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Statement submitted by the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS)*

The Secretary-General has received the following paper, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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The Academic Council on the United Nations System is a category one ECOSOC recognized Non-Governmental Organization that stimulates, supports, and disseminates research on the United Nations and issues of global governance. ACUNS promotes dialogue between academics, practitioners, civil society and students. In 2015 and 2016, an international group of graduate students prepared a worldwide survey of young adults through Rotary Clubs and universities around the world, in collaboration with the Drug Prevention and Health Branch and the Research and Trend Analysis Section of the UNODC. The survey was conducted online, after a pilot phase in 2014, and available in English, French, Russian and Spanish. Responses were also received from Germany speaking countries, Scandinavian, and Slavic countries.

The questionnaire asked young adults, aged 19 to 26 — primarily university students about their use of drugs and safety measures they use. Substance consumption seems to be initiated about the same time that alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine are first consumed. Marijuana seems to be first used around the ages of 16 to 20, while other substances such as LSD, Speed, and Cocaine are tried in their twenties. Ecstasy and Magic Mushrooms on the other hand seem to be initiated after 18 years old. Reasons given for drug use was the desire for experimentation, followed by recreational purposes, relieving stress, to feel independent from parents, and discovering new perspectives on life.

It was reassuring that most young adults consume drugs “responsibly” — restrict the amount consumed, choose a safe place for consumption, do not drive after consuming drugs, and even get drugs tested. The reasons given for stopping drug use were concerns about physical and mental health, fear of addiction, and social consequences i.e. drugs affecting the emotional, psychological wellbeing of the individual and those close to him. The complete survey is available on the website www.acuns.org/ Projects and Programs.

Conclusions and recommendations

The state of fear — prosecution and incarceration — does not stop young adults from using drugs. Changing the legal environment through a greater emphasis on harm reduction would certainly be more effective. The majority of young adults take safety measures, showing an awareness of the risks, limiting themselves to reasonable consumption of substances (as distinguished from adolescents). Instead of a message stigmatizing consumption, young adults should be encouraged to take safety measures. Accordingly drug policies and the messages directed to young adults (as opposed to adolescents) should promote responsible drug consumption.

The three major recommendations of the study are promotion of harm reduction approaches; promotion of safety measures and non-stigmatizing drug policies; and promoting the role of youth and civil society in drug policy making. Youth should have a larger role in policy making and the design of messages since they are directly impacted by drug consumption and can help in providing approaches specifically targeted for their peers. Promotion of non-stigmatizing drug policies should recognize these particular young people as voting adults — and protect them from marginalization, social exclusion, stigmatization, and harsh consequences for drug use. A legal environment which provides for the testing of drugs, provides clean syringes, and offers advice, counseling, and helping people addicted to drugs should find a place in national strategies and psychosocial interventions. Young adults should be taken seriously as these citizens have special insights on drug use, stopping drug use, and handling drugs responsibly.