

A CRISIS LIKE NO OTHER: DISRUPTIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE NEOLIBERAL AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION ERA

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has offered an opportune moment to assess the neoliberal tendencies in (South) African higher education. In critiquing neoliberal tendencies in higher education, this article proffers the thesis that university in (South) Africa perpetuates and entrenches neoliberalism as a Eurocentric canon, thereby shadowing the public good agenda of higher institutions of learning. The dawn of democracy in many African countries ushered in new thinking concerning higher education policy and practice. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the fact that African higher education has remained tethered to the former colonial powers' whims, thereby maintaining the dominator-dominated relationship. We argue that the imposed Western-style education has produced an educated élite with Western values and entrepreneurial attitudes that pilot their states on the path to modernity through the capitalisation of knowledge. Subsequently, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed deep inequalities in relation to access to African higher education. To that end, we conceptualise the predominance of neoliberal philosophy in African higher education as an instrument of keeping the public good idea of the African universities under surveillance. We provide theoretical evidence of how African universities are still suffering from colonisation of the mind decades after the attainment of political independence through complicit or sometimes implicit imbibing and embracing of the Euro-centred neoliberal philosophy under the guise of globalisation. We make a case for (South) African higher education to turn the tide to encompass locally relevant teaching and research with an eye on local needs in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. On the understanding that Covid-19 pandemic affected places differently, we argue that the deep underlying inequalities in African higher education were exposed.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Covid-19 pandemic, African university, decoloniality, public good

INTRODUCTION

The Corona Virus pandemic, hereafter referred to as Covid-19, was discovered in the Chinese

province of Wuhan in December 2019. Because the disease is highly contagious when persons are in close contact, the recommendation from the World Health Organisation (WHO) is that all forms of gathering should be banned. Subsequently, institutions of higher education were shut down to mitigate contagion to the Covid-19 virus. The closure of contact learning occasioned the debate on possibilities of migration to online teaching and learning. In the Western and other developed countries, there was relatively easy migration from contact to online digital learning. However, in the case of African higher education, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed deep embedded inequalities (Le Grange 2020). In this regard, our primary argument is that the embedded inequalities exposed by Covid-19 pandemic are authored and sustained by neoliberalism as a Western canon. We further seek to highlight the argument that the entrenched inequalities as exposed by Covid-19 reinforce the observation that the public good agenda of African higher education is under constant surveillance.

In the Covid-19 pandemic exposed inequalities, there are three important points to state in relation to neoliberalism. Firstly, while Covid-19 pandemic exposed digital divide that exist in the African higher education student and staff body, it is the case that neoliberal tendencies is affirmative the inequalities. As we have noted earlier in the conceptualisation of neoliberalism, the market forces are such that inequalities are not treated as such within the spectrum of neoliberalism. Secondly, upon the attainment of political independence, African countries embarked on transformative process in higher education with the primary aim of availing education to all deserving students. So Covid-19 pandemic can potentially derail the endeavours towards increasing access to higher education. The derailment to transformation of higher education posed by Covid-19 pandemic includes the African university could not manage full migration to online teaching and learning because the majority of students cannot afford the technological gadgets, data bundles required for proper online learning and teaching. Thirdly, neoliberalism on the backdrop of Covid-19 pandemic betrays the public good agenda which is supposed to be serviced by African higher education. We dedicate a section in this article to discuss the public good agenda in African higher education. Subsequently, this article is important in so far as assessment that encompasses Covid-19 pandemic, public good agenda and neoliberalism in African higher education. It is instructive to state upfront that in this article, we use the term, university interchangeably with higher education.

Though the African higher education university has over the years come under tremendous scholarly scrutiny (Akojee, Nkomo, and Twalo 2012; Mbembe 2016; Koopman 2019; Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda 2018), the Covid-19 pandemic has once intensified the focus. COVID-19 has resulted in the closure of university campuses all over the world, as well as the movement of all learning, teaching, and assessment activities to online domains. The

implications for academics as frontline providers of higher education are profound. We are cognizant of the fact that the term African university encompasses an assortment of processes, activities, cultures and values. Nevertheless, our observation deduced from the reasons which occasionally seek interest in African university is that it is a university that is reconfiguring for purpose of finding social meaning and relevance in the context of neoliberalism. Arguably, the notion of the public good of African universities forms the bedrock of the redefining and reconfiguration pursuits.

