

Why graduates are choosing tiktok, betting and online gigs

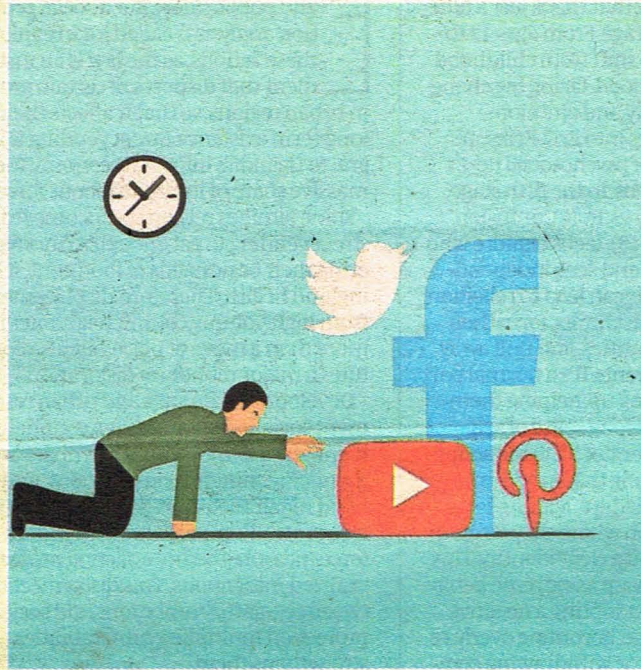
When the National Resistance Movement came to power in 1986 under President Museveni, Uganda's higher education landscape was small and elite. Makerere University dominated the academic space. University education was limited to a relatively small segment of the population, and for many graduates, employment contracts followed shortly after graduation.

Four decades later, the landscape has changed dramatically. As of 2026, Uganda has over 40 public and private universities. Each year, thousands of graduates enter the job market, but the economy has not expanded fast enough to absorb them. Formal jobs are not commensurate with the number of graduates, leaving a growing population of educated yet underemployed youth in a harsh labour market.

The shift from scarcity to surplus in higher education was hailed as progress, with wider access and more families sending children to university. However, university expansion was not matched by industrial growth or private sector absorption. The imbalance is visible in Kampala and other urban centres, where graduates endlessly search for scarce opportunities.

In a limited job market, competition has intensified. Many young Ugandans quietly argue that connections matter more than qualifications. Securing employment in certain sectors is widely perceived to favour those with government ties or the financial ability to navigate corrupt systems. For those without such advantages, the path narrows considerably.

Some graduates turn to entrepreneurship, launching retail shops, online boutiques, delivery ventures and tech start-ups.



However, a fragile business environment marked by high taxes, limited credit, economic instability and weak policy support forces many to collapse within a year. Survival requires resilience and capital that most young entrepreneurs lack.

Faced with shrinking formal employment and unstable entrepreneurship, a growing number of graduates have turned to what has become known as the side-hustle economy. TikTok content creation, sports betting and online freelancing are no longer fringe activities. They are mainstream survival strategies.

TikTok, in particular, has transformed into an informal labour market. Young Ugandans produce comedy skits, political commentary, dance videos and lifestyle content in hopes of monetising views and brand endorsements. For some, content creation provides modest but consistent income. For many others, it offers exposure but lit-

tle financial stability.

Sports betting shops, once scattered sparsely across towns, now dot nearly every trading centre. University graduates line up alongside casual labourers, hoping that statistical predictions or luck might supplement dwindling income. The betting industry feeds on aspiration and desperation in equal measure. While a few win, the majority cycle through losses that deepen financial insecurity.

Online gigs, including remote data entry, digital marketing and freelance design, offer another avenue. The global digital economy promises borderless opportunity, but access depends on reliable internet, specialised skills and international payment systems. Competition is global, not local. Ugandan graduates find themselves bidding against freelancers from across continents, often driving prices down to unsustainable levels.

The sustainability of the

side-hustle economy is uncertain. Content income fluctuates with algorithms, betting offers no long-term security, and online gigs lack social protection or career growth. A generation that invested years in education now survives on precarious income streams.

Recently, President Museveni, together with his daughter Natasha Karugire, hosted a meeting with content creators led by Isaac Katende, popularly known as Kasuku. At the gathering, a pledge of Shs5 billion in government support for content creators was announced. The gesture signalled official recognition of the digital economy's growing influence.

However, such pledges, while welcome, address symptoms rather than structural causes. Financial envelopes and temporary grants may provide short-term relief, but they do not resolve the underlying mismatch between education output and job creation. Without broader economic reforms, industrial expansion and transparent employment systems, the cycle is likely to continue.

Uganda's young population remains one of its greatest assets. The energy driving TikTok channels, online platforms and small enterprises reflects creativity and resilience however creativity alone cannot substitute for comprehensive economic planning.

The rise of the side-hustle generation is both a testament to adaptability and a warning sign. It highlights ambition constrained by limited opportunity. As universities continue to graduate thousands each year, the country faces a defining challenge: transforming education into sustainable employment rather than leaving a generation to hustle indefinitely in search of stability.

Edward Kazibwe,
political analyst