

Vaping - An inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in Queensland

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The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides this submission in relation to *Vaping – An inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in Queensland*.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan Catholic School Authorities (CSAs) and 18 Religious Institutes that educate more than 156,000 students in Queensland.

QCEC acknowledges that the committee is also currently conducting a separate inquiry into the Tobacco and Other Smoking Products Amendment Bill 2023 (Smoking Bill).

QCEC has responded to the following aspects of the Terms of Reference relating to -

1. *The current status in Queensland relating to the:*
 - a. *prevalence of e-cigarette use, particularly amongst children and young people;*
 - b. *risks of vaping harmful chemicals, including nicotine, to individuals, communities, and the health system; and*
 - c. *approaches being taken in Queensland schools and other settings relevant to children and young people to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes.*
2. *Opportunities to increase:*
 - a. *awareness of the harmful effects of e-cigarette use (with and without nicotine) to an individual's health, and the effectiveness of preventative activities; and*
 - b. *accessibility and effectiveness of services and programs to prevent uptake and continuing use of e-cigarettes.*
3. *Consideration of waste management and environmental impacts of e-cigarette products.*

Prevalence of e-cigarette use, particularly amongst children and young people.

Prevalence

CSAs report that the use of e-cigarettes has become a growing trend among school students in recent years. The increasing popularity of vaping among school students has raised concerns among parents, educators, and health experts about the potential health risks and long-term consequences of this habit.

Young people differ in their intentions with regards to the nature of the e-cigarette liquid they seek to consume with some young people attracted to the flavours of the liquids available to adults to purchase. Young people likely access these products through alternative supply chains (i.e., siblings,

friends, or online overseas vendors) given that a person must be 18 years of age to purchase electronic cigarettes (regardless of whether they contain nicotine or not). These products will sometimes contain nicotine even if labelled as 'nicotine' free.¹ Other young people will actively seek liquids containing nicotine – in some instances this decision making is reflective of past exposure to products that were inaccurately labelled but nonetheless promoted an addictive response. Finally, in considering the nature and prevalence of some young people's engagement with vaping behaviours, it is noted that it is largely artificial to differentiate the contents of e-cigarettes because young people may unintentionally be exposed to ingredients that were not accurately labelled and "all e-liquid solutions used in vaping contain a mixture of unregulated and harmful chemicals and additives."²

Trends

Queensland CSAs have observed a significant increase in the use of e-cigarettes in high school aged students. In addition, there exists concern that vaping behaviours are starting to be adopted by primary students with one CSA identifying use by students as young as Year 3. Whilst some CSAs reported that the greatest increase in vaping behaviour was amongst students in Years 9-12, other CSAs reported that vaping was also prevalent amongst students in Years 8-10.

Rates

Rates of e-cigarette use are challenging to quantify on the basis that vapes are relatively easy to purchase³, are often packaged to mirror other common items⁴ and often do not produce an easily identifiable odour.⁵ Across the Queensland CSAs, there exists a divergence of awareness of the impacts of vaping. While some schools largely observe students engaging in vaping behaviours off campus, other schools note on-school site vaping represents a weekly and even daily concern for schools. Vaping appears to have replaced smoking as a significant behaviour of concern and in some settings, represents a regular habit for a proportion of the student community.

Risks of vaping harmful chemicals, including nicotine, to individuals, communities, and the health system.

General Risks

Whilst acknowledging that the risks associated with e-cigarette use are not currently fully understood, CSAs report high levels of awareness amongst staff as to the potential health risks arising from e-cigarette use. Identified risks include:

- lung damage⁶
- cardiovascular disease⁷
- second hand aerosol⁸
- toxic and/or carcinogenic chemicals⁹

In addition, CSAs were alert to reports of battery units contributing to the explosion of the vaping device itself.¹⁰

Nicotine

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/smoking-and-tobacco/about-smoking-and-tobacco/about-e-cigarettes>

² <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/vaping-e-cigarettes/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/sep/27/australian-teenagers-are-readily-accessing-vaping-products-heres-how>

⁴ https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/E-cigarettes_and_teens/

