

# “Social Stuff” and Institutional Micro-Processes: Alcohol Use by Students in Australian University Residential Colleges

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## Abstract

The literature on alcohol consumption among university and residential college students in Australia and comparable countries shows a high incidence of heavy and/or frequent drinking. In this article, we report the findings from a study on alcohol consumption among undergraduate university students living in residential colleges in Australia. The aim of the study was to examine residents' alcohol use as part of a broader set of institutional practices in higher education that are constructed as central to the student experience. The data were collected through in-depth semistructured interviews with 29 students from seven residential colleges. We found that inclusion of alcohol in many students' social and extracurricular activities while residing in college is associated with heavy and/or frequent drinking. We suggest that the use of alcohol among students is shaped by the colleges' institutional micro-processes, leading to a tension between college managements' aim to foster alcohol citizenship and students' liberty to engage in frequent and/or heavy drinking.

## Keywords

alcohol, students, residential colleges, policy, micro-processes

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## Introduction

An increasing incidence of heavy<sup>1</sup> alcohol consumption among young people has been widely documented internationally<sup>2</sup> (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009a; Lunney, Ward, & Borlagdan, 2011; McCreanor, Moewaka-Barnes, Kaiwai, Borell, & Gregory, 2008; Measham, 2006). In particular, research has found that students in university and residential colleges have made excessive drinking part of their leisure time both on and off campus (Boyd, McCabe, & Morales, 2005; Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009b; Hutton, 2012; Jones & Gregory, 2010; Kypri, Paschall, Langley, Baxter, & Bourdeau, 2010; Patrick & Maggs, 2008). These studies outline a variety of factors associated with student drinking including the influence of cultural norms and belief systems, peer group pressure and belonging, life stages and educational transitions, and targeted marketing strategies by industry groups. In this article, we examine alcohol consumption among a cohort of undergraduate university students living in residential colleges.<sup>3</sup> The aim of the article is to examine residents' alcohol use as part of a broader set of institutional practices developed by higher education institutions to promote the student experience. To this end, our analysis takes into account both the college residents' participation as consumers of a student experience that is marketed by higher education institutions as their source of attraction (Martin, 2012) as well as the residential colleges' institutional processes geared at sustaining their prestige through the provision of academic, extracurricular, and pastoral support to students. Among these processes are practices aimed at fostering alcohol citizenship, understood here as students' acquisition of skills for developing into responsible drinkers through a liberalization of alcohol use aimed at producing a culture of moderate consumption. However, as Hutton (2012, p. 229) notes, "an entrepreneurial agenda of developing 'cultural life'" makes harm minimization problematic, as shown by how looser alcohol regulation aimed at promoting a cultural shift toward moderate consumption has led to increased drinking rather than a reduction in alcohol-related harms. Similarly, we show how a significant degree of student autonomy in relation to alcohol results in heavy and/or frequent consumption, such that college management is faced with the "problem" of frequently managing excessive drinking alongside their duty of care.

### *Alcohol and University Students*

In Australia, the legal age for purchasing and consuming alcohol is 18 years, also the most common age to commence undergraduate studies. Most universities have one or more on-campus licensed venues, while several (though not all) residential colleges have and manage their own bars. Typically, universities and residential colleges are also located close to a variety of commercial leisure amenities including bars and pubs. This combination of licensed venues within and around campuses has been shown to contribute to frequent and/or heavy alcohol use by students (Chatterton, 1999; Hughes, 2012). The incidence of heavy drinking among university students has in fact been reported in a number of studies; in Australia, Rickwood, George, Parker, and Mikhailovich (2011) have investigated alcohol-related harms among students in an Australian university, finding that college residents are at considerable risk of excessive consumption. Hughes (2012) has examined the links between alcohol use, university, and the drinking culture in Australian residential colleges, finding that most residents drink heavily, normalize excessive consumption, and downplay the concerns expressed by college management. In the international literature, Guise and Gill (2007) have similarly found that female undergraduate students in a Scottish university enjoyed the psychoactive effects of social drinking while rationalizing the consequences of heavy consumption. In a British study, consumption was reportedly linked to opportunity, leading to students' heavy drinking particularly "in the more secluded spaces of university residential colleges or private school grounds" (Griffin et al., 2009b, p. 6). Other British studies have shown that a significant number of students drink to hazardous levels, with adverse effects that include poor academic performance and financial losses and harms to

physical and mental health (Bewick et al., 2008; Heather et al., 2011). In the United States, a review by Tan (2012) of newspaper articles on college drinking found that students drank heavily within a cultural context that was framed in notions of group and college identities, solidarity, and risk taking. This was manifest through ritualized drinking and a widespread belief in the psychoactive benefits of alcohol and the drinking culture of the United States.

