Abstract
This exploratory study provides insights into the utility of telecommuting in times of adversity such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is still active globally, and also locally, as Nigerian institutions were shut down since March 2020, avoiding physical, in person contacts within the campuses. Telecommuting, or Working From Home (WFH) is becoming the new normal in pedagogy, as academic staff in some universities continue to exercise their roles in terms of Teaching, Research and Community Service. Utilising the benefits of Contingency Theory, the paper analysed the nature of telecommuting in the context of the unexpected events, the changing dynamics of the workplace and the new future of work. The paper is largely qualitative, relying largely on secondary sources of data and some primary information for analysis. The difficulties and challenges faced by several Public and Private Universities in Nigeria, like inadequate classroom spaces, hostels, infrastructure can be overcome by the introduction of a hybrid form of learning that incorporates Telecommuting and Virtual Online Learning as part of the pedagogy in the academic activities of Universities.

Keywords: Telecommuting, Nigerian Private Universities, Working from Home

Introduction
Organizations are deliberately created to realize specific goals through cooperative efforts and technological application. In modern societies, organizations are becoming increasingly interested in the work done and not where it is done. Despite the growing acceptance of this view in form of
telecommuting, studies are not certain on the thrust of telecommuting and its efficacy because studies on this appear sparse in the literature (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). The emergence of telecommuting was initially in large measure to address only transport congestion, but now has moved further to boost productivity and satisfaction. In the era of globalization, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resources such as computer, radio, telephone among others enable academic staff perform some of their assigned duties outside the work center, as some academic staff are involved in online external examination of graduate students. It is therefore necessary to examine the practice of telecommuting in Nigerian universities and its expected outcomes. Available statistics indicate that in 2010 internet penetration per 100 persons in Nigeria was 23.48% and personal computer per 100 persons was 4.7% (Nigerian National Policy for Information Technology (IT) Use, 2012). This situation has not significantly improved since evidence suggests that there is low digital knowledge in Nigeria. This makes it difficult for most academic staff in the country to take advantage of ICT potentials to enhance learning, research and academic development.

The outbreak of Corona Virus Disease and its subsequent declaration by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a global pandemic resulted to global lockdown including academic activities. Working From Home or Telecommuting has gained ascendancy that most global corporate organisations, multinational corporations, including Google, Apple, etc. have given their employees liberty to elect to work from home for the rest of the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and thereafter. What does this portend for the future of work, and workplace relations, employee-employer interactions or engagements? For academic environments outside the developed world, this is a paradigm shift in terms of delivery and contact between students and teachers. Private institutions that have been closed, just like their public counterparts have gone further to commence online lectures via several e-learning platforms. For public universities, the situation appears different owing to the ongoing industrial action embarked upon by the Academic Staff Union of Universities. The scope of the paper is therefore limited to what has been reported in the national dailies, and interviews of some lecturers in the private universities in the South Eastern Nigeria that have been involved in telecommuting. The objectives of the paper are three-fold (a) to demonstrate the utility and relevance of telecommuting as a work option in universities, (b) to highlight the challenges and difficulties associated with telecommuting in a developing, emerging economy like Nigeria, and (c) to examine the prospects of telecommuting post COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review
Telecommuting gained attention in the late 20th century with the advent of home computer and telecommunications technology. Research on telecommuting appeared in 1973 when Jack W. Nilles coined the terms “Telecommuting” and “Teleworking” (Hamilton, 2003) initially spawned by
Overcoming Workplace Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic

The early years of the 21st century marked the beginning of digital data storage (Hilbert & Lopez, 2011) which has transformed most organizations and work processes. Data storage has shifted from manual filing system to electronic storage removable devices (diskette and compact disc) to cloud based storage such as Dropbox and Google drive (Hollidge, 2018). Development in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has expanded the range of firms and industries (International Telework Association and Council, 2011) hence, modern organizations are more automated. The introduction of ICT in education in form of e-learning, blended learning, open and distance learning, etc. suggests its immense benefits (Commonwealth of Learning, 2013). ICT has increased interdependence that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away (Global Policy Forum, 2005–2014) making the global community information driven. Globally, the 4th Industrial Revolution has arrived and academic institutions cannot remain mere avenues for transmission of prescribed information but must promote acquisition of knowledge and skills that make possible continuous learning over time. Telecommuting has gained currency and popularity globally given that it enables organisational actors to provide services from anywhere, and from multiple locations (Rochas & Amachor, 2018 cited in Tavares, Santos, Diogo & Ratten, 2020). With Telework, distance or geographical location becomes less a barrier as this could easily be overcome (Jardon & Martinez-Corbas, 2020 cited in Tavares et al., 2020).

