



Life Ed NSW/ACT

Reality Now Tobacco and Vaping Report

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Reality Now: Tobacco and Vaping Report

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In the spirit of reconciliation, ACER acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today. ACER acknowledges the First Nations peoples who continue to contribute to our work to improve learning, education and research.

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from data collected through the Reality Now program, providing a long-term study exploring tobacco and vaping behaviours among Australian secondary school students. Conducted from 2018 to 2024, the program collected nearly 30,000 responses from students in Years 7 to 11.

Using a social norms approach (SNA), the program aimed to identify and correct misperceptions about peer substance use and promote healthier behaviours. This report focuses on tobacco and vaping behaviours, whereas the broader program also examined the use of alcohol, cannabis, and MDMA.

The findings show that while actual tobacco and vape use remain low, students consistently overestimate how many of their peers engage in these behaviours. These inflated perceptions can influence decision-making and increase risk-taking. This report explores how these misperceptions evolve, the impact of attitudinal shifts across year levels, and the effect of demographics on attitudes and behaviour.

Considerations from the findings for teachers, students and parents/cares are provided.

- Policy leaders in health and education should consider prioritising access to prevention programs, especially for younger students and disadvantaged communities.
- For teachers, this research highlights the importance of addressing students' misconceptions about peer behaviour through education and social norms interventions, which can foster healthier choices.
- Students can benefit from accurate information about the true prevalence of vaping and smoking among their peers, helping to dispel myths that such behaviours are widespread or acceptable.
- Parents and carers play a vital role in reinforcing positive attitudes and open communication about substance use, as well as challenging misperceptions within their own families.

Overall, this research underscores the need for collaborative efforts across schools, families, and communities to correct harmful misperceptions and support adolescent health and wellbeing.

About the Reality Now program

The Reality Now program, implemented by Life Education NSW Limited (Life Ed NSW/ACT) in partnership with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), adopts the social norms approach (SNA) to reduce risky behaviour (Dix & Carslake, 2018). The SNA focuses on correcting students' misperceptions about peer norms (Ahmed et al., 2018).

Students actively participate in the program through an anonymous online survey, which asks them to consider what *they* do, and what they think *their peers* do, regarding the use of tobacco, vaping, alcohol and other drugs. When students realise that the majority of their peers are making healthy choices, they are more likely to follow suit.

Educationally, the program aims to foster critical thinking and awareness among students about their perceptions and behaviours related to tobacco and vaping. By engaging students in reflecting on actual peer norms versus perceived norms, it promotes healthier attitudes and decision-making.

The SNA not only helps reduce risky behaviours but also enhances students' social and emotional skills by encouraging them to question stereotypes and develop more accurate perceptions of their peers. The program's emphasis on social comparison and norm correction supports the development of students' social responsibility and promotes a positive school climate focused on health and wellbeing.



Reality Now session in progress at St Pius X High School during the 2018 pilot

Objectives

This report builds on foundational research showing that social misperceptions contribute to harmful behaviour among adolescents. By gathering and comparing self-reported behaviours, perceived peer behaviours, and student attitudes via the Reality Now survey, the program highlights where perception and reality diverge and presents opportunities for intervention.

The goal of this report is to leverage the rich data collected since 2018, as part of the Reality Now session, and provide new metrics on:

- student self-reported tobacco and vaping use,
- student perceptions of peers' use, and
- student attitudes toward the acceptability of use.

The report also provides analysis of how student behaviours and attitudes changed with time, age and gender, and across socio-economic contexts (ICSEA) of the schools' students attended.

Methodology

As an embedded part of the program sessions, anonymous surveys are administered to secondary school students in Years 7–11. The survey tool measures:

- **Descriptive norms** – What students do and what they think peers do.
- **Injunctive norms** – Students' beliefs about whether certain behaviours are acceptable.

