

The effects of alcohol consumption on student life at a rural campus

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Universities ought to provide an enriching, joyful and wholesome learning experience for a student; however, recent trends in alcohol advertising as well as the lack of recreational activities in rural environments have nurtured an environment for alcohol abuse in rural universities. Most of the students who attend a rural university are compelled to stay on campus or board close by. More and more of these students are falling prey to alcohol abuse directly or indirectly. Very often the safety of students is compromised and most victims of alcohol abuse endure the torment in silence. Others quit studying and go back home. This study attempts to examine the fears, the risks of alcohol as part of the student culture, the harmful effects of alcohol and the consequence of peer pressure on students at a rural campus. This study is undertaken by using qualitative and quantitative research methods. The research was undertaken at the University of Zululand which is situated in the rural community of KwaDlangezwa (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa). Perceptions and attitudes on the effects of alcohol consumption on student life at a rural campus are surveyed. Stratified random sampling allowed the researcher to divide the population into various groups. The target population of this study are students from the campus. Data was collected by means of a comprehensive literature review and through the administration of in-depth questionnaires

Keywords: Alcoholism, alcohol abuse, alcohol effects, student life, University of Zululand.

I. Introduction

Parents expect a university to provide a nurturing environment for their children which would be conducive to studying. It is expected that a university should provide a safe, enriching and rewarding educational experience for a student. This is to ensure that children would develop their social and intellectual skills without any hindrances. However, recent news reports about South African university campuses have led to speculation about the safety of students on campus (Flanagan 2011). According to Towl (2004:2) alcohol consumption has been described as a core component of student culture and is seen as a defining feature of tertiary education lifestyle. Alcohol is among the most abused substances in South Africa (SAFM 2011).

This study examines the influence of peer pressure, the fears, the risks and the harmful effects of alcohol abuse on student life at a rural campus. The South African government's move to increase the permissible age of people who purchase alcohol, is a clear indication that alcohol abuse is a major concern in the country. Social Development Minister Bathabile Dlamini stated that the proposal to raise the alcohol drinking age from 18 to 21 is being considered at a forthcoming summit on eradicating alcohol and drug abuse from our society (Modiba 2011). Alcohol indulgence has prompted students to lose focus on their primary reason/s for embarking on a study in higher education.

Students normally enter university to further their studies and acquire knowledge so they can improve their chances of entering the job market. University study fees are a substantial expense for their parents and more especially when no bursaries are secured. Students will normally aspire to obtain qualifications which would equip them with skills to follow noble career paths. These students would expect to enjoy positive experiences that will contribute towards successfully completing of their studies. Many students are under the impression that higher education is a genuine place for one to enjoy academic bliss. Aside from the high colour paraphernalia and high tech digital media used for promoting students enrolments, students need to understand that university is another community within which advantages and disadvantages exist. Every university in South Africa faces challenges and students ought to be aware of these challenges. They should not be deceived into thinking that they have entered an ideal educational environment which is free from the influences of substance abuse and similar vices.

This paper examines how alcohol affects the behaviour of students especially with peer pressure forcing an adverse university culture upon them. It also explores the degradation of the innocence of student's behaviour by alcohol abuse and possible avenues which can be pursued to root out this evil.

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2. Literature review

Harmful effects of alcohol

Alcohol consumption by students places a major strain on their academic development. Students who indulge in alcohol consumption do not normally attend class, or lose concentration in class. Excessive drinking (or binge drinking) often leads to poor performance in assessments. In South Africa the common age for binge drinking is between eighteen and thirty five years (Addiction Search 2011).

Alcohol can cause severe damage to the body and mind. White *et al.* (2002:117) suggest that students' behaviour is very likely to change after a few drinks. For example, after drinks, a student may start becoming more sociable but if too much alcohol is consumed over a short period of time one may start having problems with walking and talking. This behaviour can be regarded as the Jekyll and Hyde syndrome where a student, who under normal circumstances is an introvert becomes an extrovert or vice versa. If students continue to focus on drinking then their studies can be affected and eventually studying will become the least of their priorities. Their behaviour could also become very violent and lead to the disregard of personal or private property.

