

## COVID -19 PANDEMIC AND NEO-LIBERAL UNIVERSITY: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR PLATFORM PEDAGOGY IN NIGERIA

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**Citation:** Olusegun Oladeinde (2022) COVID -19 Pandemic and Neo-liberal University: Implications and Challenges for Platform Pedagogy in Nigeria, *International Journal of Developing and Emerging Economies*, Vol.10, No.1, pp.54-64

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**ABSTRACT:** *As countries all over the world continue to grapple with devastating impacts and experience of COVID-19 Pandemic, even with the current variants of the disease, all aspects of livelihood and socio-economic activities of the people are affected. Even as countries reintroduced lockdown and other risk-mitigating measures, post-pandemic measures continue to impact on lives of the people. In the ensuing context, world of work and work activities, both at formal and informal levels are affected. Teaching and learning, and other academic work in the universities system are also affected. For the universities' systems, work activities such as teaching, learning and conduct of other academic work are increasingly being "redirected" and "pivoted" on digital technology. While some semblance of on-line academic work may have been introduced, broadly, in the management of higher education before now, sufficient and deliberate institutional policy frameworks are just evolving in the universities in Nigeria to support digital learning. As the current situations of "migration" to on-line academic works are largely characterized with "panicky measures" amidst the pandemic, necessities for digital skills, improved infrastructure, and equity access are equally needed to impact on Higher Education policy frameworks. However, this remains a challenge in contemporary management of universities systems in Nigeria. This paper critically explores the implications and challenges of on- line learning and teaching in the universities. It is argued that the emblematic character and dimensions of neo-liberal policy framing, generally, further make sustainable migration to on-line academic work problematic in the universities. In utilizing Gramsci's hegemonic analysis, it is further demonstrated in the paper that, as part of emblematic character of digital technology, as influenced by neo-liberal policy framing, there has been a phenomenal rise in digital inequalities, broadly; limiting equal access to digital technology and higher education in Nigeria.*

**KEYWORDS:** neo-liberal universities, on-line teaching, digital-divide, hegemony, pandemic

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### INTRODUCTION

With the global outbreak, and spread of COVID-19 pandemic, there has been resultant "restriction measures" on all aspects of socio-economic life of the people. The pandemic has put greater risks

to lives and livelihood; with so much instability on people and institutions. More specifically, educational institutions have been closed down for a long period in Nigeria, making “contact tuitions” near impossible. In response, there has been “massive migration” to on-line teaching and learning in many of the universities. Even though on-line teaching and learning had been on before pandemic, in many of the universities in Sub-Sahara Africa, (Le Grange, 2008) “hybrid model” of face to face seemed more particularly prevalent, amidst the pandemic. As noted by Le Grange (2020), the blended model of continuing face to face with on-line is also characterized by the use of Learning Management System (LMS), by “contact tuitions” to deliver teaching and learning materials.

While many students and lecturers are currently familiar with LMS (Le Grange, 2008), ability to use on-line learning and teaching with less hitches remains a challenge; basic skills level are still a challenge. The pandemic has compelled universities to “partial” migration for remote learning and teaching, with full “expectation of attention” from all stakeholders (Le Grange 2008). Such roles for stakeholders had implied advanced skills on the part of lecturers, of both technical and pedagogical nature, (Le Grange 2004), which also require complementary supports from institutions’ ICTs and basic facilities. Before the pandemic, many universities are already strained by lack of basic infrastructures and skills, and this has been exacerbated by the challenges that came with the pandemic. The ensuing “risk adjustments” and other protocols require lecturers and students to work and receive learning from home, and for many, the enablers such as basic infrastructure, electricity, and internet connectivity may not be available. As such, the pivot to on-line learning and teaching, once again, lay bare the prevailing “digital-divide” that characterized the neo-liberal HE management in Sub-Saharan African countries.

