

Higher education

The public perception of the drug dealer is either a seedy street corner ne'er do well or a bling-laden 'kingpin'. But Max Daly sheds light on a different world of dealing.

A university campus is a drug dealer's dream. Thousands of young people living together like sardines in a tin, eager for new experiences, in an environment largely cocooned from the attentions of police and hardened criminals.

It is no wonder then, that drug markets in universities are lively, lucrative and attract young dealers who would not normally get involved in a crime that could end with them spending the rest of their degree behind bars. The student drug market is so sought after that dealers have been known to enroll at colleges specifically to take out student loans and sell drugs on campus.

Gaining independence, being surrounded by their peers and living away from parents for the first time gives many students the opportunity and the motive for starting, or upping their drug use. Nearly three quarters of Britain's 2.5 million university students – a far higher proportion than the general population – have taken an illegal drug.

Some drugs are highly identifiable with student life. Ketamine, for example, is five times more popular among students than it is among non-students of the same age.

So, with halls of residence largely out of bounds for outsiders, it is not surprising that universities are cultivating a small army of academic mini-entrepreneurs, eager to subsidise their own use, gain social currency or make a healthy profit, by selling drugs to this most captive of populations.

A 2012 survey by *Varsity*, the student newspaper for the University of Cambridge, found that one in seven students who used drugs also admitted to selling them for profit.

In March one student wrote anonymously in the *Guardian* about how some of his fellow students had turned to selling drugs because of the high cost of degree courses and rent. He described

the moment police raided his student shared flat, close to the local university, to arrest a flat mate for Class A drug supply. He said he knew of three fellow students, none of whom are "violent criminals on the fringes of society", on bail for selling drugs.

But university drugs markets, and the rise of student dealers from their more caring, sharing hippy predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, are a vastly under-researched subject, especially in the UK.

The most referenced text is from the US. *Dorm Room Dealers: Drugs and the Privileges of Race and Class*, written by two US sociologists, Rafik Mohamed and Erik Fritsvold, who had gained access to a group of mainly middle class white sellers at a private college in San Diego, California, was published in 2010.

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The sociologists described how upwardly mobile college kids smuggled pills across the Mexican border and sold a mixture of weed, cocaine, valium and oxycontin with near impunity across the college campus. The message of their study was, as its title suggested, that selling drugs was just a phase that the future city brokers and newspaper editors of the future went through, and police were perfectly willing to turn a blind eye to offences that would end in prison for other US citizens.

Meanwhile in the UK, Judith Aldridge, a senior lecturer in the School of Law at the University of Manchester, has studied how a group of university students in the city responded to the rapid rise in popularity of the then legal drug mephedrone by virtually setting up shop in the halls of residence, marketing and selling the drug to fellow students via social media and mobile phones.

What interested researchers at Plymouth University's Drug and Alcohol Research Unit (DARU) was the notion of 'social supply' – an elastic term, which aims to differentiate professional drug sellers from those who pass drugs onto a friends and acquaintances for minimal monetary reward. It had previously been documented, in several studies over the 2000s, both within the UK clubbing scene and among young cannabis users.

So the Plymouth team undertook a piece of research, carried out last year, into the student drug dealing scene at their university. Aiming to compare social supply within this arena to 'drug dealing proper', researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 30 student dealers who had recently been selling drugs at the university.

It found most student sellers enrolled there were 'social dealers' rather than professionals. Many described what they charged their friends as a "hassle tax" – a small financial reward for the "inconvenience, risk and hard work" sometimes involved in sourcing drugs.

However, three of the 30 current and former student dealers interviewed were profit-motivated dealers with a wider circle of customers, who dealt to finance their way through university. Some had quickly realised on arriving at university that, because of economies of scale, buying in bulk was an increasingly attractive option, particularly if they spent a lot on drugs for their own use.

The study found that universities provided a "microsite of transition" for

both drug users and sellers. Loosened social controls at universities meant students were more likely to use drugs. And because of the high demand from such a captive, interconnected population, particularly in halls of residence, drug users were more likely to become drug dealers.

“Findings from our study suggest that universities act as an environment in which many drug-using students progress to small-scale social supply roles,” says Dr Leah Moyle, a research fellow at Plymouth University, who conducted the interviews.

The university drug dealing scene, the researchers found, had altered significantly since the 1960s and 1970s. Where once drug distribution was all about ‘sharing and spreading the love,’ now it is more financially focused with an emphasis on a wider variety and higher volume of drugs.

