

Orientation week drinking may have gateway effect

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Dr Tamlin Conner

Heavy alcohol use by students during university orientation weeks may be a gateway into heavier drinking during the rest of the academic year, according to latest Otago research.

The Otago Department of Psychology researchers' findings suggest that males who were light drinkers before coming to university may be particularly susceptible to this potential gateway effect.

In their study, which will be published in the *Journal of Studies on*

Alcohol and Drugs, the researchers used text-messaging to track the [drinking](#) behaviours of 143 male and female residential college students in their first year at university.

The study is the first of its kind to take into account participants' alcohol use before they arrived at the institution, meaning that the unique contribution of orientation week drinking on subsequent drinking could be analysed.

The students were asked immediately before orientation week about how much alcohol they had drunk in a typical week over the previous 30 days. During orientation week, they received a daily text message prompting them to report the number of drinks they had the previous night. From April to October, the research team sent a further text on one Sunday each month to assess participants' alcohol use over the previous three days.

Study co-authors Dr Tamlin Conner and Dr Damian Scarf says that high drinking rates during orientation week predicted increased rates of drinking during the academic year, and this was especially true for men.

The co-authors wrote that: "...when we controlled for pre-university drinking, men who drank more during Orientation Week showed significantly higher rates of drinking during the academic year—more than what would be expected based on their pre-university drinking rates."

Participants who drank at low levels before university—but who drank at high levels during orientation week—were nearly equivalent in their academic year drinking to participants who drank at high levels before and during Orientation, the researchers found.

The pattern for women was in the same direction as men, but not

statistically significant. Dr Conner suggests that this could be due to the sample size.

Dr Conner says further research is needed to confirm whether the link between orientation week drinking and academic year drinking is indeed a causal one.

"If this is shown to be the case, orientation week may be a prime target for alcohol-based interventions in universities," she says.

The study co-authors had more direct advice for students: "Students viewing orientation week as a 'one off' event or a last blow-out before the real work begins should consider the impact their drinking may have on their academic year."

Provided by University of Otago

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