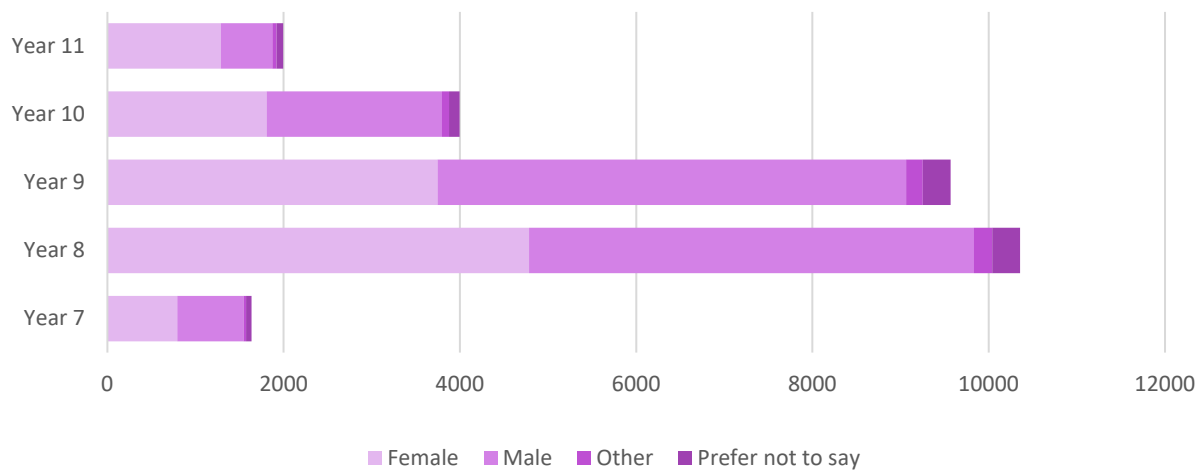
While the primary objective is to use this data during the intervention session, the growing database across diverse school settings offers a valuable opportunity to explore prevalence and trends at a sub-national level.

Accordingly, this report presents results from the Reality Now survey, delivered across schools in participating states during 2018 to 2024. Responses were anonymised and analysed to track trends in behaviour, perception, and attitudes over time. Results are broken down by year level and survey year.

Participants

The analyses presented draw on responses from 28 421 students participating in the Life Ed Reality Now program in New South Wales (40%) or South Australia (60%) between 2018 and 2024. Most students were in Years 8 or 9, with approximately even numbers of male (50%) and female students (45%) and a small contingent who defined their gender as other (2%) or did not provide their gender (3%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The number of participants in each year level by gender



Participating students were from 135 schools – 71 in New South Wales and 64 in South Australia.

- Students attended Government Schools (51%), Catholic Schools (28%) and Independent Schools (21%).
- Students attended schools in Major Cities (62%) and Regional areas (37%), with few in Remote schools (2%).
- The program was used across all socio-economic contexts, as defined by ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage). Schools spanned the full spectrum, ranging from the 0 to 98th percentiles.
- Half the students attended schools with above average ICSEA ratings (51%), and half attended schools with below average ratings (49%).

Vape use:

