

Impact of Drug Use and Substance Abuse on Students' Academic Performance in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract

Drug use and substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions have emerged as critical issues, profoundly impacting students' academic performance and overall well-being. This study examines the prevalence and consequences of substance abuse in these institutions, highlighting the socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors that contribute to this phenomenon. The research identifies a range of drugs and other substances commonly abused, including alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and prescription drugs, and explores their adverse effects on cognitive functions, academic engagement, and mental health. Findings indicate that substance abuse leads to cognitive impairments, decreased motivation, poor academic performance, mental health issues, and higher dropout rates. These outcomes are exacerbated by inadequate financial support, psychological stress, peer pressure, and the easy availability of drugs. The study critiques current punitive measures and underscores the need for comprehensive intervention strategies, emphasizing preventative education, rehabilitative support, and supportive policies. Addressing substance abuse effectively requires a multi-faceted approach that incorporates socio-cultural, educational, and health perspectives to mitigate its impact on students' academic success and future prospects.

Keywords: *Drug Use, Substance Abuse, Academic Performance, Nigerian Tertiary Institutions Cognitive Impairment, Mental Health*

Introduction

Substance abuse according to Dada & Falegan (2023) is a pattern of harmful use of any substance for mood-altering purposes, it is the use of illicit drugs or the abuse of prescription or over-the-counter drugs for purposes other than those for which they are indicated or in a manner or in quantities other than directed. Drug use and substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions have become significant issues, affecting not only the health and well-being of the students but also their academic performance and future prospects. This phenomenon is influenced by various socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors, and its impact on academic performance is multifaceted and far-reaching.

Drug abuse is a major public health problem all over the world (UNODC, 2005). The use and abuse of drugs by adolescents have become one of the most disturbing health related phenomena in Nigeria and other parts of the world (NDLEA, 1997). The prevalence of substance abuse in Nigerian universities is alarming. Studies have shown that a substantial proportion of students engage in the use of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and prescription medications such as tramadol and codeine (Oshikoya & Alli, 2006; Atoyebi & Atoyebi, 2013).

This trend is not isolated to Nigeria but reflects a global pattern where youth and young adults are particularly vulnerable to substance misuse. However, the socio-economic and cultural context in Nigeria provides unique challenges and factors that exacerbate this issue. One significant driver of substance or drug abuse among Nigerian students is socio-economic stress. Many students face financial difficulties, which can lead to increased stress and anxiety, driving them towards substance use as a coping mechanism (Oshodi et al., 2010). The lack of sufficient financial support and the pressure to succeed academically often push students towards drugs as a way to enhance performance or escape their problems temporarily.

Psychological factors also play a crucial role. Adolescence and young adulthood are periods of significant psychological development and vulnerability. Many students use drugs to cope with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and peer pressure (Olley, 2008). Peer influence is particularly strong in university settings, where the desire to fit in and be accepted can lead students to experiment with drugs. Furthermore, the false perception that drug use is a norm among peers can exacerbate this behaviour.

Environmental factors, including the availability and accessibility of drugs, also contribute to the high rates of substance abuse. In many Nigerian universities, the porous security systems and the presence of drug peddlers on and around campuses make it easy for students to obtain illicit substances (Akanbi et al., 2015). Additionally, the lack of effective drug education and prevention programs within these institutions leaves students uninformed about the dangers of drug use and ill-equipped to resist peer pressure.

The impact of drug use and substance abuse on academic performance is profound. Cognitive impairments resulting from substance abuse can hinder a student's ability to concentrate, memorize, and process information effectively, leading to poor academic outcomes (Volkow et al., 2014). Studies have consistently shown that students who abuse drugs tend to have lower academic achievements, higher absenteeism rates, and are more likely to drop out of school compared to their non-using peers (Ibrahim & Kumar, 2009).

Moreover, substance abuse can lead to severe health problems, both physical and mental, which further impede academic performance. Chronic use of drugs can result in neurological damage, impairing cognitive functions necessary for learning. Mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, which are often both causes and effects of substance abuse, can further disrupt a student's academic journey (Oshodi et al., 2010).

Additionally, the behavioural consequences of substance abuse, such as increased risk-taking, aggression, and defiance of authority, can result in disciplinary actions, suspensions, and

expulsions, further jeopardizing academic careers (Babalola et al., 2013). The overall campus environment can also be affected, creating a culture of substance use that distracts from academic goals and fosters a negative atmosphere for learning.

