



Student Drug Behaviour and Mental Health during COVID-19

2020

neurosight

Acknowledgements

Firstly, NeuroSight would like to thank SSDP UK for their contribution to the design, promotion and dissemination of this survey.

We would also like to thank Students Organisation for Sustainability for their feedback on the survey questions and help with the dissemination of findings.

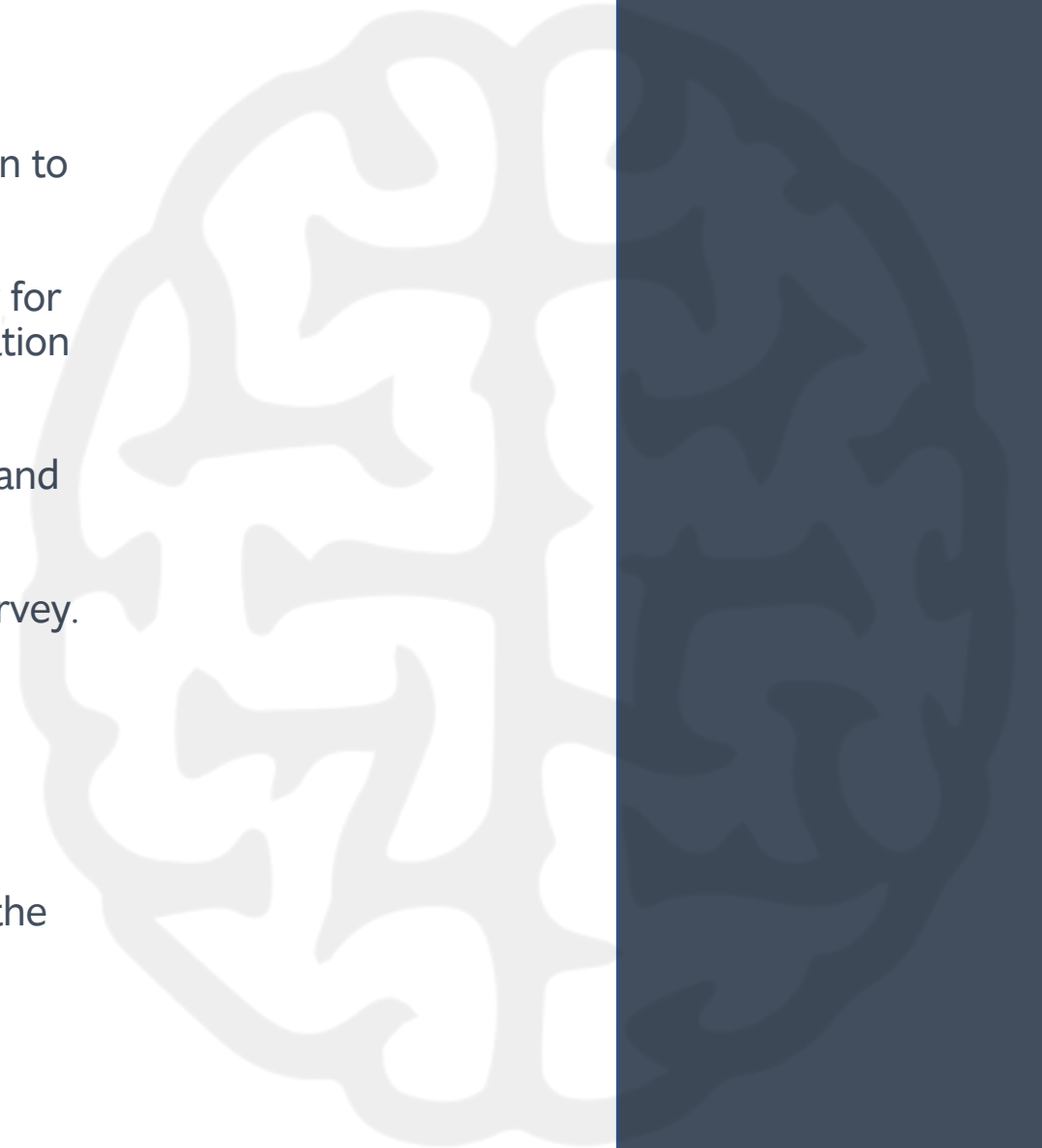
We would like to extend our appreciation to student union officers and student societies who helped us to promote the survey.

Finally, thanks to all students who took the time to complete the survey.

Contributors

Arda Ozcubukcu coordinated and designed the survey, supervised the data analysis and wrote the report.

Sabrina Bunbury analysed the data and wrote the report.



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Definitions

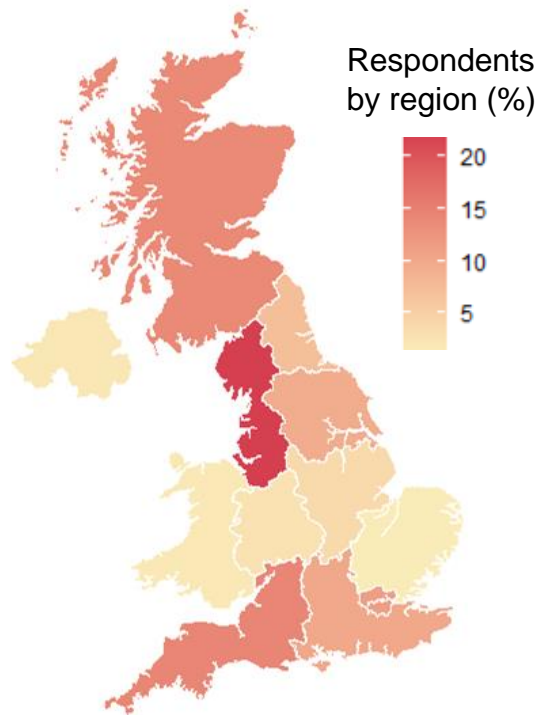
The following are the terms as defined in the questionnaire and the rest of this report:

- 🌐 **Drugs:** All psychoactive substances including alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and prescribed drugs.
- 🌐 **Illicit drugs:** Controlled psychoactive substances. This category of drugs excludes alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, but includes all other psychoactive substances unless consumed under the supervision of a medical professional.
- 🌐 **Legal drugs:** Regulated psychoactive substances, which include alcohol, nicotine and caffeine.
- 🌐 **Recreational use:** Use of psychoactive drugs for enjoyment or other purposes, rather than medical reasons as prescribed by a medical professional.
- 🌐 **Dependency:** Being reliant on a drug to feel in a certain way.
- 🌐 **Addiction:** Compulsive drug taking despite negative consequences.

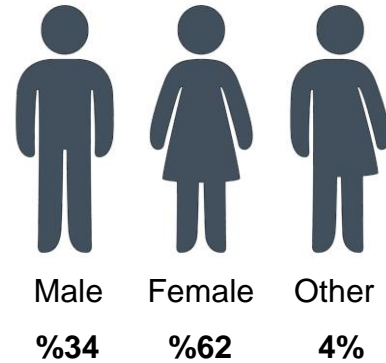
Methodology

- 🧠 The survey questions were designed in consultation with SSDP UK and DrugScience Student Society and ran between 30/10/2020 and 13/12/2020. There was a national lockdown between 05/11/2020 and 02/12/2020.
- 🧠 The survey was promoted by NeuroSight and SSDP UK on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and TikTok throughout the data collection period. The main stakeholders in the harm reduction field were contacted to share the survey on their social media platforms and newsletters. The relevant SU officers from the 100 largest universities in the UK were also contacted to share the survey on their Facebook pages as well as relevant student societies such as the psychiatry, pharmacology and neuroscience societies.
- 🧠 A chance to win £30 Amazon vouchers were offered to target all students and reduce self-selection bias.
- 🧠 The survey reached 1,360 students. Only the results of the students who were studying at a UK university at the time of data collection were analysed. (N=1,080)
- 🧠 This report only presents a description of the survey results. Further analysis of the data can be commissioned. Please get in touch via info@neurosight.co if you are interested in further analysing the data yourself.

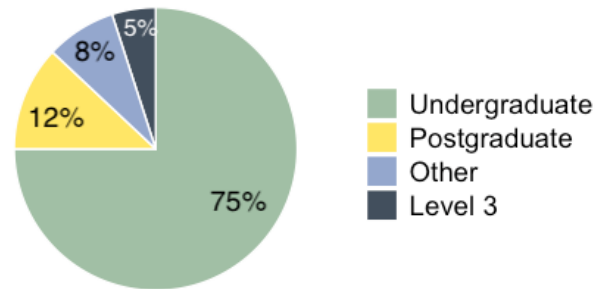
Demographics



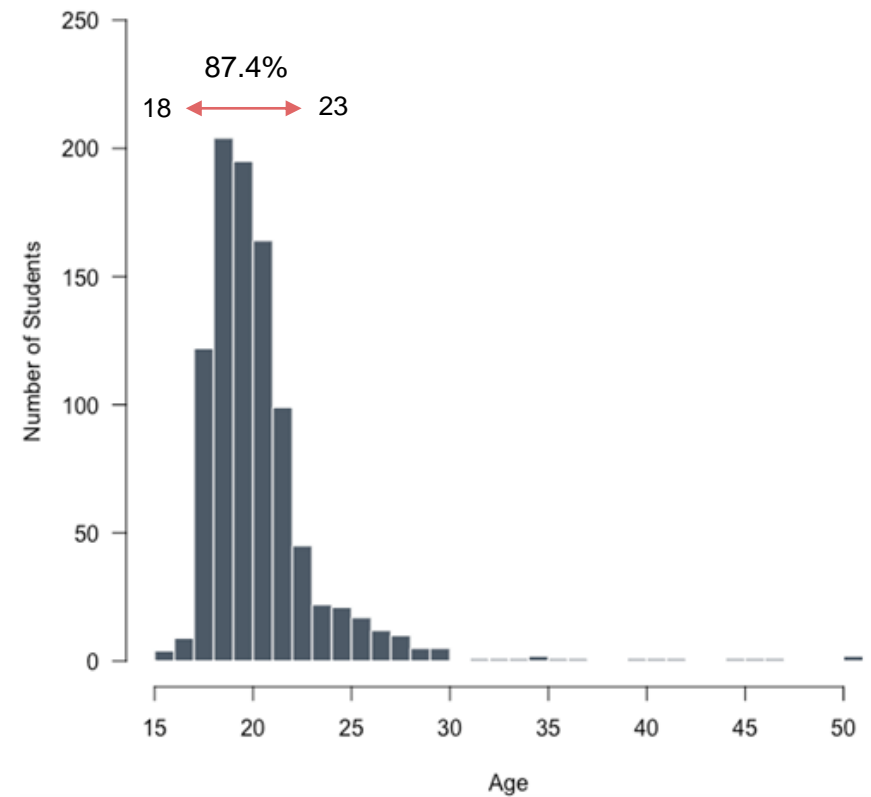
n = 1,080
732 complete responses



Level of study of students in the sample



Histogram of age of students



Demographics - Summary

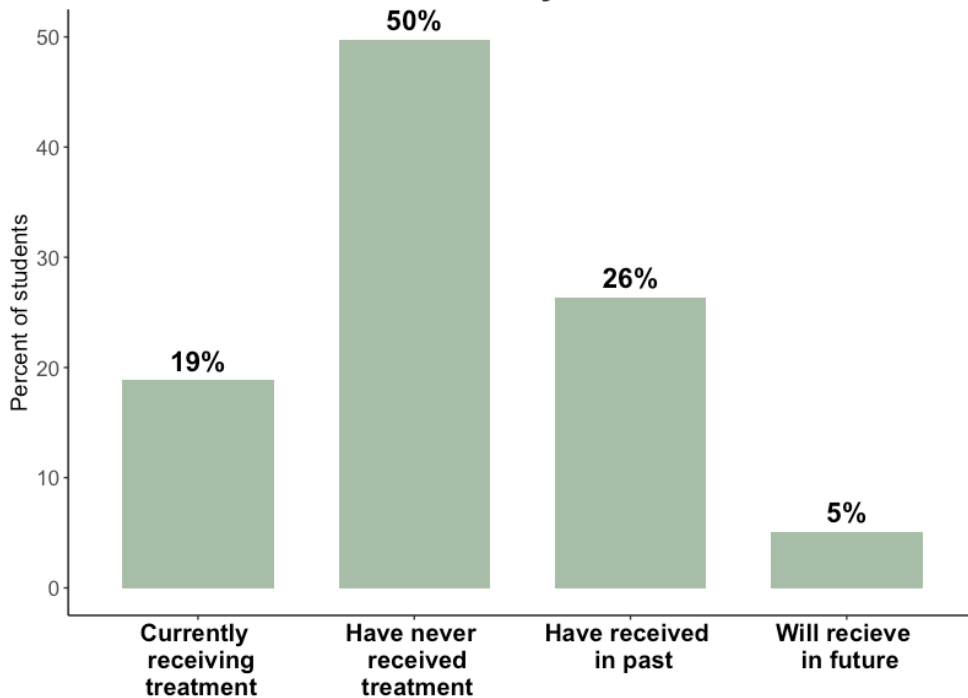
- 🌐 **Gender:** More students described their gender as female (62%) than male (34%) in the sample.
- 🌐 **Age:** The age of respondents in the sample ranged from 15 to over 50. Overall, the sample was relatively young with an average age of 20.9 (SD = 3.47) and 88.8% were under the age of 23.
- 🌐 **Level of study:** Most students in the sample were studying at undergraduate level (75%).
- 🌐 **Region of study:** There was a good geographical coverage in this study with students studying at universities/colleges in regions of the UK being represented. The highest proportion of respondents came from universities located in the North West England (22%).



Mental Health

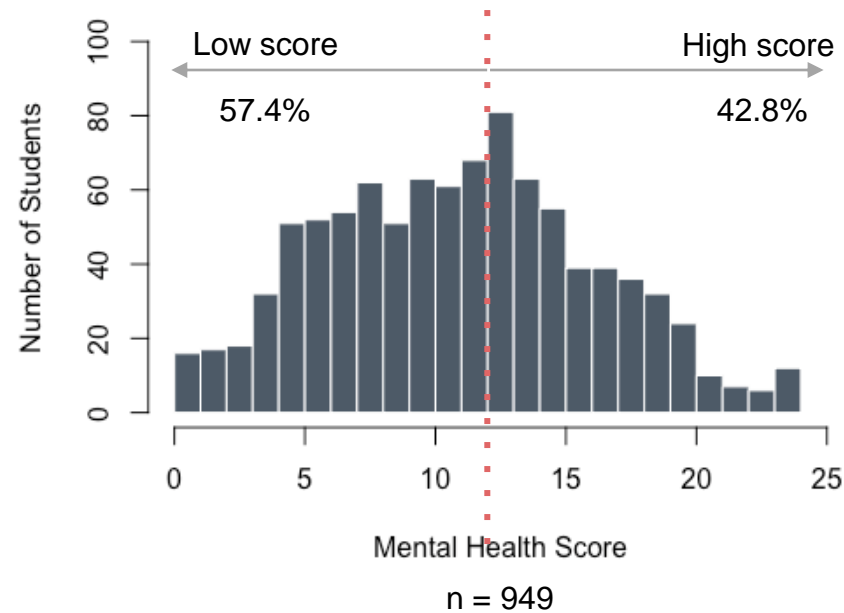
Mental Health

'Which best describes your current mental health treatment for any mental health conditions?'



