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Drug use by Greek university students and preventive actions

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Abstract

The present paper has tried to contribute to the Greek limited research concerning drug use by university students and also to discuss issues related to effective preventive actions. Results were based on a big sample (1778 students) of a medium-sized Greek university. An instrument made for the purposes of the study was distributed to the sample focusing on frequency of drug use, knowledge of the hazardous effects of drug use, assessment of easy access to drugs, reasons for abstinence from drugs. The results showed that a small part of the students were occasional and/or systematic drug users, most of the students assessed as very much easy the access to illegal drugs, a great part of the students seemed to ignore the hazardous effects of them, and the main reasons for abstinence from drugs were dislike and fears of bad experiences. Counseling services should offer preventive actions concerning information, group counseling, and peer-counseling.

Keywords: drug use; university students; prevention

1. Introduction

Drug use and alcohol consumption among young people are of serious concern, as they can damage health and impair quality of their life (Kounenou, 2010). International epidemiological and longitudinal studies (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2005b; Pope, Ionescu-Pioggia, & Pope, 2001) have focused on drug use by university students due to the fact that post adolescents and mainly academic students are at great risk for substance related problems (Simons, Gaher, Coreira, Hansen, & Cristopher, 2005).

The consumption of alcohol and illegal drug use by college and university students is growing very fast leading many countries to the adoption of preventive actions oriented to the specific population (Read, Wood, Davidoff, McLacken, & Campbell, 2002; Simons, et al., 2005; Wagner, Stempliuk, Zilberman, Barroso, & de Andrade, 2006). A critical step in prevention is the detection of trends of use throughout time, allowing authorities to choose which future action should be taken (Wagner, et al., 2006). This issue is very important when the target population is young people and especially academic students given the fact that they change habits very quickly and adopt new behaviors due to peer influence (Read, et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, Greek research concerning drug use by university students is still limited (Kounenou, 2010; Charila, 2005) leaving not only space for further research, but also questions to be answered concerning the prevalence of drug use among college and university students. The present paper deals with two issues. The first one concerns the results of a research study which aimed at the investigation of: a) frequency of drug use by university students, b) students' assessment of easy access to illegal drugs, c) students' knowledge of the hazardous effects of

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drug use, d) the reasons for students' abstinence from drugs. The second one presents in brief the preventive actions that the university authorities could adopt in order to help students to deal effectively with drug related issues and keep themselves away from drugs.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 1778 university students attending a Greek business university (44.5% males and 55.5% females). The majority of the students lived with their families (68.5%). They had specific preferences concerning entertainment activities: visiting bars (49.7%), after clubs (13.1%), joining university parties (17.6%), parties with friends (40.3%), watching movies/theater plays (46.4%), studying foreign languages (40.4%), and performing sport activities (38.1%). A small part of the sample had full- time (2.7%) or part-time job (2.7%).

2.2. Instruments

The basic measurement tool was a self-report questionnaire made for the purposes of the study consisted of 25 closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first one (10 questions) concerned the demographic characteristics of the sample (age, gender, academic year, origin, place of living, hobbies etc.). The second one included 15 questions in relation to issues such as frequency and kind of entertainment, what the students considered as important in their entertainment, places they preferred to visit for entertainment, the use of alcohol and drugs, easy access to addictive substances, knowledge of the hazardous effects of drugs, and reasons for abstinence from drugs.

2.3. Procedure

The study was survey-based. The questionnaires were administered to the participants prior to lectures. No name or identification number was required, thereby maintaining anonymity. The questionnaire took approximately 15 min to complete.

3. Results

According to the frequency of drug use the sample was divided into two categories: occasional drug users (1-20 times) and systematic users (more than 20 times). A small part of the research sample had used illegal drugs. More precisely, cannabis had been used by 9.6% of the students in an occasional way & by 4.7% of the students in a more systematic way. Club drugs had been used by 4.1% of the students in an occasional way and by 1.4% of the students in a more systematic way. Tranquillizers had been used by 3.4% of the students in an occasional way, while only 0.6% of the students had used them in a systematic way. Also, 1.8% of the sample had used cocaine in a systematic way, while 0.8% of the students had used the specific drug in a systematic way. Anabolic steroids had been used by 1.7% of the students in an occasional way and by 0.5% of the students in systematic way. Heroin was the less frequently used drug (0.4% occasional & 0.4% systematic use).

Table 1. Frequency of drug use

Drugs	Occasional user	Systematic user
Cannabis	9.6%	4.7%
Club drugs	4.1%	1.4%
Tranquillizers	3.4%	0.6%
Cocaine	1.8%	0.8%
Anabolic steroids	1.7%	0.5%
Heroin	0.4%	0.4%

The students were asked to answer the following question: "How easy is it for you to find the following drugs?" The percentage of the students who assessed as very much easy the access to various illegal drugs is presented on table 2. More precisely, 94.1% of the students assessed as very much easy the access to tranquillizers, 90.2% of them assessed as very much easy the access to cannabis, 80.1% assessed as very much easy the access to anabolic steroids, 73.7% assessed as very much easy the access to club drugs, 55.7% assessed as very much easy the access to cocaine and finally, 55.0% of the students assessed as very much easy the access to heroin.