However, there has been limited investigation of the role played by universities and residential colleges themselves in regulating and shaping students' consumption practices. For example, the study noted above by Rickwood et al. (2011) concludes that universities should recognize and address the high risk of alcohol-related harms among students, but it does not shed light on *how* universities and residential colleges regulate (or not) the provision, availability, and consumption of alcohol on campus to begin with. The work by Wall, BaileyShea, and McIntosh (2012) on community colleges in the United States has considered this point more closely when investigating residents' alcohol use and associated harms. They found that institutional characteristics are a strong determinant of drinking behavior, noting that students who are knowledgeable about the institutional policies on alcohol consumption are less likely to engage in risky drinking. The authors of the study suggest that effective harm reduction turns on targeted and/or enhanced policies and programs on behalf of college management. Likewise, following their own findings on college students' drinking, Weitzman, Nelson, and Wechsler (2003) suggest that educational institutions can address heavy consumption through a reduction in cheaply available alcohol and an increase in the provision of alcohol-free social environments. The investigation by Hughes (2012), also cited above, concluded that understanding "context-specific" drinking cultures within residential colleges is required for appropriate intervention. Our study builds on Hughes' findings by investigating whether and how students engage with and act on residential college policies or managements' approach to consumption when planning their own drinking.

Young people are not the homogeneous collective constructed by media images and reports that presume equal or similar subject positions (Moore, 2010). For Moore, in order to create targeted policy and practice around alcohol consumption and associated harms, the social analysis of youth alcohol use must take into account the diversity and specificity of both people and contexts. In our study, we have taken a nuanced approach to student drinking by examining its occurrence within residential colleges, where the latter are particular spaces of negotiation and interaction by key stakeholders—namely, resident students and residential college management—and college-specific institutional characteristics and processes. While we acknowledge and take into account the broader cultural representations of Australia as a "drinking nation," and the widespread trend toward what has been termed a "culture of intoxication" (Measham & Brain, 2005) by young people more generally, our starting point is an understanding of the university residential college as a particular environment with forms of neoliberal governance, institutional processes, and cultural identities that cannot be neatly separated from any forms of consumption by residents, least of which is the use of alcohol. Thus, while our cohort shares similar characteristics to peers in the general population—namely, age, gender division, and a drinking style that is entirely social—we focus on how students living in residential colleges use alcohol by situating their responses within the spatial and temporal configuration of college residency, and the contemporary neoliberal constitution of students as consumers of higher education.

### ***Context: The Corporatization and Marketization of Universities and the (re)Configuration of Students as Consumers***

The corporatization and marketization of universities is part of a global trend toward integration of the higher education sector into a competitive, post-Fordist, and knowledge-intensive economy (Frank & Gabler, 2006). This has attracted growing scholarly engagement and critique largely related to what is widely understood as a deterioration in the quality of higher education (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012; Fredman & Doughney, 2012; Marginson, 2013). The market logic that now shapes the directions and

purposes of universities reconfigures students as “customers” (Maringe, 2011; Nordensvard, 2011), and educational institutions as “providers” of education as a “private good” (Connell, 2013; Holton & Riley, 2013). This is reflected in the attractive packaging of university life that highlights sporting and leisure facilities, vibrant neighborhoods, state-of-the-art independent student accommodation, and a focus on student employment outcomes (Andersson, Sadgrove, & Valentine, 2012; Chatterton, 1999; Holton & Riley, 2013; Parameswaran & Bowers, 2014). This packaging presupposes students are stakeholders in an education “industry” (Connell, 2013) that is driven by notions of consumption: of education, of extracurricular activities, and of campus facilities. Thus, as we will show throughout this article, “social stuff” in the form of a wide range of extracurricular activities aimed at enriching the residency in a university college is founded in notions of consumption, net worth, and cost–benefit by the students themselves.

In their study of university residential college policy and management related to alcohol use by students, Schofield et al. (in progress) argue that residential colleges operate as institutions that are structured by, among other things, their encounters with market economies. The nighttime economy of university districts, for example, is inextricably connected with the life of students in university and in residential colleges (see Chatterton, 1999; Crawford & Flint, 2009; Holton & Riley, 2013; Waitt, Jessop, & Gorman-Murray, 2011). Alcohol consumption is a key feature of these economies; it operates as a major form of leisure that has evolved alongside the economic and cultural transformations of cities and fashionable university neighborhoods. At the same time, Australian residential colleges are prestigious institutions catering to a small and carefully selected student body. Similarly to the British context (Andersson et al., 2012), they are affiliated to (mostly) the elite universities in the country but are privately governed and have an institutional ethos that can be secular or religious. Moreover, these residential colleges have long-standing traditions and norms that include the creation of elite social networks among the residents through a wide range of extracurricular activities (see also Martin, 2012). These college-specific traditions are valued, defended, and preserved by both students and college management. In the Australian context, one such tradition is the retention of students’ autonomy in relation to alcohol use, understood as the freedom to act and make choices around drinking and leisure without undue encroachment from management. The framing of individual autonomy in this way reflects the contemporary public health discourse on alcohol use that predicates harm minimization rather than abstinence (Hutton, 2012). It draws on a conceptualization of individuals who regulate their own behavior and take responsibility for their health and well-being (Petersen, 1996). However, as shown elsewhere (Hernandez, Leontini, & Harley, 2013), this rationalist conceptualization to self-regulation has not been useful for either encouraging moderation in young people’s drinking or for understanding their contradictory attitudes toward alcohol, such as intentionally drinking to intoxication while being aware of the harms. As we show in this article, the adoption of a similar approach to self-regulation in colleges has implications for the level and/or frequency of alcohol use by college residents; for how alcohol is regulated within the residential colleges; and importantly, for how the college residents interpret their freedom and empowerment around the use of alcohol.