The outbreak of the Corona Virus pandemic (henceforth COVID-19) in the Chinese City of Wuhan, in late 2019 upset socio-economic, religious and academic activities of most countries of the world. It has destroyed livelihoods of tens of millions of people globally. Its entry into Nigeria through, an Italian citizen on the 25th of February 2020 led to nationwide lockdown and closure of schools which added to the precarious academic situation for which ASUU had embarked on strike weeks earlier. Telecommuting became expedient to be adopted as work strategy in teaching students and performing other roles by academic staff across the country (Onyeukwu, Adeniyi & Amin, 2020) using ICT online-tools such as Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, WhatsApp and other communication facilities including computer, teleconferencing, text messages, etc. to interact with students, colleagues or clients at different places (Dawodu & Osondu, 2011) thereby unbinding time and tasks from work center.

Telecommuting and telework

Telecommuting has variously been referred to as telework, home-working, working-at-a-distance, off-site workers, remote workers, virtual working, etc. (Rognes, 2002; Hamilton, 2003). Othman, Yusef & Osman (2009) point out that networking, remote working, flexible working, working from home, electronic home working and e-work are used to denote teleworking or telecommuting. Telecommuting is seen as “a subset of teleworking” (National
Transportation Library, 1993). Nilles (1994) conceives teleworking as a form of substitution of information technologies (such as telecommunications and computers) for work-related travel. Othman, Yusef & Osman (2009) agree that telecommuting is a form of teleworking whereby all telecommuters are teleworkers but not all teleworkers are telecommuters. Hence, Avellino (2005) sees telework as home-workers who use personal computers and/or the internet or mobile phone during their work schedule.

Mokhtarian & Salomon (1994) explain that telecommuting uses technology to work at home, telework center or location during working hours instead of commuting to the workplace. It could be part-time or full-time and need not exclusively involve computers but provides workers the opportunity to fulfill the demands of both work and family life.

How to handle familial obligations within the homes has become a troubled and contentious issue among working families, or even single-income earners. The spouse, usually the female gender has always raised the issue of the husband’s absence from home due to work responsibilities as standing in the way of cordial conjugal relationships. Similarly, Vora & Mahmasani (2002) view telecommuting as working away from the work center using ICT in performing paid work. Telecommuting emphasizes reduction of work-related travel, whereas telework emphasizes flexibility to work anywhere. It excludes some telework-based substitutions for transportation such as home-based workers, private consultants, over time work performed at home, and mobile workers (Balaker, 2005). These diverse views reflect changes taking place in the society and technology which have blurred line of demarcation between the concepts. As suggested by Peters, Tijdens & Wetzels (2001) the slight difference notwithstanding, telecommuting and telework, may be applied interchangeably. In line with this, Clark, Karau & Michalisin (2012) see telecommuting as working from home or alternative place and communicating with the conventional work-place through electronic system rather than travelling to the central workplace. Employees reduce transport (commute) time by performing tasks normally done in the central workplace at off-site for some portions of their work schedule using ICT to interact with the organization. In this study therefore, teleworking and telecommuting are interchangeably used.

Tustin (2013) opines that telecommuting could be classified according to locations which include:

1. **Home based**: In this situation the employee telecommutes for one to three days a week and spends the remaining days at the work centre, which is now referred to as a hybrid model.

2. **Regional Centers** are special purpose telecommuting centers that may serve as extension of the work center, either used as a satellite centre, or neighbourhood centre or casual work centres.

Hamilton (2003) on the other hand classifies telecommuting according to time and context, whether it is initiated by the employers or employees:
Overcoming Workplace Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic

a) Full-time Telecommuting: telecommuters conduct all their work off the central-site with little or no physical interaction with managers and co-workers.

b) Part-time telecommuting: This as the name implies, is done on scheduled basis.

c) Formal/Employer initiated telecommuting has contractual agreement between the employer and the employee specifying off-site days, completion of tasks, evaluation, etc.

d) Information/Employee initiated telecommuting: this has no contractual agreement. The employee telecommutes as the need arises. Telecommuting therefore refers to substituting in person, physical presence at the workplace with remote working either from home, or any other place convenient for the employee for the continued operations of the task as given by the employer.

