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Student drinking cultures in tertiary education residential accommodation: A contextual research study

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Abstract

Background: In Australia, harmful drinking among students aged 18–24 years in tertiary education residential accommodation (TRA) remains high, placing students at higher risk of harms than non-TRA and university peers. **Aim:** The aim of this study was to identify the context-specific factors distinctive to TRAs that supported a heavy drinking culture among students. Conducted across three sites in Melbourne, Australia, the purpose of the study was to inform the development of context-specific harm reduction interventions for these sites. **Methods:** Five focus groups were conducted with 32 students to examine their lived experience of drinking within the distinctive environments of their TRAs. The data were examined using thematic data analysis. **Results:** Three themes were identified: (1) routine drinking in TRAs; (2) drinking for social inclusion in the TRA; and (3) TRA alcohol governance and students' self-regulation. The data show that factors contributing to these TRA drinking cultures included: liberty to store alcohol and drink on campus; freshers' belief that admission to the TRA was conditional on "partying hard"; students' belief that staff supported the TRA drinking culture; and poor dissemination and operationalisation of TRA alcohol policy. Collectively, these factors fostered an environment that enabled frequent and heavy alcohol consumption among residents.

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Conclusions: The TRA drinking cultures were supported by social and regulatory factors specific to these institutions and, in particular, by a liberal approach to TRA alcohol governance and poorly disseminated alcohol policy that made widespread heavy drinking possible. Drinking cultures in TRAs can be changed through appropriate interventions that include nuanced policy and effective governance.

Keywords
alcohol, Australia, drinking cultures, governance, students, university

Undergraduate university students ("students") in Australia and comparable countries engage in heavy, occasional drinking (Burns et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2018; Davies et al., 2018; Heradstveit et al., 2021; Hutton, 2012). Australian guidelines (NHMRC, 2020) recommend consuming no more than 10 standard drinks per week, and no more than 4 drinks per day. Associated harms include poor academic performance, vomiting, passing out, accidents and injuries, damage to property, and interpersonal and sexual violence (Broderick, 2017; Hallett et al., 2014). Traditional approaches to health promotion, harm reduction and health literacy have proven largely ineffective, while "top down" methods of health education, the failure to engage young people's "perspectives and values", and contradictory messages in alcohol policy have led to limited success (Davies et al., 2018; Hallett et al., 2014; Hutton, 2012; Osborn et al., 2007; Wilkinson & Ivsins, 2017). While emerging data suggest that overall alcohol consumption by young people is decreasing, heavy drinking – understood here as above the recommendation in the Australian national guidelines – remains high among 18–24-year-olds, the age most representative of undergraduate students (Caluzzi et al., 2020; Månsson et al., 2022; National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2020; Pennay et al., 2019). Our study was confined to addressing heavy drinking that poses a risk to health as defined in Australian guidelines (NHMRC, 2020). Some scholars have suggested that heavy alcohol use by students is not declining but rather delayed to the start of university (Heradstveit et al. 2021). Drinking by students in tertiary education residential accommodation (TRA) is greater than among other students and non-student peers (Hughes, 2012; Kypri et al., 2018; Strandberg et al., 2018; Wilkinson & Ivsins, 2017). Heavy drinking in TRAs appears to be especially difficult to address due to a mix of context-specific environmental factors such as local traditions of drinking to intoxication, inconsistently applied regulatory measures and co-habitation of large numbers of first-year students (Leontini et al., 2015; Broderick, 2017; Kypri et al. 2018). To better understand such factors, we conducted a contextual study in 2017–2018 across three TRA sites in Melbourne, Australia, designed to inform a subsequent, multilevel harm reduction intervention. A detailed account of the intervention can be found in a separate publication (Corney et al., 2020) and will not be reported here. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to report our findings from the contextual study. A larger, mixed-methods investigation was conducted in Australia (Schofield et al., 2014); findings from that inquiry prompted the proposed intervention and the contextual study presented in this paper. The aim of our study was to identify the factors that are constitutive of a heavy drinking culture among students in the participating TRAs. A detailed discussion of how TRA policies are "constitutive" of drinking cultures can be found in Leontini et al. (2017). Given the paucity of research on the subject outside the U.S., a further goal of this paper is to build on the body of literature on TRA drinking cultures.

Drinking cultures and the VicHealth Alcohol Cultures Framework

The VicHealth Alcohol Cultures Framework (the Framework), which supported our study, was developed to guide the design of harm reduction research and intervention for population groups engaging in harmful alcohol use. The Framework is "a conceptual tool [for] shifting drinking cultures to reduce alcohol-related harms" (VicHealth, 2016, p. 4). Conceptually, drinking cultures comprise a combination of factors, including drinking behaviours, norms, beliefs and attitudes towards "what is and what is not socially acceptable for a group of people before, during and after drinking" (VicHealth, 2016, p. 6). However, the Framework notes that "[t]here is no single drinking culture in Australia, but a mix of drinking cultures across different subpopulations" (p. 4). Moreover, drinking cultures can vary, transform and adapt because people's drinking changes in relation to membership to different groups, such as family or friends, and in response to broader shifts in structural, economic, regulatory and environmental factors.

