

**A Qualitative Evaluation of the Personal, Academic & Professional
Impact of a Choose Life Project Event on Students
in Universities in England**

Dr Karen Corteen, Dr Amy Hughes-Stanley and Georgia Marriott-Smith

Changing Hearts & Minds



The impact of choose
life project events
in higher education

**SUMMARY
REPORT**

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WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK

Steve Duffy and the volunteers from the Choose Life Project, the student participants and University staff

Acknowledgements

We owe a great deal of gratitude to Steve Duffy, Founder and Manager of the Choose Life Project. We are thankful for his invitation to evaluate the Choose Life Project and for the constant support he has provided us with during this process. We would also like to thank Dr Cassie Ogden from Liverpool John Moores University and Dr Michelle Jolley and Dr Sarah Nixon from the University of Winchester for being part of this collaborative evaluation process. We would like to thank the LJMU QR Policy Support Fund for the funding that supported part of this research and the Choose Life Project Steering Committee for funding the design of the Summary Report. . Also, thanks to Leslie Hughes for his creative input and for desiging the Summary Report.

We are also extremely thankful to all the volunteers who took part in the Choose Life Project events: Simon Brown, Billy Dowdall, Victoria Cooper, Rachael Edwards-Papesch, Gary Groves, John Hart, Denise Jones, John Swanick, and Olivia Woods¹. Your presence, your powerful life stories and your experiential narratives were invaluable. We would like to acknowledge and thank all the University staff who hosted Choose Life Project events. We would also like to thank all the students who gave up their time to attend a Choose Life Project event and take part in the research. Without both, this research project could not have happened.

Dedication

At the heart of the Choose Life Project are the volunteers who are recovering from substance use and addiction and we dedicate this evaluation to them. We would especially like to dedicate this evaluation to Billy Dowdall and all the other people whose lives have been sadly lost as a result of substance use and addiction. Finally, we would also like to dedicate this to the family and friends who have been or who are impacted by substance use and addiction.

¹ Please note that volunteers have given consent for their names to be shared.



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Karen is a Senior Lecturer in Criminal Justice, she is also a lead editor of and contributor to *Forensic Psychology, Crime and Policing: Key Concepts and Practical Debates* which brings together many issues that are relevant to this evaluation (2023, Policy Press). Karen is also an experienced researcher and she has experience of researching the impact of critical pedagogies on the lives and education of criminology students. From this research she has co-authored a refereed academic article on this subject in the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*.