Table 2. Assessment of easy access to illegal drugs

Drugs	Assessment of easy access
Cannabis	90.2%
Club drugs	73.7%
Tranquillizers	94.1%
Cocaine	55.7%
Anabolic steroids	80.1%
Heroin	55.0%

The students were asked to assess the hazardous effects of drug use. Their answers showed that 37.7% of them believed that cannabis, tranquillizers were harmless, 6.4% of them answered that club drugs were harmless and 2.8% of the students answered that cocaine use was harmless.

The students who had not ever used drugs were asked to answer the reasons for that (table 3). Most of the students answered that they did not like drugs (60.7%). Others answered that they did not want to change their mood (40.8%), they were afraid of bodily damage (40.6%), of being addicted to drugs (35.2%), of having a "bad trip"(22.7%) and a very small percentage (3.3%) answered that the main reason for their abstinence from drugs was that their friends had not ever used as well.

Table 3. Reasons for abstinence from illegal drugs

Reasons	Percentage
"I do not like drugs"	60.7%
"I do not want to change my mood"	40.8%
"I am afraid of bodily damage"	40.6%
"I am afraid of being addicted to drugs"	35.2%
"I am afraid of a bad trip with drugs"	22.7%
"My friends do not use drugs"	3..3%

4. Discussion

The present research study focused on the investigation of frequency of drug use by the students of a medium-sized Greek university in order to describe in a general way the problem and contribute to the enrichment of the limited Greek research on drug use by university student population. The results showed that a small percentage of the sample appeared to be occasional users and an even smaller percentage of the sample appeared to be systematic users. Cannabis was the most frequently used drug. This finding is consistent with the results of other Greek research studies (Charila, 2005; Kounenou, 2010). The students' assessment of easy access to illegal drugs illustrates the fact that illegal drugs can be easily found in a university campus. Although the present research sample did not present high drug use frequency, the easy access to illegal drugs may result to more risk conditions for students vulnerable to drug use.

The current study was also focused on reasons for abstinence from drugs attempting to examine the parameters that keep young people away from illegal drugs despite the easy access to them. The great majority of students who answered that they had never used drugs, they explained their abstinence from them either by answering that they

did not like drugs and they did not want to change their mood or by answering that they were afraid of bad experience and bodily damage. The reasons found in this study are similar to those found in other Greek (Kounenou, 2010) and international studies (Dekel, Benbenishty, & Amram, 2004).

Additionally, the present study tried to explore the students' knowledge concerning the hazardous effects of drug use. Unfortunately, their answers showed that a great percentage of them believed that cannabis and tranquillizers were harmless and fewer believed that club drugs and cocaine were harmless. This finding has been taken under serious consideration, since university students are considered to be old enough to be aware of the bodily damage that drug use can cause. For that reason, the counseling service of the university in cooperation with the National Organization against Drugs made and offered to the students a CD paper case with useful information about the hazardous effects of drug use in short and long term.

Universities should not only be responsible for the production of scientific knowledge and transition of it to the young people but also for the promotion of students' psycho-social health. Prevention of drug use seems to be one of the major tasks that the university authorities need to focus on. Counseling services of the universities are the services that are responsible and competent enough to carry out actions that can promote students' psychological health and therefore prevent addictive behaviors. Such actions could involve: a) distribution of information about the addictive properties of illegal drugs and the bodily damage that they cause to users and b) counseling groups for assertiveness training and development of social skills. Research has already shown that individuals with poor social skills are more vulnerable to drug use and addiction in order to overcome their shyness and difficulties in having healthy social bonds (Blume, 1997).

Peer influence on young people's vulnerability to drug use has been established by several Greek studies (Kokkevi, Arapaki, Richardson, Florescu, Kuzman, & Stergar, 2007; Kokkevi, Richardson, Florescu, Kuzman, & Stergar, 2007; Kounenou, 2010). Therefore, counseling interventions oriented to the establishment of peer bonding which will not be determined by drug use seems to be rather important. Peer-counseling which refers to counseling offered from student to student could be considered as an alternative to formal counseling. Counseling services in cooperation with national authorities responsible for drug prevention could offer training both in counseling/ communication skills and enrichment of knowledge concerning drug use prevention to students willing and capable to help other students who face social and adjustment difficulties.

Future research could assess the effectiveness of such preventive actions in order for the counseling services to adopt the most effective interventions and techniques and thus contribute to the minimizing of drug problem.

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