Self-reported use versus estimated peer use

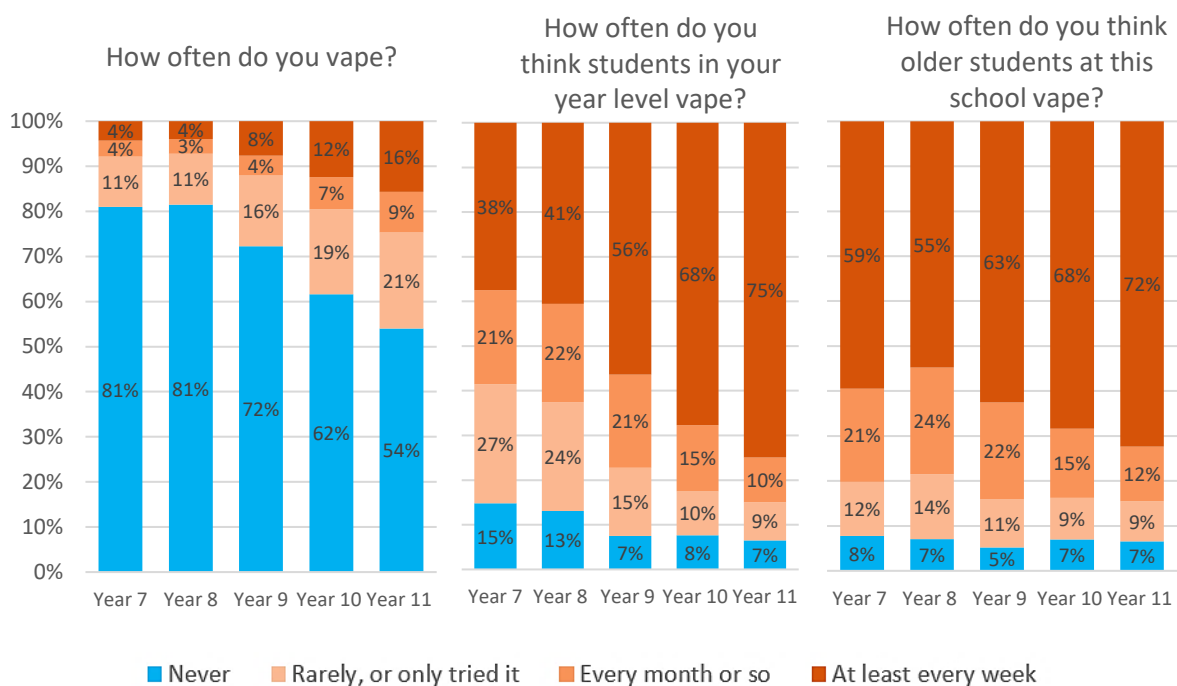
Vaping has the highest rate of self-reported weekly use of the substances students were asked about, surpassing the self-reported rates of alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis and MDMA use. However, it was not the substance most likely to have been tried, with more students reporting they had never tried vaping (74% overall) compared to alcohol (48%).

Figure 2 presents rates of self-reported vaping and assumed peer vaping across year levels. Students reported very large differences between their own use of vaping and perception of other’s use. Overall, 74% of students reported having never vaped, but they estimated only 10% believed their peers had never vaped.

Approximately 13% of students agreed or strongly agreed that it “is okay to vape” while 51% strongly disagreed. Almost 90% of students surveyed believed that vaping was a minor, moderate or serious problem in their school. Approximately 45% of students were at least “a little “concerned about being pressured in the future to vape”.

Across age groups, students showed a steady increase in self-reported use of vapes. While only 4% of Year 7 and 8 students reported vaping weekly, this proportion rose to 16% by Year 11. The fact that vaping and smoking become more common as students progress through school has been and continues to be a focus of national concern (e.g., Australian Government, 2024).

Figure 2. Rates of self-reported vaping and assumed peer vaping across year levels



Cigarette use:

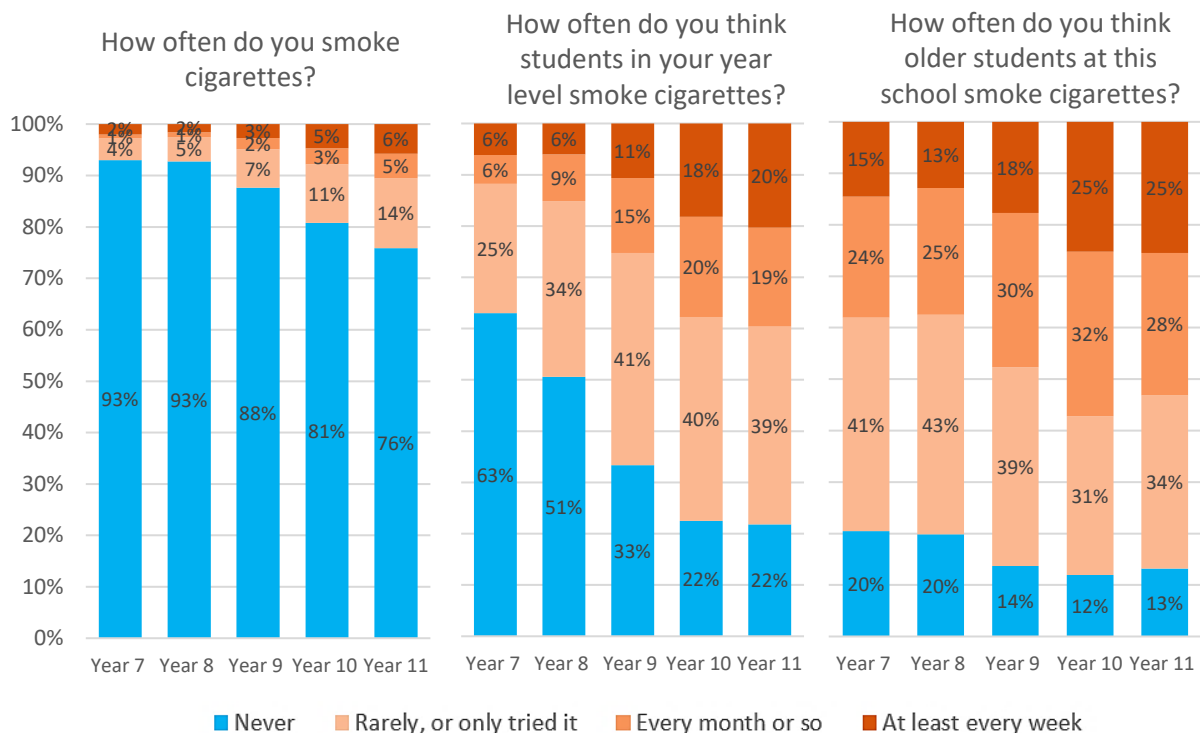
Self-reported use versus estimated peer use

