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The Role of Universities in Shaping the Future: Advancing Substance Use Education Research and Policy in Africa

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Abstract

The study examined the role of universities in shaping the future: Advancing substance use education research and policy in Africa. The study was a qualitative one which utilized undergraduate students and basically relied on multi-prolonged and purposive approach. The data collection tools used for the study were in depth interview guides, focus group discussion protocols, key informant interview schedules, and institutional document analysis checklists. The analysis framework of the study was based on a Quadruple-Helix Integration Model which connects higher education institutions with government policymakers, local communities, and healthcare systems to drive context specific, evidence-based responses. The findings of the study revealed the urgent need to replace Western-centric prevention models with indigenous evidence and to shift campus policies toward rehabilitation rather than expulsion. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that tests culturally tailored and peer-led support programs should be carried out on a regular basis in our local campuses.

Key words: Africa, Education, Research policy, Substance use, Universities.

Introduction

Universities play a pivotal role in shaping the future as regards advancing substance use education research and policy in Africa. This is because substance use education research and policy has become of great importance in Africa and indeed, in the formation of history. These efforts made by our universities in curbing the menace of substance use among

students through education research and policy development. Universities also make provisions for acquisition of knowledge, fostering serious reasoning and preparing people for careers in the future. However, the educational surrounding in universities is not particularly limited to academic activities. It covers a wider factor that covers social relationships, cultural changes and student well-being. Creation and maintenance of a firm and encouraging learning surrounding is essential for the holistic development and success of students (Litvinova et al., 2019). Such surrounding guarantees that learners feel protected, appreciated and admired, allowing them to fully participate in their educational journey. When students perceive their environment as secure and supportive, they are more likely to experience significant well-being, develop strong interpersonal interactions and achieve their academic targets. Despite the gains of the educational surrounding, university students encounter lots of problems and risks that can weaken their well-being and academic enhancement. These problems may include academic pressure (Quach et al., 2024), social expectations (Barron & D'Annunzio-Green, 2020), identity formation (Popovich et al., 2019), financial constraints (Kaufman, 2021), and conversion to a new social and academic position. The frequency of these problems emphasizes the need for a detailed understanding of the elements that can enhance a firm and encouraging educational surrounding.

However, in Africa, universities still stand out as landmarks in the advancement of substance use education especially among students through thorough research and standardized policies. It is also important at this juncture, to indicate the need to develop our universities through advanced research and policies geared towards helping students who use harmful substances to turn a new lease of life. This actually constitutes the main problems of this study which the researchers intend to solve in order to give it some relevance. In the same vein, it would be necessary in the course of this study to analyze and describe substance use among students with respect to directing them for the advancement and development of research and the policy that guides them when they are practicalized.

More so, substance use has been a long-standing public health challenge across the globe, including in Africa (Mbwambo et al., 2021). The detrimental use of alcohol and other substances has been reported to cause devastating consequences on individuals, families, and societies (Medina-Mora, 2025). These include diseases, a psychological, social, and economic burden in societies, and many other physical harms like road traffic accidents (Hall et al., 2019). In 2008, the World Health Organization estimated that tobacco and drug use contributed to 12.4% of deaths globally in 2000 (WHO, 2019). Furthermore, 2002-2030 projections by the Global Burden of Disease Project estimate that five of the six fastest-growing causes of global mortality are related to substance use (WHO, 2019). In the light of this assertion, the protection of the health of populations by preventing the harmful use of alcohol and other substances, and its effects remains a public health priority (Degenhardt et al., 2019a; Newton et al., 2019; WHO, 2019). WHO has consequently urged member states to interrupt the growing destructive trend, and reduce its related ills through prioritizing substance use prevention measures and programs (Renstrom & Back, 2019). This call by

WHO necessitates that effective substance use prevention research be conducted (Newton et al., 2019). As global epidemiological transitions from diseases of poverty to non-communicable diseases progress, substantial swing in the burden of disease and health risks among adolescents and young adults are expected to mirror the significant role played by substance use (Degenhardt et al., 2019a). To interrupt this trend, and reduce the associated harms, effective substance use prevention research is paramount (Newton et al., 2019).

