A programme to reduce excessive alcohol consumption among college students in Ireland

Dr Susan Calnan, School of Public Health, UCC
27th November 2019
About the intervention

REACT – Responding to Excessive Alcohol Consumption in Third-level
Background

Alcohol has been cited as the number one public health problem facing colleges today (Wechsler et al, 2002). College students reportedly drink more than their non-college peers (White and Hingson, 2013).

CLAN Survey 2002-2003 – a pattern of high-risk drinking the norm among college students in Ireland (Hope et al, 2005).

UCC study (Davoren et al, 2015) – almost two-thirds of students showed signs of hazardous drinking and reduced gender gap.

No standardised or comprehensive programme tackling alcohol consumption among college students in Ireland (ad hoc measures).
REACT programme

Developed in 2015, **first programme** of its kind in Ireland

Consists of a suite of **mandatory** and **optional** action points which participating colleges are required to implement

Development consisted of a **three-step** process

Informed by **4 pillars** of National Substance Misuse Strategy

- Award and accreditation
- Literature review
- Knowledge exchange
- Expert consultation
- Supply
- Prevention
- Rehabilitation
- Research
Responding to excessive alcohol consumption in third-level (REACT): a study protocol

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Abstract

Background: Problem alcohol use is an ongoing, worldwide phenomenon of considerable concern. Throughout the past 20 years, national policies have noted the importance of students when tackling a alcohol consumption. Considering alcohol is a multifaceted issue, a multi-component response is required to combat its excessive use. This protocol sets out the approach used for developing, implementing and evaluating the REACT (Responding to Excessive Alcohol Consumption in Third-level) Programme.

Methods/design: This evaluation will provide the evidence base for programme development, implementation and improvement. Stage one involved defining the multi-component intervention. This was developed following a systematic review of existing literature and a Delphi consensus workshop involving university students, staff and relevant stakeholders. Following this, the programme is being implemented across the Higher Education sector in Ireland. A number of Higher Education Institutes have declined the invitation to participate in the programme. These institutions will act as control sites. Each intervention site will have a steering committee whose membership will include a mix of students and academic and student support staff. This steering committee will report to the REACT research team on the implementation of mandatory and optional action points at local sites. An online cross-sectional study at baseline and two-years post intervention will be utilised to determine the impact of the REACT programme. The impact assessment will focus on (1) whether the intervention has reduced alcohol consumption among third-level students; (2) whether the programme altered students attitudes toward alcohol and (3) whether the programme has decreased the second-hand effects associated with excessive consumption. Finally, qualitative research will focus on factors influencing the take-up and implementation of this programme as well as students’ views on the initiative.

Discussion: Alcohol consumption has remained on the policy agenda at both national and international level over recent decades. Students are regularly among the highest alcohol consumers yet university management and public policymakers struggle to tackle this burgeoning issue. The REACT Programme provides a structure to translate policy into practice for those seeking to reduce hazardous alcohol consumption and related harms among third-level students.

Keywords: Students, Alcohol, Intervention, University, Ireland, Multi-component, Complex

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Guiding framework

MRC framework

Development
- Identifying the evidence base
- Identifying or developing theory
- Modelling process and outcomes

Feasibility and piloting
- Testing procedures
- Estimating recruitment and retention
- Determining sample size

Evaluation
- Assessing effectiveness
- Understanding change process
- Assessing cost effectiveness

Implementation
- Dissemination
- Surveillance and monitoring
- Long term follow-up
Theoretical framework

Social ecological model
Individual behaviour is shaped by factors at multiple levels
Mandatory and optional action points

