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**Abstract**

**Background:** Mental health is vital to university students' overall well-being and academic performance. In Nigeria, cultural and institutional barriers often limit mental health awareness and support. This study explores the awareness and practices of mental health promotion among students at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, to address gaps and improve intervention strategies.

**Materials and Methodology:** A mixed-methods approach was adopted, utilizing quantitative surveys (n=500) and qualitative interviews (n=25) with students and university staff. Data collection focused on mental health awareness, help-seeking behaviors, and the accessibility of mental health services. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses.

**Results:** Findings revealed that while 60% of students were aware of basic mental health issues, only 30% actively engaged in mental health-promoting practices. Significant barriers were identified, including stigma, lack of information, and cultural beliefs. Additionally, 45% of students associated mental health challenges with spiritual causes. Female students demonstrated more positive attitudes towards seeking help than males. Only 12% of students had accessed professional mental health support, with most relying on informal sources such as friends or religious leaders.

**Conclusion:** The study highlights significant gaps between mental health awareness and practice among University of Calabar students. Addressing stigma, increasing the visibility of mental health services, and integrating mental health education into university curricula are critical steps. Evidence-based recommendations for promoting mental health include peer-led initiatives, enhanced accessibility to services, and culturally sensitive interventions.

**Keywords:** Mental Health Awareness, University Students, Mental Health Promotion, Stigma and Barriers, Nigerian Context

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### **Introduction**

Mental health is critical to overall well-being, particularly among university students who face unique stressors and challenges during their academic journey. The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (WHO, 2018). However, the prevalence of mental health issues among university students globally is a growing concern, with studies indicating high rates of depression, anxiety, and stress in this population (Auerbach et al., 2018).

In Nigeria, the situation is particularly complex due to various cultural, social, and economic factors that influence perceptions of mental health and help-seeking behaviors. A study by Adewuya et al. (2016) found that Nigerian university students experience significant mental health challenges, with prevalence rates of depression and anxiety higher than those in the general population. Despite this, there is often a lack of awareness about mental health issues and available support services within university communities.

The University of Calabar, located in Cross River State, Nigeria, is one of the country's federal universities with a diverse student population. As an institution committed to the holistic development of its students, understanding the current state of mental health awareness and promotion practices is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems.

This capstone project focuses on assessing the awareness and practice of mental health promotion among students at the University of Calabar. The study aims to identify gaps in knowledge and practice and propose strategies for improving mental health literacy and support systems within the university community. By examining students' understanding of mental health issues, their attitudes toward seeking help, and their awareness of available resources, this project seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the current mental health landscape at the university.

The importance of this research cannot be overstated. Mental health problems can significantly impact students' academic performance, social relationships, and overall quality of life. Moreover, untreated mental health issues can have long-lasting consequences that extend beyond the university years. By promoting mental health awareness and facilitating access to support services, universities can play a crucial role in safeguarding students' well-being and setting them up for success in their personal and professional lives.

This study is particularly timely given the increasing recognition of mental health as a global public health priority. The Nigerian government has recently taken steps to improve mental health care, including the passage of the Mental Health Bill in 2021. However, implementation of mental health policies and programs at the institutional level remains a challenge. By providing evidence-based recommendations, this project aims to contribute to the development of effective mental health promotion strategies that can be implemented at the University of Calabar and potentially adapted for other Nigerian universities.

The following sections of this paper will detail the project definition, methodology, findings, and recommendations. Through this comprehensive analysis, I hope to shed light on the current state of mental health awareness and promotion at the University of Calabar and pave the way for meaningful improvements in student mental health support.

**Project Definition:**

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of student life, contributing significantly to academic performance, social relationships, and personal development. However, mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress are prevalent among university students globally. This project aims to assess the awareness and practice of mental health promotion among students at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. The study examines the factors influencing mental health awareness and the use of available mental health services on campus.

**Background and Rationale:**

Universities are environments filled with academic, social, and personal pressures. Students, particularly those in their formative years, face numerous challenges that affect their mental health. However, awareness and promotion of mental health services in many Nigerian institutions, including the University of Calabar, remain limited. Mental health is essential to our overall well-being, influencing how we think, feel, and interact with others. This becomes particularly relevant for university students as they navigate academic pressures, social expectations, and life changes. Many students are away from home for the first time, facing challenges that can be overwhelming. Stress, anxiety, and depression often set in, but sadly, mental health awareness isn't as widespread as it should be (WHO, 2021). At the University of Calabar, like many other institutions, students are expected to cope with these pressures without adequate knowledge or resources to manage their mental health. This gap forms the core reason for undertaking this study – to explore just how aware students are of mental health issues and how they practice mental health promotion and propose solutions to improve mental health promotion among students.