Our considered view is that such scrutiny is premised on three interrelated reasons. Firstly, the upsurge in interest in and the incessant calls for the decolonisation discourse which have entailed that everything that falls within the ambit of the university is undergoing fundamental, conceptual and empirical interrogation. For instance, issues to do with iconography, gender, institutional culture, access, funding, staff and student composition, teaching and learning, language, structure and curriculum and epistemology have gained currency across the African university (Unterhalter et al. 2019). Secondly, in the era of the seemingly irresistible and paternalistic influences of globalisation, the African university is entangled in the pressure of neoliberalism concerning the public good. For Koopman (2018, 48), “university education has become interwoven with complex neoliberal ideals and core principles that favor the subjectivity of a global entrepreneurial class”. Put differently, the university continues to advance and promote the practices and demands associated with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has been used to refer to the domination of not only the former colonies but also the new superpowers such as the USA and the international monetary organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In a broad sense, neocolonialism is sometimes used “to signify the inability of the so-called Third World economies to develop an independent economic and political identity under the pressures of globalization”. Thirdly, the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic with its attendant disruptiveness to “normal” teaching and learning has implied the embedded neoliberal-induced arrangements have come to the fore in the African higher education.

In this article, our central concern is that on the backdrop of Covid-19 pandemic, the public good agenda in African universities is being depreciated by neoliberal tendencies. In articulating this concern, we argue that neoliberal ideology is a Western-centric canon that ultimately impedes the decolonisation schema of the African university’s pursuit for serving the public good. It is aptly stated that the idea of decolonising a neoliberal university is superfluous because the impersonal processes of the market recognise only legitimate differences in the capacities of the individuals (Holmwood 2018). In this article, we are guided by the following research question:

- On the backdrop of Covid-19 pandemic, is the public good agenda in African university education under surveillance from neoliberalism as a Eurocentric canon?

Our critique of neoliberalism draws justification from the argument that it is a Western canon that primarily promotes individual meritocracy and a for-profit mindset in education. We have previously argued that the African university is contextually located in a cultural setup that is more communal than individual orientation (Hungwe and Ndofirepi 2021). In pursuance of adequate response to our concerned research question, this article is divided into five sections. In the first section, we delve into the contentious issue of the idea of an African university. To situate this idea in the broad scope of this article, the three epochs, namely colonial, postcolonial, and the contemporary university are given overview attention. The second section discusses the conceptual underpinnings of neoliberalism. The central aim of this section is to discuss the conceptions of neoliberalism as an ideology. We are considerate of the fact that neoliberalism is a broad and seemingly all-embracing concept that covers economic, social and even political spheres of modern society. Nevertheless, our concern in this article is to discuss and analyse the ramifications of neoliberalism on the public good agenda of the African university. The third section analyses the notion of the public good, while the fourth section is an explorative exposition of the 21st Century African university as a neoliberal project. In this respect, it is noted that the African university was born in chains and continues to operate under chains (Mkandawire 1997). Finally, the last section re-imagines an alternative African university, a university liberated from the machinations of neoliberalism. The possibilities of a liberated African university which entails that such a university can primarily pursue the public good agenda of Africa.

THE IDEA OF AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

This section has a dual purpose – the historical overview and a contemporary contextual setting of university in Africa. The concept of a university is complex and contested terrain mainly because universities are shaped by historical, political, economic and regional context. So, the idea of an African university cannot be adequately appreciated without regard to historical and contemporary contextual settings. Therefore, this section exposes the origins of the epistemological dominance of Western perspectives in African universities. An understanding of the origin of Western epistemological dominance sheds light on the contemporary challenge of neoliberalism concerning the public good agenda of the African university.

Firstly, from a historical perspective, it is rather contestable to regard any institution of

higher education in the pre-colonial era in Africa as a university in the modern sense of the term. However, there is also another view which suggests that “though ‘modern’ education systems in Africa are largely a product of European colonial frameworks, various studies indicated that the practice of education at all levels was there in Africa in pre-colonial settings of Africa” (Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck 2013, 35). In this view, pre-colonial institutions such as Al-Quarawiyyin in Morocco (859 AD), Al-Azhar University (970 AD), Timbuktu and others are noted to reinforce the viewpoint that pre-colonial Africa had educational establishments that could be considered as universities (Assie-Lumumba 2006; Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck 2013). Considering the divergent scholarly perspectives as to whether such institutions merit university status, it suffices to point out that whatever these institutions were, there was higher education in pre-colonial Africa.