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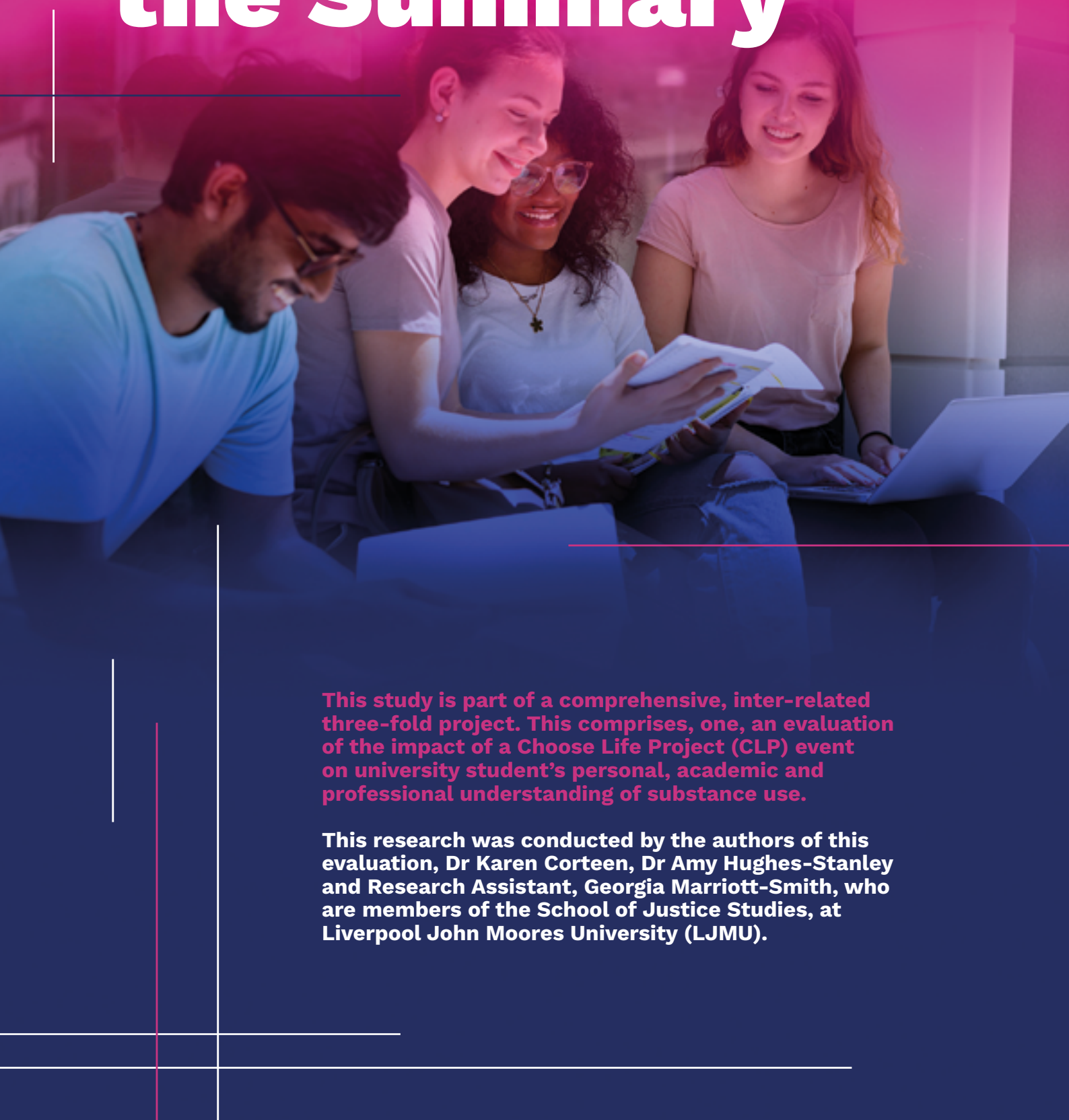
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About the Research & the Summary



This study is part of a comprehensive, inter-related three-fold project. This comprises, one, an evaluation of the impact of a Choose Life Project (CLP) event on university student's personal, academic and professional understanding of substance use.

This research was conducted by the authors of this evaluation, Dr Karen Corteen, Dr Amy Hughes-Stanley and Research Assistant, Georgia Marriott-Smith, who are members of the School of Justice Studies, at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU).

The second element of the three-fold project is an evaluation of the impact of a CLP event on pupils in secondary schools. This evaluation was conducted by Dr Cassie Ogden also based at LJMU in the Department of Sociology. The Choose Life Schools Evaluation Project – Summary Report can be accessed here: <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/23395/>

The third element of the three-fold project is an evaluation of the impact of the CLP on volunteers. This evaluation was carried out by Dr Michelle Jolley and Dr Sarah Nixon who are both based in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Winchester. The volunteers evaluation titled, 'I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for Choose Life': An Evaluation of Volunteers' Perspectives on How Choose Life Supports Recovery and Desistance can be accessed here: [10.13140/RG.2.2.29003.57127](https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/10.13140/RG.2.2.29003.57127)

The researchers have collaborated to independently evaluate the impacts of the CLP on university students, school pupils and CLP volunteers. This was with the intention of using this evidence-based research to build on existent good practice within CLP and to identify where improvements can be made. It is also hoped that policy and practice change will be made beyond the CLP's operations.

The Universities evaluation entailed a qualitative, online, open-ended question survey with 31 students in five universities in England. The students were studying criminal justice and/or criminal justice-related programmes. As well as the open-ended survey, the research also entailed an ethnographic element in which the researchers observed and interacted with the study's participants and volunteers at the CLP events. This research began at the request of practitioner Steve Duffy, the Choose Life Project Founder and Manager. Steve asked for an evidence-based evaluation of the Choose Life Project (hereafter CLP) in order to explore its impacts and the extent to which it makes a difference to the students who experience it. The CLP provides substance use and addiction education for young people, students and professionals and it has done so in the community for over 15 years (Choose Life Project, 2020).

