

# Better Than Well

The Collegiate Recovery Program  
@ the University of Birmingham

ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24



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## Introduction

**Better Than Well (BTW)** is a University of Birmingham program supporting students in recovery from addiction. It is the first university-led Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP) in the UK and currently the largest. CRPs are structured programs of support for university students in maintaining abstinent recovery from any form of addiction (drugs, alcohol or behaviours) whilst also pursuing a university degree. At the heart of a CRP is a community of students who meet regularly in formal and informal settings to offer each other support. The program is 'scaffolded' by some employed university staff (Program Director and Project Manager) who use their knowledge and lived experience of addiction to provide guidance, hope and access to services.

The report details BTW's 2023-2024 activities, including weekly meetings, sober socials, and a recovery flat. Student testimonials highlight the program's positive impact on academic success and overall well-being. Furthermore, the report discusses BTW's contributions to research and advocacy efforts within the UK and internationally, aiming to expand support for students struggling with addiction. The program's success is demonstrated through its growing community and positive student outcomes.

## The Team

Ed Day is a Clinical Reader and NHS Consultant in Addiction Psychiatry. He has worked in the addictions field for over 25 years and is currently the UK Government National Recovery Champion for addiction. He started the Better Than Well Collegiate Recovery Program in 2021 and remains the project director.

Luke Trainor is a University of Birmingham graduate and person in long-term recovery from addiction. Luke has been Project Manager of the BTW program since 2021.

## A year in the life of BTW

The academic year for Better Than Well starts with Welcome Week, where the new intake of undergraduate and postgraduate students make their first connections at the university. As usual, BTW had a stand in the hall where various societies present their activities, which this year was manned by BTW students with the support of Luke. A regular stream of new students come to ask questions, a number of which leave details for a more in-depth contact. Luke then follows up with one-to-one meetings online or in the Lodge.

The Lodge is a one-story 'gatehouse' next to the grand gates on Pritchatts Road. We share the building with Campus Pause, a service offering groups and social sessions to support mental health. The building is quiet, with soft furnishings and homely décor i.e. the ideal place to step out of the busy campus environment if feeling stressed. The Lodge is available to students Monday-Friday, shared with Pause on Tues-Thurs. Luke offers a drop-in service, but students can also book appointments with him, and 4-5 students/day take up this offer. Luke also offers guided meditation sessions on a weekly basis, which some students use as part of their recovery program.



One-to-one sessions may be directed by the student, but also focus on the development of an individual 'recovery plan'. BTW is built on the principle that there is no one path to recovery and everyone's journey is different. However, with the most severe and persistent forms of addiction it can help to have both a 'toolkit' of techniques and strategies to cope with immediate stressors and urges to use substances or behaviours, as well as an overarching 'framework' to ensure that these can be sustained over an extended period of time. Such a framework or program may be said to focus on wellness, incorporating strategies that keep an individual physically and mentally healthy.

Two regular weekly groups have run on campus (and simultaneously online) every week since 2021 and form a key part of the BTW program. Thursday 6-7pm is a proto-12 Step Fellowship meeting, where a member of the local recovery community shares their experience and participants discuss relevant issues. The meeting is not an official 12-Step Fellowship meeting, but rather adopts some of the practices and language to offer an easy way of experiencing the process. Students benefit from hearing about the experience, strength and hope embedded in shared stories from people with more recovery time. Luke is then available to accompany interested students to attend Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or Cocaine Anonymous meetings in the local community. Many have found the 12-Step program offered at such meetings an important part of their recovery journey.

Friday 5pm is always the weekly 'Celebration of Recovery' Meeting. This meeting has run every week since September 2021, including Christmas Eve. It takes place both in person and via Zoom and has evolved to follow a weekly topic chosen by members of the groups. These have included 'Recovery in an addictive society', 'Motivation in recovery', 'Relationships and dating in recovery', 'Coping when others around you are not', and 'Dealing with exam stress'. The preamble read out at the start of the meeting is reproduced in Box 1. Students report that they benefit from being able to discuss student- or young person-specific topics with a group of like-minded peers. Recovery milestones are celebrated with the presentation of a BTW keyring.



Once a month BTW organises a 'Sober Social' event, usually in the evening or at the weekend. BTW members suggest activities, which have included meals at local restaurants, visits to art galleries and museums, ten-pin bowling, mini-golf and an escape room. These are enjoyable social activities with no pressure to drink alcohol or take drugs, and often help students to build confidence in attending events in places where other groups or individuals are consuming alcohol.