Shore and Rivers in Bolton-Brownlee (1987) state that the one way to identify students' problem with the consumption of alcohol to understand the negative consequences. These include a decrease of one's performance in the classroom, obtaining poor grades, facing difficulties with management, and participating in the destruction of property.

A study conducted by Fields (2008) suggests that students under the influence of alcohol end up having their priorities changed without realising it, for example alcohol addicted students care more about their next drink than studying. Further, alcohol affects a person's mind, body and actions. Alcohol is addictive and causes one to become sick both mentally and physically.

According to Teens Health (2011), alcohol reduces the function of the central nervous system (the spinal cord and the brain). It further inhibits the flow of messages to the brain. Alcohol causes changes in the brain resulting in intoxication. Drinking promotes forgetfulness, for example a student can study overnight for the test but will not be able to remember much the next day. Excessive drinking may cause a person to have blurred vision, slurred speech, to stagger, have slowed reaction times, impaired hearing and impaired memory (NIAA 2004).

Sometimes alcohol's effects disappear overnight, but some last longer and can even become permanent. Blackouts, memory lapses and thiamine deficiency are common disorders associated with alcohol related to brain damage (NIAAA 2004). Adam *et al.* (2000) stress that the most common harms of heavy alcohol intake were memory loss and feeling sorry, guilty or embarrassed about actions while drinking.

Further, when NIAAA (2004) conducted a survey on college students' experiences with blackouts, the report states that students participated in dangerous events which they could not remember. These included vandalism and unprotected sex. Blackouts in females can leave them vulnerable and they could end up being raped. Fatal road accidents, due to alcohol abuse, are a common occurrence in South Africa.

The movie *Party Never Stops* depicts how first year students fall prey to a binge drinking lifestyle. This leads to bunking classes (since they feel exhausted after partying), failing their courses and lying to parents (My Lifetime 2007). Further, the movie depicts how alcohol influences compulsive sexual behaviour which exposes students to sexually transmitted diseases and the risk of becoming pregnant.

According to NIAAA (2004) long term drinking puts people at risk of brain damage. However, brain damage can also be caused by poor health status or severe liver diseases. Furthermore thiamine (vitamin B) deficiency is common in people with alcoholism and also results from poor overall nutrition. People with long term drinking who have a thiamine deficiency can develop serious brain disorders such as Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome (WKS). People with WKS can be too confused to find their way out of a room or even walk, and eventually develop Korsakoff's psychosis. People with Korsakoff's psychosis are forgetful and quickly frustrated and have difficulty walking and coordinating their movements. Further Korsakoff's psychosis people have problems remembering old information or laying down new information. In students, for example, they can sit in the lecture for about an hour without being able to recall anything that was discussed.

Alcohol abuse also causes cancer and weight gain. The abuse of alcohol is known to have harmful effects on the body. It can harm the immune system, liver, lungs, stomach, pancreas, intestines, kidneys, fertility, bones, and skin. According to Virginia Tech (2011) drinking alcohol affects the functioning of the immune system and weakens the body's ability to fight off infectious disease. Further short term drinking results in the increased number of colds; with long term drinking, alcohol can slow down the functioning of the immune system leaving your body vulnerable to a number of diseases. Alcohol damages the liver cells resulting in harm to brain cells and liver cirrhosis and an increased risk of liver cancer (Virginia Tech 2011).

The power of peer pressure

According to Johnes (2008) "peer pressure" is a term used to describe how an adolescent's behaviour is influenced by other adolescents. While most parents think of peer pressure as negative, not all peer pressure is bad. Teenagers may be influenced by their peers to study, to compete in athletics or to attend a religious function. However, when fellow teenagers are drinking or engaging in other risky activities, peer pressure can lead to problems.

The prevalence of peer pressure can become overwhelming, especially to students who have been subjected to this form of degradation since their schooling careers. Johnes (2008) asserts that teenagers can experience feelings of doubt and may lack self-esteem. For these reasons, they are particularly vulnerable to peer-pressure: an overwhelming desire to fit in and do "what everyone else is doing," even if it means participating in such high-risk activities as drinking, smoking and engaging in casual sex.

As students progress from primary school to secondary school and then finally end up in tertiary institutions, levels of peer pressure intensify. Many first year students enter tertiary education institutions assuming that they are privileged especially when compared to many classmates who did not qualify or are unable to afford higher education. Coming to tertiary education institutions provides the student with new possibilities of being equipped for a brighter future. Meeting other students, making new friends are all a part of tertiary education experience. This experience can be very rewarding or it can also be a devastating life altering experience for some students.

