Alcohol Use and Harm Minimisation among Australian University Students (AHMS Project)

An Australian Research Council (Linkage) Project (LP100100471)

Final Report for University Colleges Australia*

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I.   Introduction

'Given the high rate of serious, alcohol-related harm among university students, innovative interventions designed specifically to engage them in managing their own alcohol use and in minimising damage are urgently needed. Yet the detailed evidence base and theoretical framework upon which such interventions may be developed and implemented have not yet been conducted. What is required is a systematic investigation of three main dimensions:

a) *the specific social organisation and dynamics of university students' alcohol use,*

b) *the public and institutional measures designed to regulate it, and*

c) *the constraints and opportunities that the combination of these generate for* **students'** *strategies in limiting alcohol-related harm' (*AHMS Project Grant Proposal 2009*).*

This report presents findings from a research project conducted between 2011-2014 to investigate alcohol use and harm minimisation among Australian university students in both residential-college and non-college settings. The project was funded mainly by the Australian Research Council but also from cash and in-kind contributions from industry partners: University Colleges Australia, NSW Health and the Victorian Department of Health. Representatives from these agencies worked with a team of five researchers from four universities – The University of Sydney, Monash University, Queensland University of Technology and Newcastle University – in organising and conducting the project. One of the project's agreed outcomes was to provide a report to University Colleges Australia on alcohol use and harm minimisation among residential college students. The findings presented in this report thus focus on *residential-college students* attending Australian universities.

One of the key purposes of the project as a whole was to **provide an evidence base and explanatory frameworks to inform the development of interventions by industry partners (and others) to assist university students to manage their alcohol use in ways that minimise**

harm. In compiling such evidence and analyses, the project identified three domains of enquiry as critical:

1. the specific social organisation and dynamics of university students' alcohol use, and its effects,
2. the public and institutional measures designed to regulate it, and
3. the constraints and opportunities that the combination of these generate for students' strategies in limiting alcohol-related harm.

Accordingly, the findings and analyses presented in this report on residential-college students and alcohol use are the results of an investigation shaped by these three concerns. The report presents these results in three main parts, corresponding to the domains of enquiry. The first focuses on the social organisation and dynamics of residential-college students' alcohol use, and its effects; the second on residential-college policy and management of students' alcohol use; and the third on the barriers and opportunities generated by the former for residential college students' actions to limit the harm associated with their alcohol use. What the report does *not* include are recommendations for specific strategies and actions by residential colleges to address both the barriers and opportunities for students' engagement in harm-minimising alcohol use. While this may be perceived as a significant omission from the report, ***it is important to point out that one of the central objectives of ARC Linkage projects is for industry partners to use the knowledge and understanding generated by the research to formulate their own responses and interventions.***

II. Background

There is a vast literature on residential college students' alcohol use – overwhelmingly from the United States (US). Australian research on the topic, by comparison, is negligible. Most of the US findings are based on large surveys that are processed by statistical methods of analysis. The social organisation and dynamics of residential college students' alcohol use, the public and

institutional measures to regulate it, and the relationship between these, by comparison, have been largely overlooked. The over-riding concern of investigation into residential-college students' alcohol use by North American research has been to *measure* how much alcohol students consume and 'the factors' associated with its increase or decrease. Such an approach has been informed by thinking that perceives residential-college students' alcohol use as a problem of excessive consumption that corresponds with the presence – and absence – of certain behavioural and social factors. Accordingly, residential-college decision makers and managers have been understood as being able to 'fix' the problem by addressing the social and behavioural factors statistically correlated with high rates of consumption among students.

One of the main limitations associated with such an approach is that it is mechanistic and simplistic. Certainly it draws on recognised quantitative methods from the social sciences but it proceeds on the basis that 'the problem' is already generally known and understood. From a rigorous social scientific perspective, conducting research on the basis of presuming to know and understand what the problem is before investigating it is a significant flaw that will necessarily yield questionable results of limited efficacy in terms of the development of interventions. What distinguishes robust science - both in the physical and social worlds - is systematic and comprehensive investigation that addresses how things work, why and with what effects - providing cogent explanations informed by relevant theoretical scholarship, empirical data and critique. The AHMS Project was animated and guided by such a perspective and the central research question of *how residential-college students' drinking works, why and with what effects*. Like any scientific endeavour, the purpose of such a question was to furnish knowledge and understanding to inform interventions to address 'problems' associated with it. In the absence of knowledge and understanding of how things work and why, empirically based, trial-and-error approaches prevail, offering a foundation for intervention that is significantly less efficacious.

Consistent with this dynamic perspective, the AHMS Project approached residential-college students' drinking as an arena of *social practices* that were likely to be configured or *patterned* in specific ways, largely in response to particular *social dynamics.* The fundamental task of the

researchers was to identify and analyse what these patterns of practices and dynamics were in order to know and understand how residential-college students' drinking operates, why and with what effects. To that end, the Project drew on both quantitative and qualitative methods.

III. The social organisation and dynamics of residential-college students' alcohol use

Three studies, adopting different methods, were undertaken to enable the collection of findings that would provide a robust foundation for identifying and analysing the social organisation and dynamics of university students' alcohol use, and its effects. The first method involved a large survey that measured students' drinking and harms they experienced in the process; the second comprised in-depth, minimally structured interviews that permitted individual students to respond in their own words and to share their understandings of their drinking and its effects; and the third consisted of focus-group discussions in which students were able to describe and comment on their alcohol use among their peers in an interactive setting. Data were collected for both residential-college and non-college students using these methods. The following outlines the methods and findings of the three studies, focusing on *residential-college students'* alcohol use.

