

# **Student Drug Use Report**

DECEMBER 2020

**Izzy Watkins**  
**Vice President Community**

## Summary

This report offers an insight into drug behaviours, experiences and attitudes of students at The University of Surrey. For the purpose of this report, the term 'drugs' is in reference to any illegal or controlled substance, as well as non-prescribed and psychoactive substances (previously known as legal highs). Alcohol, tobacco, prescribed and over-the-counter drugs are referenced separately.

A survey conducted in October and November of 2020 was distributed to all students through multiple digital platforms.

The key finding of this survey found that drug use is relatively common among Surrey students, with 43% of respondents reporting having used drugs whilst at the university. Many respondents, including those who had not personally partaken in drug use, disclosed an awareness for drug use being a regular occurrence at Surrey.

This report sets out a number of recommendations to the university and students' union in their shared interest of supporting student welfare and safety. These recommendations will be made throughout the report and documented in full at the end.

## Method

To conduct research into student drug use at The University of Surrey, USSU shared a survey across a range of platforms, including:

1. The USSU newsletter.
2. An email addressed to all students.
3. The USSU Facebook page.
4. Digital screens across all campuses.
5. USSU run Instagram accounts, including: @SurreyUnion, @USSU\_VPCommunity, @USSU\_VPActivity, @USSU\_President, @USSU\_VPSupport, @USSU\_VPVoice, @RubixUSSU and @SurreySocs.
6. The 'Club and Society Signatories' Microsoft Teams channel.

The identities of individual respondents beyond their student status is unknown. The genders, ages, ethnicities and other characteristics of respondents were not requested as it was felt students might be reluctant to share honest experiences if the inclusion of their identity compromised their anonymity. However, it is noted that previous studies have shown an increased risk of drug dependence among certain marginalised groups including LGBT+ people and black men.

### Recommended reading:

*'Taking the Hit: Student Drug Use and How Institutions Respond'*  
Release and the National Union of Students (NUS): 2018.

The survey consisted of 8 questions which compiled both quantitative and qualitative data. A total of 835 students completed the survey which USSU believes to be sufficient for an accurate reflection of student experience. Promotion of the survey on all platforms emphasised it was targeting all students, 'whether (they) know a little or a lot about drugs', and therefore it is believed that the communications did not bias responses.

The questions asked within the survey, including their answer options, are as listed:

1) Have you ever taken a drug* whilst at university? *Any controlled or illegal substance as well as non-prescribed drugs and novel psychoactive substances (previously known as legal highs). <i>(single answer)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>
2) What drugs have you taken at university? <i>(multiple choice)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannabis (weed/ marijuana/ pot)</li> <li>• MDMA/Ecstasy</li> <li>• Psychedelics</li> <li>• Cocaine</li> <li>• Nitrous Oxide</li> <li>• Ketamine</li> <li>• Non-prescribed benzodiazepines</li> <li>• Other (please specify)</li> <li>• None</li> </ul>
3) Do you currently use drugs? <i>(single answer)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, regularly (once a week or more)</li> <li>• Yes, occasionally (around monthly)</li> <li>• Rarely (a few times a year)</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>
4) If you have taken drugs previously, where have you done it? <i>(multiple choice)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a house off campus</li> <li>• In campus halls</li> <li>• In a club/ bar/ pub</li> <li>• Other (please specify)</li> <li>• I have never taken drugs</li> </ul>
5) What was your main motivation for taking drugs? <i>(single answer)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For fun/ recreation</li> <li>• To enhance a social interaction</li> <li>• To self-medicate</li> <li>• Other (please specify)</li> <li>• I have never taken drugs</li> </ul>
6) Have you ever felt concerned about your drug use? <i>(single answer)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>
7) If you were concerned about the drug use of yourself or a friend, would you feel confident about approaching a university support service? (Centre for Wellbeing, Students' Union etc.) <i>(single answer)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No, but would contact an external service instead</li> <li>• No, and would not contact an external service either</li> </ul>
8) Do you have any other comments about drug use at The University of Surrey?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Text box answer</li> </ul>

## Results Overview

When questioned if they had ever taken drugs whilst at university, 355 (or 43%) of respondents answered, 'yes'. This statistic places Surrey students below the national average for students (NUS: 2018), however, above average for the general UK population (Home Office: 2018).