According to Schindler (2011) parenthood includes standing strong when setting limitations for your child. These limitations can be tested when a child experiences or has to deal with peer pressure and alcohol. Schindler further contends that parents should model the behaviour that they expect their children to follow. This would assist the child when s/he deals with a situation that requires an answer of "no," so that s/he will be able to handle both the silent and verbal pressure to follow the crowd (Schindler 2011).

Identity formulation

Chan & Prendergast (2007:214) state that youth need to formulate a new identity and establish autonomy from their parents. They become more independent in decision making. As a result, youth seek personal relationships that give value to their perspectives and ensure that their feelings are understood. According to Bolton-Brownlee (1987), some students use alcohol to signify or demonstrate their emerging adulthood, to enhance their acceptance social gatherings with their peers, and some use alcohol to cope with stress.

According to Schindler (2011) students face unspoken pressure which is difficult to resist. Silent peer pressure is difficult to address because it focuses on internal feelings instead of a verbal or physical response. Schindler (2011) maintains that the need for students to belong to a group or to fit in is a normal part of growing up. It is expected that when group dynamics become overpowering, this would act as a catalyst for the individual student to re-examine his beliefs in order to exert himself as a mature individual. Schindler (2011) further contends that students must be encouraged to find friends with positive attitudes and a shared disdain for drinking. This type of camaraderie is likely to promote mutual support structures for assisting in combating alcohol use / abuse.

Schindler (2011) maintains that life is filled with choices and at times these choices are hard to make. Often, young people find it difficult to maintain and enforce their personal beliefs. Schindler (2011) further states that reasons vary from person to person, but most involve alienation from the crowd, fear of ridicule or uncertainty about the situation. Ham and Hope in Jamison and Myers (2008:492) claim that the social contexts of participating in alcohol coupled with peer pressure places university students at risk for alcohol abuse.

A university culture of drinking

According to Kalman (2009), culture is the way people live. It is social behaviour; it is learnt from a society or a subgroup. This emphasises that culture exists only in the mind and is seen as a belief and attitude about something that people in a particular group share. Student culture may be described as a combination of academic study and socialising experiences. Heath (1998) claims that socio-culture is therefore the behaviour in which a certain group engages in a society. This behaviour is also constituted by some elements in a society with which people associate themselves. A choice of a beverage in a society would, therefore, be conceived as an indication of one's social status. According to Marshall (1979) drinking is mostly considered a habit. In most societies, drinking is essentially a social act and as such it is embedded in a context of values, attitudes, and other norms. These values, attitudes and other norms constitute important socio-cultural factors that influence the effects of drinking.

The effects of alcohol consumption on student life

Just as most fishermen have a trophy story about the big fish that got away, Adam *et al.* (2000) are of the view that students see it as important to have a 'drinking story' where they talk about detrimental experiences of alcohol in a

positive light. According to Kypri (2003), research at Waikato University found that students perceive alcohol consumption as an integral part of student lifestyle and a positive step towards satisfying peer integration. In addition, most students surveyed during this study reported that there was an increase in contributing factors at university (rather than at school or elsewhere) which led to alcohol consumption. Adam *et al.* (2000) further comment that students regard drinking as a passport into university culture and student cliques. A recent independent report (by the Higher Education Quality Committee) recommended that the University of Zululand review the presence of a tavern on campus and the effects this has on reported violence and crime, and its impact on student life. The purpose of this recommendation was to minimise the consumption of alcohol by students on campus and curtail associated felonies.

Fagan & Wilkinson (1998) emphasise that the consumption of alcohol on academic property may lead to other crimes and misbehaviour on the part of other students. Their study further indicates that violence and rape is more likely to occur in an environment of alcohol use. Finn (1997) provides the following example from another study: more than half the male students who admitted to having committed sexual assault said they had been drinking or using other drugs before the crime; one in four admitted to being moderately or extremely intoxicated.