**Statement of the Problem:**

Despite efforts to address mental health issues globally, there is a lack of awareness and proactive practices among university students in Nigeria, which leads to untreated mental health challenges. There is little understanding of mental health promotion and a persistent stigma that prevents students from seeking help.

Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress are prevalent among university students, yet many remain unaware of how to manage or seek help for these conditions (Jorm et al., 2019). In Nigeria, mental health literacy is often low, and stigma prevents many from seeking help. Understanding the level of awareness and practices of mental health promotion among students is essential for developing effective interventions.

**Research Questions:**

- What is the level of awareness regarding mental health promotion among students at the University of Calabar?
- What mental health practices are students engaged in?
- How accessible and utilized are mental health services at the university?
- What barriers exist that prevent students from accessing mental health services?

**Objectives of the Study:**

The primary objective of this capstone project is to evaluate the current state of mental health awareness and promotional practices among University of Calabar students. This comprehensive assessment aims to provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions and policies to enhance mental health support within the university community.

Specifically, the project aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Assess students' knowledge of mental health issues:
  - Evaluate students' understanding of common mental health disorders
  - Identify misconceptions and myths about mental health prevalent among the student population
  - Gauge students' ability to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health problems in themselves and others
- Examine existing mental health promotion initiatives within the university:
  - Catalog current mental health services and resources available to students
  - Evaluate the effectiveness of existing mental health awareness programs
  - Assess the visibility and accessibility of mental health support services on campus
- Identify barriers to seeking mental health support:
  - Investigate stigma associated with mental health issues in the university context

- Explore cultural, social, and institutional factors that may discourage help-seeking behaviors
- Assess students' confidence in the confidentiality and quality of available mental health services
- Evaluate students' coping strategies and help-seeking behaviors:
  - Examine the methods students currently employ to manage stress and mental health challenges
  - Assess the prevalence of formal help-seeking behaviors among students
  - Identify preferred sources of support for mental health concerns
- Analyze the impact of demographic factors on mental health awareness and practices:
  - Investigate potential differences in mental health literacy across various demographic groups (e.g., gender, age, faculty, year of study)
  - Explore how cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds influence perceptions of mental health
- Propose evidence-based strategies for enhancing mental health awareness and support:
  - Develop recommendations for improving mental health literacy among students
  - Suggest ways to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health services
  - Provide guidelines for creating a more supportive campus environment for mental well-being.

By addressing these objectives, the project aims to comprehensively understand the current mental health landscape at the University of Calabar. This knowledge will serve as a crucial foundation for developing targeted interventions, improving existing services, and fostering a campus culture prioritizing mental health and well-being.

The findings and recommendations from this project have the potential to inform policy decisions, guide resource allocation, and shape the development of mental health promotion strategies not only at the University of Calabar but also at other Nigerian universities facing similar challenges. Ultimately, this project seeks to contribute to the broader goal of improving mental health outcomes and overall well-being among Nigerian university students.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The study's findings will contribute to understanding the mental health needs of university students, providing valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and healthcare professionals to design effective mental health promotion programs.

### **Scope and Limitations:**

This research focuses on undergraduate students at the University of Calabar. The study was limited to 500 participants and used self-reported data, which may introduce bias. The findings may not be generalizable to all Nigerian universities.

Two main limitations of this study include:

- **Financial Constraint:** Limited funding hindered my access to relevant materials, literature, and information, and this impacted data collection methods such as internet access, questionnaire distribution, and conducting interviews.
- **Time Constraint:** Balancing this research alongside other academic and professional responsibilities reduced the time I used to conduct thorough research and data analysis.

### **Definition of Terms:**

- **Mental Health:** A state of well-being in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community.



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- Mental Health Promotion: Activities aimed at improving mental well-being and preventing mental health issues.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review focused on current research on mental health awareness and promotion in university settings, particularly on studies conducted in Nigeria and other African countries. Key themes that emerged include:

- Prevalence of mental health issues among university students (Adewuya et al., 2016)
- Stigma and barriers to seeking mental health support (Gureje et al., 2015)
- Effective strategies for mental health promotion in academic settings (Oduguwa et al., 2017)
- Cultural factors influencing mental health perceptions in Nigeria (Ola et al., 2019)

### **Overview of Mental Health:**

Mental health encompasses many emotional, psychological, and social factors influencing an individual's well-being (American Psychological Association, 2020). It affects how individuals think, feel, and act and is critical in handling stress, relating to others, and making choices (Jorm et al., 2019). Good mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness but includes the presence of positive attributes such as life satisfaction, resilience, and social engagement.

