North West, and national figures show that serving to a drunk person is a rarely penalised crime in licensed premises.<sup>86</sup> In a culture of pre-loading, and where some students are not leaving the house until they are ‘completely mortal’ (as one of our participants put it), this must be an area of greater action.

### **Building on existing efforts to tackle excessive drinking**

Excessive student drinking is nothing new, and it is important to recognise that many universities have developed a range of strategies for dealing with some of the related problems that future efforts can build on.

The majority of universities have written policies on alcohol use and abuse among students. Some contain detailed

information on recommended limits for students, training opportunities for university staff, information about local alcohol partnerships in the community, excellent signposting to help with alcohol problems, and guidance on the rules and regulations for the sale of alcohol. However, these vary considerably in length, content and quality, and other policies are much more circumspect. One of our roundtable participants pointed out that some can have fantastic policies on paper but there is ‘no evidence that they are being enforced’. More should be done to promote best practice to ensure there is a good quality standard across the board.

Efforts by the NUS to tackle binge drinking on campus show the importance of coordinated efforts at both institutional and national level. As discussed in our policy roundtable, NUS is currently running an Alcohol Impact programme with support from the Home Office.<sup>87</sup> Universities and students’ unions taking part in the scheme work together to develop policies and interventions to promote responsible drinking cultures on campus – often including working in partnership with local community groups – and are accredited by the NUS if successful. There is a detailed series of accreditation criteria to ensure a breadth of issues is being tackled.<sup>88</sup>

To date, seven pilot partnership schemes have been accredited. Examples of specific interventions include Brighton University and Students’ Union, which partnered Red Frogs (a support network for students) to provide a pre-meet space to change pre-loading habits; and Loughborough University and Students’ Union, which produced a film and put on a number of events around asserting personal limits around drinking and gaining respect from peers. There is emerging evidence from an evaluation of these seven pilots that these efforts create more positive drinking norms and reductions in harms – and a second wave of 19 universities and students’ unions are working towards accreditation.<sup>89</sup> Participants of our roundtable mentioned the importance of promoting the responsible positive norm, rather than concentrating on the negative. Research has shown that scare tactics and moralising about alcohol do not work with young adults.<sup>90</sup>

The UK National Healthy Universities Network ([www.healthyuniversities.ac.uk/](http://www.healthyuniversities.ac.uk/)), which began ten years ago in 2006, is another example of coordinated efforts and sharing of best practice to promote healthier lifestyles at universities – with membership currently including over 70 higher education institutions. Alcohol awareness campaigns at the University of West England (UWE) have been highlighted as a positive example within this network, with the university developing a Have a Safe Night Out campaign, dispensing information, unit counters and drink diaries, as well as promoting non-alcoholic ‘mocktails’ through the UWE Bar School at freshers’ fair.

Other universities, such as Durham, are tackling issues around price and serving to drunk students head-on, introducing a minimum pricing policy in college bars and having a strict policy on responsible serving practices. The university has also developed a night time scheme to tackle alcohol-related harm, supported by student volunteers.<sup>91</sup> Both Durham University and UWE and their respective students’ unions are currently working towards the accreditation mark under the Alcohol Impact programme.

And within the broader efforts to tackle alcohol-related harms, other campaigns such as the University of Manchester’s We Get It campaign and Drinkaware’s #GropeFreeNights have focused on particularly emotive topics – sexism, ‘lad culture’ and drunken sexual harassment. A 2011 report by the NUS found that more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of women experience verbal or non-verbal sexual harassment during their university years,<sup>92</sup> while its 2015 Lad Culture Audit found just half of universities have formal policies on sexual harassment.<sup>93</sup> Most recently, the Universities Minister has asked Universities UK to set up a taskforce on violence, sexual harassment and hate crime.<sup>94</sup>

Further afield, a US study shows the potential of making students more accountable to the community in which they live with respect to drinking. An intervention based in Washington encouraged students and community members to participate in a Neighbourhood Mediation Programme. The intervention led to a ‘significant reduction in heavy

episodic drinking’ in two intervention sites compared with a control.<sup>95</sup>

There are many lessons to be learnt from these initiatives – not least the importance of partnerships and the commitment of a range of stakeholders, including universities, students’ unions and community groups, in tackling alcohol-related harms. Yet there is much still to be done in light of the scale of the challenges, and the seemingly small scale reach of these initiatives to date (there are more than 160 higher education institutions in the UK). It is unclear how often university partnerships have significant involvement from the on-trade and off-trade in particular – which would naturally significantly affect impact.

### Transitions: protecting the ‘rite of passage’?

In our survey of students, we asked whether they thought they would drink more less, or about the same when they left university and got a job. We found that just 7 per cent thought they would drink more, more than half – 52 per cent – thought they would drink less, while 41 per cent thought about the same.

As stated in the previous chapter, many of the student drinkers we spoke to in our research prioritised the short-term rewards associated with binge drinking over thinking about the longer-term health or any other consequences. One focus group participant said that as a student you feel ‘invincible’, and that it was important to live in the moment: ‘Everything can be bad for you and kill you, so if you enjoy drinking and being social then you deal with the long-term consequences when you get there – you might not get there!’

During the course of our research we found that this short-termism fits into a bigger narrative about drinking transitions – namely that there is a ‘rite of passage’ at university for excessive drinking, and once experienced you grow up and get a job and adopt more responsible drinking habits. This was summarised by a drinker in Newcastle:

*It’s just three years where that’s just what you do and then you get a job and you get over it and you don’t do that anymore.*

And a teetotaller in London:

*People are like, 'It's just for uni, it's just for this period of life.' They're not really worried about risk... 'Right now I wanna get drunk, I wanna have fun. When I start working maybe I won't be doing this anymore.'*

This echoes previous research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which described a 'normative pathway' in relation to alcohol among students – 'including a period of peer group excess followed by moderation, as both the responsibilities of their working and family lives came to the fore'.<sup>96</sup>

While our survey of students actually found that around half of students thought university students drink too much, partly because of the drinking transitions thesis outlined above, many students we spoke to were fiercely protective of their drinking culture and do not think that the government or indeed anyone else should be doing much to clamp down on it. As one put it:

*They're fighting a bit of a losing battle; if they came out with a new policy about stopping students drinking I'd think it was a waste of time. Students will drink, they always have, and I don't really think there's a problem.*

Interestingly, the young workers we spoke to in our research (covered in detail in the next chapter), tended to agree, while pointing to the fact that the drinking transitions thesis may not hold as straightforwardly as many students seem to imagine. Reflecting on whether university culture should change, one young worker who had been to university said:

*I think... officially, yes... because it's blatantly like setting up an alcohol precedent for people. But, no, because it's great when you're at uni and making the most of it! You've gotta make the most of the cheap drinks while you can.*

This raises important questions for those concerned with tackling alcohol-related harm – about the extent to which groups of people should be deciding their own drinking norms and

acceptable behaviours; and if students do indeed grow out of harmful drinking, the extent to which they should simply be left to enjoy the 'rite of passage' (provided they are not doing harm to others). Our research suggests that many students do grow out of harmful drinking, but others find it creates a harmful precedent that is hard to shake off. We explore this further in the following chapter.

## 4 Drinking and working

Many of the students we spoke to in our research had fairly clear expectations of what would happen to their drinking when they got a job. In this chapter we explore the drinking habits of young adults in employment. We particularly focus on 18–34-year-olds, but also present evidence on workplace drinking for all ages.

The chapter considers first what we know about the drinking habits of young workers in different sectors, presenting new findings from analysis of the Understanding Society dataset. We then present findings on the attitudes of young people about the importance of drinking culture at their place of work, their key motivations for drinking alcohol, and the role of employers in setting encouraging or discouraging drinking precedents. We consider attitudes towards problematic drinking in the workplace and existing policies to tackle it. The chapter finishes by reflecting on the transitions point made by students explored in the previous chapter, and the extent to which drinking habits do indeed ‘mature’.

### What is known about the drinking habits of young workers?

We actually know few of the details about the drinking habits of workers in the UK – and even less so about young workers.

In the media, of course, we tend to hear about the dangerous levels of alcohol abuse in some of our leading professions – with boozy lawyers, people working in finance and medical professionals often singled out as some of the worst offenders.<sup>97</sup> ONS statistics show that people who are better paid and in more senior managerial and professional roles are most likely to drink excessively (though those in routine occupations

have the highest rate of alcohol-related mortality).<sup>98</sup> And anecdotally, it seems graduate schemes attached to some of these professions come with expectations of fairly aggressive drinking cultures, including regular networking events involving alcohol.