Study 1: The Alcohol and University Life Survey (AULS)

Method

Study 1, entitled *The Alcohol and University Life Survey (AULS),* was led by Professor John Germov (Newcastle University). It canvassed university students' alcohol use in the eastern Australian States and was conducted from April to October 2011. Students were recruited from five participating public universities. Collectively they provided a mix of: metropolitan and regional campuses; size of student population (approximately 30,000 – 60,000); age of institution (foundation years range from mid 1800s to 1970s); and level of research intensity. All of the universities involved offered a comprehensive range of disciplines spanning the arts,

sciences, commerce and the professions. In 2011, the joint population of students studying at these universities was 235,638 which constituted 19.3 per cent of all students in Australian universities (Commonwealth Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education 2012). Ethics approval was obtained from the participating universities and invitations to participate in the research were sent via email to students at these universities and selected affiliated residential colleges. The invitation contained a URL linking to an online survey which was developed using Qualtrics online survey tools (Qualtrics Labs Inc, Provo, UT). A participation incentive (in the form of an opportunity to enter a draw for one of ten AUD$50 department/grocery store vouchers) was offered. This resulted in 3,313 participants providing information on their drinking patterns and harm minimisation activities; these participants constituted 1.3 per cent of the overall student population of the five participating universities. In Australian universities at the time of the survey, 55.9 per cent of the students were female and 73.2 per cent of the students were domestic[1] students (Commonwealth Department of Industry, Innnovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education 2012). These demographic groups were over-represented in the AULS sample: 74.6 per cent of the participants were female and 92.4 per cent were domestic students. *Residential-college students comprised 11.3 per cent of the total sample* and reflected its gender distribution.

Alcohol consumption was measured using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (Babor et al. 2001). It was designed to identify hazardous and harmful patterns of alcohol consumption. Each of the ten items in the scale has a set of responses from which the respondent chooses and each response has a score ranging from 0 to 4. All the response scores are added and this is the AUDIT score. The highest possible score on the AUDIT is 40 and participants in our study had scores ranging from 0-36. The average score on the AUDIT was higher for males (*M*=9.4) than females (*F*=7.4). Using the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines (Babor et al. 2001), participants were grouped into four 'risk' groups: low risk or abstinence (scores of 7 or less); use in excess of low risk guidelines (scores 8-15); harmful and

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[1] Domestic students include Australian and New Zealand citizens, permanent residents, and those people residing in Australia on humanitarian visas. All other students are categorised as 'overseas'.

hazardous drinking (scores 16-19); and need to be clinically assessed for alcohol dependence (scores 20 or more).

Adverse alcohol effects were assessed in the AULS using a 12-item scale designed for the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Survey (CAS) (Wechsler 2008). Participants were asked to indicate how frequently, since the beginning of the academic year, they experienced a range of negative consequences as a result of their alcohol consumption. Response options varied from 'not at all' to 'four or more times' on a five point Likert scale (recoded 0-4). The list of items included: have a hangover; miss a class; get behind in academic work; do something that you later regretted; forget where you were or what you did; argue with friends; engage in unplanned sexual activity; not use protection when you had sex; damage property; get into trouble with the campus security or local police; get hurt or injured; and require medical treatment for an alcohol overdose. Items showed good internal consistency in both samples (Cronbach's alpha: AULS = 0.85) and were summed to create a single 'alcohol-related problems' score (min=0, max=48).

Results

The *Alcohol and University Life Survey* yielded significant quantitative data that permitted the research team to identify a pattern of residential-college students' drinking in relation to the amount and frequency of alcohol consumed, and the extent to which they caused harmful effects. Around 350 residential-college students participated in the survey. The majority were young women who were less likely than their male counterparts to report harmful or hazardous levels of drinking. Nevertheless, *of the total number of residential-college student participants, more than 40 per cent reported levels of alcohol consumption that were 'in excess of low risk' or harmful, with almost a quarter (24 per cent) drinking six times or more per week. About the same proportion (23 per cent) consumed seven or more drinks at any one drinking session.*

There were marked differences between rates of harmful drinking between residential-college students and university students living at home in family settings or with a partner, as Table 1 below shows. A significantly smaller proportion - approximately 25 per cent - of

students living at home in such arrangements reported harmful levels of drinking. The proportion of them reporting drinking six or more times per week was also much smaller than that of their residential-college counterparts – about half the rate. Perhaps most worrying was that residential-college students reported the highest rates of drinking frequency per week and amounts consumed at any one drinking session compared to *all* other students by living situation, including those living away from home in 'shared housing'.

Table 1: Living situation by percentage reporting harmful drinking

Students' living situation	Harmful drinking (AUDIT score 10+)	Drinking frequency 2+ times/week	Drinking frequency 6+ times/week	Typical amount / session 7+ drinks
With partner	24.6	34.1	11.6	13.2
Family home	26.6	20.5	13.1	16.8
College/residence	***41.3***	***36.7***	***24***	***22.8***
Shared house	41.3	32.1	18.9	20.7
Live alone	37	25.7	17	16

Further survey data related to indicators of 'problem drinking' suggest that ***residential-college students were in greater alcohol-related trouble than their counterparts living in the family home or with partners***, as Table 2 shows. Especially notable is that 17 per cent of residential-college students were not able to remember what happened to them after episodes of drinking compared to half that rate among students living at home with family or a partner.