A pan-Birmingham student recovery meeting has been held at the university's Exchange building in central Birmingham. Although in the early stages of development, this group aims to support any student in the city in maintaining and building their recovery.

### **BOX 1: Celebration of Recovery Preamble**

*Hello everyone and welcome to the weekly Friday All Recovery Celebration group.*

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a person in long term recovery.*

*This group is for anyone who has suffered from addiction of any kind, or anyone interested in learning about addiction and recovery. These meetings offer people a chance to share their addiction recovery experiences with an emphasis on hope and healing. We believe there are solutions to help us initiate, sustain, and grow our recovery lives. Our group focus is to have a conversation and learn from each other.*

*We believe there is no wrong way to get into recovery. This meeting is for anyone practicing "ANY WAY" they see fit to recover, including Medication Assisted Treatment, meditation, SMART Recovery, 12-Steps, therapy/counselling, or "on your own". Our goal is to achieve long-term recovery sharing what we have learned from many paths and diverse recovery-based programs.*

*We follow the 12-step tradition of anonymity, and anything you hear in this room should stay in this room. You don't have to tell us what your particular addiction is if you don't want to.*

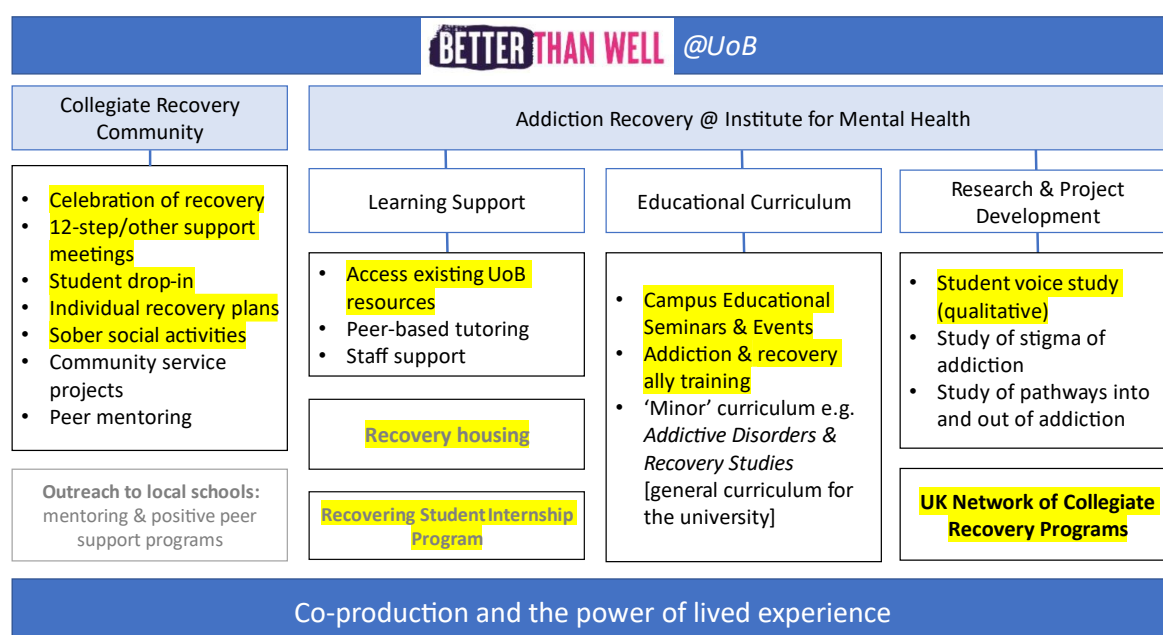
*Together we strive for progress to find healthy coping skills to support us in our health, home, purpose, and community!*

## Development of the BTW project

When BTW started in 2021 a 5-year blueprint was developed to describe the various components of the ideal Collegiate Recovery Program. The core element of a CRP is peer support, and so various activities were planned to stimulate the development of a student recovery community. Alongside this were activities that supported student academic development, promoted understanding of addiction and recovery, and captured data to understand whether this process was effective. More ambitious goals included recovery-specific accommodation on campus, a student internship program and a national network of CRPs across UK universities.

Figure 1 presents the components of this framework, highlighting (in yellow) the elements that were up and running by the end of 2023/24.

**FIGURE 1: The BTW development blueprint**



This figure summarises the proposed areas of development of the BTW Collegiate Recovery Program 2021-26. Elements of the student recovery community are shown on the left hand side of the diagram, and staff-led elements on the right hand side. Elements highlighted in yellow had been instigated by the end of the 2023/24 academic year.

