



Alcohol Research UK Research Strategy 2015-18

*Supporting research to reduce
alcohol-related harm*

www.alcoholresearchuk.org

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Foreword

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It's easy to think that, as a society, we know all we need to know about alcohol. After all, we've been living with it, in one way or another, for millennia. Its pleasures and pitfalls are all too familiar to us.

But to assume we fully understand the many sides of alcohol would be a big mistake, there is so much more that we need to know if we are to tackle effectively the many problems alcohol can cause.

That's why alcohol research is so important. We need to understand better the issues for individuals, families and communities: why some people are more vulnerable than others, the contributing factors, the effective interventions, the barriers and facilitators, the human resource implications, the economic arguments, the evidence to underpin policy – the list goes on.

As Chair of Trustees, I am excited by the challenge of working with colleagues and other experts in the field to build on Alcohol Research UK's excellent track record – helping to take alcohol-related research in the UK to the next level. This new Research Strategy builds on our strong history of funding excellence and ensures that we continue to support important work that will deepen our understanding and help further reduce alcohol-related harms in the future.

Introduction

Alcohol Research UK works to improve knowledge and understanding of the uses of alcohol, the drivers that lead to harmful outcomes from those uses and the most effective ways of improving policy and practice to tackle them. We are the only UK charity dedicated to funding high quality original alcohol research, developing new talent in research and practice, and promoting a better understanding of research findings across society.

In 2011, Alcohol Research UK took over the functions of the Alcohol Education and Research Council (established in 1982). For over three decades, we have funded more than 900 research projects in areas such as early intervention, treatment, harm reduction, education, policy impacts and mental health. This has had a significant impact on building knowledge, and improving policy and practice. We have helped develop the pool of research expertise for the future, supported innovation and new approaches within the field, funded important primary research, and facilitated the development of new interventions that have helped many people facing alcohol and addiction problems.

Alcohol Research UK supports researchers across the United Kingdom. The majority of our grant recipients are based in UK universities; however, we also fund projects outside of the university sector if they demonstrate high research standards. Many of our successful projects have involved collaborations between sectors and we will continue to encourage this.

Our role and focus

We have a unique role in supporting research to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Alcohol Research UK has a number of unique strengths. We are expert leaders in the field who can draw on knowledge accumulated over three decades of dedicated research funding. We are especially able to support innovative, developmental research that both nurtures new talent and helps drive the research agenda forward. Our streamlined application process also allows us to respond quickly to new developments, meaning we often lead the way in developing the research agenda.

Alcohol harm reduction requires creative, often challenging, thinking. Our funding and governance structure ensures that we support impartial research with a strong emphasis on early career support. We aim to help new researchers establish their unique perspectives in order to better develop our understanding of the complex issues involved.

In addition to supporting new research, we believe in promoting the use of the best evidence in clinical practice, service provision, local authorities and central government. We recognise that policymaking involves a range of factors, but we support the aspiration for policy to be informed by the best research wherever possible. We use our role to help bridge the gap between research and policy by promoting knowledge exchange, better communication of research findings and the evaluation of policy interventions.

Alcohol research is a complex and wide-ranging field. We recognise that some types of research require very significant budgets that are beyond our capacity to support. Therefore, we do not fund biomedical research, clinical trials or large randomised controlled trials. We concentrate our resources on funding:

- Social and psychological research into the factors influencing alcohol consumption.
- Analysis and evaluation of policy measures designed to reduce alcohol-related harm.
- Research on treatment for those who drink at harmful levels.
- Research on the effectiveness of interventions designed to prevent harmful drinking.

In developing this Research Strategy, our goal is to increase our capacity to support research while maintaining the strengths we have developed over time.

Incubating new research: our grants programme

We are committed to developing both talent and diversity within the alcohol research field.

We will continue to support PhD candidates through our **Research Studentship programme**. Successful applicants to this scheme receive a three-year bursary matched by the host university. We encourage our PhD students to play an active role in our early career symposia and actively support them in establishing networks within the wider alcohol research community. We also support research networks and conferences through our **Network Support** scheme.