Table 2: Living situation by percentage reporting alcohol problems

Students' living situation	Not able to stop drinking monthly+	Failed expectations monthly+	Feel guilt or remorse about drinking monthly+	Unable to remember what happened monthly+
With partner	9.8	4.7	7.8	6.1
Family home	10.1	7.1	8.4	9.1
College/residence	*14.2*	*13.2*	*11.5*	*17*
Shared house	16.1	10.9	13.1	12.9
Live alone	16	12	15	13

There were several findings from the survey that addressed factors associated with the choices of students *not* to drink at all or to limit their drinking. For the total sample, the single most important factor in deterring students from drinking or limiting their consumption was 'I'm going to drive'. Eighty three (83) per cent of participants identified this reason as important or very important in choosing not to drink, or to limit drinking. The second most significant reason for making such a choice was because 'I don't want to lose control' – identified by 64 per cent as important or very important. The third most highly rated reason for abstaining from or limiting alcohol use was 'it costs too much money' – nominated by 63 per cent as important or very important. What is significant about these findings in terms of residential-college students' drinking is that, with the exception of the second reason for choosing not to drink or to limit drinking, the main barriers to students' drinking are less likely to apply as our qualitative research (discussed below) disclosed.

Given the relationship established by international research between drinking and partying among university students, the survey canvassed the importance of partying at university in the context of a question to determine the importance of 11 different activities at university. These included, among others, 'athletics', 'sports/social clubs', 'arts (theatre, choir, bands etc.)',

'political activism' and 'volunteer work'. The activity identified by the greatest proportion of students as important or very important was 'academic work' – with a rate of 90 per cent (65 per cent reported it was 'very important'). No other university activity elicited anywhere near this level of support in terms of its importance to students – a reassuring result for all university educators! 'Parties', identified by 29 per cent of all students as important or very important, came in third. Serving as a 'student representative on a university body' and 'political activism' each attracted the lowest student ratings (10 per cent) as important or very important university activities. 'Activities at student colleges/halls of residence' was identified as important or very important by virtually all residential-college students.

Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude from these responses that residential-college students, like their non-college counterparts, prioritised their academic work as being of the utmost importance in terms of their university activities. Yet it is also likely, given the importance of residential-college activities among residential-college students, including college parties, that more than a minority of residential-college students regarded participation in college parties as important or very important university activities. As significantly, according to the AUL Survey and as reported above, drinking at such parties at levels 'in excess of low risk' also occurred among more than a small minority. In response to the survey question, 'In the past 30 days, have you had free, unlimited drinks at a student college/halls of residence party?, 190 residential-college student participants reported that they had. While this is not to say that all 190 students drank at harmful levels, it is evident that over 50 per cent of residential-college students who participated in the AUL Survey attended a college party in the month prior to the survey where access to alcohol was entirely unrestricted and where they consumed some of it.

Overall, *what the combination of the various survey data related to university students' drinking suggests is that being a residential-college student was more strongly associated with the following: attending residential-college parties where alcohol is unlimited and freely available, drinking at more harmful levels than their comparators, and experiencing significant rates of alcohol-related problems as a consequence*. The findings that related to the most powerful barriers to university students' drinking suggest that they may not be as

significant for residential-college students. As a result, residential-college students may not have the same degree of opportunity to abstain from or limit alcohol use as non-college students - particularly in relation to public regulations that limit access to and use of alcohol such as the costs of purchase and the legal prohibitions on drinking and driving.

Study 2: Interviews with residential-college students

Method

Dr Rose Leontini (The University of Sydney) led the interview-based study between 2011 and 2012. Twenty-nine undergraduate students from seven residential colleges in the eastern States were recruited, consisting of 15 men and 14 women. All but one were 18-22 years old, the age bracket most represented among undergraduate students (one participant was 26 years old). Volume and frequency of drinking were investigated through open-ended questions that encouraged rich and contextualised accounts rather than quantified approximations. Only one student reported being a non-drinker, though there was variation in terms of how students reported the degree of their own consumption. Five students were interviewed through two final group interviews with respectively three and two students in each. These students were office bearers in various committees responsible for the organisation of social, cultural and leisure activities within college. These interviews were conducted following informants' accounts of parties and other events involving alcohol.

The study was advertised and students were recruited through the survey study ('opt-in'); electronic postings on university and college websites; flyers posted in college common areas; and presentations at college formal and informal events by the researcher leading this study. The incentive was inclusion in a draw to win one of eight $50 shopping vouchers. Ethics approval was received from the participating universities, and permission was obtained from the principals of participating residential colleges. The data were collected through 30-40 minute individual, semi-structured interviews, nineteen conducted by the study's lead researcher and ten by a research assistant. Pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and examined using thematic analysis (Guest 2012). Data analysis was conducted by the study's lead researcher who searched for

common topics and themes, and held discussions, cross-referenced and reviewed the emerging themes with members of the project team before, during and after data collection. The emerging findings were presented and further discussed during several project meetings attended by the project team, at a project symposium, and at an international conference.

Results

> • *The relationship between drinking, partying and 'other social stuff'*

Drinking by college residents was entirely social and strongly linked to partying and what students described as 'other social stuff' that occurred mainly in college and on university campuses. As a rule of thumb, 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. At these events, drinking was considered to be normative. Alcohol was referred to as the '*social lubricant*' that facilitated socialising and the transition '*from feeling lonely to having many friends*'. This was particularly important to newly arrived residents. For some this meant excessive partying, with the 'fresher' year in college described as a *'constant party with no study'*, a time in which there was *'nothing else to do except drink to socialise'* and attend the *'many parties'* and *'celebrate [the many] birthdays'* that competed with academic work. Several students felt that sport-related drinking was particularly heavy and strongly associated with demonstrating that students fitted in with the group. For some students, excess was not limited to drinking but to overall revelry, evidenced by expressions such as '*work hard, play hard*' and '*get loose, get loose, get loose*' to describe the general atmosphere of the college.

Frequency of residential-college students' consumption was facilitated by the many social occasions that were manufactured into college-based, extracurricular activities (see Table 3 below). Drinking was heaviest during the first year of undergraduate studies, O-Week at the start of semester, and on certain days of the week dedicated to students' social events and parties at the college and university campus bars, as well as in off-campus commercial venues.

