

Youth unemployment

UNEMPLOYMENT
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Birungi's campus cash model tackles unemployment early

Every year, thousands of students complete Advanced Level and face a long waiting period before joining University.

During this "transition gap," students often have limited structured engagement or income opportunities.

From an economics perspective, this is a period of underutilised human capital, where young people's skills and potential lie idle, representing both personal opportunity cost and a broader loss in economic productivity.

This gap inspired Deborah Birungi to formalise the Campus Cash Skills Programme, a structured initiative targeting Senior Six leavers with practical, income-generating skills.

The programme, streamlined last year under the Population and Social Development Institute (PSDI), has already trained more than 45 students, keeping cohorts small to ensure hands-on, mentorship-driven approach.

Participants acquire digital and professional skills such as academic typing, editing, transcription, social media management, and basic graphic design.

"These are competencies that are immediately marketable," Birungi says. Graduates currently earn between Shs50,000 and Shs200,000 per month, depending on commitment and the mix of services offered.

Some work in the institute's research department, others in digital marketing ventures, and several have transitioned from volunteer roles into paid university engagements.

"University students already have some exposure and networks. Senior Six leavers are overlooked, yet it is the most critical transition stage. If you intervene early, you can shape their direction," Birungi explains.

"Most young people leave school with academic knowledge but without practical skills valued in the job market.

"We saw gaps in communication, digital literacy, professional discipline and problem-solving. Many also don't understand how to earn through freelancing or digital services," she says.

Addressing these gaps early reduces



Deborah Birungi, the founder of the Campus Cash Skills Programme. PHOTO/ RONAH NAHABWE

relevant and payable," she notes.

Participants are trained in different areas. "They can combine services, for example editing and digital marketing, which increases their earning potential."

Earning pathways

Birungi explains that the programme follows three main earning pathways. First, students are connected to businesses which need services such as social media management or digital tasks through existing partnerships.

Secondly, those interested in research support are linked to postgraduate researchers for editing and transcription work.

Third, students are guided to start small ventures, learning client management and receiving at least one initial client, after which they are mentored on growing their work.

The programme does not take any commission from client earnings.

Out of 45 students trained so far, five are in the research department, five run digital marketing ventures, twenty have volunteer roles at universities, and about eight have moved into paid positions.

Birungi adds that the programme has a subsidised participation model with two tiers: Shs400,000 covers training and support to start a first venture, while Shs800,000 adds a year of univer-

sity mentorship and client connections.

Partnerships and sponsors help reduce costs for some students, aiming for a mix of self-sustaining support rather than relying on tuition or donations.

"Space is a major constraint. With 50 to 60 students needing access to computers and practical sessions, infrastructure is limited. Funding is another challenge. We would like to reduce the cost further to support students from financially unstable backgrounds. We also encounter varying levels of digital literacy—some students start from zero—though we provide additional support where necessary," she explains.

Scaling nationally would require partnerships with schools, district education offices, youth-focused institutions, SMEs, and government integration into youth employment frameworks.

"The most effective way to reach Senior Six leavers is through existing systems. In terms of capital, the model is not extremely high-cost, but it would require investment in training hubs, digital tools and strong mentoring systems to track outcomes," she adds.

Birungi frames the challenge in both economic and social terms.

"Many students choose university courses without proper guidance. Someone meets a neighbour who recommends a course and they take it. We help them align interests with academic choices before campus. We want Senior Six leavers to transition into adulthood with practical skills and real income pathways. With the right support, youth can become productive much earlier than we assume," she says.

The labour market makes such interventions urgent.

According to the 2024 Uganda Bureau of Statistics data, 16.1 percent of young people aged 18–30 are unemployed, and about 42.6 percent of those aged 15–24 are NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training).

Many school leavers struggle to find jobs or continue their studies, which can lead to poverty, frustration, and in urban areas, higher risks of crime.

Programmes like Campus Cash aim to turn this transition period into an opportunity, helping youth build practical skills, generate income, and strengthen human capital—benefiting both individuals and society.

Skills

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the opportunity cost of idle time, transforming a potentially unproductive year into one of skill-building and income generation.

Birungi focuses on campus-friendly and market-relevant skills. These include academic typing, professional editing and documentation, transcription, social media management, and basic graphic design.

"These are skills students use for their coursework but can also monetise. They cut across professions, whether someone becomes a doctor, engineer, sociologist or artist, these skills remain