## The student view

The students are the lifeblood of BTW, and their views have been captured in various forms over the past year as part of the on-going evaluation of the program. We asked one undergraduate BTW member to describe his experiences of BTW over the 2023/24 academic year:

*My name is Alfie, I am a student in recovery and participant/staff member of Better Than Well. [2023-24] was a particularly turbulent year for me personally, as I entered the year coming off a relapse on drugs and alcohol following 2 ½ years of sobriety. I genuinely question what would happen if, freshly off a relapse, I came to a university without an ingrained recovery service. Failing university is a minor consequence of what could potentially happen to me. Unfortunately based on previous history, I know the consequences of my addiction are fatal.*

*I champion Better Than Well so much as it has acted as a lifeline for me (and many others) throughout university. The community, support and meetings offered by Better Than Well allowed me a place to bond with others who understood my condition, form strong friendships and to work through my deep traumas and all the issues that arise in daily life. I am not alone or remotely unique with my struggles, hence the motivation for my work, to spread Better Than Well and recovery to students, not just at the University of Birmingham, but all over.*

*A few months ago I had the honour of being selected as the 2023/2024 Birmingham Awards 'Student of the Year' under the 'Practically Wise' category. The criteria for this category was to display evidence of work I had complete that proved I was socially engaged, a natural collaborator and had courageous Integrity.*

*The majority of my charitable work over the past year emerged from my work in addiction recovery. I received praise for my service in local recovery meetings and particularly my role in Better Than Well. These included more trivial aspects of service from making cups of tea and hosting sober socials to more complex issues such as chairing meetings or helping to guide and support fellows through relapse, grief, loss and all the other pitfalls of recovery.*

*I also dedicated time helping to grow and spread Better Than Well. I hosted a stall directly on the greenheart campus where I passed out fliers and attempted to engage in conversations with students and staff alike to raise awareness of recovery on campus. I also began to collaborate with others to lay the foundation for a pan-university recovery group in Birmingham, in order to encourage students from other universities to access support if they required. Simultaneously, separate from Better Than Well, I began to push for greater support on campus surrounding problematic eating behaviours, a huge issue that many students struggle with. I engaged in conversations with individuals in recovery from eating disorders about the best way to achieve this and secured a guarantee of funding from a generous philanthropist if required.*

*As a Politics & International Relations student, I spent a considerable amount of time volunteering. I campaigned in both mayoral and local council elections in Birmingham, and dedicated most Wednesday mornings working at an MP's office, assisting with casework and canvassing. Through*

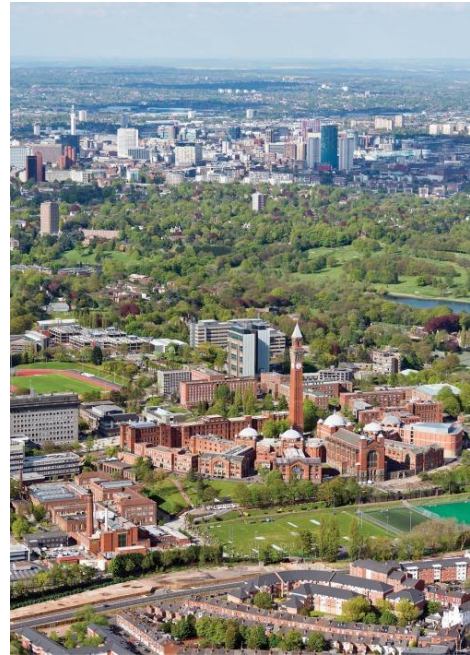


*this work I developed a network of contacts within the local political scene, where I endeavoured to keep the topic of addiction (a particularly rife occurrence in Birmingham!) as a salient issue in the minds of local politicians.*

*Continuing past the previous academic year, I have spent the summer politically campaigning, volunteering in the election in my hometown of Poole, where we gained our first ever Labour MP, and obviously continuing to advocate for recovery and sober living. I have been incredibly fortunate to accept a part-time paid role as the Communications and Social Engagement officer for BTW. This should allow me to access channels where I can have greater impact on spreading the message of recovery. Currently, I am in the process of developing the pan-university recovery group and have engaged with other societies and support services in order to discover how best we as a campus community can help to aid and assist those struggling with problematic eating.*

## The recovery flat

The Better Than Well Recovery Flat opened in January 2023, but the academic year 2023/4 saw it at full capacity (5 students) for the first time. The flat is a standard University of Birmingham Accommodation Services flat on the Vale site, at the heart of the main university student area of residence. The five students had requested recovery accommodation and signed a commitment to abstinence supported by regular drug testing or breathanalysis. Three students were new to the university, and two were in their final year having been BTW members over the previous two years. The residents were encouraged to hold a house meeting each week to offer each other mutual support in their recovery efforts, and to resolve any day-to-day living issues. They also formed a flat WhatsApp group. Luke visited the flat on a regular basis, and all five students became weekly attenders of BTW meetings.



