

Better Than Well Annual Report 2024/25

The Collegiate Recovery Program @
the University of Birmingham



Institute for Mental Health
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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. Membership is free to all students and BTW alumni, and informal support is available from BTW members and staff 7 days/week.

The report details BTW's 2024-2025 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. The report also 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 Professor 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.

The Year in Summary

Welcome Fair



The year began, as it always does, with BTW welcoming students to the University of Birmingham and offering support, solidarity and companionship to those who are in recovery, are moving towards it or are interested in being members of our vibrant and growing community. Students in recovery welcoming students interested in recovery is a great model for what BTW does, as it means that those who are involved and benefiting from peer support at university can promote and answer questions from lived experience. Many of the members who joined us this year made their first contact at the Welcome Fair.

Elements of the Program

The Lodge is a one-story gatehouse located beside the grand gates on Pritchatts Road. We share the space with *Campus Pause*, a mental health service offering groups and social sessions. With its quiet atmosphere, soft furnishings, and homely décor, The Lodge provides an ideal retreat from the busy campus environment for students experiencing stress.

The Lodge is open to students Monday–Friday and is shared with *Pause* Tuesday–Friday. Luke offers both drop-in and bookable one-to-one sessions, supporting an average of 4–5 students daily. These sessions may be student-led or focus on developing an individual *recovery plan*. Weekly guided meditation sessions are also available, which some students integrate into their recovery programmes.

BTW's approach recognises that there is no single path to recovery—each journey is unique. For students facing severe or persistent addiction, we provide both a *toolkit* of practical strategies for managing immediate stressors and cravings, and an overarching *framework* for sustaining long-term wellness. This framework includes activities that support both physical and mental health.

Two regular weekly groups form a cornerstone of the BTW programme and have run consistently—on campus and online—since 2021:

- **Thursday 6–7pm – 12 Step Fellowship Meeting**

While not a Fellowship-specific meeting, this group adopts some of its practices and language, offering students a gentle introduction to the process. Each week, a member of the local recovery community shares their story, followed by open discussion. Students benefit from hearing real-life experiences of recovery and, where interested, Luke supports them to attend Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or Cocaine Anonymous meetings in the community.

- **Friday 5pm – Celebration of Recovery Meeting**

Running without interruption since September 2021 (including Christmas Eve), this hybrid meeting follows a weekly topic chosen by group members. Topics have included *Recovery in an addictive society*, *Motivation in recovery*, and *Coping when others around you are not*. The meeting provides a peer-led space to discuss student- and youth-specific issues, with recovery milestones marked by the presentation of a BTW keyring.

Students consistently report that these services and groups help them feel understood, supported, and connected to a recovery community—both on campus and beyond.



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 wellness, strategies that keep an individual include activities that promote physical and mental health

The Recovery Flat

This year the recovery flat moved temporarily to Tennis Courts on the periphery of the student Vale Village due to the accessibility requirements of one of our students. The accommodation has been full for the whole academic year and the students in residence have had a great year both with their recovery and academic lives. Two of the students will be continuing in the accommodation next year for their final year, one student has graduated and is moving on to a career in education, another student has found local accommodation with some friends in recovery, and the final student is looking for recovery work in Birmingham while they sit their final exams. All the students have remained abstinent and in solid recovery.



Sober Socials

Damascena: September 2024

BTW members went to a favourite restaurant, Damascena in Moseley, where they enjoyed lively discussion and delicious Middle Eastern food.



Shababs Balti: October 2024

BTW enjoyed a meal at another BTW favourite, Shababs, in the heart of Birmingham's famous 'Balti Triangle'. Shabab's is always a favourite with BTW members as it offers an authentic Brummie experience with friendly staff and large portions!



Myra's Story Theatre Trip: March 2025



BTW took students to Myra's Story, a powerful play about a middle-aged homeless alcoholic struggling to survive on the streets of Dublin as she begs from passers-by on the famous Ha'penny Bridge.

CA Unity Day: May 2025

On the 17th of May, BTW members joined the wider recovery community in Birmingham by attending the Cocaine Anonymous Unity Day in The Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham. BTW Programme Manager was one of the speakers alongside shares from recovered 12 step members from around the world.



Student communications role – feature on Alfie

Thanks to a philanthropic donation from a friend of BTW, we were able to offer a paid internship in the role of Communications Officer to Alfie, a BTW member and young person in recovery. Here is Alfie's reflections on his role and the experience he gained:

"During my time as the Communication Officer at Better Than Well, I was responsible for managing the promotion and digital communications of the organisation. The role required me to run digital campaigns to increase awareness of Better Than Well and our mission to the student population of 36,000+ and wider Birmingham community. Additionally, I was responsible for collaborating with key stakeholders across the university, including the Guild of Students and the universities social media team.

