

## practice notes

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# Study Safely

## An exercise in partnership

**College students use drugs. In fact, for many students, going to college is the first time they come into regular contact with drugs. In London alone, there are over half a million students, nearly 100,000 of whom are higher education first years. Yet prior to the recent Study Safely campaign, students had not been specifically targeted for drug education across the capital. Here, one of the campaign's evaluators shares the results.**

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*Study Safely* – running London-wide from November 1997 until the end of March 1998 – was the second pan-London initiative run jointly by the 26 London Drug Action Teams (DATs) and coordinated by the London Drugs Policy Forum and the event organisers, Event Planners. The campaign adopted a non-judgmental harm reduction strategy aimed at educating students about 'safer' drug use, in preference to shock tactics or the *Just Say No* approach.

The campaign was based around several Design and Art Direction Award winning posters and a booklet, written in partnership with ISDD. The material was by necessity drafted with input from a wide range of people and institutions, and underwent a rigorous pre-testing with target audience focus groups of current London University students and freshers.

During the course of the campaign 250,000 copies of the *Study Safely* booklet were distributed to students in higher and further education establishments across London. 8000 sets of posters were also distributed, with many of these actually removed from their sites by students as souvenirs.

Alongside the posters and booklets, sat a training programme – *High on Skills* – conducted by Release, which aimed to provide appropriate staff and student representatives with the essential skills to deal with problems and issues. Over 100 people from more than 40 educational establishments in the capital, participated in this programme, including student welfare staff, bar and entertainment staff, Vice Principals and medical centre representatives.

At the local level, the campaign provided the chance to build up a sense of forward momentum without inducing too much unnecessary strain. It also aimed to establish and nurture links between DATs, local drugs agencies and educational establishments. This was successfully achieved, with ties established or strengthened between DATs and over 80 educational institutions in London. And the local can expand to the national: the materials' popularity with the student target audience has prompted the National Union of Students to encourage nationwide distribution of the campaign booklets later this year.

**You too can have a campaign like mine** Evaluation was seen as vital if the lessons of the campaign were to be adequately drawn out, and it was therefore designed to be as comprehensive and as rigorous as possible. What the evaluation found was that there were a number of vital ingredients which helped *Study Safely* achieve its goals and which anyone considering a similar campaign should try to take into account.

Firstly, get a committee together. A group of people involved with the student target audience should be convened (including perhaps drug agencies, DAT coordinators, student welfare officers, and representatives from the NUS and colleges/universities). Investigate what is wanted with a detailed needs analysis, rather than imposing preconceived ideas of what you think is needed. Once the committee is up and running, determine the aims of your particular campaign. As ever, be realistic about what you want to achieve. There is nothing worse than realising that you



### Mixing drugs:

- a) is predictable?
- b) helps you come down?
- c) increases the risk of a harmful outcome?

The best drugs campaign in the world ever!  
Probably...Coming to a university near you.

Can't wait? Call the National Drugs Helpline  
on 0800 77 66 00.

area, and then *invite* each person or agency with responsibility in those areas (don't blow your chances by ordering people around) to specify whether they are able or even want to take part, or whether they want you to manage it on their behalf. If they do want you to manage 'their' activity, try to *hire* someone to do this for you. A word of warning – *pro bono* voluntary work has its limitations. When someone is being paid to do a job, it is much easier to question what they are doing. So wherever possible, pay for all activity, because if you pay, you control it.

#### College work

Leave yourself plenty of time to set things up, as practical arrangements may take more time and effort than you imagine. It can take a long time to coordinate the requirements of educational establishments *and* students. It's an obvious point but often overlooked – students are not readily available in an 'office' environment. Student representatives will generally be fitting any campaign work around their coursework commitments, and may disappear for a time.

As for the colleges and universities, you should always bear in mind the sometimes radically differing needs and requirements of further and higher education.

#### Physically demanding

Another obvious point is that you may have to pay to store bulky materials. The *Study Safely* campaign highlighted the benefits of using an efficient warehouse and distributor. You should also bear in mind the relative costs of differing distribution systems. It is likely to cost more to make two small deliveries across a wide geographical area than it will cost to make a dozen medium-sized deliveries in a relatively small area.

Finally, as well as being realistic about your aims, you should also not expect too much in terms of press coverage. The media, and local media in particular, need sensational hooks to hang stories on and there will almost certainly be press misunderstandings because of poorly briefed media contacts. The best laid plans of mice and men...

#### The target audience

Of course, materials alone do not make a campaign. Students are not always an easy or homogeneous target group, so you should make the most of any outlet at your disposal. Use the NUS, the internet, college notice boards, student papers and any local magazines to let students know what you are doing.

Drug awareness sessions are integral to any campaign that aims to do more than simply provide information. The most successful of our sessions included most or all of the

following elements:

- a central location within the college/university
- a private and quiet area where people can talk confidentially
- student help to dish out materials and promote events
- college and tutor support for promoting events
- prior publicity, including discussions in class or lectures
- association with another function (health day/dance night)
- 'something different', such as the arrival of a health bus or a quiz night
- professional drug workers to give the facts not hearsay



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#### And finally . . .

All the information in this article comes from the evaluation of *Study Safely*. And it is impossible to overstate the significance of such evaluation.

It isn't something that just happens at the end of a campaign – evaluating from day one means that you can feed back your findings into the campaign development. *Study Safely*, for instance, used target and non-target focus groups to evaluate the wording and design of the materials before they were printed, and similar groups of evaluators could be used to help define the approach you decide to take. Evaluation should, therefore, close the 'loop', being part of a circular rather than linear procedure with data feeding back into the development of interventions. If you can do this, then your campaign can actually become part of another campaign's developmental process, acting as a means of detecting and solving problems and planning for the future ■