Respondents were asked to expand on which drugs they had used whilst at Surrey, and the following substances were reported:

*(In order of frequency)*

- Cannabis (335)
- MDMA/ Ecstasy (136)
- Nitrous Oxide (135)
- Cocaine (120)
- Ketamine (115)
- Psychedelics (LSD, mushrooms, 2CB etc.) (101)
- Non-prescribed benzodiazepines (35)
- Non-prescribed study drugs (modafinil, ritalin, unspecified amphetamines) (11)
- Poppers (>10)
- Heroin (>10)
- Speed (>10)
- Synthetic cannabinoids (>10)
- Mephedrone (>10)
- Non-prescribed sexual performance drugs (>10)
- Fentanyl (>10)

**38% of respondents who had taken drugs have taken one type only** (typically Cannabis)

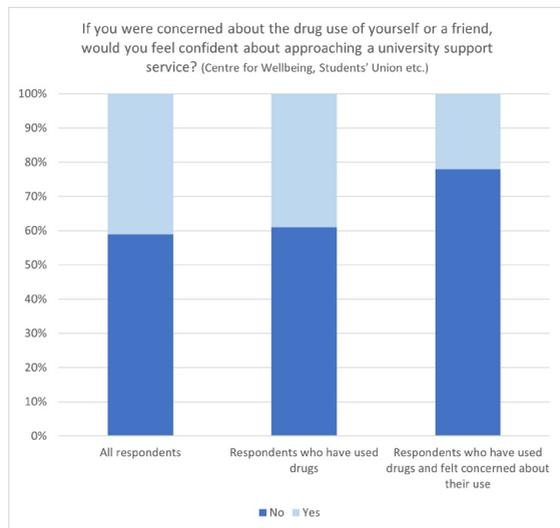
The most common location that students report having taken drugs is within off campus houses, with 337 respondents sharing this. A further 183 have taken drugs within campus halls and 168 in a club, bar or pub. Outdoor spaces including parks and fields have also been shared.

**95% of students who have used drugs at Surrey have done so at a house off campus.**

**52% of students who have used drugs at Surrey have done so in campus halls.**

Of those who had taken drugs at Surrey, 78 (23%) report having felt concerned about their drug use at least once. The data showed a correlation between the number of different drugs a student had taken and their concern over their drug use. 62 of the students who shared having felt concerned about their drug use also reported to have taken at least 3 different types of drug whilst at Surrey.

When asked if they would feel able to contact a university support service, such as the Centre for Wellbeing, if concerned about the drug use of themselves or a friend, 493 students (or 59%) said no. Viewing the responses of only students who answered 'yes' to 'have you ever taken a drug whilst at university?' there is a slight decrease of students confident in approaching a support service. 129 students said yes and 206 said no. However, 93 out of the 206 declared that they would reach out to an external service instead.



61% of students who have used drugs would not feel able to disclose drug use to the centre for wellbeing

## Drug Use and Wellbeing

Although the majority of students have not felt concerned about their drug use, 23% have, and this figure should still be addressed. 59% of students reported that they would not feel able to disclose drug use to a university support service, such as the Centre for Wellbeing. When examining the results of only students who currently take drugs and are concerned about said use, 78% would not feel able to disclose drug use to a university support service. Meaning that the demographic of students who need to access support most are the least likely to do so.



'My main issue was that I was struggling with substance issues and did not feel remotely comfortable approaching anyone about it. I felt completely isolated in halls which really fed my issues and now speaking to others, I wasn't the only one. It would be nice to have a university led support group for people with substance abuse problems.'

'I think it is very hard to approach the university about drug use as it is illegal and there will always be the worry about being removed from your course/professionalism investigation.'

It can be believed that because the Centre for Wellbeing is part of the university, students hesitate to access support from them out of fear that they will face disciplinary action from the university.

Although many students are aware that the Centre for Wellbeing has a confidentiality policy, there is uncertainty whether disclosing personal drug use is within this agreement. Currently, the drugs help page on the university's website does not specify the support the Centre for Wellbeing can offer in regards to drug use.



'Drugs addiction must be considered properly in ECs and academic performance. Plus getting more experienced staff for the centre of wellbeing at campus.'