We know, too, that employees are more likely to drink excessively than unemployed people.<sup>99</sup> And we also know that there is a huge economic cost to drinking among the workforce. Research has found that up to 17 million working days are lost each year because of alcohol-related sickness, at a cost to the economy of £7.3 billion.<sup>100</sup> An average organisation with 200 employees loses around £37,634 per year to alcohol-related harm.<sup>101</sup>

However, less effort has been made to understand in detail the social drivers of these harmful drinking habits in different workplaces. And unsurprisingly, amid these troubling statistics, less attention is paid to what employers are doing to promote healthy drinking habits and lifestyle choices among employees – and whether there has been a shift towards greater moderation around drinking, especially among the younger employees. A recent Opinium poll found that just less than half (47 per cent) of young professionals thought that it was acceptable to get drunk regularly on a night out – a high rate, but showing clearly divided opinion.<sup>102</sup> Some of our roundtable participants argued that there had been such a shift over the last two decades, and we outline progress in a section below.

## Comparing drinking habits by occupation

Drinking habits are likely to vary substantially depending on where you work. It is therefore useful by way of context to seek to understand further the drinking habits of the different occupations young people are moving into.

Understanding Society has a big enough sample size ( $n = 21,717$  – people in employment only) to enable us to compare the drinking habits of different occupational groups in the UK in detail for the first time. To keep the sample sizes large for each occupational group we have included all ages in the analysis, not just young workers. (Note that the findings of chapter 1 – that

Understanding Society appears to show a higher level of heavy drinking than official statistics – should be borne in mind in the discussion that follows. Instead of converting drinks to units in this analysis we have simply used the number of alcoholic drinks consumed as reported by respondents, reducing the likelihood of error.)

Figure 7 shows the proportion of workers in each occupational category drinking excessively – defined by us as drinking five or more alcoholic drinks on one occasion in the last week – to give an impression of the heaviest drinking occupations. We also present the proportion in each occupational category who are teetotal – having never drunk alcohol or not having done so in the past 12 months. At the bottom of the figure are totals for the 16+ population in work, and the entire 16+ population.

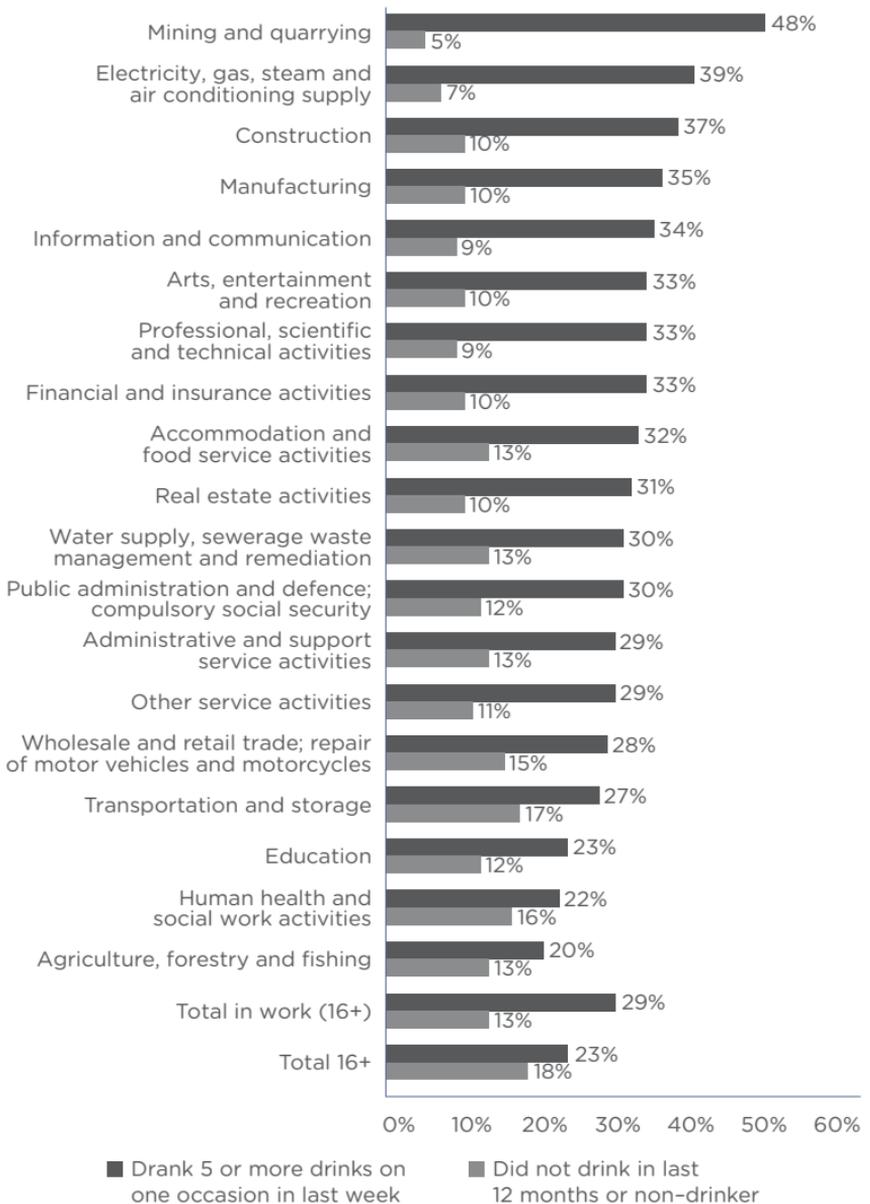
See table 8 in the technical appendix for the equivalent table for this analysis.

The analysis shows, in line with official statistics, that as a whole those in work are more likely than the entire population to have drunk five or more drinks on their heaviest drinking day in the last seven days – and less likely to be teetotal. Close to three in ten workers in most occupational groups reported excessive drinking in the last seven days. While sample sizes are smaller, it is worth noting that 18–34-year-olds are more likely to be drinking excessively in each occupational group than the average.

Figure 7 suggests that there is a trend in drinking habits by occupation: the more hands-on, physically demanding occupations (including construction and manufacturing) have the highest prevalence of excessive drinking, followed by service jobs (with law and finance being among the most excessive, fulfilling some of the stereotypes) and the public services jobs (including police, education and health) having less excessive drinking. Fairly uniformly, the occupations with the lowest levels of excessive drinking in the previous week have the highest levels of teetotalism, and vice versa.

This raises some interesting questions about some common assumptions and stereotypes – for example, whether the level of

Figure 7 **Weekly drinking habits of different occupations in the UK (all 16+)**



‘drinking doctors’ is overstated. It is worth being clear that there is a difference between the overall prevalence of excessive consumption and the experience of severe harms by a small minority. The evidence suggests that healthcare professionals are more likely than average to experience certain alcohol-related harms, including cirrhosis of the liver, for example – though also that there has been a shift towards more moderation since much of this evidence was gathered.<sup>103</sup>

### Moderation in the workplace?

Comparing the drinking habits of different occupations gives a useful big picture, capturing both drinking related, and unrelated to work. Making this distinction is important in understanding the drinking habits of young workers. One of the factors we were interested in exploring is the ways in which workplaces themselves can foster cultures of drinking, or whether most drinking occurs for other reasons.

We surveyed young workers aged 18–34 ( $n = 517$ ) – including a split of those in the private and public sectors – to get a sense of attitudes towards drinking cultures at work. (It should be noted that because of our interest in assessing transitions from being a student, our survey sample consisted of graduates – though was not restricted to those working in professional occupations.)

Overall, our survey found that the majority of young workers did not actually think drinking culture was important where they worked, though a substantial minority did. Of young workers surveyed:

- Four in ten (40 per cent) considered the drinking culture to be important where they work, with 60 per cent saying that it was not important.
- Drinking culture appeared more important in the private than public sector, with 47 per cent of private sector workers feeling that drinking culture was important compared with 28 per cent of public sector workers.

- More than two-fifths (43 per cent) of young workers thought that not drinking alcohol was a barrier to integrating socially in the workplace, compared with 57 per cent who thought it was not. (This compares with 65 per cent of students who thought so at university; see final section for other comparisons.)