At this juncture, it is necessary to look at Models of Telecommuting, Academic Staff Roles and Impacts as developed by Campbell and McDonald (2007).

Figure 1: Model of telecommuting, academic staff roles and impacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Telecommuting Types</th>
<th>Telecommuting Processes</th>
<th>Academic Staff Roles</th>
<th>Impacts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Home base</td>
<td>Employer/Management Support (Decision maker)</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Mobile</td>
<td>ICT for the management of telecommuting</td>
<td>1. Delivering of lectures</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Satellite center</td>
<td>Government mechanism for management and support of telecommuting</td>
<td>2. Training, monitoring, evaluation &amp; report on students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Local center</td>
<td>ICT for the support of telecommuting</td>
<td>3. Learner’s support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Jellies</td>
<td>Employer support (Decision maker)</td>
<td>4. Counselling</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

|                      | Research                |                      |         |
|                     1. General | 1. General | 1. Travel reduction |
|                     2. Special | 2. Special | 2. Employee autonomy |

|                      | Community Services |                      |         |
|                     1. Committee Work | 1. Committee Work | 5. More time with the family |
|                     3. Documentation of community activities | 3. Documentation of community activities | 7. Good marital relationship |
|                     8. Reduction of disease infection | 8. Reduction of disease infection |         |

Source: Campbell and McDonald (2007: 818)
Given the model or descriptive construct outlined by Campbell and McDonald (2007: 818), it is seen that telecommuting has been a vehicle for reduction of travel time, increase in employee satisfaction and motivation, high performing academics, creation of a more cordial family environment and reduction of risk prone outward behaviours. This is given impetus as would be seen later by a majority of the respondents who valorised the immense benefits of telecommuting, noting that without it, academic activities would have come to a complete stop.

**Telecommuting in Nigeria**

Telecommuting in some sectors in Nigeria has been limited, and unrecognised or largely unknown. This is evident in the difficulty experienced by many staff in accepting online or e-learning. However, in private universities, a good number of academic staff are involved in telecommuting to perform some tasks. Evidently, some staff relay taped lectures to their students, use computer, Global System for Mobile-communication (GSM) etc. to perform office-related works or transmit information to their students or colleagues, hence, making work relevant to home/family or emerging situations (Abdulkareem & Mope, 2009). Telecommuting may have mitigated some of the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on the educational sector by helping lecturers, particularly those in private institutions not currently bogged down by the national strike embarked upon by the members of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the umbrella body of lecturers in Nigerian universities, to manage their roles and accomplish family and personal satisfaction. Roles conducive to telecommuting rely on ICT devices or information-base with minimal supervision. University academic staff being knowledgeable are expected to be adept in the use of ICT devices which make teaching interesting and enable the lecturers and students to interact as if they are in a regular classroom situation (Onyeukwu, Adeniyi & Amin, 2020). However, telecommuting is constrained by technological and organizational factors that make its adoption difficult in the workplace (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Despite the difficulties, telecommuting holds a lot of attraction to the educational sector, the family and the society at large during and after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. It is likely to be, even more, the revelation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nigeria started implementing ICT policy in 2001 after the National Information Technology Policy was approved in 2000 to guide telecommunications industry in Nigeria. The National Information Technology Development Agency Act of 2007 established the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) to ensure ICT sector development. The vision for the ICT sector is elaborated in the Nigeria Vision 20:2020 (2009) National Development Plan thus: “The increasing globalization driven by ICT makes it imperative for Nigeria as an emerging market to irreversibly consider the application and promotion of ICT strategy to facilitate its rapid growth and development.” The constituent parts argue that efficient ICT sector
would expand the Nigerian economy. It acknowledges poor digital knowledge across the country particularly “in knowledge generation, penetration of ICT, access to and usage of internet and telephone penetration (fixed and mobile) and physical infrastructure.” The objective of the National ICT Policy is to make ICT networks and services accessible to all, and to transform Nigeria into a knowledge-based economy (The Ministerial Committee on ICT Policy Harmonization Report, 2012).

