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Article

Counselling Services and the Reduction of Substance Abuse among Students in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Osita Ernest Igbe Ph.D
Department of Psychological Foundations, Faculty of Education, Abia State University, Uturu. Abia State, Nigeria
Email: osita.igbe@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng, osy.igbe@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper examined counselling service strategies that can be deployed to reduce substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The paper discussed the prevalence of substance abuse in higher institutions and its effects on students' academic achievement, emotional stability, social adjustment, and health conditions. The study adopted a review research model through the use of secondary sources of data obtained from textbooks, journal articles, government publications, conference papers, and online academic materials related to substance abuse and counselling services. The paper identified orientation and awareness programmes, individual counselling, group counselling, peer counselling, family counselling, rehabilitation services, life skills training, and establishment of functional counselling centres as effective counselling strategies for curtailing substance abuse in tertiary institutions. The paper concluded that counselling services remain essential tools for behavioural modification, emotional support, rehabilitation, and prevention of drug abuse among students. The study recommended adequate funding of counselling units, employment of professional counsellors, regular anti-drug campaigns, collaboration with anti-drug agencies, and strengthening of rehabilitation programmes in tertiary institutions across Nigeria.

Keywords: Substance Abuse, Counselling Services, Tertiary Institutions, Students, Drug Abuse, Behavioural Modification, Rehabilitation, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The Substance abuse has become one of the major social and educational problems confronting tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The increasing consumption of alcohol, cannabis, tramadol, codeine, cigarettes, cocaine, and other psychoactive substances among undergraduate students has generated serious concern among parents, educational administrators, counsellors, religious leaders, and government agencies. Nigerian tertiary institutions, which are expected to serve as centres for intellectual development, moral training, and manpower preparation, are gradually experiencing growing cases of drug-related misconduct, violence, poor academic performance, cultism, and health challenges linked to substance abuse among students [1]. The problem of substance abuse is widespread in universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education across the country. Many students engage in drug use for different reasons such as peer group influence, academic pressure, emotional frustration, curiosity, family background, poor parental supervision, and the desire to enhance confidence or social acceptance. In some institutions, students abuse stimulants in an attempt to remain awake for long hours during examinations, while others consume alcohol and narcotic substances during social activities and campus gatherings. The easy availability of illicit substances around school

environments has further contributed to the increase in drug abuse among youths in higher institutions [2].

The prevalence of substance abuse among students has negatively affected the academic system and the general well-being of students. Students involved in drug abuse often experience poor concentration, low academic achievement, absenteeism from lectures, examination malpractice, and loss of interest in educational activities. Many students who abuse substances become involved in anti-social behaviours such as cultism, armed robbery, sexual violence, stealing, bullying, and destruction of school property. In addition, substance abuse exposes students to mental health disorders, depression, anxiety, hallucination, emotional instability, and premature death. Cases of sudden collapse, psychiatric complications, and violent behaviour associated with drug abuse have been reported in several Nigerian tertiary institutions in recent years. Beyond its effect on students, substance abuse also affects institutional administration and national development [3], [4]. Tertiary institutions experiencing high rates of drug abuse often face insecurity, disruption of academic activities, increased disciplinary cases, and decline in educational quality. The situation threatens the production of responsible graduates needed for national growth and development. Since youths in tertiary institutions represent the future workforce and leadership of the country, persistent involvement in substance abuse poses a serious danger to Nigeria's social, economic, and educational progress.

The increasing rate of substance abuse among students has therefore justified the urgent need for effective counselling services in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Counselling services play important roles in prevention, rehabilitation, behavioural adjustment, and emotional support for students facing drug-related problems. Professional counsellors can help students understand the dangers associated with substance abuse, develop self-control, manage stress, improve decision-making skills, and build positive relationships [5]. Through orientation programmes, individual counselling, group counselling, seminars, workshops, and awareness campaigns, counselling units can educate students on the consequences of drug abuse and encourage healthy lifestyles. Effective counselling services are necessary because punitive measures alone cannot completely address the problem of substance abuse in tertiary institutions. While disciplinary actions may temporarily control student misconduct, counselling provides long-term behavioural transformation by addressing the psychological, emotional, and social factors responsible for drug abuse. Counsellors also assist students in overcoming addiction challenges through guidance, motivation, and rehabilitation support [6]. Furthermore, counselling services can promote collaboration among parents, lecturers, school administrators, religious organisations, and security agencies in tackling substance abuse among students.

Despite the importance of counselling services, many tertiary institutions in Nigeria still face challenges such as inadequate funding, shortage of professional counsellors, poor counselling facilities, lack of student awareness, and weak institutional support for counselling programmes. These challenges have limited the effectiveness of counselling units in addressing substance abuse problems among students [7]. It is against this background that this study examines counselling services and the reduction of drug abuse among students in Nigerian higher institutions with a view to identifying strategies for improving counselling interventions and promoting a drug-free academic environment.