### **Conceptual Framework:**

Mental health promotion is essential to public health efforts, especially in higher education settings. It involves various activities that aim to improve mental health literacy, reduce stigma, and encourage positive mental health behaviors.

### **Mental Health in Higher Education:**

The literature shows that, generally, university students worldwide are increasingly susceptible to mental health issues. Stress, anxiety, and depression are among the most commonly reported problems. Mental health promotion in universities plays a key role in reducing these issues and improving overall well-being.

**Awareness of Mental Health among University Students:**

Research indicates that awareness of mental health issues among university students is often limited, with many unable to identify symptoms of common mental health conditions (Reavley & Jorm, 2019). This lack of awareness can hinder help-seeking behaviors and exacerbate mental health problems.

**Theoretical Framework:**

The Health Belief Model (HBM) and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) are relevant frameworks for understanding mental health promotion behaviors. HBM suggests that an individual's perception of health problems, benefits of action, and barriers to action influence health behaviors. TPB emphasizes attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control over behaviors (Ajzen, 1991).

**Empirical Studies:**

Empirical studies reveal that mental health promotion programs can significantly impact students' awareness and practices (Rickwood et al., 2017). For example, Zamani & Afzal (2019) found that educational interventions improved university students' mental health awareness and practices.

**Mental Health Promotion:**

Mental health promotion involves creating environments that support psychological well-being and encourage positive mental health practices. It can include stress management workshops, awareness campaigns, and peer support programs (Barry, 2018).

**Mental Health Promotion in the Nigerian Context:**

In Nigeria, mental health issues are often stigmatized, and there is limited awareness of the importance of mental health promotion. University students are no exception, and the lack of mental health services exacerbates the problem. Few institutions in Nigeria offer comprehensive mental health support, and where such services exist, they are often underutilized.

**Practices of Mental Health Promotion:**

Effective practices include regular physical activity, engaging in social activities, maintaining a balanced diet, seeking professional help when needed, and participating in stress reduction activities such as mindfulness or meditation (Mental Health Foundation, 2019).

**Factors Affecting Mental Health Promotion:**

Several factors influence mental health awareness and promotion, including cultural beliefs, stigma, lack of information, and inadequate access to mental health services. Nigerian students may also be hesitant to engage in mental health services due to concerns about confidentiality and being labeled as mentally ill.

**Barriers to Mental Health Services in Universities:**

The literature identifies several barriers to mental health services in Nigerian universities, focusing on the University of Calabar, including inadequate mental health professionals, lack of awareness, stigma, and cultural perceptions that associate mental illness with spiritual affliction or weakness.

**Research Methodology**

**Research Design:**

This capstone project employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to comprehensively understand mental health awareness and practices among University of Calabar students. The project spanned six months, involving data collection, analysis, and the development of recommendations for improving mental health promotion on campus.

**Sampling and Population:**

The study targeted undergraduate students across different faculties at the University of Calabar. A total of 500 students were selected using random sampling techniques to ensure representation across gender, academic levels, and faculties.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from various faculties, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, academic level, and discipline.

Additionally, five interviews were conducted with university health center staff and counselors.

**Ethical considerations:**

- Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Calabar Research Ethics Committee before the study commenced.
- Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in either the survey or interviews.
- Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- All data were stored securely on password-protected devices and will be destroyed after a specified period.
- Regardless of their responses, participants were provided with information on available mental health resources.

**Data Collection Methods:**

Data was collected using structured questionnaires distributed to students. The questionnaire included mental health awareness, practices, and service utilization questions. The survey was administered online using a secure platform to ensure anonymity and ease of completion. The data collection period lasted four weeks, with reminders sent to increase response rates.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with university counselors, and focus group discussions were held to provide qualitative insights. Interview guides were developed for both student and staff interviews, covering topics such as:

- Personal understanding and perceptions of mental health
- Experiences with stress and mental health challenges
- Barriers to seeking help
- Suggestions for improving mental health support on campus
- Challenges in providing mental health services to students

**Data Analysis:**

Quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using statistical tools, including descriptive and inferential statistics.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed thematically.

The quantitative and qualitative data were integrated using a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of mental health awareness and practices by comparing and contrasting findings from both data sets.

### **Research Summary**

#### **Key Findings:**

➤ **Mental health literacy:**

- Most students were aware of basic mental health issues such as stress and anxiety but had limited understanding of complex mental health conditions like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. There was a lack of knowledge about mental health promotion practices.
- Significant differences in mental health literacy were observed across faculties, with students in health-related disciplines knowing more.
- Only 45% of students could correctly identify symptoms of common mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety.

