

## The REACT (Responding to Excessive Alcohol Consumption in Third-level) project strongly supports the full enactment of the *Public Health (Alcohol) Bill*

*“In the last number of years, university and college authorities have expressed concerns on a number of issues – alcohol promotion practices on campus, high-risk drinking among students, the impact of this drinking pattern on student academic achievement, student personal problems and student attrition.”<sup>1</sup>*

These concerns expressed in 2001 are still relevant today, perhaps even more so. The findings from the 2002 to 2003 College Lifestyle Attitudinal National (CLAN) Survey in Ireland indicated that at least 60 in every 100 drinking occasions among students involved hazardous alcohol consumption. This suggests that hazardous alcohol consumption is now a cultural norm among university students in Ireland. A 2015 cross-sectional survey of University College Cork students found that 66% of students were drinking alcohol at hazardous levels. What is also alarming is the fact that a significant proportion of third-level students have an established pattern of high alcohol consumption before starting college, which is undoubtedly driven by the availability and accessibility of below cost beer and spirits.

With this in mind, the third-level sector has made significant moves to tackle this public health issue – including through the development of a recommended alcohol action plan for the university setting, the implementation of such an alcohol action plan in UCC since 2010, the decision by the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) to disassociate itself from Drinkaware in 2013, and the development and implementation of the REACT project in 2015. Is it clear, however, that in order to create significant cultural change around alcohol, meaningful, multi-sector policy and legislative changes are needed.

The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill is a vital step in Ireland’s attempts to tackle this issue. It sets out measures in the following areas: minimum unit pricing, strict separation of alcohol products in mixed trading outlets, compulsory health-labelling on alcohol containers, restrictions on advertising and promotions and its goal is to reduce average annual consumption in Ireland from 11 to 9.1 litres per person by 2020.

The REACT project strongly calls for the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill to be enacted in full and not to be watered down by the efforts of those who profit so much from the sale of alcohol. The World Health Organization’s 2001 Stockholm Declaration on Young People and Alcohol states: ‘Public health policies concerning alcohol need to be formulated by public health interests, without interference from commercial interests.’ Enacting this Bill will, we believe, help to protect the health and well-being of our young people and student population – it is time for public health to take priority over vested interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Framework for Developing a College Alcohol Policy, 2001.