Heath (1998) supports the view that the prevalence of alcohol in an academic environment is detrimental to student as well as educator wellbeing. Further, alcohol intake affects the student's psychological equilibrium and excess consumption may gradually erode the culture of teaching and learning. Most of the problems commonly associated with drinking such as crime, violence and accidents are rooted in excessive drinking (rather than moderate or normal drinking).

Stanton and Brodsky (1996) are of the opinion that the act of alcohol consumption is a social phenomenon and that this practice normally occurs within specific settings. These surroundings differ from other social environments such as places of worship or teaching and learning environments. Where there is alcohol, there is almost always a particular environment to drink it, and every culture creates its own highly distinctive public drinking places. Traeen and Rossow (1994) believe that there would be a conflict of ideals when there is an attempt to merge two environments which have different expectations. Introducing an environment of alcohol consumption within an academic environment would negatively infringe on the desired outcome of each environment.

Whether students consume alcohol moderately or excessively on campus, there needs to be regulation governing the sale and availability of alcohol on campus. Mallie *et al.* (2009) claim that this practice poses a risk to the consumer as well as other people within his/her vicinity. Many countries are implementing policies which restrict alcohol availability in order to reduce consumption and related harm among young people. Alcohol policies affect consumption by youth directly or indirectly. These restrictions would impact on the frequency and type of social interactions which would have a domino effect on the habitual interface. This study undertook a quantitative survey of alcohol consumption by students at the University of Zululand. An independent investigation was also undertaken (by the Higher Education Quality Committee) and the recommendation was that the tavern on campus be closed and a plan of action, to change the current situation of violence and crime and their impact on student life, should also be implemented. With the closure of 'old tavern' on the University of Zululand campus the excessive drinking rate seemingly dropped, however, in the absence of a plan of action to end the availability of alcohol and drunkenness it is doubtful whether the removal of the tavern has really changed the culture of the alcohol users' interaction. Three hundred and eighty four students were questioned about alcohol consumption on campus. Fourteen percent of students were brave enough to confess that they still consume alcohol freely on the University of Zululand campus.

Alcohol marketing agencies have succeeded in creating a desire to celebrate various occasions (significant or insignificant) with specific types of alcoholic beverages. Klein (1991) examined perceptions of the situational appropriateness of various types of alcoholic drinks. Adverts create the impression that it is normal behaviour for friends to gather around the beer table after work, to enjoy wine at the dinner table or to share a whiskey during stressful office meetings. Even on campus, specific types of alcoholic beverages are used to celebrate specific socio-cultural occasions. The new ideology which has developed is that certain occasions command the use of a specific alcoholic beverage. In the new fashion scene there is no shortage of an alcoholic beverage that could satisfy a specific theme. This survey, at the University of Zululand, revealed that although the tavern on campus was closed, alcohol was still available and consumed freely. There is a strong indication that a culture of alcohol consumption has been firmly established at this campus and it requires more than merely closing an old tavern to change a culture of drinking.

Skog in Kypri (2003) discovered that an individual's pattern of alcohol consumption mirrors that of their peers, therefore, students invariably fashion the pattern of other students' drinking patterns within the same academic community. This notion is reiterated by Adam *et al.* (2000) in that the students consider it important to have a 'drinking story' where they brag about their detrimental experiences of alcohol (vomiting or sustaining an injury) after drinking.

Moreover, having a 'drinking story' is useful in maintaining group membership; harmful effects are potentially being re-constructed as positive aspects of drinking.

Prensky (2000) argues that excessive drinking behavioural patterns are learnt patterns and that this learning process can be minimised by appropriate restrictions.

Creating an alcohol free environment

The ambience of a "watering hole" is entirely different from that of a library or learning centre. Any attempts to merge these two environments would be a certain recipe for disaster. Universities need to take a firm stand to ensure that such calamities are prevented. According to the Shellenbarger (2011), surveys conducted at Purdue University show a sharp drop in drinking among students from 48% in 2006 to 37.3% in 2009. Much of this success is attributed to a new trend in alcohol free events on or around campus grounds.

According to Outside the Classroom (2008), a majority of students surveyed prefer attending events that do not focus on alcohol. A reason attributed to the added interest was having a 'cool' place to 'hang out'. These findings suggested that universities might not need to organise massive parties or events; instead, they could simply provide students with a suitable venue to interact and have fun with their peers.