'The centre for well being is too clinical and boring looking. it is very intimidating and people just say 'go to the centre for wellbeing' you arent told what they can help with'

**Recommendation:** Increase the information provided on the wellbeing website (<https://wellbeing.surrey.ac.uk/help/drugs>) and include information about the Centre for Wellbeing's confidentiality specifically in relation to drug use disclosure.

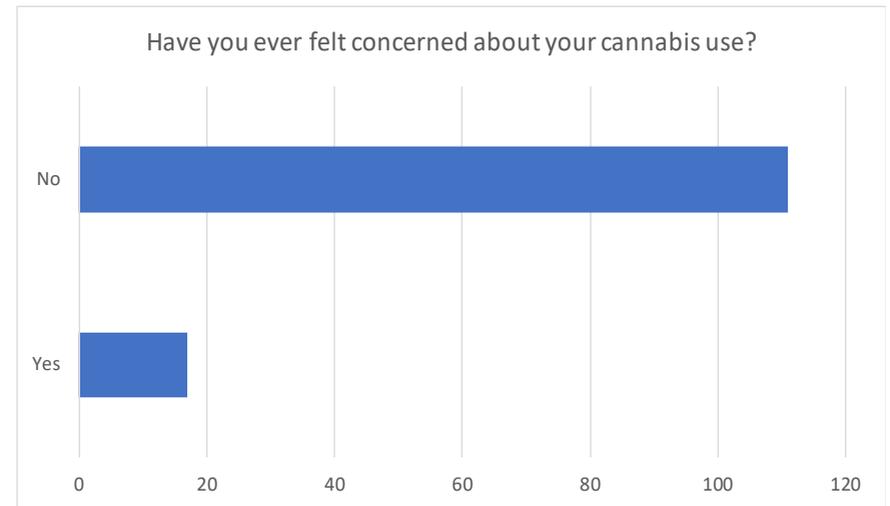
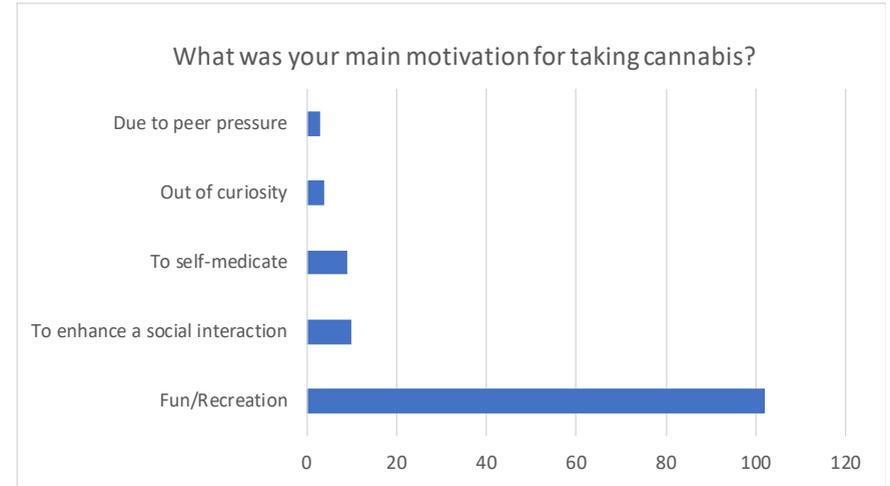
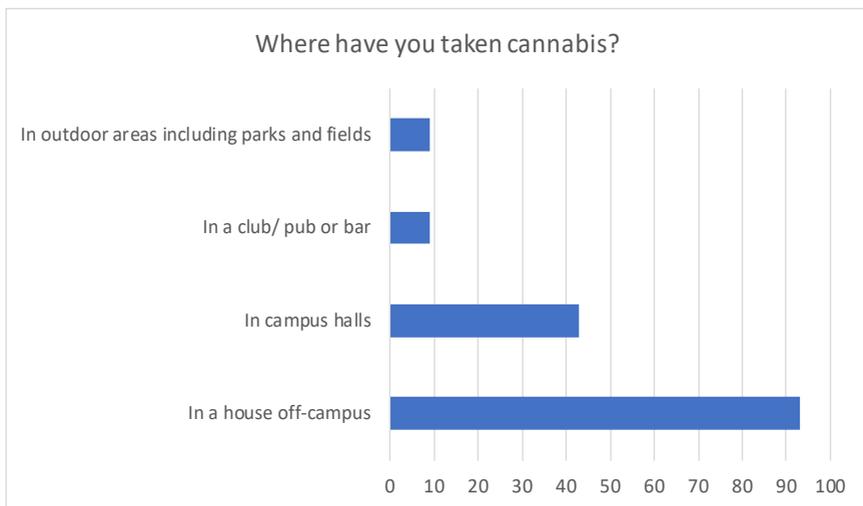
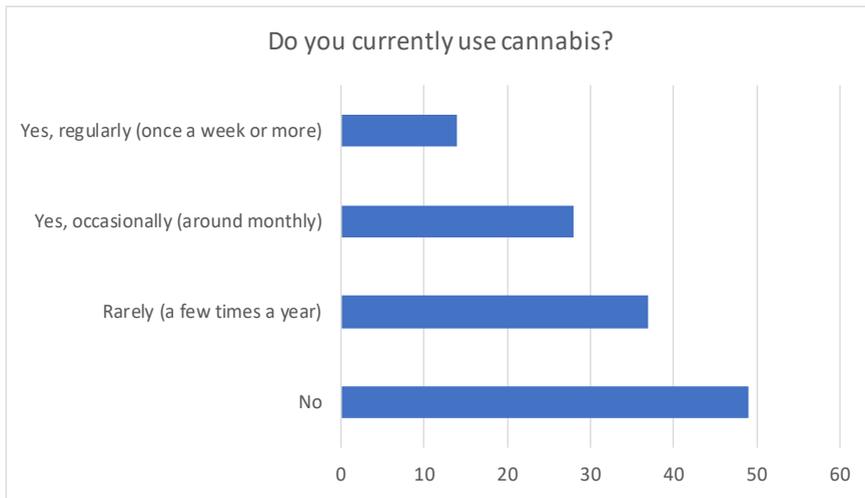
Whilst attendance at the Centre for Wellbeing should be supported if a student's drug use is affecting their mental health, it must be understood that even with confidentiality agreements in place, there will always be students who will feel unable to disclose drug use to an internal support service. Therefore, a stronger connection with external support services would be valuable.