2. Conceptual Terms

2.1 Concept of Tertiary Institutions

Tertiary education refers to the level of education provided after secondary school and includes universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, and other specialized institutions. It is designed to provide advanced knowledge, professional skills, research competence, and innovation capacity. Tertiary education plays a critical role in national development through manpower training, research and development, community service, and knowledge production. It prepares graduates for the labor market, entrepreneurship,

leadership, and civic responsibility. In Nigeria, tertiary education is regulated by agencies such as the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) [8]. Tertiary Education is the type of education that a person undergoes after the basic secondary education. It could be in a University, Polytechnic or college of education. Tertiary education is post-secondary and this is where students specialize in the core area of their pursuit which could be sciences, arts and vocational [9]. Tertiary education is to prepare the individual for the world of work with a study of the proper theories and relevant hands-on experience. The curriculum of tertiary institutions is developed to ensure that students can meet the challenges of the workplace and also ensure that all the relevant materials necessary for this are available for effective training and experience. Tertiary education or higher education is a set that constitutes the university, which is a subset of higher education. However, in some contexts, higher education and university are used interchangeably [10].

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, tertiary institutions are educational establishments that provide education beyond the secondary school level, including universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, and other institutions offering advanced academic and professional training. National Universities Commission defined tertiary institutions as institutions established for the purpose of teaching, research, and community service through the provision of post-secondary education leading to the award of certificates, diplomas, and degrees. Fafunwa viewed tertiary institutions as centres of higher learning designed for the production of skilled manpower, intellectual development, and national advancement through teaching and research activities. Federal Republic of Nigeria described tertiary institutions in the National Policy on Education as institutions responsible for the acquisition of higher-level knowledge and skills for national development through universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, and colleges of education [11]. Adeyemi defined tertiary institutions as post-secondary educational institutions established to provide specialized knowledge, professional competence, and research opportunities for economic and social transformation. Substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions remains a major threat to academic achievement, mental health, institutional stability, and national development.

2.2 Concept of Substance Abuse

World Health Organization (WHO) defined substance abuse as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs that can lead to dependence, health problems, and social consequences. American Psychiatric Association described substance abuse as a pattern of maladaptive use of a substance that leads to significant impairment or distress, such as failure to fulfill major obligations, risky use, or continued use despite social or health problems. Substance abuse may negatively affects students' academic performance, decision-making ability, emotional stability, and social relationships [12]. Also, National Institute of Mental Health. noted that substance abuse is a major gateway to crime and this undermine development by eroding social and human capital development of the students. This degrades quality of life and has negative impact on the functioning and productive ability of students in the schools. Substance abuse is associated with truancy, examination malpractice, school violence, delinquency, and dropout. Also, Chikwe, 2014; Cuijpers, Karyotaki, Reijnders, and Purgato, asserted that substance abuse contributes to long-term societal problems including crime, unemployment, mental health disorders, and reduced productivity. World Health Organization defined substance abuse as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs, in ways that can lead to dependence, health complications, and social problems.

National Institute on Drug Abuse described substance abuse as the repeated use of drugs or chemicals in a manner that negatively affects an individual's physical health, mental condition, social relationships, and daily functioning. Odejide defined substance

abuse as the excessive and persistent use of drugs without medical justification, resulting in psychological, behavioural, and social problems [13]. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime explained substance abuse as the non-medical consumption of drugs and other psychoactive substances in quantities or frequencies that impair normal human functioning. Santrock defined substance abuse as the use of chemical substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and narcotics to the extent that it interferes with a person's health, academic performance, emotional stability, and social life. The problem of substance abuse among adolescents has attracted growing attention from researchers and government agencies. Reports by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the World Health Organization indicate that substance use among young people is increasing in many developing countries, including Nigeria [14], [15].

3. Materials and Method

This study adopted the review research model. The review model was considered appropriate because the study depended on existing literature and documented evidence to examine counselling service strategies for reducing substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Data for the study were collected from secondary sources including textbooks, scholarly journal articles, government documents, conference papers, educational reports, internet materials, and publications from health and counselling organizations related to substance abuse and counselling interventions.