Rates of cigarette use were substantially lower than that of vapes, however more than 20% reported at least trying cigarettes and almost 3% report weekly use (Figure 3). As with vaping, students generally far over-estimated their peers use of cigarettes – 60% believed their peers had at least tried smoking cigarettes and 10% estimating their peers to be smoking at least every week on average.

As with vaping, approximately 13% of students agreed or strongly agreed that it “is okay to vape” while 50% strongly disagreed. However, almost 90% of students surveyed believed that vaping was a minor, moderate or serious problem in their school, only 56% of students believed tobacco was a minor, moderate or serious problem in their school. Similarly, while approximately 45% of students were at least a little “concerned about being pressured in the future to vape”, only 39% were similarly concerned about being pressured to smoke cigarettes.

Across age groups, students showed a steady increase in self-reported use of cigarettes. While only 2% of Year 7 and 8 students reported smoking cigarettes weekly, this proportion rose to 6% by Year 11. This trend with age is reflected in other research that also indicates the younger an individual starts vaping, the higher their relative rate of smoking initiation (e.g., Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024; Egger et al., 2024; Pettigrew et al., 2022).

Figure 3. Rates of self-reported cigarette use and assumed peer cigarette use across year levels



Trends and attitudes:

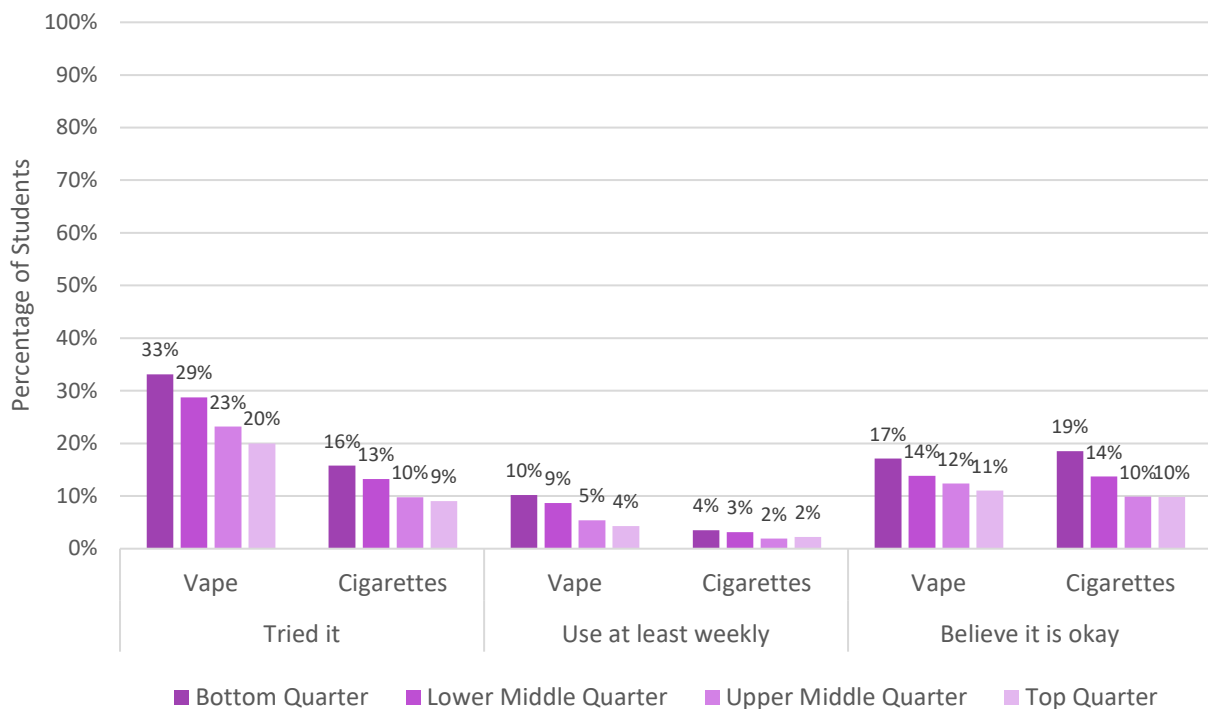
Vape and cigarette use across demographic groups and over time