My role consisted of writing blogs, managing the BTW Instagram and filming content for the universities social media. I often collaborated on social media posts with the Guild Welfare Officer, which allowed BTW's content to reach a wider audience. I established a 12-month social media plan, detailing a regular upload schedule and ideas for content to ensure that future Communications Officers and I had a basic blueprint to help structure their workload. The role required strong interpersonal qualities and excellent planning and organisational skills. I was required to attend meetings and consult on different initiatives across various internal university departments, alongside managing the production, editing and publication of content across various media channels.

I am now applying for work having graduated from my Political Science programme with a 2:1. The experience I gained at Better Than Well has undoubtedly given me a great deal of tools and motivation to pursue a career in the Civil Service."

Alfie – BA Political Science

End of Year Recovery Celebration

At the end of this academic year, we were delighted to be able celebrate the successes of the programme and the students from our community at the annual BTW Recovery Celebration event. At the event in Moseley Village there was hot food, live music and inspiring and enlightening shares from BTW members past and present. Several of our BTW alumni made the trip to Birmingham to join us in celebration and share their growth and success since graduating from UoB. BTW manager Luke even treated us to a DJ set accompanied by a live MC and a BTW member VJing film material he created and produced himself.

The shares from BTW members emphasised how their experience of BTW was different from any other help they had been offered in their lives. They spoke about feeling part of community and having some autonomy and agency in what their recovery could feel like. The shares were deeply moving and everyone in the building, including the hospitality staff, was captivated by these incredible stories of triumph and bravery.



Writing Workshop

In January, BTW teamed up with the amazing team at the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) to deliver the 'Writing for Self-Expression' 4-week course. The seminars were delivered by Jane Draycott, a poet and RLF member and involved the group reading carefully selected poems and then discussing them. For those who felt compelled, they wrote poems and prose of their own. Those who felt comfortable also shared the poems with the group. This was a very powerful exercise and we have teamed up with the RLF again to deliver another programme of seminars in October 2025.

"The sessions were well-structured, and we were introduced to a good range of poems. I thought they'd been selected judiciously: nothing was especially on-the-nose. The activities were a lot of fun and worked well in a small group setting. There was no pressure to share what you wrote (I didn't). I found the free writing exercises particularly useful as I was suffering from a bit of writer's block at the time but more generally, I think they have some therapeutic benefit for me. Overall, glad I went."

Chris – PhD Philosophy

ARHE conference

The **Association of Recovery in Higher Education (ARHE)** is the leading network for collegiate recovery programmes (CRPs) across North America, representing more than 150 member institutions. The University of Birmingham joined in 2020, becoming one of only a small number of universities outside the United States to host an active CRP.

Each year, ARHE convenes a four-day conference in a different U.S. city, bringing together students, staff, and professionals from across the recovery field. Thanks to philanthropic support, this year BTW was able to fund four students to attend the Annual Conference 2025 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

For our students, this has been an exceptional chance to connect with peers in recovery from a different cultural context, to exchange ideas, and to learn first-hand about diverse models of treatment and recovery practiced across North America. Below are accounts of their experience:

“The ARHE conference in New Orleans was an incredibly enriching experience, with a genuinely welcoming atmosphere. It was truly special to connect with inspiring individuals leading recovery schools, alternative peer groups, and collegiate recovery communities from across the globe.

Among the many compelling sessions, a few truly resonated with me. I gained fascinating insights from a seminar dedicated to the ambitious efforts of establishing recovery high schools in Japan. Similarly, learning about alternative peer groups in the States and hearing about the successful model of Victory High Schools provided valuable new perspectives. I truly felt I learned a great deal.

I am profoundly grateful for this opportunity. Beyond the networking and learning experiences, the conference prompted significant personal reflection. It has given me much to think about regarding how I can adapt and implement some of these ideas to strengthen recovery support in the UK.”