Thus, in the context of current circumstances, occasioned by the pandemic, and as argued by some commentators, such as Davids 2020; Du Prez and Le Grange 2020, effective on line learning and teaching may still be ‘up-hill’ tasks. And what obtains at present could well be described as “emergency remote teaching and learning” (Hudges, More, Lockee, Trust and Blend, 2020, cited in Le Grange, 2020:2). In responding to the challenges, universities in Sub-Saharan African countries are increasingly compelled to increase investments in digital tech. enhance capacities, and infrastructure; even in the context of “dwindling fiscus” from the public authorities and the educational institutions. The logic of neoliberalism has thus caught up with the crisis of pandemic, further accentuated by privatization, deregulation, and the “roll-back of fiscus” from the States and public institutions (Hall, 2016). Consequently, the pivot/migration towards on-line learning and teaching could be expected to be further constrained by the neo-liberal fiscal-policy on HE managements. From neo-liberal normative conceptualization, the emerging era of “digit-tech” in teaching and learning has also been described as “platform pedagogy” ( Le Grange 2020).

### **The Pandemic, Neo-liberal Universities and Platform Pedagogy: Implications for HE Management.**

As noted by Keengwe and Kiold (2010, cited in Le Grange 2020:5), on-line learning, comprising web-based instructions, distributed learning, internet based learning, and cyber learning have now become distinctive features of platform pedagogy. Here, a wide range of teaching and learning are also characterized by “just-in-time knowledge” delivery, just as in other managerial practices in neo-liberal context. The context and dimensions of learning/teaching in the universities are also tied with global imperatives of knowledge-commodification and “massification”, accentuated by “fiscal measures” being adopted globally, by the universities. Amidst this, the forced migration to platform pedagogy has also been accelerated by the pandemic.

In analyzing the emerging trends within neo-liberal universities, Peters (2013) had argued that neo-liberal universities are now put in the service of new global economy, under the conditions of “knowledge capitalism”. And the imperative of knowledge capitalism calls for fiscal measures in managing the universities system. States’ “roll-back” and retrenchment of public policy provisioning in the context of neo-liberal policy framing have also crept into HE management. States are now being compelled to initiate “alternative funding” models, e.g. more enrollment and more students fees. As part of fiscal measures in managing HE, concerns arise around “ownership of intellectual capital” (Le Grange 2020:6), as universities continue to offer cross-border admissions, with offshore and on-line academic delivery. There has also been phenomenal increase in bureaucratization of teaching and research in the universities, leading to commercialization or “patentship” of research outputs. And where platform pedagogy is accelerated with on-line learning and teaching, integrating it with academic labour process portends dire consequences for lived-work experiences of academics.

Apart from “creeping managerialism”, and bureaucratization of HE management, in relation to research, the emergence of platform capitalism has introduced the transformation of knowledge production into scientific networks (Le Grange 2020). Academics are now experiencing “relocation” of academic freedom/power in knowledge production away from the academy to the “market place” (Le Grange 2020). As noted by Le Grange (2020), the “knowledge assemblage” in form of journal articles are now being managed and controlled by multi-million dollar platform-based companies such as Elsevier Reeds (owner of Scopus), large publishing houses such as Taylor and Francis, Springer, e.t.c. Number of referred journal articles published through the platform capitalism has become a measure of academic success and career growth of academics in the university. “Metrically sufficient” and adequate the publications is, the measure of academic growth of academics in neo-liberal universities.

In the emerging dynamics, work intensification in the universities is further accentuated as a consequence of COVID-19 pandemic. As expected, post pandemic imperatives of academic work process will not only expand migration of pedagogy to on-line teaching and learning, but also accelerate the roles of platform capitalism into arena of research and knowledge production, with

embedded implications of “deprofessionalism”, erosion of rights and privileges, insecurity of tenure, as currently being experienced by the academics.

### **Neo-liberal University, Digital Technology and Challenge of Epistemological Access in Nigeria**

As analyzed above, the “fiscal crisis” being experienced by many of the universities, especially in Sub-Saharan countries, has also raised the issues of “affordances” of digital technology, even as emerging challenges of the pandemic further impact on learning and teaching in the universities. How to manage on-line teaching and learning has therefore raised the challenges of abilities and equity in access (Le Grange and Preez Petre 2020). For instance, in Nigeria, the current dimensions of “digital deficits” further exacerbated by COVID-19 have posed the threat to both to “formal and epistemological access”, as they (lecturers and students) struggle to adjust and migrate to new mode of lecture and learning activities.