## Method

The findings reported in this article are part of a larger project (Schofield et al., 2009)<sup>4</sup> conducted between 2011 and 2014. The project involved different studies across a number of universities and residential colleges using multiple data collection methods. Here, we report findings from the interview study with residential, college-based students. The aims of this study were to examine the social organization of students’ alcohol use including the social relations, purposes, and occasions involved; and to investigate how students make sense of their alcohol use within the context of the residential college. We adopted a qualitative approach for examining alcohol use as a social practice (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000), and for understanding how students create their subjective realities through their

own accounts (Ezzy, 2002). The individual in-depth interviews adopted allowed us to focus on students' experiences of alcohol consumption that could not be captured through the other methods used in the project (Mishler, 1991). For example, group interviews (also adopted in the project) might prove inhibiting to students wishing to raise sensitive issues or critiquing institutional processes. Interviews were conducted through open-ended questions that encouraged rich and contextualized accounts, and the responses were examined as students' *interpretation* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, pp. 487–508) of alcohol use in college and the residential colleges' regulatory measures (if any) they were aware of.

## The Participants

**The students.** Twenty-nine undergraduate students were recruited, consisting of 15 men and 14 women. All but one were aged 18–22, the age bracket most represented among undergraduate students. Only one student reported being a nondrinker, though self-reporting of volume and frequency of drinking varied among respondents. Five students who were office bearers in various organizing committees of cultural and leisure activities in college were interviewed through two focus groups with, respectively, three and two students in each. The office bearers were *not* asked to discuss their own use of alcohol, but to give a detailed and coherent account of the extracurricular activities available to college residents. Methodologically, the office bearers' interviews were viable on account of our inductive approach that optimized the development of unanticipated themes emerging from earlier interviews (Ezzy, 2002, pp. 80–94). In their aggregate form, references to extracurricular activities by all the study participants drew attention to the symbolic value ascribed to those activities as well as to alcohol *per se*.

**The residential colleges.** At the time of writing, there were 199 residential colleges throughout Australia; five participated in the study as industry partners, while three other colleges participated indirectly as some of their students responded to the advertisement seen on their universities' (vis-à-vis college) websites. Some colleges had bars of their own, which were run by students who had undergone training in the Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA). All college residents had access to the bars owned and managed by residential colleges and to the privately managed licensed venues on university campuses. The participating residential colleges were located in proximity to some of the largest university campuses in the country in two Australian capital cities. Most (with the exception of one college) were also within a short walk to the central business and/or commercial centers that are dense with entertainment venues such as cinemas, theatres, pubs, and/or nightclubs, as well as bottle shops. These neighborhoods provided relatively easy access to alcohol, with many commercial venues often complementing the "big" parties and student nights held in colleges and universities.

## Procedures

The study was advertised and students were recruited throughout 2011 and 2012 through the survey study ("opt in"), electronic postings on university and college websites, flyers posted in common areas, and presentations of the study in some (4 of the 7) colleges by the first-named author. Ethics approval was received from the participating universities, and permission was obtained from the principals of participating colleges. Interested respondents were sent a participant information statement detailing the study, and participants were given further explanations and asked to sign a consent form prior to beginning the interview. The data were collected by the first-named author and a research assistant through 40-minute semistructured interviews held on university or college campuses. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms used to protect anonymity. Using thematic analysis (Guest, 2012), the data were examined by the first-named author who searched for common topics and themes, and reviewed the hypothesized (such as social drinking) and emerging

themes with members of the project team. The findings were presented and discussed further during project meetings with the project team, at a symposium, and an international conference. The themes were selected on the basis of frequency and relevance to the aims of the study (Guest, 2012) and include the social stuff: partying and drinking; alcohol, college routines, and micro-processes; and the production of an alcohol economy. Students' perception of alcohol-related harms and harm minimization practices will be reported in a separate paper. The aggregate number of participating colleges and informants precludes claims to generalizability.

## Findings

### *The Social Stuff: Party and Drinking*

But definitely at college there's a trade-off between commitment to your academic work and commitment to your social life, because yeah, at college they try and make an environment where there's always social stuff happening. That means that you're spending more time doing social stuff at college than you would be otherwise. (Rod, 20)

While extracurricular activities in colleges are implicitly "social," in this section, we cover primarily drinking at events such as parties, informal get-togethers, and celebrations. Among our cohort, this "social stuff" as Rod put it, was seen as key to bonding with fellow residents. Like many other young people of a similar age (Hernandez et al., 2013), alcohol use was associated entirely with group activities, and the existence of "good bars" in some colleges and on university campuses, as well as "lots of parties and events" made life in college fun. All the participants believed that colleges had a "great social atmosphere" with "fantastic, good people"; high on the list of benefits were friendships, sexual and romantic interests, parties, proximity to the university campus and its facilities, interaction with other residential colleges, and the vibrant surrounding neighborhoods. Generally, at least one night of the week was dedicated to a party or other informal social event, which was open to students from nearby colleges ("inter-col" events):

I: Does [drinking] happen on a weekly or nightly basis, how often . . . ?