Jack BA Anthropology

“It’s hard to put into words the gratitude I feel for the opportunity to go on this trip. I loved every minute of it. The conference panels inspired me and taught me a lot, and I listened to talks on things such as recovery high schools and how they originated, and gained a deeper understanding of alternative peer groups, and how they operate alongside CRPs. One of my favourite talks was on the intersection of SUDs and grief, an area of academic and personal interest for me. I thought the closing keynote on harmony in the helping professions was particularly impactful too. One of my other favourite things to do was the International Regional meet up. We reconnected with some fellow conference attendees and spent time on introductions, as well as sharing ideas for our individual CRPs. I loved seeing New Orleans outside conference events, as it’s a city I’ve wanted to visit for a while. We spent time exploring, developing connections and friendships as well as immersing ourselves in the culture of such a beautiful place. I left the ARHE conference this year feeling inspired and filled with purpose to involve myself in the collegiate recovery world.”

Chloe BA Creative Writing

“My sobriety has brought unexpected gifts and a sense of peace I never thought possible during the depths of my addiction. Sitting on the plane to the ARHE Conference in New Orleans, I realised I was living yet another quiet miracle. I felt so grateful to be alive and sober.

The five-day event offered enriching sessions; the only regret was not being able to attend them all. One that stayed with me was a description of a silent studio performance covering clothes in cement, hanging them, then scraping it off. Each step mirrored the burden of trauma: exhausting, painful, and often unspoken. Another session highlighted the importance of presence. Sometimes a solution isn't what's needed, but someone saying, “I'm here”.

Beyond the conference, New Orleans amazed us. From beignets and jazz to walking tours on the city's spiritual history, our days were full of gasps and laughter. I'm deeply thankful to Better Than Well for all the doors it has opened. Not only can I thrive as a sober student but see there is a whole world of recovery I have not yet discovered. One day at a time, I look forward to what's still to come.”

Anon



Student views

Here is what are members say about their experience at BTW:

“Recovery is hard but BTW has provided a lovely community alongside an astute recovery program which has supported me constantly. University alongside addiction can be an isolating place and BTW changed this for me. It provides a place for people to come together with complete understanding for each other’s situation, to discuss and listen, structured through the expert knowledge and experience of Luke Trainor and Dr. Ed Day. Luke and Dr. Ed supply members with a plethora of resources and meetings to access through BTW, which can be tailored and structured to suit your personal recovery schedule and needs. University of Birmingham students are extremely lucky to have a special program like BTW.”

Anon

“It is both an honour and a privilege to write in support of ongoing recovery-focused initiatives within academic settings, particularly those like the Better Than Well (BTW) program at the University of Birmingham. Speaking from personal experience, I came to BTW during a difficult chapter of my life, having battled addiction for four years. This program opened its doors to me at a time when I needed support the most, and in doing so, introduced me to a world of meaning, understanding, and personal growth that I had not previously known. The compassion, expertise, and dedication of those within the BTW network provided me with more than just recovery support—they equipped me with a powerful set of tools that continue to serve me in my daily life.

These tools have helped me stay disciplined in my academic studies, develop meaningful relationships, cultivate self-love, and—most importantly—believe in my ability to achieve goals I once thought were impossible. Today, I am proud to say that I am working toward my dream of becoming a lawyer. I have found a freedom in recovery that I had not experienced in years, and I will be forever grateful that the University of Birmingham provided access to this life-changing programme.

Without it, I would have faced my struggles in isolation.”

Lauren BA Law

“When I came to uni, everyone was drinking, smoking, and going out often, and I wanted to too. Though, others seemed to be able to do it while keeping up with their lives and uni. I seemed to be different. I’d wake up feeling awful and look for the first thing that would ‘fix’ me: binging junk food, or porn, or games, or if things were bad, getting back on it. But after, I’d always feel worse, or I wouldn’t put it down, or I’d rotate between them.

Soon, most days looked like that, and my mental health deteriorated every day. I became nocturnal, not seeing the sun for months, and being isolated because of it. I decided to move into a recovery flat. I’m not perfect now, but I am sober, and I continue to learn to live well. I feel like I struck gold, having come to the only uni that has a collegiate recovery program and recovery housing. It’s given me my health, sanity, and life back. I have lots of love for BTW.

Now, twice a week, we learn through each other's lived experiences how to live better so that we don't have to depend on a substance or behaviour. Like by staying connected with each other within a safe and supportive environment, that we collectively nurture."

Deniz - BSc Computer Science

"I began my time at The University of Birmingham in active addiction. I was regularly in very dangerous situations as a consequence of my addictions, and I had very little hope that a life without alcohol or drugs could either be achieved, nor would be worthwhile. Thankfully I was incorrect on both counts. A large part of this discovery was the BTW programme. It has afforded me a space to honestly and openly face the problem head-on, whilst making friends along the way. From my position, it works due to that two-fold approach. We have the knowledge of, and the commitment to, serious long-term recovery. We also have a small community of friends who support each other, hang out outside of the recovery meetings, and learn to have fun without our various vices. I am very grateful for the service and hope to see it flourish in other institutions in the future."