Following an extensive review of the literature, Savic et al. (2016) note that drinking culture can refer to the different "meaning and use-values, the settings and places in which drinking occurs, and how drinking is controlled or regulated within a society" (p. 275). It can further refer to the way in which social factors, both individual and societal, interact to shape the drinking practices of individuals and groups, their decisions, choices and expectations around the consumption of alcohol, and the ways in which they negotiate and (re)constitute norms, meanings and values associated with alcohol. In addition, they note the "subcultures" and groups that distinguish themselves – and are identified as distinctive by others outside the group – as sharing particular social characteristics such as ethnicity, occupations and place of residence. Subcultures may display greater uniformity in relation to the meanings and use-values of alcohol than, for instance, the greater society. Yet, however distinctive and relatively stable in their norms and social characteristics, subcultures are not dissociated from the broader networks of actors and cultural factors, nor from society's regulatory landscape. In essence, drinking (sub)cultures are shaped by shared meanings, use-values, norms of behaviour and practice, while also connected to the way drinking "is enacted, performed or 'entrained' within a wider network of social, material and affective forces" (Duff, 2013, p. 267 in Savic et al. 2016, p. 279).

In light the variability of meanings associated with the concept, Savic et al. (2016) propose this as a "working definition" of drinking cultures that refers to their "multidimensional", "multiple and moving" nature. In this sense, the concept can be used to examine context-specific social factors that shape drinking such as (among others) age, social class/ethnicity, place of residence and settings, patterns of and norms around drinking, as well as responses to and negotiations with material, economic and regulatory factors that shape (for example) the night-time economy (Measham & Brain, 2005). For our study, we have drawn on this "working definition" of drinking cultures to examine the context-specific factors that shape students' drinking practices in TRAs.

Background literature on student drinking

Internationally, many psychosocial factors have been linked to youth drinking, including peer pressure, the need to belong or "fit in", sharing group values and identities, building self-confidence and relieving stress, transitioning to university and making friends, pleasure and fun, and just "to get drunk" (Burns et al. 2016; Christensen et al. 2018; Hallett et al. 2014; Leontini et al., 2015; Hutton, 2012; Larsen et al., 2016; Patrick and Maggs, 2008;

Strandberg et al., 2018; Tutenges & Hulvej Rod, 2009; Weitzman et al., 2003). Alcohol use among young adults is primarily social and, for many students, drinking is an inescapable part of university life (Elgàn et al., 2019; Tan, 2012). However, while "fitting in" and making friends (Broderick, 2017; Larsen et al., 2016) can drive heavy drinking, the pervasiveness of alcohol in campus leisure activities can also leave students with few options for social inclusion, and/or to feeling pressured into drinking (Hepworth et al., 2016). U.S. scholars Weitzman et al. (2003) have referred to TRAs as "wet environments" where group norms intersect other factors, including co-habitation of spaces with multiple functions (such as residential life, education and leisure activities on campus), as well as pubs and vendors surrounding campuses that are key to students' easy access to alcohol. Australian and New Zealand investigations, for example, have shown that alcohol outlet density in university neighbourhoods facilitates sales to students, while the nearby pubs, and university and TRA bars are often drinking "institutions" offering them cheaper drinks and special deals (Hughes, 2012; Kypri et al., 2010; Kypri et al., 2008). The greater rate of drinking among campus residents is also linked to a higher incidence of harm, including, though not limited to, poorer academic performance compared to non-TRA peers (Hepworth et al., 2018; Kypri et al., 2018; Strandberg et al., 2018; Wall et al., 2012; Wilkinson & Ivsins, 2017).