## BTW Alumni

At the end of the 2023/24 academic year, 20 active BTW participants had successfully graduated from the university. All BTW are encouraged to remain in active contact with the program, and many attend in-person or online meetings throughout the year. Below is a selection of reflection from our alumni on their experience of participating in BTW during their time at UoB:

*'I stumbled upon the BTW program in 2021, just days into sobriety and feeling like I had hit rock-bottom. Luke and Ed were incredibly supportive from the get-go and immediately introduced me to other students in recovery. Being surrounded by people who I could relate to made me realise that I was no longer alone. The weekly group meetings incited thought-provoking discussions, of which I learnt many lessons that I still apply to my recovery today. I am now training to become a Physician Associate and will be forever grateful for BTW for helping me to get my life back on track.'*

Undergraduate student, joined BTW in 2<sup>nd</sup> year of BSc, BTW 2021-23

*'BTW came to me at a time when I could barely look after myself, and definitely didn't see myself finishing my degree. From my first interactions with the programme, just talking to people with similar struggles, I had the strength to take the first step in tackling my addiction. I never would have thought I would pass my undergrad and later finish my dream Masters and start applying for a PhD, but thanks to a programme like BTW (especially as they cater to all forms of addiction) I was able to take more control over my life. Though I still struggle with recovery, BTW gave me a start I never anticipated and allowed me to get to a place I never thought was possible.'*

Undergraduate student, joined BTW in year 3 of BSc, BTW 2021-23

*'Better Than Well has been unimaginably formative for my personal development and professional development during and beyond university. In addiction, I lost my sense of purpose, felt isolated and spiralled into actions that deteriorated my sense of meaning. During my time with BTW, I learnt that if I sought a higher purpose, connected with a support network and committed to routines that are meaningful to me, I could have a stronger chance of surviving through recovery. At university, BTW offered these ingredients for successful recovery and even now after university, as a secondary school teacher, BTW has taught me that no matter where I find myself in life, these will always be the ingredients for successful recovery. It is through returning to my higher purpose, creating a new support network and routinising new meaningful habits that I have been able to complete my first year as a teacher, and I hope it is through this framework that I continue to teach and empower younger generations for many years to come.'*

Undergraduate student, joined BTW in year 3 of BA, BTW 2022-23

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Undergraduate student, joined BTW in year 4 of BA, BTW 2022-23

*'My experience with BTW was nothing but positive. The group environment they provide was always welcoming and open, and the experience that Luke brings to each session is invaluable. Having the group to talk to and share with helped remind me that no matter how difficult my time at university got, I wasn't alone. Since my time at university, I've gone on to work in another academic institution and look back fondly on all that I gained from BTW while in Birmingham. I hope to see groups like BTW spread across all universities in the UK to provide help and support for students everywhere, just like they did for me.'*

Doctoral Student BTW 2021-23

*'Better Than Well provided invaluable support through group meetings and one-on-one guidance from Luke and Ed, introducing me to a community in recovery so I no longer feel alone. BTW showed me that, even outside university, I could find connection in AA, NA, or CA meetings. Since graduating, I've started working in data analysis at the [another university], regularly attend online recovery meetings, and have made lasting friendships. BTW helped me see that I don't have to face recovery alone.'*

Doctoral Student BTW 2021-24

## Parents of students in recovery

Active addiction has a significant impact on all areas of an individual's life, not least their relationship with family and close friends. US CRPs have often worked with parents of students in recovery, and BTW has also had regular contact with family members when requested. The following quote comes from the parents of a BTW student who graduated successfully in 2024:

*Our daughter suffered from deep depression, bulimia and alcohol abuse. This became extremely obvious in her final years at university. Without Ed and Luke's support, she would definitely have been thrown out. It is so difficult as a parent living hundreds of miles away, to care for an adult child in these circumstances. By liaising with tutors and university staff, finding appropriate accommodation and allowing her to follow the Better Than Well pathway, the team ensured that our daughter was able to complete her degree in a safe environment surrounded by people who understood her needs, enabling her to move on after any relapses. Mental health issues are so complex and individual, it was such a relief for us that Ed and Luke were able to find time to guide our daughter through the most difficult of challenges. They will never know how appreciated they are.*