² In the open-ended survey students were asked about 'substance misuse'. Substance misuse is a term that is commonly used to convey the harmful use of drugs, including alcohol, and it is a term that student participants would understand and be familiar with. When discussing student participants responses, the original terminology will be used. However, in the rest of this report we take a more nuanced, person-centred approach by using the term substance use and by using the language of 'people who use substances'. This puts the person first and aims to be non-judgmental.

In a nutshell, the CLP is concerned with educating about drugs and alcohol, however it is far more than this and it is different to any other drugs and alcohol education. CLP events educate about addiction, how addiction happens, the harms of addiction, the pains and tribulations of recovery, and desistance from harmful behaviour. In this respect it is unique.

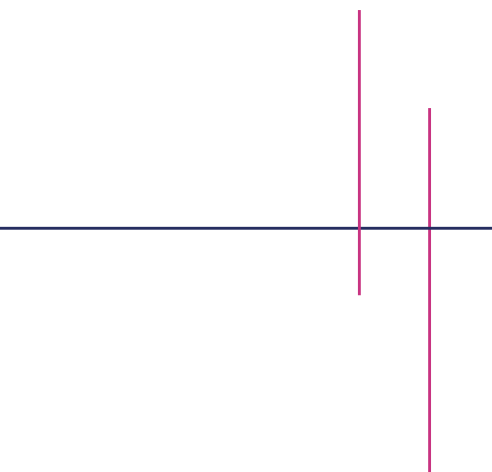
Since 2008, the CLP has educated over 50,000 young people in schools, Youth Offending Teams and pupil referral units. The project has educated over 5,000 police recruits in Merseyside, Lancashire, Cheshire, North Wales and Greater Manchester. They have also trained people from diverse fields including Criminal Justice, Job Centre Plus, Park Wardens, Probation, Psychology, Social Work and national and regional charities.

Steve's request for an evaluation was timely as it coincided with Dame Carol Black's independent review which focused on drugs, drug use, prevention, treatment and recovery (Black, 2021). Black's review highlighted that there are evidence gaps, including what works to deter people taking drugs. It recommended more research into interventions regarding the prevention of and responses to drug use. In this report we have referred to drug use as substance use and this includes alcohol use. We also preferred to discuss 'people who use substances' rather than 'substance users'². Importantly, the Black (2021) review also highlighted the role of education in preventative interventions, and it recommended that staff working with people with drug dependence be appropriately trained. In addition, it recommended bringing researchers and practitioners together. This research project, therefore, addressed some of the issues raised in the Black (2021) review including its recommendations. As such, the report is an evaluation of the impact of a community intervention concerned with addiction education, substance use prevention and recovery, and desistance from substance use.

This summary report encapsulates some of the key sections of a more comprehensive and detailed final report that has been produced as a result of this research (see Corteen, Hughes-Stanley and Marriott-Smith, 2023 and Corteen, Hughes-Stanley, Marriott-Smith and Ogden, 2024). It comprises five sections, the first of which is an executive summary which is followed by three case studies that provide an overview of three student participants perceptions of substance use before and after the CLP event. Next, the key findings and recommendations from the research will be presented. Finally, there are five recommended readings and a reference list.



Section 01 |
Executive
Summary

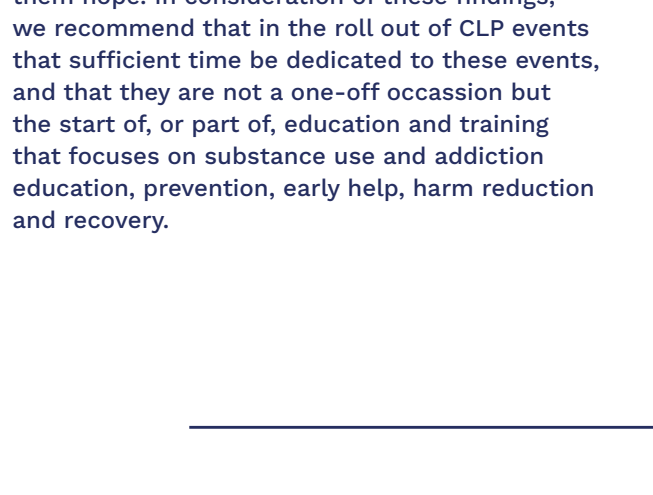


This Choose Life Universities Evaluation Project (hereafter the evaluation) contains the findings from research into the personal, academic and professional impacts of a Choose Life Project (CLP) event on students studying criminal justice and/or criminal justice-related programmes, conducted by researchers at Liverpool John Moores University. The CLP provides substance use and addiction education for young people, students and professionals and it has done so in the community for over 15 years. It also educates about the recovery journey and the desistance process. The research explored the impacts of a CLP event and the extent to which it made a difference to students that experienced it.

