University Support Systems and the Substance Abuse Crisis: A Zambian University Perspective

Nicholas Mwanza[1], Leonard Nkhata[2], Etambuyu Lubinda[3], Ganizani Mwale[4]

[1,2]Copperbelt University - Dean of Students Department

[3]Copperbelt University – Student

[4]University of Zambia - Health Services

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ABSTRACT

Background: Drug and substance abuse remains a significant global public health and social challenge, with growing implications for higher education institutions. Universities are increasingly expected to respond to the complex and evolving substance use patterns among students through comprehensive and responsive support systems. This study explored how student support services in public universities respond to rising incidents of drug and substance abuse among students.

Methods: The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design involving 94 participants. Expert purposive sampling was used to select university support service providers, while students were recruited through criterion purposive sampling based on their engagement with support services, year of study, and willingness to participate. Data were collected through five focus group discussions (15 students per group, organised by year of study) and 19 in-depth interviews with key categories of student support service providers. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data.

Results: Findings revealed that although student support services and anti-substance abuse structures existed within institutional frameworks, student awareness and utilisation of these services were limited. Weak enforcement of anti-substance abuse regulations, coupled with the emergence of drug sale hotspots within halls of residence, undermined the effectiveness of existing support systems. Participants further reported gaps in strategic support services, absence of functional whistleblowing platforms, and inadequate campus security measures, all of which constrained timely identification, prevention, and response to substance abuse.

Conclusion: The study highlights an urgent need to strengthen and reorient student support services to address substance abuse more effectively within public universities. A proactive, multi-sectoral approach is recommended, emphasising enforcement of regulations, improved campus security, establishment of confidential reporting mechanisms, and sustained student engagement through awareness and prevention campaigns to foster a supportive and informed university community.

Keywords: Student Support Services; Substance Abuse; Public Universities; Drugs; Multi-Sectoral Approach

BACKGROUND

Pursuing tertiary education is inherently demanding, requiring substantial emotional and intellectual adjustment (Leshner et al., 2021). In the absence of effective coping mechanisms, some students adopt maladaptive behaviours, including drug and substance abuse. Substance abuse remains a serious global concern with far-reaching consequences, contributing to academic underperformance, physical and mental health problems, strained social relationships, criminal behaviour, and broader psychosocial maladjustment (Mwanza & Mwale, 2023).

Universities and other higher education institutions are increasingly expected to respond to these complex challenges by providing comprehensive and responsive student support systems. Investment in student support

services is essential for institutions seeking to enhance student retention, academic performance, progression, and graduate employability (Omari & Maboe, 2021). Addressing substance abuse effectively therefore requires timely and targeted allocation of institutional resources to strengthen support service capacity. Equally important is the regular evaluation of these services to ensure alignment with students' evolving needs and meaningful contribution to both academic and personal success (Herman et al., 2015).

Student support services encompass a broad range of interventions aimed at promoting student welfare, including individual and group counselling, academic support, welfare programmes, referrals to mental health professionals, and campus health services (Omari & Maboe, 2021; Arifin, 2018). Ndhlovu (2015) underscores their importance in addressing behavioural challenges and supporting holistic student development. Despite this recognition, there remains limited empirical evidence on how effectively these services mitigate substance abuse within university settings.

The literature consistently highlights the multiple stressors that place university students at increased risk of mental health challenges and substance use disorders (Perron et al., 2011; Mwale et al., 2025). Students in recovery face additional difficulties due to the widespread availability of drugs on campus. Although institutions increasingly acknowledge alcohol and drug use as critical issues, institutional support for students in recovery remains insufficient (Perron et al., 2011), pointing to a disconnect between policy recognition and practical resource allocation.

Prevention efforts are further complicated by peer pressure, socio-cultural influences, and environmental factors such as the proximity of alcohol outlets to campuses, which have been associated with higher consumption levels among students and surrounding communities (Namada, 2021). These contextual factors undermine institutional interventions and highlight the need for coordinated responses beyond the university environment.

Against this backdrop, a critical question emerges: How are student support services within Zambian public universities responding to the growing challenge of substance abuse among students? This study seeks to address that gap by exploring institutional responses to student substance abuse within a public university context.