R: (Once a week) there is some kind of event on, at least one, well the bar next door particularly will have themed events and everything. (Kerry, 19)

Although some respondents claimed they did not deliberately select only those activities that included alcohol, as these statements show, occasions for doing so were frequent thanks to a combination of organized or ad hoc gatherings. Most informants could not specify how much they drank, noting that consumption depended on the occasion, the company they were in, and the time of week or year. For most students, alcohol use was nonetheless normative:

I would probably have to say [for] the majority of people in college the drinking is pervasive, yeah. It is more of a minority that are spending most of their time in completely non-drinking activities. (Darren, 19)

The first year of residency was described as a "constant party with no study," a time in which there was "nothing else to do except drink to socialize" and attend the "many parties" and "celebrate [the many] birthdays." For some, this was fun but somewhat surprising:

College is definitely a very full-on atmosphere and especially when I first came it was, there wasn't so much a drinking culture, I didn't feel pressured to drink, but there were just more opportunities to drink than I had ever had because I lived in [a regional town], I had just finished high school, and it was really, really, full-on. (Jake, 18)

While anticipating the inclusion of alcohol in college life, as Jake put it, the atmosphere at college was “full-on,” suggesting one has to somehow keep up with an unexpectedly heavy pace of consumption and partying. While the informal drinking occasions were central to establishing group belonging, the intensification of events at which alcohol was available led many to believe that most students *did* drink and even excessively (see also Keller, Maddock, Laforge, Velicer, & Basler, 2007). And, while not all students believed they were heavy drinkers, alcohol was referred to as the “social lubricant” that facilitated socialization, making possible the transition “from feeling lonely to having many friends.” This was particularly important to newly arrived residents:

- I: How important is alcohol use within university life?  
R: [Alcohol] is definitely pretty important at the college because it really helps especially when people don’t know each other. It really helps people get to know each other more easily and bond as well . . . because having a shared night that you all go down to the pub or have a party or whatever contributes to creating a closer bond between you and your friends. (Sam, 20)

“Fitting in” at university is not always smooth, and alienation and disconnection are not uncommon among students (Andersson et al., 2012). For Sam, there were practical as well as psychological advantages to drinking, as it allowed bonding to be uncomplicated, almost effortless. In this sense, alcohol is more than a substance; it is also a *resource* for overcoming structural and emotional barriers such as loneliness and shyness. However, finding the balance between drinking to socialize and consuming too much or too often is not easy. Several students felt that partying with alcohol *could* become excessive:

- I: How much is going out drinking for you and your friends about meeting people or picking up?  
R: [The two nights of the week], when it’s in college, that’s not really about meeting people. That’s just about getting drunk and definitely about picking up. (Paul, 20)

This deliberate intoxication was also tied to creating or sustaining college student identities through alcohol-based college traditions:

If I can sum it up it is all about getting loose, and it is a line that is repeated over and over again and again, get loose, and it has every possible meaning you can think of, loose morals, loose clothes, everything. (Liam, 22)

In Liam’s experience, the goal was to “party hard” (Lindsay, 2003) through drinking games and deliberate intoxication aimed at overcoming inhibitions while (re)enforcing bonding among fellow residents. Sport and related celebrations were also triggers for intentional heavy drinking:

As horrible as this sounds, when there is the rowing regatta, to compensate for when the rower is getting up at four or five in the morning every morning to train, they have an RSA rowing supporters anonymous meeting, and everyone else gets up in the college at four in the morning on the day of the regatta and drinks from then until nine when the buses go, so that everyone is completely totaled by the time they get there. (Liam, 22)

While sport and intercollege competitions are popular ways to socialize with fellow residents and students from nearby residential colleges, the competitiveness of sport and team membership are celebrated through heavy drinking and associated revelry. Critically, the RSA meeting and subsequent deliberate intoxication by “supporters” of teams are a show of camaraderie and solidarity that operates through the pressure to belong, and by flouting any rules around moderation. Thus, the rigors and discipline of sport are transgressed in favor of “calculated hedonism” (Measham & Brain, 2005) through behavior that Liam went on to describe as “disgusting” but fun (see also Hubbard, 2013). Taken

together, these accounts show that the students in residential colleges perceive drinking frequently and/or heavily as necessary for socializing and fitting in with their peers, college life, and a college identity. This is particularly during their first year when they can experience greater social anxieties associated with their introduction to college and university life.