## The Association for Recovery in Higher Education (ARHE) annual conference

The ARHE (<https://collegiaterecovery.org/>) is an umbrella organisation supporting the development of CRPs in North America and has over 150 member organisations. The university of Birmingham has been a member since 2020 and is one of only a handful of non-US universities with active CRPs. Each year the organisation holds a 4-day conference in a different US city, and in 2022/23 and 2023/24 BTW has utilised philanthropic funding to support three students to attend the conference alongside Luke. This is a tremendous opportunity for UK students to meet peers in recovery from a completely different culture, and hear about the different approaches adopted to treatment and recovery in North America.

Below is an account of the experience written by one of the student attendees, a second year politics student.

*Earlier this June, I had the privilege to be invited to the 2024 ARHE conference in San Diego alongside other members of the BTW and have spent the weeks working out how best to put into words the highlights of this experience.*

*I left the conference feeling inspired and motivated in a way that I can't equate with any other time of my life. It was a space filled with academics who have dedicated their time to recovery, some of whom are in recovery themselves, and I had the pleasure of so many interesting conversations with a variety of them.*



*I have first-hand experience of addiction recovery, so I was equally surprised and thrilled that I learned so much at this conference. There was a part of me that found this unexpected, and the experience reminded me that there is always more to learn, even about something so close to my own heart and life. I attended some of the All Recovery Pathways meetings at the conference, which proved to be such a huge bonus to the trip, and resulted in some incredibly safe and open spaces being created over the course of the week. It never ceases to amaze me the honesty that comes out when you bring a handful of people in recovery together.*

*I absolutely loved the conference sessions that I attended, ranging from the international lens and experience of ARHE recovery, as well as exploring different perceptions of recovery in film, and the intersection of other struggles with recovery such as eating disorders. I also found it interesting to learn more about nurturing student leadership in collegiate recovery programmes, and thought that talk provided some useful starting points on how, in BTW, we can continue to use student voices and leadership throughout the programme as it keeps growing, and the importance of that.*

*One of the highlights of the whole trip for me was connecting with other international members of ARHE, and getting to converse about the differences between Canadian, UK and Irish perspectives in comparison to the USA experience. I had assumed that Canada and the USA would have a more similar timeline of recovery programmes, but was intrigued to discover how much further ahead the USA groups seem to be in terms of both open conversations about recovery in the wider communities, as well as specifics within universities such as funding access and available resources to students.*

*Despite this, I returned from San Diego with a renewed sense of hope, and also feeling incredibly proud of BTW and the work that has gone into growing the programme and all of the support available. I think that the connection we have with wider recovery in Birmingham is a definite strength of the group, as well as the different styles of meetings and one on one's that BTW has available. There is a sense of community and genuine care for one another is palpable in our group meetings- a determination to show up under this umbrella of shared experience.*

## Beyond Birmingham: dissemination activity around student recovery

Ed and Luke have been involved in a variety of activities to promote the concept of Collegiate Recovery and present the findings of the work of BTW:

### **Universities UK report: Enabling Student Health and Success**

Ed and Luke were part of a 9-month Taskforce led by Universities UK to review the response of UK universities to psychoactive drug use by students. The [project report](#) was released on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024 (<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/enabling-student-health-and-success>) and urged a new 'harm reduction' approach to tackling supply and demand for drugs with a greater focus on student health and wellbeing. The work of Better Than Well was recognised in the report as one of the few university-led initiatives to support students in recovery from addiction.

### **Collegiate Recovery UK**

In August 2023 BTW submitted a bid to the Society for the Study of Addiction projects fund in partnership with colleagues at Recovery Connections in the North-East of England. We wanted to replicate the Texas Tech University Collegiate Recovery Program curriculum, created with US Government funding in 2005 to support other universities set up a recovery program.

Collegiate Recovery UK has created a website (<https://collegiaterecovery.uk/>) that will act as a toolkit for anyone wishing to develop a Collegiate Recovery Program in the UK. This will be slowly developed over the next year, adding new student perspectives and data on the extent of addictive behaviours on the UK campus. The website includes a toolkit to support students, academics or administrators to start a CRP on their campus.

### **Centre for Social Justice visit to BTW**

On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2024 BTW was visited by Alexandra Galvin and Nathan Gamester from the Centre for Social Justice. The CSJ was starting a new research project looking at addiction support, treatment and recovery, and BTW was one of a range of frontline practitioners being interviewed to gather evidence. On the back of the visit one of the BTW students secured a short summer internship at the CSJ as part of his politics degree.

