

An observational study of tobacco smoking and vaping at The University of Sheffield: Insights to support a healthier university environment

Duncan Gillespie, Isobella Freeman, Edward Green, Emily Hudson, Anab Mahamed, Emma Hock.
Contact email: duncan.gillespie@sheffield.ac.uk

Why are we doing this?

A consultation process is ongoing on The University of Sheffield’s potential transition to being smoke-free.

The aim is to protect the wellbeing of students, staff, and the public by reducing exposure to harmful tobacco smoke and promoting a healthier environment.

National and local context

Sheffield has a City-Wide Tobacco Control Strategy for preventing smoking initiation, encouraging and supporting people who smoke to quit and reducing exposure to second-hand smoke.

As a key institution within the city, The University of Sheffield has a role in contributing to the city-wide efforts to reach the target of fewer than 5% of the population smoking.

The UK Government is about to pass the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which will move the age of sale for tobacco from 18 to 21 in the first three years, i.e. from the typical age of starting an undergraduate degree to the age of leaving university.

What does it mean?

Smoking and vaping are clearly visible at key university areas.

Signage could be improved and smoking-related cues such as cigarette litter removed to clearly communicate the importance of a healthy environment.



Student-led research

This project was conducted by undergraduate medical students as part of the Student Selected Component of the medical degree (MBChB) course.

In October 2024, four students observed smoking and vaping in 20-minute periods at the entrances of the Students’ Union and two major study buildings, the Information Commons and The Diamond.

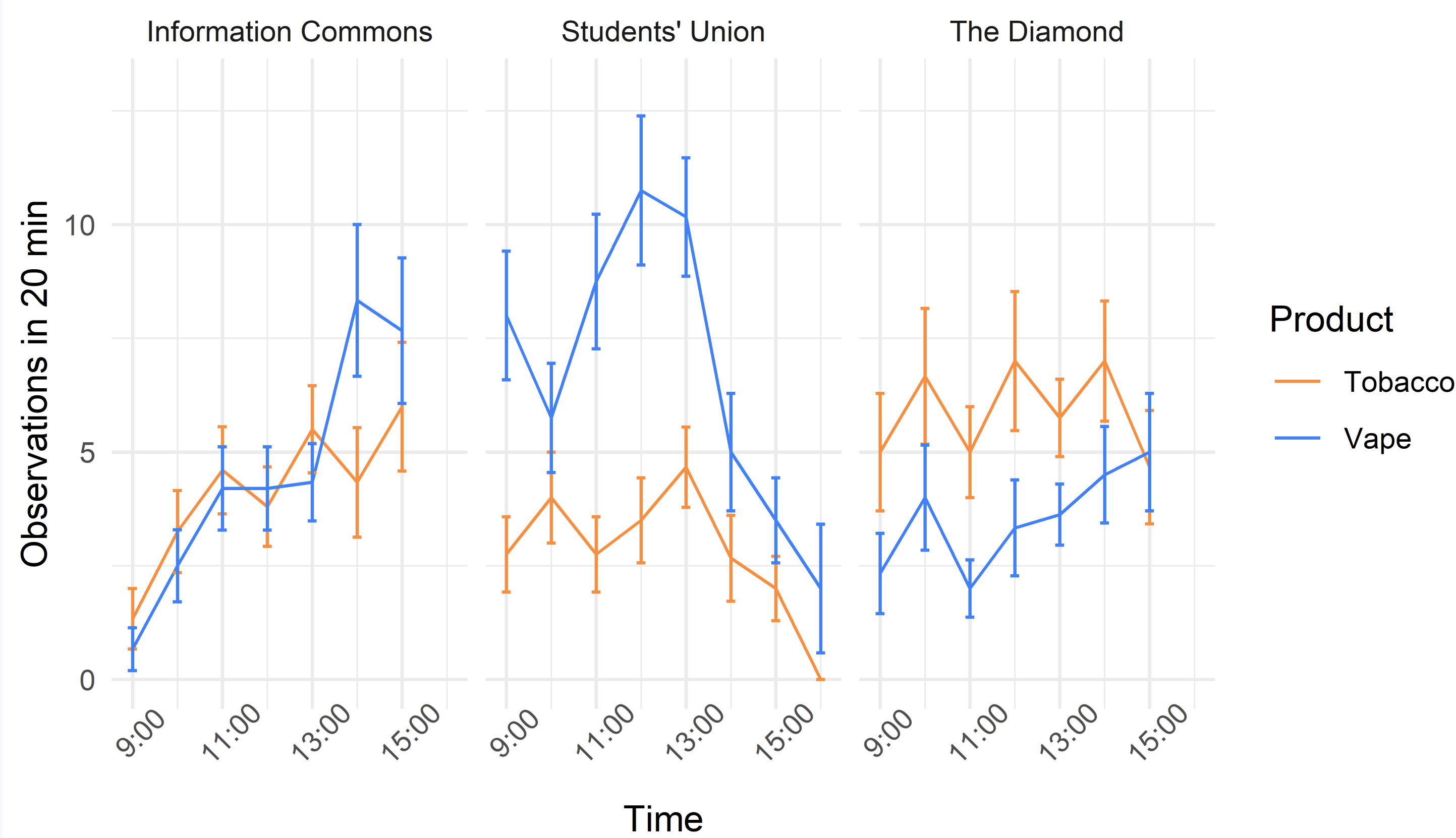
The students also assessed the look and feel of key spaces and the presence of no-smoking signage.

Observations

A total of 842 people were observed smoking or vaping: 388 smoked tobacco (average 4.4 per 20 minutes), and 454 vaped (5.2 per 20 minutes).

The highest smoking rate was at The Diamond (5.8 per 20 minutes).

The highest vaping rate was at the Students’ Union (7.5 per 20 minutes).



The figure shows that peak smoking and vaping times varied between the three sites, tending to be highest in the late morning and early afternoon.

Reflections

The students’ reflections highlighted the following themes:

Ashtrays & cigarette litter

The presence of ashtrays and cigarette litter near no-smoking signage was thought to send contradictory messages.

Signage

The Royal Hallamshire Hospital’s signage (see above) was thought to be a good example of a clear, positive message.

Seating and social spaces

People who were smoking tended to stand further from seating areas occupied by people who were not smoking, suggesting that additional seating could encourage socialising and reduce smoking.

Acknowledgements

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