



One of the strongest messages emerging from a series of focus groups conducted with Year 12 Western Australian students was that alcohol education programs that ignored young people's concerns are likely to be viewed by the target audience as irrelevant. This information was used in the development of the SHAHRP 2000 program, a quasi-experimental, research intervention involving over 2,000 students in Western Australia.

**A**LCOHOL education in the past has had considerable difficulty demonstrating impact on the drinking behaviour of young people (Perry & Kelder 1992; Hansen 1993, Perry, Williams, Komro et al. 1998). A critical factor in this may be that drinking is such a normative adult experience in western society. Young people perceive that alcohol is an integral part of adult life and that part of becoming an adult is learning how to drink. With such a right of passage association, getting young people to abstain from drinking is clearly unrealistic as the sole goal of alcohol education. Accordingly, education needs to look at how to best equip the majority of young people who will take up drinking as they grow into adults.

The drug education literature suggests that interventions are most

# fine line

## Students' perceptions of drinking, having fun and losing control

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likely to create change if they are based on the experiences of the young people they are trying to influence (Dusenbury & Falco 1995; Dielman 1994; Hansen & Graham 1991; McBride, Midford & Farrington 2000). This requires identifying young peoples' alcohol-related experiences and exposure, and incorporating this information into a program that is evidence based and developmentally appropriate to the target group. However, the drug education literature contains little information from students and other young people regarding their own alcohol education needs. Accordingly, this paper presents the perspectives offered by students involved in the formative development of the School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project 2000 (SHAHRP 2000) intervention as a way of adding to the range of evidence which contributes to decision

making about alcohol education.

SHAHRP 2000 is a quasi-experimental, research intervention currently being conducted in 13 high schools in Perth Western Australia, involving approximately 2,000 intervention and control students. The aim of the study is to provide senior high school students with skills to enable them to minimise alcohol-related harms they have identified as commonly encountered or of particular relevance, at a time when alcohol use typically increases. The SHAHRP 2000 intervention is an evidence-based, alcohol harm minimisation education program for senior high school students (16- to 17-year-olds).

To ensure that the SHAHRP 2000 intervention was sensitive to the concerns of those it sought to influence, 12 focus groups were conducted with senior secondary Western

Australian students (aged 16–17) during March 1999. Students participating in the focus groups were selected by random sample, stratified by school, year level and gender, producing a total of six focus groups of seven females and six focus groups of seven males (n=84). The aim of the focus groups was to identify young people's alcohol use experiences, alcohol related harms that are of particular concern to young people, harm reduction strategies used by young people and educational approaches likely to be effective with young people.

The students involved in the focus groups were generally keen to express their opinions about alcohol and issues associated with its use by young people. They were remarkably consistent in many of the issues they identified as being of concern to them.

## Young peoples' thoughts about drinking

It is clear that alcohol plays a significant role in the lives of the young people involved in the focus groups. Alcohol use is perceived to be commonplace, acceptable practice and the drug of choice of the majority of young people.

*When you were younger maybe you had different opinions about things like whether it was right or wrong but now it's such a usual thing you just come to accept it and I don't really think anything in particular.*

This is consistent with findings from similar studies which conclude that alcohol use, even excessive use is viewed by young people as a right of passage into adulthood (Shanahan, Hewitt, Elliott et al. 1999; Midford, Farrington & McBride 1996; Saunders & Baily 1993; Australian Drug Foundation 1994).

Although the majority of young people indicated that drinking in moderation was the ideal, the reality is that many young people are engaging in high-risk drinking and potentially harmful behaviour.

*It depends because some people drink and totally get smashed and there is no point to it because you don't remember what you actually do and you vomit and you don't have a good time in the end. If you don't drink to excess then its okay.*

This is supported by Australian prevalence data which indicates that young people are more likely to drink at hazardous or high risk levels than any other age group (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 1999; Shanahan, Hewitt, Elliott et al. 1999; Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer 1998). In addition, in Western Australia, alcohol causes more harm in the 15 to 19 age group than any other age group (Unwin & Codde 1999).

Some studies have indicated that the majority of young people drink to

get drunk and get drunk quickly (Shanahan, Hewitt, Elliot et al. 1999; Midford, Farrington & McBride 1996; Saunders & Baily 1993; Australian Drug Foundation 1994). This, however, is not necessarily the case with the young people interviewed in this study. Some did plan to get drunk but others felt that getting drunk was an unplanned consequence of drinking with friends and having a good time.