Statement of the Problem

Student support services play a critical role in promoting students' social, emotional, and academic well-being (Omari & Maboe, 2021). When these services are underdeveloped or inadequately resourced, students, particularly those experiencing challenges such as drug and substance abuse, face increased risks of adverse academic, health, and psychosocial outcomes. Research in higher education contexts highlights the importance of early, coordinated, and accessible interventions in managing substance abuse, underscoring the need for well-organised and responsive student support systems (Kageni et al., 2022; Masiye & Ndhlovu, 2016). Such student support responses would help reduce further challenges that institutions face due to substances abuse including the campus safety, cost of treatment that limits access and retention (Zhang and Wu, 2025)

Despite widespread recognition of substance abuse as a growing concern within university campuses, empirical evidence remains limited on how public universities, particularly in Zambia, are responding to this challenge. While institutional support services are acknowledged as central to prevention and intervention efforts, the nature, scope, and effectiveness of these responses are not well documented. This gap in evidence limits institutions' ability to design informed, context-appropriate strategies. Consequently, this study examined how student support services at a public university are responding to substance abuse among students, with the aim of identifying existing gaps and generating evidence to inform institutional approaches to prevention, intervention, and support.

METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by a constructivist paradigm that holds that knowledge is socially generated through interactions. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how student support services respond to substance abuse within a public university setting. A qualitative approach was appropriate for capturing participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and institutional realities surrounding substance abuse, which are not easily quantified (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive design enabled a detailed examination of existing support structures and practices as articulated by both students and service providers (Kelkar, 2024).

The study population comprised students who had engaged with student support services for substance abuse related concerns and staff members directly involved in student welfare provision. Purposive sampling was used to recruit information rich participants with relevant experience (Patton, 2015). Criterion purposive sampling was applied to select 75 students across Years 1 to 5, who participated in five focus group discussions of approximately 15 participants each. Expert purposive sampling was used to recruit 19 staff members, including student counsellors, hall wardens, administrative officers, clinicians, and security officers. The staff sample size was determined by data saturation. Data were collected through focus group discussions with students and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with staff, conducted in English and audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy before coding. Initial codes were generated independently by members of the research team, focusing on recurring ideas relevant to the study objectives, and were subsequently grouped into broader themes through iterative discussion and consensus. Peer review of codes and themes enhanced analytical rigour and credibility. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study through secure data handling and the use of non-identifiable labels.

FINDINGS

Participant Profile

The findings are drawn from qualitative data generated through five focus group discussions (FGDs) involving a total of 75 students (approximately 15 students per group, spanning Years 1 to 5 of study), and 19 in-depth interviews with staff directly involved in student support services. Staff participants included student counsellors, hall wardens, administrative officers, clinicians, and security personnel. This combination of student and staff perspectives enabled triangulation of experiences related to substance abuse and institutional response within the university.

Availability and Visibility of Student Support Services

Participants described a range of student support services intended to address substance abuse, including counselling and guidance units, campus health facilities, student welfare offices, security services, and student-led initiatives such as peer educators and health awareness clubs. In addition, some participants referenced external referral options such as public hospitals and the Drug Enforcement Commission. However, student awareness and perceived accessibility of these services were notably limited. Across the focus group discussions, only a small proportion of students indicated confidence that functional services responding to substance abuse were available, while the majority expressed uncertainty or outright lack of knowledge regarding where and how to seek help.

Students repeatedly emphasized that although support services existed within institutional structures, they were poorly communicated, weakly coordinated, and largely invisible in relation to substance abuse prevention and response. Several participants noted that services appeared to focus on general welfare or academic issues, with little explicit attention given to substance abuse as a priority concern.

"*I am not aware of any services that help students who abuse drugs,*" one participant stated.

"*They might exist, but no one tells us about them*," another added.

A third student explained, "*You only hear about counselling when something serious happens, not when it comes to drug abuse*."

This limited visibility translated into low utilisation and contributed to the perception that the institution was reactive rather than proactive. Many students interpreted the absence of regular sensitisation, outreach, or visible enforcement as an indication that substance abuse was tolerated or overlooked.