“We spoke to students who had been involved in selling relatively large quantities of class-A substances, but who had no previous experience of commercial drug supply. The prospect of making a relatively good income in a short space of time often outweighed the risk of undertaking ‘one off’ periods of drug dealing activity,” said Moyle.

The ‘normalisation’ of drug use and drug dealing at the university made ‘drifting’ into supply easier to do. Interviewees said they started selling drugs as a consequence of using them rather than the need to make money. Nearly all the social dealers rejected being associated with normal drug dealers.

“In the university context, these students felt relatively protected from law enforcement, and often had access to a ready-made customer base of friends and acquaintances, through which drugs could easily and discreetly be distributed,” says Moyle.

“Our findings also indicate that, in the university environment, engaging in a supply role on behalf of the wider social group can act as a kind of social cement, and that our respondents often wanted to ‘do their bit’ for the group by accessing drugs for less well connected friends.”

It identified different types of social suppliers at the university: stash user suppliers (heavy drug users who fund their habit through selling to friends), designated buyers (who buy on behalf of the group), party buyers (who buy large amounts on special occasions) and entrepreneurs (who buy in bulk when the opportunity arises to sell for profit).

The study found that social supply differed from normal dealing because

it was more fluid and less hierarchical. As a result, most social suppliers at the university generally avoided contact with professional drug sellers and provided their fellow students with convenient access to drugs without the risk, while at the same time “cushioning” themselves from the wider drug market.

Of the student dealers interviewed, eight in ten had used an illegal drug in the last month (mainly cocaine, MDMA and cannabis), spending an average of £70 a month on drugs for themselves. More than three quarters of them had sold drugs in the last six months and the average age they started selling drugs was 17 years old.

One student drug dealer studying in a northern city university, who now earns £500 to £1,000 a week from selling drugs to students from his rented flat in the area’s student district, told me: “I don’t think of myself as a drug dealer in the popular sense of the word,” he says. “It’s more like a hobby that pays for drugs, going out, rent and holidays.

“Selling drugs in halls was too easy, because it all took place in a bubble. Students knocked on the window if they needed anything. There were no police or locals to worry about, just a couple of security officers looking after 3,000 students who all wanted to get high. I knew if I hadn’t taken advantage of the situation I would have regretted it.”

Although the Plymouth University study revealed only 10 per cent of student dealers had become out and out profiteers, there’s a catalogue of cases around the country where student dealers have ended up in front of a judge.

In September last year, Salford students Cara Donnison and Daniel Campbell, both 20, were locked up for two years each after being caught with £2,500 worth of ecstasy, cannabis and ketamine, alongside plastic snap bags and weighing scales, at their halls of residence.

In January of this year, Michael Thompson, 22 – a final year History student at Sheffield University – was sentenced to three years after police intercepted a package addressed to him from Holland that contained £600 worth of ecstasy pills. A raid on his flat, close to the university campus, found 46 bags of ecstasy tablets, cannabis resin, weed, ketamine, Valium and LSD.

In conclusion, and in order to ensure social dealers are not punished by courts in the same way as professional dealers, the Plymouth study recommends that a new definition of social supplier – someone who offers minimally commercial supply – as a good way of

removing non-commercial drug dealing from the ambit of conventional drug supply offences.

“A conceptual shift towards ‘minimally commercial supply’ offers a more realistic and inclusive means of conceptualising both social supply and user-dealing activity,” the study said. “Possible ways forward therefore include the implementation of this term as a distinct offence that focuses on intent, thereby presenting a more proportionate approach than current policy responses for these groups allow.”

■ **Max Daly** is a freelance journalist



What student dealers told the researchers

‘I mean I’ve bought for ten people before so that would be over £100, so that would be over 100 pills it might be even 200 pills or something...it sounds stupid to say it out loud. I mean, that’s a serious amount of drugs! But yeah if you’re going to a festival or something and you’ve got 10-15 people...’
Jacob, 23

‘It’s kind of using your business sense really... So you think I might as well go and do this so instead of £40 for one [gram] you pay £400 for 28 [grams] so that means I’ve only got to sell 10 and then...it’s free. So yeah, but then you are aware that you’re taking a bit of a risk... You never push it on people you don’t know but you know at uni you’ve got so many friends that do it and it’s just easy really...you don’t really think of the consequences.’
Tom, 22

‘I didn’t have a part time job as I have done for the last couple of years and one day it just occurred to me it would be so easy with all the contacts I’ve got that I just thought I’ll give it a go, see how I get on, buy a ‘work’ phone and kind of take it quite seriously and the money started to come... It’s not ridiculous money, but for a student it’s quite nice.’
Dan, 22