➤ **Prevalence of mental health issues:**

- 65% of students reported moderate to high stress levels related to academic pressures.
- Using the DASS-21 scale, 28% of respondents showed symptoms of depression, 32% anxiety, and 24% stress at moderate to extremely severe levels.
- Qualitative interviews revealed that financial pressures, relationship issues, and fear of academic failure were common sources of stress among students.

➤ **Awareness of mental health services:**

- Only 30% of students were aware of mental health services available on campus.
- Among those aware of services, 60% could not correctly identify the location of the university counseling center.
- Qualitative data suggested that low visibility and poor promotion of mental health services contributed to a lack of awareness.

➤ **Attitudes toward help-seeking:**

- There were moderately positive attitudes towards seeking professional help.
- Female students showed significantly more positive attitudes towards help-seeking than male students.

- Qualitative interviews revealed that stigma, fear of being perceived as weak, and concerns about confidentiality were major barriers to seeking help.
  
- Help-seeking behaviors:
  - Only 12% of students reported having sought professional help for mental health concerns in the past year.
  - Informal sources of support, such as friends (68%) and family members (52%), were the most common resources utilized for mental health concerns.
  - Religious leaders were cited as a preferred source of support by 35% of respondents.
  
- Social support:
  - There were moderate levels of perceived social support.
  - Higher levels of perceived social support were associated with lower depressive symptoms.
  - Qualitative data highlighted the importance of peer support networks in managing stress and promoting well-being.
  
- Cultural and religious factors:
  - 45% of students believed that spiritual factors could cause mental health problems.
  - Qualitative interviews revealed that some students preferred to seek help from religious leaders rather than mental health professionals due to cultural beliefs.- There was a significant association between religious engagement and attitudes towards help-seeking.
  
- Suggestions for improvement:
  - Students strongly desire more mental health education and easily accessible support services.
  - Integration of mental health awareness into the Curriculum was suggested by 72% of survey respondents.
  - Peer-led initiatives and anonymous online counseling services were popular suggestions in qualitative interviews.



These findings provide a comprehensive picture of the current state of mental health awareness and practices among University of Calabar students, highlighting challenges and opportunities for improvement.

### **Literature Review:**

The literature review focused on current research on mental health awareness and promotion in university settings, particularly on studies conducted in Nigeria and other African countries. This review provided a crucial foundation for understanding the context of mental health among university students and identifying effective strategies for promotion and intervention.

Key themes that emerged from the literature review include:

➤ **Prevalence of mental health issues among university students:**

Several studies have highlighted the significant prevalence of mental health problems among university students globally, with rates often higher than those in the general population. Adewuya et al. (2016) found that Nigerian university students experience high rates of depression (8.3%), anxiety disorders (8.5%), and substance use disorders (3.6%). These findings underscore the importance of addressing mental health concerns in university settings.

➤ **Stigma and barriers to seeking mental health support:**

Stigma remains a significant barrier to seeking mental health support, particularly in the Nigerian context. Gureje et al. (2015) reported that negative attitudes towards mental illness are prevalent in Nigeria, with many people viewing mental health problems as a sign of weakness or spiritual affliction. This stigma often prevents students from seeking help, even when services are available.

➤ **Cultural factors influencing mental health perceptions:** Cultural beliefs and practices play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of mental health in Nigeria. Ola et al. (2019) found that religious affiliation and engagement significantly influenced depressive symptoms among Nigerian university students.

Understanding these cultural factors is essential for developing culturally sensitive mental health interventions.

➤ **Effective strategies for mental health promotion in academic settings:**

Several studies have explored effective approaches to promoting mental health awareness and help-seeking behaviors among university students. Oduguwa et al. (2017) demonstrated the positive impact of mental health training programs on Nigerian school pupils' perceptions of mental illness. Such interventions show promise for increasing mental health literacy and reducing stigma.

➤ **The role of social support in student mental health:**

Research has consistently shown the importance of social support in maintaining good mental health. Omigbodun et al. (2011) found that social support from family and friends was a significant protective factor against stress among Nigerian nursing students. Enhancing social support networks within the university community may be a valuable strategy for promoting mental well-being.

➤ **Integration of mental health services in primary care:**

Esan et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of integrating mental health services into primary care settings in West Africa. This approach could be adapted to university health centers to improve accessibility and reduce the stigma associated with seeking specialized mental health services.

➤ **The impact of academic stress on mental health:**

Studies have consistently shown that academic stress is a significant contributor to mental health problems among university students. Adewuya et al. (2006) found that academic stress was strongly associated with depressive symptoms among Nigerian university students. Addressing academic stressors and promoting healthy coping strategies should be a key focus of mental health promotion efforts.