### **External review**

As part of the process of spreading the word about recovery on a university campus, Brand Statelist [Kate Wilson](#) was commissioned by a philanthropic funder to prepare an impact report about programs that support students in recovery. This was sent to Vice-Chancellors and other university leaders as part of a national promotion campaign. In addition, a 20 minute film was made by producer Simon Wheeler to promote the concept of Collegiate Recovery Programs.

### External student placement

A final year medical student in recovery from the university of Southampton spent a 6 week elective period with BTW in 2024, joining the recovery program and learning about how BTW started and developed.

Two **peer-reviewed academic papers** about BTW were published:

- Trainor L. [Being better than well at the University of Birmingham](#). Journal of Substance Use and Addiction Treatment. 2023;146:208949.
- Day E, Trainor L. [Recovery from addiction on a university campus - a UK perspective](#). Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly. 2024:1-14.

Through semester one of the 2023/4 academic year 10 BTW students were interviewed as part of an evaluation of their experience of addiction and recovery at university, and the impact of a Collegiate Recovery Program. Academic papers analysing this data are currently being prepared.

### List of presentations featuring Better Than Well

Both Ed and Luke are frequently asked to speak about BTW at academic and clinical meetings around the country and internationally. Below is a list of presentations made in 2023/4:

- **30<sup>th</sup> Sept 23:** *Collegiate Recovery Programs*, British Doctors & Dentists Group Conference, Manchester
- **12<sup>th</sup> Oct 23:** *Lived Experience and Recovery Support Services*, North-West Regional Commissioners Meeting [Online]
- **12<sup>th</sup> Oct 23:** *Championing Recovery in Treatment & Policy*, Solihull Harm to Hope Recovery Group
- **24<sup>th</sup> Oct 23:** *Towards Better Treatment & Recovery Systems: Lived Experience Recovery, Organisations (LEROs)*, EWODOR Conference, Dublin
- **14<sup>th</sup> Jun 24:** *Better Than Well @ University of Birmingham*, Collegiate Recovery UK Launch Event
- **1<sup>st</sup> Jul 24:** *Recovery on the University Campus: A New Frontier for the UK*, DB/UKESAD Conference, London
- **5<sup>th</sup> Jul 24:** *Better Than Well @ university: Supporting students in recovery from addiction*, Student Health Association Conference, Cambridge
- **16<sup>th</sup> Jul 24:** *Above & Beyond: The Key Role Family Members Play in Recovery*, Adfam Conference

## Successes and challenges from this year

The BTW community has continued to grow in size and strength over the past year, with an extremely diverse range of participants (see Appendix for details). The individual stories of student recovery continue to inspire and the internal BTW processes have become embedded into university welfare structures. Work continues to promote the BTW service throughout the university, as the stigma of addiction remains a powerful barrier to recovery. We are extremely grateful to the funders, the university leadership, and staff from across the campus for their support in facilitating this work.

The full opening of the recovery flat at the start of the 2023/24 academic year was a major landmark in the development of BTW. All 5 places were taken, and the first semester demonstrated the power of a 24/7 recovery experience. When two students relapsed back to substance use during the Christmas vacation the BTW community worked hard to support both students back onto the pathway to graduation. However, this experience confirmed our previous challenges in linking students into effective treatment for addiction if a relapse occurs, and more work is needed with the local treatment providers to develop an effective pathway for young adults in higher education.

There are signs that the UK CRP movement may be starting to grow. In addition to existing colleagues at Teesside and Sunderland university, Chester university has also signalled its strong support for student recovery services. Fledgling services are emerging in four other universities in England. The Collegiate Recovery UK website and toolkit will be useful materials to support this growth. BTW students have made links with peers across the world through attendance at an international meeting and will be ambassadors for the growth of understanding of addiction recovery as we move forwards.



## Future plans

### **Student Internships**

In the academic year 2024/5 BTW will be launching the first of a proposed three student internships. BTW members will be employed for 10 hours per week on an hourly rate to deliver key roles within the program, starting with a Communications Lead. The student will work with the communications team in the university to learn about techniques to promote BTW and its activities across a range of media platforms. Future roles will focus on developing the Collegiate Recovery UK website and BTW social and community activities. These roles reward progress in recovery whilst equipping the student with valuable skills to take into the workplace in the next phase of their journey.