Jack - PhD Philosophy

Alumni views

Better Than Well now has over 40 graduates of the program, all doing fantastic things in the world outside and beyond university. We actively encourage alumni to continue to join meetings in person or online, and it is rare that a week goes by without at least participating in the program. These graduate students are a source of inspiration for current BTW members, and we are very proud of their many achievements. Here are a couple of quotes from two such alumni:

"Better Than Well helped me through a really tough time in life when I was trying to stay sober while studying a full-time degree. It was so helpful to be part of a peer support group community of like-minded people who could openly and honestly share their own experience and hope with me. Since graduating, I have felt inspired to start working for my church local to the university, focussing on how we can contribute to combatting social injustice particularly among addicts and homeless people. I also still regularly attend BTW meetings as a graduate which helps me to stay connected and be of service to the new students joining."

Isaac - Alumni

"Reflecting on my PhD journey, I am filled with gratitude for the support I've received from Ed and Luke through the Better than Well (BTW) program. Without their help I don't think I would have reached the milestone of my graduation. I was one of the original members of BTW, and my involvement in the program was pivotal in my recovery from alcohol use disorder. Navigating life as a student while trying to maintain my sobriety was incredibly challenging, especially with the social pressures that came with conferences and dinner meetings. During these times, Ed and Luke helped me build a toolkit they supported my recovery, including mindfulness practices and sharing my feelings in a group setting. Before joining BTW I had never been part of a support group, but the experience gave me the confidence to attend Alcoholics Anonymous and similar groups. BTW was

there for me during some very difficult times at university, and it has set me up with the tools and support I need as I move into the new chapter after graduation.”

Andrea - PhD Psychology



Plans for 2025/26

NUS-SOS Drug & Alcohol Impact Program

In 2024 the University of Birmingham signed up to the Drug and Alcohol Impact program run by SOS-UK (<https://www.drugandalcoholimpact.uk/>). In this 2-3 year project, the Guild of Students will work with university leaders to explore the impact of drugs and alcohol on the student population and develop a healthy and inclusive approach to the issue. UoB students were invited to participate in the SOS national survey in semester 1, and over 500 responses were received. This will help the project team develop new campus policies around drugs and alcohol that will reduce harm and promote recovery. The experience gained by the BTW project over the past four years will be used across the national NUS-SOS program to support abstinence-based recovery initiatives.

Welcome to Dr Laura Nice

Laura joined the BTW team as a part-time Research Fellow in April 2025. She started her research journey at the University of Birmingham as a Psychology PhD student studying spatial memory and quality of life in brain injury rehabilitation. Her interest in addiction research began when she worked with Professors Jim Orford and Alex Copello to develop the Addiction and the Family International Network (AFINet). Laura's other role is as a Patient and Public Involvement/Engagement (PPIE) Lead in the College of Medicine and Health at UoB. There she works with patient/public partners and research teams to support meaningful involvement across a portfolio of medical and healthcare research projects.

Laura will be developing and embedding a longitudinal evaluation framework for BTW, helping us to explore the impact that the project has on student lives. She will use her experience in working on PPIE projects to involve BTW students in co-production of this research project to ensure that it captures the most meaningful changes in their lives.

Recovery Ally Training

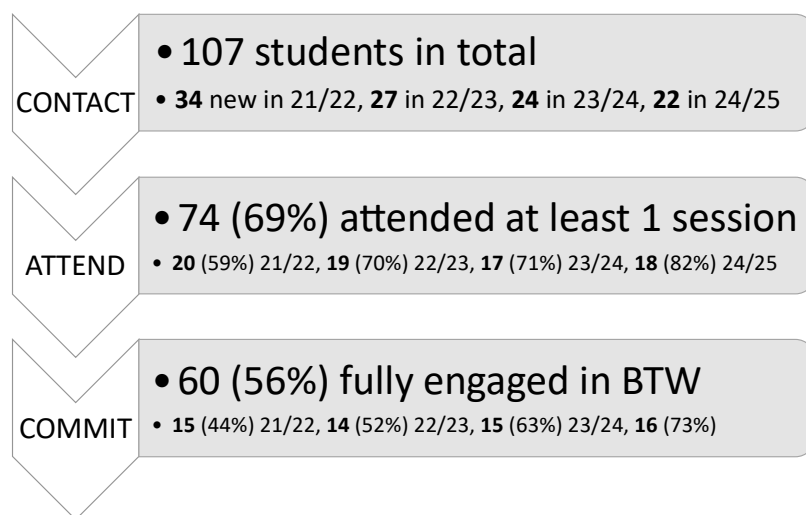
The BTW team plans to launch its Recovery Ally training scheme in 2025/26. This will be a series of workshops with both staff and students, aimed at helping the campus community to identify and support people in recovery from addiction.