In conclusion, drug use and substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions represent a complex challenge with significant implications for academic performance and future prospects. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that considers the socio-economic, psychological, and environmental factors driving substance use, and implements effective prevention, intervention, and support strategies to help students navigate these challenges and succeed academically.

Conceptual Clarification

Drug

According to Lewinso (2007 as cited in Adewale, 2022), drug is any product other than food or water that affects the way people feel, think, see and behave. It can be chewed, inhaled, smoked, drunk or taken through injection. Drug can also be described as any substance that has the ability to modify mood, perception, behaviour and the overall body functions of any living thing. If drugs are rightly prescribed and administered, it brings stability and aids the healing process of the users but it is quite unfortunate that its misuse is rampant these days especially among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria which constitute a large percentage of our youths.

Many people especially, youths take drugs which have the properties of altering the mental state of a person in ways that are considered by social norms to be inappropriate and harmful to the life of the user and the entire members of the society. Drug abuse is the wrong use of drug for purposes besides medical reasons which consequently affect the user negatively. This usually alter the mood and behaviours of the abuser socially, cognitively or physically.

Substance/Drug Abuse

Substance abuse has become a critical issue of concern all over the world which affects everyone—parents, children, youth, adults, teachers, government officials, workers and the entire society. (Nacada, 2005 in Adewale, 2022). Substance abuse can be described as a pattern of harmful use of substance for mood-altering purposes. This is carried out through the use of illicit drugs or the abuse of prescription or over-the-counter drugs for purposes other than those which the drugs are prescribed or in a way or quantities other than as directed which is refer to as an overdose (Dada & Falegan, 2023). The World Health Organisation (WHO) defined drug abuse as a state of periodic or chronic intoxication, which is dangerous to the individual and to the society, produced by the consumption of a drug (natural or synthetic) (WHO, 2016). Also, drugs can be said to be abused when it is used without being prescribed by a qualified and registered medical personnel. The effect of substance abuse is not limited to the abuser or the affected person but it also affects everyone that is connected to the individual. For instance, a driver who drives a vehicle with passengers under the influence of drug might have an accident which may lead not only to his death but to loss of lives of the passengers in the vehicle.

The types of drugs abused by students are but not limited to these- alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, hypnotic, phencyclidine sedative or anti-anxiety drugs. The reasons why our youths are involved in substance abuse are not far-fetched. Some of these are lack of parental care and supervision, curiosity, peer group pressure, boredom, the need for energy to work for long hours, availability of the drugs, advertisement, quest to develop sexual pleasures, emotional and psychological stresses like frustration, anxiety and economic depression.

The consequences of substance abuse are declining grades in school, loss of memory, absenteeism from school, low level of commitment to education, dropping out of school; health-related issues including mental health. The mental health issues which the substance abuser may be faced with are withdrawal, depression, developmental lags, suicidal thought, attempted suicide etc. The act of drug/substance abuse does not in any way contribute to the development of the students and this invariably lead to a decline in their academic performances. This on the long run impact negatively on the overall development of the country because the active members of the country who are supposed to make meaningful contributions towards the upliftment and development of the country are disempowered by the consequences of drug abuse.

Tertiary Institutions

The students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria is the focus of this study and it can be simply defined as the third level of the learning process after the primary and secondary schools. (Oluwatusin & Daisi, 2017). The tertiary institutions in Nigeria consist of three categories of institutions- Colleges of Education, Polytechnics/Colleges of Technology and Universities. The Nigerian National Policy on Education describes tertiary education as education given after secondary education in Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Monotechnics including institutions offering corresponding courses (Nweke & Nwoye, 2016). Students re groomed morally and academically in tertiary institutions towards the attainment of competence and professionalism for the overall development of the country.

Prevalence of Drug Use and Substance Abuse/Classification

Research indicates a worrying prevalence of drug use among students in Nigerian universities. Commonly abused substances include alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and prescription drugs such as tramadol and codeine (Atoyebi & Atoyebi, 2013). Others include: Narcotics drugs which include Opium, Morphine, Codeine and Heroin; Stimulants drugs which include Cocaine, Amphetamines, Nicotine, Caffeine and Khat; Depressants drugs which also include Alcohol and Barbiturates; Cannabis like Marijuana and Hashish. We equally have Hallucinogens, Inhalants, Steroids among others. Studies have shown that, peer pressure, the desire for academic success, stress, and socio-economic conditions are major contributing factors to drug use among students (Oshikoya & Alli, 2006; Olley, 2008).