This evaluation also coincided with Dame Carol Black's independent review of drugs, drug use, prevention, treatment and recovery (Black, 2021). Black's (2021) review highlighted that there are evidence gaps, including what works to deter people from taking drugs. It recommended more research into interventions regarding the prevention of and responses to drug use. This evaluation was an attempt to begin to address the evidence gaps in relation to the impact of substance use and addiction education, as well as education about recovery and desistance.

The evidence base for this evaluation comprised a thematic analysis of 31 qualitative, online open-ended surveys completed by university students in five universities in England, together with ethnographic observations at CLP events. The first CLP event and data collection began on Monday 14th February 2022. The final CLP event and data collection process took place on Friday 28th October 2022.

A preliminary analysis of the data gathered from the CLP events was conducted and this was published in March 2023 in a preliminary report. To summarise the findings of the preliminary report, the research demonstrated that creative pedagogical methods in substance use education, such as role play and the sharing of experiential narratives, had positive impacts on those who participated in CLP events. The research highlighted that students' awareness of attitudes towards and responses to substance use, addiction and people dependent on substances can positively change personally, academically and professionally as a result of attending a CLP event. CLP events provide a powerful opportunity to increase understandings of substance use, addiction, recovery and desistance and therefore, these events should be rolled out locally and nationally for schools, universities, and professional bodies. Those who influence policy in this area and people who come into contact with people who use substances as part of their practice or profession should also attend a CLP event. The research also found that attendance at a CLP event can be validating for individuals trying to support someone dependent on or addicted to substances and it also offers them hope. In consideration of these findings, we recommend that in the roll out of CLP events that sufficient time be dedicated to these events, and that they are not a one-off occasion but the start of, or part of, education and training that focuses on substance use and addiction education, prevention, early help, harm reduction and recovery.



Section 02 |

Three Case Studies

“

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Participant 3

Participant 3 (P3) was a student on a Forensic Investigation Programme. They attended the Choose Life event (CLE) as part of a programme event during their student enhancement period. The key words P3 chose to describe their thoughts about substance misuse before the event were, “choice”, “abuse”, “misuse”, “homeless”, “bad” and “upbringing”. When asked what their thoughts were regarding substance misuse before the CLE, P3 said “that people choose to do drugs, drink etc”. When asked what their thoughts were about substance misuse after the CLE, P3’s perspective shifted away from their original belief that “choice” was a key factor in substance misuse, and they instead focussed on events outside of an individual’s control as a factor that impacts on substance misuse. To this, P3 said “the cards you are dealt with in life can affect how you react to taking drugs, for example those surrounded with love, good friendships, partners etc. are less likely to than those with no support, bad relationships or even those who suffer traumatic events in their lives. You could be a happy person than one day age 40 a tragic event happens, and grief and pain can cause you to need a helping hand i.e. drink, drugs etc.”.

In terms of how the CLE impacted P3 as a person and upon their personal beliefs, P3 expressed that the event was “very emotional”. Furthermore, it made P3 reflect on themselves, to which they said that the event “opened my eyes completely to even just my own life. I’m lucky to be around a good support team and to have a wonderful family and it’s sad that there are people who don’t have this”. This reflection allowed P3 to imagine how they would cope with serious adversity and how they may respond if something tragic happened to them, such as the loss of their child or partner. In the event of such a tragedy, P3 said “I also could understand how me myself could be in the same

situation as those people... the grief would be too much to handle and could see how turning to drink, drugs to get out of realism could be a choice”. This prompted P3 to consider how people who use substances are understood more broadly, and they emphasised that “I think we are quick to judge people with substance abuse, but we need to look at the bigger picture look at them as an individual and why they took that substance in the first place”. Reflecting on what they learned from the CLE, P3 highlighted that the event has made them aware that there is “not much support out there” for people desisting from drug use, but also in terms of preventative measures before people “turn to” substances or relapse.