The government has come to realise more the importance of ICT in its socio-economic development. Despite this, the situation has not substantially improved. Adeniyi (2016) maintains that most Nigerians lack access to Personal Computer (PC) or internet facilities. The International Telecommunications Union statistics reveals that PC penetration is at the ratio of 7 computers per 1000 Nigerians. Agyeman (2007) opines that the National Universities Commission (NUC) prescribes PC ownership for universities as follows: one to every four students; one to every two lecturers below the grade of Lecturer 1; one per Senior Lecturer, and one per Professor/Reader. While some universities, like the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, have achieved a better ratio for their faculty, the same cannot be said for the PC-to-student ratio.

Many years ago in 2004, the management of Nnamdi Azikiwe University made it compulsory for every lecturer to own a laptop computer. Also, lecturers and students had compulsory lectures/training in basic ICT. Obafémi Awolowo University, University of Nigeria,Nsukka, University of Ilorin and University of Ibadan, etc. have embarked on access to the Internet and application of ICT to all its services and academic research. The University of Jos also embarked on e-learning in addition to campus networking. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) established in 2002, is trying to establish computer-based study centers in all states of the federation in order to make tertiary education available to all citizens. However, most universities in Nigeria are yet to make ICT skills a requirement for their lecturers and graduating students. This is likely to affect the adoption of telecommuting in most universities in Nigeria. The ICT industry in Nigeria comprises the telecommunication sector; the Information Technology; the Postal service though, technological advances such as the social media have affected its dominant role, and the Broadcasting industry which is the most effective means of reaching large number of people simultaneously (Nigerian National Policy for Information Technology (IT) Use, 2012). Recent data show that ICT usage in Nigeria has substantially improved, there are about 92.3 million internet users and this figure is likely to reach 187.8 million in 2023. Internet penetration is expected to increase from 47.1 percent in 2018 to about 84.5 percent in 2023 with more than 50 million Nigerians acquiring the capacity to access the internet (Onyeukwu, Adeniyi & Amin, 2020). Those with this capacity are largely the academic staff. This is of immense benefit to telecommuting in teaching and learning.
Driving forces of telecommuting
Technological innovation has brought fundamental changes across the globe influencing human activities, society and world of work (Cross, 2015). Technology-aided communication has passed through the era of telegraph, telephone and radio and currently, aided by the computer technology which has more information packages in form of digital electronic that enhance information transmission. Social media, known as new media has become pervasive. Effective communication spurred by ICT has become imperative as modern organizations increase. Globally, employees, company professionals and business executives are engaging in telecommuting. Some organizations provide computers to their employees as bonuses rather than cash, believing that the computers could be used by the workers outside the work center.

Telecommuting is further influenced by globalization. Globalization describes the growing interdependence of peoples and countries (Global Policy Forum, 2005–2014) involving diffusion of ideas, practices and technologies in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away. Globalization ensures openness of national and international economies and greater integration. It has become evident more in its shortening of distances, that the world is now seen generally as a global village due to globalisation. Consequently, globalization is powered by technology, fueled by information and driven by knowledge (Tinio, 2011). The modern nature of work dominated by service industries is an indication that business activities through Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things (IoT) and manufacturing are now driven by ICT. Business documents have been taken over by computer files which transmit files to where they are needed. Workers are becoming increasingly information oriented as such they spend more time interacting with computers and other information technology. Consequently, some portions of their work are performed outside the work center. The nature of homes/families is undergoing fundamental changes and more employees are becoming more receptive to technology. Hence, the organizational landscape is likely to affect more employees in the post COVID-19 pandemic. Those who are not ICT compliant stand the risk of losing their jobs in the coming years. The labour market is likely to be seriously affected by the advancement of the 4th Industrial Revolution. The introduction of telecommuting would be beneficial to the employees, that is if they learn, and relearn, or unlearn, so as to be able to increase business competition and make productivity and employee satisfaction prime objectives (National Transportation Library, 1993).