Our survey found that the most common reasons for drinking during a typical week among the workers surveyed were:

- socialising with friends from outside work (67 per cent)
- socialising with colleagues (44 per cent)
- managing stress (26 per cent)
- long working hours (20 per cent)
- drinking related to the job such as networking events (10 per cent)

While several of these are high proportions, by far the most common reason for drinking alcohol among young workers is thus not directly related to the work environment but rather drinking with friends from outside work (although indirectly many may be drinking with friends as an escape from work). This is perhaps an obvious finding in some ways, given that most young people entering work have colleagues of different ages and backgrounds who would not always be natural drinking companions.

The finding that most drinking is not directly work-related was echoed in our qualitative research with young workers. Participants in our focus group in Manchester were all in work – coming from a range of backgrounds including health and social care, finance and education – and most were regular drinkers. All of these participants said that they went for drinks with colleagues on occasion (see below), but emphasised that any heavier drinking tended to be at the weekend with friends (sometimes university friends), with more moderate consumption during the week with colleagues. There were exceptions – and in particular the participant from finance spoke about a culture of lunchtime drinking with colleagues, though this was something the participant no longer wanted to be part of, feeling it impacted negatively on health.

## Drinking to get on at work

While our survey suggests that the primary reason that the majority of young workers drink is to socialise with friends from outside work, around four in ten young workers surveyed thought drinking culture is important where they work, and a similar proportion thought that a key reason for drinking is to socialise with colleagues.

Our wider research found that work-related drinking can be important at many stages of working life – from first initiation with colleagues through to appearing to help with achieving business objectives and career progression in some sectors. Some employers may even use drinking culture explicitly as a draw for job candidates in the first place.<sup>104</sup>

Not unlike students, many of the young workers we spoke to in our research suggested that the primary reason for drinking with colleagues was to create social bonds and not to feel left out – believing it was especially important to go for work drinks when first joining a company or employer to set a good precedent. This allows people to get to know colleagues in an informal setting and share jokes and banter. One participant described the importance of this initiation as follows:

*I think if you first start somewhere and you can't go to the first drinks you're invited to you feel like you've lost your chance to make friends with everyone. It's like 'I'm really sorry but next time [I] definitely will' and you miss out on the gossip, which is what people talk about other than work.*

Being teetotal was felt to be a difficult choice in these circumstances, though some in our focus groups thought that the decision not to drink would be 'respected'; it was certainly a more straightforward position than in a university setting.

In some areas of work there appears to be a soft pressure or expectation to drink, with at least part of this being driven by colleagues. Our survey of young workers found that a quarter (25 per cent) feel that their work colleagues encourage them to drink more than they otherwise would (a substantially lower rate than the number of students who said this when asked the same question about their peers, at 44 per cent – see final section for further comparisons). Again, this figure was higher in the private

sector than the public sector (27 per cent compared with 21 per cent).

In general, there were different attitudes in our focus groups to how levels of ‘professionalism’ of the work environment affects drinking – with public service jobs such as health and education seen as natural places where there should be more moderation.

While in some jobs – health, education, policing – drinking on the job is of course prohibited (and therefore drinking with colleagues only ever takes place outside work hours), in other sectors drinking helps to serve important business functions, and it is the norm to drink during work hours at least on occasion. One in ten of those we surveyed highlighted drinking related to the job – work events or drinking with clients – as a reason to drink. There is much anecdotal evidence about the prominence of alcohol at events and meetings in many professions – including in areas of business, law and finance – with many advice blogs written about the ‘sensible’ amount to drink at these professional functions. A 2010 survey of 200 employers by Aviva found that over half of social events include alcohol, while 13 per cent of employers said that a few drinks helps people to ‘come out of their shells’.<sup>105</sup> Reflecting on networking, one of our focus group participants said that alcohol was ‘always there’ at these types of events. Choices about drinking are therefore certainly not made in a neutral environment.

This, again, can lead to difficult situations for teetotallers. One said:

*Even for like networking events, [drinking] is usually the norm. You wanna go get some drinks after and we can talk more.’ I remember me and a friend were [saying] that when you get into work you definitely have to go for drinks with the boss if they suggest it. [Being teetotal] is definitely not the norm, you can’t shy away from bars or pubs.*

There is emerging research to suggest that not drinking alcohol can actually be harmful towards career advancement – especially in those professions with a heavy networking element for bringing in new business. In some cases, this could

lead to the marginalisation of religious and ethnic minority groups or others who do not drink. In our previous report *Rising to the Top* we spoke to a number of Muslims about workplace drinking in the higher professions, with several interviewees discussing ‘barriers’ to progression in this regard (‘unfortunately in most cases the only opportunity to network would be at these drinks’).<sup>106</sup>

It is worth reiterating that the weight of these factors in driving excessive drinking behaviour depends a lot on where you work – but they should not be underestimated. While evidence from the UK is limited, international research from the USA found that workplace attitudes to drinking have a significant impact on individuals’ overall alcohol intake: those in the most ‘discouraging’ drinking workgroups were 45 per cent less likely to be heavy drinkers, 54 per cent less likely to be frequent drinkers, and 69 per cent less likely to drink at work than those in the most ‘encouraging’ groups.<sup>107</sup>

### A stressed-out generation?

Young workers are not just drinking to socialise and get on professionally. Over a quarter (26 per cent) of young workers surveyed drink during a typical week in order to manage stress. This is, then, no small issue.

Workplace stress is in general a big problem in the UK workplace. Statistics from the Health and Safety Executive show that work-related stress, depression or anxiety have a prevalence rate of 1,380 per 100,000 workers, and the total number of hours lost through work-related stress was 9.9 million days in 2014/15.<sup>108</sup> Other research has linked stress to alcohol consumption and abuse in the workplace, as well as relapse for those with a prior history of alcohol problems.<sup>109</sup> Stress was listed as one of the key contributors to increased alcohol consumption in a report by the Trades Union Congress, with workloads, cuts in staff, long hours, shift work, bullying and harassment being some of the causes.<sup>110</sup>

We asked participants in our focus groups to rank occupations by what they thought were the heaviest drinking cultures –

and ‘high stress office jobs’ tended to rank highly. However, none of our focus group participants said that they themselves drank to cope with stress (instead they were much more likely to drink in order to socialise with friends or colleagues), but they thought it explained some of the drinking behaviour of other colleagues: ‘Some people from my work they’ll drink every day... they probably can’t handle the stress of the job.’

Focus group participants discussed the intensity of working life in the UK compared with other countries (‘we work the most hours, don’t we’), and felt that this was paired, culturally, with heavy alcohol consumption at the weekend. One said:

*It is engrained in the culture that you work really hard all week to get by and to climb the career ladder and then you go out at the week end and completely let loose and then you start it all again on Monday. And I think it’s a lot more prevalent here than it is in other countries, and the whole cycle of drinking is a lot more prevalent here.*

Some felt this may be especially true of those professions with non-drinking policies at work, such as police or health workers: ‘[It’s a] stressful environment, and they might leave it to the weekend when they’re off shift, but then they go a little bit mental.’ One participant felt that until this dynamic changes, ‘people will continue with the same mentality towards drinking, no matter how expensive it is’.

### Problematic drinking at work

Our survey found a range of negative behaviours associated with alcohol among young workers:

- One in three (32 per cent) said they had performed less effectively at work because of alcohol.
- One in five (21 per cent) had been into work with a hangover in the last month.
- One in ten (9 per cent) had been into work under the influence of alcohol in the last month (having had a drink immediately before or during work hours).

- Nearly two in five (17 per cent) had arrived late to work, while 15 per cent had taken the day off work because of drinking.
- A few (3 per cent) had missed a deadline because of drinking.

These rates were all higher in the private sector than public sector.

For this research we were interested in the views of young workers on what they would identify as a problem with drinking – to understand the norms and perceived acceptability of some of these behaviours – as well as young worker’s awareness of workplace policies on dealing with problematic drinking at work.

Our research found that most of our focus group participants felt that drinking is only really a problem if it affects work. For example, one participant, whose colleagues were regular drinkers during working hours, said: ‘The only problem would be if it actually affects the work.’ Others listed ‘poor quality work’, ‘slacking’ and ‘being late’ as problems, which link to several of the survey findings above.

Few focus group participants knew the details of their employers’ alcohol policies beyond the obvious, such as drinking in uniform or drinking on a college campus, which was made clear by the employer ‘right at the beginning’. In general, it is unclear how many employers currently have explicit alcohol policies in place (a 2007 survey by the CIPD found 15 per cent have no policy at all, while the detail and quality of others varies substantially), nor how effectively they are being communicated.<sup>111</sup> While there is no legal requirement to have such a policy, employers are obliged to maintain a safe working environment, and this includes identifying and tackling alcohol-related harm.<sup>112</sup>

Focus group participants gave examples of problematic drinking they had encountered in the workplace, and of incidents of employers tackling issues to do with harmful drinking affecting work. For example, one employee described emails sent out about alcohol-related incidents affecting work performance.