**Recommendation:** Consider introducing an external alcohol and drugs specialist to attend the Centre for Wellbeing regularly for students who wish to have an appointment with somebody unaffiliated with The University of Surrey.

## Cannabis

Of the students who had taken drugs whilst at university, cannabis was reported to be used the most frequently, at least twice as often as any other substance. As a result, we have examined cannabis specific responses to gather a greater understanding for student usage.

Out of the 335 students who reported having used cannabis, 128 (or 38%) have not used any other drugs.



Within the responses to question 8, 'do you have any other comments about drug use at The University of Surrey?' the drug most frequently referenced by both users and non-users was cannabis. Multiple responses highlighted a strong awareness of cannabis use within University halls.

**'At least 3 times a week I can smell cannabis from the courtyard at Twyford'**

**'I've been casually asked if I do weed by some dudes in pajamas at the base of the stairwell to my dorm room, I just said "nah, not my thing" and went on'**

“**‘As I live on Manor Park, the weed smell seems to be everywhere, and if my window is open, it’ll creep into my room - maybe we could suggest a designated place not around apartment blocks for smokers’**”

Many respondents reported finding the smell of cannabis within halls of residence to be unpleasant and disturbing, including those who disclosed previously using cannabis themselves. Students offered varied solutions to this; many suggested the need for greater communications to students about where smoking is prohibited and why, whereas other respondents called for a stronger disciplinary procedure for those smoking cannabis on campus.

**Recommendation:** Greater signage in stairwells and entrances to accommodation blocks warning students not to smoke, alongside a reminder of the location of the closest smoking shelter.

**Recommendation:** More communications to students about how smoking outside accommodation entrances can negatively impact their peers, as well as the disciplinary penalties they could face from doing so.

In reference to cannabis use, students offer mixed attitudes towards the way security responds to it. Some students voiced concerns that cannabis use is not taken as seriously as it should:

“**‘It is prolific in the university, especially in accommodation. Security turn a blind eye to it all the time.’**”

**‘Too many people smoking weed outside late at night and security doing nothing about it.’**

**Whereas other respondents share that security respond too harshly to cannabis use:**

**‘Drug use on the premises is too heavily monitored. It’s very incorrect for security to walk up to anyone smoking just to check how it smells like in hopes of enforcing the law inside university grounds, especially if nobody’s being bothered, at the expense of a student’s academic record.’**

**‘Security need to stop crying over people smoking weed its not that deep.’**”

Responses also describe multiple concerning occasions where students have smoked within campus bedrooms and tampered with fire safety equipment.