### **Recovery Ally training**

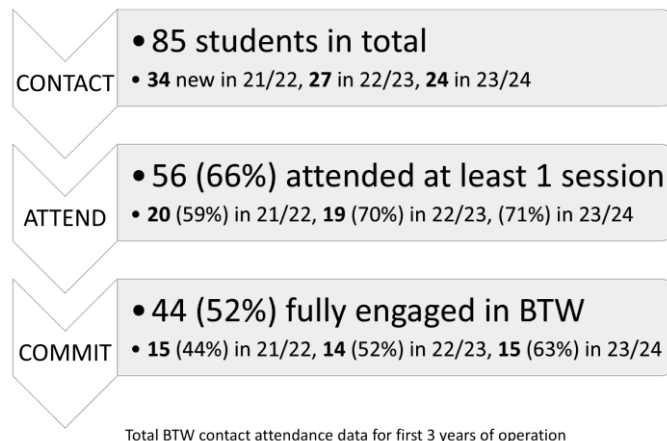
In 2024/5 the BTW team will launch 'Addiction & Recovery Ally Training', a 90 minute seminar to increase understanding of addiction and recovery in both students and university staff.

### **Evaluation**

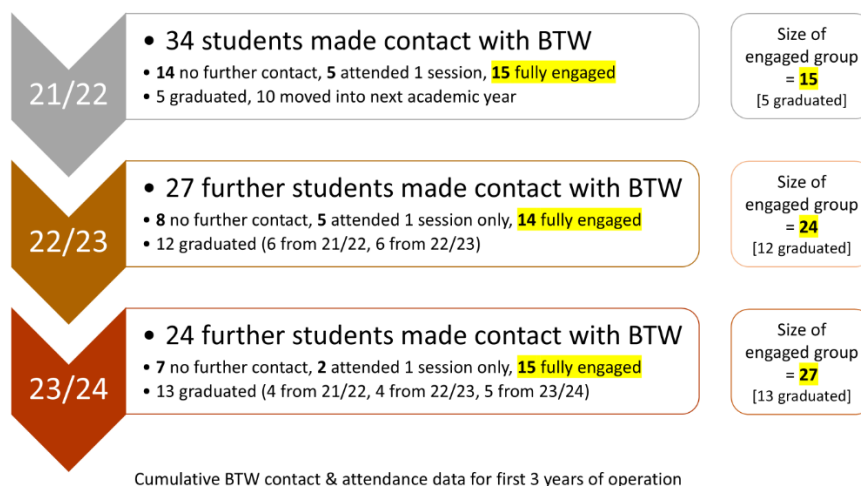
2024/25 will see the appointment of a university-funded postdoctoral researcher tasked with developing the evaluation of BTW and the wider UK CRP movement.

## APPENDIX: BTW COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

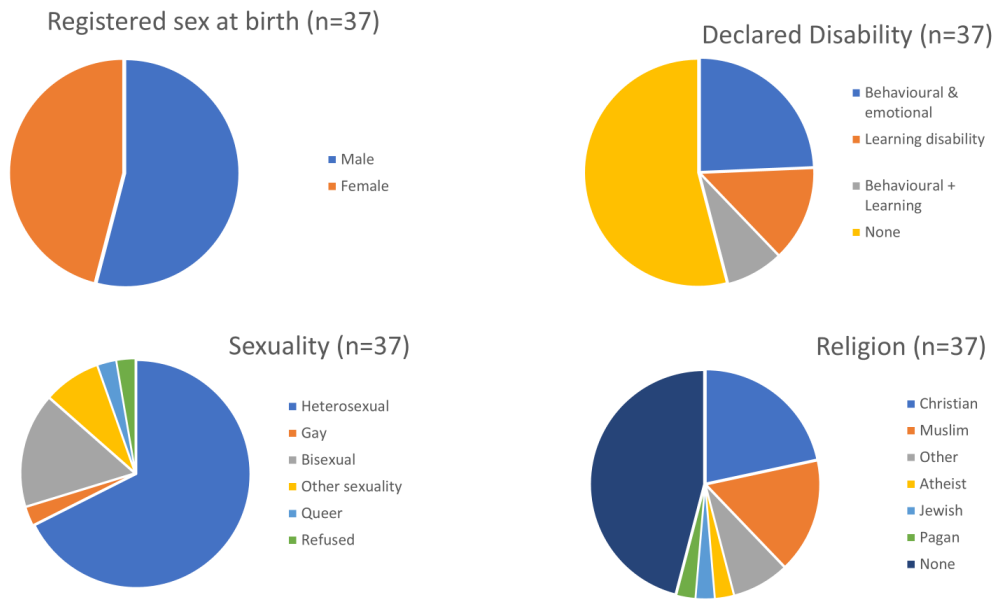
Over the first three years of operation, 85 students made contact with BTW. Of this group, 44 (52%) actively participated in the program on a weekly basis



Students engage at different stages of their academic journey, with some new students joining and others graduating and leaving the university each year. Taking account of new members and those leaving, the size of the BTW community has steadily increased each year.