"*If these services were serious, we would see them talking to students more often,*" one participant remarked.

Another noted, "*Because nothing is said or done, people think it is normal*."

These perceptions were reinforced by staff interviews, where some service providers acknowledged that substance abuse-specific programming was limited, fragmented, or dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional strategy. Collectively, these narratives suggest a disconnect between the formal existence of student support services and their practical effectiveness in addressing substance abuse on campus.

Perceived Ineffectiveness of Institutional Response

Across all focus group discussions, the majority of students expressed dissatisfaction with how the institution responds to substance abuse, describing responses as inconsistent, delayed, or largely symbolic. Participants frequently referred to the existence of substance abuse hotspots—particularly within halls of residence—where drug use was described as visible and normalised. Students reported rarely witnessing meaningful intervention, which reinforced the perception that institutional controls were weak or selectively enforced.

"*You see people smoking in hostels openly, and nothing happens,"* one student explained.

Another noted, "*If the school were serious, people wouldn't be abusing substances without fear*."

Staff interviews corroborated these views, with several service providers acknowledging that institutional responses tended to be reactive rather than preventive, often triggered only when cases escalated into disciplinary or medical emergencies.

"*Most of the time, we deal with cases when they are already serious*," one staff member admitted.

Another stated, "*There is no dedicated programme focusing on substance abuse prevention*."

Narratively, these responses suggest that while institutional structures existed, their limited visibility, enforcement, and coordination undermined their perceived effectiveness, contributing to low confidence among students.

Challenges in Addressing Substance Abuse on Campus

Participants identified multiple, overlapping challenges that constrained efforts to address substance abuse. Addiction and dependency were among the most frequently cited barriers, with students across all years of study describing substance use as deeply entrenched for some peers.

"*Some students are already addicted, so stopping becomes very difficult,"* one participant explained.

The transition to independent living was also widely discussed. Many students described university life as a period of unrestricted freedom, during which advice from staff or peers was often resisted.

"*When students come here, they think they can do whatever they want,*" one student stated.

Another added, "*They don't want to listen because they feel they are adults now*."

Environmental factors further exacerbated the problem. Participants consistently reported easy access to drugs on campus, describing a setting where availability made both prevention and recovery difficult.

"*Drugs are everywhere on campus*," one participant remarked.

"*Even those trying to stop are surrounded by it,*" another added.

Fear of stigma, retaliation, and exposure also discouraged help-seeking and reporting. Several students expressed concern that reporting substance abuse could lead to victimisation or social exclusion.

"*People are afraid to talk because they will be judged,*" one participant said.

Another explained, "*You can even be targeted for reporting.*"

These narratives illustrate how personal, social, and structural barriers interact to sustain substance abuse on campus.

Student Roles in Reducing Substance Abuse

Across the FGDs, most participants believed that students have an important role to play in addressing substance abuse, particularly through peer-based approaches. Peer mentorship emerged as a dominant theme, with senior students viewed as credible sources of guidance for new entrants.

"Students understand each other better than staff," one participant noted. Another added, *"It's easier to listen to someone who has gone through the same experience."*

Whistleblowing and peer accountability were also discussed as potential strategies, although participants emphasised the need for confidentiality and institutional protection.

"Students know where it happens and who is involved," one student explained. *"But without protection, it is risky to report,"* another cautioned.

A smaller group of participants expressed scepticism about student involvement, citing academic workload, fear of peer backlash, and frustration with perceived inaction by authorities.

"Even if you report, nothing changes," one student remarked.

These contrasting views highlight that while students are willing to contribute, their engagement depends heavily on institutional trust and support mechanisms.

Gaps in Detection, Tracking, and Prevention Systems

Participants consistently reported limited or non-existent systems for detecting and tracking substance abuse incidents. Across discussions, students noted the absence of routine inspections, weak monitoring of campus entry points, and minimal follow-up on reported cases.

"*I have never seen any inspections*," one participant stated.

"*People bring drugs from outside without being checked*," another added.

Some students raised concerns about compromised security personnel, which further weakened confidence in institutional safeguards.