n = 949

Histogram of Mental Health Scores



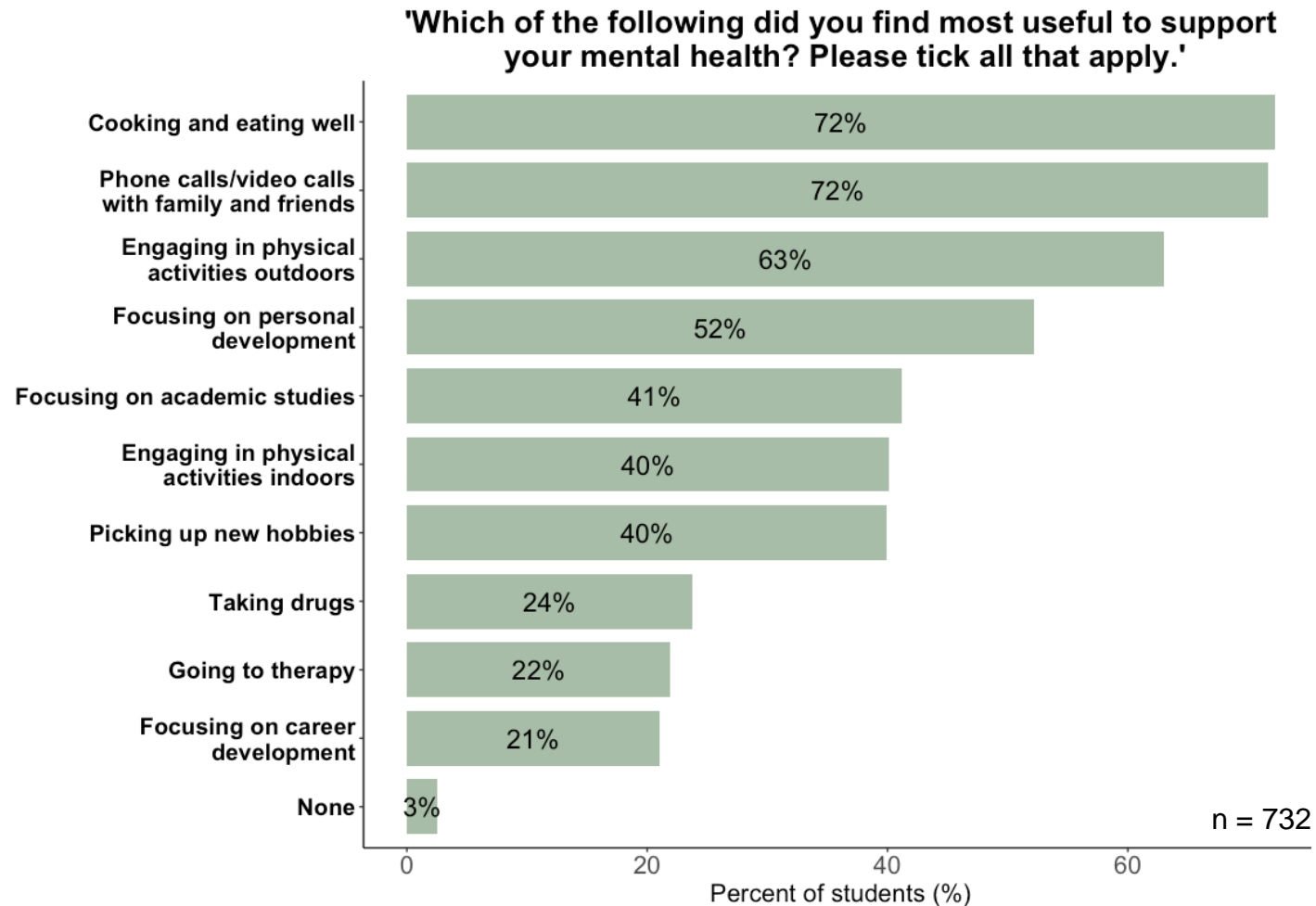
Mean score (all):	11.4
Mean score (female):	11.9
Mean score (male):	10.2

A score of >12 is a strong indicator of the presence of a mental illness with considerable disability according to the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6).¹

On average, drug users and non-drug users in this sample had a very similar score.

¹ Kessler RC, Barker PR, Colpe LJ, Epstein JF, Gfroerer JC, Hiripi E, Howes MJ, Normand SL, Manderscheid RW, Walters EE, Zaslavsky AM. Screening for serious mental illness in the general population. Arch Gen Psychiatry. 2003 Feb;60(2):184-9.

Mental Health



Mental Health - Summary

- 🌐 **Mental health treatment:** Half the students in the sample had never received treatment and the other half had either received treatment in the past (26%), were receiving treatment (19%) or were expecting to in the future (5%).
- 🌐 **Mental health scores:** The scores came from the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6)¹, which is a reliable self-reported measure used in many other studies of mental health globally. The average score was 11.4 (SD = 5.16) and this was higher for females (11.86) than males (10.16). Slightly more students had a score between 0-12 (57.4%) than above 12 (42.8%).
- 🌐 **Mental health coping strategies:** Cooking and eating well (72%) and phone/video calls with family and friends (72%) were the most useful strategies students used to support their mental health. Only 22% of students found that going to therapy was a very useful strategy to support mental health.

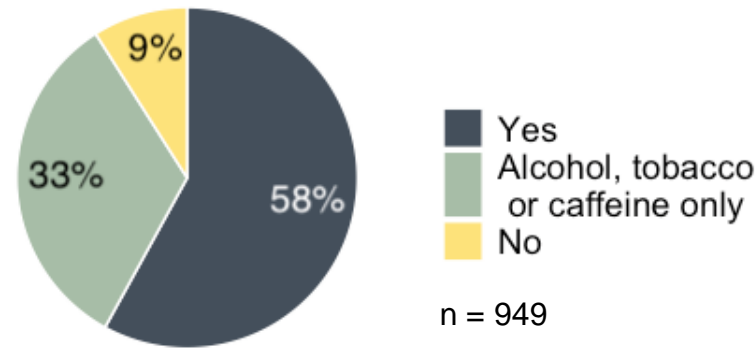
¹ Kessler RC, Andrews G, Colpe LJ, Hiripi E, Mroczek DK, Normand SL, Walters EE, Zaslavsky AM. Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. Psychol Med. 2002 Aug;32(6):959-76.

A stylized graphic of a human brain, split vertically. The left half is dark blue and the right half is light grey. The brain is composed of thick, rounded lines forming the gyri and sulci.

Illicit Drugs

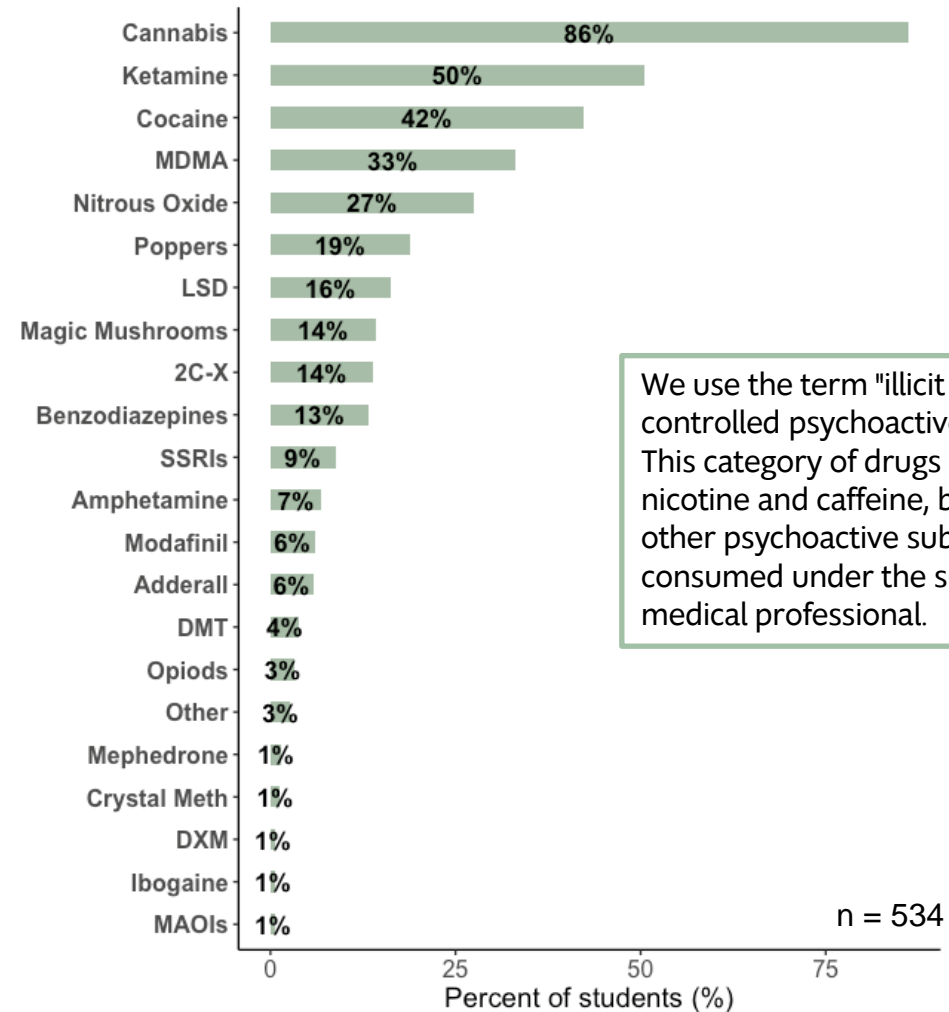
Illicit Drug Use

'Have you used any drugs recreationally since the start of term?'



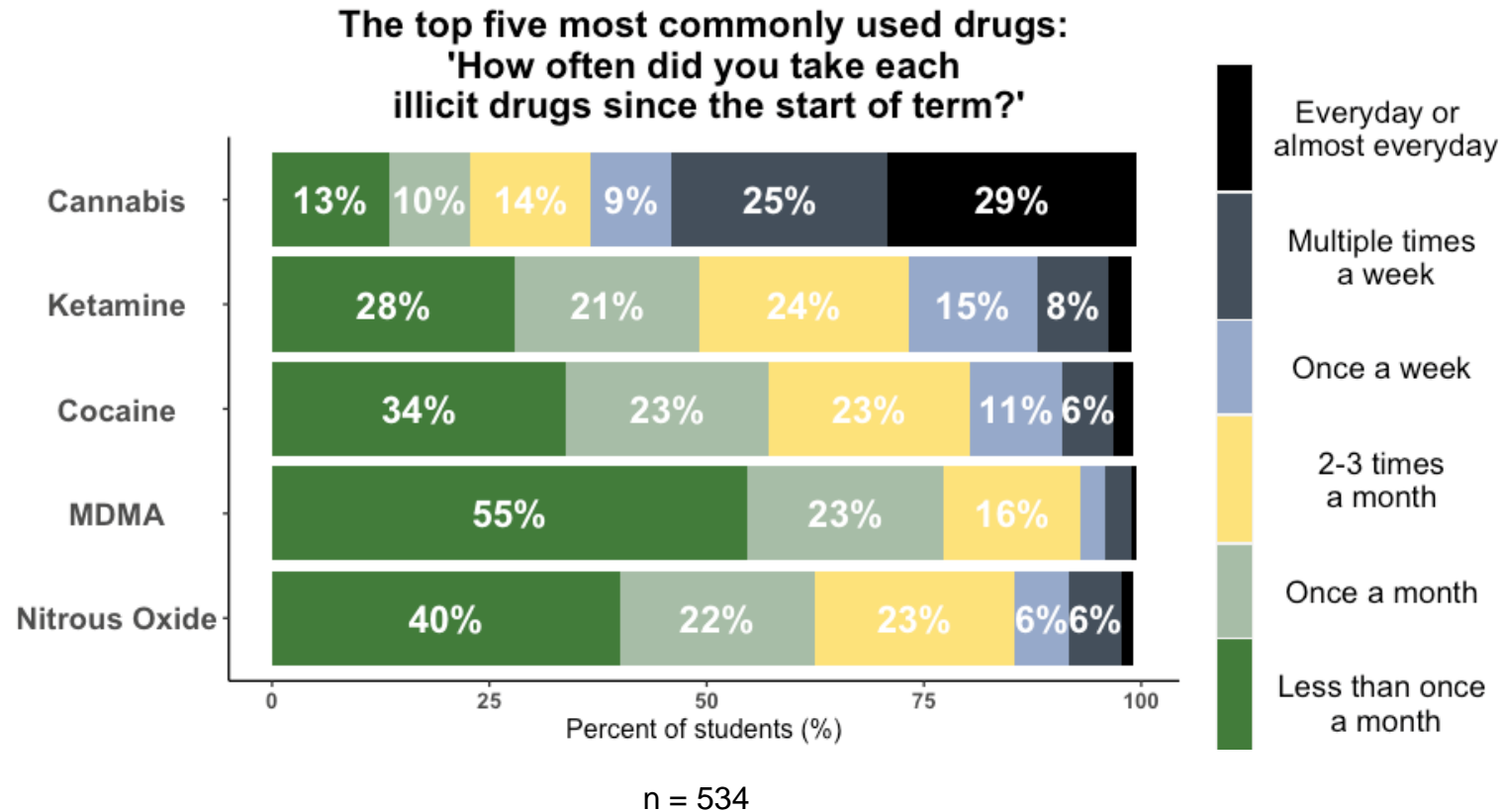
Recreational use refers to the use of psychoactive drugs for enjoyment or other purposes, rather than medical reasons as prescribed by a medical professional.

'Which illicit drugs have you taken since the start of term?'



We use the term "illicit drugs" to refer to controlled psychoactive substances. This category of drugs excludes alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, but includes all other psychoactive substances unless consumed under the supervision of a medical professional.

Illicit Drug Use



Illicit Drug Use - Summary

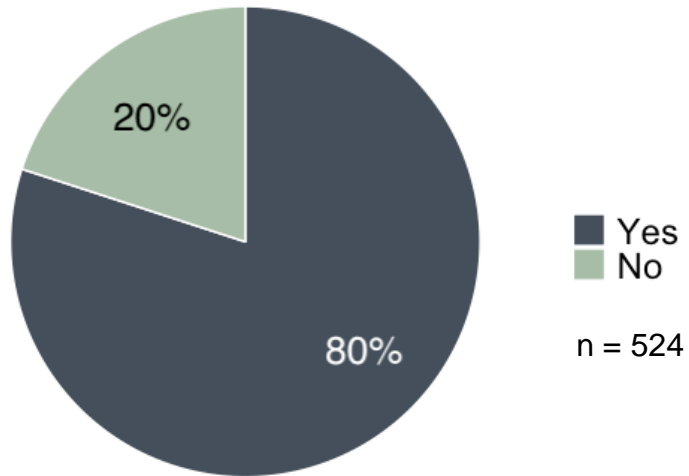
- 🌐 **Recreational drug use:** Most students had used drugs recreationally since the start of term (58%). Only 9% had not used legal or illegal drugs since the start of term. There are limitations to measuring drug use prevalence due to self-selection bias. This may lead to the overrepresentation of students using drugs.

The following applies to students that had used drugs recreationally since the start of term:

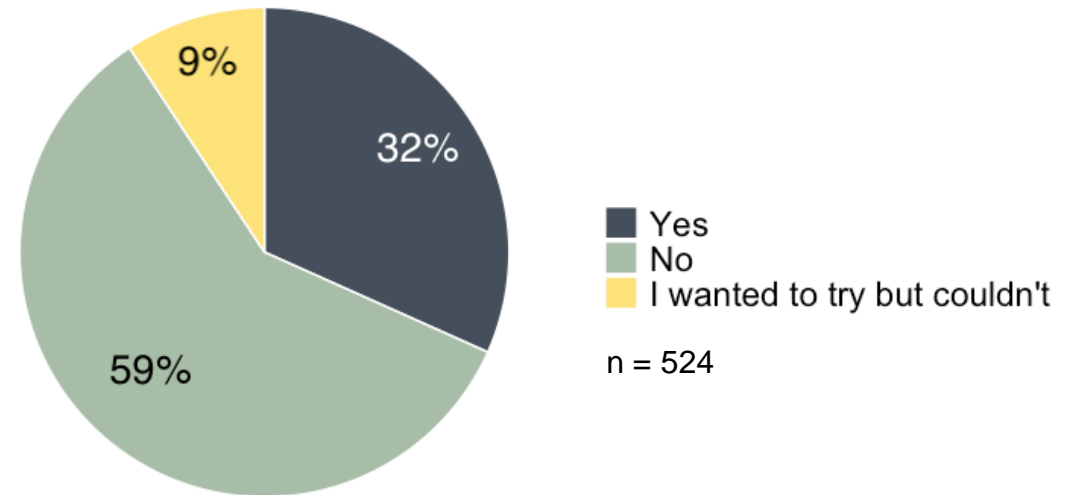
- 🌐 **Choice of drug:** Based on usage since the start of term, cannabis was the most popular drug for students in this sample (86%) followed by ketamine (50%), cocaine (42%), MDMA (33%) and nitrous oxide (27%).
- 🌐 **Frequency of use:** For the top five most used drugs, cannabis was used most often (54% use multiple times a week or everyday) whilst cocaine, ketamine and nitrous oxide were used less often (45-46% use 1-3 times per month) and MDMA was used rarely (55% use less than once a month).
- 🌐 **Use of drugs before university:** Most students in the sample had used drugs before attending university (80%).
- 🌐 **New drugs:** Most students had not tried any new drugs since the start of term (59%). Roughly 1 in 3 had tried a new drug.