Table 3: List of Extra-Curricular Activities

Activity type	Formal/ Informal	College/Inter-col/Open (to non-college)	Management or Office Bearers	Alcohol	Frequency
Dinner: • 'High Table' • 'Special' e.g. Christmas	formal	college	management	yes†	weekly/yearly
Cellar lunch or similar	formal	college and inter-college	management	yes†	periodic
Cultural: • Debating • Performances (musical, orations, drama e.g.)	formal	college and inter-college	management and office bearers	yes and no	weekly
Religious: • Liturgical • Mass • Christmas	formal	college, some inter-college	management and office bearers	no	regular/weekly
Community: • Charity • Fundraisers	formal and informal	college and inter-college	management and office bearers	no	periodic
Competitive sport (various): • Competitions • Awards • Celebrations • Victory dinners	formal and informal	college and inter-college	office bearers	yes and no	occasional or regular depending on college
Social: movie nights; casual sport (e.g. ice-skating, bowling, rock	informal	college and inter-college college sub-groups (eg. freshers, sport, O-week only)	office bearers	yes and no	regular or occasional

climbing, other); themed events (e.g. Italian night, tiramisu night, trivia night); casual organised outings (coffee crawls, picnics);		On or off-campus, depending on activity			
Parties: 'big' or 'massive'	informal	college, inter-college & open	office bearers	yes	sessional (1 per semester)
Parties: • themed • garden party • sport team party	informal	college, inter-college	office bearers	yes	weekly
Other: • Discipline based camps • Pub crawls • Harbour cruises	informal	college, inter-college, open to non-college students	organised by university societies	yes	variable, mostly O-Week

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> • *College routines and micro-processes*

Frequent consumption of alcohol by residential-college students was also linked to college routines and the everyday practices of residential-college life. Colleges permitted students to purchase, store and consume alcohol in their own rooms; they freely provided alcohol at formal occasions; and alcohol was cheaply available at all other events organised by and through college social clubs. These arrangements accorded students considerable autonomy in relation to alcohol use.

Residential-college students were encouraged to participate in the making of a collective identity, the college community. Yet, as their comments revealed, they regularly interpreted

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the processes of inclusion in their own fashion, typically involving excessive drinking and associated harms. Cultural and educational events organised in colleges allowed residents to 'learn certain dispositions' (Chatterton, 1999: 120) through which to further their own development but many of these events (formal or informal) included alcohol (see Table 3 above).

For some activities, alcohol was purchased on location, for others it was included in the cost of the event. All but one of the participating colleges organised regular formal lunches or dinners (such as 'high table') that are open only to college residents (single or inter-college). Regardless of the style of the occasion, students could drink both during and after the event, as they moved between college drinking spaces and commercial venues nearby. Alcohol operated as an integral part of the student experience through college activities and spaces. College bars, common rooms, lawns, and even students' rooms, all prevailed as settings for students' alcohol use, but of a particular style – 'responsible drinking'.

College activities and spaces, then, were the institutional means by which colleges perceived themselves as creating opportunities for students to become responsible 'alcohol citizens'. However, this liberty and the expectations that accompanied it were not matched by students' knowledge and understanding of the policies that governed alcohol use in their institutions. They interpreted policy on alcohol use as management's tolerance of private and even heavy consumption by small and large groups alike, and leniency toward alcohol-related misdemeanours. They had no sense of there being any hard rules around *how much* alcohol or *how often* they should drink. From the 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 college students' communal, everyday life. Drinking was routinised and some of its harms treated as customary or typical.

- *The alcohol economy of residential colleges*

The pervasiveness and frequency of students' drinking were closely linked to an alcohol economy that prevailed in residential colleges. Residential-college students' leisure was

targeted by a number of stakeholders, especially college clubs that benefited financially from students' participation. Much of this benefit was obtained through the sale of alcohol that was generally much cheaper than that at commercial venues. Cheaper alcohol resulted in heavier consumption than would normally occur in commercial venues.

Various residential-college events were ticketed and open to non-college guests, which led some residents to believe that part of the revenue generated from the sale of alcoholic drinks was used to subsidise the cost of alcohol at future college or inter-college festivities, many of which were organised by college clubs. For students, this translated into stakeholder benefits, whereby colleges or their clubs made a profit and residents enjoyed the proceeds. The 'big' and 'massive' parties were therefore understood by students to be occasions for generating revenue with which to fund college formals. Students produced and managed with dexterity an alcohol economy by collectively organising both their finances and their spaces of consumption to suit their needs. They used alcohol as both a resource for funding and marketing events, and as the substance which held the key to socialising.

Conclusions

While there were 'dry' activities available to students and popular among heavy, moderate and non-drinkers alike, many more events, both formal and informal, included alcohol. Students believed that policies and rules around the use of alcohol were either unspoken or vague, or even inexistent. They basically perceived that drinking in college was normative, routine, and even *expected.* While there was variance in the volume of drinking among individual students, and although individual colleges applied different degrees of *dis*couragement of heavy drinking on campus, what stood out in this study was the *frequency* with which students from all colleges could engage in alcohol-based activities. This is significant given that frequency, as much as quantity, is a recognised health risk according to current national guidelines (NHMRC, 2009).

Residents re-configured colleges into spaces for heavy and/or frequent alcohol consumption by using the micro-processes of college life (formal and informal events, extracurricular activities, routines such as breakfasts, the performing arts and O-Week celebrations) as opportunities for

drinking. They also employed them for developing and managing an alcohol economy that efficiently incorporated marketing strategies and economies of scale for promoting and subsidising drinking by students. Thus, there were repercussions of these practices that were not always part of the deal; as one student put it, students are '*not always responsible'*, and only sometimes '*can pretend to be mature for the afternoon*'.