Trends in vaping and cigarette use and attitudes were explored using binomial mixed effects models. How student behaviours and attitudes changed with time, age and gender, and across socio-economic contexts (ICSEA) of the schools’ students attended, were considered. This analytic approach made it possible to estimate the effect of each factor while controlling for the influence of the other variables.

A link between use and context

Lower Socio-Educational Advantage of a student’s school was related to higher rates of trying vaping and smoking cigarettes ($ps < .001$) and of using them weekly ($ps < .001$) (accounting for student age, student gender, and year) (Figure 4). Students were also asked if they believed it was okay to vape and if it was okay to smoke cigarettes, reported behaviour was mirrored in reported attitudes, with students from lower ICSEA schools being more likely to agree that vaping and smoking cigarettes is okay ($ps < .001$).

Figure 4. Relationship between Socio-Educational Advantage quartiles and rates of vaping and smoking



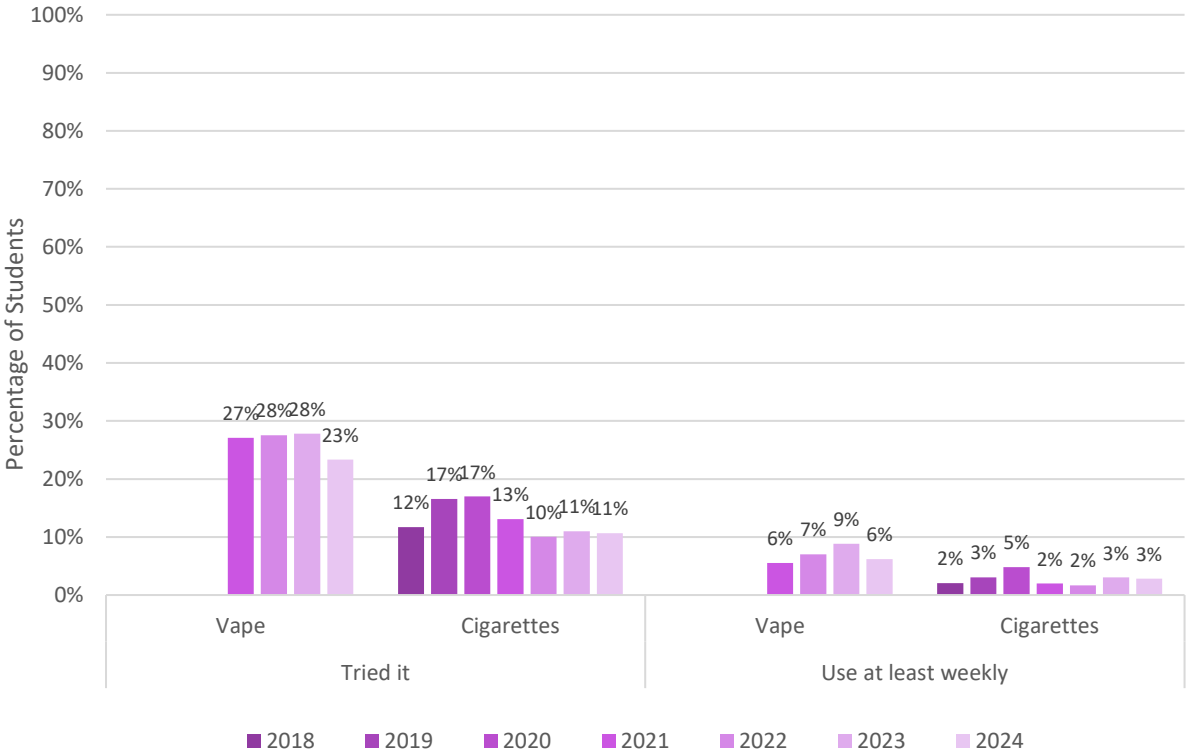
Some reduction in trying vapes or cigarettes over time

