

June 2025

Analysis of universities' implementation of UUK's recommendations

Introduction

The tragic death of Daniel Mervis in 2019 highlighted the critical need for universities to move from zero tolerance drugs policies based on sanctions to compassionate and evidenced harm reduction approaches.

One year on from the publication of Universities UK's report [Enabling Student Health and Success](#), SafeCourse submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 144 UK universities to assess their adoption and implementation of the report's recommendations.

We are very grateful for the detailed and considered responses provided by universities on this sensitive issue.

This analysis examines the sector's progress one year after the report's publication, revealing some encouraging trends but also concerning gaps in how universities are supporting student safety, wellbeing and success.

Summary

One year after UUK's landmark report, UK universities show uneven progress toward harm reduction. While support services are widely available, critical gaps remain in drug testing, drugs education and disciplinary reforms.

However, the sector's willingness to engage with SafeCourse's audit suggests growing recognition of the importance of these issues, though resistant institutions remain.

Future monitoring will track whether policies "in development" materialize into tangible protections. SafeCourse will continue to support the cultural and policy changes needed to protect student lives. Daniel Mervis' story continues to drive this vital work forward.

Overview

The request asked universities the following six questions derived from the key recommendations of the UUK report:

1. Is your institution adopting a harm reduction approach to student drug use?
2. Is your institution providing/providing access to drugs awareness education to help students understand risks and make informed decisions?
3. Is your institution providing/providing access to drug testing/checking?
4. Is your institution providing/providing access to confidential advice and support services for students who use drugs?
5. Has your institution reviewed your disciplinary policies to avoid automatic sanctions for drug possession, focusing instead on student safety and wellbeing?
6. Has your institution enhanced data Collection & monitoring to improve tracking of drug-related incidents, to better understand trends and risks and to tailor harm reduction strategies effectively?

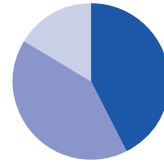
Of the 144 institutions surveyed:

- 117 provided responses
- 15 declined the request on grounds that it was 'vexatious', 'not applicable', that data was already in the public domain or provided responses that were unreadable
- 1 did not receive the request
- 11 did not respond

Findings

1. Harm reduction policy:

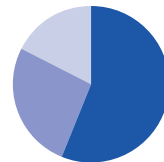
- 34% have adopted harm reduction policies
- 33% are developing such policies
- 13% maintain zero-tolerance approaches



Analysis: While nearly two thirds of universities are moving toward harm reduction, a significant minority continue to prefer punitive approaches that may deter students from seeking help. Though the sector shows clear momentum for change, implementation remains uneven.

2. Drug education:

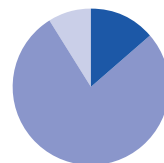
- 45% provide structured education programs
- 21% are developing programs
- 14% offer no drug education



Analysis: Just under half of universities now provide vital drug education. Concerning gaps remain. Evidence demonstrates that materials created for students by students have maximum impact: SafeCourse's planned national student media competition will help bridge this need.

3. Drug Testing

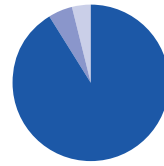
- 11% provide access to testing
- 62% do not offer testing
- 7% are in development



Analysis: This represents the most significant implementation gap, with only 1 in 10 universities offering this evidenced, life-saving intervention. Initiatives to distribute testing kits through student unions could dramatically improve this. Note that there is no evidence that drug testing increases use.

4. Support Services

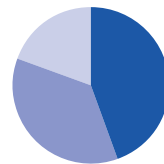
- 74% offer confidential support
- 4% are expanding services
- 3% provide no dedicated support



Analysis: The strongest area of implementation, suggesting widespread recognition of the need for confidential support. At the same time, to note that many of these services are non-specialist, embedded within wider wellbeing support.

5. Disciplinary Reforms

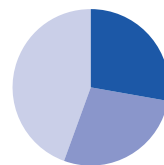
- 32% have revised sanctions-based policies
- 26% are reviewing procedures
- 14% retain automatic sanctions



Analysis: While a third have made crucial reforms, 1 in 7 still prefer disciplinary approaches that increase student risk. The correlation between punitive policies and student deaths, as with Daniel Mervis, underscores the urgency of further reform.

6. Data Collection

- 22% systematically track drug-related incidents
- 22% are developing systems
- 35% lack robust monitoring



Analysis: Poor data collection prevents evidence-based policymaking. Without proper monitoring, universities cannot identify trends or measure the effectiveness of interventions.

Cross-Cutting Themes

1. Implementation disparities

- Larger universities showed more comprehensive implementation
- Smaller and specialist institutions more frequently cited resource constraints

2. Barriers to Progress

- Resource limitations: Many cited funding and staffing shortages
- Institutional culture: Some responses revealed lingering stigma around drug use and continuing focus on reputation.

Recommendations for universities:

1. Adopt and implement harm reduction policies.
2. Improve access drug awareness and testing.
3. Improve data collection to enable evidence-based decisions
4. Empower students to reduce both demand for drugs and drug-related harms.

SafeCourse

Our approach is to work with universities and other agencies to address key gaps:

1. **Legal advocacy:** Guidance on institutional liability may prompt reluctant universities to act
2. **Student engagement:** Involvement in policy design and peer-led initiatives like the upcoming national media competition.
3. **Sector evaluation and monitoring:** Annual audits to maintain progress on demand and harm reduction.