According to Shellenbarger (2011), other universities following this new trend of alcohol free parties include:

- Lehigh University in Pennsylvania recently held an alcohol free event called 'Mix it up!' Teams comprising members of residence halls made their own alcohol free cocktails dubbed 'mock tails' whilst the other teams provided information and entertainment.
- In Muncie, Indiana, the University hosts a 'Late Nite' every Saturday night from 9pm to 1am, which has received acclaim as the 'Best Party on Campus'. 'Late Nite' features a variety of activities which include movies, dance videos, games, arts and crafts, laser tag, rock climbing and live bands.
- North Dakota State University hosts a club which has been dubbed the 'hottest club in town' by the school's website. Club NDSU (North Dakota State University) features a night-life atmosphere including a live disc jockey, a video game lounge with Nintendo Wii's, free food, non-alcoholic drinks and prizes. The admission is free and is exclusively for NDSU students.

This study has found that the University of Zululand, unlike most universities, has a strong prevalence of a single culture which dominates attempts at globalisation. Although, there is a sporadic sampling of other cultures, the native culture is extremely dominant. This dominance of culture makes it difficult to model the culture of cosmopolitan universities which have adopted a global culture. Cosmopolitan universities make a concerted effort to draw the attention of students to other forms of entertainment (other than the consumption of alcohol). The strategies used elsewhere could be adapted to change the ambience at the University of Zululand and strengthen the culture of learning. According to the Higher Education Centre (2011) a comprehensive approach has been developed to assist students with alcohol use, which addresses the issues not only through educational channels but also by bringing about change at the institutional, community, and public policy level. The premise of this approach is grounded in the principle that people's attitudes, decisions, and behaviour and those that relate to alcohol use are shaped by the physical, social, economic, and legal environments. This Centre argues that many aspects of this environment can be shaped by campus and government officials. This model, termed environmental management, has since been supported by scientific research for its effectiveness in bringing about lasting and positive change on a college campus.

Environmental management

According to the Higher Education Centre (2011), environmental management addresses several factors that, though they may vary in the degree to which they exist on a college campus, have significant effects on students' decisions regarding alcohol use. These factors are:

- Students' lack (or lack of awareness of) adequate social, recreational, and extracurricular options to deter them from drinking.
- Students' perception of a strong normative pressure to drink in college.
- College students are often the targets of aggressive marketing and promotion tactics by the alcohol industry.
- Alcohol is often abundantly available on and around college campuses.
- Campus and local laws and policies on alcohol can be vague or non-existent and are not always consistently or adequately enforced.

The Higher Education Centre (2011) states that in order to further the target and address these factors, a strategy driven approach has been devised which should be adapted to each campus needs and problems. The following are some suggestions:

- To offer and promote social, recreational, extracurricular, and public service alcohol-free options which will be integral to avoiding the promotion of alcohol within the campus grounds.

- To create a social, academic, and residential environment that supports health-promoting norms that would help sustain the initiative to assist students who consume alcohol on campus.
- To restrict marketing and promotion of alcoholic beverages both on and off campus as this will reduce the temptation to consume alcohol.
- To limit alcohol availability both on and off campus which would help remove the element of convenience in purchasing or obtaining alcohol?
- To further develop campus policies and enforce laws at campus, local, state, and national levels.

In order to drive this effort forward, it is recommended that the university body measure the extent of the problem as well as the nature of the problem and not ignore the factors that propel the use and consumption of alcohol on campus. Hannay in Jamison and Myers (2008:492) states that final year students tend to drink less due to exam pressures. It could well be that these students have come to realize that they are at the end of their studies.

3. Research methodology

This study is undertaken using qualitative and quantitative research methods. Bless *et al.* (2006) support this stance by stating that qualitative and quantitative surveys are important as they determine how well data will be analysed. They also indicate that quantitative measures are generally more convincing when they are supported by qualitative arguments.

The research is undertaken at the University of Zululand which is situated in the rural community of KwaDlengzwa (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa). Perceptions and attitudes on the effects of alcohol consumption on student life at a rural campus were surveyed. Stratified random sampling allowed the researcher to divide the population into various groups. The target population of this study were students from the campus.