The increasing adoption of automobile transportation has increased traffic pressure, and its consequences such as stress, road accidents, substantial consumption of gasoline and emissions from vehicles cause poor air quality. The world particularly, the industrialized nations, is seeking alternative means to improve its air quality and reduce global greenhouse emission. This may not be achieved only through measures such as emission control, improved transits, etc. more attention is directed to energy conservation at national and
Overcoming Workplace Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic

international levels. It is not surprising that there would be rise in telecommuting among individuals, businesses and governments as many countries are pushing interest of workers towards telecommuting (Cross, 2015). Indeed, working time, is actually becoming chaotic as traffic gridlock during rush hours (mornings and evenings) becomes commonplace. The man hours lost in traffic is unimaginable. The scenario in Lagos, Onitsha, Kano, Abuja and other big cities has been a serious concern.

Contingency theory

Work organisations are generally dynamic releasing outputs to the environment and receiving inputs from the environment. Organisations are therefore not closed systems, and the trajectory of organisations is also largely dependent on the situations, and its capacity to handle unexpected situations. Contingency theory is one of the frameworks for the study of organizational change. It holds that effective organizations deal with uncertainties, instabilities and fluid environment of the organization (Schoech, 2006). The theory, against the run of play from previous theories, claims that there is no best way to run organizations or make decisions. The optimal course of action depends on situations such as technology, clients, competitors, government policies, etc. The theory developed in the 1960s following the seminal works of Burns and Stalker (1961), Joan Woodward (1965), Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), Fiedler (1967) and Jelinek (1977). The theory contends that organizations are open systems, and therefore, management should modify workers’ roles according to task and the environment since there is no best way of organizing. The contingency theory dealt a fatal blow to the one best way thinking that hitherto dominated management thought. Situation dictates managerial action and approach hence, there is no single way of solving problem because workers and organizational goals differ (Morgan, 2007). It rejected wholesale the theses that one size fits all organisations, and rightly highlights the dangers and pitfalls of a single story as evident in the thinking of previous theories. The theory offers useful approach to organizational practices in relation to management variables such as professionalism and decision making, task management, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic that had ravaged the world, came as a thunderbolt, as it swept through the operations of most organisations requiring that management practitioners pressed the reset button, if their organisations would not become extinct. The contingency theory is useful in its understanding and prediction of unforeseen events and what should be done circumstantially. The paper deploys the analytical insights of the contingency theory to explain Telecommuting and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The study is essentially exploratory and qualitative, relying largely on library materials, secondary sources and some primary information, through anecdotes by concerned university academics in three private institutions in South Eastern Nigeria, namely Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu; Paul University,
Awka and Madonna University, Okija. 30 university academics, and 3 non-teaching university administrators were interviewed to provide information on the content, character, style of telecommuting by the Teaching Staff in the concerned universities.

Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu took off on 27 October, 2009. It is owned by the Catholic Diocese of Enugu. The university presently has five faculties and 19 departments. The teaching staff population of the university is 232.

Paul University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria is another faith based university which was granted license to operate as a university in 2009. Its formal takeoff was in 2010. The university is owned by the 55 Dioceses of the Anglican Communion in the South East. The university has three faculties and 17 departments. The number of teaching staff is 140.

Madonna University is a faith based private university founded by Reverend Father E. M. P. Edeh in 1999 on behalf of a Missionary Society known as Brothers of Jesus Christ the Saviour. Madonna University is a multi-campus university which has three campuses: Okija, Elele and Akpugo, located in serene rural areas with enough land for development of the university. Given the huge wage bill and low student enrolment, it is observed that the staff strength in private universities is not as great as in public universities where Teaching and non-Teaching staff are in their thousands. The main campus, Okija from which the interview respondents were drawn has a teaching staff strength of 99.

The universities are largely faith based private universities that have been in existence for over ten years, and present us with a highly relevant context for the research, given that they were able to operate during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (which covered the study period).

Given the severity of the ensuing lockdowns, the interview had to be conducted remotely through telephone using the staff list containing their phone numbers. The interviewers got the consent of those that were interviewed. The age of those interviewed varied from 31 to 68, with most being in their late forties. Among those interviewed were 3 professors, 5 associate professors, 10 senior lecturers, and 12 who belong to the junior teaching categories – Assistant Lecturer to Lecturer I. 3 non-teaching senior administrative staff from the Registry were also interviewed, bringing the total number of respondents to 33.