"*Even security sees what is happening and does nothing*," one participant remarked.

When asked about improvements, participants proposed several strategies, including confidential whistleblowing platforms, strengthened security, random inspections, and collaboration with law enforcement agencies. Importantly, many emphasised that enforcement should be balanced with supportive interventions, such as counselling, rehabilitation, and sustained awareness programmes.

"*Punishment alone will not solve the problem,*" one participant noted.

"*Students need support, not just discipline,*" another added.

The findings indicate a clear disconnect between the formal existence of student support services and their functional effectiveness in addressing substance abuse within the university. While institutional structures such as counselling units, health services, security, and student-led initiatives were reported to exist, most students were unaware of substance abuse–specific support or uncertain about how to access it, resulting in low utilisation and limited confidence in institutional response.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Student Support Services' Response to Substance Abuse on Campus

This study demonstrates that while student support services formally exist within the institutional framework, their operational effectiveness in responding to substance abuse remains limited. Participants' perceptions of high levels of substance abuse reflect not only individual behaviour but also institutional gaps in prevention, visibility, and enforcement. The finding that many students were unaware of services responding to substance abuse suggests a disconnect between service provision and student engagement. Although the literature consistently notes that higher education institutions are equipped with student support structures (Omari & Maboe, 2021; Arifin, 2018; Ndhlovu, 2015), the current findings indicate that such services may function more as administrative requirements than as proactive welfare mechanisms. This observation aligns with Mwanza (2021), who argues that student support services often lack responsiveness to emerging student needs.

An unconcerned or permissive institutional culture further weakened response efforts. Participants described an environment in which substance abuse appeared normalised, particularly within halls of residence, reinforcing perceptions of institutional indifference. Adekeye et al. (2015) emphasise that institutional commitment is central to effective student support systems, suggesting that weak leadership engagement and unclear accountability structures may contribute to such relaxed responses. The presence of known substance abuse hotspots without sustained intervention underscores systemic capacity constraints. Mwanza and Mwale (2023) highlight the importance of increased surveillance and strengthened campus security in mitigating substance abuse, while Hannibal (2021) draws attention to Zambia's Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, which provides a legal basis for prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. The persistence of hotspots despite this framework suggests a gap between policy existence and institutional implementation.

Inadequate sensitisation and awareness-building emerged as critical weaknesses in institutional response. Omari and Maboe (2021) argue that investment in student support services enhances academic performance and progression. Yet, the absence of targeted substance abuse campaigns in this study limited opportunities for prevention and early intervention. The findings, therefore, point to the need for student support services that extend beyond counselling offices to include sustained outreach, education, and visible engagement across campus spaces.

Difficulties in Dealing with Substance Abuse on Campus

The study identified multiple, interrelated challenges that complicate institutional efforts to address substance abuse. Addiction and dependency emerged as major barriers, with participants noting that students with entrenched substance use behaviours were difficult to support in the absence of rehabilitation facilities. This finding supports Olutende et al. (2021), who emphasise the need for rehabilitation services within higher education contexts. Masiye and Ndhlovu (2016) further argue that early intervention is critical in preventing progression to dependency, highlighting missed opportunities for timely support within the institution.

Newfound freedom associated with university life and reduced parental oversight further intensified vulnerability to substance use. Combined with the easy availability of drugs on campus, this autonomy created an enabling environment for continued abuse. Adekeye et al. (2015) and Namada (2021) similarly identify environmental exposure and proximity to substances as key drivers of increased consumption among students. These findings suggest that student support services must adapt to the developmental and contextual realities of young adults transitioning into independent living.

Weak enforcement of anti-substance abuse guidelines worsened these challenges. Participants reported inconsistent rule application and few consequences for violations, which reinforced perceptions of tolerance. Mwanza and Mwale (2023) and Namada (2021) similarly identify weak campus security and unrestricted access as facilitators of substance abuse. Additionally, concerns about the safety of those reporting substance abuse emerged as a critical deterrent. While Zambia's legal framework provides for whistle-blower protection (Hannibal, 2021), participants' experiences suggest limited institutional implementation of these protections. Fear, shame, and stigma further discouraged help-seeking, aligning with Vogel et al. (2007), who observe that cultural norms, perceived judgment, and social consequences heavily influence decisions to disclose substance use issues. Similarly, Mwale and Makasa (2025) recommend implementing enhanced health communication and

education that adopt flexible service delivery models to encourage help-seeking behaviours among young people.