Poor information and inconsistent alcohol governance can be key barriers to harm reduction (Cremeens et al., 2011). University and TRA alcohol policy is often beset with inconsistency and ambiguity, which is reflected in students' contradictory attitudes to drinking and associated harms (Leontini et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2018; Osborn et al., 2007; Patrick & Maggs, 2008). One investigation in Sweden, for example, found that alcohol policies and guidelines developed by student unions were widely supported by students, but drinking among them remained heavy (Strandberg et al., 2018). Elsewhere, Larsen et al. (2016) report that heavy drinking was widespread among students in their investigation, yet Danish universities generally adopt a liberal approach to alcohol use, with policies that are poorly articulated, inconsistently implemented or virtually invisible. Ambivalent attitudes to alcohol governance can also be held by staff whose differing views on how to strike a balance between promoting self-regulation and enforcing institutional regulation can confound attempts at harm reduction. Staff in a Danish university, for example, acknowledged student drinking was problematic, but also believed that the use of alcohol was important to their self-confidence while transitioning to university; a small number of staff further stated that drinking did not pose a risk to students' academic performance (Christensen et al., 2018). An Australian study ("Project X") (Anon, 2015) conducted in TRAs found that alcohol was embedded in the social, spatial and temporal organisation of TRAs through their "micro-processes" – the organisation of everyday routines and services, the activities (including social and leisure) students conduct on campus and the policies designed to guide them. The study reported, however, that while in theory the TRAs' style of alcohol governance was designed to foster responsible drinking among students, in practice it was "internally and deeply conflicted" about the extent of regulation and freedom applied to students' alcohol use (Leontini et al., 2017, p. 45), leading to widespread and harmful drinking. Importantly, this study highlighted the rationalist approach adopted in TRA policy, which "typically attributes causality of problem behaviour to individuals and groups, and usually in terms of their failure to make what are understood as 'rational choices'" (Leontini et al., 2017, p. 35). The literature thus suggests that universities, but TRAs in particular, are potentially risk environments where social, physical and regulatory factors intersect to facilitate heavy drinking among students (Weitzman et al., 2003; Wilkinson & Ivsins, 2017).

Methods

Recruitment and ethics. We adopted purposeful sampling (Carpenter & Suto, 2008) for recruiting organisations and individuals, which involves a deliberate and resolved sourcing of data, and where processes and decisions are based on the rich information contained within the site, setting or individual participant. Three TRAs took part in the project, issuing letters of permission in accordance with the administering university's HREC protocol, and ethics clearance was obtained before commencing the study. The three TRA sites (S1, S2, S3) were selected on the basis of "convenience" to maximise opportunities for identifying suitable participants within the short timeline of the project (Wright & Sim, 2002). Other reasons included affiliation and proximity to public university campuses, mixed-gender resident cohorts and staff availability for access and assistance during the conduct of the study. The recruitment of focus group participants was facilitated by TRA student organisations using existing social media and established networks. Student leaders emailed and posted an open invitation to TRA residents to participate in the research. The email and posts included a plain language, explanatory statement about the project and information regarding participant consent. To protect anonymity, the TRAs cannot be named, and pseudonyms have been used for students.

The participating TRAs. The TRAs were located in Melbourne, Victoria. All were licensed, though only S1 and S2 had internal "bars" or common areas where drinks could be served during events. In S3, drinking was only permitted in students' rooms. Each site had approximately 300 mixed-gender undergraduate students, mostly domestic (urban, regional, rural and interstate), though S3 had a slightly higher international representation. Information on TRAs' leadership, governance structures and alcohol regulation can be found in Broderick (2017), Hepworth et al., (2016) and Walker (2016).

The participating students. To be included, students had to be aged 18 years and over, a resident at a participating TRA and consuming alcohol to any level and frequency. All but two (slightly older) students were undergraduates aged 18–21 years. Two non-drinking students were included when they "dropped in" at the focus group requesting to voice their views. The aggregate gender representation was roughly equal (M:F = 17:15). The Anglo-Celtic ethnicity was over-represented, with smaller numbers of Asian and other ethnicities (24:8). Approximately half were first-year students, the rest were senior, which included a small number of student leaders as "key informants in the field" (Suri, 2011, p. 66), often involved in organising events in TRAs, and informing freshers about TRA processes and procedures. The participants' residency ranged from two months to two years. With the exception of two non-drinkers, all other students consumed alcohol, though there was variation in quantity and frequency of drinking: 2–10 standard drinks per occasion among self-reported "moderate" and "heavy" drinkers; 1–2 standard drinks per occasion among "moderate-to-very-moderate" consumers; the range of frequency was 1–16 occasions per month. The relatively small sample size of TRAs and participating students is not intended to be representative.

Data collection

Our theoretical approach to data collection and analysis draws on Gubrium and Holstein's (2000, pp. 487–508) concept of "analytics of interpretive practice" to examine the "hows" and the "whats" of social reality. Put simply, we analyse how people constitute their realities (such as objects, events or relationships) intersubjectively, that is, in interaction with others. Guided by the literature showing the relational nature of drinking and the interactive construction of associated norms and pleasures among young people and in student environments (Hallett et al. 2014; Larsen et al. 2016), we selected the use of focus groups to collect the

data. To this end, we drew on Krueger and Casey's (2009) focus group methodology, which further enriches data with details such as co-constructions of events and breadth of perspectives that occur through group dynamics.

A discussion guide was developed comprising 11 open-ended questions with prompts. Questions were grouped into icebreakers (introductions, students' enrolment/discipline, length of residency), transition (focus on taste, reasons for and locations of drinking, approximate consumption levels and frequency of drinking) and discussion. The latter category focused on the following: perceptions, observations and experiences of alcohol use (their own and those of fellow residents) in their TRA; what struck students as most unexpected or unusual about alcohol use in their TRA, especially upon or shortly after arrival at their TRA; views and opinions on social events with or without alcohol; occasions when they drank more (including to intoxication) or less (what they considered to be in moderation); any knowledge of recommendations by national guidelines; and any knowledge or awareness of their TRAs' alcohol governance.