Study 3: Focus group discussions with residential-college students

Method

Professor Julie Hepworth (Queensland University of Technology) led this study, conducting it throughout 2011. The study was based on focus group methodology (Krueger and Casey 2009) to gather data that were generated by group discussion. A total of 19 focus groups with 70 participants was involved. Of these, ten focus groups comprised residential-college students including 39 participants. The residential-college groups included six single-sex – four all-female and two all-male - and four mixed sex.

The participants were mostly first year undergraduate university students, aged between 18-24 years and enrolled at one of three major universities in the eastern States of Australia. Recruitment of residential-college students occurred mainly through verbal announcements made by college principals, emails and flyers posted around the colleges and universities that invited students to participate. An incentive to win a shopping voucher valued at AUD$50 for participation in one focus group was offered, and non-alcoholic beverages and food were provided at each focus group. The residential-college focus groups were held in residential-college meeting rooms.

Professor Hepworth facilitated all the focus groups and collected the data with a research assistant who recorded field-notes. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were offered another opportunity to read the information and ask questions about the study before signing a consent form. At the beginning of the discussion, participants were given several assurances about confidentiality and anonymity, and provided with guidance on how to include information about risk-related alcohol use without compromising their own or other people's

safety or confidentiality. The care taken at the beginning of each focus group, as far as it is possible to ascertain, resulted in accounts of actual alcohol related events. Discussions were guided by a series of five questions with prompts. The question areas were designed so far as possible to allow participants to raise and discuss issues of most relevance to them relating to student drinking and included:

1. Would you tell me about consuming alcohol? Prompts: what do you drink, how often?
2. Where do you mostly consume alcohol? Prompts: How are parties arranged/begin?
3. Why do you consume alcohol? Prompts: Do you have a pre-set drinking limit?
4. What steps do you take (or not) to keep yourself safe when drinking alcohol? Prompts: have you found what you do is effective? If not, why?
5. What suggestions do you have (if any) for improving the safety of yourself and friends when drinking alcohol? Prompts: How would that work in practice?

The focus groups lasted between 45-60 minutes and were audio-recorded. The data were fully transcribed by a professional transcriber. Professor Hepworth read the transcripts multiple times, and reviewed all field-notes. The research team analysed the full data set using thematic analysis (Pope, Ziebland and Mays 2000). After repeated readings, three main themes and sub-themes related were identified. Extracts from focus group discussions were then subjected to fine-grained analysis, in accordance with recognised principles of discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter 2005; McKinlay and McVittie 2008; Wiggins and Potter 2013). Using this framework, the focus lies on the action orientations of the discourse that people use, and thereby on understanding what individuals are doing when they provide particular descriptions of people, actions, or events. Analysis focused on examining how participants described their own and others' behaviour and the university and/or college contexts in which their drinking or non-drinking took place. Particular attention was given to how participants' descriptions functioned to account for their actions.

Results

The thematic analysis of all focus groups resulted in the identification of a key area of talk about ***pressure in how students made sense of harmful alcohol use or drinking 'in excess of low risk'***.

It was a discourse of pressure that framed students' interpretations and understandings of their harmful alcohol practices within residential-college settings and among their peers. 'Pressure' was what absolved them of individual responsibility for their participation in harmful drinking. Pressure was constituted by three main themes: (1) minimising choice; (2) explaining drinking as culture; and (3) resisting peer pressure; together with related sub-themes. These are outlined below in Table 4.

Residential-college students constructed individual choice as being embedded within social dynamics that were coercive, involved college rituals of drinking games that exerted pressure on themselves and other students, particularly first year students, and that going to university involved an accepted notion of risk-related alcohol use.

Table 4: Themes and sub-themes about pressure to drink alcohol

Theme	Sub-theme	Sub-theme
	College students	*Non-college students*
Minimising choice	Not drinking means missing out on friends	Saying no is seen as an excuse followed by more pressure
	Pressure to drink even after setting own limits	Invade room to put pressure on to drink
		If you say you don't drink guys then want to see you drunk
		Guys will get you into a fight over not drinking
Explaining drinking as culture	Drinking is the main culture so don't want to miss out	Peer pressure is a culture thing
	Just choose the easy option, follow friends	Rules to regulate drinking don't work - strong peer pressure at university

	Pressure is worse during O Week	Pretend to drink because no other option
	Drink to conform and not stand out	Drink to get friends
	Pressure through rituals of drinking games and competitions	
	Most pressure in first year	
	Drinking a lot started at college	
Resisting peer pressure	Avoid eye contact with peers	Pretend to drink alcohol with a cup of by water instead of spirits
	Drinking is not forced and decisions are respected	Not much pressure it's a social get together
	Not much pressure at all from peers	Uncomfortable with the way I look around friends after drinking so reduce amount
		International students get bored with drinking mentality of peers

IV: Residential-college alcohol policy and measures to regulate students' alcohol use

In examining residential-college measures to regulate students' alcohol use, the AHMS Project included a fourth study conducted by Associate Professor Toni Schofield. It focused on residential-colleges' policies and management of students' alcohol use.