### ***Alcohol, College Routines, and Micro-Processes***

While some residential colleges do not permit large parties on their campuses, none ban the use of alcohol altogether. They each produce their own guidelines and policies on alcohol use that, according to management,<sup>5</sup> are readily available on university and college websites, and reiterated to students annually—particularly, though not exclusively, to first-year students. These policies specifically address heavy consumption that can lead to health and social harms, as well as damage to property. The analysis of these policies and of managements' accounts of how they are used are the subjects of a separate publication; here we note in brief that “responsible” drinking is understood in libertarian terms that encourage moderation without encroaching on residents’ right to consume, share, and sell alcohol. For example, one college policy states,

It is recognized that alcohol consumption is part of a College’s social environment but . . . [this] College will not condone alcohol consumption that has harmful physical, behavioral or social outcomes. (Schofield et al., in progress)

Educational approaches used by colleges include the RSA training for students who wish to sell or distribute alcoholic drinks at events or in bars, and guest speakers who present on the subjects of alcohol and related harms. Guidelines are given to students by some, though not all the colleges, that list unacceptable drinking practices such as drinking under the age of 18 years, deliberate intoxication, and the practice of drinking games. Such policies notwithstanding, there are two important features common across Australian residential colleges that are critical to shaping alcohol use among residents. First, students can (lawfully) purchase, store, and consume alcohol in their own rooms; second, alcohol is provided at no cost by the residential colleges at formal occasions, and cheaply at many other events organized by and through the college social clubs. Giving students this degree of autonomy around alcohol is aimed at fostering alcohol citizenship, a civic development into young adults who can enjoy the right to drink alongside the duty to do so responsibly. However, this autonomy is not matched by students’ knowledge of the policies that regulate alcohol use in their institutions:

Investigator: Are there any alcohol policies in the hall of residence?

Respondent: Not particularly. There are just some areas that we’re not allowed to drink in and there are rules about sound late at night, but, for all purposes, you could be as loud as you wanted until ten o’clock and continue to be loud until one [a.m.]. So, it’s—as far as drinking or partying goes—it’s an ideal situation. (Olga, 20)

I am not exactly positive about the Principal’s policy on drinking but I think she has kind of accepted that it happens but expects us all to be responsible about it, and if we are not, which we are not always, then she doesn’t really want to know maybe, as long as we are not destroying the college or the reputation of the college, then I’m sure she won’t mind. (Kerry, 19)

As far as I know I would highly doubt that there is a rule against [drinking] just because everyone has alcohol in their room here [in Australia], and so if they did have a rule it is not enforced, or it is even not talked about because I haven’t heard of it. (Amy, 20)

Part of the “ideal situation” is the freedom to organize small, private gatherings in their rooms and in some common rooms on condition that they notify the resident assistants about gatherings with more than eight guests. Yet the above comments suggest that, first, students interpret policy—or its “absence”—on alcohol use as management’s tolerance of private and even heavy consumption by small and large groups alike, and leniency toward alcohol-related misdemeanors as the following response shows:

I guess the biggest thing that happens is pre-drinking, but if they do get too rowdy or noisy or disruptive basically all that happens is someone will call the Resident Assistant and [they] will let them know that they have to keep things a little quieter. (Frances, 26)

Second, these comments show that there is a significant contradiction between, on the one hand, the students’ perception of what a college policy on alcohol use (in broad terms) actually *is*, as well as their knowledge of the scope of its enforcement; and on the other hand, the assumption by college management that the existence of policies is self-evident and their content familiar to all their residents. To put this differently, there is an evident contradiction between what managers believe to be a widely known expectation and what students believe to be the full scope of their liberty in relation to alcohol use. And yet, policies on alcohol use are manifestations of key institutional processes that are crucial to the viability of the colleges as organizations that can be trusted with the safety, health, and well-being of their residents. They are also critical to the measures that colleges need to take to maintain and protect their reputation and status as providers of academic and civic development. However, as the excerpts above show, the residents did not have a sense of there being any hard rules around *how much* alcohol or *how often* they could drink. Thus, from their bedroom to the common room, from the college bar to the campus lawns, and from the dining room to the nearby pub, alcohol was considered to be part of communal, everyday life in a residential college:

I: So is there any drinking in the college?

R: I wouldn’t say it completely revolves around alcohol but we do go out and drink . . . (mid-week) at night and [in my first year] my group would have pre-drinks in our common room, just like a handful of us and our guy friends, starting at like 6 or 6:30 and have pre-drinks and make like jelly shots or a punch or Pimms or something to share, and then go out. Every night we normally would go to the college bar from about 8 or 9 till 12, and then we would go to the [pub name] or [pub name] from like 12 or 1 or 2 or 3 or whatever. (Lisa, 19)

As Lisa’s comment suggests, for these residents, frequent occasions for drinking did not translate into a problematic *focus* on alcohol; they were instead easily integrated into the everyday condition of being in college. Similarly, while heavy use of alcohol leading to drunkenness was more *obvious*, it was still normalized and, among this study cohort, never condemned:

I: What is your impression of [witnessing intoxication] in bars and venues?