At the start of each session, the investigators explained the project goals, the aims of the contextual study, the procedures involved in the focus groups, including compliance with national privacy and confidentiality requirements, and consent. A total of five focus groups were conducted by two investigators at the sites during orientation week (O-week), comprising two groups (G1, G2) each at S1 and S3, and one group at S2. The groups comprised 5–8 participants, totalling 32 students across sites. The focus groups had a duration of 45 min, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using a professional transcribing service. They were timed to coincide with O-week celebrations and introductions of freshers to campus, allowing for analysis of the data ahead of the interventions held in 2017, 2018 and 2019. All students received a $20 supermarket voucher at the conclusion of the focus groups.

Data analysis

The transcripts were scrutinised through multiple readings by the lead author, discussed with the project team and cross-checked with field notes that included insights from the investigators' experiences of the groups' dynamics during the focus groups. Informed by earlier studies (Leontini et al., 2015, 2017; Weitzman et al., 2003; Wilkinson & Ivsins, 2017), we focused on the social, spatial and regulatory elements that can shape student drinking in TRAs. The data were coded manually by the first author and a second investigator based on participants' responses to key questions relating to the social aspects of drinking, practices associated with "heavy" or frequent drinking, including to intoxication, the spaces and occasions of drinking, and students' knowledge or awareness of TRAs' alcohol regulation. In the first instance, themes were identified based on frequency or "strongest responses" to each question in the discussion guide for each site and group. Among these were, for example, the cost of alcohol and the social situations of drinking (on-campus bars and rooms) as factors influencing choice of drinks and frequency. Sections that featured strongly in terms of a group's overall consensus *and* that were particularly pertinent to the subsequent development of the intervention were further examined and compared to responses from the other groups, and subsequently selected as the final themes (Guest, 2012). These were: routine drinking in TRAs; drinking for social inclusion in the TRA; and TRA alcohol governance and students' self-regulation. The findings were presented at project meetings, to which TRA representatives were invited, and at a conference.

Findings

Routine drinking in TRAs

The participants estimated that 70%–90% of drinking occurred in students' rooms. While pubs and venues were sought (primarily) when they offered "*whatever is on special*",

"*whatever is cheap*" and "*whatever makes you drunk quicker*", pre-purchased alcohol made drinking cost effective and convenient: "*We're pretty lazy. I don't know, I feel like we all go to [name of street] or here*" (Grace, S2G1). By "*staying in*", students could enjoy drinking without the logistics of venturing out: "*I normally drink in my room so it would be either just me or I will have a couple of friends over and we're just sort of getting together*" (Irene, S3G2). This relaxed approach to drinking in rooms fostered consumption that, even when not "heavy", became routine; alcohol was on hand regardless of the occasion, mood or reason for drinking:

> It's so easy, if I'm here - my mate's room is literally across the corridor - and if I finish my beer, I'm like, oh you know what, I'll have another one and go grab a glass of wine or another beer or something like that. (Ian, S2G1)

As these excerpts suggest, the short distance between rooms and other residents was reconfigured as a shared point of interaction in which alcohol was used to cement friendships, intimacy and familiarity. In S1 and S2, drinking extended beyond the bedrooms and into the common room, corridors and lawns, "*Basically you're allowed to drink anywhere except the library*" (Adam, S1G1). Residents could "hang out" with others while drinking, or to "check out" when to drink and with whom:

> So, if we're going to have [event name] on [x-weeknight] we usually have a formal dinner first, so we will get ready in someone's room, maybe have a couple of drinks … and then we drink at the formal dinner in the dining hall, and then after that you go to someone's room and keep drinking and get ready to go out to the pub down the road. So, most of the drinking would be done by just floating around people's rooms and socialising, going to different floors and seeing what everyone else is doing, and then going to the pub. (Claire, S1G2)

As Claire describes, spaces for drinking could be created or set up for an occasion, adapted for the event, then restored to their more mundane role. For example, "the bar" in one site was located in a corner of the common room that, outside of functions, could be used as a meeting space without the sale of alcohol. In S3, drinking was permitted only inside students' rooms so students practiced pre-drinking before going out:

> Saturday we'd just won a grand final so after the game I had a couple [in the room] and then we went to our footy club and we drank there. It was about 2 [am] when we tried getting into one of the clubs, but they wouldn't let me in because I was too drunk. (Ross, S3G2)

Though drinking in this TRA was largely confined to rooms, two international students reported bumping into intoxicated residents in the corridors and lifts, or of hearing rowdy get-togethers in other rooms:

> Sean: You're not allowed to have exposed alcohol in the lobby and such but in your room you can drink however much you want as long as you don't disturb other people.
>
> Sylvia: You can't drink in the common areas but in your room you can do whatever you want.

