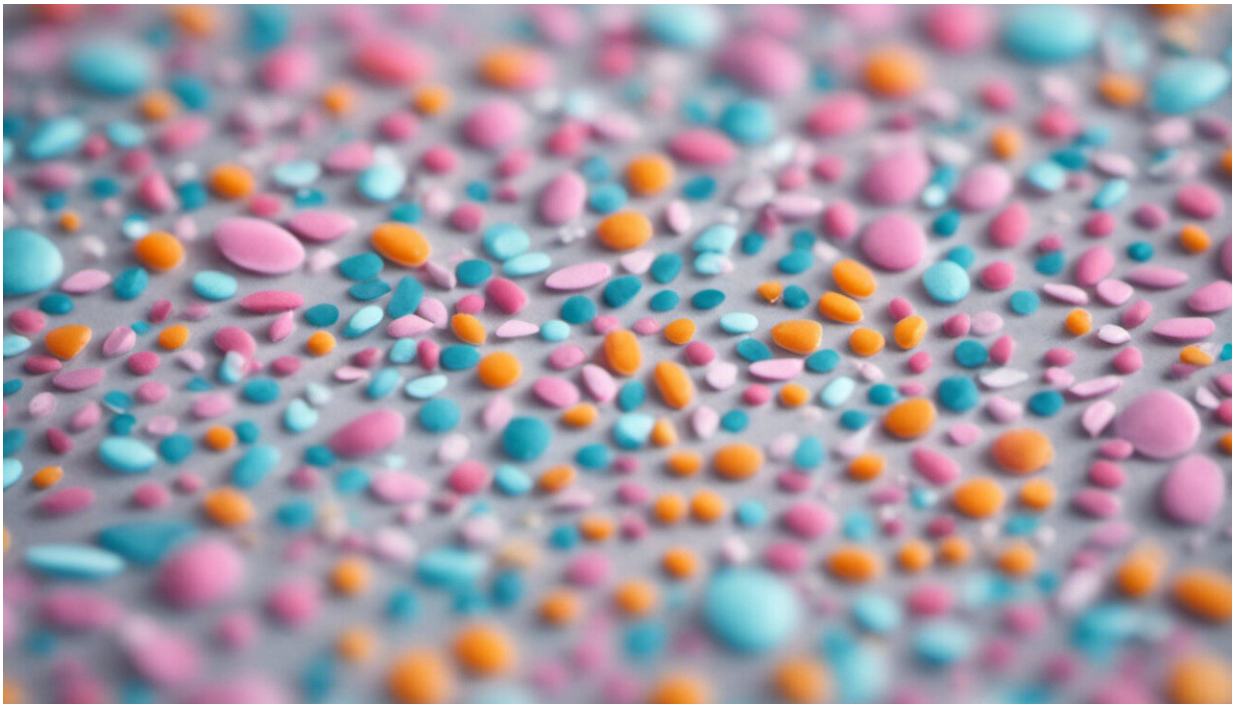


# What drugs are students taking and why are they taking them?

June 21 2018, by Robert Ralphs, Mike Salinas And Rebecca Askew

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

For many students, the move away to university is the first time living away from home. And with all the freedoms independent living entails, it's maybe not surprising then that drug use tends to be much higher among students than the general population.

[The 2017 Crime Survey of England and Wales](#) found that around one in five adults age 16 to 24 have taken a drug in the past year – but the figure is much higher for university students. About two in five students are drug users, according to a [study from the National Union of Students](#)

The most popular drugs are cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy, but the rise in prescription drugs – included in the [Crime Survey for England and Wales survey](#) for the first time in 2015 – represents a noteworthy development in peoples' drug using repertoires.

To try and deal with the issue of widespread drug use at UK universities, one university is enforcing a drug-free policy among its students. In a [recent letter](#) printed in the Sunday Times, the University of Buckingham's vice chancellor, Sir Anthony Seldon, announced that the university was set to become the first in the UK to ask students to sign a contract promising not to take drugs on university property. "Drug taking has no place at all in our vision of what a university is about. If students persist in taking drugs, they will be asked to leave."

This might sound all well and good, but this type of proposed crackdown on drug use is likely to exacerbate stress among students. It will also mean that students will be more likely to hide drug use and less likely to discuss any drug concerns with staff or peers.

## Grade pressures

Part of the problem is that students aren't just using drugs to get high on nights out. Far from being used for hedonistic reasons, research shows many students are self medicating with substances [to progress in their education](#). This is in part because increased [student fees and debt](#) are leading to greater pressure on students to achieve high grades.

A recent [YouGov survey](#) found that 77% of all students reported a fear of failure – with their primary cause of stress being university studies. This fear of failure and desire to attain high grades leads to a willingness among some students to do anything to keep up – using "[smart drugs](#)" such as Modafinil, Ritalin and Adderall, according to some reports.

These prescription medications are used to help improve students' concentration and focus, particularly when studying toward assessments. Students claim that using them means they can study for long periods and combat procrastination and exhaustion.

## Self medicating

Increased levels of stress and anxiety may also account for the recent trend in young people using more benzodiazepines, particularly Xanax. Access to these drugs has been made easier with the growth in online illicit pharmacies and the "dark web".

The extent of mental health problems in UK universities was also highlighted in the [YouGov survey](#). It found that over a quarter of students reported having a [mental health problem](#) – with depression and anxiety the most common. Almost three-quarters of those surveyed stated that studying for their degree was one of their main sources of stress.

In a [recent study of 2,810 UK-based students](#), conducted by the National Union of Students, mental health featured prominently as an explanatory factor for drug use. One-third of students who used drugs, said they had done so to deal with stress, while almost a quarter said they use them to self medicate for an existing [mental health](#) problem.

## What's the answer?

What all this shows is that drug use is very much a part of the [student](#) experience. And, given that [drug](#) taking happens at universities for a myriad of reasons, a blanket ban on substances is not the answer.

University policies should instead aim to minimise harmful effects rather than simply condemn and prohibit them. This is important, because hard-line prohibitionist policies increase stigma and discourage engagement with support services.

What's more, students studying at [university](#) are often in vulnerable financial and emotional states. And universities have a duty of care to ensure their students are appropriately supported, rather than punished.

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