

WORKING PAPERS

NAIROBI SHADOW ACADEMY: A STUDY OF CONTRACT CHEATERS (ACADEMIC WRITERS) IN KENYA

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Abstract: In Kenya, labour market trends for university students and recent graduates are bleak as youth employment stands at 35%. To help counteract this, the Kenyan government has promoted digital labour as a viable employment option, particularly for young people. One form of labour which has become popular is contract cheating, or 'academic writing' as it is commonly known in the country. Estimates suggest there may be upward of 20,000 writers in Kenya, however, little is known about their lives, views, motivations or writing processes.

This study addresses this gap in knowledge. It comprises a mixed method design, combining elements of a traditional ethnographic approach, with digital methodologies. Over 200 writers were surveyed using an online survey, and more than 20 were interviewed using Whatsapp chat, Skype and face-to-face interviews. The writers were recruited via snowball sampling, as well as through Facebook and Instagram advertisements. The study is particularly interested in the ways in which their livelihoods are intertwined in this 'blind-spot' of global education, the new digital labour economy and youth unemployment in Kenya.

Preliminary findings indicate a demographic profile of young university students or recent graduates, with primarily economic motivations for writing such that ethical questions were largely overlooked. Further, academic writing was generally perceived as a transitory form of employment which served as a supplement or temporary substitute for formal employment. Moreover, the writers reported using mainly 'patchwork' processes for their writing, and research comprised basic Google searches for keywords relating to the assignment.

This paper gives much needed insight into the 'supply' end of contract cheating. It offers an opportunity to understand the industry through the eyes of the Kenyan writers who help facilitate this trade.

Key words: contract cheating, plagiarism, academic writing, digital labour, digital economy, Kenya, youth unemployment, higher education

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