Thus, while there were fewer on-campus events at S3, alcohol-induced revelry was essentially the worst-kept secret. The data in this section show that student drinking was frequent and even routine; drunk or intoxicated students were a common site, and among our participants many spoke of their leisurely drinking as common practice. Easy access to cheap alcohol was made possible through pre-purchasing and storage on campus, and this

convenience facilitated frequent and even heavy drinking among students.

Drinking for social inclusion in the TRA

TRAs have their own institutional identities that can include a history of academic excellence, sporting achievements and a considerable number of traditions that are valued by students and staff. Thus, from their day-to-day routines to their leisure and drinking traditions, students inhabit their TRA as a temporary but cherished "microcosm" (Leontini et al., 2019, p. 283) that meets their educational and residential needs alongside a variety of leisure activities. Within the latter category are parties, celebrations, sports and cultural events. In our study, participants reported that most events included alcohol, generating an expectation that these were occasions designed *for* drinking, or as one student put it, "*at every function [drinking] is just a given*" (S1GI). Claire, from S1G2, was openly sceptical of "dry" events, "*If most of our functions were dry, I don't think they'd get many people attending*" (S1G2). Dry events, described by some as "*boring*", had to compete with those that included alcohol by offering "*something special*", such as a guest speaker, a novel activity or food. Alternatively, explained Fiona (S1), students would pre-drink in their rooms and "*turn up a little bit tipsy*" at the dry event. For many young people, alcohol is a "social glue" or "lubricant" that helps transform shyness and doubt into self-confidence, paving the way to feeling included (Hallett et al., 2014; Tan, 2012). Likewise, in the TRAs, students participated in drinking traditions and functions aimed at helping them establish a sense of belonging. Crucial to this process was the relationship between senior students and freshers. For example, some TRAs organised O-week activities that had little or no alcohol. However, after O-week, participants noted, "*when all the seniors were there with the freshers, how crazy drunk everyone got then*" (S2). Several participants described being surprised by senior students' frequent drinking:

> Grace: I knew the events would be huge and I was not shocked by how much people drank … but [by] how often in a week it would happen. I thought it'd be once a week you'd have one big event and everyone would go crazy and then recover for the rest of the week. But in some weeks, it was three or four times a week that people were getting plastered for days in a row.
>
> Luke: I was going to say the frequency as well, it was something I couldn't have been prepared for.
>
> Jack: Yeah, what surprised me was the fact that pretty much every event is like centred around drinking… while I really enjoy getting drunk, I was very surprised that very, very few events actually don't have drinking at its core.

Led by senior students who introduced freshers to the TRAs' social environment, new residents quickly learned that the route to belonging involved heavy and frequent drinking:

> I was surprised by some of the seniors; one event a week wasn't enough for them, they wanted to go out on the weekend as well. And so getting swept up in that, I am now used to that, and get confused when there's less than three events a week. (Grace, S2G1)

Statements like these were common; yet besides describing events with a prevalence of alcohol, they imply a sense of urgency, as if the process of acculturation into TRA drinking was not only fun but essential. Students were thus "swept up", filled with the urge to "*go along*" with the revelry of their TRA's drinking culture. For first-year residents in particular, alcohol-infused customs marked the transition from the uncertain status of fresher to that of membership to a community with a long and established history (see also Tan, 2012). For example, several participants in S1G2 believed that fitting in with the party culture of their TRA was an institutional *expectation*. While stopping short of suggesting that their TRA

insisted they *ought* to drink, given the ubiquity of alcohol, "being social" was interpreted as a pre-requisite for admission to their TRA:

> Debbie: In my interview I got asked "How highly do you value your studies? How highly do you value your social life?" and then after I responded, the indication I got was they want people who are going to participate in the social events and not just sit in their room and study. That's the kind of people they want when they're picking. So, they're not explicitly linking that to drinking but I would say they want people who study hard but also socialise hard … it was definitely indicated to me that if you just want to sit in your room and study then maybe [S1] isn't the place for you.

> Claire: Because they say there's so many people that want to get in, there's so many [TRAs] across the road which have such a different culture and Harry you said attending [S1] is a privilege and if you're attending [S1] you have to contribute to the [TRA] culture, and that's really [an] aspect that they like to recognise.

For these students, the TRA "picked" students on the basis of their capacity and willingness to fit into the social culture, which was also, essentially, a drinking culture. Such statements suggest there was a pre-existing culture of drinking to intoxication that new applicants were expected to embrace. This added to the attraction of the TRA; in-house "clubbing", in other words, was part of the TRA's prestige and desirability. Moreover, the above excerpts show that students believed they were expected to show loyalty to the institution and solidarity toward (drinking) residents past and present. By participating in the drinking traditions, they were not only "fitting in" and being included into the TRA culture but contributing to its enduring history. In this sense, the TRAs' drinking culture was not an accidental or unintended outcome, but rather understood, experienced and celebrated by students as the route to belonging in *their* institution's history and exclusivity.