Data was collected by means of a comprehensive literature review and through the administration of in-depth questionnaires. As recommended by Bless *et al.* (2006) these questionnaires were pre-tested to ascertain whether the instrument adequately established what the study intends to achieve. More than five hundred questionnaires were distributed but only three hundred and eighty four good responses were collected and quantified. Finally, responses from the data were encoded and analysed with the use of MoonStats[©] (statistical software program).

4. Results

4.1 Students' perspective of alcohol consumption

This section exposes the results of the students' responses towards alcohol consumption on campus. Only three hundred and eighty four responses were received and analysed.

4.1.1. Availability of alcohol on campus

The Council for Higher Education's (CHE) audit on the University of Zululand advised that the University review the presence of taverns on campus. The University conformed early in 2011; however, the recent survey (Figure 1, below) indicates that alcohol is still freely available on campus. A large percentage of students indicated that alcohol is still freely available, even though the taverns were closed!

This could indicate that the alcohol addiction is deeply ingrained among students and that they would resort to unsavoury means of bringing alcohol into the campus in the presence of astute security measures.

The possibility of alcohol being sold illegally on campus is also a consideration and an avenue which the university should pursue. The indication that it is available freely would infer that alcohol restrictions are not sufficiently severe or are not in place.

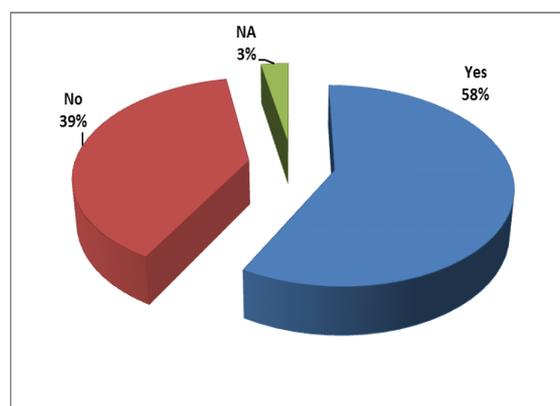


Figure 1: Alcohol is still freely available on my campus

There is definitely room for suspicion or speculation that the 39% of students who are unaware of the availability of alcohol will soon be supporting the illicit trade.

4.1.2. Rehabilitation Centre on Campus

A large percentage of students (68%) maintain that there are facilities on campus for alcohol rehabilitation. This clearly indicates that the caregivers of institution have been aware of the tarnished reputation of alcohol consumption long before the CHE audit revealed the problem. For some reason, the problem has been allowed to fester and is definitely not under control.

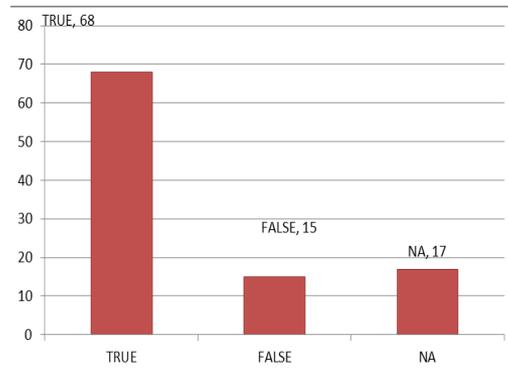


Figure 2: Rehabilitation centre for students who have an alcohol problem

4.1.3. Consequences of alcohol abuse

Figure 3 reveals the emotional state of students who are subjected to alcohol abuse on the campus. A sizeable percentage of students live in fear because of the behaviour of drunken students. Further research is necessary to determine if there is a positive correlation between those who live in fear and academic performance. However, it would not be unjust to infer that there is a strong possibility that this state of mind would provide fertile ground for poor performance.

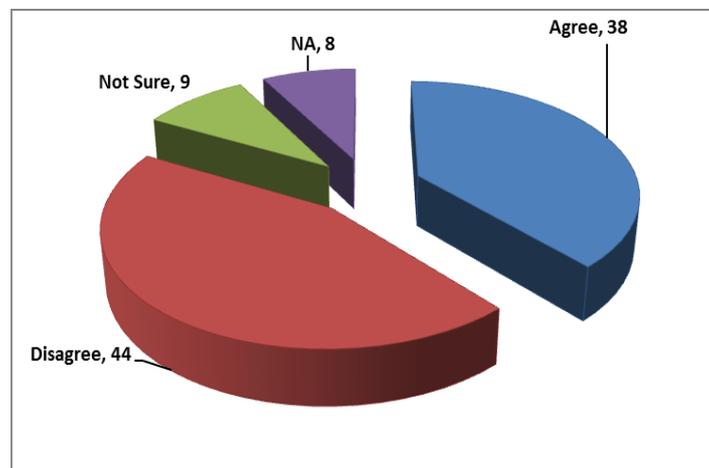


Figure 3: I live in fear because of the high prevalence of drunken students on campus

