

Removal of high sugar-sweetened beverages from a large university campus – an intervention to improve the university food environment



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PROBLEM

- Public health bodies have proposed reducing consumption of high sugar-sweetened beverages (HSSBs) as a strategy to curb the obesity epidemic.
- However, producers and retailers are often concerned that removal of HSSBs from sale would lead to unhappy consumers and reduced revenues – cooperation is needed between retailers and public health bodies
- Healthy UCD is a health promotion initiative designed to create a sustainable healthy campus in University College Dublin (UCD).
- In March 2018, Healthy UCD undertook the removal of all taxable HSSBs from sale in all outlets on the UCD Belfield campus and aimed to investigate the impact on sales and the consumer response

EVIDENCE

- Healthy UCD, in partnership with the contracted beverage supplier, conducted a 7-week intervention where all HSSBs were removed from all UCD Belfield campus food outlets.
- Sugar-free alternatives were provided in their place, consisting mainly of water (plain and flavoured), sugar-free energy drinks and sports drinks.



Figure 1: Outline of taxable and non-taxable beverages.

- Post-trial, a student survey was conducted among regular student HSSB consumers (≥ 1 /week, $n=295$) to determine current HSSB purchasing habits and attitude towards their removal.
- Recent research from the University of British Columbia has described a similar removal of HSSBs from campus albeit from selected locations only on a pilot basis and has reported that the majority of students were unaware of the removal and supported it being made permanent. (1)
- A key difference in approach here was the continued availability of HSSBs in other campus locations, but there was no evidence of compensatory purchasing.

SOLUTION

- The student survey in UCD showed that 75% of regular HSSB consumers were unaware they had been removed and over 37% supported permanent HSSB removal while a further 30% were indifferent.
- Retail sales for drinks across the 16 campus outlets (shops, cafes, restaurant, delis, bar) grew despite removal of HSSBs.
- Results of the initial trial removal led the University Management Team to permanently remove HSSBs from sale on all UCD campuses.

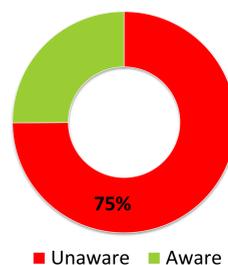


Figure 2 (left): Proportion of students surveyed who were unaware of HSSB removal from campus.

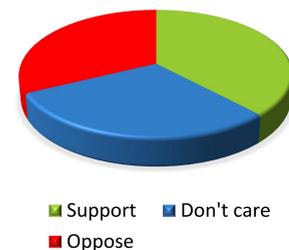


Figure 3 (right): Support and opposition to permanent HSSB removal

- Complaints and drinks sales data have been monitored in the three years since the intervention period
- Sales continued to grow for the duration of the 2-year follow up, until the UCD campuses closed due to Covid-19 restrictions.
- Although sales data is unavailable for 2020/2021 due to the campus closure, the no HSSBs policy continues to be monitored and enforced by Healthy UCD and the SU following the full reopening of UCD in September 2021.

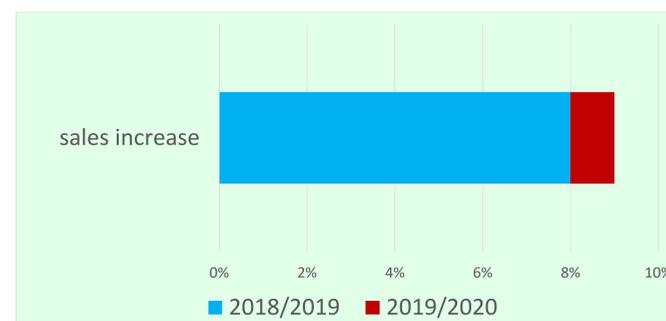


Figure 2: Increase in drinks sales in UCD in the two years following HSSB removal. Note: 2019/2020 figures cover Oct-Feb only due to campus closure.

Estimated that removal of HSSBs from sale of campus over two years equates to **7.4 million g sugar & 29.63 million kcal** removed from UCD campuses.



Complaints?

- Very few – one relating to removal of choice from campus outlets
- One query regarding those with diabetes mellitus and removal of a particular HSSB. This HSSB had not been previously sold in UCD. Therefore, national advice regarding access to high sugar products in the case of hypoglycaemia from Diabetes Ireland was provided

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

- Removal of HSSBs from a university campus is possible.
- Buy-in from relevant stakeholders has been crucial to the continued success of the initiative, including the beverage supplier and campus hospitality manager – with their support, the removal of HSSBs has been sustained and sufficient alternatives provided.
- However, advice must be provided to those members of the community who may feel negatively impacted by the change in the retail environment.
- Future work will include research to assess the food environment on campus as a whole with a view to improving university policy.

REFERENCE

1. Di Sebastiano KM, Kozicky S, Baker M, Dolf M, Faulkner G. "The University of British Columbia healthy beverage initiative: changing the beverage landscape on a large post-secondary campus." *Public Health Nutr.* (2021) 24(1): 125-135



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