Relevant materials were sourced from university libraries, online academic databases, and institutional publications focusing on drug abuse, counselling psychology, student behaviour, and higher education management. The collected materials were critically reviewed, analyzed, and synthesized in line with the objectives of the study. The review method enabled the researcher to examine different scholarly opinions, empirical findings, and practical counselling strategies that can help in addressing substance abuse problems among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

4. Results and Discussion

Counselling Service Strategies for Curtailing Substance Abuse in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

Counselling Interventions and the Substance Abuse Challenge in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Substance abuse has emerged as one of the most persistent behavioural and public health challenges confronting students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The increasing misuse of alcohol, cannabis, codeine-based products, tramadol, tobacco, and other psychoactive substances has been linked to poor academic achievement, mental health problems, risky sexual behaviour, violence, cult-related activities, and school dropout. Studies conducted among Nigerian undergraduates indicate that peer pressure, curiosity, stress, academic demands, and environmental influences significantly contribute to substance use behaviours among students. Consequently, counselling services have become indispensable in addressing both the preventive and rehabilitative dimensions of substance abuse. Unlike punitive approaches that merely focus on sanctions, professional counselling seeks to address the underlying psychological, social, emotional, and environmental factors that predispose students to drug use, thereby promoting sustainable behavioural change and psychosocial adjustment [16].

Orientation and Drug Awareness Programmes

Evidence from preventive counselling literature suggests that orientation and drug awareness programmes remain among the most cost-effective strategies for reducing substance abuse among young people. Through structured orientation activities, seminars, workshops, anti-drug campaigns, and public enlightenment programmes, counsellors can provide students with accurate information regarding the physical, psychological, academic, and social consequences of substance abuse. Such interventions are particularly relevant because many students initiate substance use due to misinformation, curiosity, or

perceived social acceptance. The involvement of stakeholders such as university health centres, student affairs units, religious organizations, and the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) can strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of these programmes. Awareness campaigns that incorporate real-life testimonies from recovered substance users often enhance students' perception of risk and discourage experimentation with drugs [17]. Research in health promotion consistently demonstrates that preventive education contributes significantly to improved decision-making and reduced vulnerability to substance misuse among youths.

Individual Counselling Services

The literature identifies individual counselling as one of the most effective therapeutic approaches for addressing substance abuse among students. Many students who engage in substance use often struggle with depression, anxiety, family conflict, emotional trauma, academic pressure, low self-esteem, and financial difficulties. Individual counselling provides a confidential and supportive environment where students can explore these challenges and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Professional counsellors frequently employ evidence-based approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Motivational Interviewing (MI), behavioural modification techniques, and person-centred counselling to facilitate behavioural change. Motivational Interviewing, in particular, has been widely recognized for helping adolescents and young adults resolve ambivalence toward behaviour change and strengthen their intrinsic motivation to discontinue substance use. A review of 39 intervention studies found that approximately two-thirds reported significant improvements in substance-use outcomes following motivational interviewing interventions [18]. Through individualized support, students can acquire practical skills for managing stress, improving emotional regulation, and enhancing academic performance without resorting to substance use.

Group Counselling as a Recovery Support Mechanism

Contemporary counselling research highlights the importance of group counselling in substance abuse prevention and recovery programmes. Group counselling creates opportunities for students facing similar challenges to share experiences, discuss recovery journeys, and receive mutual support under the supervision of trained counsellors. The therapeutic value of group counselling lies in its ability to reduce feelings of isolation, increase self-awareness, promote accountability, and foster positive peer reinforcement. Within tertiary institutions, support groups can be established for students recovering from alcohol dependence, smoking, prescription drug misuse, or other substance-related problems [19]. Through regular meetings, participants learn relapse-prevention strategies, identify behavioural triggers, and develop healthier social relationships. Scholars argue that group-based interventions often complement individual counselling by creating supportive social networks that reinforce long-term behavioural change and emotional resilience [20].

Peer Education and Peer Counselling Programmes

Peer influence remains one of the strongest predictors of substance use behaviour among university students. Consequently, peer counselling and peer education programmes have gained considerable recognition as effective preventive strategies. The rationale is that students are often more receptive to messages delivered by their contemporaries than by authority figures. Counsellors can therefore identify, train, and mentor responsible students to serve as peer educators, anti-drug ambassadors, and behavioural role models. These peer leaders can facilitate awareness campaigns, identify at-risk students, provide basic support, and encourage referrals to professional counselling services. Research on youth substance abuse prevention consistently emphasizes that positive peer engagement contributes to healthier behavioural choices and improved resistance to drug-related pressures [21]. Universities that establish peer mentoring clubs, drug-free campus associations, and student-led advocacy groups often report stronger student participation in prevention activities and improved awareness of substance abuse risks.