Focus on Gambling

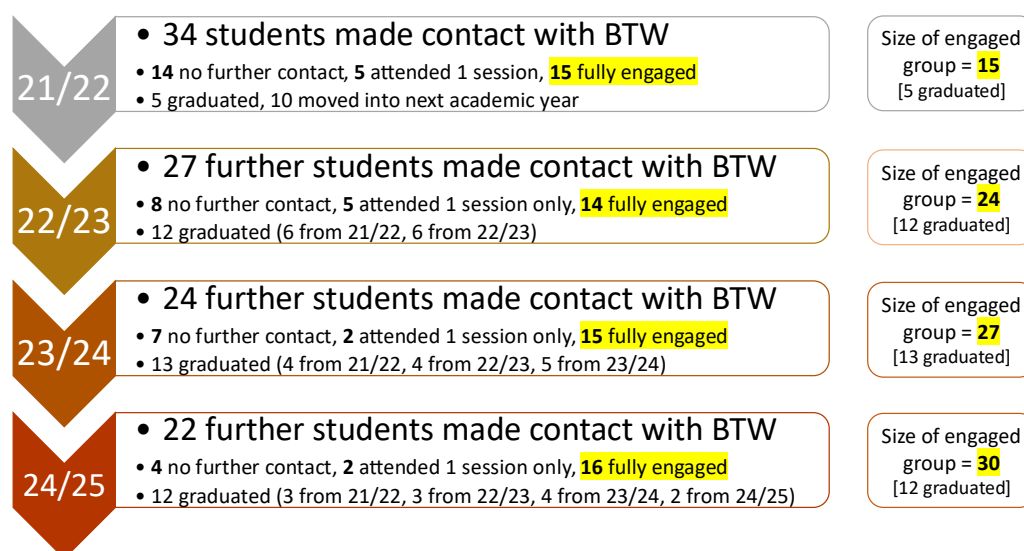
Across the four years of the BTW program we have engaged students with a variety of addiction issues (see Appendix). However, it is noticeable that we have rarely seen problems with gambling, despite a recent national student survey reporting that of the roughly 50% of students who had gambled in the past year, 17% were in the 'problem gambling' category (<https://ygam.org/news/annual-student-gambling-survey-2025-findings-published/>). BTW will run a series of seminars with BTW students to try to answer two key questions: 1) Why are students experiencing gambling harms not seeking help, and 2) How can we co-design an engagement programme to reach them?

APPENDIX: BTW COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

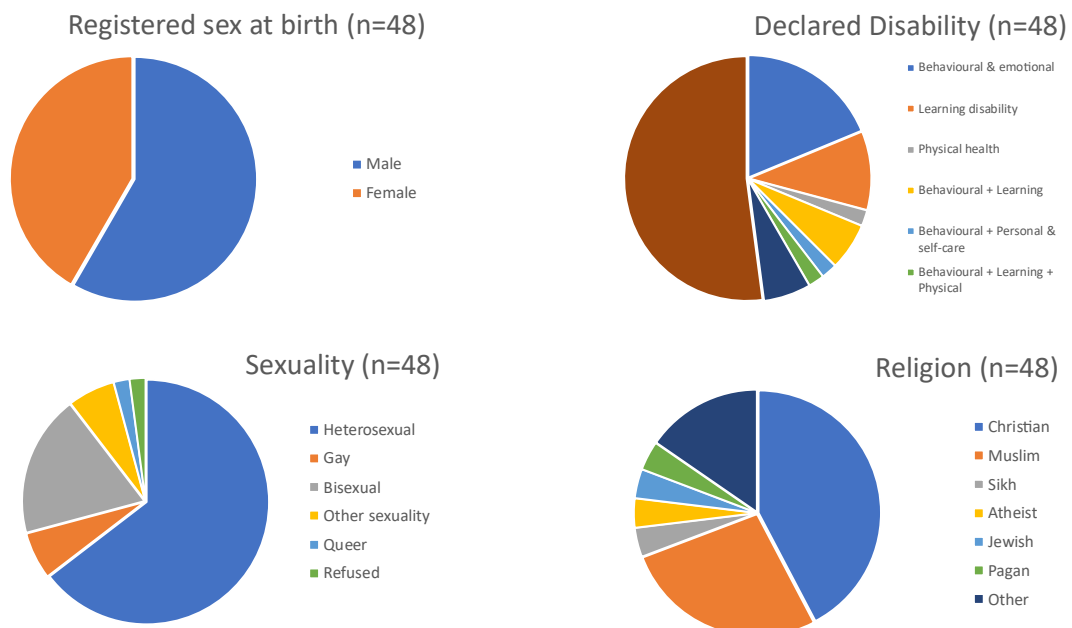
Since BTW started in 2021 107 students made contact with the service. Of this group, 60 (56%) actively participated in the program on a weekly basis and were said to be ‘fully engaged’ with the process. Another 14 (13%) made contact for a short period, usually only 1 or 2 sessions with Luke or Ed. The proportion of students fully engaged has slowly increased year on year.