Furthermore, discussing the strategic role of African universities in shaping futures through substance use education, research, and policy involves frameworks linking higher education to public health and social transformation. To buttress more on this, some key theories were adopted, and they include: Triple Helix model by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1995), the Developmental University model by ICA/African perspectives, and General Systems theory by Bertalanffy (1968). Triple Helix model, as developed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1995) explained the interaction between university, industry, and government. In substance use, universities act as innovation hubs generating local epidemiological research (academia), which informs legislative/public health frameworks (government) and drives community or pharmaceutical intervention initiatives (industry). Similarly, the Developmental University model emerged collectively through African higher education scholarship and policy dialogues (rooted in post-independence regional frameworks). It evolved prominently during the 1960s to 1970s and refined in contemporary discourse on African community engagement. It asserted that African universities must directly target domestic socio-economic and public health challenges such as localized substance use trends (e.g., cannabis, tramadol, and codeine misuse) rather than operating as ivory towers.

Overall, General Systems theory, as developed by Bertalanffy (1968) viewed the university as an open subsystem embedded within a larger societal environment. Invariably, inputs like student behavioural stressors or regional drug crises are transformed through educational curricula and research output into policy outcomes and community safety. Studies conducted by Abikwi et al. (2022) revealed that the effects of drug abuse on the academic performance of Nigerian school students are significant and detrimental. To further buttress on this, it is key to emphasize that understanding these effects in addressing drug abuse among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions especially in Africa is essential to safeguarding their academic achievements, mental well-being, and overall educational experience. Efforts to prevent and combat substance abuse in educational settings are essential to ensure a conducive learning environment and promote positive academic outcomes. The menace of drug abuse has brought about various negative effects on education and the society as it undermines students' academic achievement. Addiction reduces concentration, weakens memory, and diminishes learning abilities, leading to poor performance, declining grades, and absenteeism. In many cases, this escalates into indiscipline, violence, and eventual school dropout, thereby lowering educational standards and producing a generation of half-educated or uneducated youths.

Similarly, a study carried out by Casa Palmera Staff (2019) on the effect of drug abuse on society is profound and far-reaching, as it highlighted on how drug abuse imposes heavy costs, drains national productivity, increases healthcare expenses, and fuels crime and insecurity. Law enforcement resources are overstretched, while drug-related accidents and violence pose significant threats to public safety. In the end, society bears the burden of rehabilitating addicts, managing crime, and supporting broken families.

Furthermore, studies of Hassan (2019), Recovery Crossroads (2023) and Pondel and Etal (2016) highlighted the psychosocial effects of drug abuse encompasses a wide range of impacts on individuals' mental health, social interactions, and overall well-being. Drug abuse erodes individuals' mental and social well-being. Addicts often suffer mood swings, paranoia, and sleep disturbances, which impair their ability to maintain healthy relationships. Many experience guilt, shame, and social withdrawal, creating a cycle in which emotional pain fuels further substance use, deepening the addiction. However, the gap this current research intends to fill, which may be lacking in previous research conducted in this area, are to identify various ways in which our universities can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of our youths and devising means of advancing substance use education research and policy in Africa. This is because Africa as a large continent is an embodiment of human and natural resources and this epitomizes our level of endowment that singles us out as a people, globally.

Conversely, these natural resources have been converted by a selected wayward youths into harmful substances of abuse which they use for their own gratification and self-aggrandizement. Therefore, this study tends to use practical but purposeful and tactical steps as stated in the objectives to handle this menace our youths are into in order to curb the frequency in their use of harmful substances by tutoring them on research and policy that pertains to the advancement of substance use especially in universities in Africa. In other words, some of the objectives of this study include: To develop and implement competency-based curricula on substance use disorders across undergraduates; fund multi-site, mixed-methods studies investigating region-specific predisposing factors (e.g., peer pressure, socio-economic stressors, and campus environments) affecting substance use in African tertiary institutions; establish university-led surveillance systems to track substance use prevalence and evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions; collaborate with national agencies (e.g., the NDLEA) and community organizations to build stakeholder consensus and create effective anti-drug policies; and implement evidence-based prevention strategies, campus mental health integrations, and support group initiatives that mitigate the impacts of substance use on academic performance.

Method

Study setting

The study setting was based on how universities in Africa shape the future of substance use management by integrating addiction studies into curricula, leading localized public health research, and advising national policy frameworks. In other words, academic centers confront rising substance use on our campuses through evidence-based prevention, professional counselor training, and community-engaged outreach.

Participant selection

The selection of participants who were basically undergraduate students typically relied on a multi-prolonged and purposive approach or sampling. This approach was driven by the need to capture diverse, expert, and context-rich perspectives. It ensures representation across academic disciplines, policy sectors, and community structures to adequately address complex regional challenges like substance use in African higher education.