Planning and Motivations

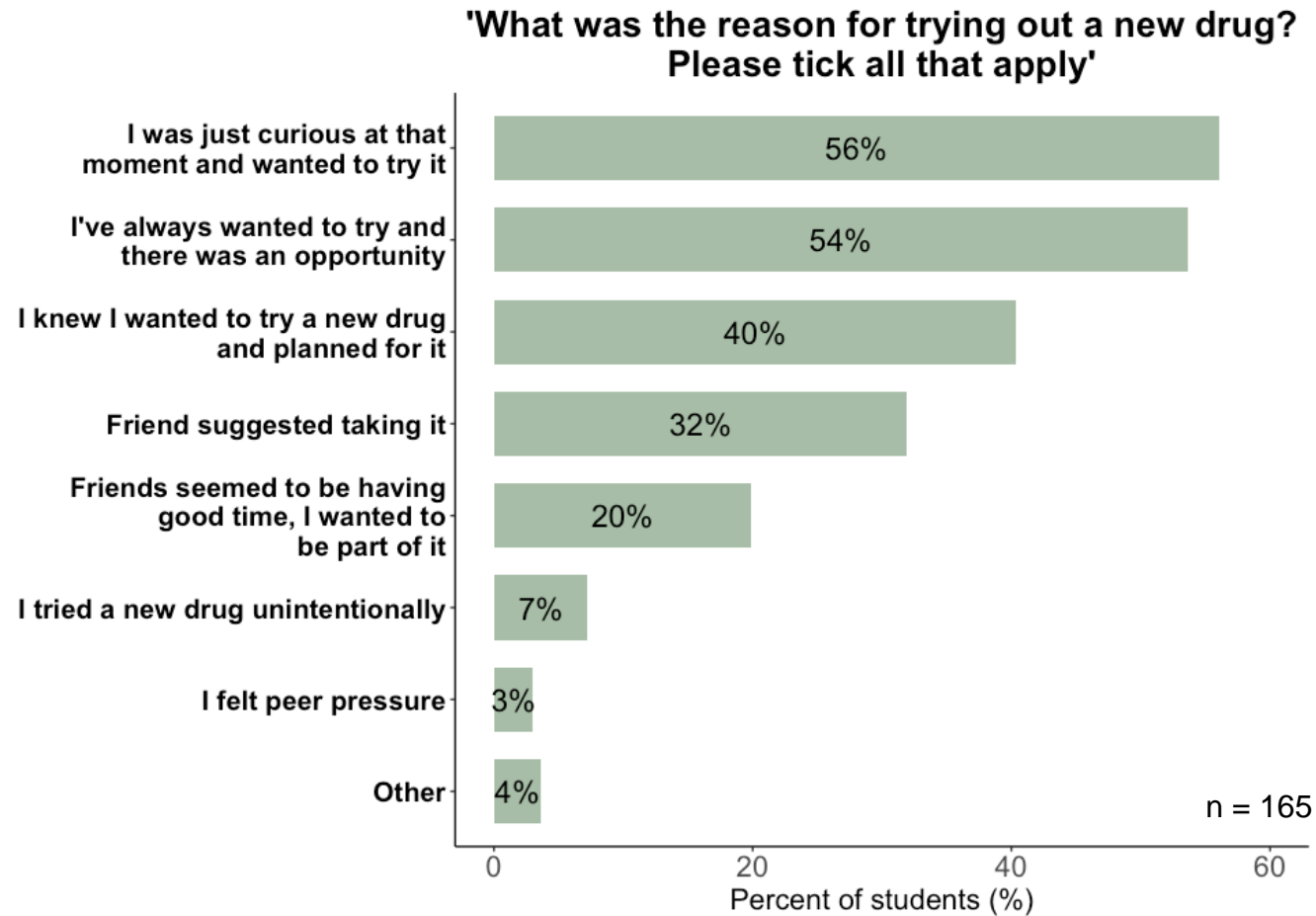
'Did you try or use any illicit drugs prior to your enrolment at your university?'



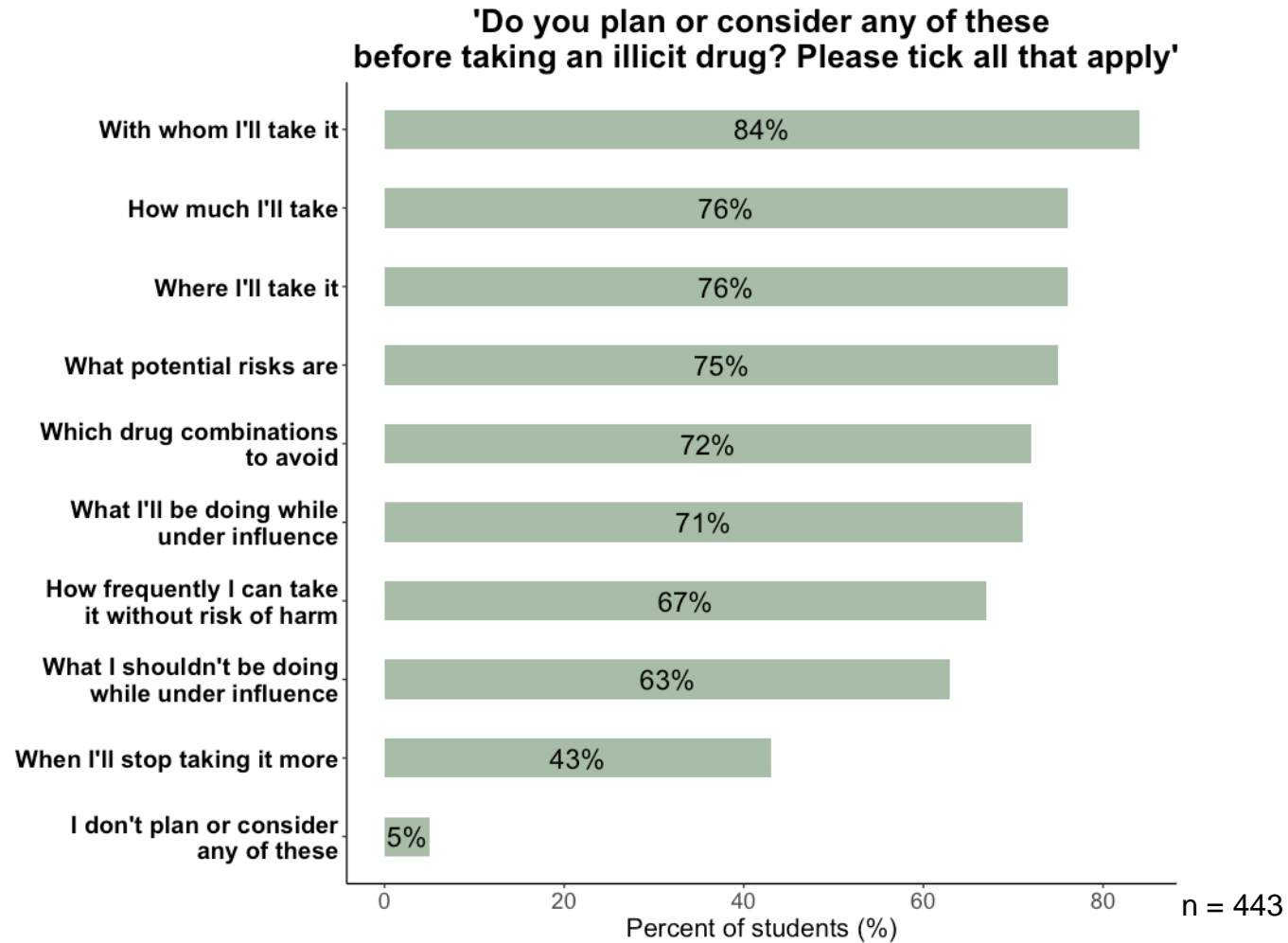
'Have you tried any new drugs since the start of term?'



Planning and Motivations

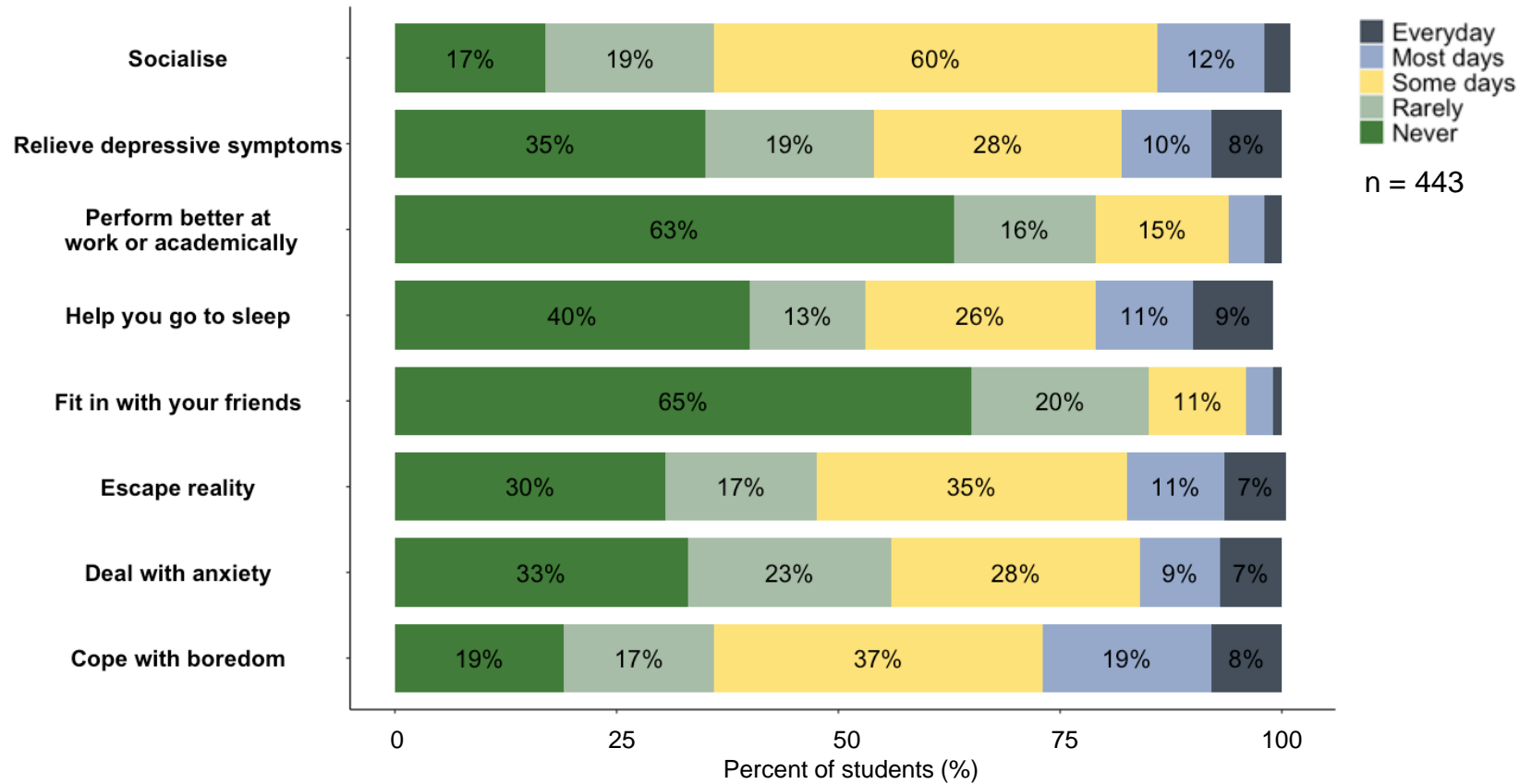


Planning and Motivations



Planning and Motivations

'How often since the start of term have you taken an illicit drug to...?'



Internal motivation is defined as “the internal force that drives people to do things because they feel it is good or right”

External motivation “comes from external pressures and demands”

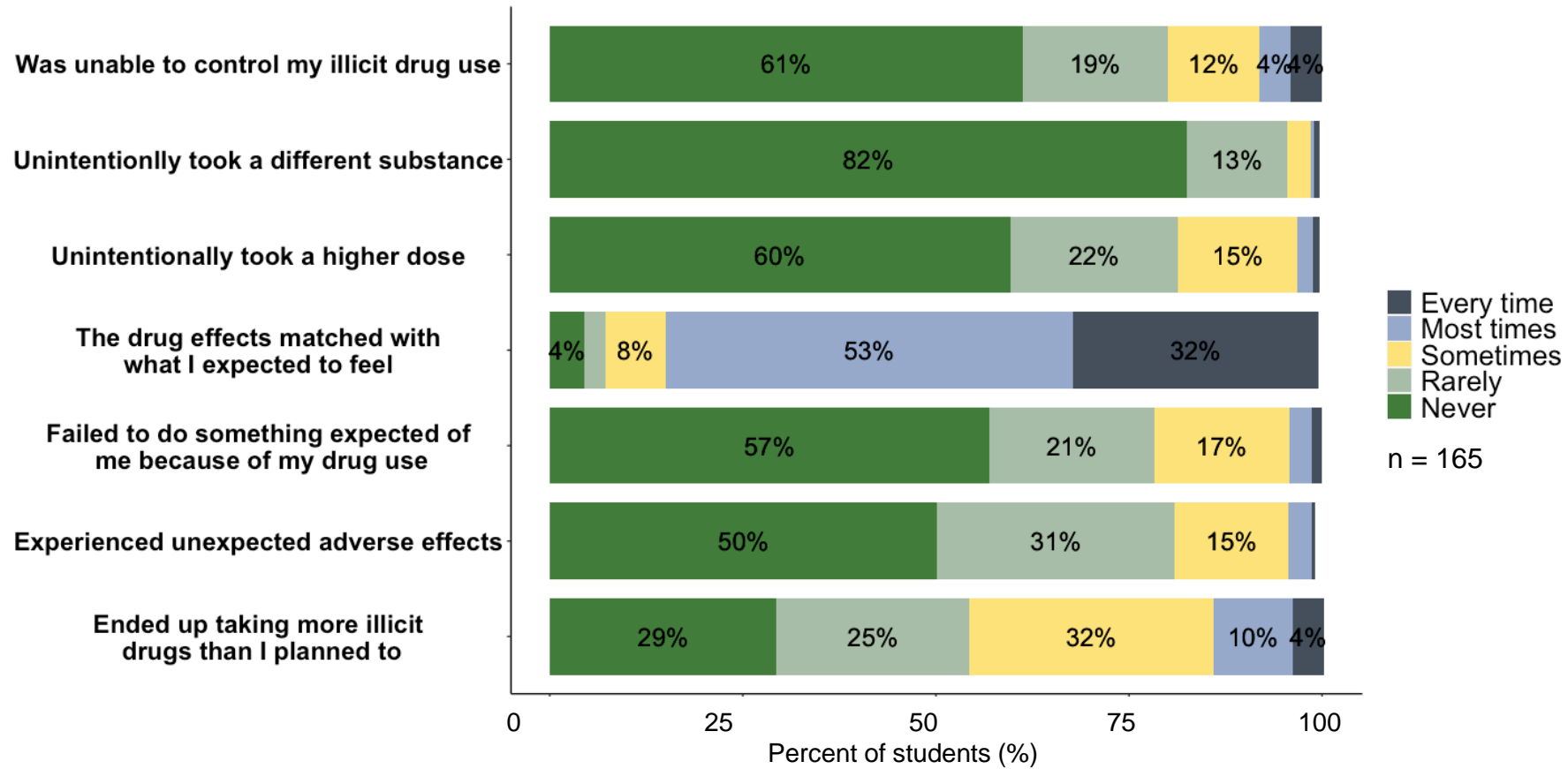
Planning and Motivations - Summary

The following applies to students that had used drugs recreationally since the start of term:

