# The Duality of Student Hustle: Enterprise, Survival and Meaningful Choice

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## Abstract

Student hustle presents a critical dilemma for South African higher education: while income-generating activities may expand students' entrepreneurial capabilities and support their educational needs, the necessity to earn can also expose socio-economic inequalities that constrain meaningful academic participation. Drawing on scholarship concerning student hardship, informal livelihoods, time poverty and the Capability Approach, I argue that student hustle should be understood through both its developmental possibilities and the circumstances that make it necessary. Using institutional documents from the University of the Free State (UFS) and the University of Venda (UNIVEN), I examine how universities promote entrepreneurship while navigating their responsibilities for student welfare, academic participation and campus governance. UFS's business incubator and student market, alongside UNIVEN's rapid incubation centre, illustrate structured support; residence rules highlight equally legitimate responsibilities for shared spaces and safety. Rather than assuming unequal institutional treatment, I question whether existing support arrangements adequately accommodate students whose income-generating activities emerge outside formal entrepreneurship programmes. I argue that transformative governance requires balancing entrepreneurial opportunity, financial necessity and proportionate regulation without romanticising student hardship or compromising academic responsibilities. Ultimately, higher education transformation should be judged not merely by the enterprises universities recognise, but by whether students have meaningful opportunities to pursue livelihoods without sacrificing their education.

**Keywords:** student hustle; entrepreneurial agency; student livelihoods; higher education transformation; academic participation; university governance

Education as Change
Volume 30 | 2026 | #23667 | 7 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/23667
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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## Introduction

Student entrepreneurship exposes a critical tension in South African higher education transformation: While universities promote entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic empowerment, some students undertake income-generating activities out of financial necessity, potentially compromising their academic participation. I argue that this duality requires universities to reconsider how entrepreneurial opportunities are promoted, recognised and regulated without overlooking the unequal circumstances that shape students' choices. Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE), a national university-sector initiative, supports entrepreneurial learning and student ventures (EDHE 2025). Such efforts are valuable. Yet Hlatshwayo (2022) cautions that market-oriented approaches to universities can leave structural inequality unresolved. In a survey of 1,612 first-year students at one South African university, 23% experienced food insecurity with hunger, which was associated with poorer academic progression (Wagner, Kaneli, and Masango 2021). This establishes neither the prevalence of hustling nor its effects. It shows, however, why material conditions cannot be separated from educational participation. I use "student hustle" for income-generating work undertaken alongside study: selling food, providing hairdressing or laundry services, paid tutoring, digital freelancing or running a venture. However, not every paid activity amounts to business ownership, and necessity and opportunity can coexist. Thieme (2018) locates hustling within uncertain livelihoods; Forster-Holt (2021) shows how small student ventures can create learning opportunities. Using publicly available materials from the University of the Free State (UFS) and University of Venda (UNIVEN), I examine whose activities become visible as enterprise when earning conflicts with learning, and what fair governance might demand.

## Entrepreneurship Support and Its Unanswered Questions

At UFS, CartZA, a student-founded app for ordering and delivering food, began with founder financing before accessing the UFS Business Incubator's mentoring, idea validation and business-development support (UFS 2026a). The venture also participated in the Enactus South Africa National Exposition. Enactus supports student-led projects and enterprises addressing social and environmental challenges (Ndlovu and Lefera 2024). CartZA illustrates how an initiative can develop into a recognised venture without having begun with extensive resources. UFS's August 2026 Student Entrepreneur Market Day offered another practical route: the incubator managed marketing and logistics while student vendors engaged customers (UFS 2026b). This is meaningful support, though a one-day market cannot, by itself, establish sustained trading opportunities. However, it can provide the sense of the what and how students engage in their daily hustle/entrepreneurial opportunities.

UNIVEN offers a different institutional model. Its Directorate of Community Engagement, Entrepreneurship, Inclusive Innovation and Commercialisation links entrepreneurship with community development, while the Centre for Entrepreneurship

and Rapid Incubation reports supporting 29 student ventures in 2025/2026 (UNIVEN 2026). Unlike UFS's market day, the figure reflects support for ventures, not necessarily opportunities for daily subsistence trading. Both initiatives deserve recognition. Yet neither tells us whether a student selling snacks or providing hairdressing services mainly to meet study costs can easily access institutional support. That question, rather than an assumption of exclusion, frames the policy tension.

At UNIVEN, entrepreneurship support also serves community-based economic development; supporting students to strengthen community ventures is not equivalent to supporting their own day-to-day livelihoods. Its published 2012 residence rules require permission for trading and restrict unsuitable food preparation in shared residential space (UNIVEN 2012). Their current enforcement has not been established, and such rules can reasonably protect safety, hygiene and other students' right to study. The policy question is whether students have understandable, affordable alternatives when a particular activity cannot be accommodated. Recognition and regulation need not conflict; their combined effect on students with different resources, objectives and academic obligations deserves closer scrutiny.

Institutional publicity is also an incomplete measure of whose livelihoods are improved. A delivery platform can create jobs for students who are not its founders; those workers may obtain income without ownership, mentorship or a share in business decisions. Likewise, incubation may offer practical learning without guaranteeing a durable livelihood for every participant. None of this diminishes the ventures' achievements. It asks universities to distinguish between enterprise visibility, student employment, educational learning and sustained income rather than presenting them as interchangeable outcomes. Who benefits, and in which way, should be part of the institutional story.