Method

The principals of a number of residential colleges were invited to participate in the study and seven, based in major Australian cities, agreed to do so. The specific aim of this study was to investigate how university college policy and management in Australia represented, understood and responded to residential-college students' alcohol use. To achieve this aim, the authors chose a qualitative approach in order to elicit rich and in-depth data. The study employed two forms of qualitative methods. The first involved 12 semi-structured interviews with college principals and other members of management staff. Semi-structured interviews ensured that specific topics were explored, but also allowed participants to discuss students' alcohol consumption and the implementation of college policy in their own words. Ethics clearance was granted (by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney) to conduct the interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and yielded a total of 150 pages of single-spaced transcripts. The second form of data collection involved identification and compilation of college policy documents explicitly related to alcohol use and harm minimisation among residential students. These were identified by management participants at each college and included alcohol-use agreements with universities, college handbooks, guides to living in college institutions, specific college alcohol policy documents and a manual for operating a college bar. The purpose of this second line of enquiry was to explore how 'the problem' of student alcohol use was constituted and communicated in 'official' text at an institutional level by college management. Using the two methods of data collection in combination allowed for a more comprehensive and informed understanding of the colleges' approach to students' drinking. It also highlighted any convergences, inconsistencies and contradictions between the interview data and official documents.

To begin the analysis, the college documents were subject to qualitative content analysis for meta-themes and sub-themes. The documents varied as indicated above but cumulatively they disclosed the ways in which college management interpreted and communicated its representations of students' drinking. This part of the analytical process focused on the themes and narratives related to students' drinking across the spectrum of documents rather than with respect to the specific purposes of the documents. The interviews were subject to the same form of thematic inquiry. Adopting Ezzy's (2002) approach to this mode of analysis, the lead researcher and a research assistant read the interview transcripts and alcohol-related documents numerous times in order to immerse themselves in the data. Thematic analysis also involves an ongoing and iterative process of identifying, analysing, conceptualising and theorising the patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006), so the researchers moved back and forth between the documents and interview transcripts, eventually turning to the relevant literature in explaining the findings. Combining analysis of the documents and interviews served as a form of data triangulation, increasing validity and credibility of the study and its analysis (Patton 1999). College managements participated in frank and critical discussion of the findings with the university researchers, yielding comments and insights that were incorporated into the final analysis but distilled by the application of conceptual tools provided by the relevant scholarly literature.

Results

As the college policy texts and management interview themes suggested, representations and understandings of the problem of students' alcohol use and harm minimisation were not 'all of a piece'. The aggregate picture was complex and differentiated. Nevertheless, *dominant patterns* of understanding 'the problem' by college managements and of approaches to addressing it emerged that yielded a body of evidence suggesting the operation of specific *organisational dynamics* within residential colleges.

- *A problem not of our making*

The first such dynamic involved policy and management's characterisation of 'the problem' of students' drinking as one attributable to the irrational and irresponsible behaviour of

individual and groups of students themselves, especially at events they organised at college and in response to other corrupting influences 'outside' and beyond college management control. There was no doubt that management disapproved of such behaviour, expressing serious concerns about the damage and disruption it caused, especially to students themselves. As management comments clearly showed, it was students' behaviour – caused by a number of 'factors' such as the immaturity of students, their gender (usually male), disposable income, residential student-organised social events, proximity to late-opening licensed premises and so on – that was responsible.

From management's perspective, then, students' drinking posed a problem, responsibility for which belonged squarely to students themselves and factors beyond the control of colleges. While the problem was perceived as not one of management's making, it was one that management was obliged to manage and regulate because of the de-stabilisation it posed to college life. Such behaviours had to be neutralised.

- *Regulating students' drinking and enacting organisational responsibility*

Directly associated with the dynamic of neutralising the problem of irrational student behaviour was the adoption of a strategy for behavioural control informed by 'risk management'. This was most evident in management's comments related to harm minimisation. 'Risk management' is arguably the most pervasive approach to harm minimisation in relation to alcohol use (Stockwell 2004): alcohol use is accepted as a normative practice but one in which consumption should be modest and 'safe' – an outcome achieved by a range of public interventions to support individuals to take responsibility for their drinking and the pleasures they pursue in doing so (Stockwell 2004; Loxley et al. 2005; Robson and Marlatt 2006).

Such public interventions are strongly influenced by what is widely described as 'responsive regulation' (Ayers and Braithwaite 1992), an approach where the prevention or minimisation of 'problem behaviour' is targeted through a combination of persuasion and punishment tactics – or 'supports and sanctions' (Braithwaite 2011:482). This combination is metaphorically

structured like a pyramid in which education (information and advice) constitutes the bottom of the pyramid and punishment or sanctions are located at the pointy end. Intermediate strategies lie in between. Regulators seeking to change behaviour are advised to adopt all layers of the pyramid reserving punishment for the most intractable and 'offenders' or egregious 'offences' (Jacint and Levi-Faur 2004; Healy and Braithwaite 2006, Braithwaite 2011).

College management of students' drinking operationalised such regulation as their repertoire of harm minimisation strategies indicated. They drew on a graduated range of interventions – from education to punishment – in order to control students' drinking behaviour. These interventions reflected the features of what are now recognisably standardised organisational approaches to such threats: regulatory or risk management regimes that are fundamentally rationalist in purpose and character. Such an approach supported college principals and others involved in management of students' drinking to adhere to an interpretation of it as one primarily attributable to rational deficits in students' behaviour.

Various commentators have noted that such strategies presuppose that 'the regulated' are rational actors whose behaviour will respond to the sanctions and supports enacted by the regulator, producing a safe or risk-reduced environment in the process. There is no strong evidence, however, that such an approach works in practice. Nevertheless, in adopting it, management exhibited conformity to a model of regulation that has achieved widespread legitimacy in a myriad of organisational settings concerned to prevent or minimise risk and harm (see, for example, Schofield et al. 2014). Workplace health and safety, roads and traffic safety, and environmental hazard reduction are common examples.

