

DRINKAWARE

ALCOHOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME

YEAR ONE EVALUATION



AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FROM PROFESSOR SINÉAD MCGILLOWAY, MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

We would like to convey our warmest thanks to all of the students and teachers who agreed to take part in this research and to the school principals who consented for their schools to be involved. Their help, co-operation and support are very much appreciated.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Martha Sweeney of Drinkaware for all her help, support and patience. In addition, we are most grateful to Niamh Gallagher, the former CEO of Drinkaware, for her time, interest and support

when this study first began and more recently, to Sheena Horgan, current CEO, for overseeing and enthusiastically supporting its continuation. We extend our warmest thanks also to Rachel Riordan, Feargal Rhatigan and Annalena Dressler for all their help with data organisation, management and analysis.

Lastly, we acknowledge, with thanks, the funding provided by Drinkaware to support this study.



81%

of teachers felt that there was a very strong need for a programme like the Drinkaware AEP in schools

ABOUT

DRINKAWARE

Drinkaware is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol misuse in Ireland. Achieving this requires ambition, trust, independence, collaboration and credibility.

The need to educate and inform young people about alcohol is a priority for Drinkaware and a societal imperative. But equally critical to us is that we are mindful about the appropriateness of with whom we engage, and how, when and where this engagement takes place. We take a best-practice approach with our Alcohol Education Programme, allowing for the right skills and behaviour to be developed through sustained activity and conversation both in-school and at-home.

Our role in tackling underage drinking is to provide support and resources to those in the strongest position to positively shape the attitudes and future behaviours of young people – parents and teachers. Drinkaware does not engage directly with students but instead trains teachers to deliver the junior cycle Drinkaware Alcohol Education Programme in an effective and meaningful way.

Registered Charity Number: 20204601

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

This evaluation is led by Professor Sinéad McGilloway, Director of the Centre for Mental Health and Community Research at Maynooth University Department of Psychology, in collaboration with Dr John Weafer of Weafer and Associates.

Professor Sinead McGilloway is a research innovator/leader, educationalist, public health/community psychologist and population health/health services researcher. Professor McGilloway is the Founder/Director of the Centre for Mental Health and Community Research (CMHCR) in Maynooth University Department of Psychology and Social Sciences Institute. The CMHCR is the only centre in Ireland to specialise in mental health care and wellbeing (and services) research across the lifespan and in a community context (www.cmhcr.eu). Its staff and students conduct high quality, interdisciplinary, community-engaged research on innovative and diverse health services and social care research programmes and projects across a number of practice- and policy-relevant subject areas of both national and international importance.

FOREWORD

Drinkaware's purpose is to prevent and reduce the misuse of alcohol in Ireland. Included in this, is a remit to tackle underage drinking, which we do by empowering teachers and parents to support their students and children to have a better awareness and understanding of the facts regarding alcohol. The ultimate objective is to delay the age at which they take their first drink - currently 15 years old in Ireland (Drinkaware Index 2019).

The need for alcohol education amongst young people is widely recognised by parents and teachers, but was also identified in our previous research by young people themselves; 56% of Junior Cycle students participating in this research (Behaviour & Attitudes, 2016) felt they had limited knowledge relating to alcohol use, and 70% were unaware that one in four adults do not drink alcohol. The research also found a deficit in knowledge regarding binge drinking, as well as the link with cancer and alcohol. Students' review of school teaching on alcohol was only modestly positive, with 36% ranking it as having taught them very well about alcohol. Critically, the students themselves ranked teachers second (89%) in terms of where students learn about alcohol. Parents were the leading source at 95%.

Drinkaware also commissioned Mark Morgan (2015) Cregan Professor of Education and Psychology at St. Patrick's College, to undertake research identifying the most effective practices in delivering alcohol education in schools.

The findings and learnings from both of the above research exercises were used to inform the development of Drinkaware's manualised 9-week Alcohol Education Programme (AEP). Developed within the context of the Framework for Junior Cycle and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), the programme has a strong focus on wellbeing. It aims to promote awareness among students of the effects of alcohol, and to support the development of personal and social skills which encourage

independent decision making about alcohol. It seeks to empower young people to develop strategies to resist peer pressure, change behaviours and engage in alternatives to alcohol use.