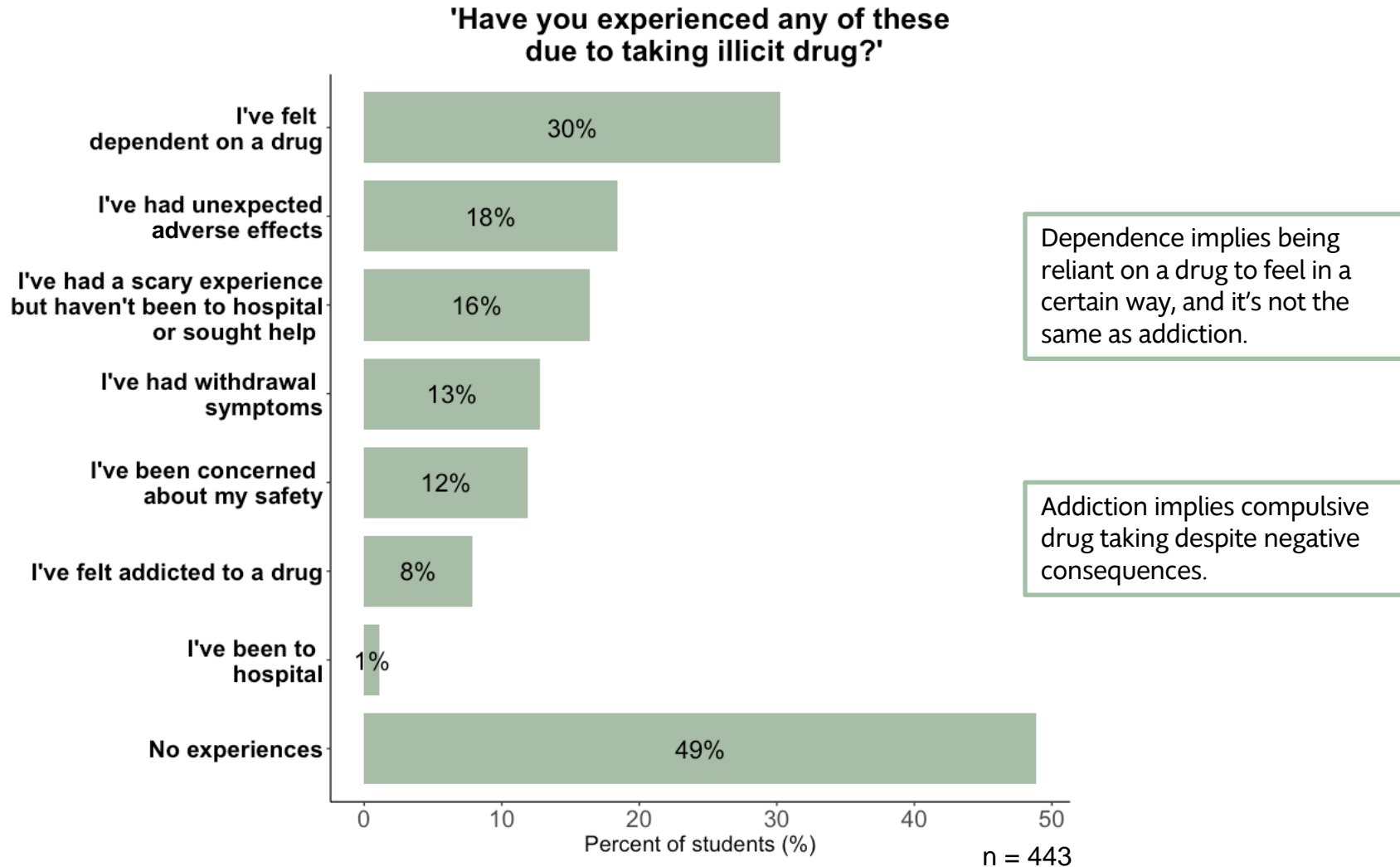
- 🌐 **Reasons for trying new drugs:** 56% tried a new drug spontaneously out of curiosity, while 40% planned for when they would try a new drug. The least common reason for trying a new drug was “peer pressure” (3%).
- 🌐 **Planning:** Just 5% of students did not plan or consider any of the given options before taking a drug. A very high proportion (between 70-84%) considered: what they’ll be doing, which combinations to avoid, what the risks are, where they’ll take it, how much they’ll take and with whom they’ll take it. Less than half (43%) of the students planned or considered when they would stop taking more of the drug. There is uncertainty as to whether the information students base their decisions on was accurate.
- 🌐 **Motivations for regular use of drug:** The most common reason (of the 8 options given) for regular use (most/every day) of an illicit drug was to cope with boredom (27%) followed by to help sleep (21%). The least common reason for regular use of an illicit drug was to fit in with friends (3%). This suggests that internal motivations play a larger role in regular drug use than external motivations (see page 16 for definitions).

Accidents, Effects and Concerns

'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'

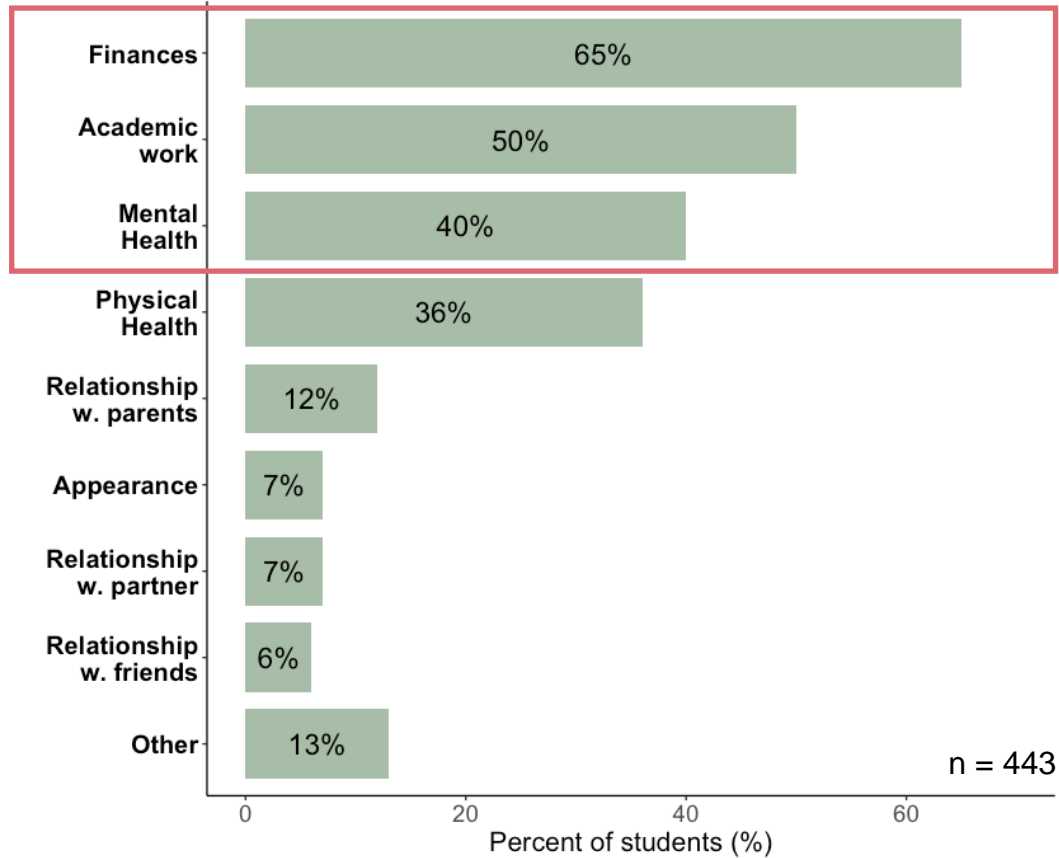


Accidents, Effects and Concerns

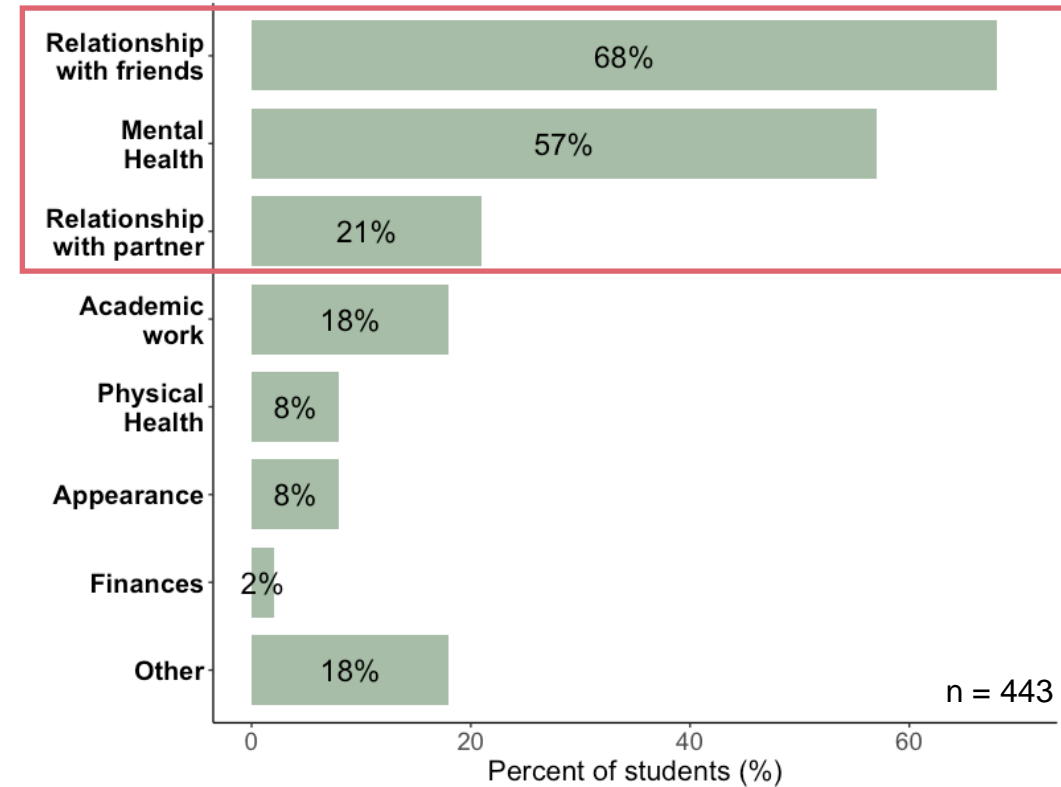


Accidents, Effects and Concerns

'Which 3 aspects of your life do you think your illicit drug use affects the most negatively?'

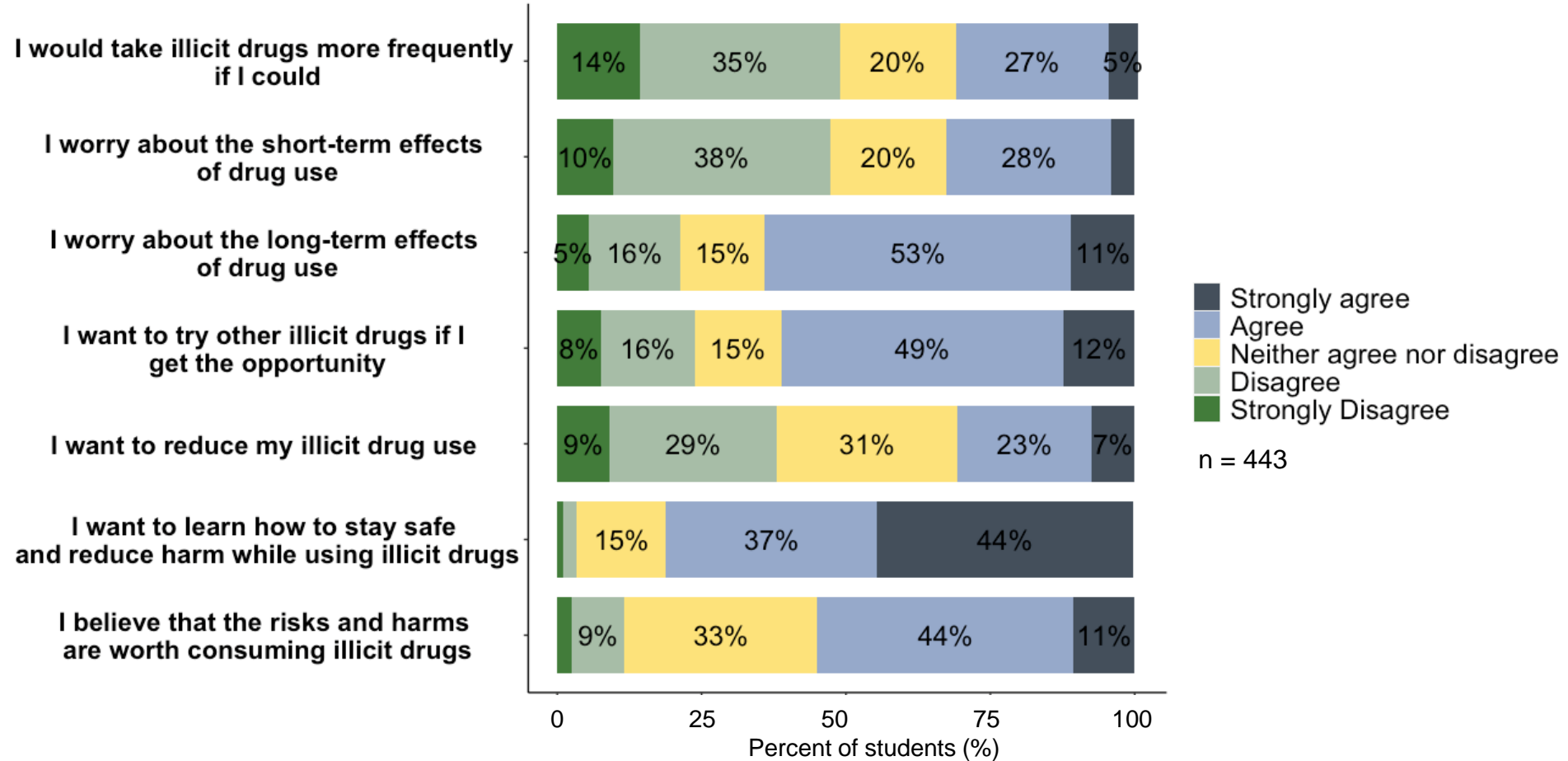


'Which 3 aspects of your life do you think your illicit drug use affects the most positively?'