The pandemic has also led to a situation in which lecturers who prior to the pandemic were used to on-campus, on-site contact teaching had to migrate to remote teaching and learning (Hodges, Moore and Locke 2020). Thus in a situation of emergence remote learning/teaching ( ibid), pedagogical materials were expected to be hurriedly prepared, contingent infrastructure had to be put in place, and ad hoc access developed, both for the students and lecturers. As observed by Le Grange (2020:7), on line learning remains a challenge in Africa as “less than a third of the population currently has access to broad-band connectivity”. Deficits in access to internet and other ICTs have been identified to undermine the quality of on-line teaching and learning amidst the pandemic. Also, effective and sufficient participation of learners and teachers, quality of delivery have been affected by poor ICT infrastructures. According to Hodges et al. (2020), such “new-turn” to online modes is bound to potentially mar the quality of delivery. Improvised, emergency solutions could ultimately affect the great expectations of on line learning and teaching in the context of neo-liberal HE management and the pandemic.

The current dynamics in this context has been well described as “instrumental approach” to the use of digital technologies in higher education, which according to Du Toit and Verhoef (2018) could actually deny the “embodied” and “socially embedded” nature of individual in teaching and learning (in Le Grange 2020). Described as “pragmatism” in neo-liberal higher education management, instrumentalist approach has the tendency to neglect the “complex and social relations“(intra-relatedness) of the embodied students (sic), as “technology artificially” divide the person and culture in teaching and learning (DuToit, 2020). According to Du Toit and Verhoef (2018, cited in Le Grange 2020:94) “an embodied-humane understanding of technology needs to recognize the personhood of students; who is the receiver of learning. However, in developing countries, “sufficient adoption” of digit tech is constrained by digital divide. The current socio-economic status of people remains the biggest constraint to fully utilize the various potentials and benefits of internet connectivity.

### **Socio-economic Inequality, Digital Divide and Access to Higher Education**

The concept digital-divide refers to a gap in terms of access to, and usage of information and communication technology among people of different socio-economic status (Steele 2019). Digital inequality is evident in all aspects of socio-economic activities of the people; demonstrating a limited or lack of access to education, and all that enhance socio-economic participation, through communication and technology. According to Steele (2019), a distinction could be made between three types of digital-divide; the gender divide, social divide and the universal divide. Further distinctions are also made between age divide (Friemiel 2016), and race divide ( Floburg 2018). Within a social structure, the first three types of divide are characterized by inequality in access to ICT that could have enhanced the socio-economic activities and participation of all citizens. Lack of internet access, data devices and technological know-how (Steele, 2019) exacerbate digital inequality to education across all ages and sexes. As universities, amidst the pandemic, currently rely on varying tech devices for teaching and learning at all levels of engagements, inequalities in access are expected to be more pronounced.

However, a “binary understanding” of digital divide as those having access, and those without access (Van Dijk 2006) is further compounded by broader perspectives of inequality “between those with more and those with less bandwidth”, and also those with digit skills and those without digit skills( Blau 2002;Hargitti 2003, cited in Le Lavange 2020:95). Within the context of knowledge capitalism, a “second level” of digital divide has further been identified (Correa 2008). And this has to do with gap between those identify as “knowledge producer”, and “knowledge consumer”; here, referred to as “knowledge lecturers” and “knowledge students”. Again, this has to do with socio-economic inequality as influenced by digital skills, or lack of digital fluency. In neo-liberal universities, digital skills has been identified with knowledge production and accumulation .

As the pandemic continue to influence migration and pivot to on-line learning, knowledge production and delivery of higher education are also “pivoted” on access, affordability and quality of internet services. Even when universities are increasingly compelled to go virtual in terms of academic work and activities, physical access to data remain problematic to participants-students and lecturers, as basic institutional facilities are lacking; limiting access to primary websites for e-library. A nuanced understanding of impact of post-pandemic in higher education delivery is still characterized with fundamental challenges of access and affordability. Physical access to ICT therefore remains part of numerous challenges amidst COVID-19 pandemic. Physical access is conceptualized as both access to device and connectivity (Le Lavange, 2020).