The AEP utilises Drinkaware's expertise as educators. We do not engage directly with students, but train the teachers to deliver the programme in an effective and meaningful way. Each year, we facilitate teacher training days for those who take up the programme and, to date, the programme has been delivered by 176 teachers, across 87 post primary schools in Ireland, reaching over 8,000 Junior Cycle students.

The Department of Health Strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery – a health-led response to alcohol and drug use in Ireland, 2017-2025 (Department of Health, 2017) recognises that future prevention programmes should be evidence-led. In keeping with this, and as Drinkaware's core values are trust and credibility, we ensure our programmes are grounded in evidence and evaluated to safeguard their integrity and efficacy. As a national charity, our credibility is further fortified by our independence and our commitment to good governance.

In line with this commitment to transparent and rigorous evaluation and reporting, Maynooth University was commissioned to conduct a three-year evaluation of the AEP, under the leadership of Professor Sinead Mc Gilloway, Director, Centre for Mental Health and Community Research, (MU Department of Psychology and Social Sciences Institute). The University's independent critical assessment demonstrate that the programme was viewed very positively by teachers and students alike.

The results also reflect important shifts in knowledge amongst those young people who completed the programme (when compared to pre-programme levels) as well as meaningful (positive) changes in attitudes toward alcohol use after completing the programme.

Designed by and for teachers, the AEP is rooted in evidence and fact, and informed by national and international research regarding best practice in alcohol education. It includes neither conjecture nor dictate. Its purpose is to encourage and enable discussion and thought, and to provide factual information to replace the often erroneous presumptions and myths about alcohol held by many school-age students.



5%

increase in the proportion of students who reported that they did not drink alcohol at all, following completion of the AEP

66%

of students said that they would recommend the AEP to other schools





62%

Almost two-thirds of students rated the AEP as 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent'

84%

of teachers thought the training provided was 'very good' or 'good'

88%

of teachers thought the programme content was 'very good' or 'good'

Ultimately the Drinkaware AEP's purpose is to prevent and reduce the misuse of alcohol, and in particular underage drinking and to delay the age of the first drink.

The findings and recommendations from this Year 1 report are already informing the continued design and delivery of the programme, including the development and piloting of a "Whole School Approach to Alcohol Education", and Drinkaware's parent workshops and research.

With Irish children as young as 13 having their first alcoholic drink, the need to educate and inform them is a societal imperative and for Drinkaware, a priority. It is also critical that we are thoughtful about the efficacy of our approach, the appropriateness of with whom we engage, and how, when and where this engagement takes place.

Positive change can only happen through collective efforts, and we know that parents and teachers are key sources of education and role modelling for children regarding alcohol. So while there is no quick fix to eradicating underage drinking, sustained cumulative and collaborative efforts can make a difference. This is why we channel our resources to tackle underage drinking to parents and schools, to those who know the children and young people best, and whom they trust. Thousands of children have received the AEP programme to date, and thousands of parents are supported and empowered on a monthly basis by accessing our information, advice and resources through our website, social media and parent workshops.

The real value of this approach, which follows best practice, is that it engages a positive rather than punitive approach with the emphasis on learning outcomes. This allows for the right skills and behaviour to be developed through sustained activity and conversation both in school and at home.

The potential effectiveness of the AEP going forward will be determined by how it equips teenagers with the necessary skills and resources to resist social influences/pressures surrounding alcohol, and whether or not it positively 'turns the table' on peer pressure (i.e. leverages the positive influence of peers).

This points to the value of the AEP in improving/helping students to make better-prepared decisions on alcohol and supporting the development of personal and social skills. This, in turn, helps to promote independent decision making about alcohol. In this evaluation of Year 1, teachers noted that participation in the AEP had the potential to help students make better decisions on alcohol if they do begin drinking.