Each year, we fund a number of exploratory research projects through our **Small Grants programme**. These include pilot intervention studies, qualitative social research projects, evaluations, scoping projects, proof-of-concept studies and lab experiments. Small Grants allow new ideas to be tested and often provide the foundation for much larger follow-on studies. They allow us to seed-fund a wide range of projects and provide a critical first step on the funding ladder for early career researchers. Small Grant recipients are required to produce accessible reports that demonstrate why their research findings are important and what implications they may have.

Our **Research Innovation Grants** programme supports larger projects that meet our core priorities and have demonstrable potential to influence knowledge, policy or practice. Research Innovation Grants involve teams of junior and senior staff, and we stipulate that proposals must identify key roles for early-career researchers. We have a strong track record of our major projects leading to significant research outputs. Many also lead to larger follow-on research programmes. Research Innovation Grants are expected to produce easily accessible, high impact outputs including open access, peer reviewed journal papers and brief 'Insight' reports for our website. We also support and facilitate dissemination activities aimed at policymakers, practitioners and the wider public.

We are committed to not only supporting researchers but also those who work at the coalface of alcohol harm reduction – in drug and alcohol treatment services, health services and social support. Through our **Taught Course Studentship** and **Continuing Professional Development** funds, we provide financial support for professionals and committed volunteers to develop their skills and knowledge. This programme of professional development is under constant review as the landscape for taught courses and CPD schemes changes.

Translating research findings

We believe alcohol policy and practice should be informed by the best available research.

We always seek to maximise the impact of our work through multiplatform dissemination and direct contact with our wide network of contacts in academia, policymaking, service delivery and the media. Under this Research Strategy, we will develop a programme of activities that are designed to better disseminate both work we have funded and wider findings from the alcohol research field.

We hold an annual **national conference** based around our stated research priorities. Our conferences link researchers, policymakers and practitioners from the UK and abroad in a constructive, collaborative and informative environment. Our conference presentations are publicly available online via a collaboration with the Film Exchange on Alcohol and Drugs.

In 2014, we held our first **early career research symposium** in London. This successful event included sixteen papers from early career academics as well as a keynote from the eminent alcohol researcher Professor Robin Room. Early career symposia will continue to be supported by Alcohol Research UK, with the goal of allowing researchers to share their findings, identify opportunities for collaboration and develop social and academic networks. We aim to hold one residential symposium annually.

We also host specialist **symposia and expert groups** to focus on key issues in alcohol research and policy. As with our conference, these aim to develop networks both within the UK and between UK-based researchers and international colleagues. We believe face-to-face discussions between diverse stakeholders play a critical role in promoting the use of research evidence in policy development. We also see a critical role for symposia in allowing researchers to identify, debate and seek solutions to new research problems.

In line with our priorities, we work with selected researchers to produce **thematic reports** aimed at informing policymakers, practitioners and the general public on specific issues. Our thematic reports are delivered through a range of media to maximise awareness and promote access.

As a relatively small research charity, one of our core strengths is the capacity for **rapid responses** to changes in the research, practice and policy environment. We retain sufficient funds in our budget to support activities which address up-and-coming issues through commissioning rapid reviews, arranging and hosting meetings, producing interim reports and co-funding projects that can help set the research agenda and identify research and policy needs.

Working with partners

We are encouraged by, and wish to support, the work of other organisations, research centres and individuals in the field.

We have a strong record of working in partnership projects with a range of organisations including the ESRC, MRC, Alcohol Concern, the Institute of Alcohol Studies, Alcohol Focus Scotland, the United Kingdom Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies, Balance North East, the Thomas Pocklington Trust and the Chief Scientists Office of the Scottish Government. We will always explore co-funding opportunities with partner organisations where they support our strategic priorities.

