

PhD course programme

Drug and alcohol studies – theories, pillars and debates

The individual lectures and discussions will be led by different researchers, selected based on their relevant expertise. The exercises will be led by the lecturer in collaboration with the course organizers. For each session, there will be 80-100 pages of reading material. The texts will reflect the course's interdisciplinary approach. The following concepts and themes will be presented and discussed.

First gathering (unit 1-3), venue: Aarhus University, 10-11 March

1. Introduction – Cross disciplinary alcohol and drug research

Lecturer: Assistant Professor Esben Houborg; Professor Torsten Kolind.

In the last three to four decades, the interest in drug and alcohol issues has increased markedly in many societies. This is due both to an increase in worldwide use of substances and an increased political focus on both illegal and legal drug use. This societal interest is also reflected in academia, in social and health policy developments at national and international levels, and in the growth and diversification of professional services. Research on prevention, treatment, harm reduction, policy and recreational consumption has been conducted from a range of different disciplinary perspectives, e.g. sociology, psychology, political science, history, cultural studies, gender studies, geography, anthropology and economics. Consequently, the field by its very nature is inter-disciplinary and this characteristic is reflected in this PhD course. On this background, this session will introduce the broad and interdisciplinary social science alcohol and drug research field and argue that while it does not constitute a discipline, it can be understood as a strong international research area in its own right. In addition, we will also discuss use of ethical sound language when we do research within this field. Finally, you will also be introduced to the course. Participants should prepare a short oral presentation (3-5 min) of their research project.

2. Why do people use drugs – and what is a drug?

Lecturer: Professor Torsten Kolind, Associate Professor Sidsel Karsberg, Professor Kristine Rømer Thomsen.

In this session, we draw on the academic disciplines that have been most engaged with answering the question of why people use drugs: sociology, psychology, and neuropsychology. This will also provide explanations and theories at three different levels. Sociology's macro perspective on the relationship between drugs and society and culture respectively, psychology's meso perspective focuses on psychosocial learning, and neuropsychology's micro perspective examines how processes in the brain are linked to our behaviour. Although the three explanatory frameworks complement each other, the session will also look into the disciplines' different backgrounds for explaining drug use. Thus, the neuropsychological theories

have primarily sought to explain what happens when drug use gets out of control, the psychological theories have focused on the development of problematic behaviour, and the sociological theories have investigated how overarching economic and sociocultural conditions influence both problematic and recreational use of drugs, as well as how individuals construct their drug use as meaningful.

3. Addiction

Lecturer: Assistant Professor Sinikka Kvamme.

This session examines addiction by integrating perspectives from the social sciences, psychology, and neuroscience. It traces the historical development of the concept of addiction, exploring how it has been defined, medicalized, moralized, and politicized over time. Attention is given to how these shifting understandings relate to broader social structures and cultural contexts. The session also considers how definitions and experiences of addiction are shaped by class, race, gender, and governance. Critical approaches that question the validity, usefulness, and social consequences of the addiction concept are also introduced. Psychological perspectives are explored with a focus on key theoretical models and their implications for treatment and clinical practice. Finally, the session turns to neuroscientific perspectives. Advances in brain imaging technologies such as fMRI and PET scanning have deepened understanding of how repeated drug use affects neural structures and functions. This research has contributed to the conceptualization of addiction as a brain disease (the Brain Disease Model of Addiction). The session examines its scientific foundations, clinical relevance, and the controversies it has provoked both within neuroscience and in public discourse. Overall, the session encourages critical reflection on how different disciplines conceptualize addiction and what is gained or lost in emphasizing one approach over another.

4. Drug policy (online): 17 March, 9.30-12.30

Lecturer: Associate Professor Esben Houborg.

Drug policy is a central concern in the field of alcohol and drug research, shaping both the regulation of substances and the lives of those who use them. While often equated with drug control and criminal justice policy, this session broadens the scope to include treatment, social, and public health policies. We will explore how drug policy operates at local, national, and international levels, examining key institutions, treaties, and legal frameworks. This includes a review of major actors such as the UNODC, EUDA, and national agencies, and how their policies are shaped by political, social, and economic forces. The session introduces theoretical approaches to the study of drug policy, including critical policy studies, governance theory, and socio-legal perspectives. We will analyse the rationales behind different policy models, from prohibition to decriminalization and harm reduction, and consider their intended and unintended consequences. Special attention will be given to concepts such as 'harm reduction', 'diversion', and 'public health approaches', and how these reflect broader

shifts in the understanding of drugs, users, and state responsibility. The session encourages critical reflection on how drug policies are formed, justified, and contested—and how researchers can engage with them empirically and theoretically.

5. Drug markets and drugs policing (online): 9 April, 9.30-12.30

Lecturer: Associate Professor Thomas Friis Sogaard.