However, the modern-day university model is derived from the colonial period. By design, almost all universities in Africa were established as extensions of European metropolitan institutions and decisions about priorities for educational development followed the dictates of parent cultural corporations in Britain, France, Belgium, and partly the Netherlands (Mazrui 1975). The early African university in the post-colonial had two distinct idiosyncratic features. Firstly, it was characteristically developmental in orientation. The university was modeled along developmental agenda within the framework of national economic and social narrative (Assie-Lumumba 2011). However, the notion of development was conceptually confined to the racially-determined upgrade of the standard of living for white minority while marginalising the black Africans who were the majority. So after the attainment of political independence, the development narrative which formed the basis for public good agenda was ideally tailored towards national rather than racial development. Henceforth;

“the university education envisioned by the Africans in post-colonial Africa was intended to contribute to the development of the continent, improve the living conditions of, not just an emerging westernized elite, but also to the ordinary citizens in urban centers and rural communities precisely related to the elite through a complex web of extended family relationships and whose whole well-being is of vital importance to the elite” (Assie-Lumumba 2011, 178).

The above citation suggests that the primary objective of post-colonial university in Africa was to advance the public good agenda. Ultimately, the notion of public good, as discussed in the following section, was central to the function, mission, and vision as well as service orientation of the university.

Secondly, the contemporary settings of the university in Africa are such that it should be re-configured and re-orientated to be relevant rather than alienated from the local. For Ndlovu-

Gatsheni (2017), a re-imagined African university is entrenched in African cultural and intellectual outlook. In other words, an African university is immersed in the African worldview. The immersion can be achieved by legitimising the experiences, objectives and ambitions/ aspirations of African people and consequently upgrading their standard of living (Mkandawire 1997). Additionally, it is a university that identifies itself with the African people's endeavors to epistemologically liberate them. At the heart of the African university should be the address of challenges that have come to define the African people. For instance, where is or what is the African university doing in response to dehumanising economic poverty, tribalism, ethnicity, gender-based violence, dictatorial tendencies amongst political leaders, the threat towards democracy and human rights?

Despite the local contextual settings, the African university ought to have a national and international character. In this respect, the university should avoid political intimacy with the State which may in turn compromise academic and institutional autonomy. Additionally, the university is supposed to be culturally close to the society while simultaneously maintaining scholarly and scientific linkage in the international domain (Mazrui 2003). We are using the word international here to refer to the connection that the African university needs to establish with the university sector and societies across the world. Ndofirepi and Cross (2014, 293) argue that "universities have been allocated the explicit role of the production of highly skilled manpower and research output to sustain the professed economic needs. Their business has been basically to produce through research, relevant knowledge and to disseminate the same knowledge through teaching". What this implies is that relevant knowledge produced in African university should be "exported" and applicable to the global world. However, universities in many African countries are ranked in accordance with their participation in an international system of knowledge distribution. As such, for these universities

"the evaluation of scholarly work of faculty and students, their research proposals, manuscripts and publications that verifies the key incentives of their intellectual life are controlled from Europe and America as the centre while university academic making is dependent in the epistemological preconditions set by their former colonial handlers" (Ndofirepi and Cross 2014, 293).

In due course, these practices, which are driven by competition and the financial profit motif, are characteristically neoliberal tendencies. On the basis that universities in Africa are not immune to neoliberal influences, it is imperative to proffer an exposition of the public good and the university. The primary purpose of such an exposition is in line with the guiding question in this article that interrogates the impact of neoliberalism on the African university as a public good.

CONCEPTUALISING THE PUBLIC GOOD AND UNIVERSITY

In view of Covid-19 pandemic and neoliberalism the idea of an African university as outlined in the foregoing section, it is imperative to explore the implication of public good to the African university sector. This is necessary because a university is supposed to be uniquely identifiable through service to the public good. In this consideration, the notion of public good is central to this discussion. The assumption here is that the term “public” is in reference to societies which can be a nation, in which the university is located. We do not wish to appropriate “publicness” to the idea of citizenship since this may divert the scope of this article. Our focus is exploring the public about the society that stands to benefit from the institutional presence of a university in Africa. What then are the goods that the public are supposed to benefit from at a university? We note two of such possible goods. Firstly, the public is supposed to benefit from the knowledge produced and disseminated by the university. In this respect, the university is supposed to produce knowledge that is relevant to address and respond to the social, political and economic challenges (Department of Education 2008). The notion of public good presupposes that there is collective identification of those challenges; otherwise the university will be imposing its agenda on the public. Secondly, the characteristic of non-excludability has some implications for the provisioning and access to university education in Africa.

