
Original Research Article

STUDENT HUSTLING IN NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: In the contemporary neoliberal university, students often enter with expectations of structured academic engagement but quickly encounter a far more complex reality, one that demands competence not only in scholarly pursuits but also in financial management, entrepreneurial improvisation, emotional resilience, and strategic survival. Within Kenyan universities, this experience is particularly pronounced due to rising tuition costs, constrained public funding, and an increasing reliance on student loan schemes such as those administered by the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB). Institutions of higher learning are progressively reconstituting students as consumers responsible for financing and managing their educational trajectories, thereby transforming the university into a marketplace in which academic priorities must compete with basic needs such as housing, food, transport, and digital access. Under these conditions, university life extends beyond intellectual development to become a site of continuous economic negotiation. Across Kenyan campuses, students engage in diverse income-generating activities, including freelance digital work, online entrepreneurship, academic writing, and informal trade such as selling clothing, food, or digital services. The normalization of these hustling practices reflects broader socio-economic dynamics in Kenya, where persistent youth unemployment and economic precarity compel students to seek income well before graduation. Yet this reality stands in tension with humanistic and critical pedagogical traditions that conceptualize education as a collaborative, nurturing, and emancipatory process rather than one governed by constant economic calculation. Drawing on theoretical perspectives such as Vygotsky's social constructivism and Freire's pedagogy of care, this paper interrogates how neoliberal rationalities reshape student experiences within Kenyan higher education. It argues that while universities continue to espouse ideals of holistic development, innovation, and transformation, the lived realities of students increasingly reflect a system in which economic survival frequently supersedes intellectual engagement. The need to reconcile academic demands with financial pressures produces what may be understood as a "hidden curriculum", one that cultivates not only critical thinking but also persistent hustling as a necessary life skill. This paper foregrounds student hustling as an everyday survival strategy and examines its implications for financial stability, emotional well-being,

and psychological health. In the Kenyan context, these pressures are intensified by structural inequalities, particularly in access to digital infrastructure and adequate accommodation. Furthermore, the analysis situates student precarity within a broader institutional environment marked by the casualization of academic labor and the expansion of precarious employment among university staff, revealing a shared culture of instability within the university ecosystem. Ultimately, the paper contends that student hustling in Kenyan universities should not be interpreted merely as a manifestation of individual resilience or ingenuity, but rather as a structural outcome of neoliberal transformations in higher education. It calls for renewed engagement with educational philosophies and policy interventions that prioritize dignity, reduce precarity, and create conditions under which students can meaningfully engage in learning without the constant burden of economic survival. INTRODUCTION The Neoliberal Hustle: How Financial Pressure is Reshaping Higher Education in Kenya

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Higher education, Hustle culture, Kenya, Student precarity.

INTRODUCTION

The Neoliberal Hustle: How Financial Pressure is Reshaping Higher Education in Kenya

The notion of “hustle culture” has gained significant prominence among young people globally, often celebrated as a marker of ambition, discipline, and self-reliance. Within Kenyan universities, however, hustling transcends the realm of lifestyle choice and emerges as a structural necessity shaped by prevailing economic realities.

Students typically enter university with aspirations of academic advancement and professional preparation. These expectations, however, are frequently disrupted by the material realities of university life, which demand financial independence, adaptability, and continuous problem-solving. The contemporary university experience encompasses not only lectures and examinations but also the management of rent, the pursuit of income, and the navigation of an increasingly uncertain socio-economic future.

This transformation is best understood within the broader framework of neoliberalism. While the concept itself remains contested, its manifestations within higher education are readily observable. In Kenya, declining public investment in universities, the expansion of privately sponsored programmes, and the intensification of institutional commercialization have fundamentally reconfigured the structure and purpose of higher education. Students are now expected to shoulder a significantly greater share of the financial burden associated with their education.

Consequently, higher education has increasingly assumed market-oriented characteristics, where degrees are framed as economic investments and students are positioned as consumers responsible for financing their academic journeys. This shift

carries profound implications for how students experience university life, reshaping both their engagement with learning and their broader social realities.

This paper advances the argument that student hustling in Kenyan universities constitutes a direct response to these structural transformations. Rather than reflecting mere ambition or entrepreneurial spirit, hustling emerges as a strategy of survival within a system that systematically transfers economic responsibility onto students. Through the application of social and critical theoretical frameworks, the paper demonstrates how neoliberalism not only influences access to higher education but also fundamentally redefines the meaning and experience of learning.

