



KENYA

‘Academic writers’ set to lose lucrative global market

Gilbert Nakweya 19 April 2019

Recent measures taken by the United Kingdom government to stamp out the use of essay mills by its students come as a blow to thousands of Kenyan university students and graduates who rely on contract academic writing as a major source of income.

Kenya is an international “hotspot” of individuals enabling contract cheating, according to **Dr Thomas Lancaster**, an integrity expert and higher education professional at Imperial College London. A hotspot is an international location with essay mill companies and individual writers keen to make money by helping other people to cheat.

In a paper published in the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* last year, Lancaster said the majority of writers for contract cheating companies were based in Kenya. He said revenue calculations indicate a price of US\$31.73 per 1,000 words, which is below the cost of traditional essay mills, but show that 96 providers were able to generate around US\$270,000 of essay-writing business between them.

Unemployment

Because of high levels of unemployment in Kenya, many graduates have resorted to what is referred to as 'academic writing' as an employment opportunity and a primary source of income. In addition to online advertisements, it is common to see signposts on the streets of major towns, especially the capital Nairobi, advertising the writing of term papers, theses, research projects and research proposals.

While local universities obviously prohibit academic cheating, there is no law prohibiting Kenyans from engaging in the practice for students in other countries.

James Mutua (not his real name) holds a degree in telecommunication and information engineering from Dedan Kimathi University of Technology. He is what Kenyans call an 'academic writer', having ventured into the field 10 years ago while still a student.

In an exclusive interview with *University World News*, Mutua said tough economic times coupled with need to pay for his university tuition and upkeep prompted him to venture into academic writing.

After graduating, he could not find a job.

“After graduation, there was no employment and I had to continue academic writing to make ends meet,” Mutua explains.

To get into the system, Mutua said one starts by learning simple writing and formatting skills, then writes for established academic writers for some time. Thereafter one can own an academic writing account.

Widespread practice

Mutua described the practice among his peers as widespread.

“While I was on campus, three quarters of my classmates were practising academic writing for university students mostly in the United States and the UK,” said Mutua, adding that today he has a circle of over 40 friends who are into essay-writing as full-time employment.

Mutua owns an academic essay-writing account and has a circle of over 10 students and graduates that he sub-contracts to write assignments when he is overwhelmed. The students used here, he says, are usually fresh graduates and university students who take as little as US\$50 per assignment.

Although the proceeds from the venture are dependent on demand, on average Mutua makes between KES50,000 (approximately US\$500) and over KES200,000 (approximately US\$2,000) per month.

Conceding that the UK ban would help improve integrity and honesty in the UK education system, Mutua said UK students and those elsewhere should not submit the essays as their own work but use them as revision material and guidelines to write their own essays.

Either way, the end result would be an adverse effect on jobless Kenyan youth, he said.

If the UK and other countries such as the US manage to ban these services totally, Mutua says that it will be a economically devastating for many unemployed graduates in Kenya. “However, we are likely to venture into other freelance services like writing business plans, company profiles or providing technical services to companies that need them online,” said Mutua.

Kenya has a youthful population with a high unemployment rate. In October last year, MP Anthony Oluoch put **overall unemployment** among Kenyan youth at 55%.

‘Providing a valuable service’

Quoting research done in Kenya by Chloe Walker, Lancaster said in his blog that contrary to in the West, contract-writing has a “legitimate feel” in Kenya. “That is, the participants think of their jobs as providing a service of value, not as helping people to cheat. They see

themselves as working as academic writers,” he wrote.

In the United States and the UK in particular, the practice is considered deeply unethical and there are concerns it will have damaging effects on the quality of higher education. Earlier this year, in response to mounting pressure from vice-chancellors, UK Education Secretary Damian Hinds called on tech firms to block payments and stop airing adverts for essay mills helping students.

In response to pressure, Google and YouTube have taken down adverts and promotional content for some of the essay mills, and payments company PayPal – the most popular method of processing payments for essay mills and academic contract-writers – indicated it was going to withdraw services from essay-writing firms selling to university students.

According to UK media reports, Hinds also urged university students to report their colleagues who sought the services of essay-writers from abroad, warning of dire consequences.

Mutua said that he had not yet received any notification from PayPal, which he also uses, but said he will seek alternative methods of payment as there is no legal framework in the country that outlaws essay-writing for foreign students at a fee.

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