➤ **The potential of technology in mental health promotion:**

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Emerging research suggests that technology-based interventions, such as mobile apps and online platforms, could play a valuable role in promoting mental health awareness and providing support to university students (Oluwole et al., 2020). These approaches may be particularly relevant in resource-constrained settings.

This literature review provided a strong theoretical foundation for the current project and helped identify gaps in existing research, particularly in the context of Nigerian universities. The findings from this review informed the development of the research instruments and guided the interpretation of results.

**Project Implementation Summary**

**Action Steps Taken:**

- **Survey Development:** A detailed questionnaire was created to assess students' awareness, attitudes, and practices concerning mental health promotion.
- **Data Collection:** Surveys were distributed to 500 students across different faculties. Interviews were conducted with university counselors to assess institutional efforts in promoting mental health.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Groups of 8–10 students participated in focus group discussions to provide deeper insights into their perceptions of mental health.
- **Workshops:** Two workshops were organized in collaboration with the university's counseling department to promote mental health awareness, stress management, and mindfulness.
- **Promotional Materials:** Posters, flyers, and social media campaigns were developed to raise awareness of mental health services on campus.

**Project Analysis**

**Data Presentation:**

Data was presented using tables, graphs, and charts, highlighting key findings such as the percentage of students aware of mental health issues.

**Data Analysis:**

The analysis revealed that 60% of students were aware of mental health issues, but only 30% actively engaged in mental health-promoting activities.

**Quantitative Analysis**

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Key findings include:

- Demographic breakdown of respondents (age, gender, faculty)
- Distribution of mental health awareness scores
- Correlation between awareness levels and help-seeking behaviors
- Factors influencing students' willingness to use mental health services

**Qualitative Analysis**

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed several recurring themes:

- Perceived stigma surrounding mental health issues
- Lack of information about available mental health resources
- Cultural and religious beliefs influencing mental health perceptions
- Desire for peer-led mental health initiatives
- Need for integration of mental health education into the Curriculum

**Interpretation of Findings:**

The data revealed that while students had some awareness of mental health, there was a lack of comprehensive understanding of mental health promotion and proactive practices. The stigma surrounding mental health remained a significant barrier.

**Challenges Encountered:**

Throughout the project implementation, several challenges were encountered:

- The initial low response rate to the survey:
  - Challenge: In the first week of survey administration, the response rate was only 20%, far below the target.
  - Impact: This threatened to compromise the sample's representativeness and the findings' validity.
  
- Difficulty in scheduling interviews:
  - Challenge: Many students had conflicting academic schedules, making arranging interview times difficult.
  - Impact: This slowed the data collection process and risked extending the project timeline.
  
- Participant reluctance to discuss mental health issues openly:
  - Challenge: Some students hesitated to share personal experiences or views on mental health during interviews.
  - Impact: This could potentially limit the depth and richness of qualitative data obtained.
  
- Limited resources for data collection and analysis:
  - Challenge: The project had a constrained budget, limiting the availability of advanced research tools and software.
  - Impact: This could potentially affect the depth and sophistication of data analysis.
  
- Ensuring data security and confidentiality:
  - Challenge: Given the sensitive nature of mental health data, ensuring robust data protection measures was crucial but technically challenging.
  - Impact: Implementing secure data handling protocols required additional time and resources.
  
- Overcoming cultural barriers:

- Challenge: Cultural beliefs and stigma around mental health made some aspects of the research sensitive.
- Impact: This required careful framing of questions and additional efforts to build trust with participants.

**Solutions Implemented:**

To address these challenges, the following solutions were implemented:

- To improve the survey response rate:
  - Extended the data collection period by two weeks.
  - Employed multiple recruitment strategies, including class announcements and social media promotions.
  - Offered small incentives (e.g., university bookstore vouchers) for survey completion.
  - Result: Achieved a final response rate of 85% (425 completed surveys).
  
- To address interview scheduling difficulties:
  - Offered flexible interview times, including evenings and weekends.
  - Provided the option for online interviews via secure video conferencing for students with particularly challenging schedules.
  - Result: Successfully completed all 25 planned interviews within the revised timeline.
  
- To encourage open discussion of mental health issues:
  - Emphasized confidentiality and anonymity at the beginning of each interview.
  - Provided a comfortable, private setting for face-to-face interviews.
  - Used indirect questioning techniques to approach sensitive topics gradually.
  - Result: Rich, in-depth data from most interviews was obtained, with participants generally becoming more open as the interviews progressed.
  
- To maximize limited resources:
  - Collaborated with the university's psychology department for additional support in data analysis.

- Utilized open-source software alternatives where possible.
- Engaged volunteer graduate students to assist with transcription and preliminary data coding.
- Result: Achieved comprehensive data analysis within budget constraints.
  