Regarding the professional impact that the CLE had on P3, they highlighted that they have “always been a compassionate person” and had previously volunteered in prisons for Young Offenders. Crucially though, P3 believes that “everyone needs someone who supports them and has their back, that someone believes in them and want to listen”. Furthermore, reflecting on how the CLE event fits in with their academic studies, P3 commented that the event has given them more understanding and allowed them to think more open-mindedly.

Volunteer testimonies had a great impact on P3. When asked which aspect of the CLE impacted them the most, they noted “...life is sadly not perfect and the people who spoke had all experienced some form of tragic event and life can hit anyone like that any day”. The final remark of P3 was that “...everyone was so brave and thank you for sharing your stories”, illustrating the impact of real-life testimonies during a CLE. Overall, the only aspect of the CLE that P3 did not like was “that is was not long enough I could have listened to it for hours”, again, demonstrating the power of the event and the centrality of volunteers to the work of the CLE. P3’s experience of a CLE demonstrated that such events foster empathy within participants and open a critical space for reflection on their personal perceptions of substance misuse and people who use substances. P3’s testimony also illustrated that the inclusion of volunteer life narratives were also a crucial, impactful element of Choose Life events, which created a rich experience and acted as a valuable educational tool.

Section 02 | continued

Three Case Studies



Participant 6

Participant 6 (P6) was a student on a Policing and Criminal Investigation Programme. They attended the Choose Life event (CLE) as part of a programme event during their student enhancement period. The key words that P6 chose to describe their thoughts on substance misuse before the CLE were, “selfish”, “dependant”, “unreliable”, “messy”, “problematic”. They also remarked that before the CLE that they were “very judgemental and subconsciously turn [their] nose up at people that used drugs”. After the CLE, the keywords that they chose to describe their thoughts on substance misuse changed markedly to “broken”, “misunderstood”, “lonely”, “hurting”, and “helpless”.

P6 expressed that the event had impacted them academically as they will now “take a different approach when starting [their] career in the police”. When considering their future professional career, P6 in fact stated that the CLE had “made [them] want to look into other routes to support people with addiction”. As well as fostering academic and professional impact on P6, the event also enabled P6 to consider their own personal beliefs about substance misuse, to this they said that the event “made [them] open [their] eyes to drug abuse”. As well as this, P6 also said that they learned that “addiction can take hold of anyone and it doesn’t matter how you were brought up it can all affect you”.

“

very judgemental and subconsciously turn [their] nose up at people that used drugs”

The real-life narratives of the volunteers were particularly impactful for P6. When asked if there was anything that could have been improved about the CLE or if there was anything they would like to hear more about they said that they particularly enjoyed hearing the “life stories” of the volunteers as this helped them to “understand the illness”. Similarly, the impact of the volunteers to the CLE was also emphasised by P6 when they said “the honesty of the volunteers made the project, it made me open my eyes and understand the person, the fact it was face to face made me feel a connection and understand their struggles and pain”.

Overall, when asked if there was anything that they didn’t like about the event, P6 said “nothing, I thought it was amazing”. P6’s narrative was chosen as a case study as it shows the power of a CLE to change the way participants view substance misuse and those who use substances. P6 initially said that before the event that they turned their nose up at people who use drugs, however, after the event, they expressed personal empathy with people who use substances, and in fact stated that this experience has caused them to reconsider their future career.



Participant 17

Participant 17 (P17) was a student on a Law and Criminal Justice Programme. They attended the Choose Life event (CLE) as part of their module. The words that P17 provided to describe their thoughts about substance misuse before the CLE were, “disgusting”, “a waste of life” and “selfish”. The key words that P17 provided after the CLE were, “difficult”, “sad” and “unaware of consequences”. Before experiencing the CLE P17 explained that they had “been exposed from a young age to people who were substance abusers” including their “Mother”. P17 continued to state that they “knew” that substance abuse was a “disease” however they did not “have any sympathy for those [who] abused alcohol and drugs” as it was “their choice”. After the CLE event P17 asserted, “I still believe that a person cannot be completely free from blame just because they get addicted to a drug they choose to try in the first place but the event helped me broaden my mind to understand how it actually affects a person’s way of thinking and how their rationalisation switches when misusing substances”.