From a conceptual perspective, a public good has two idiosyncratic characteristics, namely non-rivalrous and non-excludable. The primary character of non-rivalrous goods is that their usage or consumption does not diminish or get devalued because they are being used (Stiglitz 1999). The implication here is that the non-rivalrous consumption of public good is that the consumption of one individual does not detract from that of another. On the other hand, non-excludability means that it is difficult if not impossible to exclude an individual from enjoying the good. Concerning the university, Stiglitz (1999) aptly notes that the tenet of non-excludability implies that knowledge cannot be provided in private. However, the assertion by Stiglitz has been reconfigured by the neoliberalism influences which have infiltrated the university sector as the following section of this article will show. Moreover, one way of understanding the public good is to articulate it in juxtapose with the private good. A private good is rivalrous and excludable. Examples of private goods are a personal car, home, and radio, while public goods can be exemplified by public roads, parks, fresh air, knowledge, national defense, or street lighting. It can further be elucidated that public institutions which are established by the State for the provisioning of public services can follow the standard definition, which is described as public goods. Public hospitals, schools, universities, transport and public delivery services such as water and refuse collection are examples of public goods.

From this brief sketch, we note that the idea of access is the central, conceptual feature of a public good. By establishing a public good, it is envisioned that such a good will be accessible to people in society. Access is facilitated by the minimisation of impediments which includes the financial profitability idea. Because once an institution that is considered as a public institution is motivated more to pursue financial profit than its delivery service agenda, then the consequent is that the majority is gradually denied access to the services. By extension, the denial of access implies that the public good agenda of the institution is compromised. In recognition of the possibility of compromised public good agenda of an institution, we now turn to focus on neoliberalism as it manifests and shapes the African university.

NEOLIBERALISM AS A NEO-COLONIAL PROJECT IN THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

Like any other institution, the African university has not been spared of neoliberalism influences. The African university has become enmeshed with neoliberalism as it “attempts to locate itself” and find “recognition” in the “global” arena of the university world. Because neoliberalism is Western-centric, we argue that it is a neo-colonial agenda that entrenches coloniality. More specifically for this article, we state that that contradicts the public good which is a communal-orientation towards education. Education is supposed to serve the community. Neoliberalism entails that education continues to entrench and perpetuate inequalities between the rich and the poor (Moloi, Makgoba, and Miruka 2017). Inequality in Africa is endemic, despite the rising levels of access to university education, and when the inequality arises, the African university’s goal is no longer a public good but rather an individual (private) good.

Neoliberalism has a complex nature in higher education as it advocates for an educational service that tends towards market and profit. Under neoliberalism, the management of an educational institution is primarily focused on profits and cost-cutting measures. As a cost-cutting measure, universities are involved in constant downsizing of staff, shutting down faculties that are regarded as non-profit-making, outsourcing services rather than permanently employing staff and encouraging research that has financial returns. Overall, the market influences the practices, values, grading and legitimisation of all the activities in the university. Attention should also be paid to the reality that neoliberalism promotes individualism that is guided by the free market, deregulation of the economy, and minimal government intervention. The neoliberal influences include “increasing tuition fees, slashing teaching grants, encouraging business-friendly courses as well as pretending that private sector is a supplier of higher education”. Moloi et al. (2017) caution that the independence of the higher education

sector is likely to be curtailed in that it would not be able to do research and teaching outside the dictated parameters and expectations of capitalism and corporate power. Neoliberalism, therefore, compromises and redefines the notion of autonomy in universities, in other words the African university may be free from government interference but is not free from market (corporate power) manipulation.