- *A clash of organisational dynamics*

At the same time, however, *there was a further organisational dynamic that ran headlong into conflict with the regulatory imperative that guided college management's approach to students' drinking. This was disclosed in the largely unstated expectation and management's acceptance, evident in interview comments, that students were entitled to collectively organise and run their own on-site residential college social life, including their use of alcohol.*

This is not to say that students had free rein in the process. Management required students to participate in risk-management procedures showing how they themselves were going to ensure responsible drinking at their on-site social events. Yet, such a dynamic accorded students considerable licence in 'running their own show'. It was college management, meanwhile, that remained ultimately responsible and accountable for any significant risks or harms that such events posed. Such an approach expressed an organisational dynamic that operated in practice to protect students from the excesses and harms associated with their drinking - what one principal described as a 'bubble world'. For example, the provision by management of a licensed bar at one college – which was perceived as a regulatory measure to control students' drinking – operated as a means by which many students did not have to take responsibility for their harmful drinking. Though it was a 'public bar', students felt it was for their private use and not subject to the same strictures and liabilities of publically regulated drinking.

- *Split identities and conflicted paths for drinking*

Both policy documents and management interviews indicated the conferral of a particular *identity* on students regarding their alcohol use. Identities are important in organisations because they establish paths for what individuals feel or think they may follow in terms of permissible or possible action. As the college policy documents and management interviews showed, students were constructed as rights- and responsibility-bearing individual subjects in relation to alcohol use. The specific identity that the data disclosed, then, was that of the student as *alcohol-using citizen*. Conferral of such an identity imposed certain behavioural expectations of students involving the exercise of rationality in enacting the rights associated with accessing alcohol and in assuming the responsibilities of alcohol use. Such an identity, of course, complemented the responsive regulatory approach to students' drinking that operated in accordance with the organisational imperative for rational control of uncertainty posed by students' drinking.

At the same time, and in accordance with the dynamic of organisational protection of students in relation to drinking, students also experienced an identity that protected them from their 'failures' of rational choice or behavioural 'mistakes'. As a result, residential college students

were split – on the one hand as citizens with rights and responsibilities that, on the other, were effaced by their construction as minors requiring protection from their own actions. ***Students' organisational identity in relation to alcohol use, then, was riven by a contradiction that established inconsistent paths for drinking that were difficult to integrate – a situation that rendered organisational authority ambivalent and uncertain***.

College management also accorded *themselves* contradictory identities in relation to students' alcohol use through their own management approaches and practices. On the one hand they were risk managers or rationalist regulators while on the other they were protective parent figures, established through the routines they enacted in relation to students' alcohol use. Further***, just as the split that students experienced created ambiguity and tensions for them, so too, did the division in college management's identity produce an approach to managing 'the problem' that lacked coherence and consistency.***

> • *The organisational dynamic to produce independent adults and citizens*

Yet, as the last of the study's thematic findings from interviews with college managers revealed, it was evident that ***there was an organisational dynamic within colleges that did not sit happily with the dominant dynamics related to students' drinking.*** Principals expressed reservations that the dominant approach to managing students' alcohol use ran the risk of compromising or limiting students' development as independent adults and citizens. ***Management reservations appeared not only to reflect awareness of the barriers that prevailing alcohol management regimes posed to the advancement of such a project. They also reflected a central organisational dynamic to support students to develop as independent adults and citizens through the provision of educational, pastoral and mentoring services. The provision of such services towards these objectives was core organisational business and integral to organisational legitimacy***.

As the study's results showed, at least one college principal believed that this core business could be successfully advanced if conducted beyond the confines of colleges themselves, especially in relation to students' alcohol use. College students' social engagement in diverse

public settings and involving alcohol, could be a highly effective strategy in supporting students' adult development as demonstrated by the ways in which students' 'O week' events, according to this college principal, had operated. As this principal's comment suggested, organising residential students' social events on-site at colleges tended to focus students excessively on alcohol use rather than the development of their social skills and capacities as adults.

Conclusions

By contrast with much of the regulatory literature that identifies 'the regulated' and their behaviour as 'the problem', this study emphasised organisational processes as critical to the management and regulation of residential students' drinking. It found that college management identified the problem of students' drinking in terms of damage it caused to property and people, especially other college students, attributing it largely to irresponsible behaviour by students in relation to their alcohol use. Management participants identified a range of 'factors' they believed caused and exacerbated the problem, deflecting responsibility from management. In seeking to regulate the problem, managers drew on a repertoire of strategies informed by risk management and responsive regulation towards 'harm minimisation' of students' drinking. The latter amounted basically to acceptance of students' drinking but not the damage to property and people that regularly accompanied it. These findings, the paper suggested, indicated the operation of certain organisational dynamics or logics: namely, the imperative by colleges to minimise organisational instability inherent in harmful behaviour generated by the regularity of students' drinking, accompanied by a further organisational drive towards demonstrating responsible and competent management of the problem.

At the same time, college policy and management approaches to students' drinking expressed 'mixed messages' both in relation to management and to students. This outcome derived from the ways in which management conferred conflicting identities on themselves and students through their alcohol use policies and management practices. Given the significance of identity for possible paths or actions associated with drinking, split identities created confusion and uncertainty about what was acceptable. On the one hand, students were rendered alcohol-

using citizens with rights and responsibilities that were effaced or undermined by their construction as minors in need of protection by college authorities. Managers were also unintegrated, on the one hand acting as rationalist regulators of students' drinking and on the other as protective parent figures sheltering students from public risk and accountability associated with being an alcohol-using citizen. These tensions derived from a clash of conflicting organisational logics: one driven towards residential college students' entitlement to arrange their own social lives within college precincts, incorporating drinking largely on their own terms in the process; and the other motivated to regulate the uncertainties of students' drinking in the interests of organisational stability and legitimacy.