Causes of Drug/Substance Abuse

Other than the above mentioned powerful influencing ways, students in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria and abroad still have some risk factor that can make or led them to drug usage, these include:

- (a) Influence of Peer groups - According to the submission of Fatima (2017), youth associates with different types of people otherwise known as friends, through the pressure from these friends, a child tends to have a taste of these drugs and once this is done, they continue to take it and get addicted to it in the long run.
- (b) High level of unemployment, poverty rate and cultural mentality are the immediate causes of drug abuse among students.
- (c) Another major cause of substance abuse is the flagrant media advertisement of alcohol, cigarettes and other non-medicated drugs on our television and radio stations.
- (d) Depression - This is a mental state in which a person has feelings of great unhappiness and hopelessness. Students in this category may think the best option is to take drug or any substance which may eventually become fatal even to the point of death.
- (e) Deviation and inability of the students to keep to normal statutory prescribed dosage and continuous use of a particular drug for a long period without Medical Doctor's approval, is also a major cause of drug abuse in our institutions of tertiary learning in Nigeria.

Impact on Academic Performance

The adverse effects of drug use and substance abuse on academic performance are well-documented. Key impacts include:

- (a) **Cognitive Impairment:** Substance abuse can impair cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and learning, which are crucial for academic success (Volkow et al., 2014). Students under the influence of drugs often struggle to concentrate in class, retain information, and perform well in exams.
- (b) **Decreased Motivation and Attendance:** Drug use can lead to decreased motivation and interest in academic activities. Students who abuse substances are more likely to skip classes, miss assignments, and disengage from academic responsibilities (Arria et al., 2013).
- (c) **Poor Academic Performance:** Empirical studies have shown a direct correlation between substance abuse and lower grades. For instance, a study conducted in a Nigerian university found that students who used drugs had significantly lower GPAs compared to their non-using counterparts (Ibrahim & Kumar, 2009).
- (d) **Mental Health Issues:** Drug abuse is often associated with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis, which can further impair academic performance and overall quality of life (Oshodi et al., 2010).

(e) **Disciplinary Issues and Dropout Rates:** Substance abuse can lead to behavioural issues, resulting in disciplinary actions, suspensions, or even expulsions. Additionally, the academic underperformance and disengagement often lead to higher dropout rates (Babalola et al., 2013).

Critique, Discussion and The Way Forward.

The relationship between drug use and academic performance in Nigerian tertiary institutions highlights the need for comprehensive intervention strategies. Current efforts to address this issue often focus on punitive measures, such as suspensions and expulsions, rather than preventative and rehabilitative approaches.

Preventative Measures: Educational institutions should implement robust preventative measures, including awareness campaigns, peer education, and counselling services to address the root causes of substance abuse (UNODC, 2018). Programs that educate students about the dangers of drug use and promote healthy coping mechanisms can be effective in reducing the incidence of substance abuse.

Rehabilitative Support: For students already struggling with substance abuse, providing access to rehabilitation and support services is crucial. Tertiary institutions and other citadel of learning should establish partnerships with health services and drug rehabilitation centres to offer comprehensive support to affected students (WHO, 2014).

Government policy: Government should further strengthen her policy to combat fundamental forces that promote and encourage drug taking and illicit drug trafficking in their societies.

Policy Implementation and Research: There is a need for policies that not only penalize drug abuse but also support students' recovery and reintegration into academic life. Further research is necessary to understand the specific socio-cultural factors influencing drug use in Nigerian tertiary institutions and to develop tailored interventions (Akanbi et al., 2015).

Sensitization and Awareness: Institutions should engage themselves in provision of adequate information on rehabilitative measures by providing up-to-date books and journal articles to the students.

Conclusion

Drug use and substance abuse significantly impair students' academic performance in Nigerian tertiary institutions, leading to cognitive deficits, decreased motivation, mental health issues, and higher dropout rates. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach that includes prevention, rehabilitation, and supportive policies. By implementing comprehensive strategies and support systems already highlighted and discussed, educational institutions in Nigeria and diasporas can help mitigate the impact of substance abuse and improve students' academic outcomes and overall well-being.

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