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.

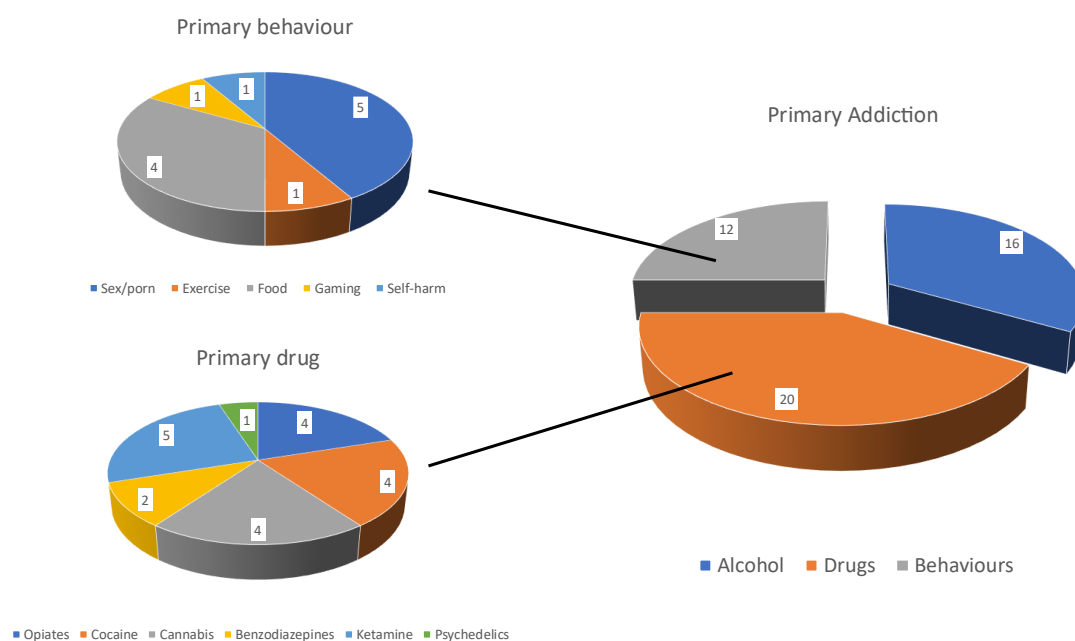


Basic demographics are collected from the students when they commit to join BTW, and the following data suggest that the BTW community is diverse across several parameters:



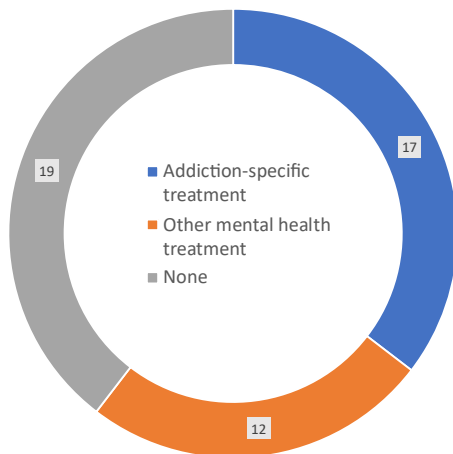
The largest group of students are in the 18-21 years range at the time of enrolment i.e. school-leaving undergraduate university students. Of the 48 students that provided a full data set, 28 (58.3%) were studying for a Bachelors level degree, 14 (29.2%) for a Masters level degree and 6 (12.5%) for a 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=48)