Under the neoliberal influences, education is becoming an internationally traded commodity. No longer is it seen primarily as a set of skills, attitudes, and values required for citizenship and effective participation in modern society – a key contribution to the common good of any society. Rather, it is increasingly seen as a commodity to be purchased by a consumer to build a “skill set” to be used in the marketplace or a product to be bought and sold by multinational corporations, academic institutions that have transmogrified themselves into businesses, and other providers. The political and economic aspects of globalisation dominate changes to higher education. Education, particularly at the post-secondary level, is entering the global economic market globalisation and is the vehicle of neoliberalism, which in turn has marked the character of globalisation. The influence of globalisation on higher education can be viewed through neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal economic agenda is leading to decreasing funding for public services around the world; in education, this agenda attempts “to weaken public control over education while simultaneously encouraging the privatisation of the educational service and greater reliance on market forces”. In the neoliberal model higher education is ideally integrated into the system of production and accumulation in which knowledge is reduced to its economic functions and contributes to the realisation of individual economic utilities. In neoliberal paradigms,

“the emphasis is placed on bodily performativity as a measure of effectiveness as it does not give students the space for critical thinking and self-directed learning and to be playful partners in the knowledge construction process. This is because academics are under pressure to complete the syllabi which encourage them to neglect foundational knowledge that students require to master any subject” (Koopman 2018, 58).

The universities in Africa were and still are accused of being primary relay points or conveyor belts of Western culture and imperialist ideals.

In universities in Africa, the neoliberalism influence, which is sometimes referred to as “soft power” (Kidman 2020) manifests itself in multiple forms. There is rigid managerialism which is expressed through hierarchical structures that are being endowed with powers to regulate university activities, teaching and learning modules, research output, staff promotion and recruitment policies, amongst others. It should be recalled that from a traditional

perspective, African forms of authority have often been patriarchal, communal and authoritarian. These strict and rigid managerial approaches tend to produce anxiety amongst academics, thereby shaping and reconfiguring the purpose of intellectual labour (Kidman 2020). In a neoliberal framework, the students are regarded as clients or sources of finance that boost the university coffers.

The participation of neoliberal stakeholders during the pandemic while providing some effective decision-making and mitigation measures of the effects of the pandemic are complicit in their concept of free economic management as they bring forth the pressures that subsist between approaches to care and its value in higher education institutions. Care is meaningful for its influence it has on student experiences especially in times of a pandemic and its criticality to development of a relational approach, for students who are already part of disadvantaged groups including women, the poor and the disabled. Complementing to the intricacy, disparities continue in practice regardless of the generalised pronouncements made by higher education institutions concerning cultural inclusivity.

THE RAMIFICATIONS OF NEOLIBERALISM ON UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA

Having outlined the neoliberalism ideology and its possible encroachments, which shape higher education, the logical consequences are to explore the impact of neoliberalism on the African universities. We focus our attention on two factors, namely the centrality of the market and the ethical implication of neoliberalism. In doing so, we aim to gradually expose how neoliberalism derails the African university as public good agenda. Over the past 20 years, international interest in African higher education has intensified. Aid agencies in the North have developed policies that are designed to strengthen Africa's research capacity. Scandinavian countries were amongst the first to do so: Denmark has the Building Stronger Universities programme; and Norway and Sweden have similar collaborative programmes. Another problem is that this international collaboration may draw African universities into the competition fetish that dominates higher education today. This may help them to become globally competitive, but they risk losing their local relevance in the process.

The market as a central neoliberal factor has numerous implications on the African university. Neoliberalism is occasioned by increasing economic interdependence, exchange of commodities and services across national borders, the direct and indirect circulation of international financial grants and, lines of credit, economic regional integration and the rapid spread and influence of information technology. The dimension of cross-border student mobility and other forms of international collaboration amongst universities all point to the irresistible power of neoliberal influences in the African university. Moloi et al. (2017) aver

that neoliberalism is irreversible not only in Africa but in the university sector across the world.

Moreover, the market factor implies that the role of the government as an overseer of the African university is greatly reduced. Without government regulations, there is a danger of mushrooming low-quality universities that recruit low-quality students and staff both in and outside the country, thereby compromising higher education. Tuition becomes unaffordable as it is determined by the markets and increased privatisation of education. The deleterious financial implication of reduced government role is an equally reduced subsidy to universities. The free-market ideology that sustains neoliberalism entails that universities are forced to “look somewhere” for financial sustainability. For instance, endeavours such as the internationalisation of higher education are transformed into income-generating projects rather than ways of broadening educational horizons. Aptly, the globe is seen as the market for neoliberal higher education. Universities seek to be admired and recognised across the globe so that they recruit international students and derive monetary gains out of it (Montoto 2013). The African university is caught up in the competition race for the “best products” that guarantee financial gains. A market-orientated university can encourage research activities amongst the staff with the sole aim of monetary benefits.

