

UK universities and schools urged to ban alcohol industry-backed health advice

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Public health experts are calling for a ban on alcohol industry funded education programs in UK universities and schools, which they say normalize drinking and downplay the long term health risks of alcohol.

They include an industry-backed "freshers' week survival guide" for [university students](#) and a theater based educational program in schools funded by Diageo, one of the world's biggest alcoholic beverage companies, reports an investigation by *The BMJ*.

The call follows a successful campaign in Ireland that has led to educational programs funded by the [alcohol industry](#) being removed from schools.

But in the UK, universities continue to welcome initiatives funded by Drinkaware—a charity funded by major alcohol producers and retailers, venues and restaurant groups—intended to educate students about "responsible" drinking skills.

In universities, for example, Drinkaware materials are distributed to students, including a free cup to measure alcohol units and a wheel with the number of units and calories in popular drinks, while a "freshers' week survival guide," advises students to eat carbohydrates or protein before going out and drink plenty of water.

Drinkaware claimed "the cup and wheel help people understand how much they are drinking." It added that it had quoted directly from the chief medical officer's guidelines and that the stated aim of the guidelines is to inform people but not to stop them drinking alcohol, "as it is considered a normal activity."

But Mark Petticrew at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said this focuses on the short term effects of getting drunk. "Food has no relevance to the longer term harms of alcohol, including [cardiovascular disease](#), cancers and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders," he argues.

May van Schalkwyk at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical

Medicine added that the material selectively quotes from the chief medical officer's advice.

The Department for Education said that universities are private institutions and the government has no remit to review materials distributed to students in England.

In Wales, universities were given a toolkit to assess whether they are keeping students safe from alcohol created by the Welsh government, NUS Wales, and Drinkaware.

But Mark Peticrew criticized the toolkit as "misinformation" given it omits any information about the risks of cancer, cardiovascular disease, injury, and death associated with alcohol. "The framing of the entire document is to preserve the industry reputation and not about protecting young people at universities from harm," he says.

Karen Tyrell, chief executive of Drinkaware, described its work in UK universities as "a pragmatic and worthwhile contribution to reducing alcohol related harm across the UK."

She said, "We work with the grain of public opinion and treat people like adults capable of making informed choices. While some may not like it, alcohol is a part of our society and there is currently no public desire to change that. We make no apologies for delivering a range of activities which support our charitable objectives and organizational purpose."

In the absence of a specific ban, as in Ireland, industry related alcohol education charities have also been active in schools, providing information to pupils as young as 9, the investigation finds.

There is a concern in the public health community that these industry

backed programs are poorly evaluated, says John Holmes, professor of alcohol policy at the University of Sheffield. Well designed and effective programs have a role to play.

"Alongside that, we need other measures such as reducing the affordability of alcohol, reducing its availability, and better restriction of alcohol marketing," he says.

More information: Big alcohol: Universities and schools urged to throw out industry-funded public health advice, *The BMJ* (2024). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.q851](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q851)

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