We currently provide core funding to two external projects that fulfil a key role in disseminating research knowledge among practitioners and policymakers: Drug and Alcohol Findings and Alcohol Policy UK. While this funding is subject to annual review, we believe it fulfils our purpose of supporting those who contribute to the shared goal of reducing harm through the promotion of research evidence. Where appropriate, we will continue to support similar programmes in future.

Research principles

We are committed to supporting impartial, objective and rigorous research.

While our goal is to support the best use of research evidence in policy and practice we are not a lobbying or advocacy organisation. We encourage our grant recipients to identify policy and practice implications from their research, but will not seek to steer their conclusions to align with particular policy positions. We believe fully in the independence of the research we fund and support the right of researchers to produce challenging findings.

We recognise that alcohol research can be contentious and that policy decisions can be skewed by vested interests. Consequently, we do not accept money or any support in-kind from the alcohol industries; however, we will engage with the alcohol industry in conferences, debates and discussions and allow our grant recipients to do so where they feel it is appropriate. We do not proceed on a principle of non-engagement with industry, but one of critical interaction on the basis of no financial or structural relations.

Our full guidelines on interaction with the alcohol and pharmaceutical industries and our policy on acceptance and refusal of donations are both available on our website.

Similarly, while we often work with campaign groups we believe that our independence, and that of our researchers, is fundamental in supporting the free, critical research inquiry that is essential to the achievement of our charitable objects. We do not fund projects in which advocacy is the primary goal or purpose, but we do expect our research to inform and support advocacy activities where appropriate.

We aim at all times for our funded research to have maximum impact. We recognise that research impact involves both raising public awareness and targeting the right people - whether that be policymakers, practitioners, journalists, or the wider research community. We are also committed to ensuring the pursuit of impact is not at the cost of research integrity: when working with the media, we want to set the agenda and challenge assumptions rather than simply chase headlines.

Annual research priorities

We want our work to be focused, timely and relevant.

In order to make our programmes as effective as possible, we set annual research priorities that allow us to focus on key issues that fall within our broader remit. In developing our priorities, we consult with the wider research community, policy and practice stakeholders and our Scientific Advisory Panel (SAP). The final decision on annual priorities is made by the Board of Trustees and announced alongside the annual grants programme. Where appropriate, priorities may remain in place for more than one year.

Scientific advice and peer support

Alcohol Research UK is committed to promoting the highest standards in research.

Our Scientific Advisory Panel supports our strategic decision-making and priority-setting. It is drawn from experts across a range of academic disciplines as well as individuals working in alcohol and substance use services. Our Grants Advisory Panel consists of academics with specific expertise relevant to our grants programme. Following formal peer review, the Grants Advisory Panel is responsible for recommending which applications to fund. We draw on a large body of peer reviewers, and applications for Research and Development Grants are read by at least two external referees before being considered by the Grants Advisory Panel. Members of the Grants Advisory Panel also advise staff on Small Grant applications. All grant decisions are ratified by our Scrutiny and Review Committee, which is a sub-committee of the Board of Trustees. All applications are considered on their merits according to explicit criteria.

Reviewing our research strategy

Alcohol Research UK reviews its Research Strategy every three years.

Between review periods, it monitors the Strategy and makes adjustments where necessary. A priority for staff and trustees in the first three-year period is to ensure that our strategic development is based on the best evidence of our own effectiveness and impact. This will be informed by the findings of a major independent review of our research impact, the establishment of robust systems for

tracking the impact of new grants and the development of clear processes for the collaborative development of our strategic goals.

The future of alcohol research

Tackling alcohol harms has never been higher on the national agenda. We believe that Alcohol Research UK has a crucial part to play in this challenge.

We are committed to using our resources in a targeted and collaborative manner and to produce research findings that can have a demonstrable impact on knowledge, policy and practice. We also believe that through building capacity and nurturing new talent, we can help ensure that the research community remains vibrant and ready to respond to new challenges.

We will continue to use our unique position to support this and ensure that research makes the best contribution possible to the reduction of alcohol harms throughout the UK.



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