The researchers for this article have vast experience in research, teaching and learning in an African university. One such common experience is the commercial value that is highly attached to research and research output. We have attended many seminars, conferences with themes such as “Doing meaningful research” or “How to maximise research output for recognition”. We do not dispute the significance of doing meaningful research or the advantages of recognition in the career of an academic. However, oftentimes, the terms meaningful and recognition are mostly couched in potential monetary or economic values that a university stands to benefit from. An academic who for some reason or other fails to produce research output at a stipulated timeframe is often reminded that a lack of research output has financial implications for his/her department, faculty, and university. This neoliberal tendency of commercialising research defeats the underpinnings of public good that knowledge should be produced, disseminated and consumed for the sake of the good of society.

It is also critical to state that the influence of neoliberalism on African universities is located in the historical relations between African and Western countries that donated money. Most African countries accepted financial donations with the idea of participating in the global economy and developing themselves. In this sense, newly independent countries remained dependent on the former colonial powers. Since the same relationship of domination continued, it can be argued that all that changed in Africa are symbols such as a national flag and anthem and the former colonizer has remained dominant in terms of social, educational, economic and

cultural power (Assie-Lumumba 2006). Through this loan money, they promote Western-style education, which is “expected to produce an educated élite with Western values and entrepreneurial attitudes ... [who] would then lead their states on the path to modernity” (Assie-Lumumba 2006).

In so far as the ethical implications of neoliberalism are concerned, the African university is in a quagmire that alienates it from the immediate social and cultural values. We argue that neoliberalism influences have made the African university to be “foreign” and distanced from the social, economic and political challenges that obtain in Africa. According to Koopman (2018, 56), “the adoption of practices and procedures that favor neoliberal ideas expense the core ethical African values and the development of a strong African identity”. The idea of relevant knowledge/research tends to be politicised to fit into the global, notwithstanding the fact that global is Western perspective. Neoliberalism as a Western orientation is not convinced that local knowledge domains such as *Ubuntu*, *ukama*, Akan and many others can be adequately appropriated into the African university’s curriculum and institutional culture. The neoliberal tendency is forcing the African university to move certain “skills” and capabilities to the fore while other foundational “skills” as critical thinking and self-directed learning are increasingly marginalised (Koopman 2018).

From an ethical perspective, Western-centric epistemologies may be preferred to the indigenous knowledge system. What constitutes knowledge in the African university are privileged Western philosophical perspectives based on euro-western philosophical perspectives based on euro-American culture and history which stipulate the dominant theoretical structure for social science knowledge and research with little sensitivity to African (Ndofirepi and Cross 2014). Similarly, Lebakeng, Phalane, and Dalindjebo (2006) say African universities take lip service as African. Currently, the faculties of African languages are either downsizing or shutting down because under neoliberalism they are considered less marketable to Western languages. It is impressed upon the African students that fluency in Western languages like French, English, Portuguese or Spanish creates opportunities for the graduate in marketable disciplines like the Hospitality Industry. Of course, what is deliberately ignored in the promotion of Western languages under neoliberalism is that markets are not racial or cultural-neutral, but the market is rather racialised. The standard market is white, male and European, thereby transmitting the cultural values of that cohort.

Moreover, activities such as community service become less important. Because “the public responsibility to the citizenry of the state where the university is located is less important, the new liberal framework has more global than the local view. Research is highly prioritized as the potential to bring external monies” (Lebakeng et al. 2006, 78). Moreover, a university

that is strongly orientated towards neoliberalism encourages academics to establish connections with industry and business for purpose of accruing financial benefits. Consequently, the role of the faculty members moves away from teaching but focuses on research which is geared towards financial accumulation. For the students, the professional programmes and programmes in engineering, science, technology and mathematics are privileged to liberal arts and humanities. The universities are more drawn towards profit-guaranteeing activities, academic disciplines and research. In an African context which advocates for communally-oriented perspectives such as ubuntu, it is an ethical contradiction to regard students as financial clients or sources of income. The humanness-enhancing concepts such as human dignity, compassion and hospitality are thwarted by a neoliberal value which puts more premiums on money than humanness.

