Hostels turned into business outlets

By Noelina Nabwire and Mugure Kihika

Computer bureaus. Tuckshops littered with food-stuffs. Barber shops and saloons. These are permanent features at the entrance of every hall of residence at the University of Nairobi's Main campus.

Upon entering the halls of residence, one is left wondering whether it is a business or a learning institution. So strategically placed are the businesses that one cannot miss their presence. Their services range from typing and printing to hair styling and shaving.

Businesses have changed the serenity of the institution. It is surprising that students can cope with both business management and studies at the same time.

Business enterprises began in 1999 following the demolition of shacks and other kiosks by city council and provincial administration. The kiosks were both a security risk and a health hazard. Alternatives had to be found to cater for what the kiosks had been providing - supplying students' basic items. This saw the introduction of tuckshops and other business ventures.

The Customer Relations Officer, Mr Fred Kihika, says that businesses were also seen as a way of helping needy students generate money for fees and upkeep. He added that every hall has a tuckshop and a pool table.

"One wonders whether a poor student who cannot afford Shs 3,000 accommodation fee per semester can afford 30,000 to start a shop?" poses Olanch.

He prefers the work study programme, saying that it truly identifies needy students and has applied success fully.

Rent charged for tuckshops, barber shops and pool tables range from Shs 2,500 - 3,000, while computer bureaus and saloons go for Kshs 7,000.

There are more than 42 halls in the entire University. Some have more than two shops and pool tables depending on the student population. The Students Welfare Authority (SWA), which leases the businesses, earns more than Kshs 200,000 per month in rent.

Students, most of whom rely on the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB), term business enterprises as a scourge. They cite affordability as the main reason why they prefer services within campus. "My final year project is over 200 pages, you do not expect me to pay around ten thousand, the amount charged by computer operators in town," says Emicre Murambi, a final year sociologist student. She says that she pays a third of the amount at the university campuses.

Concurring with Ms Murambi, Ms Kanyi says that she cannot afford the high costs charged by saloons in town and prefers the cheaper ones at the university. "Salons at Anniversary Towers, the nearest to campus charge triple the amount charged at the university." She adds: "In fact such saloons are extra-ordinary and enemies of development. How can one expect a student to afford five hundred shillings for treatment?"

Saying that the services are within their reach and convenient, some students threaten that closure of such ventures are likely to lead to a rise. "I have a tight work schedule. I have classes from 9.00 a.m to 5.00 p.m., the only time I have for my thesis is at night," says a masters student at the university who preferred anonymity. He says that with these facilities at his disposal, he can work at any time of the night including weekends.

While students like Kanyi and Murambi benefit as customers, others are suppliers. Mr Mugo, an MSc student at Chiromo campus, says he has been in the business for two years now. He runs a computer bureau at the Main Campus, where he offers typing, printing, scanning, telephone, photocopy and e-mail services. "I saw the opportunity after I realised that students had to go all the way to town to print their work where the rates are very expensive."

The ventures not only benefit students but also non-students as they offer employment opportunities. Mugo, for instance, has employed five people who manage his business. Asked why he ventured into business rather than concentrating on studies, he said that he is a business minded person and was just looking for a viable opportunity. He had been in business before, running a quarry, an inheritance from his father.

"Beauticians have not been left behind. Students do not have to go outside the campus to get some of these services. "We only charge Kshs 180 for treatment as compared to Kshs 250 to 500 in town," says Brenda, a beautician at the Eye on Style Beauty Parlour, located in the women's hall.

Services offered in the saloon range from relaxing, treatment, facials, pedicure, manicure, and barbering. There are three employees at the salon who are paid between Shs 5,000 and 8,000 per month. Tailoring has also curved its niche. The services are indeed cheap. What they are charging is anything to go by. Charges for lady skirt and trouser suits range from Shs 400 to Shs 1,300.

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