Questions regarding use of and attitudes to cigarettes were asked between 2018 to 2024, but questions regarding vaping were introduced from 2021. As such, observations of change over time are possible for a briefer period for vaping than for cigarette smoking.

A recent national survey examining smoking and vaping trends in Australia found that the proportion of adolescents aged 14–17 who reported recently using a vaping product rose from 0.8% in 2018 to 14.5% in 2023 (Wakefield et al., 2023). This surge raises two key public health concerns: nicotine can harm adolescent brain development (affecting attention, learning, and addiction risk) and vaping may increase the likelihood of starting tobacco smoking. According to Wakefield et al. (2023), smoking prevalence also trended upward between 2020 and early 2023 among respondents aged 14 to 17 years.

Unlike the findings from the national study, **we observed a reduction over time in the proportions of students reporting trying vapes or cigarettes ($p < .001$), but no change in the rate reporting use every week ($p > .468$)** (accounting for student age, student gender, and school ICSEA). Attitudes to the questions about whether smoking and vaping are okay did not change significantly in the period reviewed ($p > .146$). See results in Figure 5.

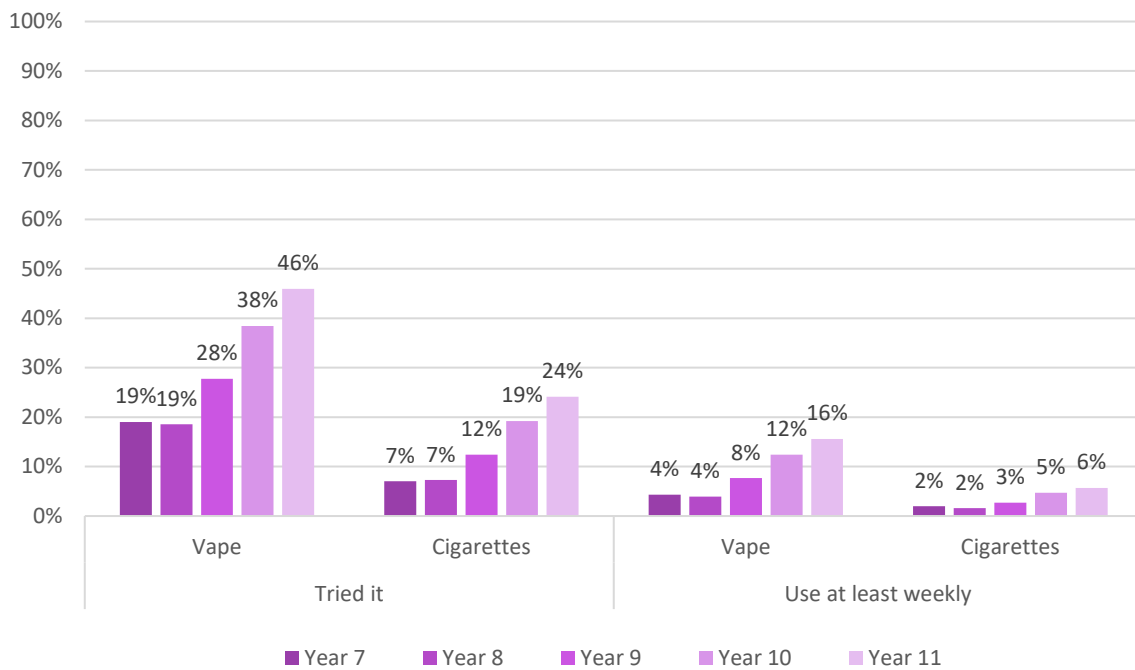
Figure 5. Relationship between Year and rates of vaping and smoking