Figure 4 unfolds the fear which most parents would harbour about sending their daughter to a university hostel. Hostel students are definitely at risk of becoming victims of the prevalence of alcohol on campus. Merely closing down of taverns will not eradicate a problem which has grown deep roots into the system. Rape on campus may be only one of the sore effects of the abuse of alcohol on campus. Authorities would have to undertake further research to understand the full impact of alcohol on campus.

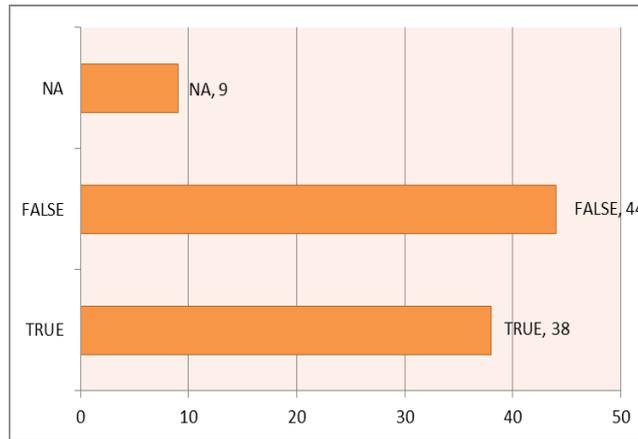


Figure 4: I know at least one female student who has been raped by a drunken male student

4.1.4. Admission of guilt

Figure 5 indicates the percentage of students who admitted that they consume alcohol on campus after the tavern was closed.

The figure creates the impression that here is an anomaly between the number of students who say that they consume alcohol on campus and those who claim they do not. Fear of contravening the rules could be a reason for not assuming personal responsibility for alcohol consumption. However, 14% of students who declare that they do consume alcohol on campus create sufficient grounds to embark on an anti-alcohol drive to protect the majority of students.

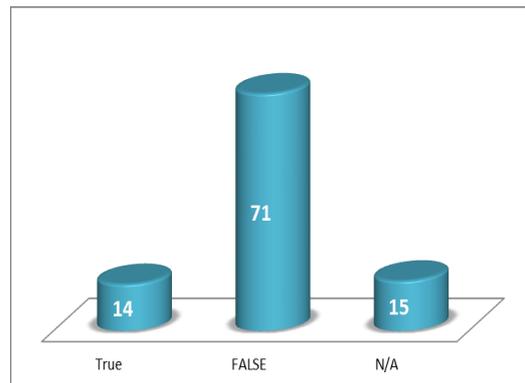


Figure 5: I consume alcohol on campus

5. Conclusion and recommendations

A place of learning should never allow students to indulge in alcohol consumption. Universities need to take a firm stand to ensure their campuses are alcohol free zones. A stance against alcohol on campus requires regular policing. This is a small price to pay to ensure the safety and success of our future generation.

The study recommends the following:

- The University must take cognisance of the fact that although the old tavern has been closed, this has not put an end to the social evils of alcohol on campus. Other measures have to be taken to eradicate alcohol consumption and drunkenness on campus.
- The University of Zululand must take immediate action to control the influx of alcohol into campus.
- Severe restriction pertaining to alcohol consumption must be enforced at University of Zululand.
- All universities should be a reflection of a global community and should not be dominated by a singular culture. University of Zululand needs to aspire to attain global status in terms of cultural, political and academic standing. This will ensure its long term viability.
- University of Zululand must design a well equipped counselling centre for alcoholics and victims of alcohol abuse. Parallel to this there ought to be effective alcohol education programs.

- There is a need to draw the attention of students to other forms of entertainment other than the consumption of alcohol.
- It is important that issues of alcohol use and abuse are addressed as a social disease.

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