Family-Based Counselling and Parental Involvement

A substantial body of literature demonstrates that family dynamics significantly influence students' attitudes toward substance use. Factors such as inadequate parental supervision, family conflict, domestic violence, emotional neglect, and weak parent-child communication have been associated with increased risk of substance abuse among young people. Consequently, family counselling has become an essential component of comprehensive substance abuse intervention programmes. Through collaborative engagements involving counsellors, parents, and guardians, families can be equipped with the knowledge and skills required to identify early warning signs of substance abuse and provide appropriate emotional support. Parent-focused counselling programmes also encourage continuous communication and monitoring even after students gain admission into tertiary institutions. Studies in adolescent development consistently show that strong parental support and monitoring serve as protective factors against substance use and other risky behaviours among youths.

Rehabilitation and Referral Services

The reviewed literature further indicates that some cases of substance abuse require interventions beyond routine counselling. Students with severe addiction problems often need multidisciplinary support involving medical practitioners, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and rehabilitation specialists. Effective counselling centres should therefore establish referral networks with hospitals, rehabilitation centres, and specialized treatment facilities. Rehabilitation programmes provide comprehensive support that addresses the physical, emotional, psychological, and social consequences of addiction. Referral systems also ensure continuity of care, thereby reducing the likelihood of relapse. According to the World Health Organization, integrated treatment approaches that combine psychological support, medical care, and social rehabilitation generally produce better recovery outcomes than isolated interventions. Therefore, tertiary institutions should strengthen partnerships with relevant healthcare and rehabilitation agencies to ensure prompt intervention for affected students.

Life Skills Training and Behavioural Modification Programmes

Another major finding from the literature is that life skills education significantly contributes to substance abuse prevention among young people. Students frequently resort to substance use when they lack effective coping strategies for managing stress, interpersonal conflicts, emotional challenges, and academic pressures. Life skills training programmes equip students with competencies such as decision-making, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, communication, assertiveness, self-management, conflict resolution, and leadership skills. These competencies enhance students' capacity to navigate social pressures and make informed choices regarding their health and wellbeing. The World Health Organization has consistently advocated life-skills-based education as a critical preventive strategy for promoting positive youth development and reducing engagement in risky behaviours, including substance abuse. Students who possess strong life skills are generally more resilient and less susceptible to negative peer influence.

Establishment of Functional Counselling Centres

The effectiveness of all counselling interventions ultimately depends on the availability of functional counselling centres within tertiary institutions. Unfortunately, many Nigerian institutions continue to face shortages of professional counsellors, inadequate counselling facilities, and limited funding for mental health services. The literature therefore recommends the establishment of well-equipped counselling centres staffed by qualified counsellors, psychologists, and behavioural therapists. Such centres should provide confidential counselling services, psychological assessment, crisis intervention, substance abuse screening, rehabilitation referrals, and mental health promotion programmes. Beyond responding to existing problems, counselling centres should proactively organize anti-drug campaigns, wellness programmes, and behavioural development workshops across campuses. Strengthening institutional counselling

infrastructure will significantly enhance the capacity of tertiary institutions to prevent substance abuse and promote students' overall wellbeing.

5. Conclusion

Substance abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions has continued to pose serious threats to academic excellence, student health, emotional stability, moral behaviour, and institutional peace. The widespread abuse of drugs such as alcohol, cannabis, tramadol, cigarettes, and codeine has contributed to examination malpractice, cultism, violence, poor academic performance, mental health disorders, and school dropout among students. The increasing prevalence of substance abuse has therefore made counselling services highly necessary in tertiary institutions across Nigeria.

The study established that counselling services provide effective preventive, corrective, and rehabilitative measures for addressing substance abuse among students. Strategies such as orientation programmes, individual counselling, group counselling, peer education, family counselling, life skills training, rehabilitation services, and functional counselling centres can significantly reduce drug abuse and promote positive behavioural adjustment among students. Counselling services help students understand the consequences of substance abuse, develop self-control, manage emotional stress, and adopt healthier lifestyles. Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1) Management of tertiary institutions in Nigeria should strengthen counselling units through adequate funding and provision of modern counselling facilities.
2) Professional counsellors with training in addiction counselling and behavioural therapy should be employed in tertiary institutions to address substance abuse problems effectively.
3) Regular orientation programmes, seminars, workshops, and anti-drug awareness campaigns should be organized for students in all tertiary institutions.
4) Tertiary institutions should collaborate with agencies such as the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, religious organizations, and health professionals in combating substance abuse among students.
5) Peer counselling and anti-drug clubs should be established in tertiary institutions to encourage positive peer influence and behavioural change among students.
6) Parents and guardians should maintain regular communication and emotional support for students to reduce their vulnerability to substance abuse.
7) Rehabilitation and referral services should be strengthened in tertiary institutions to support students already affected by substance addiction.
8) Government should formulate and implement policies that promote drug-free campuses and support counselling programmes in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

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