While use of library, in particular, e-library has been recognized to be playing significant roles in “cognitive access”, and which “succor” users to find, and use reliable library information, ability to select and organize available information is influenced by “digital fluency” of library users (Le Lavange, 2020:91). The challenge is more compounded by lack of physical access, financial access, accentuating digital gap and unequal distribution of connectivity. Marrow (1994) had

earlier observed that “epistemological access” refers to providing broad opportunity for access to knowledge as primary concern of university’s “distributive responsibility” to the larger society. An expansive access to education defines the distinctive characteristics of “publicness” of higher education knowledge production and distribution. However, in the current situations of COVID-19 pandemic, such widened access could be expected to have been constrained, which necessitated the “emergency-migration” by universities to on-line teaching and learning ( Le Garange and du Preez 2020). Constrained in access to knowledge production is further reinforced by endemic inequalities across sex and socio-economic status in the society.

In neo-liberal context, even formal access to IT and connectivity does not automatically translate to equal epistemological access; described as “systematic teaching” that assures organized systematic learning in the university (Marrow 1992; 2007; cited in Le Garange 2020). It is also in this context that the concrete expenditure of academic labour involves the ability of academics to select and sequence information to ensure continuity and progression in learning (Le Garange and du Perez 2020). The epistemological access which also demands “curriculum responsiveness” acts upon the academic labour process in the university. Developing and effecting impactful delivery of wide varieties of instructional materials, strategies and pathways intensify academic labour in the university. This is more challenging amidst the pandemic when required skills and competencies are crucial for stakeholders to be able to cope with the demands of on-line teaching/learning and other academic activities.

So far, in this paper, attempt has been made to evaluate, and further contribute to understanding the challenges embedded in neo-liberal pedagogical academic delivery, even in the context of post COVID-19 pandemic. Emergency migration to on-line academic activities, broadly, has not only shown the inherent deficit in ICT content, and delivery capacity of many of the universities in SSA , but also the “structured digital- divide” in the social structure, made more pronounced and accentuated by the pandemic crisis. While on-line teaching and learning has become the “new-normal”, and constantly being re-emphasized as solutions for bridging the gap in educational delivery, the implications for academic work and labour process remain. Quality academic delivery at all fronts can only be assured when comprehensive and broad based interventions are provided by stakeholders in the management of higher education.

In what follows, here, the paper reconceptualizes the discourse surrounding digital divide, and provides a dialectical/hegemonic understanding of inequality in digit tech, within the broader neo-liberal framing. A critical analysis of “non-access” to collective digital knowledge production and distributions laid bare the inequity that inherently characterized neo-liberal knowledge capitalism.

### **Discourse of Digital-Divide: towards a hegemonic understanding**

The emergence of instructional technology for teaching and learning in the universities amidst the current pandemic has led to a reconsideration and evaluation of its implicated dimensions. While remaining a topical issue in the process of academic delivery, generally, the discourse of digital-divide, and impact on quality access to learning/teaching calls for critical analysis( Kvasny and

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Keil, 2006; Sassi, 2005) . A critical analysis of impact of digital inequalities in recent years has focused on whether the divide is actually “closing” or whether indeed it is “widening” (Hecker and Mason 2003, cited in Kucukyadin and Tisdell 2008). Indeed, Wresch (1996) had earlier noted that digital divide in education is intensified by already existing inequities created by neo-liberal knowledge capitalism in the society. Even as digital technology advances, there still exists polarization between the disadvantaged groups and the privilege few, in the society. And in this understanding, the division is more acute in the context of knowledge production and provisioning, to the larger members of the society.