However, perhaps unsurprisingly, no one felt that their employer was someone to whom they could turn if they had a

problem with alcohol, nor if they observed a problem with a colleague:

*No. Probably could, but would avoid it really, it's more of a last resort. The last person that you want to know that you've got a problem is your employer.*

*Cos they'd think you're a pisshead wouldn't they! We don't want a pisshead working here!*

Others stressed the added pressure they would feel, being more 'scrutinised' if something goes wrong:

*It's added pressure really isn't it? Like if you actually are ill one day and you've got to call in sick and you'd be thinking 'oh no they're going to think I've been drinking' or just anything. The less they know the better really.*

There was disagreement about whether employers have any responsibility to set precedents for the drinking habits of employees. While one felt that it was not their concern, another felt it should be ('like their employees' welfare and that'), but even the latter participant did not feel comfortable 'bringing social issues into the workplace', and generally voluntary and anonymous services for dealing with alcohol problems were favoured. The overall impression is that the workplace can be a fairly closed shop when discussing issues with drinking, especially before they become serious.

### **Building on what employers are doing**

The 2012 Alcohol Strategy noted that the government expected to see improvements in work-based education and prevention programmes for alcohol – though given the amount of time people spend in the workplace, and opportunity for intervention, its lack of focus in the strategy is striking.

Participants of our roundtable discussed developments in this area. It was noted that it remains unclear exactly what proportion of employers have good quality alcohol policies in

place – with small businesses in particular less likely than larger employers to have one<sup>113</sup> – and more work certainly needs to be done to drive up quality where they do exist. Moreover, while there has in recent years been increasing policy attention to the importance of proactive and preventative approaches to alcohol problems in the workplace nationally, as well as promoting employee wellbeing in a wider sense, some fresh impetus under the new government is required.

For example, under the coalition government Dame Carol Black spearheaded Health at Work pledges as part of the Public Health Responsibility Deal, first launched in 2011.<sup>114</sup> The Deal encourages voluntary commitments (pledges) from businesses and other organisations to promote public health objectives. Under the specific alcohol in the workplace pledge, employers sign up to:

- embed a workplace alcohol policy drawn up in consultation with employees
- promote alcohol awareness among employees
- ensure employees with alcohol problems receive appropriate help, and managers know how to support them
- where necessary provide alcohol at work events, and ensure it is served responsibly and that non-alcoholic drinks are available

This particular pledge went live in early 2015, and 38 organisations signed up to it.<sup>115</sup> Other pledges within the Public Health Responsibility Deal's Health at Work strand target other areas of staff wellbeing, including diet, exercise and mental health, giving much needed attention to tackling the problem of stress at work.<sup>116</sup> It is worth noting that a review of health promotion activities in the workplace and job wellbeing has found moderate evidence that these activities decrease sickness absences and improve mental wellbeing – though not yet physical wellbeing.<sup>117</sup>

Following the 2015 general election, the DoH appears to have neglected the Public Health Responsibility Deal, and the Deal's future is unclear. With the time and resources already invested, and the commonsense approach to many of the Health

at Work pledges, the department should be thinking about how to build a positive new strategy, with more traction and a bigger public brand.

This is no simple task. The Public Health Responsibility Deal in its entirety (and it has a very wide remit) is controversial – and there is much debate about whether voluntary agreements with business are effective in achieving desired public health outcomes. Debate is especially acute in the areas of the Public Health Responsibility Deal targeted at specific industries such as the alcohol and food industries – and it is difficult to separate the cross-industry Health at Work strand from these targeted elements, even if such a hiving off might actually be desirable.

Despite the controversial nature of the Public Health Responsibility Deal, the government must consider the areas of weakness identified in evaluations of the Deal. An independent evaluation from researchers at the London School of Tropical Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSTHTM) points to several current issues: the difficulties of recruiting business partners (bigger businesses that already do most to promote public health are more likely to pledge); the prohibitive resource implications for many smaller businesses; the lack of accountability for non-compliance with pledges; lack of robust data collection systems; and broader issues around branding and image, to name some. Participants of our roundtable spoke about the small business problem in particular, arguing that small and medium-sized enterprises would need more encouragement from government to sign up to the alcohol in the workplace pledge, for example. An additional scoping study by researchers at the LSTHTM notes that the evidence on more effective voluntary agreements may make it necessary to explore the potential for business incentives, sanctions for non-compliance, and disincentives for non-participation (such as loss of financial perks or public announcement of non-compliance).<sup>118</sup>

On a more local level, evidence on what workplace-based interventions are particularly effective in encouraging sensible drinking is still emerging – but there are some key findings to inform future approaches among employers.

Studies from the USA have shown that independent and personalised health support for employees such as employee assistance programmes (EAPs) can reduce alcohol consumption and incidences of work being negatively affected by alcohol.<sup>119</sup> EAPs are specifically designed to prevent loss of employment, and are at arms-length from the employer themselves. In an evaluation, employees said the professionalism of EAP staff and knowledge of a range of potential problems, the service being provided (but not delivered) by the employer, and the confidentiality of the service were key reasons for seeking help. Other counselling-based interventions have been shown to be less effective.<sup>120</sup>

Using colleagues and looking to shift peer norms may be a profitable approach. A 2004 evaluation of a Team Awareness Programme in the USA involving peer referral, team building and stress management also found reductions in problem drinking (from 20 per cent of participants to 11 per cent).<sup>121</sup>

Alongside general education programmes – which tend to have short-term impact – there is a role for individual feedback programmes and identification of risky behaviour. Web-based feedback programmes on consumption delivered in the workplace have been shown to be effective in reducing consumption among young adults.<sup>122</sup> On similar lines, underexplored in the UK is the feasibility of introducing brief interventions in the workplace, and other auditing tools – well evidenced to be effective in other settings, primarily in GP surgeries, where they are most frequently used,<sup>123</sup> and one US study has found increases in productivity through doing so.<sup>124</sup> We return to several of these points in our recommendations.

### **Transitions: are employees more responsible with alcohol than students?**

Our expectation while undertaking this research was that the ‘drinking maturity’ hypothesis of students may not hold true in reality – with statistics showing that older people in work tend to have higher rates of harmful drinking than those out of work, and media stories about the heavy drinking cultures of many

graduate jobs, including in the higher professions such as law and finance.

To get a sense of this, in table 2 we compare the results of our surveys of students and young workers and show some of our qualitative findings.

There is reason to think that some drinking behaviours do mature, giving credence to the view expressed by students. For example, while 46 per cent of students thought they would drink less after university, 58 per cent of young workers said that they did in reality drink less than at university. Noticeable, too, is the difference in the proportion of each group drinking to 'fit in' (16 per cent of students vs 9 per cent of workers). And alongside the lower importance attached to alcohol in the workplace itself, in our surveys workers were more likely than students to be thinking about the longer-term health effects of drinking alcohol – though only very slightly (51 per cent of workers said this compared with 47 per cent of students).

Some of our qualitative work added more evidence to the maturity hypothesis. One teetotal participant said that it was going to work that enabled him to put into place a stricter regime around drinking. Talking about reasons not to drink, he said:

*The health always came first. What helped [me to] implement it... was going to work. I wanted to learn as much as possible and put in everything you can.*

Another, who used to binge drink twice a week, commented:

*That's probably what I used to do [at] 16–19, probably every week, and then obviously, you've got to grow up haven't you? Get a job, try and sort your life out. And that's when I cut it all out.*

There is also evidence to the contrary, however. Workers in our survey appear to think less about how much they are spending on alcohol, with 58 per cent of workers surveyed thinking about how much they were spending on alcohol compared with 66 per cent of students. Workers were certainly

Table 2 **The proportion of students and young workers who agreed with survey statements on drinking**

	Students (%)	Young workers (%)
Drinking culture is important at university or work	78	40
Not drinking is a barrier to integrating socially	65	43
University friends or colleagues encourage [me] to drink more than otherwise would	44	25
Think about how much money spent on alcohol on night out	66	58
Think about long-term health consequences of drinking	47	51
Reasons to drink in a typical week:		
• Socialising with friends	84	67
• Socialising with colleagues	-	44
• Managing stress	17	26
• Long working hours	7	20
• Monotonous work	5	3
• To 'fit in' (social pressure)	16	9
Negative outcomes related to drinking:		
• Been to university or work under the influence of alcohol in last month	7	9
• Been to university or work with a hangover in last month	26	21
• Missed classes or taken the day off work	37	15
• Performed less effectively in studies or at work	23	32
• Arrived late to a university class or work	24	17
• Been sick during a university class or at work	6	11
Drink less after university?	46	58
Think university students drink too much nowadays?	56	58
N	511	517

spending more. We asked for an estimation of total spend on alcohol in the past week, and found workers averaged £23.54 per week (around £94.16 per month and £1,224.08 a year) compared with students' expenditure of £15.96 per week – though given limited student budgets this is perhaps understandable.