*Getting pissed is not the sole aim, it's to go out and have a good night with your mates but you usually do get pissed.*

They appear to make a distinction between getting drunk and losing control, and while getting drunk in itself did not seem to be a major concern, losing control was. It is apparent that many young people find it difficult to determine the line between drinking, having fun, getting drunk and losing control. This is consistent with findings from the developmental research for the national alcohol campaign (Shanahan, Hewitt, Elliott et al. 1999), which reported that while getting drunk was the aim of most young people, losing control was viewed negatively. A number of comments indicate that young people are receptive to messages that would help them find the line between drinking and having fun and losing control.

*The problem is that when you start getting pissed you have the urge to drink more, so you don't know where that line is. It might taste like crap but you can't tell.*

Relatedly, many of the young people interviewed in this study perceive responsible alcohol use to be something they primarily learn from experience. They believe that they learn their limits from experience; therefore, the greater the experience with alcohol, the greater the chance of control. This finding is similar to other studies (Shanahan, Hewitt, Elliott et al.

1999; Midford, Farrington & McBride 1996).

*Yeah, it's a way to learn the effects, like if they haven't done it before they might get drunk for the first time and just get in a car and smash it. You learn the effects by experimenting.*

## Why young people drink alcohol

It is apparent that the young people interviewed in this study drink alcohol for similar reasons to adults. That is primarily to enhance socialisation and to have fun.

*Its harder to socialise without alcohol because you open up more after you've had a few drinks.*

Alcohol consumption for these young people appears to be very much a group activity and although they dismiss the suggestion of peer pressure, peer group norms appear to be an important influence on the use of alcohol. Young people prefer to drink alcohol with their friends and although they do not consider that they are pressured into drinking, it is unlikely they will choose not to drink if their friends are drinking.

*It's a choice thing but if all your mates are drinking it's highly unlikely that you won't but they're not pressuring you to.*

*Maybe they might try it because someone tells them to but once they've tried it becomes their decision. Like to have a good time, loosen up and socialise.*

The young people interviewed in this study believe that younger students experience greater pressure to drink alcohol. Although drinking is perceived to be the norm, those young people who choose not to drink are not viewed negatively.

*You pretty much do your own thing. I think when we were younger it might have been a bit*

*more oh come on, come and drink with us, but now it's like you do your own thing. If you don't want to it doesn't matter.*

Similar to other studies, those who drink alone are perceived to have major problems, the behaviour being viewed as antisocial (Shanahan, Hewitt, Elliot et al. 1999; Midford, Farrington & McBride 1996).

### Where young people drink alcohol

The young people interviewed in this study identified parties as the main place where young people their age consume alcohol. They agreed that although not everyone at parties drinks alcohol, more alcohol is consumed at parties than in other settings and some young people drink to excess.

*There are a lot of people who don't drink at parties but you assume that they do because they're there and they're having a good time.*

*They might start out thinking that they're not going over the top and stay in control but when they get with their mates it just happens ... It happens a lot at parties.*

Drinking at home with parents was repeatedly identified as another place where young people consume alcohol and it is clear they consume less alcohol in this setting. Parents appear to be the key moderators on young people's alcohol use because they either control the amount of alcohol available or young people don't want their parents to know how much they actually drink. Losing control in front of parents appears to be a major concern for young people due to the implications it may have for future alcohol use situations.

*Yeah like you have to drink what your parents offered you and your parents are controlling how much you have.*

*Yeah you don't drink as much because you don't want to be stupid in front of your parents.*

*Yeah that way they know how much you're drinking, like my parents will buy it for me and its not enough to get me smashed but at least they know how much I've got.*

Many students indicated that drinking with parents tends to demystify alcohol and teaches young people how to drink safely and discover their limits.

*The way my dad sees it is that he doesn't want me going out on my 18th birthday and never having had a drink and go and get smashed and not know what the hell's gone on. So he goes try this, try this, try this. Whatever he brings home.*

Other studies reinforce the importance of parents in developing safe drinking behaviours in their children through introducing alcohol gradually in family situations (McBride, Midford & Farrington 2000; Foxcroft & Lowe 1997). Although not addressed in this study, there is strong evidence to suggest that a parental education component in school drug education programs can be an important contributor to reducing drug-related harm in young people (Dusenbury & Falco 1995; Ballard, Gillespie & Irwin 1994).

Licensed premises were also identified as venues where some young people consume alcohol. The students acknowledged that it could be difficult for young people who were under 18 to gain entrance to licensed premises but once inside it was rare to

be asked for identification. It was generally agreed that young people drink less at licensed premises due to cost and because they want to remain inconspicuous.

