

# Electricity bills skyrocket as students opt to cook in halls

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**The University of Nairobi is spending more than Shs 6.0 million per month in electricity bills, due to massive cooking in the halls of residence.**

The Director of the Students Welfare Authority (SWA), Dr. Maurice Awiti, says the University is struggling to meet the high bills. Awiti confirmed that the university has reached an understanding with the Kenya Power and Lighting Company to settle the bills in instalments.

The director warns that cooking in the halls of residence is a disaster in waiting, unless it is controlled or stopped altogether. He adds that as a deterrent, the university is taking disciplinary measures against students involved in the practice. Students whose cooking activities have caused fires are either denied accommodation or expelled.

The *Anvil* has established that more than 85 per cent of the students in the Main Campus, cook in their rooms. The

University is spending huge sums of money in electricity and water bills. Maintenance costs have gone up following escalated destruction of sockets and circuit breakers.

The power rating at the halls is inadequate for cooking. Mr. Oluoch says that the use of cooking gadgets has resulted in frequent power blackouts caused by overloading.

The situation is worsened by overcrowding at the halls of residence. A room meant for one person now accommodates two to three people, who all use the same power supply output.

Cooking is done under unhygienic conditions. The rooms are poorly ventilated. Fire outbreaks are likely and no safety measures have been put in place. There are no visible fire extinguishers in the halls while most halls have one entrance which also serves as the exit. Last year, six serious fire accidents were reported in various halls of residence. Two rooms in Hall Nine were completely burnt after a student left a heater on and went to class.

In February last year at Kikuyu Campus Pioneer Hall, cooking gadgets left unattended caused the destruction of two rooms. Property worth over Shs100,000 was also destroyed.

More problems continue to bedevil the institution due to the introduction of the cost cutting measures.

A halls assistant who has been at the university for more than 35 years equates the halls with slums. He says that cooking in the halls is responsible for the deplorable conditions in the hostels. The situation is worsened by retrenchment. Some halls officers have to take charge of more than three halls.

The Customer Relations Officer at the Students Welfare Authority, Mr. Fred Oluoch, says that it is impossible to keep the hostels clean. The students dirty the bathrooms with potato peelings, sukuma wiki stalks and other food remnants as soon as they are cleaned.

Mr. Oluoch maintains that every hall has fire extinguishers kept in the custodian's office. He adds that each hall has a

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# Power bills skyrocket

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water hydrant to fight fires but accused the students of using the water for other purposes.

He said such fires have also occurred at Lower Kabete Campus and at Stella Awinja hostel with devastating effects. The entire wiring system of Hall Five had to be redone in 1998. This was due to the high power consumption of the cooking apparatus which they were not designed for.

Halls with emergency exits are few while those in existence are used as stores. The staircase of an emergency exit in Hall Four is strewn with dilapidated chairs, beds, unused mattresses and pillows making it impassable in case of a fire outbreak.

Mr. Oluoch adds that SWA has started a disaster preparedness unit that trains staff and students in disaster management. He says the university trained halls officers, custodians and four students per hall in 1998. He, however, regrets that most of them have left the university.

Students on their part have come up with cost cutting measures for survival. They use all kinds of gadgets for cooking which are cheaper but have high power consumption rates.

They view cooking as a necessary evil that has to be endured. Though they acknowledge that cooking is illegal, they hasten to add that it was their only option. Citing affordability, quality and convenience, students maintain that cooking is there to stay, unless the administration scraps the pay-as-you-eat cafeteria system.

Most students depend on the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) for sustenance. The loans given, however, do not reflect current economic hardships.

Susan, an Economics first year student, says that it is impossible to survive on the paltry Shs 20,000 she gets from HELB. From this she has to tuition and accommodation fees, among others, leaving her with about Shs 6,000 for subsistence for the whole academic year.

Students interviewed say hard economic times have interfered with their studies as one cannot learn on an empty stomach. Kimanthi, a Second Year Civil Engineering student says that his workload is too heavy to allow him to cook. He is lucky to have been awarded Shs 42,000. This is supplemented by his parents and a business he runs. He spends Shs 120 per day for meals, which is far above an average of Shs 50 for most students.

Mr. Oluoch said that although the disparity in the amounts given contributes to the problem, cooking is due to financial mismanagement by students.

He is dismayed that cooking in the halls of residence has caused a lot of damage. Apart from the added costs in plumbing, sockets and circuit breakers replacement.

Cooking has also had its toll on the cafeteria services at the university. Few students eat from the messes. This has led to the closure of the Students Centre cafeteria. Records at Mamlaka Catering Unit, for instance, indicate that only an average of 650 students take meals there in a day. This number is negligible considering the student population.