While students are more likely to be taking time out of studying than workers are to be taking days off work, the proportion of workers stating that drinking has undermined performance is higher than that of students (23 per cent vs 32 per cent). And while fewer workers than students are drinking because of social pressure, more are drinking because of the pressures of working life – stress and long working hours.

Indeed, our qualitative work suggests that for some young workers the habits formed at university die much harder than the maturity hypothesis suggests, and while there were associations of moderation with work colleagues, with friends from outside work – where most alcohol was consumed – it was much the same as when at university:

*But Saturdays I'm out with my friends getting smashed again as much as I can. So it's more the environment – like when I'm with my friends it's the same, I just get absolutely wrecked, but with colleagues it's a bit more moderate like.*

Two further points of interest emerged in our focus groups. The first is that there is often still a celebration of the university stage of life among workers, and cheap booze culture – echoing the protectiveness of some of the current students we spoke to. For example, one focus group member in Manchester in work commented:

*My friends are at uni... £1 drinks or like free drinks between whatever time... Get on it! Really, cheap drinks are cheap drinks!*

The second is that several of the young workers we spoke to tend to push considerations of moderating their drinking even further into the future, suggesting that it is a later age and stage of life makes the real difference when it comes to moderation:

*I think the differences are more kind of age or like where you are in your life. So like the people who don't have kids or say they're single or aren't in a serious relationship, they don't share a house and stuff, you know that they're gonna be out every time drinks are planned, but the people who are a bit more stable and settled down a bit more, they're the ones that are least likely to come out.*

A broader social parallel may have some significance here, with young people living at home for longer, starting work later, as well as getting married and having children later. As the attempt to drink moderately is pushed ever further into the future, it seems that unhealthy drinking habits are being set at university, which in many cases are more difficult to change than are first imagined.



## 5 Unemployed youth and drink

The final group of young people considered in this report are to be NEETs – a key and challenging population for policy makers. Currently more than one in ten (12 per cent) of 16–24-year-olds are NEET – around 865,000 people.<sup>125</sup> This promises a range of social and economic challenges for their futures, as well as substantial costs to the state. A 2010 study by academics at York University estimated a lifetime cost to the state per NEET at £56,301, including benefit payments, tax losses and lost productivity.<sup>126</sup>

A small amount of research has been published on the specific topic of alcohol and being NEET – some of the findings of which we summarise below. We did not specifically recruit people for our focus groups who were NEET, and as a result only two of our focus group participants were NEET (in Liverpool). Nonetheless we include insights gathered through that research here.

### The link between alcohol and being NEET

ONS statistics on drinking for all age groups show that people who are not in work are actually less likely to drink – and drink harmfully – than those out of work.<sup>127</sup> There is, however, a known link between alcoholism and worklessness, and those who are workless for long periods of time are more likely to drink harmfully.<sup>128</sup>

NEETs are a particularly vulnerable group, and policy solutions in this area are likely to be very complex because of the bundle of problems that often co-occur for the group once they have left compulsory education and the complex causes of these issues.

The evidence shows that young people who are NEET are both more likely to have problematic relationships with alcohol prior to their being NEET (suggesting drinking could be a driver of becoming NEET), and are more likely to develop harmful relationships with alcohol and other substances during their unemployment – driven often by boredom and the social exclusion that precedes and characterises their unemployment.<sup>129</sup>

On the latter point, a 2010 study by the Audit Commission found that young people aged 16–17 who are classified as NEET for at least six months are twice as likely to have problematic relationships with substances (including alcohol, smoking and drugs) than all young people that age;<sup>130</sup> while a survey conducted by the Princes Trust found 11 per cent of 16–25-year-olds who had been unemployed said that they had ‘turned to drugs or alcohol’ directly as a result of their employment.<sup>131</sup>

The causal link between drinking and becoming NEET is less clear. The DfE released a report in 2010 which showed that, before controlling for demographics and other behaviours, there is indeed a link between drinking and becoming NEET – with young people aged 16–17 who have drunk more than twice in the past month being between 1.5 and 2.5 more likely to become NEET.<sup>132</sup> However, further investigation found the link to be indirect – explained ‘almost entirely’ by the connection between drinking alcohol and a range of other negative behaviours, such as truancy, fighting and poor behaviour, and being suspended from school, rather than drinking alcohol per se.

Nonetheless, the DfE report concluded that reduction of alcohol consumption among young people may help to reduce young people’s chances of becoming NEET indirectly through reducing their likelihood of participating in other risky behaviours.

The complex weave of factors contributing to a trajectory towards being NEET includes educational disengagement, having a mental health issue, having a disability, as well as poor parenting and difficulties at home (among others).<sup>133</sup> As figures quoted in chapter 2 from our previous research show, parental drinking habits and the way in which – and age at which – alcohol is first introduced to young people is likely to play a

part. A recent paper from Alcohol Research UK found that regular drinking by mid-adolescence is a contributory factor to determining ‘less positive life trajectories’, including labour market entry.<sup>134</sup>

### The drinking habits of NEETs

Our conversations with unemployed young people for this research drew some parallels with a recent, more ambitious, academic study on the topic of drinking and NEETs by Nelson and Taberner – which looks in particular at the ‘drinking careers’ of NEETs, including transitions over time.

In that 2015 study, in which 23 NEETs aged 14–23 were interviewed, alcohol features primarily as an important part of social lives and having fun, drawing parallels to the social glue for our students and workers.<sup>135</sup> Most of the sample in the study had begun drinking an early age – 12–14 years – with friends, where drinking was an opportunity to seek autonomy from family life and participate in a ‘wilful loss of control’. Because of the exclusion of these young people from positive social situations such as school and work, drinking with friends in this manner gave them a ‘sense of belonging’.

On the transitions point, Nelson and Taberner note that while for some NEETs more adult circumstances appear to lead to a reduction in drinking, for others patterns of consumption become more and more harmful:

*For some of the young people, a new boyfriend, a new job or a baby had resulted in a reduction in their drinking. For others, as they become older, or more isolated, a new drinking pattern emerges that includes drinking every day, all day.*

The two young adults who were unemployed whom we spoke to as part of our research began drinking in year 7 or 8 at school (age 12 or 13). As above, drinking with friends was their primary motivation to drink (‘I wouldn’t drink on my own’) – though in one case drug use was more regular, and drinking infrequent.

One described fairly difficult family circumstances, with relationship breakdown and police being involved; while both identified factors in their relationships with parents that may have contributed to their drinking or other substance issues. Family influence was seen as complex, however, as the two participants were keen to emphasise that they took their 'own decisions', and the role of family members in informing them about the harms of drinking and attempts made to restrict their drinking.

There were other underlying reasons for drinking, echoing some of the wider literature, such as dealing with anxiety. For example, one said:

*If I'm f\*\*\*\*\* up then I won't be thinking about it... I'll be thinking about having a good night... It's more in my head, over-thinking and worrying. It just doesn't stop.*

The other NEET participant described having a harmful cycle following drinking, including hangovers with 'suicidal thoughts' – but even then, 'I go back and do it again.'

The drinking habits of those we spoke to were more excessive than their friends. While both described a culture of pre-loading, when talking about buying rounds with friends when out in town one said: 'I'd usually get two to myself, because by the time I'm finishing two they'd only just be finishing one.' The focus group participants emphasised they made 'individual choices' when it came to drinking pace, and said that some of their friends did not drink at all.

While too small a sample to draw conclusions, the two NEETs we spoke to were the most clearly neglectful of their health in other respects – such as diet and exercising – of all the groups of young people we spoke to. One said: 'I don't look after my body so when I go out I destroy my body, because I don't care.' Yet, answers were sometimes contradictory during interview, with both saying they were at least to an extent concerned about the health consequences of heavy drinking.