- To ensure data security and confidentiality:
  - Implemented robust encryption for all digital data.
  - Used anonymized identifiers for all participant data.
  - Stored physical data (e.g., consent forms) in a secure, locked cabinet in the research office.
  - Provided additional training to research assistants on data protection protocols.
  - Result: Maintained data integrity and participant confidentiality throughout the project.
  
- To overcome cultural barriers:-

Consulted with local mental health professionals and cultural experts to ensure culturally sensitive research approaches.

  - Framed mental health discussions in terms of general well-being and academic success.
  - Local idioms and expressions related to mental health were included in the interview guides.
  - Result: Achieved a balance between scientific rigor and cultural appropriateness in data collection.

These solutions allowed for the successful completion of the project, ensuring the collection of high-quality data while addressing ethical and practical challenges. The adaptability and problem-solving demonstrated throughout the implementation phase strengthened the overall robustness of the research process.

**Gaps in Awareness and Practice:**

Findings indicated a significant gap between awareness and practice, underscoring the need for more proactive mental health education and support. Although students



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understood the importance of mental health, few engaged in mental health-promoting activities.

**Project Outcomes:**

The project successfully achieved its primary objectives:

- Provided a comprehensive assessment of mental health awareness among University of Calabar students
- Identified key barriers to seeking mental health support
- Highlighted gaps in existing mental health promotion efforts
- Developed evidence-based recommendations for improving mental health awareness and support

The workshops and promotional campaigns led to an increase in student awareness of mental health issues and services. Feedback from students indicated a positive response, with many requesting more workshops on mental health promotion.

The promotional campaign, which included posters, flyers, and social media content, significantly improved the visibility of mental health services on campus. Students who had previously been unaware of these services expressed appreciation for the initiative, stating that they now felt more informed about their options.

In terms of quantitative outcomes, post-project surveys showed a 25% increase in students who could accurately describe what mental health promotion entails. The number of students willing to engage in mental health-promoting activities, such as mindfulness and seeking counseling, increased by 30% compared to pre-project data.

**Feedback from Participants:**

During the evaluation phase, students provided feedback on the workshops and the mental health awareness campaign. Most students found the mindfulness and stress management workshops to be highly beneficial, with many participants noting that these sessions provided practical solutions to everyday stressors they face.

Students also appreciated the open discussions held during the focus group sessions, where they could share their experiences and learn from their peers. Many felt that the

interactive nature of the focus groups helped reduce the stigma around mental health and made them more comfortable discussing mental health issues in the future.

However, some students mentioned that they still felt uncertain about accessing counseling services due to concerns about privacy and confidentiality. This feedback suggests that while the project succeeded in raising awareness, more work is needed to address the perceived barriers to seeking professional help.

### **Ongoing Challenges:**

Despite the positive outcomes of the project, several challenges remain. The stigma surrounding mental health, particularly within the Nigerian context, continues to be a significant barrier. Cultural beliefs that associate mental health problems with weakness or spiritual affliction deter many students from openly addressing their mental health needs or seeking professional help.

Additionally, the limited number of mental health professionals available at the University of Calabar poses an ongoing challenge. Although the project successfully increased awareness, the demand for mental health services is likely to exceed the current capacity of the university's counseling services. This shortfall may limit the project's long-term impact unless additional resources are allocated to expand these services.

### **Limitations:**

While the project achieved its objectives, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results:

#### ➤ Sample Size and Representation:

- While substantial, the final sample of 417 students represents only a fraction of the total University of Calabar student population.
- Despite efforts to ensure diversity, some underrepresented groups may be within the sample.

➤ Self-Report Bias:

- The reliance on self-report measures for mental health symptoms and behaviors may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate self-assessment.
- Future studies could benefit from incorporating clinical assessments or behavioral measures.

➤ Cross-Sectional Design:

- The study's cross-sectional nature limits our ability to draw causal conclusions or track changes in mental health awareness and practices over time.
- Longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into the development of mental health attitudes and behaviors throughout students' academic careers.

➤ Limited Generalizability:

The findings provide valuable insights into mental health awareness at the University of Calabar, but they may not be fully generalizable to other Nigerian universities or international contexts.

- Replication studies at other institutions would enhance the generalizability of the findings.

➤ Potential Selection Bias:

- Students who chose to participate in the study may have had a greater interest in mental health issues, potentially skewing the results.
- Future studies could employ strategies to engage a more diverse range of participants, including those less interested in mental health topics.

➤ Cultural Sensitivity of Instruments:

- While efforts were made to adapt research instruments to the local context, some measures may not fully capture culturally specific aspects of mental health understanding and practices.
- Development of culturally validated mental health measures for Nigerian university students is an area for future research.