This table details the **MANDATORY** Action Points of the REACT Award Scheme. A college must complete all aspects of the below points before application for the award.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTION POINT</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>All incoming students are required to take an online brief intervention tool. All incoming students are required to take ePUB (or other brief intervention tool if already in place) with the stats being presented to a relevant college committee on an annual basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Develop a college alcohol policy in line with the ‘National Framework to Develop a College Alcohol Policy’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The President of the college commits to the REACT programme.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Form a Steering Committee of staff and students, chaired by a senior college official, that meet twice a year (minimum) and review the Action Plan annually.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Safety issues in the context of alcohol must be considered while planning all large scale events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Establish a tracking and reporting mechanism for key alcohol related harm indicators.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The college completes its own evaluation of the effectiveness of the alcohol action plan every 3 years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Train relevant staff in Brief Intervention Training. Ensure key individuals in student, therapy, and alcohol related roles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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This table details the **OPTIONAL** Action Points of the REACT Award Scheme.

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<td>1.</td>
<td>Designate a specific college official to have overall responsibility for the colleges REACT programme.</td>
</tr>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Develop a calendar of events in conjunction with local Students’ Union.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Develop reporting mechanism for tracking high risk promotions by local licensees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>REACT Training Toolkit is utilised at class rep training to provide them with relevant safety information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Alcohol counselling service available to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Hold an annual meeting with local stakeholders.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Develop a visible and accessible referral pathway to a range of internal and external alcohol support services for students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Provide alcohol free housing and alcohol free social spaces. Provide:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) alcohol free housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) alcohol free social spaces</td>
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## Mandatory action points

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<td>1. All incoming students are required to take an online brief intervention tool</td>
<td>All incoming students are required to take ePub (or other brief intervention tool already in place) with the data being presented to a relevant college committee on an annual basis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Develop a college alcohol policy in line with the National Framework to Develop a College Alcohol Policy</td>
<td>Develop a college alcohol policy in line with the National Framework to Develop a College Alcohol Policy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. President of the college commits to the REACT programme</td>
<td>The President of the college (or equivalent management figure) signs a 3-year commitment to the college actively pursuing the criteria set out by the REACT programme(s) Action Plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Form a Steering Committee of staff and students, chaired by a senior college official, that meet twice a year (minimum) and review the Action Plan annually</td>
<td>Form a Steering Committee which will: (a) Have student and staff representation. (b) Be chaired by a senior college official. (c) Have a member of the Gardaí, a member of the local council, and a member of the Local Drugs and Alcohol Task Force as committee members. (d) Meet a minimum of twice a year. (e) Review the college Alcohol Action Plan annually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Safety issues in the context of alcohol must be considered while planning all large scale students events</td>
<td>An agenda item of alcohol &amp; safety issues must be present and discussed on the agenda of all SU Societies and Clubs planning meetings related to any large scale student entertainment events at which alcohol will be available, e.g. College Balls, Gigs, R&amp;G, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Establish a tracking and reporting mechanism for key alcohol related harm indicators</td>
<td>Establish a tracking and reporting mechanism that will track key alcohol related harm indicators e.g. Injuries, anti-social behaviour, harm to relationships, studies, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The college completes its own evaluation of the effectiveness of the alcohol action plan every 3 years</td>
<td>The college devises and completes an evaluation strategy to monitor the effectiveness of the alcohol action plan every 3 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Train relevant staff in Brief Intervention Training</td>
<td>Ensure key individuals in student health and the student experience are able to deliver Brief Interventions Therapy around alcohol misuse and have a clear understanding of the internal referral pathways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Requiring a proportion of incoming students to take an online brief intervention tool (ePub)
- Establishing a dedicated Steering Committee with staff, student and community representation
- Developing a college alcohol policy in line with national framework
## Optional action points

This table details the **OPTIONAL** Action Points of the REACT Award Scheme.