Improving the Efficiency of Institutional Responses to Substance Abuse

Participants overwhelmingly perceived institutional responses to substance abuse as inadequate, identifying critical gaps in service provision and coordination. The absence of specialised counselling and rehabilitation services reflects challenges previously documented by Nkhata (2010), who found that guidance and counselling structures often exist but lack the capacity to address complex behavioural issues. Similarly, Phiri, Mwanza, and Phiri (2025) and Masiye and Ndhlovu (2016) caution against overreliance on punitive approaches, arguing that enforcement without supportive interventions fails to address underlying drivers of substance use.

The lack of routine inspections in halls of residence and limited recreational facilities further undermined prevention efforts. Perron et al. (2011) observe that students attempting recovery are particularly vulnerable in environments where substances are readily accessible. The absence of alternative recreational and psychosocial engagement opportunities, as identified in this study, may therefore exacerbate substance use. Herman et al. (2015) argue that student support services should be holistic and regularly evaluated to ensure alignment with student wellbeing needs, reinforcing the need for integrated institutional strategies.

Participants also highlighted the importance of individual responsibility and peer engagement. Ndhlovu and Mwanza (2024) emphasise personal responsibility as a critical attribute for university students, while Arifin (2018) underscores the role of student support services in behaviour modification. However, the findings suggest that individual and peer efforts are insufficient without visible institutional action. Weak detection and tracking mechanisms, compromised security personnel, and non-action on reported cases significantly eroded trust in institutional systems. Despite the existence of national legislation governing drug control (Hannibal, 2021), participants' experiences indicate limited accountability at the campus level. Strengthening whistleblowing mechanisms, detection systems, and collaboration with law enforcement, alongside sustained awareness, counselling, and peer education, is therefore essential for improving institutional efficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how student support services in a public university are responding to the challenge of drug and substance abuse among students. The findings reveal a clear gap between the formal existence of student support structures and their practical effectiveness in addressing substance abuse. Limited visibility of services, weak coordination, inconsistent enforcement of regulations, and insufficient preventive and rehabilitative interventions have contributed to the normalisation of substance abuse within the campus environment and reduced student confidence in institutional response mechanisms.

The study further demonstrates that substance abuse is driven by a complex interaction of individual, social, and structural factors, including addiction, increased student autonomy, easy access to drugs, fear of stigma, and safety concerns when reporting incidents. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from reactive and fragmented approaches to proactive, coordinated, and student-centred support systems. Strengthening institutional capacity through sustained awareness, improved enforcement, peer engagement, and accessible counselling and rehabilitation services is essential to promoting student wellbeing and creating safer learning environments within higher education institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen institutional responses to drug and substance abuse within higher education settings:

First, institutions of higher learning should strengthen campus security systems by implementing regular and random inspections, including surprise checks in halls of residence and at campus entry points, to deter the circulation and use of drugs. Security personnel should be adequately trained, resourced, and monitored to ensure professionalism, accountability, and consistency in enforcing anti-substance abuse regulations, while safeguarding the rights and safety of students.

Second, student support service providers should shift from predominantly reactive responses to proactive, prevention-oriented strategies. This includes sustained sensitisation and awareness programmes, early identification of at-risk students, accessible counselling and referral services, and the integration of peer education and mentorship models. Support services should be visible, coordinated, and responsive to students' lived realities to enhance utilisation and trust.

Third, institutions should adopt a multi-sectoral approach by strengthening collaboration with external stakeholders such as drug enforcement agencies, state police, public health facilities, faith-based organisations, and relevant civil society actors. Given that substance abuse extends beyond campus boundaries, coordinated partnerships are essential for prevention, enforcement, rehabilitation, and referral, as well as for aligning institutional interventions with national policies and legal frameworks.

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