The Nelson and Taberner study suggested that media were not important in determining drinking habits of NEETs –

though this was a point of disagreement with the individuals we spoke to for our research. For example, *Geordie Shore* was thought to glamourise a drinking culture and encouraged their own consumption: ‘As soon as we were watching it I was thinking “I want to go to town now”.’ Likewise, social media exerted a fairly strong influence – as discussed in chapter 2 – with one participant saying: ‘You want to get involved – you don’t want to feel left out.’

### Preventative solutions

As stated above, tackling the NEET problem, and harmful drinking among this group, will require a coordinated approach from a range of organisations including government departments. Ultimately, many of the problems start early – including through individual factors such as low self-esteem and poor impulse control, parenting factors such as low levels of support or discipline, and other external influences such as school and peer group.

The education system obviously has a clear role to play here. In *Character and Moderation*, we argued for a preventative approach to tackling alcohol-related harm based on building the capabilities and life skills of young people early in their education – on the growing evidence that developing self-control strategies and resilience in young people can reduce participation in risky behaviours including drinking.<sup>136</sup> The evidence base on what works in this regard is again developing but we summarised some of the most promising initiatives for building these skills in that report, including school- and community-based interventions. We highlighted in particular the Alcohol Education Trust’s Talk About Alcohol programme, as a well-evidenced, skills-based model for schools to help with delaying the age at which young people first drink and become intoxicated. Alongside providing teaching materials to schools, the programme encourages wider work with parents.<sup>137</sup>

It is worth noting that several successful programmes from the USA and elsewhere, with robust evidence of impact on alcohol use, are now being implemented in the UK context, such as:

- LifeSkills Training – a programme focused on personal competence (eg problem solving, decision making), social competence (eg communication and healthy relationships) and drug resistance training (to help with resisting peer pressure)<sup>138</sup>
- Unplugged – a set of 12 sessions focused on ‘core’ life skills, and including correcting perceived norms around alcohol use<sup>139</sup>
- the Good Behaviour Game – an approach to classroom management based on developing pro-social skills<sup>140</sup>

In a 2013 review of evidence for non-cognitive skills development, the Education Endowment Foundation found that mentoring, service learning programmes, social and emotional learning programmes, and outdoor activity programmes have all been shown to promote character capabilities – though to varying degrees.<sup>141</sup> Mentoring programmes such as the one run by Fast Forward ([www.fastforward.org.uk/](http://www.fastforward.org.uk/)) have been highlighted as positive examples for tackling educational disengagement and the NEET problem in particular.<sup>142</sup>

It is encouraging to see the DfE committing further resources to character development opportunities in schools,<sup>143</sup> but further steps must be taken. For example, we recommended in *Character and Moderation* that personal, social and health education (PSHE) be made a statutory part of the national curriculum – on the understanding that it is a natural place for delivery of both alcohol education and character education. Delivery is currently patchy because there is inadequate recognition of the need for statutory PSHE, lack of curriculum time and non-specialist teachers delivering the subject. It is worth emphasising that those teaching young people about alcohol should develop skills and promote responsible norms – lessons involving scare tactics, likely still common in many schools, are not effective in changing behaviour.<sup>144</sup>

Schools can only do so much, especially with a target audience that is often disengaged from formal education. Another area to build on are the successful local alcohol partnerships in many areas of the country that are tackling underage drinking and related antisocial behaviour. In our 2013 report *Sobering Up* we explored the role of community alcohol

partnerships (CAPs) in particular, where alcohol retailers in the on-trade and off-trade partner local law enforcement, trading standards, businesses, schools and youth organisations to create a coordinated approach to tackling underage drinking.<sup>145</sup> There are currently 92 CAPs across the UK, several of which have been evaluated to show fairly substantial impact on antisocial behaviour linked to underage drinking.<sup>146</sup> Key to the success of these partnerships is not just age-verification and communication between enforcers, but the provision of diversionary activities for young people, which give productive alternatives to drinking. Participants at our policy roundtable discussed new developments here – particularly a CAP initiative in Tower Hamlets which is providing work experience and reports an 80 per cent reduction in youth disorder.<sup>147</sup> However, one participant pointed out that the ever-expanding academy programme can make it increasingly difficult to access and work with schools.

Targeted and individualised support must also be provided to young people at risk of becoming NEET. While life skills mentoring is valuable, some young people already have multiple, complex problems and require professional support. One of our roundtable participants pointed to the difficulty of providing support to vulnerable young people in the current climate, given cuts to budgets for local youth work. Schools, too, were criticised for an approach that ‘moved on’ pupils with substance misuse issues through expulsion, so they become ever more isolated.

For many, being NEET is not a short-term transient problem – those who are NEET at age 18–19 are 28 per cent more likely to be unemployed five years later than other people; and more likely to be in low paid jobs and jobs that do not offer training.<sup>148</sup> Solutions must therefore focus on getting people back into meaningful employment that uses employees’ skills properly. Evidence from the Nelson and Taberner study suggests that at least for some NEETs, transitioning into work is a key motivation for change in drinking behaviour.<sup>149</sup> Traineeships and payment-by-results schemes as part of the Work Programme and Youth Contract (with responsibility now devolved to some cities) show the policy attention being paid, and increasing investment

in locally led approaches; but results are patchy and overall there is limited evidence of what works.

Finally, there is also a hugely important role for work with family and parents – building the capabilities of families and not just individuals. Families experiencing problems with alcohol often face a range of disadvantages and problems, and thus coordinated support is required from agencies working with those families. Again, in *Character and Moderation* we summarised some of the effective preventative models here – including family nurse partnerships and other local initiatives such as Addaction's Breaking the Cycle programme – which we argued should be more effectively targeted at areas with the highest prevalence of alcohol-related harm.<sup>150</sup>

This is difficult work, and will require more effective attempts to build trust between service providers and the families most in need than are currently made. Some families have a history of disengagement with services, with experience of failed interventions in the past, and view these types of interactions with mistrust. In our 2014 report *Ties that Bind*, we explored some successful models of whole-family support, finding that giving families greater agency and ownership over services from the outset (for example, setting priorities and co-designing goals), helping family members to develop new skills that they value (through parenting classes), and ensuring continuity in the relationships between families and agency staff were common success factors in building trust between service providers and families.<sup>151</sup> More policy attention should also be paid to the ways in which families can be brought together to help each other, building a wider social network of support beyond traditional service providers.

## 6 Conclusions and recommendations

Progress is clearly being made in tackling excessive drinking among young adults in Great Britain. This report opened by looking at the trends in drinking habits over time, which show that fewer 16–24-year-olds are drinking to excess than ever before, and more are choosing not to drink alcohol altogether. While there are huge information gaps, it seems that health messages may be finally getting across, and that many in this generation of young adults are thinking carefully about how much they spend on alcohol. Parenting around alcohol appears to be improving, too.

Yet, there is much still to be done, and while it is worth building our understanding of what is driving the positive trends, young adults remain among the most likely age group to be drinking harmfully, and across the country many problems remain. It is vital that policy makers do not become complacent – this is not a victory won.

Indeed, our research with university students, young workers and young NEETs show that excessive drinking cultures are still a mainstay of adolescence and early adulthood in otherwise very different life contexts. Many of the similarities between the drinking habits of young adults in our case study groups were striking – including the power of social norms and expectations, the operation of peer pressure in different forms, the fear of missing out as a reason to drink, as well as the social challenges still faced by those who choose not to drink.

Setting the right precedents at key life stages is vital to achieving a more responsible drinking culture. As a report about transitions, we found that young drinkers commonly held a notion that they would grow out of excessive drinking as they hit key, more ‘adult’, life stages. For some this is true – and encouraging these transitions along may even be part of the

solution for some vulnerable young people. Yet it is clear that while many move on, others set dangerous precedents that are much harder to shift.

Institutions have an enormous contribution to make, as do policy makers, in encouraging young people to take more responsible approaches to drinking. While we have outlined some of the positive steps being taken by universities, employers, the education system, retailers and others, there is much still to do. Policies at universities and in workplaces on alcohol are patchy and often of poor quality. It does not appear that the infrastructure – legislation, guidance, procedures – around tackling irresponsible drinks promotions and serving to people who are drunk is having a significant impact. Efforts to promote moderation and teetotalism as a positive life choice are being stifled in many settings by powerful pro-drinking norms. Evidence-based preventative approaches to tackle alcohol problems before they take root are still in relative infancy, and funding constraints are making vital social work more difficult to deliver.

