

Policy briefing: the Union should promote harm reduction in regard to students who take illegal (and legal) drugs.

October 2022

Audience: Welfare and Community Zone

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

Neither the Union nor UCL currently have a specific policy on student drug use.

UCL, however, does state in Section 2 of the 2022-23 Academic Manual¹, 'Disciplinary Code and Procedure in Respect of Students', that "use, possession, buying or selling of illegal drugs" is an "example of [a] major offence". Under the procedure if a student (or staff member) is alleged to have committed a major offence this will be referred to the Discipline Committee for investigation. The Committee determines if a disciplinary offence has been committed and has the power to impose penalties including a reprimand, a fine, exclusion, compensation for any damage to person or property, and permanent expulsion from UCL. UCL provides a list of external support services for drug and alcohol misuse or addiction under 'Student Support and Wellbeing'².

UCL have set up a working group to consider a harm reduction policy. Membership of this group includes the Welfare & Community Officer and members of staff from the Students' Union.

What would change if the policy was successful?

Harm reduction describes a variety of different policy and intervention methods aimed at reducing the negative outcome of drugs.

If this policy was successful, it outlines the steps the Students' Union would take, which broadly falls into four categories: communication, support, resources and lobbying. In terms of communication, the Union would provide guidance during Welcome Week about illegal substances and alcohol so students can make informed choices, and also promote more alcohol-free events for societies. For support, the Union would provide specific well-being support for substance abuse. This could either be recruiting new Advisers in the Advice service who specialise in substance abuse and addiction, upskilling current staff with specialist training, or signposting students to specialist external services. In terms of resources, the Union would provide free drug testing kits in Union bars. Lastly, the Union would lobby UCL to include drug safety in their Welcome Week induction talks and provide more support for those with substance abuse issues.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

¹ https://www.ucl.ac.uk/academic-manual/sites/academic_manual/files/section_2_student_disciplinary_procedure_2022-23.pdf

² <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/support-and-wellbeing/resources/mental-health-and-wellbeing-resources/support-drug-and-alcohol>

Taking a harm reduction approach to drug use, specifically in university contexts, has been widely discussed for many years. This year Universities UK announced a new taskforce to help universities understand and address drug use, which aims to provide evidence-led sector guidance and “Make student drug use visible as a welfare and health issue with consequences for exploitation, mental health, learning, employability and community”³. A report from the Higher Education Policy Institute in 2022 suggests that a harm reduction approach to drug use in university is a better way to approach this issue, as a zero-tolerance approach can create barriers for students accessing support⁴.

Students’ Unions across the UK have varying approaches to student drug use. Most Students’ Unions express that they do not condone the use of drugs, however focus their efforts on encouraging students to access support if needed and educating students on the potential risks and effects associated with drugs⁵. Sheffield SU, for example, states that they have a “zero tolerance policy towards drugs”, however if a student feels unwell or unsafe due to drugs at the Union then they will not be judged or penalised in any way if they seek help or support⁶. Some Unions’ have taken an explicit harm reduction approach, such as UWE⁷. Recently many Unions with event venues have taken a stricter approach to drug use, such as increasing searches before entering the venue and increasing security presence, following increasing reports of spiking at university events or venues.

The University of Exeter recently introduced a harm reduction policy approach to student drug use, stating that they “do not endorse the use of drugs”, however “operate a policy of harm reduction that prioritises the welfare and wellbeing of our community”⁸. The university retains the right to enforce disciplinary action if necessary, however states that when “[this] needs to be taken, the focus will be on the person’s behaviour and its actual or potential impact on others, rather than on their substance use”. Other universities, such as the University of Bristol⁹, have implemented similar policies.

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

Depending on the specific harm reduction approach there are potential legal implications. Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, it is a criminal offence for an institution to knowingly permit use, production or supply of any controlled drug on its premises. A harm reduction approach does not necessarily involve knowing or encouraging drug use, however it would be important to consider the framing and wording of any communications to students, interventions or policies to ensure the approach is lawful.

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

No.

³ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/news/student-drug-use-reducing-harm-and>

⁴ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Illicit-drug-use-in-universities-zero-tolerance-or-harm-reduction.pdf>

⁵ E.g. <https://yusu.org/advice-support/support-a-z/drugs>

⁶ <https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/advice-and-support/health-wellbeing/drug-harm-reduction>

⁷ <https://www.thestudentsunion.co.uk/community/late-night-do-it-right/harmreductiondrugs/>

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https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/level1/academicserviceswebsite/academicpolicyandstudentadministration/documents/studentcases/Drugs_and_Alcohol_Policy-v4.pdf

⁹ <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/students/support/wellbeing/policies/harm-reduction/>

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder / public relations issues with this policy proposal?

The Union would have to either find additional income, or reallocate expenditure from elsewhere, to pay for free drug testing kits to be available.

Are there any sustainability implications to this item for discussion?

No.

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this item for discussion?

Research has found drug use to be higher among certain groups, such as LGBT+ students and students with disabilities¹⁰. The University of Exeter harm reduction policy states that:

“Harms related to the use of drugs and alcohol, are disproportionately experienced by the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society. While in some cases substances are used to alleviate the symptoms of long term illnesses, disabilities and trauma, UoE recognises that policy responses that approach the use of drugs and alcohol as solely disciplinary issues fail to identify the complex reasons behind people’s use and therefore risk further marginalising certain groups of students.”

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

If this policy proposal was passed the Union would work to adopt a harm reduction approach to drug use, provide students with additional resources, support and education, and lobby UCL to do the same.

¹⁰ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Illicit-drug-use-in-universities-zero-tolerance-or-harm-reduction.pdf>