⁵ <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/tobacco/Pages/vaping-faqs.aspx#:~:text=Vapour%20from%20vapes%20does%20not,smell%20depending%20on%20the%20flavour.>

⁶ <https://lungfoundation.com.au/lung-health/protecting-your-lungs/e-cigarettes-and-vaping/>

⁷ <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-funded-studies-show-damaging-effects-vaping-smoking-blood-vessels#:~:text=Long%2Dterm%20use%20of%20electronic,either%20of%20these%20products%20alone.>

⁸ https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Electronic-cigarettes-e-cigarettes

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

CSAs reported an understanding that the risks of e-cigarettes containing nicotine mirror those of smoking and similarly, are accompanied by the risk of addiction.¹¹ The impact of nicotine upon the adolescent brain is of particular concern given it has the capacity to negatively impact upon brain development.¹² CSAs reported they were aware that e-cigarettes can potentially contain more nicotine than cigarettes. Despite CSAs and schools holding this knowledge, they have observed it appears that students and parents are not always aware of the risks and see it as a 'safe' form of smoking. For example, one CSA reported that students playing high level sport are engaging in vaping – presumably as it is perceived as an option that it not as harmful to peak physical performance as using traditional tobacco based smoking products.

School Attendance

Vaping describes a behaviour which has implications for young people with respect to their schooling. The role of schools in educating young people as to the risks of vaping behaviours is discussed with proactive approaches preferred by CSAs and schools. For example, schools across the Queensland Catholic education sector report a range of approaches to communicating with students, inclusive of individual student conversations, discussions with larger groups of students (e.g., year levels) and whole school assemblies. However, schools must also attend to the smoking laws in Queensland that prohibit the use of e-cigarettes in educational settings.¹³ In response to vaping behaviours engaged on campus, CSAs report disciplinary approaches that include internal and external suspensions. Whilst any suspension results in missed classroom time, so too does the decision of the student to engage in vaping during school hours. Similarly, intrusive thoughts arising from the intense desire to consume an addictive substance can impact concentration.¹⁴ Further, the potential impact of missed school as a result of vaping was also illustrated by one CSA which reported that vaping had been linked to other health issues causing students' to be absent from school.

Approaches being taken in Queensland schools and other settings relevant to children and young people to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes.

Sector Wide Response

As a sector, Queensland Catholic education has sought to support CSAs to respond to the challenges presented by e-cigarettes. QCEC acknowledges the drug and alcohol funding provided by the Queensland Government which has enabled QCEC to partner with Griffith University to offer the [Blurred Minds Academy](#) to CSAs. In addition, QCEC authored a publication to members in 2021 on the subject of vaping and hosted [Dovetail](#) (i.e. the initiative of Queensland Health, providing clinical advice and professional support to workers, services and communities who engage with young people affected by alcohol and other drug use) at the 2022 QCEC Wellbeing Forum.

Catholic School Authority Responses - Proactive

The Queensland Catholic education sector places a significant emphasis upon proactive approaches to educating students and parents of the risks associated with vaping. CSAs reported that nicotine and its side effects are addressed within the Health and Physical Education Curriculum with alcohol and other drugs representing a key focus area.¹⁵ In addition, alcohol and other drugs were also discussed within personal development curriculums. In some instances, schools had developed bespoke programs that address vaping behaviours, with others identifying material based on Queensland Health resources, Life Education and the work of Paul Dillon. Furthermore, some schools have engaged external presenters such as Dovetail and National Drug Awareness to present to students and QCEC advocates for additional funding to be provided in order to support additional interventions across all schools into the future. However, it must also be highlighted that there are competing demands for timetabling and that the

¹¹ Ibid

¹² <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/news-events/news/known-harms-of-e-cigarettes-vaping-smoking>

¹³ <https://www.qld.gov.au/health/staying-healthy/atods/smoking/laws>

¹⁴ <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/e-cigarettes-are-harmful-and-addicting-youth-report>

¹⁵ https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/teacher-resources/learning-area-resources/hpe_focus_areas.html

first responsibility of supporting, monitoring and responding to substance related matters should remain with parents and carers. Queensland Catholic schools routinely provide parents with resources aimed at increasingly parent/carer knowledge and supporting their efforts to assist their child. These resources include newsletters, hosting of parent information evenings, provision of resources (i.e., Lung Foundation, School TV) and promotion of a webinar hosted by Catholic School Parents Queensland.