R: Looking at it now I am probably too comfortable with it . . . well probably [once a week] there will be definitely within college someone who is too drunk, because everyone will be drinking . . . In the college environment you know the formula, you know that they have just had a couple of extra drinks here and there, or have been drinking too quickly. (Ian, 20)

“Once a week,” “every night”; these expressions suggest that drinking is routinized through consumption practices that are “formulaic,” predictable, and unsurprising. Whether deliberate or unplanned, heavy drinking went unquestioned. Other typical expressions used by students to denote this included “[it’s] that kind of lifestyle” and “[alcohol is] the college thing.” Although asked about intoxication in commercial venues, Ian’s focus remained on college drinking which, as we examine in

greater detail in the next section, was more affordable. Besides costs, intoxication was common because it was also incorporated into a variety of college routines and everyday practices, including those activities that would *not* normally be identified as party-worthy:

Orientation week was quite intense, they try to get you to meet as many of the other colleges as possible. For example we had the breakfast [with wine in the orange juice] and then a BBQ lunch which included a lot of drinking, so by 4 [p.m.] you were quite drunk, and then at 6 [p.m.] we would have a party and so you sort of continued on and it would start again, for 7 days in a row. So I got very sick. (Grace, 20)

Orientation week (O-week), which is held by universities and residential colleges in the week prior to the start of semester, is designed to introduce new students to the institutions' facilities, foster bonding among students, and promote the student experience through a number of formal and informal leisure activities organized by their clubs, societies, the student union, faculties, and so on. Activities are held on and off campus and may include parties, music, theater, harbor cruises, food and drink nights, city tours, and more. Some activities are paid for by students, others are partly subsidized by relevant organizations and associations, and some are at no cost to students. But the life in residential colleges can intensify the partying in both subtle and obvious ways. Communal living involves a particular organization and management of space and time (Moss & Richter, 2010) that, in a residential college, are driven by institutional regulatory processes (such as policies and admission procedures), college traditions (such as college O-Week, formal dinners, and cultural events), and the students' own needs, desires, and expectations (such as parties to socialize and develop friendship groups). All of these operate through institutional micro-processes, and in their aggregate form contribute to the student experience. However, these students' comments illustrate how the use of alcohol is indissociable from many of the institutional processes. To put this another way, drinking is not considered to be an extraordinary practice or luxury, but a taken-for-granted initiation into college everyday life.

Residents can enjoy a vast array of cultural and educational events that allow them to "learn certain dispositions" (Chatterton, 1999, p. 120) and add to their cultural capital (Holton & Riley, 2013). Office-bearing students listed some of these, including debating, choir, music, oration, drama, sporting activities with related celebrations, college and intercollege social events, movie nights, parties, different types of formal lunches and dinners (including "high table"), resident assistants' events, and many more. Many of these events include alcohol; for some activities, it is purchased on location, for others it is included in the cost of the event. All but one of the participating residential colleges also organize regular formal lunches or dinners (such as high table) that are open only to college residents (single or intercollege). Regardless of the type of occasion, students can drink both during and after the event, as well as moving between the drinking spaces in their residential college and the commercial venues:

- I: So tell me a bit about your group of friends and your social life ...  
R: We have a function [one night a week], a themed function where you dress up and go and get cheap drinks and stuff like that. Also [on another] night [during the week] we have a formal dinner as well. So that's a bit more formal, academic gowns and stuff. Yeah that's good. Then we go to the pub after that, usually. (Zac, 19)

As this excerpt shows, college residents can switch drinking levels and styles to match the occasions and the norms that govern them. At the same time, while making sense of the codes of consumption across formal and informal situations, they also participate in the creation of college identities through "things" that have symbolic value such as academic gowns, and a rich array of cultural and educational practices. In this sense, alcohol plays a key role through activities and within spaces that are carefully selected for creating cultivated alcohol citizens. To this end, college bars, common rooms,

lawns, and even students' bedrooms are spaces in which college traditions and routines are designed to create appreciative young adults who (would) learn to regulate their own drinking. But as the data show, these spaces and micro-processes not only *include* alcohol with regularity, they also render the rules and guiding principles around alcohol citizenship unclear and, at best, discretionary.

### *The Production of an Alcohol Economy*

While alcohol is consumed throughout the academic year, drinking is heaviest during the first year of undergraduate studies, O-Week, and during week nights that are dedicated to students' social events and parties at the college and university campus bars, as well as in off-campus commercial venues. There exists at these times a coproduction of the student leisure and nighttime economy by a number of stakeholders including university clubs and societies, neighborhood venues that adopt marketing strategies targeting university students through special deals and "student nights" (see also Chatterton, 1999; Gill, 2002; Kypri et al., 2010), and the students themselves. Cheap and sometimes free alcohol is most readily available at events organized through university and residential colleges' bars and societies:

- I: Now that you are in your third year of university, do you drink as much as you did in first year or was first year, O-week worse?
- R: I did drink more [during O-Week] because it was all included in our pay so that also plays a big role for college students.
- I: What do you mean it was included in your pay?
- R: So we paid for O-Week, like your parents pay it to the college and then everything is provided so.
- I: Including the partying?
- R: Yeah. So like the food and drinks are provided for that whole week because they are included in your lump payment, and for college students I think that is pretty significant. So at informals alcohol is usually provided because it is in your ticket price, so because you go there and you think it is free you just have as many drinks as you want. But if you have to actively pay for it people will control their drinks, and that is what I find happens with me. So at informals I will drink a lot more because it is just there, but when it is not and I have to pay for it I sort of think twice. (Grace, 20)