## When Income Supports Study, and When it Competes with it

The value of hustle cannot be inferred from revenue alone. A student earning enough for transport or data may be better able to attend class and use digital learning platforms. A student operating a food stall until late at night may secure that same income at the expense of reading, sleep and assessment preparation. These are plausible examples, not observed cases at UFS or UNIVEN. Research on time poverty shows why the availability of hours on a timetable is not equivalent to predictable time for academic work (Wladis, Hachey, and Conway 2023). It does not measure the effects of campus micro-trading specifically. The distinction matters when participation is presented as evidence of developmental success. Forster-Holt (2021) demonstrates the pedagogical possibilities of student side hustles, but her structured learning context should not be generalised to every student selling under financial pressure. A student who acquires pricing and negotiation skills while struggling to afford meals may gain capabilities without enjoying a genuine choice about working. Conversely, assuming that every low-income student vendor is merely a victim of poverty denies the initiative, ambition and

expertise students may exercise. What matters is not whether the activity appears entrepreneurial, but whether students can reasonably choose its intensity and pursue their studies alongside it.

Sen's (1999) capability approach helps sharpen this point: Having an observable activity is not the same as having substantive freedom to choose it. My proposed transformation test is two-sided. Does enterprise widen the student's opportunities to learn and earn? Would access to food, secure funding and protected study time allow that student to choose differently? The first question recognises enterprise as potentially enabling; the second prevents institutions from treating ingenuity as a substitute for material support. Thus, universities should nurture ventures without making entrepreneurship an unofficial condition of educational survival.

This reading resists a simple division between "needy traders" and "promising entrepreneurs". Some students may need immediate food assistance and mentoring; others may reject incubation because a modest service already meets their goals. A compulsory transition from informal work to a growth-oriented start-up would reproduce the very problem it claims to solve: Institutional objectives would displace what students themselves value. Equally, long-term reliance on emergency assistance without accessible enterprise opportunities could constrain initiative. The appropriate response begins with students' circumstances and aspirations, not with a single institutional definition of success.

## Governance Must Be Supportive, But Not Permissive by Default

Universities also owe duties to students who do not trade. Residence rooms, kitchens and corridors are shared educational spaces, not unlimited commercial premises. UFS's junior residence conditions address visitors, hazards, disturbance and designated cooking facilities (UFS 2026c). A student arranging online deliveries from an authorised food outlet and another commercially preparing meals in a shared residence kitchen pose different demands on safety, infrastructure and neighbours. Financial necessity makes the student's circumstances understandable; it does not make the risks disappear. Nor should an authorised enterprise automatically receive preference over a roommate's quiet study environment.

The opposite response, a blanket refusal without explanation or alternative may also be counterproductive. It can make livelihood activity less visible to welfare services and harder to govern. I favour a narrow, workable pathway rather than an entitlement to trade anywhere: accessible information about permitted activities; written, risk-based conditions for food, equipment and customer access; affordable approved spaces where feasible; reasons for refusals; and referral either to hardship assistance or voluntary enterprise support. A student selling sealed snacks might qualify for a designated stall, whereas unsafe cooking could be refused with an explanation of approved alternatives. These are proposed procedures, not claims about current practice. The practical

objections should not be minimised. Who pays for cleaning and supervision? Would new stalls breach existing catering contracts or disadvantage established vendors? How are scarce sites allocated without rewarding social connections? Even a formally equal application process can exclude a student unable to pay fees or prepare business documents. I would judge a pilot less by registrations and photographs than by accessible entry criteria, complaints and safety records, student study time experiences, and whether less-resourced applicants could participate. Student traders, non-trading peers, residence personnel, and campus vendors should all be involved in that assessment.

An accessible process must also avoid turning support into intrusive surveillance. Students should not have to disclose household hardship to every official merely to ask where they may sell a lawful product. Needs-based referral should be voluntary and confidential; risk assessment should concentrate on the activity and site. Otherwise, a policy framed as inclusion could stigmatise the very students it intends to assist. Universities should publish basic conditions for approval and evaluate who is refused, without collecting more personal information than necessary. Some boundaries should remain firm. Paid design or lawful tutoring need not threaten academic integrity; writing assessed work for another student does. The response to contract cheating should be clear prohibition and appropriate educational support, not its rebranding as entrepreneurship (Lubinga, Ramnarain, and Tonkin 2023). A proportionate approach distinguishes economically valuable activity from conduct that compromises another student's assessment. The aim is not to remove regulation, but to ensure its justification and consequences are intelligible.

## Conclusion

The duality of student hustle lies neither in a heroic story of self-reliance nor in an assumption that informal trading is institutional deviance. Income generation may create skills and sustain participation, but its necessity can also reveal the restricted choices through which students navigate university. CartZA, the UFS student market and UNIVEN's entrepreneurship support demonstrate real opportunities; residence rules demonstrate real competing obligations. Neither proves discriminatory treatment. What they place on the transformation agenda is the quality of the route between need, initiative and support. I argue that universities should ask not only how many student enterprises they celebrate, but who can reach support, what academic sacrifices earning requires, and whether safety rules are applied transparently. The task is to expand meaningful choices while protecting shared educational rights. A university should not expect students to hustle to survive, but neither should it overlook what students can build when they choose to do so.

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