Use increases with age

Student age, estimated by their Year Level in school, consistently predicted their use of vapes and cigarettes. Older students were more likely to try ($p < .001$) and to use vapes and cigarettes weekly or more ($p < .001$) compared to younger students (accounting for student gender, year and ICSEA). Likewise, permissive attitudes to smoking and vaping increased with student age ($p < .001$). Figure 6 presents the results.

Figure 6. Relationship between Student Age and rates of Vaping and Smoking

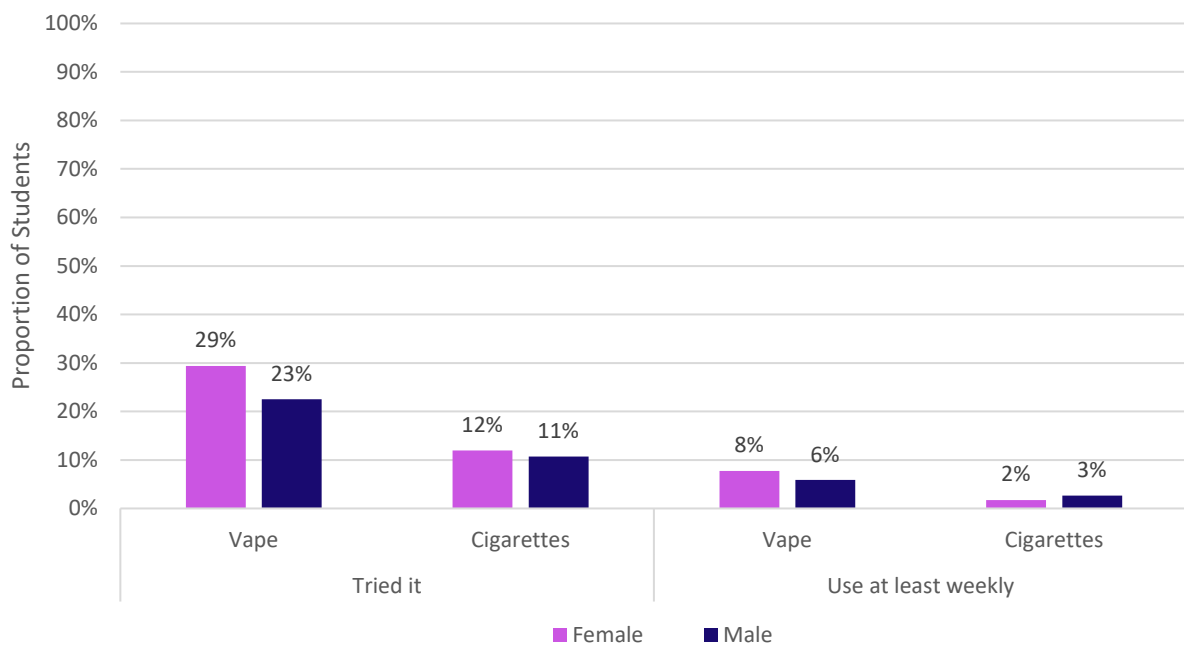


Use differs with gender

As Figure 7 shows, **female students were more likely to report both having tried vaping and vaping weekly, than male students** ($p < .001$). This pattern also appeared in their attitudes to vaping, in which female students expressed more permissive attitudes ($p < .001$).

There was no difference between male and female students in reporting having tried cigarettes ($p = .350$), **however male students were slightly more likely to report smoking cigarettes weekly or more** ($p < .001$). When asked if smoking cigarettes was “okay”, there was no significant difference in responding ($p = .320$). There were too few students who reported their gender as “Other” to meaningfully analyse their use or attitudes in comparison to other genders.

Figure 7. Relationship between Gender and rates of Vaping and Smoking



Considerations

It is clear that the Reality Now program is collecting rich and insightful data from Australian schools about student behaviours and attitudes towards tobacco and vaping. Although not reported here, similar data is also being gathered regarding the use of alcohol, cannabis and MDMA.