When alcohol is part of the "full board" package, opportunity meets intention with a view that paid, up-front privileges override the requirement to exercise self-restraint. In fact, while there is growing evidence that the rate of alcohol use diminishes among students in the later years at university (Bewick et al., 2008), this excerpt by Grace shows that, whatever protective factor seniority at university may have, its effectiveness is undermined by the availability of cheap drinks or all inclusive party deals. Thus, as leisure and entertainment are prepaid, moderation takes a back seat, while the calculated "worth" of drinking results in residents *intensifying* consumption by participating in as many events, and by drinking as much as possible, whenever cheap or free alcohol is served. This leads to—as one student put it—a "manic" attitude toward drinking, as if the good times were running out. The emphasis shifts from the *festivity* to the *feasting*, as surplus and overindulgence are perpetuated, while propagating the belief that in college drinking is inevitable:

- I: Do you think [drinking is more frequent] in colleges where you share most of your social life than among students who don't live on campus?
- R: Yeah, it is characteristic of college life, and it can be a bit of a problem as well. It's the role of the college to provide a social avenue sort of thing, but it's not always directed the right way like stuff is always advertised as this event and this is how much the drinks are going to be. Yeah, you just

expect that there's going to be alcohol there. People expect that there's going to be alcohol there. (Rod, 20)

As Rod's statement suggests, college-subsidized alcohol generates a sense of entitlement and anticipation. In fact, while colleges are located in proximity to commercial venues, the availability of cheaper alcohol on campus *does* result in heavier consumption:

[One of the week] nights, they call it function night. That's when we have a party in the common room. There's some sort of theme. You get dressed up and they serve you alcohol, two bucks. Yeah, usually have a big night. (Paul, 20)

Drinking in Sydney is quite expensive and we are all students on a budget, so we like to call them "investments," we will go out and maybe two of us, or just me if I just got a pay cheque, buy just a bottle of vodka and then some of us have fridges in our rooms and we will keep mixers there, and before we go out someone will arrange to have pre-drinks in their room, and then like eight of us will come together and pre-drink. So we buy less drinks when we go out because it is just cheaper . . . well, this is our BYO. (Grace, 20)

The college bars are like a rum and coke or a vodka lemonade is about four dollarish, and so you can get pretty drunk pretty quickly there for not too much, whereas some of the [venues in the neighborhood] are about seven or eight dollars. Yeah so it is kind of the general consensus that even if you are going to a place where their drinks are reasonably expensive if you pre-drink significantly beforehand then you can have a couple of drinks when you are out and it is all fine. (Kerry, 19)

Statements such as these illustrate how, for the residents, the college itself is the scene of a "cost-benefit assessment" (Brain, Parker, & Carnwath, 2000) that facilitates drinking, preloading, and even intoxication. They also show how challenging it can be, for both students and staff, to respectively act on and manage the contradiction between the exhortation to drink in moderation and the enticement to benefit from the best deal students can get. Some residents believed that part of the revenue generated from the sale of alcoholic drinks at the ticketed events (which are also open to noncollege guests) are used to subsidize the cost of alcohol at future college or intercollege festivities. For students, this translated into stakeholder benefits, whereby colleges (or their clubs) make a profit, while residents enjoy the proceeds:

Each college will have things called informals, they are the big events of the semester, so we had an event in semester one which was a massive party and we got lights and a stage and bands to come in, and then other colleges will do that throughout the year and that is where they raise a lot of money for the formals, it is a big party but they use it to raise funds for other events for the members of the college. (Ian, 20)

The "big" and "massive" parties are therefore understood by some students to be occasions for generating revenue with which to fund college formals. Critically, and by its very nature, an alcohol economy is dependent on the existence of large parties at which students *will* drink; alcohol *sells* social events. Students therefore produce and manage with dexterity an alcohol economy by collectively organizing both their finances and their spaces of consumption to suit their needs. They use alcohol as both a resource for funding and marketing events, and as the substance that holds the key to socialization. Thus, for the college residents, market logic translates into a student experience that revolves around consumption.

## Discussion

The data show that alcohol use in these Australian residential colleges is ubiquitous and that for at least some of the students, heavy drinking is intentional. These findings support those from similar studies (Hughes, 2012; Rickwood, George, Parker, & Mikhailovich, 2011). As with many young people of a

similar age (Brain et al., 2000; Griffin et al., 2009b; Hernandez et al., 2013; Hutton, 2012), drinking in college is not a solitary practice, occurring largely through formal and informal extracurricular activities that form part of a rich student experience; importantly, alcohol is used by students to facilitate friendships, establish group belonging, and to strengthen a college identity. One important finding is that residents are at liberty to lawfully use alcohol in most private and common areas within the residential college, and to organize large and small parties at which alcohol is consumed, shared, sold, or exchanged. The data show that this leads to frequent, routinized drinking. Indeed, while there are many “dry” activities available in colleges and popular among heavy, moderate, and nondrinkers alike, many more events, both formal and informal, include alcohol. This is a significant finding, in light of the fact that frequency of consumption is a recognized health risk according to current national guidelines (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009).