It is therefore instructive, as noted by Kucukyadin and Tisdell (2008), that discursive analysis of digital-divide, and its implication on educational provisioning pays distinctive attention to the endemic character of inequities within the entire social structure. In other words, analysis of inequities and “no-access” to technology, and the attendant educational imbalance should focus more broadly on the wider context of neo-liberal social system, which defines inequities within the wider social structure. More specifically, a reconceptualization of discourse of “digital inequities” should focus more, beyond “closing” or “bridging” the divide, but on critiquing underpinning normative assumptions embedded in neo-liberal capitalism, broadly. Thus, as argued by Kucukyadin and Tisdell (2008), lack of access to digital tech for learning and education are not different from other inequities which characterized neo-liberal social system. According to Luyt (2004), the embedded character of neoliberal social structure is of many “divides”; such as , decent-work conditions divides, health-life divides, gender-divides- all deserving to be interrogated, as digital-divide in education is being interrogated. Therefore, the discourse of digital divide should be well located and analyzed within the wider context of social inequalities of neo-liberal social structure.

While the challenges of digital-divide remain central to understanding how to “effect” and “raise” human/cultural capital and in solving issues of learning and teaching in the universities, the broader side; digital inequality, which has to do with inequitable access to advantages and benefits are also important. Digital inequality, as observed by Kwasny (2006, in Kucukyadin and Tinsidell 2008) is concerned with inequitable access to the benefits derived from internet connectivity and ICT. However, it not only depicts disparities in access to ICT, but also illustrates the embedded social inequality in the society. Thus, in neoliberal setting, the rhetoric of “bridging” the digital-divide and the “benefits” are discursive and essentially normative assumptions from corporate institutions serving the neo-liberal agenda (Kucukyadin and Tinsdell 2008). At a more macro-level of analysis, the beneficiaries are not particularly the under-privileged and under-represented, rather, the normative assumptions privilege the interests of some groups over others ( Kwasny and Keil 2006). A reconceptualization of “discursive-turn” of digital divide is therefore further located within the political economy of social relations of production, and the embedded educational inequalities. A discourse analysis provides for our understanding the hegemonic power-asymmetry in the society, and what it portends for higher education provisioning.

### **Towards a Theoretical Reconceptualization of Digital Divide: hegemonic analysis**

In utilizing much of Antonio Gramsci's (1981) conceptualization of how hegemony structures the relations between the dominant groups and the dominated in reproducing the established order, this Section of the paper reconstructs the discourse of digital inequities and impacts on higher education. In Gramsci's analysis, hegemony is a "political power" that flows from intellectual and moral elites who strongly influence the thinking and orientation of the people (cited in Kucukyadin and Tisdell 2008). Both "coercive force" and "cultural force" combine to shape the ideology of the State, which also influence States-Citizens relations. The control over these forces by both the political and intellectual authorities privilege the domination by the ruling elites over the "dominated". However, as observed by Gramsci, with advanced capitalism, the forces of control have become subtle but more insidious; "with the rise of modern science and technology, social control is exercised more, through the distribution of an elaborate systems of norms and imperatives" (Giroux 1981: 39). It is in this theoretical framing that the rhetoric of digital divide is reconceptualised as a neo-liberal discourse and its normative assumptions as a product of ideological hegemony, serving the interest of the ruling elites, and shaping the thinking of other members of the society. Thus, contemporary management of higher education with its control imperatives such; as connectivity, ICT, e-learning and teaching, including roles of educators are implicated in the hegemony.

In extant literature and analysis, the characterization of hegemony has taken on three major turns in understanding its resilience to analysis of dimension of hegemony and digital inequities. As noted by Gunkel (2003), this characterization revolves round three major issues in neo-liberal context; digital-divide .i.e meaning, what it implies, how it developed; its understanding as a "binary structure", and reflecting the concrete category and interests of those who have access to technology and those who do not ( Gunkel 2003, in Kucukyadin and Tisdell 2008). At a more broader perspective, Sassi (2005) locates the understanding within the technocratic, socio-cultural, and as defined by the capitalist social relations of production. The "binary model" is therefore understood as an essentialist approach of either/or; focusing narrowly on digital-divide as an issue of physical access to emerging technologies. It demonstrates an illustration of gap between those who have the opportunity to access and, or use digit tech, and those who do not (Gunkel, 2003). The terms deployed to illustrate the binary understanding are "haves"; and "have-nots" or "information rich" and "information poor".