The SNA used in the Reality Now program is unique in Australia and offers both immediate and longer-term benefits:

- Students (and their teachers) benefit immediately by engaging with and being confronted by the ‘live’ results presented and discussed during the in-person expert-facilitated session.
- Post-session, school leadership and teachers have access to their school’s interactive report, allowing them to scrutinise the year-level data, identify areas of concern, and take strategic action. If implemented over multiple years, schools can monitor the effectiveness of strategies.
- Longer-term benefits from the ongoing collection of data are demonstrated in outputs such as this report, with the opportunity to produce similar reports on the use of alcohol, cannabis and MDMA.

Presently, the Reality Now program is only delivered in New South Wales and South Australia – the two Life Ed partners that were instrumental in the original development of the program (Dix & Carlake, 2018). Given the potential benefits available to students, schools, and policy leaders in health and education, expanding the program to other states and territories should be considered, particularly given the positive impact of other Life Education programs (Dix et al., 2021).

There are further implications that emerge for teachers, students, parents/cares and other key stakeholders from the SNA data:

- **Policy leaders in health and education should consider prioritising access to prevention programs, especially for younger students and disadvantaged communities.** Appetite for this has already been demonstrated with the rollout of a national program to prevent young people from taking up vaping (Australian Government, 2024).
- **Schools should consider implementing evidence-based programs like Reality Now that correct false peer norms and build decision-making skills.**
- **The program focuses on secondary school-aged students but may want to consider extending the age range to younger children in upper primary school given the increased risk associated with age:** the younger an individual starts vaping, the higher their relative rate of smoking initiation (e.g., Egger et al., 2024; Pettigrew et al., 2022).
- For teachers, this research highlights the importance of addressing students’ misconceptions about peer behaviour through education and social norms interventions, which can foster healthier choices. Educators play a key role in creating open, supportive discussions that challenge misconceptions and build student confidence. **Reinforcing key messages delivered by expert presenters strengthens the opportunity to change student behaviour that has lasting impact.**

- Students can benefit from accurate information about the true prevalence of vaping and smoking among their peers, helping to dispel myths that such behaviours are widespread or acceptable.
- **Parents and carers play a vital role in reinforcing positive attitudes and open communication about substance use, as well as challenging misperceptions within their own families.** It presents another opportunity to cement healthy norms by having early, honest conversations about vaping, peer pressure and personal choices.

Overall, this research underscores the need for collaborative efforts across schools, families, and communities to correct harmful misperceptions and support adolescent health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Students consistently and substantially overestimate their peer’s substance use, including levels of infrequent and frequent use. Although actual vape and cigarette use remains relatively low – evident both in this study and in other large-scale Australian research (Rose et al., 2023; Scully et al., 2024) – students report very high estimates of peer use. The presence of such clear misperception of their peer’s behaviour evidences the need for social norms interventions. Evidence from other studies demonstrate that beliefs that smoking and/or vaping is “common, acceptable and normal” drives young people to believe that engaging in similar substance use will help them “fit in” (Yazidjoglou et al., 2024; Rose et al., 2023).

Age was found to be related to a substantial increase in vaping and cigarette use. By Year 7, almost 20% of students had tried vaping, and 85% believed their same age peers had tried vaping. This shows that use and misconceptions of peer use are present from the youngest age cohort included in this data and may suggest that interventions are warranted at even younger ages.

According to data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024), low socio-economic advantage is related to higher rates of smoking, but *not* of vaping. In contrast, we found that students attending schools with lower socio-educational advantage (ICSEA) consistently showed higher rates of *both* vaping and smoking, along with stronger beliefs that these behaviours are acceptable.

Overall, the data shows that smoking and vaping, while not occurring at very high levels, was occurring consistently, even in younger cohorts. Concerningly, their perception of what is normal among their peers is reliably much higher.

The findings suggest that initiatives targeting social norms, such as the Life Education Reality Now program, are well-positioned to counter the misperceptions that often contribute to substance use among young people. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of collaborative efforts among schools, families, and communities to challenge these harmful beliefs and support the health and wellbeing of young people.

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