P17 commented that they “enjoyed the event” and that the “drug dealer role play was phenomenal”. The drug dealer role play “really struck a chord” with P17, because they had never looked at the issues from a drug dealers perspective and it made them realise that individuals who deal drugs may actually be vulnerable, and because of such vulnerability they may be “preyed upon.” It also made them “see how easy it is for a person to take advantage of someone’s vulnerabilities and how unconscionable” people can be. They also thought it was “great” to hear the experiential narratives from the volunteers who were in recovery, as this was real people telling real stories about what they had been through. Because of their own lived experience of substance abuse P17 found it “eye-opening” and “difficult” to hear how self-aware the volunteers were of the impact of their actions on their family and close friends. P17 stated that drugs had ruined and were still ruining their family and that the discussion of the importance of ‘connections’ had upset them. The discussion of ‘connections’ stressed the importance of people who use substances being connected to the community and/or family or friends. The discussion about connections was upsetting for P17 as they contended that people who are connected can also take and misuse drugs/alcohol. P17 wanted to emphasise that it is not just “lonely, depressed people” that take and

misuse drugs. The event had also enabled P17 to see how once a person is addicted, their reason for using changes.

Although, P17 thought that the CLE was “great”, “very emotive” and “a brilliant eye-opener” they did feel that it was “very one-sided” in that it did not give “the whole story”. They commented that whilst they “thought everything was good” there was a “lack of information about how this also affects families and close friends”. In P17’s experience “not all substance misusers are as regretful and apologetic as the two volunteers” as they personally had given “help until [they were] blue in the face” but sometimes people addicted to drugs are never going to stop. They felt the CLE could be improved if the event organisers had brought along a family member with lived experience of the difficulties of trying to help someone with an addiction. This would enable the “hurt” to relationships, and even how relationships can be “completely severed”, to be shown. P17’s stated that “addicts aren’t bad people but a lot of them do bad things and sometimes these things are unforgivable” and therefore including the family in a CLE would further improve it as “drugs and substance abuse doesn’t just affect the person who is addicted”.

With regard to their academic studies and professional aspirations P17 stated that they thought the event “fits great” in “any and every course as education about substance abuse and rehabilitation is vital to the problem”. They went on to say how the two volunteer’s stories “solidified” their “ambition to help those affected by substance abuse, especially children” as they did not “want anyone to have to go through what [they] went through as a child”. Hearing the volunteers stories made them realise that are still people in society who are so heavily relied on by family members with an addiction, which made them want to help people in this situation more.

For P17, the CLE was positive however, they identified aspects of it that was negative for them. This case study was chosen on this basis. It is clear from this case study that P17 had lived experience of living with and supporting people struggling with addiction, including their Mother. That experience had also clearly been painful and damaging to relationships and rightly P17 would like to see this reflected in future CLEs. The CLE allowed P17 to see substance use and addiction from new perspectives and this enabled them to be more knowledgeable, understanding and empathetic to individuals struggling with substance use and addiction. In addition, it was important to their academic studies and moreover, it consolidated their ambition to work in this area and make a positive difference.



Section 03 | Key Findings & Recommendations

The data collected through the course of the research was thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The key findings and recommendations are laid out below. These findings are discussed in more depth in Corteen, Hughes-Stanley and Marriott-Smith (2024).

[F1] Finding

Student participants' thoughts about substance misuse before attending a CLP event were mixed and they were dependent on their existing level of awareness of substance misuse and their lived experiences.

[R1] Recommendation

The level of awareness of substance use amongst attendees to CLP events should not be assumed by the CLP and by the facilitators of a CLP event. The CLP event provides a powerful impactful opportunity to raise an awareness of substance use, addiction recovery and desistance. It also provides the opportunity to validate the lived experiences of members of the audience who have experienced, or who are experiencing, substance use and addiction either directly or indirectly.

[F2] Finding

CLP events gave student participants a fuller and more empathetic understanding of why people use substances and people's journeys to recovery.

[R2] Recommendation

Policy makers and influencers should attend a CLP event themselves to experience and witness its impact. The CLP events should be rolled out widely to individuals who come into contact with people who use substances in an educational, practical, non-professional and professional capacity. The CLP event should not be a one-off event and facilitators should think about where in their education, programme or training a CLP event

fits, and what other follow up sessions with or in addition to the CLP event are required.