Data collection tools

The data collection tools used for this study include: in-depth interview guides, focus group discussion protocols, key informant interview schedules, and institutional document analysis checklists. This was fundamentally informed by the need to capture complex institutional, systemic, and cultural dynamics. These instruments are structured to address specific gaps in addiction science, academic capacity, and public health frameworks across the continent.

Analysis framework

The analysis framework of this study relied on a Quadruple-Helix Integration Model. This approach connects higher education institutions with government policymakers, local communities, and healthcare systems to drive context-specific, evidence-based responses. Furthermore, the researchers were able to earn the trustworthiness of the participants in the study by using Lincoln and Guba's four foundational criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. By adopting credibility as a criteria for this study, the researchers spent extended time in African university (such as Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka) and community settings to understand cultural nuances around student substance use, combining diverse data source such as key informant interviews with university health administrators, student focus groups, and policy documents, and returning analyzed transcripts or preliminary themes to participants or regional experts to verify that their real-world views are accurately represented.

Using transferability as another criteria, the researchers were able to provide detailed context-rich descriptions of specific African higher education environments, socioeconomic factors, and regional policy frameworks, as well as selecting information-rich cohorts (e.g., student counsellors, affected youth, or academic policy-makers) so readers can assess if findings apply to other institutional settings. Dependability, another criteria for trustworthiness was used by the researchers for maintaining a transparent, step-by-step record of methodological choices, data collection hurdles, and coding frameworks, and also involving independent research colleagues or local academic experts to cross-check codes and confirm consistency in data interpretation. Finally, confirmability, another criteria adopted by the researchers for this study was used in documenting researcher biases, personal assumptions, and theoretical standpoints throughout the African regional inquiry and ensuring that final policy insights and educational themes stem directly from participant narratives and field evidence rather than preset external agendas.

Results/Findings

Research indicated that African universities must bridge implementation gaps by replacing punitive policies with health-focused, localized strategies that address the root causes of student substance use. Key findings highlight the need to shift from theoretical curricula to practical, peer-led support systems and prioritize contextual research over global data to effectively inform campus safety and rehabilitation frameworks. The findings further highlighted an urgent need to replace Western-centric prevention models with indigenous evidence and to shift campus policies toward rehabilitation rather than expulsion.

Discussion

Abikwi et al. (2022) focused narrowly on diagnosing the negative individual impacts of drug abuse such as peer pressure, poor memory, and lower grades among Nigerian students. Broader institutional frameworks shift this view by positioning universities not just as passive settings for substance use, but as active policy drivers that can reshape regional education and public health standards across Africa.

Ultimately, the Triple Helix model by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1995) conceptualized universities, industry, and government as overlapping institutional spheres driving social and economic development. In Africa, applying this framework to substance use shifts universities from isolated ivory towers into entrepreneurial centers that co-create community-wide solutions, local policies, and targeted public health education.

Conclusion

In summary, universities in Africa shape the future by driving substance use education, local research, and policy. Higher education institutions must move past simple punitive rules. They need to build local data, update health laws, and offer student support. However, some key insights to what young people (students) encounter in our campuses, include: young adults on African campuses exposed to high risks for alcohol, cannabis, and pharmaceutical misuse (like tramadol) due to stress and peer pressure, formal addiction studies and prevention training are rare in most African universities, existing national and campus drug policies often rely on punishment rather than public health solutions and off-campus housing and nearby vendors make substance access easy for students.

Similarly, some of the practical impacts of substance use among university students include: unchecked drug use lowers student focus, increases dropouts, and worsens mental health, campus use spills into local communities, driving crime and social instability, impaired cognitive function harms the future professional quality of graduates. Invariably, the study limits reporting whether urban campus or rural setting witness substance use by young adults (students) more or less include: few long-term tracking studies exist across Sub-Saharan Africa, self-reported drug surveys suffer from under-reporting due to strict social stigma and legal fears, and findings from one nation or urban campus rarely apply to rural or different regional settings.

Future research ideas and recommendations generated from this study include:

- It is important to input the ideas/opinions of the present researchers, which will assist future researchers in tracking student habits from entry to graduation to see the real causes of this setbacks they are having in achieving academic success and make the required changes that will bring about positive outcomes.
- It is essential and highly recommended that tests culturally tailored and peer-led support programs should be carried out on a regular basis in our local campuses.
- It is also recommended that there should be a comparison of punitive rules with health-focused support models across different African universities.

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