Accidents, Effects and Concerns - Summary

'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'

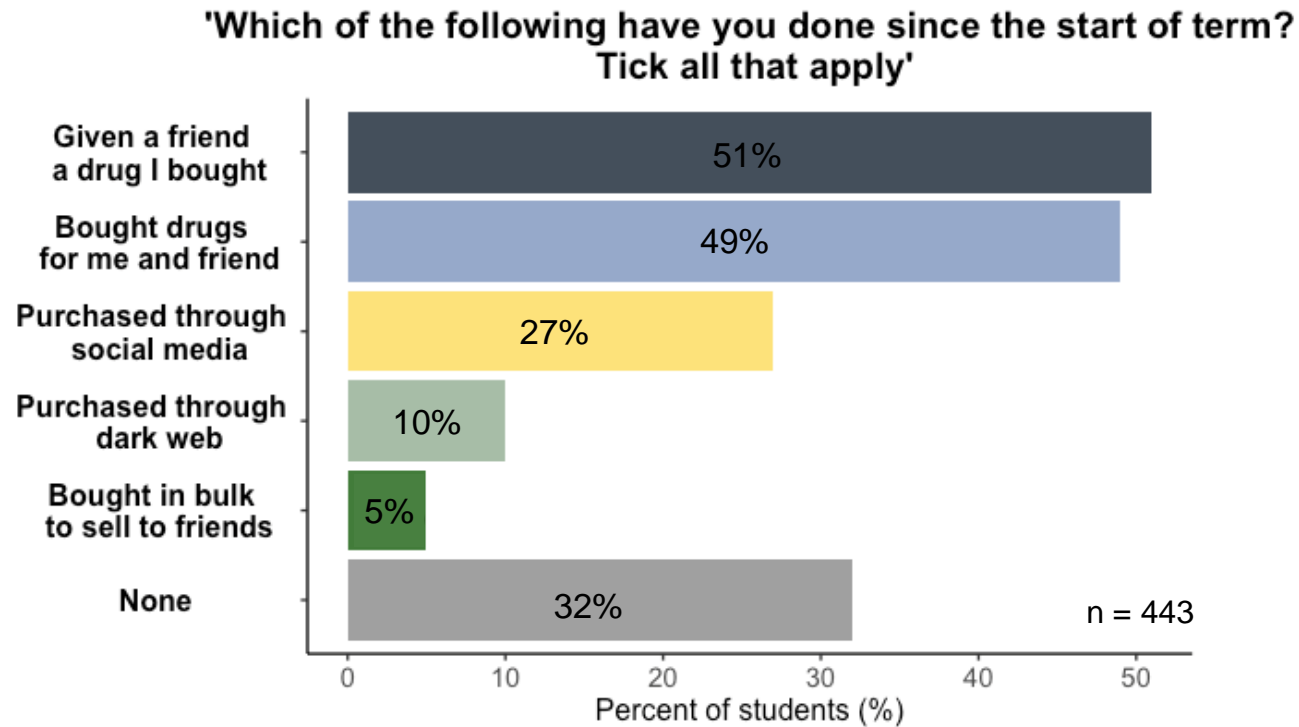


Accidents, Effects and Concerns - Summary

The following applies to students that had used drugs recreationally since the start of term:

- 🌐 **Accidents:** On average, students in this sample often controlled their drug use and took the correct substance at the correct dose. Similarly, it was rare that students failed to do something due to drug use or experienced unexpected adverse effects. Also, drug effects usually matched expectations for students in this sample. However, 42% indicated that they sometimes or most times took more than planned.
- 🌐 **Negative experiences:** Almost 1 in 2 students indicated that they had not experienced any of the listed negative experiences. The most common negative experience was feeling dependent on a drug (30%). Concerningly, 16% had a scary experience but didn't seek help.
- 🌐 **Effects:** Finances, academic work and mental health were the top three aspects most negatively affected by illicit drug use for the students in this sample. Relationship with friends, mental health and relationship with partner were the top three aspects most positively affected by illicit drug use. Mental health was both positively and negatively affected by drug use.
- 🌐 **Concerns:** On average, students appeared to be much more concerned with the long-term effects of drug use than the short-term effects. A large majority would like to learn how to stay safe and reduce harm when taking drugs. Most students were open to trying new drugs and believed that the risks and harms were worth consuming drugs.

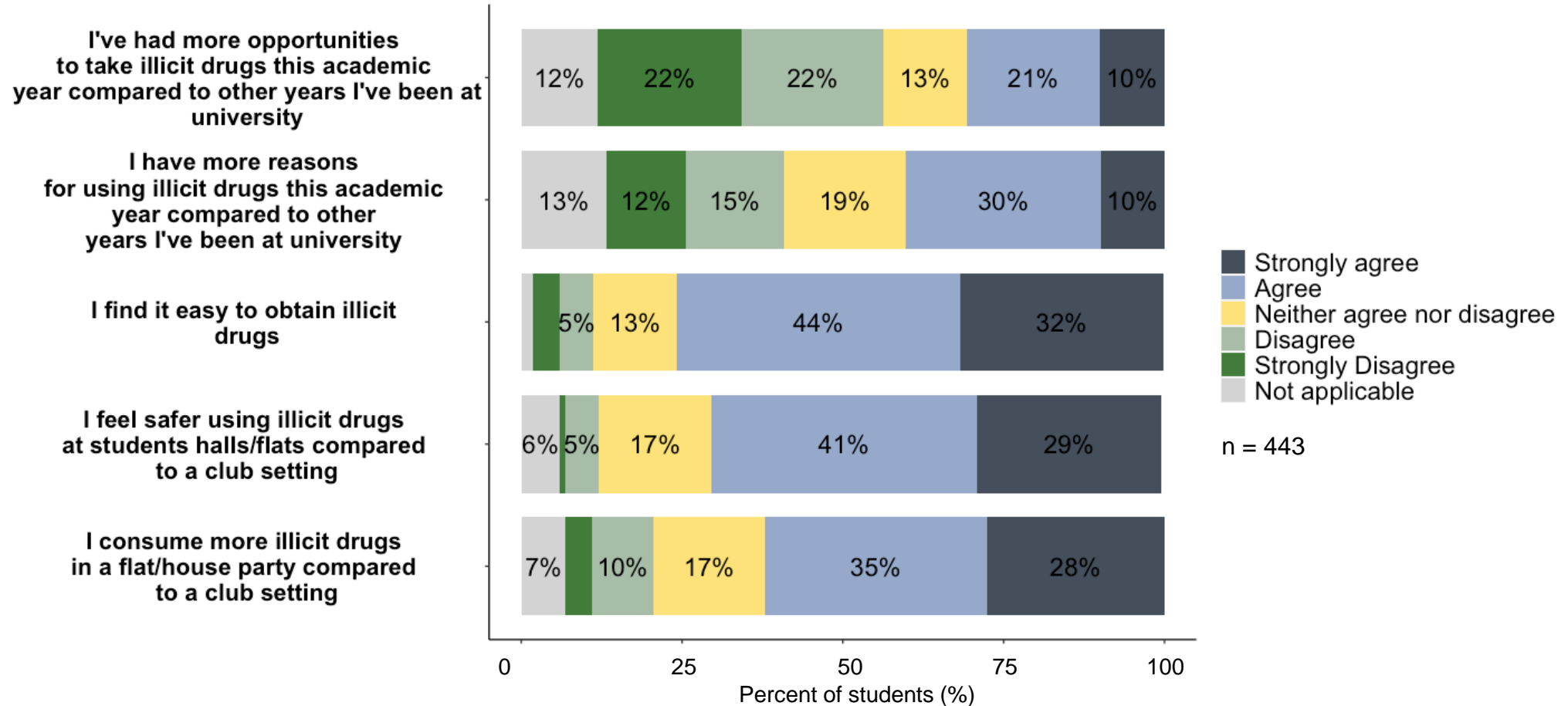
Accessing Drugs



The offence of possession with intent to supply includes social supply, which is non-commercial drug dealing found between friends and acquaintances. The sentencing for such cases depends on the drug quantity and the offender's role.




Accessing Drugs

'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'



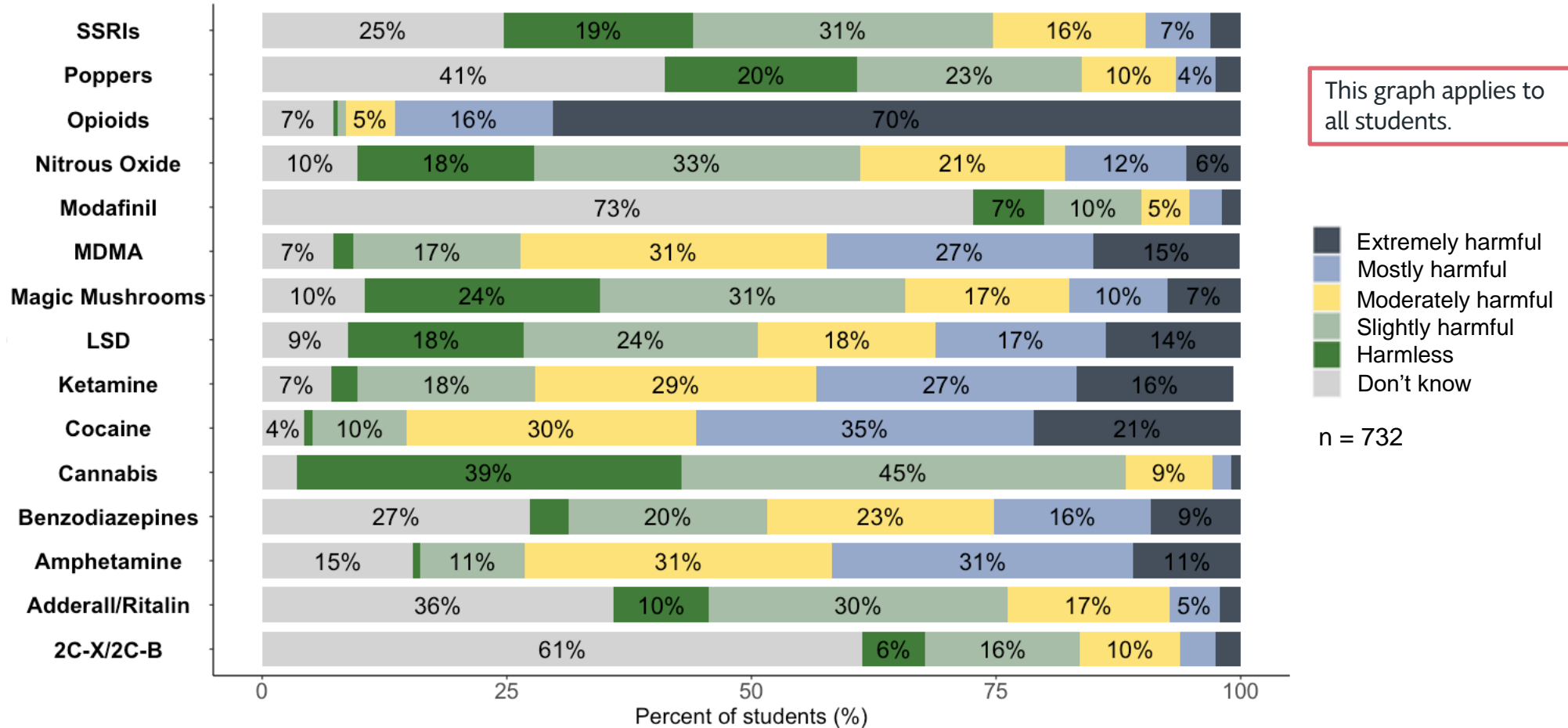
Accessing Drugs - Summary

The following applies to students that had used drugs recreationally since the start of term:

-  **Buying drugs:** Around half of the students had given a friend a drug they had bought (51%) or had shared their drugs with their friends since the start of term (49%). Drugs were more commonly purchased through social media (26%) than through the dark web (10%). A very small percentage of students (5%) reported buying in bulk to sell to friends / dealing.
-  **Accessing drugs:** 40% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had more reasons for using illicit drugs this year compared to other years. A large majority of students (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that they found it easy to obtain illicit drugs.
-  **Settings:** A large majority agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safer using illicit drugs in student accommodation rather than a club setting (70%) and consumed more drugs at a house party than at a club setting (63%).




Perceptions on the Level of Illicit Drug Harms

'Please rate each drug based on how harmful you believe these drugs to be in relation to each other.'



Perceptions on the Level of Illicit Drug Harms- Summary

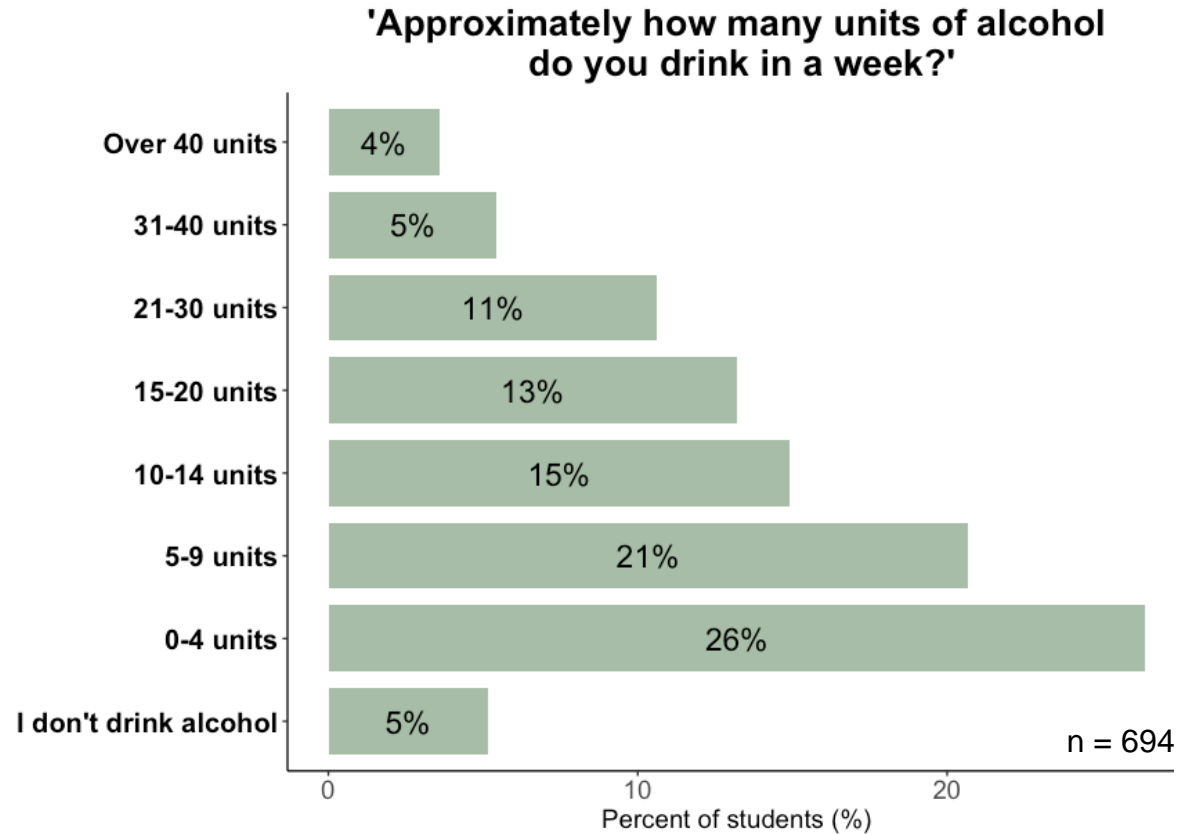
The following applies to all students:

-  **Most harmful:** Students in this sample believed that opioids (70% - extremely harmful) were the most harmful drug, followed by cocaine (21% - extremely harmful).
-  **Least harmful:** Students in this sample believed that cannabis (39% - harmless) was the least harmful drug, followed by magic mushrooms (24% - harmless).
-  **Unsure of harms:** Students in this sample were most unsure about how harmful modafinil (73%) was, followed by 2C-X (61%).

A stylized graphic of a human brain, split vertically. The left half is dark blue and the right half is light grey. The brain is composed of thick, rounded lines forming the gyri and sulci.

Legal Drugs

Alcohol Use



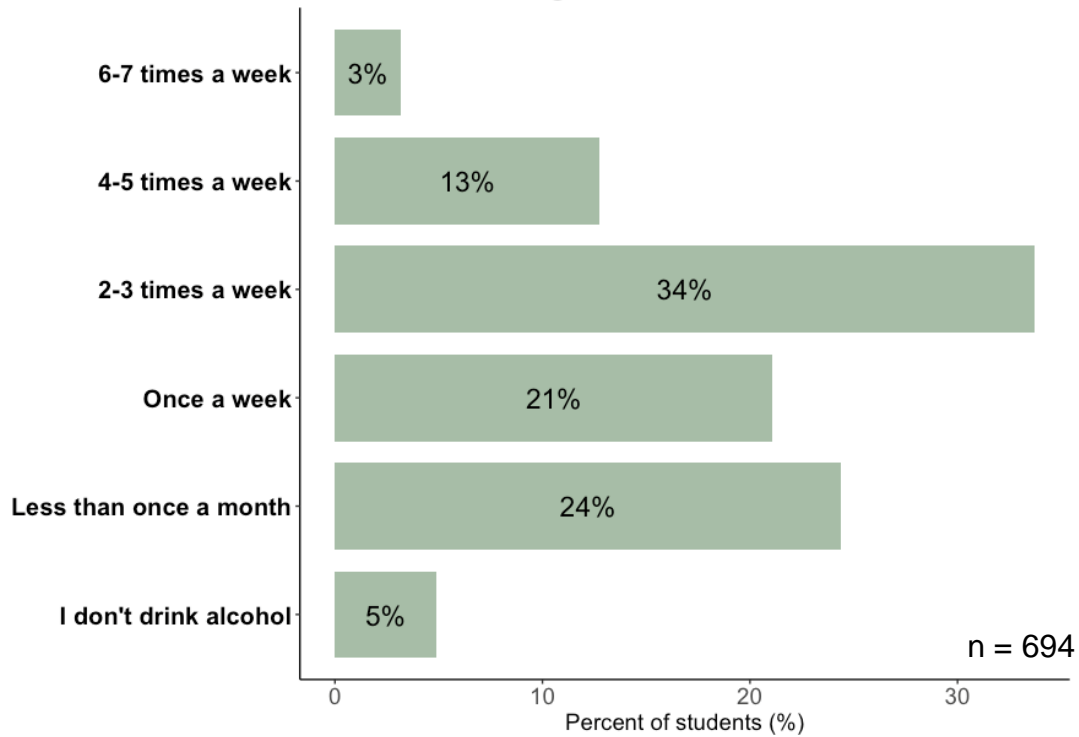
According to the NHS men and women are advised not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis.