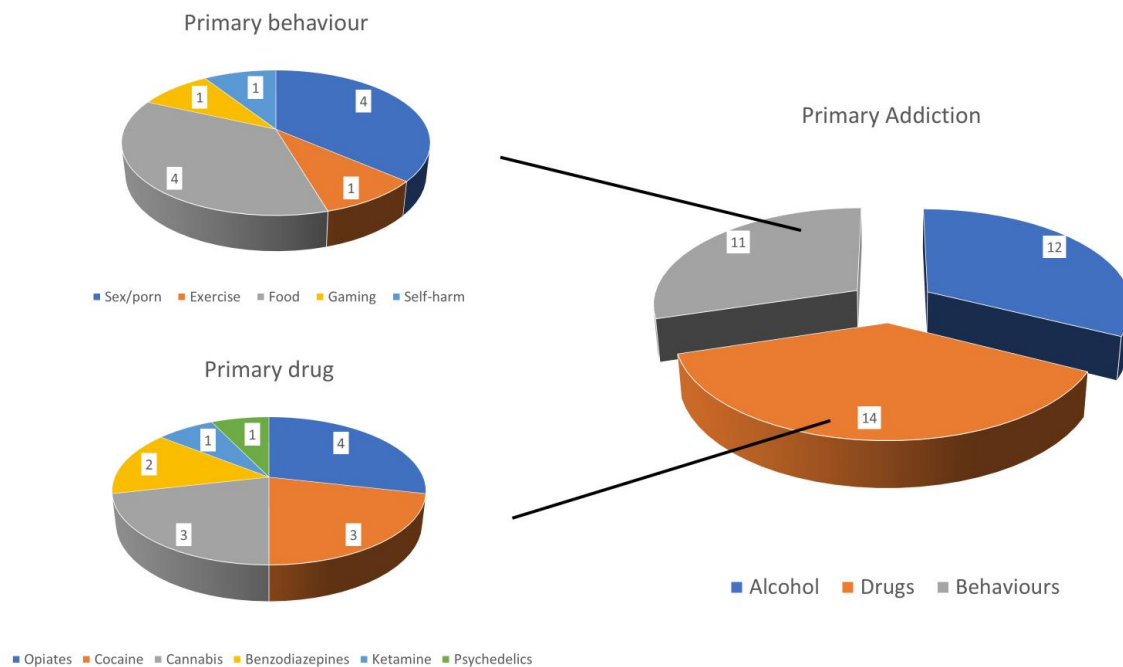


Basic demographics are collected from the students when they commit to join BTW, and the following data suggest that the BTW community is diverse across several parameters:



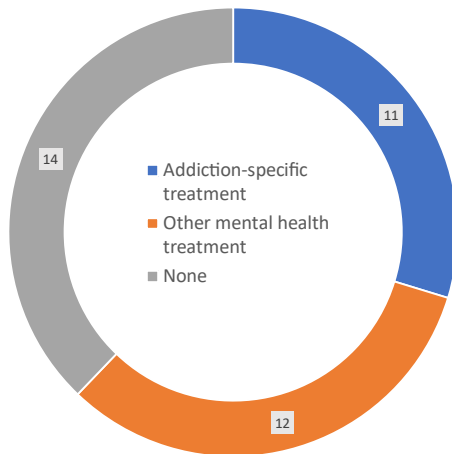
The largest group of students are in the 18-21 years range at the time of enrolment i.e. traditional undergraduate university students. Of the 37 students that provided a full data set, 22 (59.5%) were studying for a Bachelors level degree, 10 (27%) for a Masters level degree and 5 (13.5%) for a Doctoral level degree.

Most students have overcome more than one problems substance or behaviour, but when asked to nominate a primary issue, the group is split evenly between drugs, alcohol and behaviours



Unlike CRPs in the USA, a significant proportion of the BTW cohort decide to seek abstinent recovery whilst at university, usually without any form of addiction-specific treatment.

Experience of Treatment prior to joining BTW



Time in recovery when joined BTW (months)  
(n=37)