The Rising Cost of Education in Kenya

A primary driver of student hustling is the escalating cost of university education. Although access to higher education has expanded considerably, affordability remains a persistent challenge. The cumulative expenses associated with tuition, accommodation, food, transportation, and digital resources impose substantial financial strain on both students and their families.

While financial support mechanisms such as HELB loans provide some relief, they are often insufficient to meet the full cost of living. Delays in loan disbursement further exacerbate financial vulnerability, particularly during critical periods in the academic calendar. These inconsistencies create conditions of uncertainty that compel students to seek alternative sources of income.

The growing centrality of digital learning has intensified these financial pressures. Participation in online academic environments requires reliable internet access and consistent data bundles, costs that remain prohibitive for many students. As a result, disparities in digital access reinforce existing inequalities within the student population, further complicating the learning experience.

Hustling as a Structural Survival Strategy

Student hustling within Kenyan universities manifests in diverse and evolving forms. Some students operate small-scale businesses within and around campus, selling clothing, food items, and essential goods. Others participate in the digital economy through freelance writing, graphic design, social media management, and online marketing. Platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram have become critical spaces for student entrepreneurship and economic engagement.

However, it is important to resist romanticized interpretations of these practices. While they undoubtedly reflect creativity and initiative, they are fundamentally responses to structural economic pressures. Students engage in hustling not out of preference, but out of necessity.

This phenomenon resonates with Bourdieu's conceptualization of economic capital as a determinant of opportunity. Students with limited financial resources are compelled to develop compensatory strategies, often at the expense of their time, energy, and academic

focus. Hustling thus becomes embedded within broader processes of negotiating inequality and socio-economic marginalization.

Impact on Learning and Academic Experience

The proliferation of hustling practices carries significant implications for the quality and nature of learning. From a Vygotskian perspective, effective learning occurs within supportive and collaborative environments that facilitate cognitive development. Persistent financial stress, however, disrupts these conditions and undermines students' ability to engage meaningfully with academic work.

Students preoccupied with financial concerns often experience reduced concentration, limited participation, and diminished engagement with course material. Time that might otherwise be devoted to study is redirected toward income-generating activities, creating a tension between academic aspirations and immediate survival needs.

Freire's conception of education as a humanizing and emancipatory process is similarly challenged. Rather than experiencing education as transformative, students may come to perceive it as an additional burden, one that must be managed alongside pressing economic demands.

As a result, academic performance may decline, not due to lack of ability, but because of structurally imposed constraints. The erosion of conducive learning environments ultimately compromises the broader educational mission of the university.

Uncertainty and the Question of Graduate Employability

Another key factor driving student hustling is the widespread uncertainty surrounding post-graduation employment. In Kenya, the expansion of higher education has significantly increased the number of graduates without a corresponding growth in job opportunities, producing an increasingly competitive labour market.

Students are acutely aware of these dynamics and often adopt proactive strategies to mitigate future risks. Rather than relying solely on academic qualifications, they begin cultivating alternative income streams while still in university. In this sense, hustling functions as a form of anticipatory adaptation to an uncertain future.

This reality raises important questions about the value and purpose of higher education. While a university degree remains significant, its ability to guarantee stable employment has diminished. Consequently, students may begin to reassess the role of education within their life trajectories, leading to a shift in priorities and expectations.

Emotional and Psychological Dimensions

Beyond its economic and academic implications, student hustling carries profound emotional and psychological consequences. The constant balancing of multiple responsibilities often results in stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Students frequently experience a sense of overwhelm as they attempt to meet both academic and financial demands. When their efforts do not yield immediate or sustainable

outcomes, this can lead to frustration, exhaustion, and, in some cases, disengagement from academic life.

Such responses should not be interpreted as a lack of commitment, but rather as adaptive strategies in the face of structural constraints. The psychological burden of hustling underscores the need to view student experiences through a more holistic and empathetic lens.

BEYOND SURVIVAL

Student hustling within Kenyan universities should be understood not merely as an expression of individual resilience or ingenuity, but as a structural consequence of neoliberal transformations in higher education. While hustling demonstrates adaptability and resourcefulness, it simultaneously exposes systemic inadequacies that undermine the core purpose of the university.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive rethinking of policy frameworks and institutional practices. This includes strengthening financial support systems, reducing the cost burden of education, and fostering learning environments that are genuinely inclusive and supportive.

Universities should not function as spaces where students are forced to choose between intellectual engagement and economic survival. Rather, they should cultivate conditions that enable students to pursue knowledge, critical inquiry, and personal development without the constant pressure of sustaining parallel economic livelihoods.

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