Fourteen units is equivalent to 6 pints of average-strength beer or 10 small glasses of low-strength wine.

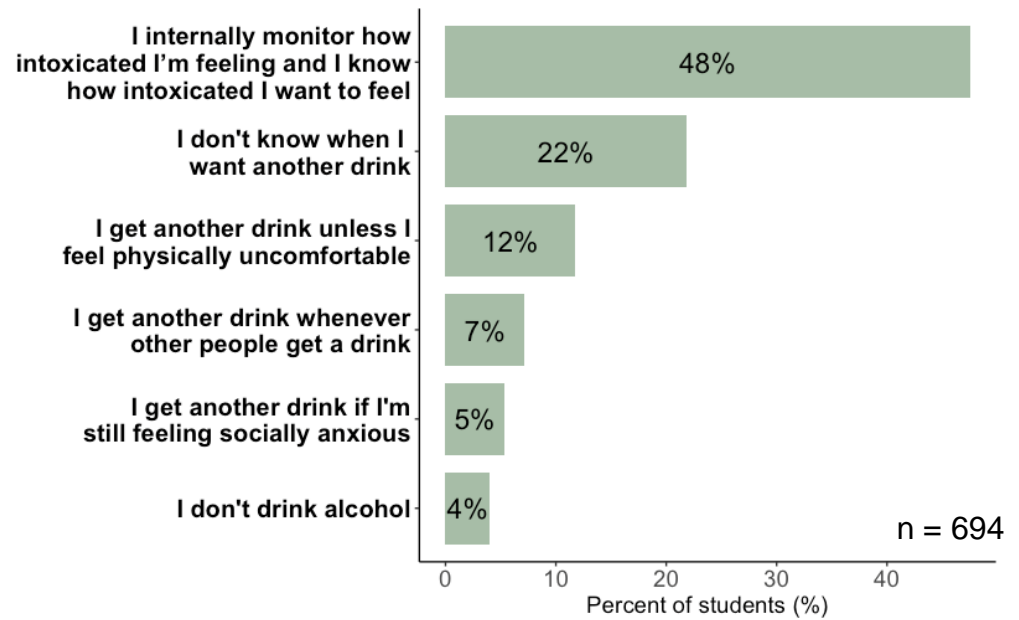
According to the NHS, you should spread your drinking over 3 or more days if you regularly drink as much as 14 units a week.

Alcohol Use

'How many days a week do you drink alcohol on average since the start of term?'



'How do you know that you want another alcoholic drink?'



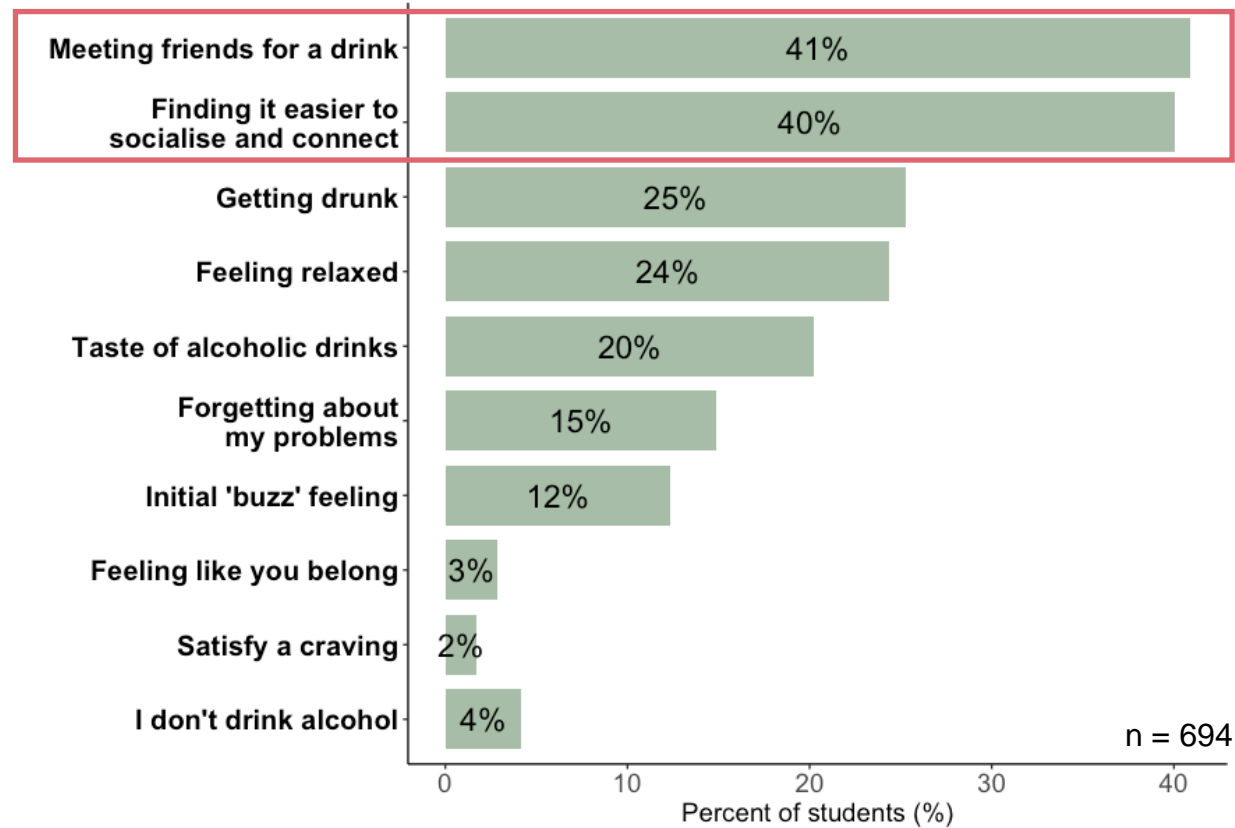
Alcohol Use - Summary

The following applies to students that had consumed illicit or/and legal drugs since the start of term:

- 🌐 **Units of alcohol:** Most students (62%) drank less than 14 units per week. A third of students drank more than 14 units per week. There are limitations to measuring alcohol intake using units as it is difficult to know how many units are in a drink and to remember how many drinks were consumed. This leads to inaccuracies in reporting.
- 🌐 **Frequency of drinking:** Since the start of term 34% of students drank 2-3 times a week, 21% drank once a week and 24% drank less than once a month. Very few students drank almost everyday or did not drink at all.
- 🌐 **Monitoring drinking:** Almost 1 in 2 students internally monitored how drunk they were feeling and knew how drunk they wanted to get. Very few reported being influenced by others in their decision to get another drink.

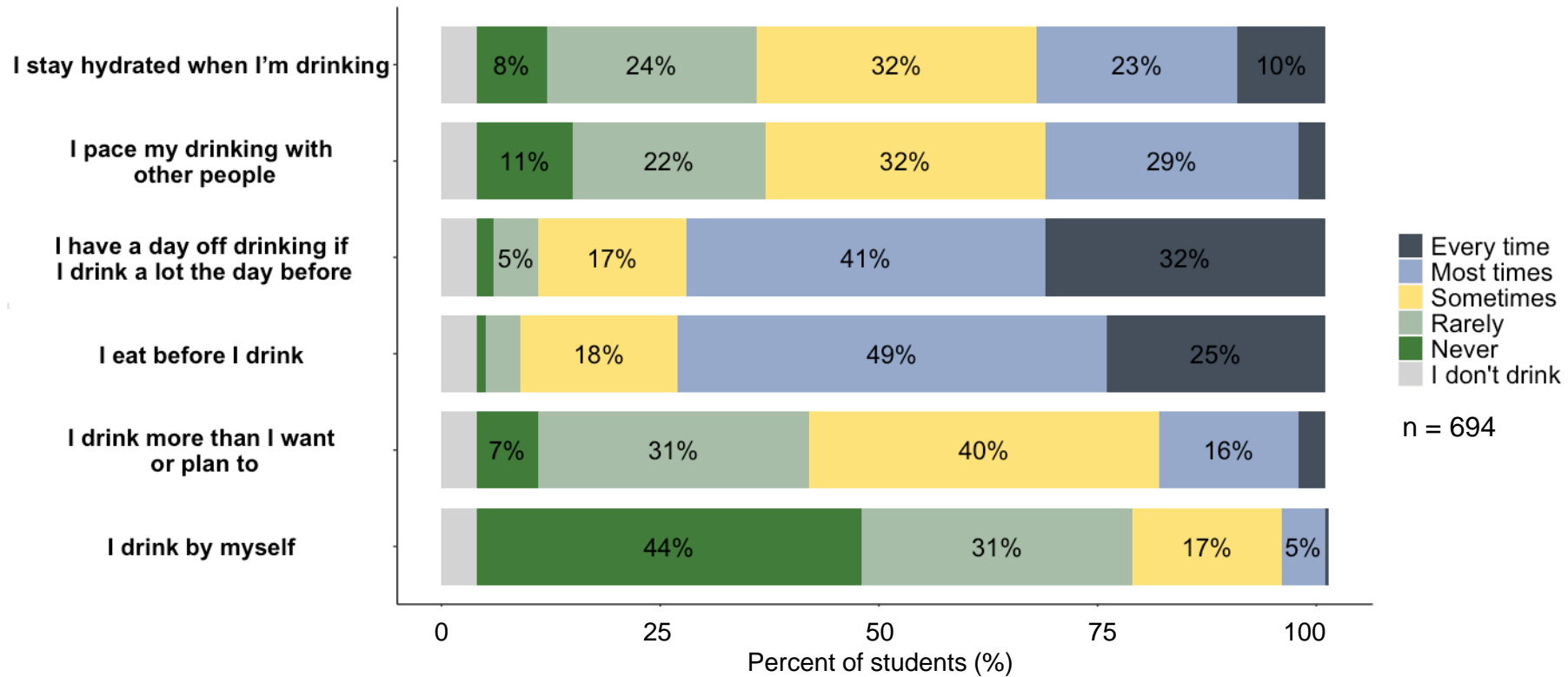
Planning and Motivations

'Which 2 of the following options motivate you the most to drink alcohol?'



Planning and Motivations

'Approximately how often, if at all, do you do the following when drinking alcohol?'



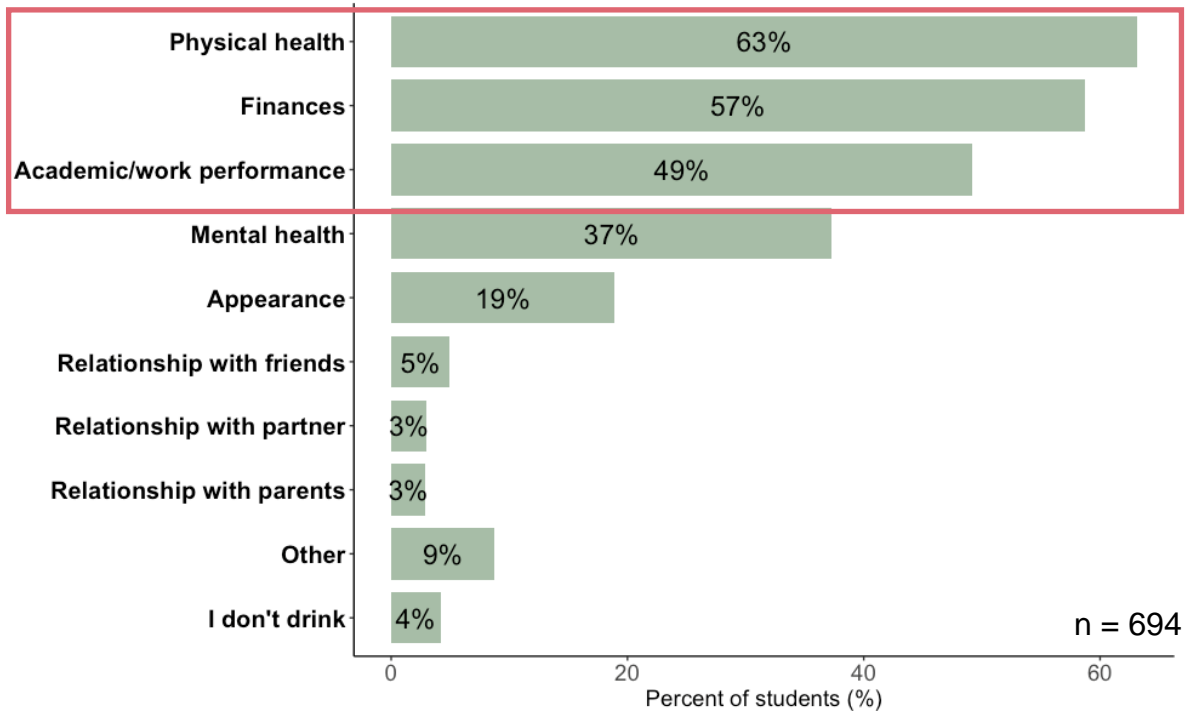
Planning and Motivations - Summary

The following applies to students that had consumed illicit or/and legal drugs since the start of term:

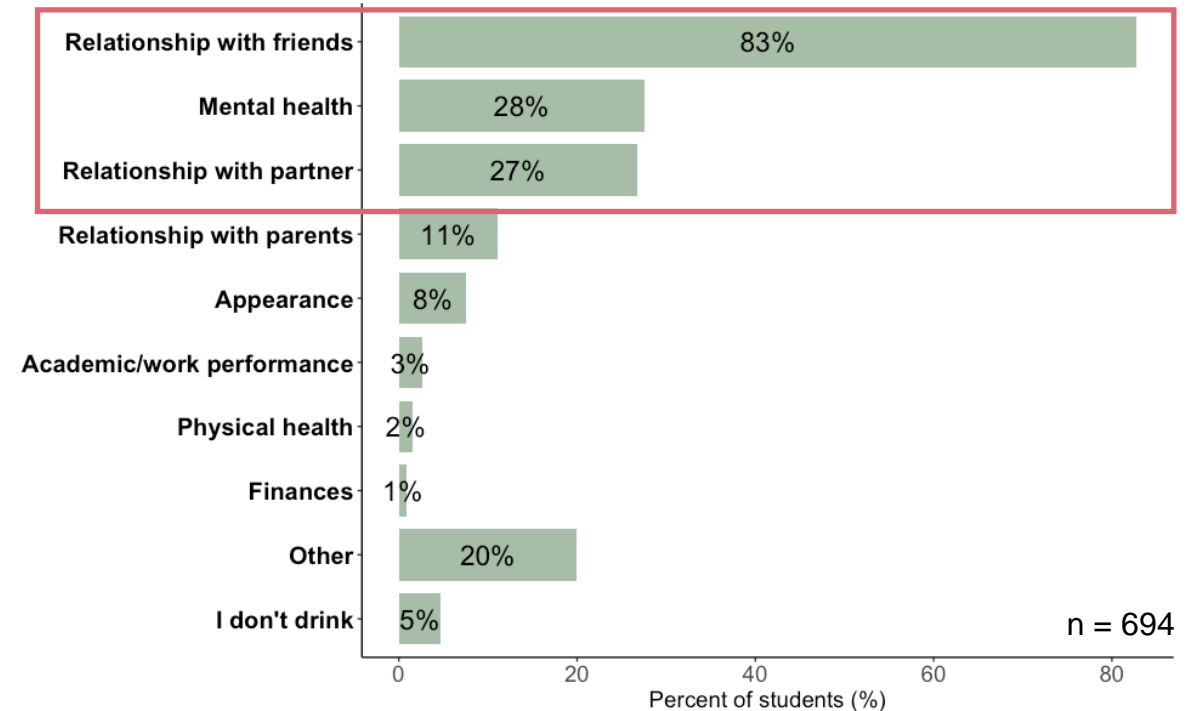
- 🌐 **Motivations:** The top 2 most cited reasons for drinking were associated with socializing with friends. Only 1 in 4 drank to get drunk.
- 🌐 **Planning and safety:** 74% of student in the sample regularly (every time or most times) ate before drinking. However, only 33% regularly stayed hydrated whilst drinking. A high proportion regularly took a break from drinking the day after drinking a lot (73%). 40% of students indicated that they sometimes drank more than they had planned to. On average, students did not regularly drink by themselves.