### Recommendations

With these challenges, and the evidence we have gathered in the previous chapters, in mind we make the following recommendations.

To improve evidence on the drinking habits of young adults and others:

- **Recommendation 1: Official surveys on drinking habits should be trialled with self-completion questionnaires only, and a detailed methodological review undertaken to establish whether reported drinking is indeed much higher than that reported in face-to-face interviews.**
- **Recommendation 2: The government should commission a survey to capture the drinking habits of 16–17-year-olds – a current blind-spot in official statistics – helping to explore the drivers of underage drinking and accessibility of alcohol to this age group.**

- **Recommendation 3:** Researchers should explore opportunities for longitudinal analysis on drinking habits of young people to test the drinking maturity hypothesis, establishing how many grow out of excessive drinking, who does and when, and how many do not.

To further the positive trends towards moderation:

- **Recommendation 4:** New official guidance, campaigns and drinks labelling should foreground commonsense language on recommended drinking limits, rather than relying on messaging around units, which evidence shows has a limited impact on behaviour.
- **Recommendation 5:** Responsible drinking campaigners should trial an approach appealing to financial responsibility, including total money saved from modest cut-backs each year.
- **Recommendation 6:** Researchers should undertake a detailed review into the role of social media in encouraging excessive drinking, and pilot schemes to help readjust norms online (eg Facebook quizzes to compare consumption with the wider age group).

Related to students:

- **Recommendation 7:** The Home Office should investigate the prevalence of sales of alcohol to people already drunk in the on-trade and off-trade, and should suggest better tools for enforcing the law. This has particular relevance for students, but is a much wider issue.
- **Recommendation 8:** The Home Office should produce clearer national guidelines on irresponsible drinks promotions, rather than emphasising the discretion of local licensing authorities.

- **Recommendation 9:** Universities and students' unions should trial different approaches to freshers' weeks to reduce student expectations of concentrated drinking on arrival at university.
- **Recommendation 10:** Universities and students' unions, at a coordinated and national level, should raise the profile of teetotalism and promote moderate consumption as a positive choice. Sports societies should be encouraged to take a prominent role in these campaigns.
- **Recommendation 11:** Universities and students' unions should place greater emphasis on the involvement of the local on-trade and off-trade in partnerships to tackle alcohol-related harm.

For young adults in employment:

- **Recommendation 12:** Employers should engage employees in an open conversation on drinking and setting workplace alcohol policies, including how to ensure that work-based socialising and events are inclusive for non-drinkers.
- **Recommendation 13:** The DoH must be transparent about the future of the Public Health Responsibility Deal. It should set out a coherent strategy for engaging a far greater number of employers in health promotion in the workplace, including related to alcohol.
- **Recommendation 14:** The DoH should commission a national web-based portal, which is promoted by employers and enables employees to benchmark their drinking against others, identify risky behaviour, and be signposted to help.
- **Recommendation 15:** Community health workers should approach local businesses to offer identification and brief advice to employees, and advise employers on developing workplace alcohol policies.

For NEETs:

- **Recommendation 16:** The DfE should continue to invest in trialling and evaluating new programmes in schools tackling risky behaviour (such as alcohol use), but must balance this by providing greater support for successful programmes to scale.
- **Recommendation 17:** Local alcohol partnerships across the country should follow the example of Tower Hamlets Community Alcohol Partnership and facilitate work experience opportunities for young people who are drinking underage and are at risk of becoming NEET.
- **Recommendation 18:** The DoH and other relevant departments should invest further in preventative work with families, including expanding family nurse partnerships and trialling family-to-family mentoring schemes – targeting funding at areas experiencing high levels of alcohol harm.



# Technical appendix

In this report we used the Understanding Society dataset in our analysis. Understanding Society, also known as the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), is the largest nationally representative longitudinal household survey in the UK, covering 40,000 households. Understanding Society is designed to help understand the long-term effects of social and economic change, using responses from participants on a range of questions on health, work, education and social life.<sup>152</sup>

Data collection for the first wave of Understanding Society began in 2009. Each wave lasts 24 months, though collection periods overlap so that individuals are interviewed at approximately yearly intervals. Adult participants aged 16 or over in each household complete the main individual questionnaire, while there is a separate youth questionnaire for 10–15-year-olds. For our analysis we used wave 5 of the dataset, using the adult questionnaire, with data gathered in 2013/14. At the time of writing (summer 2016), this is the most recent wave to contain alcohol variables, as these items are not included in every wave.

Most data for Understanding Society are collected face to face via computer-aided personal interview, but the questions on alcohol are exclusively asked via a self-completion booklet. This distinguishes Understanding Society from the official sources of data on drinking – the HSE and Opinions and Lifestyle Survey – discussed further below.

## Alcohol variables

Understanding Society contains several alcohol-related variables in its self-completion questionnaire, including the following that we used for our analysis (variable labels are in parentheses):

- whether the respondent has ever had an alcoholic drink (e\_sceverdrnk)
- how often the respondent drank alcohol in the last 12 months (e\_scfalcdrnk)
- whether the respondent drank alcohol in the last 7 days (e\_scalcl7d)
- on the heaviest drinking day in the last 7 days, how many of each of the following drinks the respondent had:
  - pints of beer, lager, stout or cider (e\_scnalcpint)
  - glasses of wine – including sherry, port, vermouth (e\_scnalcwine)
  - alcopops – including pre-mixed drinks such as Barcardi Breezer, WKD and Smirnoff ice (e\_scnalcpops)
  - single measures of spirits – including gin, whisky, rum, brandy, vodka or cocktails (e\_scnalcshot)

All of these variables are adapted from the HSE (see UKHLS Mainstage Questionnaire wave 5, vo3 for full details on these variables).<sup>153</sup>

## Analysis of excessive consumption

Our initial analysis of the alcohol variables was guided by practice in the HSE. That survey asks a range of similar – but more detailed – questions about the different drinks consumed on the heaviest drinking day in the previous week. These drinks are then converted into units to estimate the proportion of the population falling into different consumption categories (with more than eight units for men and more than six for women tending to indicate excessive consumption).

While accepting that the questions in Understanding Society are less precise than those in the HSE, we attempted to mirror this procedure, converting the drinks that people listed in their heaviest drinking day into units and summing the total. We used the following approximations of units to perform this calculation:

- pints of beer, etc = 2 units

- glasses of wine = 2 units
- alcopops = 1.5 units
- a single measure of spirits = 1 unit

These were decided through a combination of guidance from the NHS,<sup>154</sup> observation of the syntax used to perform the procedure in the HSE available through the UK Data Service, and previous research on alcohol using Understanding Society.<sup>155</sup>

In order to compare Understanding Society data with the HSE, we restricted the sample to England only (using variable `e_gor_dv`), and created a variable with the age categories used in the HSE (recoding `e_dvage`). Data were weighted using the self-completion weight, as specified by user guides for Understanding Society (`e_indscub_xw`). We ran a series of outputs setting different levels of maximum units to identify any effect of extreme outliers. While this had a very minor effect on outputs, we set an upper limit at 40 units to exclude some of the most extreme.

Table 3 shows the output from our analysis of Understanding Society compared with the HSE. Analysis of Understanding Society was performed on weighted data, though we include unweighted `n` values. This applies to all tables in this chapter.

Table 3 **The volume of alcohol consumed on heaviest drinking day in the last week: Understanding Society compared with the HSE**

Amount drunk in the last week	Age 16–24		All 16+	
	HSE	U Soc	HSE	U Soc
Did not drink in the last week	52%	49%	43%	42%
Up to 3–4 units	17%	11%	26%	16%
More than 3–4 up to 6–8 units	12%	11%	16%	18%
More than 6–8 units	19%	29%	15%	24%
N	735	3,815	8,006	28,568

As discussed in the main text, there are substantial discrepancies about the number of respondents reporting excessive consumption (more than 6/8 units), with a ten percentage point difference for 16–24-year-olds drinking excessively between the two surveys, and a nine percentage point difference for all age groups.

In the main text, we used 2011 Census figures (England only) to make approximate calculations of the difference in numbers of excessive drinkers captured in the two surveys:

- The 2011 Census has the 16–24 population at 6,284,760, so according to the HSE, 1,194,104 16–24-year-olds in England drank excessively in the last week, while the estimate from Understanding Society is 1,822,580 (628,476 more).
- The 2011 Census found the entire adult population in England (age 16+) is 42,989,620. According to the HSE, 6,448,443 adults drank excessively in the last week, while the estimate from Understanding Society is 10,317,508 (a difference of 3,869,065).