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<td>Designate a specific college official to have overall responsibility for the colleges REACT programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Develop a calendar of events in conjunction with local Students’ Union</td>
<td>Develop a calendar of events in conjunction with local Students’ Union which requires proactive planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Develop reporting mechanism for tracking high risk promotions by local licensees</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. REACT Training Toolkit is utilised at class rep training to provide them with relevant safety information</td>
<td>a) The REACT Training Toolkit (available via the REACT website) is utilised for a session at class rep training annually with a special emphasis placed upon safety. Members of Clubs and Societies for which they would hold relevance in event planning are invited to this training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alcohol counselling service available to students</td>
<td>Provide an alcohol counselling service to the student body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Hold an annual meeting with local stakeholders</td>
<td>Hold a minimum of one meeting annually with local stakeholders (e.g., local Gardaí, local residents, local businesses, etc.) as a forum to discuss grievances and suggestions related to students excessive alcohol consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Develop a visible and accessible referral pathway to a range of internal and external alcohol support services for students</td>
<td>Develop a visible and accessible referral pathway to a range of internal and external alcohol support services for students. In addition: a) The pathway will include and promote a self-referral route for students b) Training and information relating to the pathway is to be offered to front line staff of the college every two years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Provide alcohol free housing and alcohol free social spaces</td>
<td>Provide: a) alcohol free housing b) alcohol free social spaces</td>
</tr>
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- Providing alcohol-free housing and alcohol-free social spaces
- Providing class rep training on relevant safety information in relation to alcohol (REACT toolkit)
- Providing an alcohol counselling service to students
10 third-level institutions recently received REACT accreditation for actively implementing the measures (end of Aug 2019)

5 universities, 4 ITs and one college
Evaluation

Student perceptions
Explore students’ perceptions regarding the REACT programme and alcohol more generally

Implementation
Examine factors influencing take-up and implementation of REACT among third-level institutions

Impact
Conduct a baseline and follow-up survey (incl. AUDIT*) to determine any changes (e.g. consumption, attitudes, etc.)

Policy context
Examine the wider policy context regarding alcohol regulation at time of REACT
Summary of main findings

Students

- Continued prevalence of hazardous alcohol consumption among college students in Ireland (60%+ in both years and for males/females)

- Low awareness of own drinking among the hazardous drinkers

- Student perspectives – sceptical about the efficacy of REACT given the perceived pervasiveness of alcohol; also many viewed it as their personal responsibility to control drinking rather than that of the institution
Summary of main findings

Implementation

• Significant barriers faced in implementing the programme in colleges, especially regarding resources (time and personnel)

• Need for a local champion or opinion leader to drive the programme

• Importance of increasing clarity e.g. practical steps on how to implement the programme
Summary of main findings

Impact

- Lack of change in hazardous consumption levels at 2-year follow-up raises questions about efficacy of REACT
- However, low response rate of survey, short timeframe (2 years) and only one follow-up study means should remain sceptical of results

Should REACT continue?
Continue to develop and refine but critically evaluate at later time points
Challenges in the implementation

- Initial enthusiasm for REACT waned in some institutions once implementation began
- Intensity of implementation differed by institution
- Some institutions felt illicit drugs should also be included
- Needed a champion to drive the programme – lack of ownership in some colleges
- Lack of resources (time, personnel) to implement & to oversee
Challenges in the research

- Surveying of students – difficulty of access, had to go with web instead of paper based
- Timeframe of research – 3-years, pressurised juggling various aspects of the research
- Low response rate of student surveys, risk of survey fatigue
- Organising process evaluation – busy schedules of staff, summer recess, etc.
- Getting more than one control institution
Lessons learnt

Importance of planning for rigorous and adequately powered evaluation study in designing complex interventions

Value of conducting a feasibility study before going to pilot stage (constraints of health service vs research board funding)

Need to schedule adequate lead-in time when planning primary research studies or surveys (it takes time)

Importance of context when implementing an intervention and value of an implementation strategy to accompany int.
Parting thought

Never underestimate the importance of the particular context in which the intervention is being implemented.

Also, the value of having a local champion or opinion leader to help drive the intervention – “the new idea either finds a champion or dies” (Rogers citing Schön, 1963)
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