Accidents, Effects and Concerns

'Which 3 aspects of your life do you think drinking alcohol affects the most negatively?'

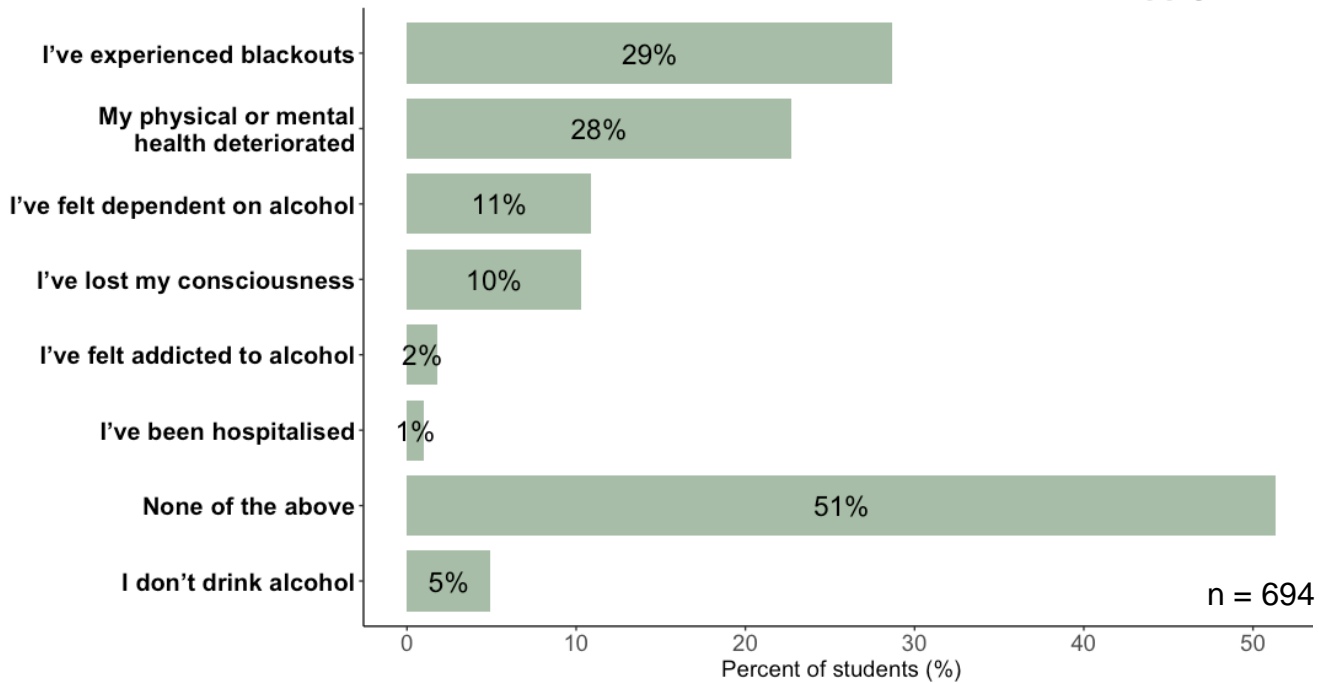


'Which 3 aspects of your life do you think drinking alcohol affects the most positively?'

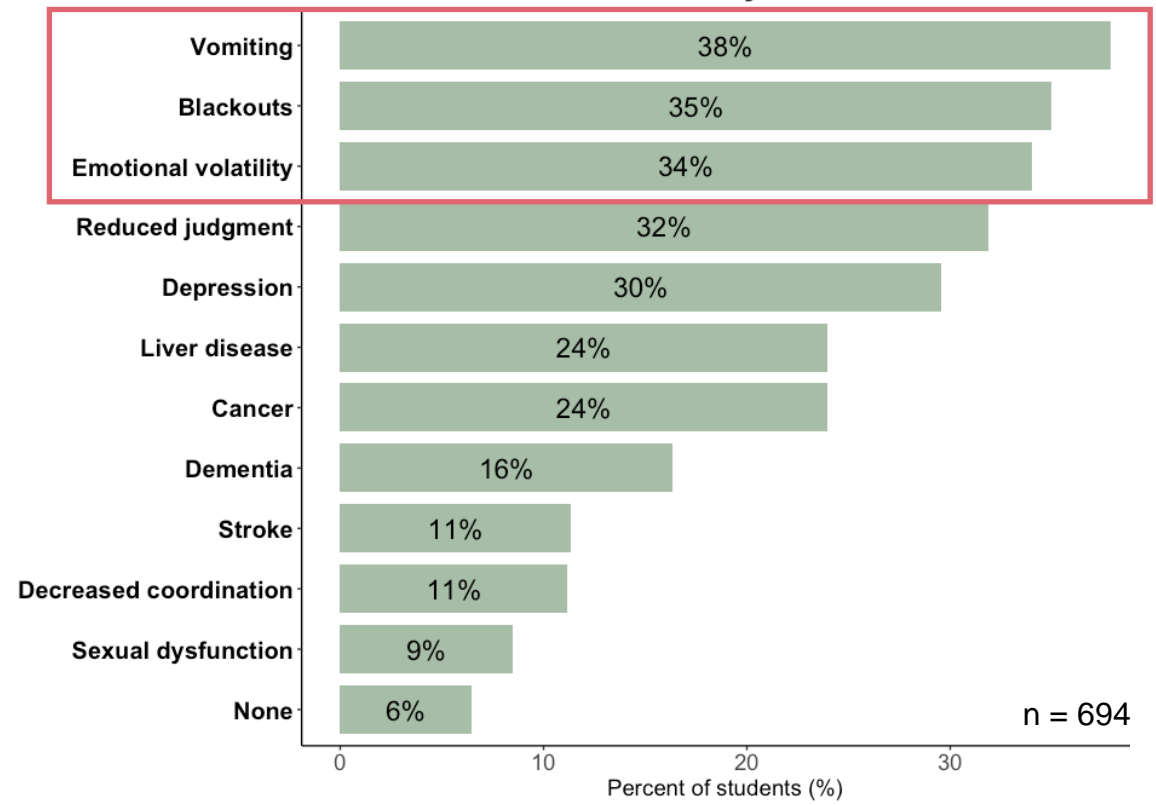


Accidents, Effects and Concerns

'Have you experienced any of these due to drinking alcohol since the start of term? Please tick all that apply.'






'Which of these 3 adverse effects of alcohol concern you the most?'

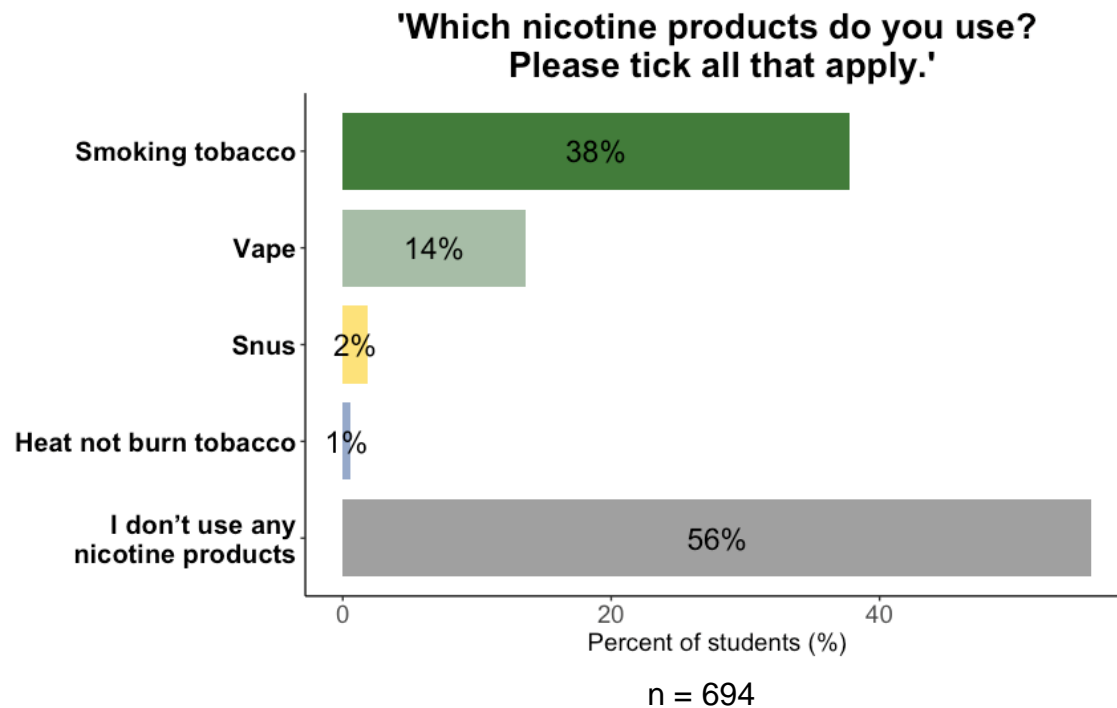


Accidents, Effects and Concerns - Summary

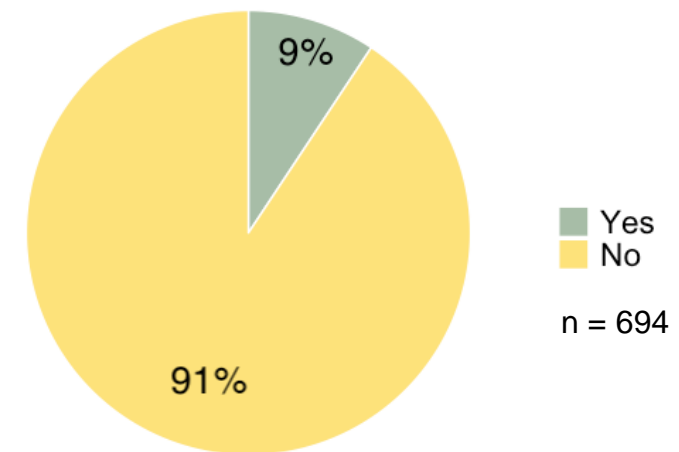
The following applies to students that had consumed illicit or/and legal drugs since the start of term:

-  **Effects:** Physical health, finances and academic work were the top three aspects most negatively affected by drinking. Relationship with friends, mental health and relationship with partner were the top three aspects most positively affected by drinking.
-  **Negative experiences:** 1 in every 2 students had not experienced any of the listed negative experiences. The most common negative experiences were blackouts (29%) and physical or mental health deterioration (28%).
-  **Concerns:** Students in this sample were most concerned with the short-term risks such as vomiting, blackouts, and emotional volatility as a results of drinking. There was less concern for long-term health complications such as liver disease, cancer, dementia and strokes.

Nicotine and Caffeine Use



'Do you use caffeine pills?'



Nicotine and Caffeine Use - Summary

The following applies to students that had consumed illicit or/and legal drugs since the start of term:

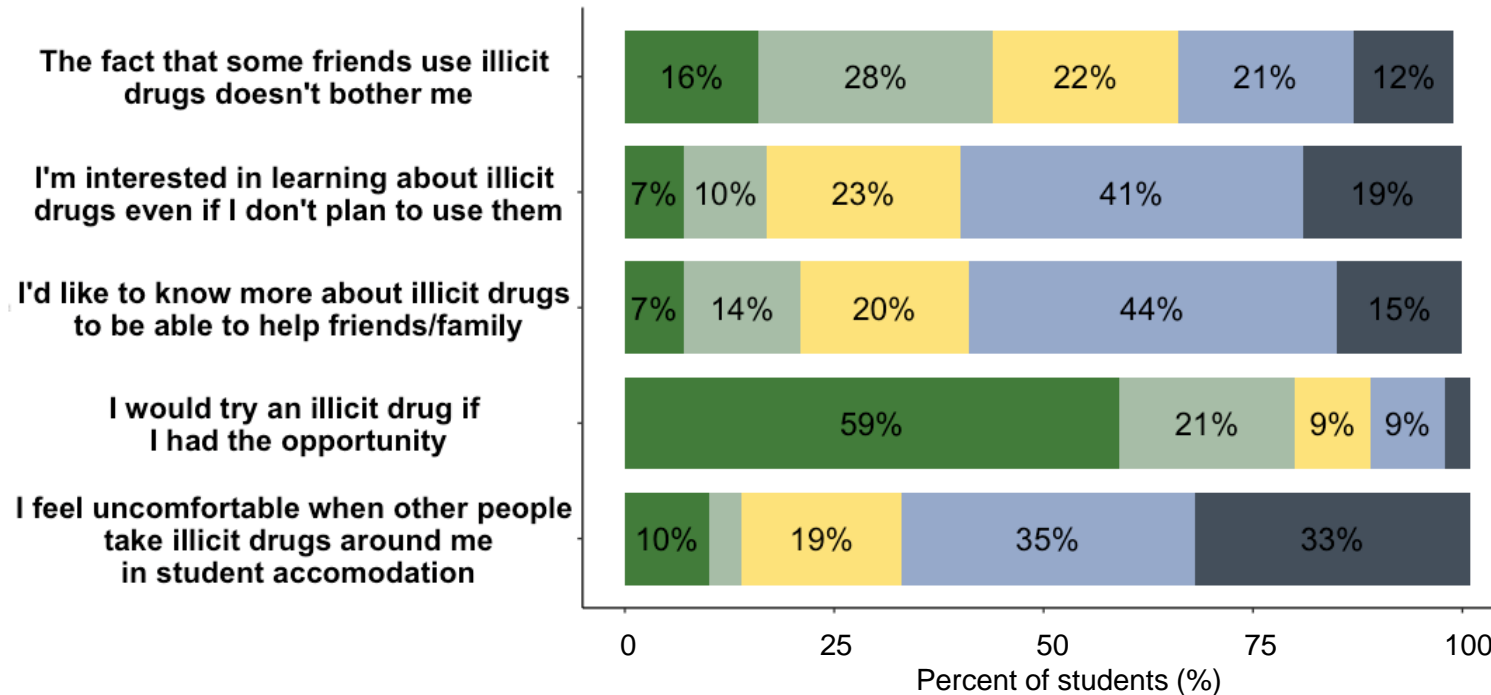
- 🧠 **Nicotine products:** The most popular nicotine product was smoking tobacco (38%), however over half the students in this sample did not use any nicotine products.
- 🧠 **Caffeine pills:** Roughly 1 in 10 students in this sample used caffeine pills.

A stylized graphic of a human brain, split vertically. The left half is dark blue and the right half is light gray. The brain is rendered in a simplified, almost abstract style with visible gyri and sulci.