The data in this section show that, for students, feeling included and belonging to the TRA culture and history were contingent on drinking frequently and heavily ("socialising hard"). Several participants across the groups stressed that no one "forced" anybody to drink, yet this indicates that they understood peer pressure to drink in a narrow sense, more akin to coercion. This is of concern in light of research showing that pressure to drink can come in the form of enticement that, often, operates at the level of young people's anxieties around [not] belonging or fitting in with their peers (Hepwroth et al., 2016; Wilkinson & Ivsins, 2017).

TRA alcohol governance and students' self-regulation

All TRAs have alcohol policies that instruct, in one way or another, on what is acceptable behaviour around the use of alcohol. In this section, we examine what students understood to be alcohol regulation and how they performed self-regulation. Student awareness of alcohol governance in TRAs is critical to the goal of harm reduction (Cremeens et al., 2011); to be effective, however, alcohol policies should be disseminated and applied consistently (Wall et al., 2012; Weitzman et al., 2003). According to staff in our study all students were given hard copies or links to their TRAs' policies on arrival. An overview of TRA policies was conducted in previous studies and reported elsewhere (Corney, 2016; Leontini et al., 2017). When asked during the focus groups, however, participants could say little about these policies; as one student put it, "*I think it is safe to say most [students] probably haven't read it*" (S2G1). Across all focus groups, students reported that "information" on alcohol use was circulated "*by word of mouth*". There were vague understandings of "the rules" articulated through expressions such as [it is] "*understood*", "*informal*", "*not written anywhere*", "*something*

you're told" or a "*chat*" with staff or student leaders on arrival at the TRA and/or during O-week:

> In O-week we are told that we're allowed to drink but you have to understand how much you can drink yourself and not to go so far that you're throwing up everywhere … you need to make sure you're still able to control yourself and not do anything stupid that could injure you, anyone else or TRA property especially if you get to the stage where you are like passing out and throwing up everywhere. (Gavin, S1G1)

"Self-control" was understood to be a TRA's goal of promoting students' development into self-regulated adults and this meant having a choice to be treated as adults rather than minors:

> Debbie: [I]t's more a conversation that you have with the [student] leadership team, a discussion [about] your choices; you're an adult now and you choose how you want to consume alcohol.
>
> Claire: And they highlight to you at the beginning you're an adult now you're in charge of your own life … and it's your responsibility, so … that's possibly why [management] lay low with wanting to know so much [about our drinking] because they enforce that we are adults. (S1G2)

Yet the assumption that poor self-control is the cause of harm presupposes a policy approach framed in terms of cause and effect; intoxication and moderation are presumed to be, respectively, the problem and the solution in relation to harm reduction, independent of other sociocultural and institutional factors, such as the normalisation of frequent drinking on campus. For their part, students, interpreted self-control to mean the freedom to drink heavily without incurring or even becoming the harm to others:

> [T]his isn't a policy written down anywhere, but we try and encourage to the best of our ability that if you are going to drink heavily it's not to a point where you're a harm to yourself or potentially other people. But that's not a policy, it's not written down somewhere or in a handbook. (Ian, S2G1)

Ian was a student leader whose task was (among others) to inform students and, in particular, freshers about the rules not "written anywhere"; however, as this excerpt suggests, the rules presupposed a collective agreement to the TRA giving and students taking permission to drink, even to intoxication. This permission to drink with relative abandon was further supported by the invisibility of not just the policies but management. The participants were certain that staff were aware of the many occasions in which students drank heavily but that management chose not to intervene. Participants from S1G2 interpreted this as an unspoken collusion between students and staff:

> Claire: Principals go home at 4 o'clock and they know that we drink, but I don't think they know the extent to which we actually drink. So, if they were to have a policy on alcohol I think it would be a lot different to how we actually behave.
>
> Harry: I think admin are very "ignorance is bliss". If they wanted to find out how much we drink, they could have easily found out but they kind of turn a blind eye on how much we drink.