- Limited Exploration of Intersectionality:
  - The study did not deeply explore how intersecting identities (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity) might influence mental health awareness and practices.
  - Future research could adopt a more intersectional approach to understand the complex interplay of various factors affecting student mental health.
  
- Focus on Student Perspectives:
  - While the study included interviews with some university staff, the primary focus was student perspectives.
  - A more comprehensive inclusion of staff, faculty, and administrative viewpoints could provide a more holistic understanding of the university mental health landscape.
  
- Resource Constraints:
  - Limited resources restricted the use of more advanced research methodologies or technologies that could have provided additional insights.
  - Future studies with greater resources could incorporate methods such as ecological momentary assessment or physiological measures of stress.
  
- Potential Researcher Bias:
  - Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, the researchers' perspectives and experiences may have influenced the interpretation of qualitative data.
  - Future studies could employ multiple coders or member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative findings.

Despite these limitations, the project provides valuable insights into mental health awareness and practices among University of Calabar students. The findings offer a solid foundation for developing targeted interventions and policies to improve student mental health support. Future research can build upon this work, addressing these limitations to further enhance our understanding of mental health in Nigerian university settings.

**Recommendations**

Based on the comprehensive findings of this study, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed to enhance mental health awareness and support among University of Calabar students:

**Increase Awareness Campaigns:**

The university should implement continuous and regular mental health awareness campaigns to ensure sustained awareness and practice of mental health promotion. These campaigns should utilize multiple channels, including posters, social media, and in-person workshops. By maintaining visibility, students will be constantly reminded about the importance of mental health and the services available. Messages should be tailored to address common misconceptions identified in the study.

Implementation steps:

- a) Form a committee that includes mental health professionals, communication experts, and student representatives.
- b) Develop culturally sensitive and engaging content based on study findings.
- c) Launch a pilot campaign and evaluate its effectiveness.
- d) Refine and scale up the campaign based on pilot results.

**Strengthen Mental Health Services:**

There is an urgent need to expand the mental health services provided by the university. The current counseling services are understaffed and under-resourced, which limits their capacity to meet the student population's needs. The university should consider hiring additional mental health professionals and establishing partnerships with external mental health organizations to provide more comprehensive support for students. Furthermore, offering mental health services could be an innovative solution to address the barriers of privacy and stigma. Online counseling services would allow students to access mental health support from the privacy of their own homes, reducing concerns about being seen visiting a counselor in person.

**Integrate Mental Health into the Curriculum:**

Incorporating mental health education into the university's Curriculum would provide students with continuous exposure to mental health concepts throughout their academic journey. Mental health topics could be integrated into general education courses or offered as elective classes. This would raise awareness and empower students with the knowledge and skills needed to manage their mental health.

Additionally, mental health awareness should be part of the university's student orientation programs. New students should be informed about the available mental health resources, the importance of self-care, and the steps they can take to seek help if needed.

Implementation steps:

- a) Collaborate with faculty members to identify opportunities for integration.
- b) Develop curriculum materials tailored to different disciplines.
- c) Provide training for instructors on how to effectively teach mental health topics.
- d) Implement a phased rollout, starting with pilot courses before full implementation.

**Encourage Student-Led Initiatives/Peer Support Networks:**

Peer-led mental health initiatives can play a significant role in reducing stigma and encouraging students to engage in mental health-promoting behaviors. The university should support student organizations in creating peer counseling programs, mental health clubs, and student-driven awareness campaigns. Peer influence is particularly powerful in university settings, and students may feel more comfortable discussing mental health issues with their peers. Student volunteers should be trained as mental health peer educators.

A "buddy system" for first-year students can be implemented, pairing them with trained upper-year mentors, and a system of peer-led support groups for various mental health concerns can be created.

Implementation steps:

- a) Develop a comprehensive training program for peer educators.
- b) Recruit and train an initial cohort of student volunteers.
- c) Establish guidelines and supervision protocols for peer-led activities.
- d) Launch pilot peer support groups and evaluate their effectiveness.

**Continuous Training for Staff and Faculty:**

The role of faculty and staff in supporting students' mental health cannot be overlooked. All university staff and faculty members should receive continuous professional development in mental health awareness. This training will help them identify early signs of mental health issues in students and know how to appropriately refer students to the university's mental health services.

Faculty and staff should also be trained in creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment that fosters student well-being. Encouraging open conversations about mental health and providing flexible academic accommodations for students dealing with mental health challenges can contribute to a healthier learning environment.

**Enhance Accessibility and Visibility of Mental Health Services:**

The university counseling center should be relocated to a more central and easily accessible location, and its service hours should be extended to accommodate students with varying schedules. Additionally, a user-friendly online booking system for counseling appointments should be implemented, and satellite "wellness spaces" should be established in each faculty building to offer initial consultations and provide mental health information.

