

Kat: I'm joined here with John de Pury, who is University UK's Assistant Director of Policy.

So, John, what do we know about student drug use? How common is it?

John: We don't know as much as we should know. There have been several surveys over the last few years and then Dame Carol Black's really significant independent review. From the surveys, we understand that there may be significant use among students. Some surveys, for example, US surveys have suggested actually lower rates than we might have expected. Around 13% of students from a recent survey suggested they were using drugs.

From Dame Carol's review, she really identified by age group that there were really significant increases, in particularly in powder cocaine use, but also ketamine, MDMA, ecstasy and cannabis use. And she really deduced from that that this was likely to be driven by some increases amongst student users. But the short answer is we need to know more. And this research and policy work is part of that.

Kat: So we need to find out more about what students are using and how common is. But what are some of the problems universities are finding among students in relation to drug use?

John: Yeah, we need we need to know more. We also need to know more about why they're using drugs so we don't make assumptions. We do understand a lot about the problems, the harms that may come from drug use and in particular from our work on mental health. We know that drug use can be a really significant component of mental health difficulties.

We know also that there are really significant difficulties in, for example, fitness to study and fitness to practice procedures around students and drug use. And we hear also from accommodation partners across the sector that there is something like a normalis





Kat: Has the pandemic had an impact on student drug use?

John: There may have been an increase in use through the pandemic. We know that there were certainly some deaths related to student drug use during the lockdown.

Some of this may be about the settings where students were using drugs and the fact that they were doing this within accommodation, rather than potentially as part of the nighttime economy, where they might have been testing facilities available to them, there might have been security staff who had recognised the signs of an overdose, for example, and acted on it. So some of that may be about settings and lack of awareness.

We also think that as the pandemic and the lockdowns lifted, there may have been, if you like, a cohort of students who were coming out of a period of social isolation and

were encountering drugs for the first time with less awareness, less understanding of the risks, and r the



Kat: We also talked a little bit about how a zero tolerance approach and punitive approaches don't necessarily work – there's no evidence to show that they're working. So what what's the alternative?

Hanna: Zero tolerance has been kind of the norm for so long that it's really hard to try and think about moving away from that, because as soon as we start talking about



Providing harm reduction advice, it won't necessarily stop that from happening, but it's going to make it less likely.

So for me, this is really about protecting students' lives and protecting not just people who are using drugs, but everyone around them as well.1 (0) (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10) (11) (12) (13) (14) (15) (16) (17) (18) (19) (20) (21) (22) (23) (24) (25) (26) (27) (28) (29) (30) (31) (32) (33) (34) (35) (36) (37) (38) (39) (40) (41) (42) (43) (44) (45) (46) (47) (48) (49) (50) (51) (52) (53) (54) (55) (56) (57) (58) (59) (60) (61) (62) (63) (64) (65) (66) (67) (68) (69) (70) (71) (72) (73) (74) (75) (76) (77) (78) (79) (80) (81) (82) (83) (84) (85) (86) (87) (88) (89) (90) (91) (92) (93) (94) (95) (96) (97) (98) (99)



But I would hope to see universities, chatting to local service providers and seeing if there is a way that the treatment providers can make themselves helpful and maybe more relevant to students and be a welcoming space for them. I think the easiest thing for universities to do is just acknowledges the problem. Just say, like, 'students are taking drugs and we want to talk about it.'

Kat: So are there different approaches by the police to the ethical in the country and how can universities work better with the police?

There are so many different approaches in policing at the moment. It's been kind of dubbed a postcode lottery in terms of what your outcome will likely be if you're caught in personal possession of a small amount of drugs by different police forces.

This has really stemmed from the creation of police crime commissioners and that kind of different priority setting across local police forces, which means that we have some areas who are really, really heavily invested in diversion schemes, so trying to divert people away from the criminal justice system and towards treatment, if that's what's needed. In Thames Valley, that's the kind of approach they've gone for, working with a local drug treatment provider and that's kind of mirrored in similar approaches in several different other areas as well.

But it really, really depends. So a student could quite feasibly have grown up in Birmingham and had West Mids Police stop and search them at one point and had quite a favourable outcome, not had huge criminal justice involvement from that as a result, and then have moved to a different city for university and had the exact same thing happen, but have a much more punitive outcome as a result.

So it's not just how universities are approaching this issue, but it's how local police are as well. And it is completely dependent on where you are. And obviously police also have a huge amount of discretion that they can use as well. So it's not even necessarily the local area you're in that will decide that, it may just be the police officer you come into contact with that day.

Kat: And am I right in guessing that students probably don't know about this inconsistency?

Hanna: I think on the whole, yeah, I think that's probably right. My default is 'no, of course students know', but the students I interact with are students who are engaged in these discussions and these debates already, so there is obviously that understanding that you get when this is an interest or an area that you're involved in.



But on the whole, no, students probably don't understand that. And I think actually students probably wouldn't know what the official outcome would be, even if there was a centralised approach that was at the same across the country. So, yeah, it's really, really difficult to manage student involvement with kind of policing in their day to day lives.

And that's why we recommend apps like Y-Stop, so if you are stopped and searched, you can make sure that you're doing everything that you legally need to, but also so are the police officers who stopped you.

Kat: Thank you so much, Hanna, that was really, really interesting to hear about.

So I'd like to welcome our next guest on the show today, Professor Nic Beech, who is the Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University and he's also the Chair of Universities UK's taskforce on student drug use.

Welcome, Nic.

Nic: Thank you. Delighted to be here.

Kat: So I wanted to start first by asking, what is the approach that Middlesex University takes to student drug use?

Nic: This is a complex area, but I actually think it is a massive opportunity and the reason I say that is I think it's an opportunity for us to improve wellbeing and outcomes for students, for staff and actually for broader communities.

And so I know Hannah and John have been talking about connectivity. And for us that is one part of the way that we seek to work in co-leadership with our students.

And that means that there are areas of expertise and expertise through experience that students have that we need to be learning from and supporting. And that needs to balance out with the level of care for wellbeing that we can provide and the way that we think about students who use drugs, students who don't use drugs, but also the impact on staff and local community.

So for us, this is a fairly holistic approach that's bound up with the student experience and the student journey and with our approaches to wellbeing more generally.

Kat: We've talked quite a bit about a zero tolerance approach or a punitive approach to this issue. I wanted to know what you think about it. Do you think it works?



Nic: The idea of z





who are feeling isolated, struggling to fit in, feeling anxious about their studies and so on. So I think it's really important just at the moment.

Secondly, there is a real opportunity, because actually if we look at the student body at the moment, I think it's wonderful to see the strength of opinion and the values that underpin what they're trying to do about climate and the environment, what they want to do about social change and justice, what they want to do actually rather differently, quite often, around economy in the way that economy is part of society.

So I think all of those give us a really fertile ground for a very positive engagement with students, thinking about the positive outcomes for them and how we best fit them for that. And tackling drugs and particularly the harm that comes from drugs, is something that can really enable students across the board to be part of that hugely positive movement of that generation. And that's why I think it's really crucial right now.

And actually the more time that we've spent in this project and the more people that we've listened to and spoken to, what has really impressed me is that there are some geographical areas and some universities in which this has been taken really seriously. I think all of those that are taking it seriously would see themselves as being on a learning journey with it.



