

## University Students' Perceptions of the Influence of Cannabis Use on Mental Health

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**Abstract :** The study explored university students' perceptions of cannabis use on academic life at a higher education institution (HEI) in Nelson Mandela Bay, South Africa. Cannabis is described as the most commonly-used drug by youth, especially those who are in tertiary institutions. The use of cannabis has both negative and positive effects; this is evident in different areas of human functioning. Cannabis usage has been debated upon in courts regarding its legalization and decriminalization, and on the 18th of September 2018, the South African High Court decriminalized cannabis for personal use. Cannabis use has increased in academic settings, and this has raised concerns about how it affects the mental health of students. A qualitative approach was used for the study with an explorative, descriptive design. Purposive sampling was used to select 15 participants for the study. Data were collected using focused-group interviews, following ethical clearance from the HEI. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis, and cognitive behavioural theory was used as the theoretical framework. The research findings indicated both positive and negative influences of cannabis use on mental health. Most participants who expressed positive effects have used cannabis before, whereas most participants with negative perspectives of cannabis use on mental health are non-cannabis users. The findings revealed that participants perceived that the quantity of cannabis smoked determined whether there was a positive or negative effect on mental health; that is, large doses of cannabis were perceived as having negative effects. The research findings also revealed that the legalization of cannabis is very likely to increase its use and also highlighted precautionary measures users take to avoid the substance's negative effects on mental health.

**Keywords :** cannabis use, mental health, university students, legalization

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