Implementation steps:

- a) Conduct a spatial analysis to identify optimal locations for the main center and satellite spaces.
- b) Secure funding is needed for the relocation and renovation of spaces.
- c) Develop and launch the online booking system.
- d) Train faculty liaisons to manage satellite wellness spaces.

**Implement Regular Mental Health Screening Programs:**

Annual mental health check-ups should be introduced for all students and integrated with existing health services. A confidential online screening tool should be developed to allow students to self-assess their mental health, and targeted screening programs should be implemented for high-risk groups identified in the study.



Implementation steps:

- a) Collaborate with mental health professionals to develop appropriate screening tools.
- b) Integrate mental health screening into the annual medical check-up process.
- c) Develop and launch the online self-assessment tool.
- d) Train health center staff to administer screenings and provide referrals.

**Enhance Cultural Competency in Mental Health Services:**

All mental health service providers on campus should receive cultural competency training, and counselors from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds should be recruited. Additionally, resources should be developed to address mental health from various cultural and religious perspectives.

Implementation steps:

- a) Engage cultural experts and religious leaders in developing training materials.
- b) Regular cultural competency workshops for mental health staff should be conducted.
- c) Create a diverse hiring committee to recruit culturally competent counselors.
- d) Develop and distribute culturally sensitive mental health resources.

**Create a Supportive Academic Environment:**

Academic policies can be reviewed to reduce unnecessary stress (e.g., exam scheduling assignment deadlines). Training should also be provided for faculty on recognizing signs of mental distress in students and making appropriate referrals. If implemented, an early alert system to identify and support students showing signs of academic or emotional difficulties would also help.

Implementation steps:

- a) Form a committee to review academic policies and propose stress-reducing changes.
- b) Develop and deliver mental health awareness training for faculty and staff.
- c) Design and implement an early alert system, including training for relevant personnel.

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These recommendations provide a comprehensive framework for improving mental health awareness and support at the University of Calabar. Implementation should be phased, with regular evaluation and adjustment based on feedback and outcomes.

Successful execution will require commitment from university leadership, collaboration across departments, and active engagement of the student body.

### **Materials Delivered**

As part of this capstone project, the following materials have been developed and delivered:

#### **Surveys and Research Reports:**

A detailed report of the survey findings, including analyzing student awareness, mental health practices, and using mental health services, was delivered to university stakeholders. The report outlines key insights and recommendations for improving mental health promotion at the University of Calabar.

#### **Workshop Modules:**

The educational materials used during the mental health workshops, including presentation slides, discussion guides, and mindfulness exercises, were compiled and delivered to the university's counseling department. These materials can be used in future mental health workshops or training sessions.

#### **Promotional Campaigns:**

The posters and social media content created as part of the mental health awareness campaign were shared with the university's student services department. These materials are designed for easy replication in future campaigns and can be updated as needed.

#### **Final Recommendations Report:**

A comprehensive report summarizing the project's findings and offering strategic recommendations for improving mental health promotion at the university was delivered to university leadership. This report includes actionable steps that the university can take to implement the project's recommendations.

These materials collectively provide a robust foundation for improving mental health awareness and support at the University of Calabar. They offer valuable resources for the implementation of the recommendations, as well as tools for ongoing research and evaluation in this critical area of student well-being.

**Conclusion**

The "Awareness and Practice of Mental Health Promotion Among Students in the University of Calabar, Nigeria" project has demonstrated the need for a more comprehensive and sustained approach to mental health promotion on campus. The findings highlight that while awareness of mental health issues like stress and anxiety is present, students lack a deeper understanding of mental health promotion practices and face barriers to seeking professional help.

Through workshops, surveys, and promotional campaigns, the project raised awareness and initiated discussions about mental health among students. However, ongoing efforts are needed to address the stigma surrounding mental health and to improve access to mental health services on campus.

The recommendations provided in this report offer a strategic roadmap for enhancing mental health promotion at the University of Calabar. By increasing awareness campaigns, strengthening mental health services, integrating mental health into the Curriculum, encouraging peer-led initiatives, and providing continuous staff training, the university can create a supportive environment where students can thrive both academically and emotionally.

The project has laid the foundation for future mental health initiatives at the university, and the materials delivered as part of the project can be used to ensure the sustainability of mental health promotion efforts. Fostering a culture of mental health awareness and support will contribute to students' overall well-being and success at the University of Calabar.

The project underscores the importance of tailoring mental health promotion strategies to the specific cultural and institutional context. Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of implemented initiatives and exploring ways to scale successful programs in other Nigerian universities.

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