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Alcohol Control at South African Universities

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School of Public Health

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Abstract

Background

It is known that university students frequently engage in harmful alcohol consumption with serious consequences for their health, well-being and academic performance. However, there are currently no national guidelines regarding alcohol control at universities and technikons in South Africa. The National Drug Master Plan (NDMP) outlines a national strategy to address substance abuse but provides limited specific guidance to higher education institutions (HEIs). Campus alcohol policies (CAP) in low- and middle-income countries have also received very little attention in the academic literature to date. This study aims to explore the policies and practices of alcohol control currently used in South African universities and technikons by drawing on the knowledge, experiences and perspectives of national stakeholders and HEI administrators.

Methodology

This qualitative study explored the views of national and HEI participants on alcohol control in South African HEIs. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 15 key informants (KIs) and then analysed using Thematic Network Analysis. Data was coded and the study themes were unearthed at different levels; thematic networks were then constructed to identify the overarching main themes.

Results

The majority of study participants believed that alcohol abuse was a significant problem in HEIs in South Africa. Commonly cited negative impacts related to compromised student safety, student health and academic performance. The respondents outlined a range of strategies currently implemented at HEIs to control alcohol access and consumption on campus. These focused mainly on providing information about the dangers of alcohol abuse, and regulating access to alcohol at university events through the issuing of event specific alcohol licenses. Only a few institutions have gone further in prohibiting alcohol industry marketing or sponsorship at their institutions.

KIs acknowledged the limitations of current initiatives, but identified a number of obstacles to improving alcohol control at HEIs in South Africa. One concern was the lack of national standardisation and

coordination of alcohol control initiatives at HEIs. Informants also noted that current national and institutional surveillance systems for monitoring the problem are under-developed.

Conclusion

Alcohol abuse and its effects are an important public health issue in HEIs. Alcohol abuse affects the safety, productivity and health of students. However, this study has found that alcohol control strategies at South African HEIs are currently poorly developed and coordinated at both the national and institutional levels.