

## 6.8 Computerised drinking feedback challenges 'everyone's doing it' beliefs

- Findings** An interactive alcohol education CD-ROM tailored to student culture showed promise as an accessible harm reduction tool, but the internet may be the future for computer-based intervention.
- Study 1** assembled media and marketing specialists to create a CD with professional production standards, a non-judgemental tone, and harm reduction objectives, and which placed the student in control of the flow of information. *Alcohol 101* enabled students to compare their drinking and their estimates of other students' drinking against survey findings ('normative feedback'), to 'witness' the consequences of their decisions in risk situations, and to test their expectations of the social, emotional and physical consequences of different drinking patterns. 643 US students were randomly assigned to work through the CD, to a lecture or exercises on the consequences of drinking, or to no alcohol education. Beforehand all three groups gave similar responses concerning facts about drinking and related problems, responsibility for their own and their friends' welfare, when loss of control might occur, and their willingness to maintain self-control. Afterwards the CD group had significantly higher scores in all these areas and rated their education much more highly.
- Study 2** monitored reactions to a [Canadian web site](#) which assesses the user's drinking and related problems, compares these to national norms, and indicates the expected level of adverse consequences. Of the first 1729 visitors, 243 completed a web survey. Half scored as problem drinkers, of whom 53% were surprised at how much more they drank than the norm. Nearly 6 in 10 found the information useful.
- In context** Almost 30% of Britain's students 'binge' drink and 1 in 7 drink quantities hazardous to health. Attempts to moderate student drinking founder on college drinking culture. Group lectures are ineffective and individual interventions are expensive. Interactive programs enable individualised messages without one-to-one contact. Encouraging as these studies are, changes in attitudes and knowledge do not always mean changes in behaviour. However, normative feedback through conventional means has (not always) achieved drinking reductions in students, in heavy drinkers identified by screening, and in the general population. Such approaches rely on the desire to conform or on depriving drinkers of the comforting belief that others drink even more. They are likely to be less effective in subcultures which value conformity less or where unusually heavy drinking is considered a virtue. Choice of reference group is crucial: one too close to the drinker's own circle may not give the message that they drink more than others, one too distant may lack relevance.
- Practice implications** Computerised alcohol education has promise for the student population which typically avoids and can react badly to conventional approaches. The non-threatening vehicle, privacy, anonymity, and the ability to control the process, should make it an option students will use and respond to. Development costs are an obstacle but models are available in the UK and North America and there is no need for each institution to start from scratch. Especially if web-based, core elements can be adapted for particular regions or even particular colleges. Any approach should acknowledge that for most students drinking is a pleasurable and normal feature of college life and meet criteria for good educational practice with young people: provide new information in a thought-provoking, engaging, non-judgemental and non-threatening manner with explicit objectives developed in partnership with the intended recipients.
- Alcohol web sites can attract relatively large numbers among whom may be a high proportion of problem drinkers and women, but the interactive and multi-media content must be limited to prevent unacceptable response times.

**Nuggets 6.9 4.14**  
Prevention is a two-way process, issue 5

- Featured studies** 1 Reis J., et al. "Interactive multimedia preventive alcohol education: a technology application in higher education." *Journal of Drug Education*: 2000, 30(4), p. 399-421 2 Cunningham J.A., et al. "Providing personalised assessment feedback for problem drinking on the internet: a pilot project." *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*: 2001, 61(6), p. 794-798. Copies: for both apply Alcohol Concern.
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