“**‘It is really frustrating when they smoke in their rooms and stink the whole flats out or outside peoples windows. They also don’t care about tampering with fire sensors because they are too lazy to walk somewhere to smoke it. There needs to be a crackdown on it as it’s currently almost being accepted by the university as the norm.’**”

**‘A fair few people smoke weed in their rooms around Manor Park’**

**‘The usage of cannabis in the residences when people smoke in their rooms- it makes the entire accommodation smell as well as personal belongings and people are too afraid to say anything because they have to live with the person for the year. What worries me more is that if there was a fire in their room there is no smoke detector since it is covered.’**”

The number of responses highlighting students risking fire incidents by smoking in their bedrooms and tampering with safety equipment is worrying. Further responses suggest that some students smoke in their rooms rather than outside to avoid patrolling security staff.

Security staff patrol residences in the interest of student safety, however, in this scenario student safety is being compromised because security presence leads to students choosing to smoke inside their bedrooms rather than outside.

Furthermore, the fear of disciplinary action from the university was raised by many respondents, with some noting that students will use potentially riskier drugs because they are less detectable than cannabis.

“**‘Should be lighter warning structure for cannabis use. Final warnings will encourage students to turn to harder less detectable drugs like cocaine. Or smoke cannabis off campus where they aren’t safe and can get in trouble’**”

**‘There are worse drugs than weed going on, which actually harm people. Harshly penalising weed use in halls will lead to more inconspicuous drugs like cocaine, and mdma, to be consumed. As they smell less and less likely to get you in trouble. Instead, you should penalise weed use less. Students who want to take drugs will take drugs either way. Harshly imposing penalties will force them to take drugs outside campus in dodgy locations with dodgy people which could lead to worse problems and worse drugs...’**”

Some students will risk taking a more dangerous substance than cannabis through fear of detection by security. In many instances, students fear disciplinary action greater than they fear coming to harm from using a potentially dangerous substance.

The current penalties for cannabis possession or use can, in some circumstances, compromise student safety. Because they are aware of these penalties, some students resort to smoking cannabis in less detectable (however more dangerous) locations such as in outside areas off-campus.

It is widely advised by drug harm reduction organisations that the home is the safest place to take a drug. Because drugs can affect one's situational awareness, a person could make poor judgements under the influence. If they have taken drugs in an outside area off-campus, there are added risks of harm including: injuries caused by impulsive decisions, i.e. running into a road; injuries from reduced coordination; and general poor judgement, such as approaching strangers. It can be believed that should cannabis possession penalties be removed or reduced, students will less often feel the need to resort to these unsafe measures to use cannabis.

According to the University's 'Misuse of Drugs by Students' policy, a 1st offence possession or use of a Class B or C drug will result in a student receiving a £100 fine. This penalty is considered unproductive, particularly because it is not an equal punishment for all students.

For a wealthier student, a £100 fine would make little impact on them whereas for another student, a £100 fine could leave them financially vulnerable. Similarly, a fine is less likely to deter students from future use than a workshop or counselling session.

**Recommendation:** Scrap fines for first offence possession, in place of attendance at the CUBIC course or other relevant intervention workshop or meeting.

## Drug Related Emergencies

Emergencies involving drugs occur at Surrey, however, student feedback shows a lack of knowledge about what to do in an emergency. A recurring message is that students fear seeking help during an emergency out of fear of potential disciplinary action.

**'I have also been in a situation where someone needed medical attention while on an illegal drug but i had no idea what to do or who I could call. I didnt want to risk that friend or my house mates place at uni but still wanted to help them. More advice on anonymous help would be good.'**



**'Make people aware of what they should do when something like an overdose occurs and any substances that should not be taken at same time including illegal and legal substances.'**

**'I think there should be a designated safe space, especially at night where students can feel safe going to if they feel ill or have ODD (drug related) as drug users are unlikely to seek medical help if they think they will be prosecuted. Things such as a 'no judgement ambulance on site' where students can get medical attention with no questions asked. Drug use will continue whether these safe spaces are present or not and so providing them is only going to protect students.'**



Feedback shows that students would hesitate in contacting security if an emergency involving drugs occurred on campus. This delay in getting a casualty help could prove fatal and therefore, it is crucial that the university and students' union produces student communications about what they must do in a medical emergency.