*Drinking at clubs is more controlled because it's more public, you don't want to get kicked out and the guys behind the bar control what you drink.*

### How much and how often do young people drink alcohol?

The quantity of alcohol that young people consume and the frequency with which they consume it appears to be partly dependent on peer group



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norms. It is clear that young people drink more with friends at a party than with parents or other adults. The amount of alcohol consumed also appears to be dependent to a large degree on what young people see as opportunity. Opportunity is determined by who the young people are friends with and when parties are held. In addition, the amount of alcohol consumed depends on whether the person wants to get drunk and then what level of intoxication the person wants to achieve.

*Depends what type of group you hang around with. Like some people might go out every weekend and their aim would be to get drunk and some groups might just like ... when you're at a party you'd drink.*

*There are different levels of being drunk, like some want to be out of it and others just want to be happy so that takes different amounts.*

Availability in terms of how much money, the type and amount of alcohol also determines how much alcohol young people will consume.

*If you've got \$30 you'll buy a bottle for yourself but if you've only got \$15 then you might have to go halves with someone.*

*I'll limit myself by pre-mixing my drinks before I get there. Like instead of bringing along a bottle of Jim Beam, you bring along half a bottle mixed already and that's all you'll have because that's all you've got.*

The young people interviewed in this study indicated that alcohol is easily accessible and although it is illegal for the majority of them to buy

it, most experience few problems in purchasing alcohol. Purchasing their own alcohol is seen as preferable to having alcohol supplied by parents because parents would control the amount and type available.

*Not a problem. You know the bottle shops that will give it to you and the ones that will ask for ID.*

*Unlikely to get what or as much as you want with parents.*

*My parents buy it for me because they like to know what I'm drinking. What quantity and stuff.*

### **Harms experienced by young people due to their own use of alcohol**

The students interviewed in this study were aware that young people are at risk from alcohol in various ways. Knowledge of their own tolerance to alcohol and the consequences of their alcohol use, particularly loss of control, was identified as a major concern by the majority of students. Loss of control includes behaving in silly ways, vomiting and memory loss.

*My best friend who went to a party got really, really drunk and went home with a guy she didn't know or anything and she was like really*

*stressed. She had to have like all these different tests and stuff. She didn't know what he did to her. She didn't know if anything had happened to her, if it happened. Well she thinks she had sex but she's not sure.*

They consistently cited violence, particularly for young males and sexual vulnerability for young females as alcohol-related harms young people might encounter.

*Mainly just mouthing off and a bit of pushing. (Male)*

*People might tell you that someone had been saying stuff about you and you go up and start yelling and they might not have even said anything and you have a fight. (Male)*

*It sounds a bit sexist but the guys are going to be a lot more ready to take advantage of a drunk girl. (Female)*

*If you're drunk, it makes it a lot more easier to go along with - it's hard to say no. (Female)*

These concerns are consistently identified in other studies (Shanahan, Hewitt, Elliot et al. 1999; Midford, Farrington & McBride 1996; Australian Drug Foundation 1994). The females in this study, however, appeared to be more concerned about the potential harms associated with young people's alcohol use than the boys, particularly the embarrassment caused by out of control behaviour. It is apparent that these young males and females view the potential consequences of alcohol use for their own and the other gender quite differently. The males thought that females drink more, get drunk quicker and become very emotional.

*And they hug each other and say, "I love you".*

*They get into more bitchy stuff and one ends up in tears.*



The females, however, thought that males drink more and are insensitive to the consequences of intoxicated sex. Damage to reputation appears to be a major concern for young females.

*Girls have risks of getting pregnant and all that other stuff where guys can walk away from it and emotionally they may feel they shouldn't have done that but then they can walk away and say its not my problem.*

*Guys are like heroes and stuff if they can get anything, girls straight away are sluts and stuff.*

Clearly young people would benefit from the opportunity to discuss the issues associated with these different perceptions.

### **Harms caused by someone else's use of alcohol**

The majority of students identified violence as the major harm that young people might encounter due to someone else's use of alcohol. The students suggested that young people can become victims of violence or unwillingly involved in physical fights because others, who are affected by alcohol, initiate the conflict. In addition many suggested that young people might suffer verbal abuse in the form of insults, gossip and the spreading of rumours by others affected by alcohol. They were concerned that this may adversely affect a friendship.

### **Harm reduction strategies used by young people**

Although most young people involved in these focus groups displayed a good understanding of harm reduction strategies, they felt that these strategies are unrealistic for young people.