Decisions around drinking do not happen in a vacuum; reward and punishment are not the (only) factors implicated in drinking cultures (Savic et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant to youth drinking, which is known to be contradictory and contextual (Davies et al., 2018; Osborn et al., 2007; Patrick & Maggs, 2008). To illustrate this point, several participants said they sometimes planned to drink in

moderation yet remaining committed to this was difficult:

> There are nights where I plan to have a moderate night but you know it happens you either underestimate how much you've drunk or overestimate how much you've eaten, or when the punch is a lot stronger than you think it is … there's definitely been times when I've been distracted by talking to friends and just drinking, not noticing how much I am actually drinking, so there's definitely been occasions where I've had some unplanned big nights. (Fiona, C1G2)

> Yeah, there's been nights where I wouldn't even plan to drink at all but then someone will convince you, or you will be planning on drinking but you drink too much, you didn't plan to get that smashed but you did. Um, sometimes we'll be drinking and say "Oh we're in for a big one". (Paul, C1G1)

The "big one" referred to occasions of drinking to excess, even to intoxication. These occasions included (among others) 21st birthday celebrations, traditions such as annual balls or other local customs known to draw most students. Other "big nights" known to students were mid and end of term events that were highly anticipated and "hyped up" as the last chance to have fun with their friends until their return to campus; such occasions were known for the deliberate plan to drink to intoxication. What these occasions had in common was the reputation for intoxication and the marketing of alcohol ahead of the event. Claire calculated which nights were worth waiting for, but this did not necessarily involve periods of abstinence ahead of the big event, rather a mix of moderation and heavy drinking across the week:

> I plan my week around which nights I want to have a big night. So, if there's going to be a good function on, I'd probably have a quieter pub night to save myself for the following night's event if it's going to be a good function. But if I don't think it's going to be a very good function, I usually go to the pub and have my big night that night and plan my study around when I want to get drunk. (Claire, S1G2)

Knowing about the regularity and frequency of formal and informal events shaped the "choices" of students. In essence, these predictable "big nights" were occasions for "calculated hedonism" (Szmigin et al. 2008), in which heavy drinking was expected, enjoyed and performed as an integral part of TRA living. Nevertheless, drinking was not always uncontrolled or left to chance. We asked the participants, for example, what circumstances or reasons might shape decisions about whether to drink heavily or in moderation. Responses ranged from the cost of drinks to the allure of campus events. Several students, for example, drank in moderation in city bars and restaurants where costly wines, cocktails and spirits imposed a budget on spending; in other cases, travelling to and from the TRA required being "conscious" and alert, as well as observing venue rules around intoxication. Other students referred to the company they were in:

> If I'm going out with friends I don't spend much time with, I might go to the bar and just have one or two because I'm still remaining conscious of who I am and what I'm saying to them so I'm not embarrassing myself … But at the TRA, anyone you hang out with you can have a big night with. (Debbie, S1G2)

> I try to drink less if I'm upset about things like school or life or whatever, I try to stick to the code of only drinking when I'm in a good mood … I drink a lot more at events that are very specifically advertised as alcoholic … advertised as being this is a night you're supposed to get fucked up on. (Keith, S2G1)

Taken together, the data in this section suggest TRA policies and other regulatory measures were not clearly disseminated, discussed or enforced by TRA management. The students' perception was that management were concerned with reducing the risks of serious antisocial behaviour or damage to property but that they adopted an arm's length approach to institutional alcohol regulation. From this, students interpreted the "informal chat" with student leaders as a manifestation of a liberal framework in TRAs that turned on self-control. But while students planned when and how much to drink, they did so in relation to the traditions, spaces and people they knew and cared about. That is to say, what motivated students into planning when and how much to drink was not a response to institutional rules framed in a rationalist notion of self-regulation. Rather, students made choices through a combination of desire (for bonding, pleasure) and capacity to fit in with the TRA drinking culture while preserving the "other things" that mattered to them.

Discussion

The aim of the contextual study was to identify the unique, context-specific factors that were constitutive of the drinking cultures in the participating TRAs. Its purpose was to inform the development of interventions planned for the TRAs. Three themes were identified for their frequency and relevance to the aims of the study: routine drinking in TRAs; drinking for social inclusion in the TRA; and TRA alcohol governance and students' self-regulation. In the broadest sense, the data show that students drank frequently and/or heavily during the many extracurricular events and even at "non-events", such as hanging out in rooms or elsewhere on campus. The students' freedom to pre-purchase and store alcohol in their rooms made consumption on campus both cost-effective and convenient, leading to opportunistic, routine drinking. Yet, these kinds of measures adopted by students were made possible by a liberal approach to alcohol governance on campus aimed at encouraging self-regulation. As previous research has shown (Leontini et al., 2015, 2017), the outcome of such a regulatory approach in TRAs is heavy and frequent drinking among residents. A close analysis of the data yielded a number of novel findings.