## Drug Testing

Many respondents suggested that drug testing kits should be available for students to access on campus. The University of Bristol Students' Union are the most recent Students' Union to offer testing kits to students, with other unions currently providing them including: LSE, Manchester, Sussex, Portsmouth, Warwick and Newcastle.



**'Substance testing should be more accessible.'**

**'We will never eradicate the use of drugs, so we should aim to make their use less dangerous, rather than "more punishable". If legal, drug testing like some festivals offer?'**



**Recommendation:** USSU to connect with a local service to offer drug testing kits to students.

## Supplying and Dealing

Within the responses to question 8, students shared that there are known student drugs dealers on campus.

‘...there’s at least 11 students who deal drugs on Stag Hill campus that I know of, so it’s incredibly easy to get stuff. I don’t use recreationally so I’m not engaged in it but it’s hugely accessible and I have seen them approach first years.’

USSU understands that by dealing drugs students are putting their peers in danger and therefore, would not suggest any changes to the current disciplinary regulations and outcomes for drug dealing.

It is understood, however, that some students will purchase drugs with the intention of passing them on to friends. In particular, female students report that in the interest of personal safety, a male friend will purchase drugs from a dealer and subsequently sell them on to female friends.

Within university disciplinary regulations, this would be considered supplying; a major misconduct that can result in student expulsion. Currently the misuse of drugs policy does not differentiate penalties for supplying compared to dealing. Therefore, students who supply their friends, often in the interest of keeping them safe from potentially dangerous dealers, could face severe disciplinary action as a result.

Many students who currently supply their friends are unaware of the severity of disciplinary outcomes they could face if caught. It is important that students are aware that if they give a drug to a friend who then dies as a result of it, they could face a severe criminal conviction.

In October 2020, multiple students at Newcastle and Northumbria Universities were arrested and are awaiting conviction after supplying drugs to peers who later died as a result of the drugs.

**Recommended:** An emphasis during accommodation welcome talks on the definition of supplying as well as the legal risks.

## Recommendations in Full

### Wellbeing

1. Increase the information provided on the wellbeing website (<https://wellbeing.surrey.ac.uk/help/drugs>) and include the Centre for Wellbeing confidentiality agreement, specifically in relation to drug use disclosure.
2. Introduce an external alcohol and drugs specialist to attend the Centre for Wellbeing routinely for students who wish to have an appointment with somebody unaffiliated with the University of Surrey.

### Smoking

1. Increase signage in stairwells and entrances to accommodation blocks warning students not to smoke, alongside a reminder of the location of the closest smoking shelter.
2. More communications to students about how smoking outside accommodation entrances can negatively impact their peers, as well as the disciplinary penalties they could face from doing so.
3. Build more smoking shelters on campus and consult with smokers as to which locations would be most ideal.

### Cannabis

1. Remove fines for first offence possession, in place of attendance at the CUBIC course or other relevant intervention workshop or meeting.

### Supplying and dealing

1. An emphasis during accommodation welcome talks on the definition of supplying as well as the legal risks associated.

### Students’ Union

1. Connect with a local service to offer drug testing kits to students.
2. Launch an SSDP (Students for Sensible Drug Policy) chapter to support student activists in promoting sensible drug policy at the University and nationally.

## Conclusion

Whilst it is understood that The University of Surrey has a responsibility to deter and penalise drug use, a 'just say no' approach is not in the best interest of student safety and welfare and therefore an informative and harm reduction approach to student drug use is encouraged.



**'I just feel like the university only wants to punish drug users without wanting to know why they felt the need to use drugs rather than helping students.'**

**'The zero-tolerance policy that is implemented by the University is archaic and needs to go. It should have zero impact on your academic record or standing/status in the university, and only serves to victimize, threaten and punish drug users rather than rehabilitate.'**



We believe the findings of this report are evidence of the need for greater information and support for students regarding drugs. Very sadly, student deaths involving drugs have already occurred this academic year across the UK and we hope that a joint effort from the Students' Union and University will be effective in reducing the risk of harm to Surrey students.