In this session we will focus on the 'drug market' as concept and empirical practices, including trading, supply and buying of illegal drugs. We will discuss different theoretical perspectives on drug market, for example a hierarchically structured organization versus more network type of markets. We will discuss how the methods and data used to define and describe drug markets have an impact on the understanding of these practices. We will also look into related concepts such as the 'drug dealer', 'commercial-'and 'social supply', and into the different factors driving recent drug markets developments.

6. Intoxication and the nighttime economy (online): 23 April, 9.30 – 12.30

Lecturer: Professor Torsten Kolind.

This session will introduce and go into depth with the history and development of the concept 'Nighttime Economy' (NTE). The NTE is seen as critical important for economic development, and since the 1990s, an entire infrastructure of bars, clubs and restaurants has been constructed in cities across the whole of Europe backed by local authorities and encouraged by the State. Drugs and alcohol are central aspects of these nighttime activities, and are both controlled and encouraged in particular ways. This session will explore the understandings of NTE from a multi-disciplinary perspective, including the historical roots, the recent developments as well as examining the theoretical approaches that have been developed to understand the impact of these changes and the importance of the consumption of substances within these developments.

7. Interventions (1); Prevention (online): 6 May, 9.30 – 12.30

Lecturer: Associate Professor Lotte Vallentin-Holbech.

This session is the first of three sessions that examine how society responds to alcohol and drug problems. More specifically, we will look at prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and recovery. We will critically discuss the general thinking and core ideas behind these different forms of intervention, we will look at the idea of 'evidence', which characterizes most interventions, we will discuss the different diagnostic manuals that underlie identifying and understanding who needs treatment, and we will also discuss how problems and problem identities (social identities) are constructed in the interventions. We will also look at how the

different interventions both overlap and contradict each other. Finally, the sessions will provide examples of different types of interventions.

This session introduces key concepts and approaches to the prevention of harmful substance use, with a particular focus on how society seeks to prevent, reduce, and respond to alcohol and drug-related problems. Through a combination of short lectures, group activities, and critical discussions, students will explore how prevention is defined and practiced across different levels - from individual and behavioural interventions to broader structural and policy-oriented strategies. The lecture will provide a theoretical and practical foundation for understanding Brief Interventions (BI) as a central preventive approach, examining their evidence base, implementation, and challenges. Participants will engage with current research, analyse intervention studies, and design their own preventive BI concept aimed at reducing substance-related harm among university students.

Second gathering, venue: *to be announced* (unit 7-9): week 24

8. *Interventions (2); Treatment*

Lecturer: Associate Professor Birgitte Thylstrup; Associate Professor Sidsel Karsberg.

This session is the second of three sessions that will examine how society responds to alcohol and drug problems. This session examines how treatment is conceptualized, organized, and practiced within the alcohol and drug field. The session will critically engage with concepts such as 'evidence-based practice', 'harm reduction', and 'recovery', including how they are understood and practiced. Attention will also be given to the role of lived experiences, peer support, and structural factors shaping treatment and outcomes.

9. *Interventions (3); Harm reduction and recovery*

Lecturer: Associate Professor Maj Nygaard-Christensen.

This session is the third of three sessions that examine how society responds to alcohol and drug problems. Here the concepts of harm reduction and recovery will be examined. The session will first examine the history and rationale behind the concept of harm reduction. It will include debates of how harm reduction policies and interventions have been implemented, and the dilemmas and controversies that has developed in the wake of these initiatives. This part of the session will also include discussions about how harm reduction requires particular understandings of 'substance use' and processes in and out of substance use. The second part of the session examines the concept of recovery. It will include discussions about how different understandings of the concept 'recovery' provides different understandings of pathways out of problematic alcohol or drug use. The concept will primarily be introduced in relation to processes out of problematic substance use without treatment, often called 'selfchange', 'natural recovery' or 'maturing out'.

10. Taking pleasure seriously: examining theories of pleasure within alcohol and drug research

Lecturer: Professor Geoffrey Hunt.

Given the extent to which alcohol and drug research has emphasized the risks and problems associated with substance use consumption, the aim of this lecture is to examine the question: why has the field of public health research consistently failed to explore the notions of pleasure in drug and alcohol consumption? Although most people drink or use drugs because they enjoy it, much public health discourse within alcohol and drug research downplays or ignores these pleasures. As Coveney and Bunton noted “few attempts have focused on this topic”. In examining this question, we will explore the different theories of pleasure that have been developed within the field of alcohol and drug research, which have, as yet, failed to have an impact on the field.

11. Paper presentations

At the final session of the course, the PhD student will do a paper presentation of 4-5 pages. The presentation is expected to be based on (parts of) the student's own project and to put it into perspective with the course's teaching materials and discussions. The presentation must be circulated before the final session, and it is expected that each PhD student, in addition to their own presentation, prepares comments on selected presentations from the other course participants. The PhD students will also receive comments on their presentations from senior researchers.