First, in S1 and S2, there was an expectation that alcohol *would* be served at most social events. For students, this meant that routine drinking was normative and indissociable from TRA living. By contrast, the absence of an on-campus bar and the prohibition on drinking in common areas in S3 led to fewer large parties and on-campus events, but students nonetheless drank heavily in their rooms and wandered into common areas while intoxicated. Second, participants from all sites reported that senior students continued to drink heavily and frequently. This is contrary to prior research (Bewick et al., 2008; Broderick 2017; Hughes, 2012; Rickwood et al., 2011) reporting that drinking is heaviest among freshers, with a tendency toward reduced consumption as they progress through their candidature. The findings in our study instead support the view by Heradstveit et al. (2021) that students' drinking *increases* as they enter university and that, unlike their non-university peers (Caluzzi et al., 2020), the rate of consumption in the participating TRAs was not falling. Third, TRAs do have policies on alcohol use (Corney, 2016; Leontini et al., 2017); while there is variation to alcohol governance across institutions, as licensed premises, they are legally required to have regulatory tools for protecting the health and well-being of students. Our data show, however, that from the students' perspective, such policies were neither visible nor operationalised. This shaped students' understanding and experience of the TRA alcohol culture as permissive, further enabling heavy and frequent consumption.

Fourth, freshers were instructed to make "adult choices" around alcohol and to know their limits, the goal being to foster their development into self-regulated adults. However, while the meaning of "excessive drinking"

was left to individual interpretation (Biagioni et al., 2017), this approach suggests that TRA policy conceptualises "problem" drinking as being confined to individuals who (presumably) could not or would not "know their limits" (see also Hutton, 2012; Leontini et al., 2017). Fifth, students assumed that in order to belong to the TRA history and culture, drinking was *expected*. While many had heard about the reputation for partying in TRAs, the participants from one site believed that admission to their institution was conditional on residents being social drinkers. For freshers in particular, this meant that campus drinking was not only about pleasure and sociality, but about supporting the institution's prestigious history and traditions. In a sense, participants held the belief that freshers – like seniors – ought to somehow "pitch in"; drinking and partying were about sustaining the culture of the TRA. Sixth, the participants believed that staff colluded with students in sustaining the drinking culture of the institution. From the students' perspective, their heavy and frequent drinking was so obvious – and the rules so vague – that staff were very likely aware but "laying low" and "turning a blind eye" to residents' use of alcohol. The final important finding is that students did "self-regulate" their drinking, but not in response to the "unwritten rules". Instead, they planned when to moderate their drinking and, conversely, when to drink heavily and even to intoxication in response to, respectively, the aims and the relationships they wished to achieve and preserve, and the events that cemented their belonging to the TRA drinking culture. While planned moderation was not always successful, the "calculated hedonism" (Szmigin et al., 2008) was, in terms of both quantity and frequency of consumption. This, as recent research suggests, departs from the drinking practices of non-TRA students and youth more generally whose heavy occasional drinking has declined (Kypri et al. 2018; Strandberg et al., 2018; Wilkinson & Ivsins, 2017).

To conclude, many of the psychosocial reasons for drinking that are common among young people were relevant to our cohort – such as pleasure, fun, belonging and making new friends. However, the findings from this contextual study show that TRA drinking culture was also constituted by material, cultural and regulatory factors specific to these institutions. Thus, while students transformed TRA spaces – including campus and neighbouring bars – into "drinkscapes" (Wilkinson, 2016), they did so with the (apparent) consent of staff. These multiple factors show that drinking cultures are "multidimensional" (Savic et al. 2016) and dynamic. Yet, the significant occurrence of heavy and frequent drinking is compelling evidence that tailored interventions are required to support student well-being. Drinking cultures in TRAs can be changed through appropriate interventions, nuanced policy and effective governance; suggested examples of regulation include imposing restrictions on cheap or subsidised alcohol, promoting alcohol-free activities, and clearly defining roles and responsibilities for reducing risk (Kypri et al., 2018; Stafford & Keric, 2017; Weitzman et al., 2003).

The present study has some limitations: first, the non-representational number of participating TRAs; second, the study does not capture the diversity of TRA governance structures in Australia, including how they regulate alcohol on campus (there are over 200 TRAs in Australia with different governance structures); and third, the participation of TRAs from metropolitan Melbourne only, with a notable absence of institutions from regional Victoria. We also selected not to focus on the impact of demographic characteristics, such as gender, on account of cohort size and the feasibility of developing more complex interventions in the available time and TRA participation rate. In addition, this contextual study focused only on students' interpretation of alcohol policy without a parallel focus on the perspectives of TRA staff or an analysis of their policies. However, as noted earlier, two of the investigators had conducted prior inquiries into TRA policies, and their expertise informed the development of this project. To the extent that the

aim of both the research team and the VicHealth Alcohol Cultures Framework was to develop nuanced harm reduction interventions with direct participation from students, the contextual study was intentionally designed to examine the students' interpretations of drinking on campus and existing TRA regulatory tools and their effectiveness. Thus, the noted limitations notwithstanding, the strength of the contextual study lies in its examination of how students recognised and explained the drinking cultures of their institutions.

The significance of the findings from our study is twofold. First, it informed and contributed to the design of the subsequent three-stage intervention, which included developing instruments for reducing access to alcohol and stakeholder-participation to TRA policy development (see Corney et al., 2020). Second, the findings build on the domestic and international literature on the subject of drinking cultures in TRAs.

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