But students’ drinking practices cannot be readily disentangled from the colleges’ institutional ethos and micro-processes. For example, consumer liberty in relation to alcohol, including its private use in students’ rooms and bars, at parties and other events, is a long-standing college tradition that has symbolic value and that contributes to sustaining the exclusivity of these institutions. From the perspective of the colleges, one of the objectives driving this approach is to foster and sustain a prestigious college identity. The inclusion of alcohol at formal events, the exclusivity of college bars that are run by the students themselves, and the residents’ management of an alcohol economy are techniques through which the colleges strive to create savvy and responsible consumers who can, presumably, switch drinking styles by aligning themselves with the appropriate codes and norms of conduct inherent to an elite educational environment. A second objective of residential colleges is to foster responsible alcohol citizenship among their students, understood as an enjoyment by residents of their civic rights as consumers that is balanced by duties and responsibilities for safeguarding their own health and the reputation of their college. However, our findings suggest that this is a citizenship that is imagined in rationalist terms, involving a degree of self-presence and self-regulation that are diametrically opposite to the “calculated hedonism” evident in this and other studies (Measham & Brain, 2005). Critically, cheap and free drinks at many events are linked to deliberate intoxication, which is an obvious contradiction to the colleges’ exhortation to drink responsibly and eschew intoxication. As one student in our cohort put it, “we are not always responsible” and only sometimes “can pretend to be mature for the afternoon.” In other words, while enjoying the sobriety of some occasions, remaining sober is left to chance. This statement is not reproduced here to infantilize the students; it is to acknowledge that for the college residents, their role and liberty as *consumers* of extracurricular activities that include alcohol is, if convenient, also problematic. The colleges’ project of fostering alcohol citizenship turns on the belief that students can abstract themselves from other types of subjectivity (stakeholder, customer, consumer, and college resident), and from the pressure to engage with the pleasures and symbolic value of the extracurricular life in college, all of which are captured euphemistically by the catchphrase “student experience.” Yet, college residents reconfigure the student experience into a space–time dimension in which heavy and/or frequent alcohol consumption are made possible by using the micro-processes of college life itself such as formal and informal events, cultural activities, everyday routines, sport, and O-week celebrations. Reflecting the neoliberal shift toward the corporatization of universities and the (re)conceptualization of students as consumers, residents also employ these micro-processes for developing and managing an alcohol economy that efficiently incorporates marketing strategies and economies of scale for promoting and subsidizing drinking. For the staff, an alcohol economy by residents can compromise the colleges’ objective of educating students into becoming the responsible drinkers—indeed, the alcohol citizens—they hope to create. We suggest that a market logic that promotes the student experience as a selling point in higher education translates into a perception among students that residential colleges are spaces of consumption: of education, of leisure, of the norms of acculturation, *and of alcohol*.

Another important finding is the students’ perception that policies and rules around the use of alcohol are vague or even nonexistent, which they interpret as management’s tolerance of frequent,

routinized, and heavy drinking. This is despite the provision, by all colleges, of policies and guidelines which, among other things, specify a low tolerance by management toward intoxication and associated harms to individuals and property. Deliberate intoxication certainly points to behavior that relinquishes individual responsibility for practicing moderation. However, it also highlights an incongruity between the self-present individual imagined through the lens of policies that predicate libertarian notions of autonomy and choice, and the reliance on alcohol by students for group cohesion and college-based identities. To put this differently, while the students' organizing principle turns on collective efforts—manifest in practices such as drinking games, parties, celebrations to support team sports, and the production of an alcohol economy—the concept of self-regulation is implicitly individualistic. Nevertheless, policies can shape behavior. We suggest that a reduction in frequent, heavy drinking and deliberate intoxication requires that policies should be not only made relevant and visible, but enforceable through tighter regulation on the provision of cheap or subsidized alcohol, and through the introduction of limits on the spaces and occasions of consumption (see also Wall, BaileyShea, & McIntosh, 2012; Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003). To conclude, while the findings reported here represent a small and somewhat privileged segment of the larger student population, they nevertheless provide invaluable insights into how specific institutional micro-processes within circumscribed spaces (the university residential colleges) alongside a neoliberal reconfiguration of higher education as commodity for private consumption can shape students' practices around the use of alcohol in college and university life. This is particularly the case in residential colleges where student autonomy and self-regulation in relation to alcohol are, in the final analysis, constructed by colleges and perceived by students as privileges that are inseparable from college traditions.

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### **Notes**

1. Australian guidelines set by the National Health and Medical Research Council (2009) define heavy consumption as four or more drinks in a single session and frequent consumption as two drinks per day or "across multiple drinking occasions" (pp. 40, 45–51).
2. Discussion is confined to comparable practices in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.
3. Formally referred to as "halls of residence," we retain "residential college" and "college" for simplicity.
4. Schofield et al. (2009; Project number LP100100471) is a multi-method project comprising a number of studies (published separately) including policy analysis, online student survey, focus groups, and individual interviews conducted with college and noncollege students, and with institutional representatives.
5. These data were collected as part of the study that focused on institutional regulation of alcohol use in colleges. The detailed findings are published separately in a forthcoming article.

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