### Potential explanations to explore further

We are aware that some of the discrepancy in the HSE and Understanding Society figures is likely explained by the translation (simplification) of the questions from the HSE for use in Understanding Society.

However, as discussed in the main text, it may be explained in part by survey method – with the emphasis on self-completion in Understanding Society driving up the numbers drinking excessively. While there are options to self-complete alcohol questions anonymously in the HSE and OPN, these are only usual for respondents under 18.

Because the HSE gives 18–24-year-olds the option to answer the alcohol questions through a self-completion booklet or face to face, as a component of our research we were able to compare data for the two groups using the 2013 HSE. We found that self-completers were more likely to report excessive drinking than face-to-face respondents, although the sample sizes are very small (table 4).

Table 4 **The volume of alcohol consumed in the last week by 18–24-year-olds respondents to the 2013 HSE: face-to-face interviews compared with self-completion booklet**

Amount drunk in the last week	Face-to-face interview (%)	Self-completion booklet (%)	Total (%)
Did not drink in the last week	44%	37%	43%
Up to 3–4 units	20%	22%	20%
More than 3–4 up to 6–8 units	12%	10%	12%
More than 6–8 units	24%	31%	25%
N	505	107	612

Furthermore, an earlier 2006 study by NatCen also found fairly substantial discrepancies between the main HSE survey (mostly conducted face to face) and a boost sample of respondents who completed the survey through a self-completion questionnaire. Researchers concluded that this is consistent with other evidence showing that ‘respondents tend to be more honest in self-completion questionnaires and are likely to under-report in face-to-face interviews’.<sup>156</sup> Other methodological studies have suggested that mode of questioning affects levels of reported drinking,<sup>157</sup> which is worthy of further detailed investigation.

### Delaying gratification analysis

In chapter 2 we outline findings from our analysis of the relationship between ability to delay gratification and consumption using Understanding Society – in particular focusing on indicators of financial responsibility within that. Understanding Society contains an adapted version of the Delaying Gratification Inventory (DGI) developed by Hoerger, Quirk and Weed.<sup>158</sup> Survey respondents are asked their level of agreement with ten statements, using a 0–10 scale. These statements are:

- I would have a hard time sticking with a special, healthy diet.\*

- I try to spend money wisely.
- I have given up physical pleasure or comfort to reach my goals.
- I try to consider how my actions will affect other people in the long term.
- I cannot be trusted with money.\*
- I do not consider how my behaviour affects other people.\*
- I cannot motivate myself to accomplish long-term goals.\*
- I have always tried to eat healthily because it pays off in the long run.
- When faced with a physically demanding chore, I always tried to put off doing it.\*
- I have always felt like my hard work would pay off in the end.

For our analysis we recoded the asterisked items so that high scores were converted into low scores. Scores for each item were then combined into a total DGI score. We also combined relevant questions into smaller constructs, including ‘try to spend money wisely’ and ‘cannot be trusted with money’ into a variable on financial responsibility. Tables 5 and 6 summarise the results. To avoid some of the issues around conversion to units (discussed above), we instead created categories based on number of drinks consumed.

While the variable for number of drinks consumed does not neatly meet some of the prior assumptions of statistical testing, we ran a Pearson’s product-moment correlation to assess the relationship between DGI score and number of drinks consumed on the heaviest drinking day in the last seven among 16–24-year-olds (excluding non-drinkers). Our results found a small negative correlation,  $r(2262) = -.170, p < 0.0005$ . This result was similar when the items on financial responsibility were isolated, though a very slightly larger negative correlation was found,  $r(2270) = -.185, p < 0.0005$ .

## Social media analysis

As discussed in chapter 3, Understanding Society asks respondents aged 16–21 about the number of hours they spend ‘chatting or interacting with friends though social websites on a

**Table 5 Total delaying gratification scores by alcohol consumption in the previous week among 16-24-year-olds in the UK**

Delaying gratification score	Non-drinker	Drinker but not in last week	1-4 drinks	5-8 drinks	9+ drinks	Total
Low (0-25)	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Low-mid (26-50)	19%	16%	10%	15%	20%	16%
Mid-high (51-75)	59%	64%	69%	70%	66%	66%
High (75-100)	21%	19%	20%	15%	13%	18%
N	998	1567	909	734	715	4923

**Table 6 Financial responsibility scores by alcohol consumption in the previous week among 16-24-year-olds in the UK**

Financial responsibility score	Non-drinker	Drinker but not last week	1-4 drinks	5-8 drinks	9+ drinks	Total
Low (0-5)	3%	4%	4%	3%	5%	4%
Low-mid (6-10)	21%	15%	13%	16%	25%	17%
Mid-high (11-15)	29%	33%	36%	39%	40%	35%
High (16-20)	47%	48%	47%	42%	30%	44%
N	1005	1569	914	735	716	4939

normal week day, that is Monday to Friday'. Table 7 shows the results, with some categories combined in the main text for simplicity.

### Drinking by occupation analysis

Table 8 shows the drinking levels of different occupational groups in the UK for our analysis in chapter 4.

Table 7 **The relationship between the number of hours 16-21-year-olds in the UK spent on social media on a typical weekday and their level of alcohol consumption in the previous week**

Hours spent on social media on typical weekday	Non-drinker	Drinker but not in last week	1-4 drinks	5-8 drinks	9+ drinks	Total
None	4%	3%	2%	3%	2%	3%
Less than an hour	31%	25%	27%	26%	23%	26%
1-3 hours	33%	43%	44%	39%	36%	40%
4-6 hours	18%	17%	16%	21%	24%	19%
7+ hours	14%	12%	11%	11%	15%	13%
N	543	1,012	548	469	481	3,053

Table 8 **Level of alcohol consumption by occupational group, UK**

Occupational group	Non-drinker	Drinker but not in last week	Drank last week but less than 5 drinks	Drank 5+ drinks	N
Mining and quarrying	5%	15%	32%	48%	83
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	7%	20%	34%	39%	120
Construction	10%	22%	30%	37%	1,141
Manufacturing	10%	21%	33%	35%	1,994
Information and communication	9%	19%	38%	34%	799
Arts, entertainment and recreation	10%	22%	36%	33%	536
Professional, scientific and technical activities	9%	16%	42%	33%	1,290
Financial and insurance activities	10%	21%	37%	33%	752
Accommodation and food service activities	13%	30%	24%	32%	1,016
Real estate activities	10%	23%	36%	31%	224
Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	13%	28%	29%	30%	127
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	12%	18%	40%	30%	1,579
Administrative and support service activities	13%	28%	31%	29%	1,071
Other service activities	11%	24%	37%	29%	531
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	15%	27%	30%	28%	2,926
Transportation and storage	17%	25%	31%	27%	991
Education	12%	22%	43%	23%	2,609
Human health and social work activities	16%	27%	36%	22%	3,675
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	13%	27%	40%	20%	195
Total	13%	24%	35%	29%	21,717



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Each year national statistics give us reason to be positive about the drinking habits of young adults, with fewer and fewer drinking to excess. Many column inches have been filled in trying to explain this trend. Yet, it is not a victory won for policy makers: 16–24-year-olds are still the age group most likely to be drinking harmfully.

This report explores the drinking habits of young adults in Great Britain. It seeks to contribute evidence to explain some of the positive trends – including the decline in binge drinking and rise in teetotalism. However, the report also seeks to understand the outstanding drivers of harmful consumption and how best to tackle them, with particular regard to three key case study groups: students, young adults in employment, and young people who are NEET. As the title suggests, a running theme of the report is transitions – both in national trends, and for young people moving between key life stages.

The report argues that setting the right precedents at key life stages is vital to achieving a more responsible drinking culture. Many of the similarities between the drinking habits of young adults in our case study groups are striking – including the power of social norms and expectations, the operation of peer pressure in different forms, the fear of missing out as a reason to drink, as well the social challenges still faced by those who choose not to drink. A commonly held notion among excessive young drinkers is that they will grow out of it as they hit more ‘adult’ life stages. But it is clear that while many do indeed move on, others set dangerous precedents that are much harder to shift.

To build on the positive trends and tackle the drivers of harmful drinking, we make a series of recommendations to government departments, universities and students’ unions, employers, schools, local community organisations and others.

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