The main outcome of the combination of college management's understandings of and actions seeking to address 'the problem' of students' drinking, and the organisational drives that underpinned them, was an approach fraught with tensions. This imposed considerable barriers to a coherent, integrated and effective framework for advancing harm minimisation. Nevertheless, there was apparent a countervailing organisational trend that disclosed an opportunity for interrogating the prevailing organisational tensions. As the study's findings demonstrated, this dynamic was associated with the core business of university residential colleges – namely, to provide services to support students to develop as independent adults able to take their place as such in society more broadly.

IV. Barriers and opportunities for residential-college students to minimise harm related to their alcohol use

Based on the results of the various studies outlined above, this section identifies the barriers and opportunities for residential-college students in minimising harm related to using alcohol.

Barriers

In identifying the barriers to harm minimisation related to residential-college students' drinking, this report stresses the operation of a powerful social and institutional dynamic. In short, *alcohol worked both symbolically and materially to confirm and consolidate a powerful,*

collective residential-college student identity, distinct from others. This dynamic, in effect, worked as the over-arching barrier to harm minimisation in residential colleges and was constituted in specific ways as the following outlines.

1. ***The ubiquity and frequency of access to alcohol***. As Studies 1 and 2 showed, residential-college life was 'awash' with alcohol, posing a significant barrier to harm minimisation. At residential-college parties, and numerous college events and occasions, alcohol was unlimited and freely available – through low cost or no cost. Ready access was further liberalised through unlimited private provision (in rooms mainly). 'From the bedroom to the common room, from the college bar to the campus lawns, and from the dining room to the nearby pub, alcohol was … part of college students' communal, everyday life.'

2. ***The normalisation of drinking and pressure to drink in order to 'fit in' at college.*** As Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated, both the everyday expectation to drink combined with a pervasive pressure to engage in 'high-risk' drinking were dominant features of the culture of college students' alcohol use. They posed major barriers to harm minimisation. 'Drinking was routinised and some of its harms treated as customary or typical.' Students disclosed no or limited recognition of 'responsible drinking' or 'low risk' drinking as a dominant expectation of college life. '(Students) had no sense of there being any hard rules around *how much* alcohol or *how often* they should drink.' One of the main ways by which harmful drinking was enacted and normalised was through students *feeling pressured* to drink. This pressure was associated with becoming part of a group - and belonging to college - through a range of drinking practices including drinking games and rituals. Routine, identity-formation processes were also implicated as becoming a residential-college man or woman was closely associated with harmful drinking for many participants.

3. ***The political-economy of students' alcohol use.*** As Study 2 showed in particular, one of the main barriers to harm minimisation was the entrenchment of a well-developed alcohol economy managed and controlled by students themselves. For many students,

their leisure time and practices were strongly associated with the economic drive to supply alcohol as cheaply as possible at college parties and other events and occasions. Alcohol operated as a *critical resource in the collective exercise of power by residential-college students both over their leisure and everyday lives, and in differentiating themselves from others, including principals and institutional managers.*

4. ***Liberal-rationalist alcohol policy and 'risk management'.*** College approaches to alcohol regulation played a critical role in generating the major institutional barrier to students' alcohol-related harm minimisation. These approaches were comprised of two main dimensions: alcohol policy that was democratic, liberal and rationalist, and relying on individual moderation and responsibility; and alcohol-management practices informed by 'risk management' models. The former – associated with organisational motivations towards tolerance and support for students' development as adults - presumed that students' drinking was predominantly an individual behavioural issue, amenable to reason – certainly not a social mechanism involved in the creation and exercise of students' collective *identity* and *power*. 'Risk management' of students' drinking demanded both the implementation of punishments as well as 'softer' measures for success in deterring 'problem behaviour'. However there was very little evidence of management's adoption of options at the pointy end of regulation. The overall effect of college approaches to alcohol policy and management was that management posed no significant challenge to students' power in relation to their alcohol use.

Opportunities

Opportunities for minimising harm in relation to residential students' alcohol use were markedly less pronounced than the barriers students faced. Nevertheless, there was evidence of some organisational resistance to the operation of alcohol as a means of symbolically and materially confirming and consolidating a powerful, collective residential-college student identity, distinct from others. As Study 4 revealed, there was a discernible commitment among management to the mentoring and development of residential-college students as citizens able to take their place alongside and together with other Australians in civil society – not overly

protected and segregated from them. For one principal, this meant explicitly organising college student social events and occasions beyond college boundaries in public space, and involving alcohol use. For most, however, such a strategy appeared fraught with danger and more likely to cause alcohol-related harm for their students – a fear not supported by the survey evidence for this project.

Conclusions

It is important to point out that the results of this project, and the barriers and opportunities they suggest for harm minimisation among residential-college students in relation to alcohol use, were generated by investigation of samples or sub-sets of the residential-college student population in Australia. These were located in the eastern States of Australia, mainly attending large and long-established universities in urban settings with diverse social and cultural amenity offering generally abundant opportunities for participation. Yet, as the findings of the Project suggest, residential-college students disclosed a marked resistance to engaging in recreational and leisure pursuits beyond college boundaries. They exhibited preferred engagement in college-based social activities that offered opportunities not only for social and cultural cohesion, but for becoming part of an institutional community distinct from those of most other university students. Such a project is inextricably political in the sense that collective formation and consolidation demand the exercise of power. The role of college management in this process was central – indeed, active in supporting it, albeit unwittingly and with the best of intentions to minimise harm. In such a context, alcohol use was intrinsic to these organisational dynamics and relationships. Accordingly, the advancement of alcohol-related harm minimisation among residential-college students depends on college management's active intervention. The focus of such intervention, as this report has suggested, is the nexus between residential-college students' alcohol use and their day-to-day *collective* lives and identities as residential-college students. Successful interventions will necessarily involve challenging and disrupting this connection.