



Summary 14th of February 2022

# University Forum

*Alcohol at the University*

# Alcohol at the University

Those who expected a glass of wine at the drinks after the Dies celebration were presented with an assortment of mocktails: the new alcohol policy of the UvA. Why the new policy? What does it entail? The meeting on the 14th of February opened with an introduction by Prof. Dr. Reinout Wiers, professor of psychopathology. Reinout informed us about the Dutch drinking culture, addiction risks and the effects on the mental and physical well-being of our students. If we look abroad, we see that our way of dealing with alcohol is not self-evident. If we want it different, we can.

After Reinout explained the reason for and necessity of a university alcohol policy, Karin Walstra-Timmermans, integrated safety policy officer, presented the 'ins and outs' of the new alcohol policy. The UvA endorses the national prevention agreement and is committed to (1) breaking the norm that alcohol is self-evident, (2) raising awareness of the negative consequences of excessive alcohol consumption and (3) providing more alternatives. The ultimate goal of the policy is to be able to take the next step towards the denormalization of alcohol based on both intrinsic motivation among students and staff and common values. The UvA does this mainly through communication campaigns and clear agreements with associations and caterers.

It is clear that something needs to change, but there is still a lot that remains open. Should we follow the national trend or should the university take a different path? Do employees have special responsibilities towards students? And what exactly is the responsibility of the study associations? On the 14th of February, the members of the University Forum discussed these questions, among other things. You can read the results of those conversations [here](#).

# Subquestions & Statements

In the Netherlands, alcohol is becoming less and less self-evident, a development that we have already seen with smoking. Should the UvA keep pace with this development, or does an institute such as a university have a greater responsibility? Or not at all?

1

Is 'dry january' an appropriate instrument to combat excessive alcohol consumption? Why/why not? And possibly: what would be other methods?

2

Statement: the UvA should also develop prevention policy for other aspects of health, such as ...

3

Statement: study associations should play an active role in reducing alcohol consumption.

4

In joint activities with employees and students, employees have an exemplary function in the area of alcohol consumption.

5

**In the Netherlands, alcohol is becoming less and less self-evident, a development that we have already seen with smoking. Should the UvA keep pace with this development, or does an institute such as a university have a greater responsibility? Or not at all?**

The extent of the university's responsibility depends on several things. To begin with, there are reasons to think that the responsibility of the organization with regard to alcohol is smaller than, for example, with smoking, because the harmfulness of moderate alcohol consumption is more limited to the individual compared to smoking, and therefore the responsibility also lies more with the individual. The negative effects of excessive alcohol consumption do have a greater impact on the environment, such as safety. This clearly increases the responsibility of the university to do something about it. This responsibility also increases as the distance from the university becomes smaller. Students and employees are themselves responsible outside working hours and off campus, but associations can be said to be an indirect part of the university. More information about the responsibilities of associations will follow in sub-question 4. Drinks organized by the UvA, especially when they take place on campus, bear a great responsibility to prevent excessive alcohol consumption.

Nobody doubts the importance of preventing excessive alcohol consumption, but it becomes more complicated when we have to ask ourselves whether the UvA should also do something about moderate alcohol consumption. There are several reasons to do so. The aim of staff drinks is to create a cosy, informal atmosphere. Alcohol can help with this, but is not the only option. It is good that the new alcohol policy underlines the importance of alternatives. In this way we also ensure that non-drinkers feel welcome at drinks. The exclusion dimension of alcohol policy is often overlooked.

Furthermore, serving alcohol at UvA events has a normalizing effect. Alcohol abuse almost always takes place outside the university, but the university can influence it indirectly through

this normalizing effect. The fact that the normal status of alcohol is not an absolute given is apparent from the major cultural differences between UvA students from different countries in how they view alcohol. In that sense, the university, as an international organization, is in a good position to take a critical look at the Dutch alcohol culture with a little more distance.

## **Is ‘dry january’ an appropriate instrument to combat excessive alcohol consumption? Why/why not? And possibly: what would be other methods?**

2

To assess the effectiveness of Dry January, it is important to first consider what exactly the target group is. The aim for the UvA appears to be mainly to reduce excessive alcohol consumption, but addiction experts emphasize that a campaign like ‘Dry January’ deals far too frivolously with something as serious as alcoholism. It puts a deadly serious problem in the same category as New Year’s resolutions.

That does not make the campaign a bad idea, by the way, because for the large group of drinkers without a real addiction, such a campaign can encourage reflection on their own consumption, something that would otherwise not be considered. How much do I drink exactly? Is that too much? Should I do something about that? It makes alcohol consumption a topic of conversation and that may have added value for this target group. Beyond that, we cannot expect much effect, after all, it is not a measure that clearly focuses on structural behavioral change, while that is exactly what is needed.

Unfortunately, we cannot empirically assess the effectiveness of the UvA campaign when the number of participating students is so limited. We will have to check whether this was due to the reputation or whether the enthusiasm among students is not great enough.

3

### **Statement: the UvA should also develop prevention policy for other aspects of health, such as ...**

If we think it is important to reduce alcohol consumption because of its harmful health effects and addiction risks, then it is not far fetched to wonder why we do not also make policy for, for example, sugar. Furthermore, ethical considerations play a role in the UvA's policy to make meat less attractive as an option for catering requests. In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the health risks of sedentary work. Such policies are gradually becoming more and more important, but it is currently inconceivable that it would eventually be prohibited, for example, to drink soft drinks on campus during working hours. So there is a boundary somewhere where the responsibility of the UvA ends and that of the individual begins, but where exactly?

In any case, we have not yet reached that limit, for example because there is a desire to pay more attention to health, allergies and the impact of animal products in the canteen offer. Banning anything unhealthy would go too far, but clearer labels would help consumers make better choices in a way that isn't patronizing. The UvA can set requirements for this in the tender procedure.

4

### **Statement: study associations should play an active role in reducing alcohol consumption.**

The differences between associations are large, but in general alcohol plays a more important role in student associations than study associations. We do have more control over study associations, because the ties with the university are much stronger. Because much of the excessive alcohol consumption takes place in associations and we think it is important that study associations are accessible to everyone from the relevant study programme, study associations should do their best to prevent alcohol abuse and improve accessibility for non-drinkers. The UvA can, if necessary, enforce this via the board grants.

However, we are confident that a good conversation with the boards can already achieve a lot. The aim is not to stop alcohol consumption, but to normalize non-drinking and to combat alcoholism.

Something the University Forum could not agree on is whether nudging or a ban (with a time lock) is the least patronizing. On the one hand, nudging leaves the ultimate choice to the student or staff member and thus respects their own responsibility, but the non-transparent nature of nudging measures also has something derogatory in it. That would actually make a clear ban less paternalistic, although at first glance this is not intuitive.

## **In joint activities with employees and students, employees have an exemplary function in the area of alcohol consumption.**

5

In principle, employees should be allowed to drink in the presence of students. Moderate alcohol consumption without excluding non-drinkers and preferably outside working hours should be possible as far as the University Forum is concerned. The presence of both students and staff does not significantly change this.

In a mixed group, this moderation is of extra importance. Informal occasions with both students and staff already carry a somewhat greater risk in terms of social safety. This risk increases when alcohol is also consumed and especially when it is done excessively. Employees have a responsibility to be vigilant about socially unsafe situations, something that can be made more difficult by alcohol.

Outside the UvA, for example on excursions, we should be able to rely on the professionalism of our employees instead of introducing new rules.











Vragen? Neem dan contact op met secretaris  
Roeland Voorbergen  
[universiteitsforum-bb@uva.nl](mailto:universiteitsforum-bb@uva.nl)