Going forward, the findings of the longer-term evaluation (i.e. Years 2 and 3) will be critical in terms of gauging the impact of ongoing participation in the AEP. Our priority for Drinkaware's evidence-led alcohol education programme for 2019-2021 is the continued growth in its reach and delivery. We will also be improving the programme based on our ongoing research findings, and piloting our Whole School Approach to Alcohol Education in 2019 with a view to rolling it out to interested schools in 2020 and 2021.



Sheena Horgan
CEO, Drinkaware

66%

Two-thirds of teachers believed that the AEP had a positive impact on their students' attitudes towards alcohol.



574

STUDENTS



49%



50%

19



SCHOOLS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS MIXED METHODS STUDY WERE TO:

- 1) Assess the nature, extent and experience of alcohol use amongst a sample of First Year students in post-primary schools throughout Ireland;
- 2) Investigate attitudes and beliefs towards, and knowledge of, alcohol, amongst the students and;
- 3) Assess the perceived effectiveness, experience and acceptability of the AEP in the school setting amongst both students and teachers.

The student sample on which this study was based, comprised 574, mainly 13-year-old, young people (49% girls; 51% boys) from 19 schools located in various parts of the country including Dublin, Galway, Tipperary, Longford, Roscommon, Leitrim, Limerick, Laois, and Mayo. The study involved assessing all student participants before the programme was delivered (baseline) and then again upon completion approximately 8 weeks later (follow-up).

Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with a small number of teachers and students, whilst all participating teachers were invited to take part in an online survey.

A summary of the key findings is presented in the following pages.

FINDING 01

The Year 1 findings reported here, show the potential of the AEP in terms of empowering young people to develop skills, knowledge, attitudes and values in order to enable them to build resilience to alcohol. Empowering students and the importance of skills-based learning are stated core components of the AEP and are key to its rationale.

For instance, there was a 5% increase in the proportion of students who reported that they did not drink alcohol at all, following completion of the AEP. Likewise, 35% of students at follow-up (i.e. after programme completion) versus 28% at (pre-programme) baseline, indicated that they would choose to delay drinking for as long as possible. In addition, students' overall attitudes towards alcohol (as measured by the Torabi Alcohol Attitude Scale) became statistically significantly more negative after the completion of the AEP. While it is still early days, these findings point toward the positive potential of this programme in changing attitudes and possibly behaviour patterns established during early adolescence, which can have a longer term impact on health and wellbeing.

The AEP was also shown to have had a positive impact on students' knowledge and awareness of the negative impact of alcohol. There were statistically significant post-programme increases in a number of knowledge domains relating to: the facts about alcohol; impact on overall health and wellbeing (including mental health); the consequences of underage drinking and of drinking too much; and healthy alternatives to alcohol. For example, there was a 21% increase from baseline to follow-up, in the proportion of students who reported 'knowing a lot' about the impact of alcohol on overall health and wellbeing.

There were also significant post-programme improvements in how much students felt they knew about the importance of self-esteem, having a support network and managing and describing feelings in appropriate ways.

FINDING 02

a) Reassuringly, teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the AEP (84%). However, some important considerations for improvement were also noted (e.g. duplication of some of the SPHE curriculum content). The findings provide important lessons for Drinkaware to consider in terms of, for example, the specific context in which the programme is delivered in each school and other suggested changes, such as smaller class sizes.

Eighty-four per cent of the teachers rated the training which they had received in advance of programme delivery, as 'very good' or 'good' and felt that it was creative and comprehensive. Approximately one-third (32%) indicated that they were unsure as to whether or not they would like additional training. It is unclear as to the extent to which this is related to the time commitment and/or teachers' typically heavy workloads.

b) Almost two thirds (62%) of the students who took part in this research expressed positive views about the AEP and most indicated that they would recommend the programme to other schools. A number of suggested changes to the programme were made by the students including a greater emphasis on the facts of alcohol and how it affects a person's body and mind. This was an area where some attitudinal shifts were seen after completing the AEP regarding impacts on health, sports and academic performance.

c) With regard to sport in particular, 93% of the male and 95% of the female student participants indicated that they were "actively involved in sport". Sport was cited as a reason not to drink and during the in-class discussions which were conducted as part of this research, references were made to the negative effects of alcohol in relation to sport and the ambiguous nature of sport sponsorships. Sport was also the second most cited option (38%) as "alternative socialising that could happen without involving alcohol."