*We know these are things that you should do but that's not necessarily the thing that we do.*

It is apparent that young people drink in ways and in settings where spacing drinks, eating food and

drinking non-alcoholic drinks are not only viewed as inappropriate but also in some instances as impossible. They consistently commented that the most realistic harm reduction strategy available to them is having an agreement with friends to look after one another. It is clear, however, that although looking after each other is common, it is due more to good luck and group dynamics than good management.

*Most of the time when you're with mates you just sort of look out for each other.*

*And that person changes too, like it depends on how everyone is feeling and if one person isn't feeling too good they won't drink as much and look after everyone else.*

*I know that at our parties if someone got drunk and tried to drive home or walk home on a main road, they're not allowed to because we all go out and say you're not allowed and it doesn't matter how drunk we are. It's a part of looking after each other.*

The other most commonly identified harm reduction strategy used by young people is pre-planning how to get home safely from drinking settings. The majority indicated that sleeping over at the party is the best way of ensuring young people's safety. Although the students interviewed indicated that the majority of young people do not drink and drive because, "it's really pumped into us not to", they were concerned that some young people did drink and drive. In addition some indicated that young people sometimes got into cars with other intoxicated people and a driver who had been drinking. They acknowledged that it is often difficult to determine if a driver is affected by alcohol and at times they didn't care.

*I know someone who organised to stay at someone's house, but he didn't, and drove home with a guy that was totally drunk – apparently*

*they nearly had a crash but luckily they didn't.*

*I think that they didn't tell me that they were drunk actually and they've had accidents, like running over rabbits and cats and crashed into a tree and ... like you don't really care, like I didn't care then.*

It is a major concern that although these young people are very aware of the dangers inherent in drinking and driving, some ignore these dangers and put themselves in potentially high-risk situations when affected by alcohol. In Australia, 72% of substance related hospital episodes for 15- to 19-year-olds relate to alcohol, with the majority of these admissions resulting from road accident injuries (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 1999). Given this, young people need to be given the opportunity to discuss and develop strategies that will assist them in making safe decisions related to drinking and driving.

Clearly, alcohol use among young people is most common and most likely to be excessive at parties. Given that many parties appear to be unsupervised by adults and that alcohol-related harms increase with unsupervised drinking (McBride, Midford & Farrington 2000), young people require realistic strategies that will help keep them and their friends safe in these situations.

### **Alcohol education approaches likely to be effective with young people**

The young people interviewed in this study were quite scathing in their views about the alcohol education they had experienced, indicating that it was boring, has abstinence as it's primary goal and focused on the negative aspects of drinking. It is very clear that young people are unresponsive to an abstinence-only message, seeing it as inappropriate and hypocritical in a society where alcohol use is prevalent, socially accepted and often encouraged.

*We were told about the worst that could happen, not that most of the time [anything] bad happens.*

*I don't even remember talking about alcohol. Very boring, very restrictive teaching from her desk, handing work-sheets out – don't drink message that got across, and apart from that I just don't remember, and we spent the whole term learning about it, so that really stuck in my head.*

*I don't know whether they are trying to tell us not to drink or like not to binge drink all the time, just drink in moderation because sometimes they're just actually saying don't drink at all.*

There was strong consensus that harm minimisation is the education approach most likely to be accepted by young people. This is consistent with findings from other studies that conclude that students will “turn off” if an abstinence message is promoted (Midford, Farringdon & McBride 1996; Saunders & Baily 1993; Australian Drug Foundation 1994).

*The only thing that would be relevant is how not to be an idiot because people are still going to get drunk.*

*By year 11 I would really like to be sitting down with someone like Mr ..., like with someone that we could all respect, and talking about when we were drunk, what to do when someone is on the floor and collapsed. Things like that we need to know just so we can be a bit more confident in looking after each other.*

## Conclusion

The discussion that emanated from these focus groups provided a valuable insight into the alcohol-related issues that young people perceive as relevant. One of the strongest messages to emerge is that young people will view alcohol education that ignores these issues as irrelevant. Consequently, these insights

have been incorporated into the SHAHRP 2000 curriculum. Specifically, the curriculum provides students with the opportunity to develop skills that will enable them to minimise risks and harm when in alcohol use situations that they have identified as commonly encountered or of particular relevance. In particular, the curriculum incorporates alcohol-related scenarios generated from the focus group information relating to commonly encountered risks and harms, realistic harm reduction strategies, and drinking settings. The curriculum also examines how young people can help friends to stay safe in situations where alcohol is available, focusing on strategies to minimise the potential risks and harms than can happen at parties. In addition, the program examines sex-specific alcohol related issues, issues surrounding drinking and driving and explores how students can find that line between having fun and losing control.

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