However, in providing a critique of this model, Gunkel (2003) argues that the model tends to oversimplify the endemic/hegemonic character of neoliberalism, which in the first instance, defines the "dichotomy". From hegemonic perspective, the understanding of digital-divide is fundamentally deeper within the social structure, and shaped by neo-liberal logics. Simplistic framing of digital divide has also been critiqued by other scholars such as Blau, 2003; Gorski 2003; Gunkel, 2003 and Solomon 2002. To Basser (2001); a more fundamental analysis should focus on the divide between those who produce the "platform" ( with knowledge and skills), and those who consume; illustrating the social contradictions between those who have the resources to produce,



and those who do not (Diimaggio et al. 2004; Patterson and Wilson 2000 in Kucukyadin and Tisdell 2008). The dichotomies and contradictions also reflect the “diffusion” of inequalities which remain the emblematic character of neo-liberal framing, and which continue to reinforce digital inequalities.

One of the most illuminating conceptual understandings of digital divide in neo-liberal context has also been provided by Kvasny (2006). While utilizing Bourdieu’s theory of “cultural and social reproduction”, Kvasny’s analysis also moves beyond the narrow conceptualization of essentials of technological access as “boundary issue”, to analyzing the endemic socio-economic inequalities within the broader social context (in Kucukyadin and Tisdell 2008). In neo-liberal context, the issues and problems associated with digit tech are also tied with the dominant ideological underpinning and hegemony that drive it. And as Luyt (2004) and Sassi (2005) put it, an understanding of dynamics of capitalism would also bring to our understanding, the “tools” and symbolic resources that legitimize capitalist ideology and its latest “form of reorganization” in which issue of digital tech is also embedded. As noted by Gorski (2001), digital inequities are all about “regenerating” old inequities in a new cyber-form”. To Gramsci (1972), for capitalism to remain relevant and to successfully complete any “circuit” of its transformation, it has to build and maintain its hegemony and influence by constantly creating cultural and political resources through formal and informal institutions such as the university system. The institutions such as the schools, the media and the family are where the hegemony resides and exercised by allied forces, on behalf of the capitalists (Kucukyadin and Tisdell 2008).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this paper, attempts have been made to further explore the compelling logics of hegemony in the context of neo-liberal dynamics, broadly, and in the management of higher education university system, more specifically. It is argued that the logics of digit tech, and discourse of digit divide is part of broader attempt to fulfill the hegemonic interest of global capitalism, which therefore shape and re-direct the goals and objectives of universities academic deliveries, even as challenges of COVID-19 pandemic remain unabated. It is also argued that in the emerging context of post-pandemic, embracing and embedding digit tech is to further fulfill the goals and objectives of knowledge capitalism in attainment of efficiency and uninterrupted academic deliveries in the universities. In the emerging context, universities are constantly confronted by the powerful forces of neoliberalism, so much so that it defines academic content and curriculum, learning and platform for learning, and even the goals of “entrepreneurial universities”.

While the concept and terms such as “closing”, “bridging” the gap, or eliminating the divide, rhythoretically, aimed at enhancing access to knowledge and knowledge production in the university, the imperatives are undergirded by neoliberal logics. It is argued in this paper that neoliberal discourse of access to technology cannot solve the historically embedded social contradictions of neoliberalism. The discourse of digit tech and digit divide has historically been

part of “corporate hegemony” of neoliberal states. It has been successfully deployed to continuously create “intellectual army”, needed to serve and maintain dominant ideology of neoliberalism. As noted by Gramsci (1972), hegemony takes various forms and it is always “hidden in context”. Thus, in performing the numerous academic work processes, such as teaching and research, defined by emerging imperatives, academics, “consciously” and “unconsciously” engage in (hegemony), oppressive discourse and tasks.

In this understanding, hegemony works best when it operates at less than conscious level (Holtzmann 2000). The “hegemonic socialization” obscures the subjectivity (consciousness) of academics, so much so, that they see their roles and positions as “articulating knowledge”, for knowledge production. Underneath, the “innocent caring”, “pastoral roles” and surrogate parenthood of academics, are hidden forms of hegemony operations. Hegemony in academia not only functions through the visible forms of learning and teaching but also in the invisible lived-work experiences of academics.

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