Catholic School Authority Responses - Reactive

Acknowledging that the increase in vaping behaviours has occurred at significant pace, the Queensland Catholic education sector has engaged a range of reactive responses, which inform local school approaches to responding to e-cigarette use. In some instances, these responses have included environmental modifications such as retrofitting bathrooms for greater visibility and installing sensors. Such measures are financially prohibitive and if they were to be consistently applied, would require targeted additional funding. In addition, CSAs report that school guidance officers, psychologists or counsellors support at risk students with direct support or provision of relevant referrals to external service providers. CSAs would welcome additional funding to ensure greater access to health counselling for students who are struggling to reduce their use of these products. Finally, the use of suspensions has already been noted. Whilst the use of suspensions remains at the discretion of the CSA, repeated use or supplying items to others were identified behaviours of specific concern. At times this could mean multiple students suspended simultaneously due to the propensity to engaging in vaping with peers.

Opportunities to increase: awareness of the harmful effects of e-cigarette use (with and without nicotine) to an individual's health, and the effectiveness of preventative activities; and accessibility and effectiveness of services and programs to prevent uptake and continuing use of e-cigarettes.

The Queensland Catholic education sector advocates for a range of opportunities to increase awareness of the effects of e-cigarette coupled with effective interventions. Firstly, there is a desire for increased inclusion of engaging, vaping specific risks within the curriculum. This might include the creation of vaping specific resources informed through the input of health and other experts. Such resources might be characterised by being free to access, online and providing content that is specific for both the classroom (proactive) and those students identified as already engaging in vaping (reactive).

Secondly, there is a strong appetite for social media (inclusive of TV) campaigns targeting young people in a manner similar to past anti-smoking campaigns. It has been suggested that the funds for these campaigns might be sourced from the sale of other nicotine products, namely cigarettes.

Thirdly, the influence of peers is acknowledged with CSAs suggesting that presentations by young people detailing their own relationship and journey with e-cigarettes may be of assistance. In addition, schools would welcome presentations by health practitioners. A dedicated Queensland Health unit with capacity to provide presentations within schools would be welcomed. It is suggested that a mobile unit might service regional and remote schools thus providing expert knowledge to staff, parents and students.

Finally, recent changes to legislation that further limit a young person's access to e-cigarettes¹⁶ were welcomed by CSAs. However, it appears that students are purchasing e-cigarettes online, within the community or sourcing them from older peers or siblings. As such, it is proposed that there be an increased range of enforceable legal restrictions upon e-cigarettes (including banning all e-cigarettes, regardless of nicotine content, that are not accompanied by a medical script; restricting the glamorisation of vaping through restrictions on packaging and promotion on social media) coupled with awareness and enforcement of existing offences/charges stemming from the provision of devices to young people.

¹⁶ <https://www.tga.gov.au/news/blog/nicotine-vaping-laws-are-changing>

Consideration of waste management and environmental impacts of e-cigarette products.

The Queensland Catholic education sector acknowledges that the environmental impact of e-cigarettes represents a meaningful consideration. Returning to the partnership between QCEC and Griffith University, it is noted that the Blurred Minds Academy's 2022 Annual Report (prepared for QCEC) suggests that the impacts of vaping include the costs of appropriate disposal of vaping products as well as the financial implications of fire services being called to the school. CSAs report that students are preferencing single use e-cigarettes, the implications of which include where to place used items. Whilst matters of sustainability may resonate with some young people, there is a general view that environmental considerations are unlikely to impact a young person's decision to vape and even less likely to have an impact once the young person had developed a nicotine dependence. Nonetheless, efforts to limit the importation of single use devices and the provision of e-cigarette disposal units in high foot traffic areas, may be worthy of consideration.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. This inquiry is most welcome as it considers the significant escalation in concerns pertaining to e-cigarette usage by young people.

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