From the foregoing notations, it has become apparent that neoliberalism is the most dangerous ideology towards the core mission of the university in the 21st century. While neoliberalism means many things, it represents a form of “economic rationalism [that] reduces all human dimensions, social relations, and activities into consumer exchange” (Mullen et al. 2013, 188). Its educational manifestations are far-reaching, resulting in a shift of education from primarily a cultural to an economic concern. In summative terms, neoliberalism in university entails rigid managerialism, audit cultures, values of commodification, efficiency, and effectiveness from a wholly alien sector – the industrial economy – reduces education to an export-import trade (Mullen et al. 2013). Uncritical worship of free markets falsely promising universal prosperity coupled with a cultivated and aggressively marketed cynicism about the ability of public institutions to efficiently serve public interests, including schools and universities. People are left alone to devise

“solutions to socially generated problems, and to do it individually, using their individual skills and individually possessed assets. Such an expectation sets individuals in mutual competition, and renders communal solidarity ... to be perceived as by and largely irrelevant, if not downright counterproductive. Competitive individualism divides people rather than brings them together around common public interests. The danger here is that neoliberalism is redefining the public good in the African university. The marketplace idea that sees university education as exchangeable with job opportunities is in tandem with neoliberalism. In line with neoliberalism, the African university is entangled with rigid procedures, regulations and domains of knowledge.” (Mullen et al. 2013, 188).

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY AS A PUBLIC GOOD

T points are emanating from the foregoing sections that we seek to highlight and emphasise as we delineate the possibility of African universities as a public good in this section. Firstly, it has become apparent that neoliberalism is an ideology that comes outside the African continent.

Neoliberalism is in all accounts a Western-centric ideology that seeks to turn education into an economic enterprise. Secondly, and closely related to the first point, is the fact that neoliberalism has become ubiquitous in all universities across the world. Despite this, it is the case that the impact of neoliberalism tends to differ from one context to the other. While we do not seek to generalise the universities in Africa, the above sections have alluded to some common historical patterns that shape the university sector in Africa. We therefore argue that neoliberalism has become disruptive to the African university as a public good. An African university as a public good here refers to an institution whose primary vision and mission is to respond and offer a possible solution to the myriad of challenges that obtain in Africa. Deducing from the historical trajectory as outlined in this article, the African university as a public good has to encompass developmentalism, intellectualism and research for both applied knowledge and knowledge for its own sake.

Universities are institutions not only located geographically in society, but are ideally supposed to serve the society. A university becomes dislocated when it primarily serves and attends to the global need and neglects the local needs. This is where the issue of public good comes in. In simple terms, the public good presupposes that the university sector serves the good of the society. Put differently, the society in which the university is located should benefit from proceeds derived and gained from knowledge production and dissemination. Africa's universities need to be locally relevant, focusing their teaching and research on local needs. To be more sturdy in these times of crisis, equitable and inclusive, university education systems must transform, leveraging technology to profit all learners and building on the advances and partnerships activated during this pandemic.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the inattentive annexation of neoliberal, Western performance-driven models founded in economic rationalism transmutes into some practices of elusive, and sometimes explicit, hostility and disgrace against the marginalised groups. We conclude that the neoliberal commodification of African universities spoils the academic quality and freedom of the university and depicts higher education as a “private good” for self-actualisation. The entry of the proliferating privatisation of public universities in Africa rooted in the caustic impression and pervasive nature of neoliberalism has thus placed the original public good value of the higher institutions of learning under surveillance.

A pandemic like the Covid-19 virus forces humanity to recondition and reinvigorate itself, although in destructive ways. Higher education institutions in Africa and throughout the world are undergoing significant changes as a result of the need to digitise education and training

activities in real-time. In a world of digital transformation, disruptive technology advances, and rapid change, the university system must work to overcome this situation to remain competitive and provide high-quality education. While efforts are made to overcome some of the barriers and challenges that African universities face during crises, we conclude that rather than alleviating inequalities caused by the neoliberalising global philosophy imposed on African universities, the gap between rich and poor students continues to widen. Higher education institutions in Africa are attempting to implement learning recovery programs. Amid the Covid-19 epidemic, the detrimental repercussions of neoliberal ideals continue to plague governments' efforts to assist the poor. especially considering the significant economic strain that countries have been under as government expenditures for higher education institutions have been slashed in favour of the health sector. As a result, higher education institutions must prepare for future shockwaves by improving their resilience. Now is the time to put what we have learned to good use to be better prepared for future crises.

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