FINDING 03

81% of the 52 teachers who took part in the online survey, felt that there was a very strong need for a programme like the AEP in schools. They alluded to what they considered to be a harmful culture of underage drinking in Irish society, whereby drinking alcohol is being normalised for teenagers.

This highlights the potentially important role of the AEP in terms of influencing behaviour and challenging social norms and attitudes. Indeed, part of Drinkaware's remit is to provide education and increase awareness around the negative impact of underage drinking. This is also in line with the Department of Health's prevention and early intervention strategy on alcohol and drug use in Ireland ('Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery – A health led response to alcohol and drug use in Ireland 2017-2025').

FINDING 04

The young people in this study were highly socially engaged with typically large social networks and, as might be expected, were regular social media users with 92% of participating students engaging with social media at least once a week. This is clearly an integral part of young people's lives (OECD, 2018) and arguably therefore, social media could be harnessed more effectively to help change negative social norms around underage drinking.

FINDING 05

The research findings also highlight the important role of sport in the lives of these young people, with more than 9 out of 10 (94%) students reporting that they played sport. The proportion of students who recognised the potentially negative impact of alcohol on sporting performance, increased by approximately 10% following completion of the AEP.

The ambiguous relationship between sporting celebrations and alcohol was also raised in the student focus group discussions. Collectively, these findings suggest that sport is a crucial part of the wider health and wellbeing debate and the message relating to the potentially negative impact of alcohol on sporting performance, suggests that this may, at least in some cases, serve as a key motivator to abstain from, or reduce, drinking in the early teenage years. As a sporting nation, these are important insights and suggest that sport may be a potentially positive lever for attitudinal and behavioural change regarding underage drinking.

FINDING 06

Importantly, some of the findings from this research support those from other research conducted by Drinkaware which demonstrate how teenage drinking should not be viewed, or addressed, in isolation. For example:

- a) The teachers in the current study, when asked about their views on the need for a programme like the AEP, referred to the wider social context and the positioning of alcohol in Irish society.
- b) More than one in three students (35%) felt that their parents/guardians would not mind them drinking alcohol if the drinking is not excessive, or if it is consumed on a special occasion. This provides an interesting insight into the students' perceived views of parental attitudes toward underage drinking and illustrates the important role of parents, not only in protecting their teenagers, but also in how they themselves think about, portray and 'model', the drinking of alcohol in the home.
- c) On the related issue of access to alcohol, approximately four in ten (41%) of the 230 students in this study who indicated that they had consumed alcohol on at least one occasion, indicated that they had done so in their own home. This mirrors the centrality of home as a key place for alcohol consumption amongst Irish adults as recently reported in the Drinkaware Index (2019) research (e.g. at 62%, the home was the most commonly reported location for consuming alcohol).
- d) In addition, the motivation for drinking reported by the students in this research, is similar to that noted in the wider Irish adult population (Drinkaware Index, 2019). In other words, most of the students who reported that they had drunk alcohol on at least one occasion, had done so "to be cool/popular" and/or in response to peer pressure. Furthermore, 40% of this group indicated that they did not enjoy their first drink.

FINDING 07

Crucially, the findings from the evaluation of Year 1 of the AEP are already being used to inform the ongoing delivery and rollout of the programme across the country. For instance, both teachers and students who participated in the research, highlighted the need for more information within the AEP, on the legal implications of underage drinking. The programme has now been revised to include more information on Irish laws and the possible consequences of the underage purchase, possession, and/or consumption of alcohol.

Lastly, the close similarity of teacher and student views in this research – especially with regard to the topics which they both considered to be important and of interest - highlights the extent to which teachers are 'in tune' with their students with regard to alcohol education; this, in turn, speaks to their important role in delivering such education and, in this case, the AEP. This also suggests a need for a whole-school approach in delivering alcohol education going forward.

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