Non-Drug Users

Non-Drug Users

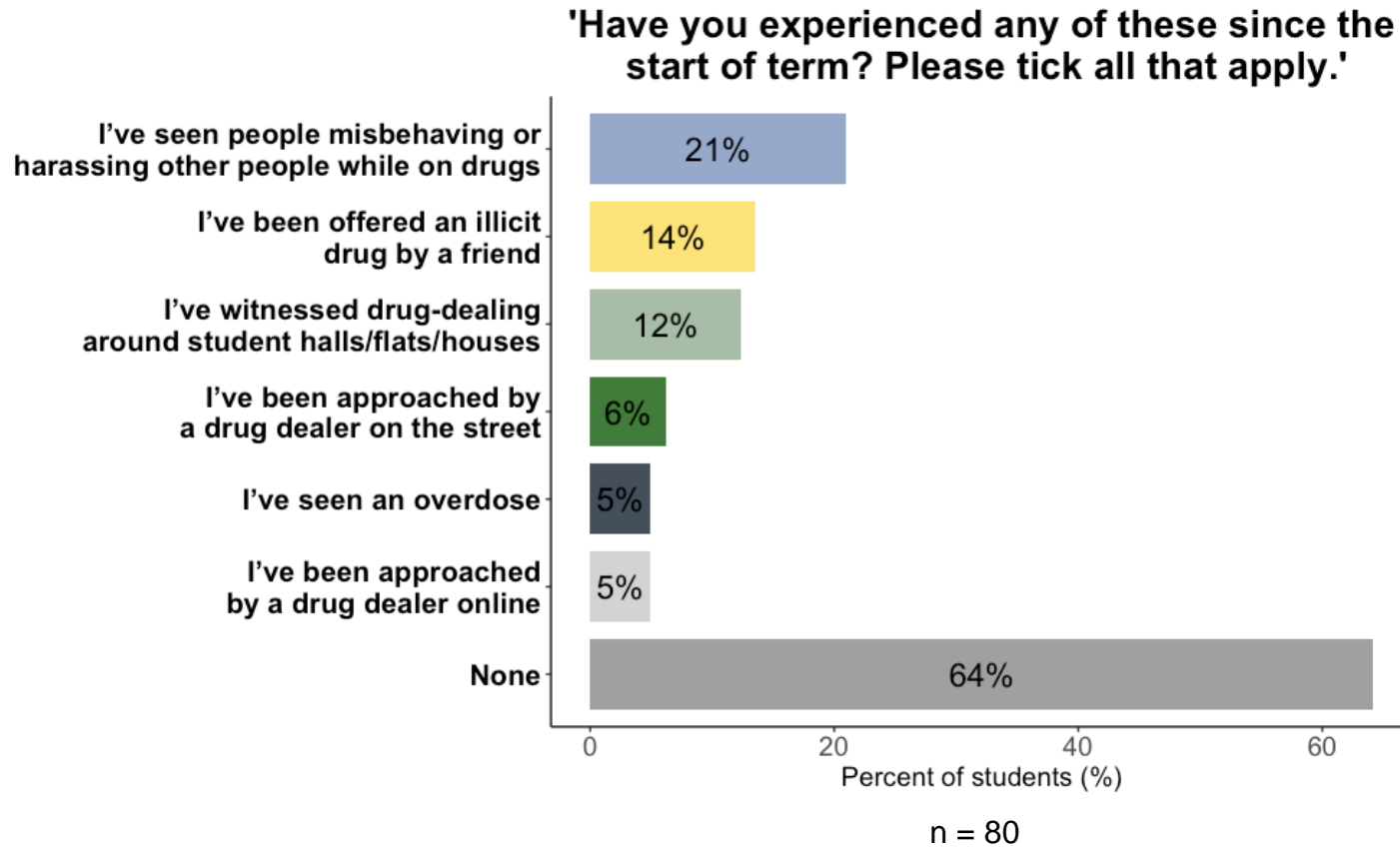
'To what extent do you agree with the following statements?'



The findings apply to students that had not used any drugs, including alcohol, nicotine or caffeine since the start of term:

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree
 n = 80

Non-Drug Users



Non-Drug Users - Summary

The following applies to students that had not used any drugs, including alcohol, nicotine or caffeine since the start of term:

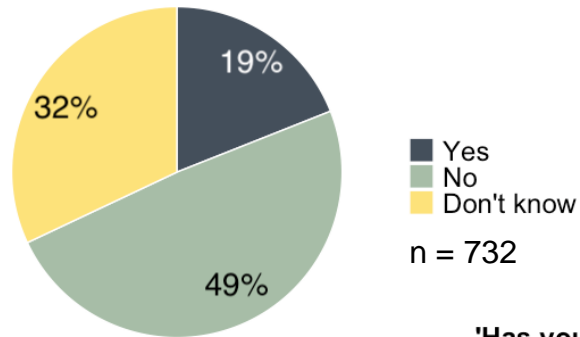
- 🌐 **Drug use:** Only 1 in 10 non-drug users in this sample agreed or strongly agreed that they would try an illicit drug if given the opportunity.
- 🌐 **Learning:** Most non-drug users in this sample agreed or strongly agreed that they were still interested in learning about drugs even if they did not plan to use them (60%) and that they would like to learn more so that they can help friends and family (59%).
- 🌐 **Concerns:** 68% of non-drug users in this sample either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt uncomfortable when others were doing drugs around them in student accommodation.
- 🌐 **Experiences:** The most common experience for non-drug users was seeing people misbehave or harassing others while on drugs (21%). Only 14% had been offered an illicit drug by a friend. Very few had been approached by a dealer either online or in the street (5-6%)



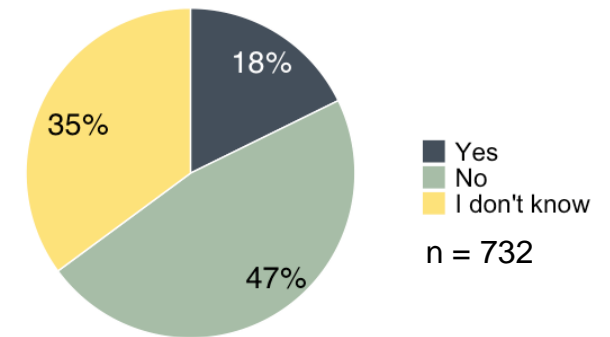
Support at University

Support at University

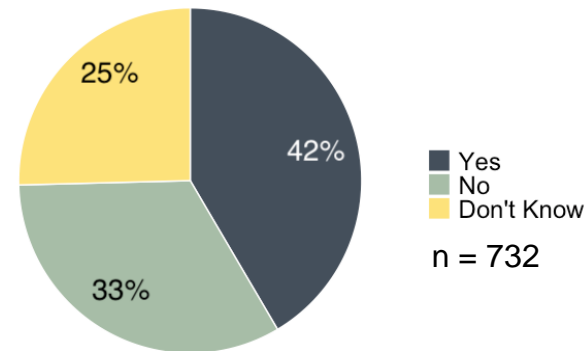
Has your university provided you safety information concerning illicit drugs?'



'Has your university provided you safety information concerning alcohol?'

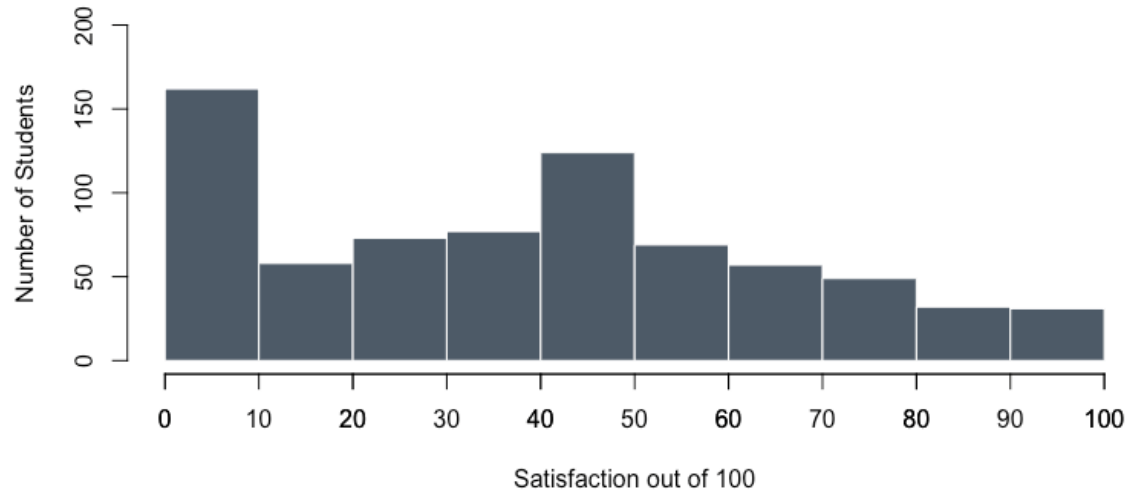


'Has your university provided you additional wellbeing support and advice regarding the potential effects of COVID-19 on your mental health?'



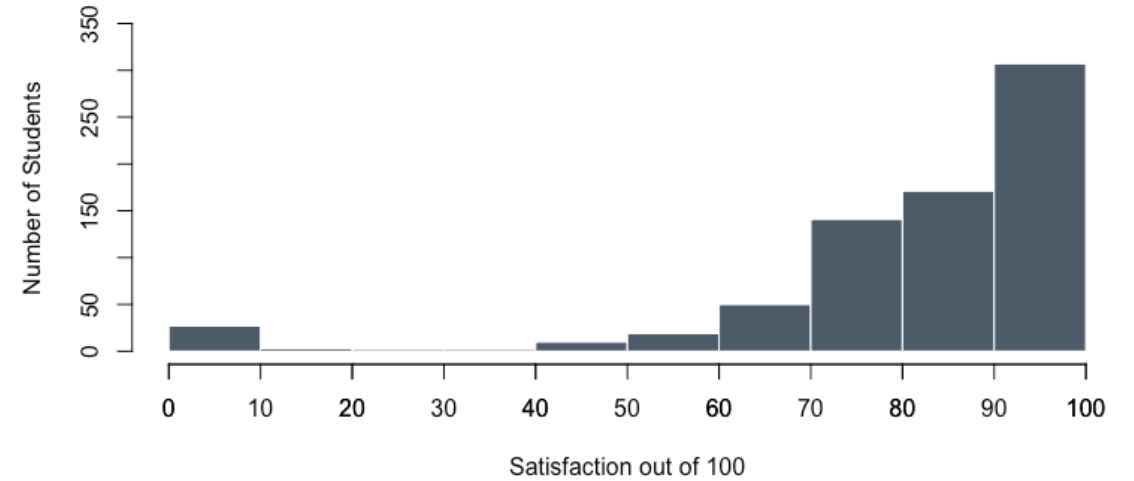
Support at University

'On a scale of one to 1-100, how satisfied are you with the mental health support your university provided since the start of term?



n = 732

'On a scale of one to 1-100, how challenging do you think this academic year has been for students' mental health at your university?



n = 732

Support at University - Summary

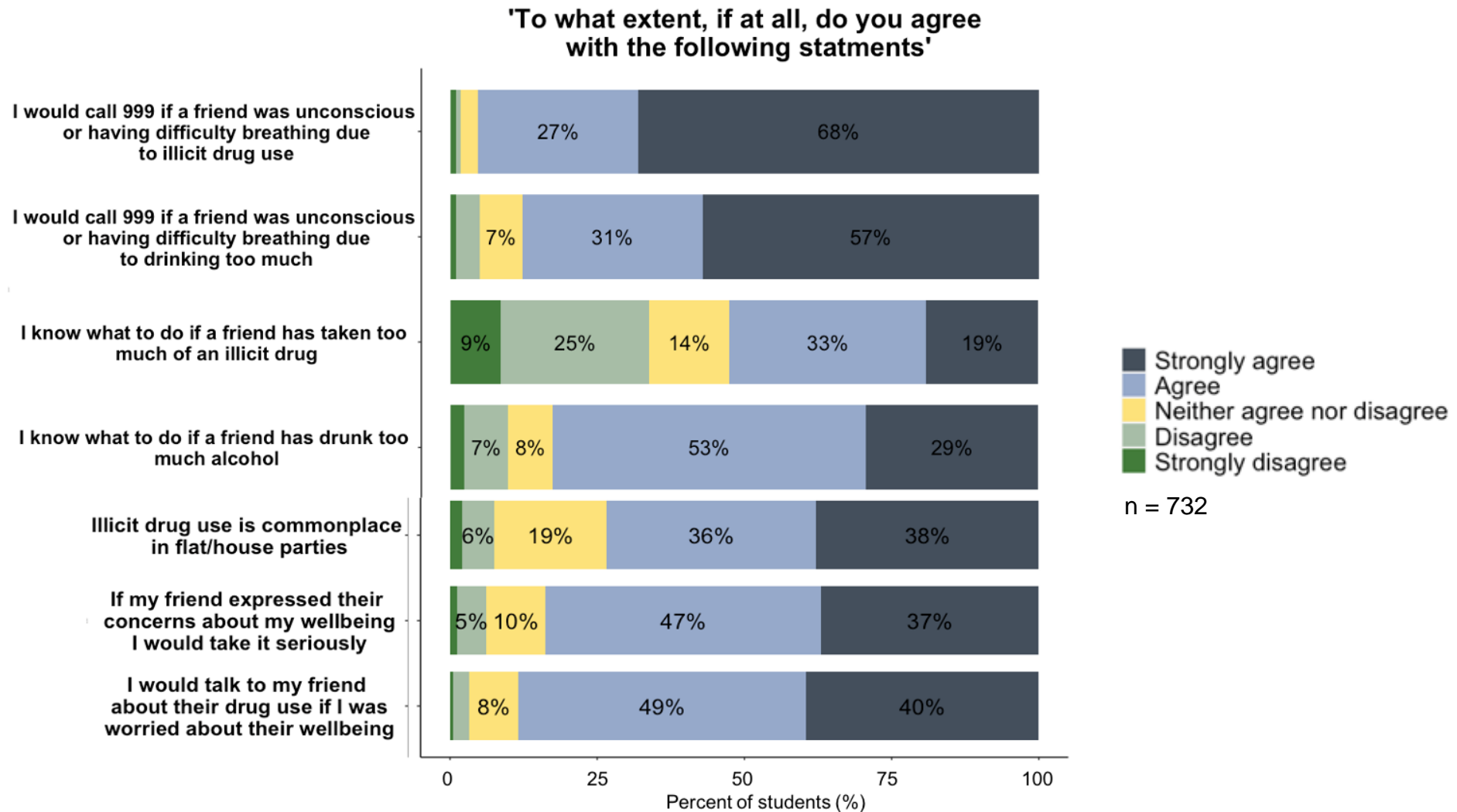
The following applies to all students:

- 🌐 **Illicit drugs:** Half the students in this sample had not been provided safety information concerning illicit drugs by their university. Only 2 in 10 had been provided information and 32% indicated that they did not know.
- 🌐 **Alcohol:** Half the students in this sample had not been provided safety information concerning alcohol by their university. Roughly 2 in 10 had been provided information and 35% indicated that they did not know.
- 🌐 **Wellbeing:** 42% of the students in this sample had been provided additional wellbeing support and advice regarding the potential effects of COVID-19 on mental health. 1 in 3 had not been provided information.
- 🌐 **Student mental health:** Overall, students in this sample believed that this academic year had been very challenging for students' mental health at their university. The average score was 8.4 out of 10, the median score was 8.9 out of 10 and the most common answer was 10 out of 10.
- 🌐 **Satisfaction with support:** Overall, students in this sample were not very satisfied with the mental health support their university provided. The average score was 4 out of 10, the median score was 4 out of 10 and the most common answer was 5 out of 10.

A stylized graphic of a human brain, split vertically. The left half is dark blue with a lighter blue brain pattern, and the right half is light gray with a darker gray brain pattern.

Emergency Situations and Concerns for Wellbeing

Emergency Situations and Concerns for Wellbeing - Summary



Emergency Situations and Concerns for Wellbeing - Summary

The following applies to all students:

- 🌐 **Emergency situations:** A slightly higher proportion of students agreed or strongly agreed that they would call 999 if a friend had taken too much of a drug (95%) compared with if a friend had drunk too much alcohol (88%).
- 🌐 **Actions:** More students agreed or strongly agreed that they would know what to do if a friend had drunk too much alcohol (82%) than if they had taken too much of a drug (52%). 1 in 3 would not know what to do if a friend took too much of a drug.
- 🌐 **Concerns for wellbeing:** A high proportion of students (74%) either agreed or strongly agreed that illicit drug use was commonplace in flat/house parties. A large majority either agreed or strongly agreed that they would talk to their friend about their drug use (88%) or would take a friend's concerns about their wellbeing seriously (84%).

We hope that you found this report interesting.

If you would like to understand more about the drug behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of the individuals in your organisation, please get in touch.



info@neurosight.co