[F3] Finding

The CLP event impacted on student participant's beliefs about substance misuse and people who use substances. In this way, the event opened student participants eyes to the realities of substance misuse and it positively changed and challenged their negative beliefs about people who use substances. In addition, the event impacted on student participants perspectives of their interpersonal relationships and substance use and their own substance use.

[R3] Recommendation

The CLP event does positively challenge and change negatives beliefs regarding substance use and people who use substances. In doing so, it raises awareness and increases an understanding of these issues. Therefore, CLP events should be delivered locally and nationally to those who come into contact with people who use substances and those who may do so in their future career. When doing so, consideration should be given to attendees who may be impacted by substance use personally and/or interpersonally.

[F4] Finding

As a result of attending a CLP event, student participants gained new knowledge and perspectives on a range of drug, alcohol and addiction related issues, including the negative impact of substance use on people. This resulted in an overwhelmingly more humanistic response to people who use substances, why they use substances, the recovery and desistance journey and what should be done about it.

[R4] Recommendation

CLP events are needed locally and nationally in order to disseminate knowledge and understanding of the real-life experiences of substance use, the realities of recovery and desistance and to encourage a more humanistic

Key Findings & Recommendations

and realistic way of responding to people who use substances.

For professionals the more humanistic and realistic understanding gained from an event could be followed up with the opportunity to develop and practice skills.

[F5] Finding

Student participants made connections between the issues raised in the CLP event and their studies and it impacted on how they would approach this area in their studies and in their post-university life. This included finding alternatives to punishing and imprisoning people who use substances.

[R5] Recommendation

Due to the positive attitudes of student participants regarding their academic studies and post-university life as a result of attending a CLP event, it is recommended that a CLP event or training be integrated into any education or training that deals with addiction, drug and alcohol education, prevention, early help, harm reduction and recovery.

[F6] Finding

The volunteer experiential narratives, life stories and the role play were especially impactful on the student participants. The experience of a CLP event goes beyond educating about substance use, it extends to participant self-reflection and self-identification with the work of the CLP and its volunteers.

[R6] Recommendation

The creative pedagogical tools employed in the CLP event should be recognised as powerful and impactful on attendees and should be extended to local and national substance use and addiction education and training courses and programmes. Support for attendees should be considered.

[F7] Finding

For the majority of student participants there was nothing about the CLP event that they did not like. Some students commented positively on what they liked about the event and three important issues were raised: the role play, family and friends, and triggering.

[R7] Recommendation

The CLP event is impactful and should continue and be expanded locally and nationally. Greater attention needs to be paid to the debriefing of the 'drug dealer' role play, to the inclusion of the impact of substance use and addiction on families and friends, and to the potential of triggering. The facilitator and the CLP should make known the immediate and ongoing wrap around support and services following an event.

[F8] Finding

Approximately half of the student participants did not comment on how a CLP event could be improved. Some student participants offered useful suggestions on how to improve an event. These are grouped as: more information, comments on volunteers and the role play and the impact on families. The CLP would benefit from each event having more time dedicated to it.

[R8] Recommendation

In the closing of a CLP event the audience should be informed of what the aim of the event was and what it aimed to achieve. Where possible, the CLP Manager should continue to include volunteers with different characteristics and different experiences of substance use and time in recovery. The duration of a CLP event should be extended to increase the participant experience.

[F9] Finding

The student participant experience of the CLP event is overwhelmingly positive, and students demonstrated a great appreciation of the event and of the volunteers' experiential narratives and life stories.

[R9] Recommendation

The CLP event should evolve and expand and should be rolled out locally and nationally. Sufficient time should be provided for CLP events, and they should be followed up with one or more sessions focusing on substance use, addiction, people who use substances, and sources of immediate and ongoing support.

The student participants were asked to provide three to five key words that describe their thoughts about substance misuse before and after the CLP event. The impact of the event can be seen in the words provided by the students:



Section 04 |

Recommended Readings

Black, C. (2021) Review of drugs part two: Prevention, treatment and recovery, 2nd August [online] Available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-drugs-phase-two-report/review-of-drugs-part-two-prevention-treatment-and-recovery

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Section 05 |

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