Table 1: Distribution of staff interviewed for the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Teaching Staff</th>
<th>Teaching Staff</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer I and below</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin Staff</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
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It was discovered that some of the lecturers were on adjunct appointment as they had full time regular appointments in the public universities (state and federal). The interview period lasted 63 days, and spanned from June through September, 2020. The interviews which were largely semi-structured, centred around the focal themes that underpinned the research work namely; the use of online virtual teaching and learning in the universities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown, by working from home and different locations, and the challenges and prospects of working outside the strict confines of the classroom and offices in person. This was necessary to unravel the changing trends in work behaviour occasioned by the novel Corona Virus Disease, and understand the reality facing scholarship in these climes. For as Bourdieu (1988) long revealed in his study of French Academicians, declaring the author’s viewpoint is the only possibility of unpacking the implicit criteria of ordinary experience and unpacking their own premises.

This approach is consistent with other studies which investigate work behaviour of different professional groups (Carollo & Solari, 2019; Barley, Bechky & Welson, 2016; Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Cohen, 2005) where the responses and available documents were analysed following the thematic approach. With the permission of the respondents, the interview responses were recorded, and transcribed manually. The participants were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings
The norm for Nigerian academics is to have their lecture schedules through official timetable dispersed through the various days in the week. In those classrooms, lecturers make their presentations, or what is known in Nigeria as delivering lectures physically, in person to students. This is what obtains in almost all Nigerian universities. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed all these.

Telecommuting embraces employees of various occupations working part or full time during normal business hours for which the commute is eliminated through performance of work from alternative location using electronic aid linked to the work-center (Tustin, 2013). The link could be employee to office, colleagues or online documents/information (Brown, 2010) to communicate with superiors, colleagues or customers (Mayo, Pastor, Gomez-Mejia & Cruz, 2009). Telecommuting could be online or offline and individually or collectively organized varying from few hours, some days to a week. This suggests that work is something you do, not some place you go (Hamilton, 2003) hence, the commuting time not the commuting costs makes telecommuting attractive. Assumption against telecommuting is that employees could engage in other ventures and pretend to be working. For academics, this appears unrealistic as the role of a teacher, ipso facto, connotes the existence of students. Teachers who telecommute have time allotted for their lectures, for instance, and during this time, students are expected to join the online learning real time. An academic staff member in one of the universities had this to say:
“I normally give my lecture on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9am – 11am, and it is usually through Zoom, where my students in the final year class join the lectures through the Registration ID and Password shared in advance. My Head of Department sometimes observes the lecture from the comfort of her home.”

(Lecturer, Godfrey Okoye University)

The Stanford Administrative Guide (2013) further reinforces this when it notes that staff are not permitted to engage in other businesses rather, it touches on issues of integrity, attitude, nature of work, skill and competence. This is because telecommuting is part of broad category of flexible work options available to employees (Allen, 2001; Clark, 2000). The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown across the nation prompted closure of the educational sector and substituting telecommuting for in-person services. The home or alternative work location could be equipped with satellite, cable television system and appropriate information technology to enable the staff interface with the students and institution’s system necessary for the job. This minimizes commuting by students and staff and simultaneously serves students in various locations as well as those unable to physically appear on campus.

Telecommuting could be more challenging in the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown which has brought difficulty to the society at large. Hitherto, employees saw telecommuting as a privilege rather than a way of working (Hamilton, 2003). This has changed as they are now demanded to give their lectures, interface with students online. Evidently, it enables academic staff to deal with responsibilities without disruption to work and mitigates the work-family conflict. Work-family conflict exists when an individual performs multiple roles (worker, spouse, parent, etc.) and the pressures from the different domains are incompatible or conflicting culminating in role conflicts (Hamilton, 2003; Akanji, 2012). Telecommuting reduces work-family conflict by providing control over work and family schedules. A lecturer whose spouse gave birth opined that he will now spend more time at home, “as I do my work from the house teaching my students, attending to their requests, and taking care of my darling” (Lecturer, Paul University).

However, some other staff feel differently about the positive outcome of Telecommuting with respect to reduction of work-family conflict. Some say that this has been aggravated following the lockdown and the propensity to work from home, is even more stressful, leading to increase in domestic quarrels and violence. “This one that we are both at home, for weeks, months now causes its own palaver. Office time is no longer there to visit to ease home tension. I worry o” (Female Lecturer, Madonna University).

Organization’s ability to telework depends on ICT infrastructure, organizational features, business environment and personnel proficiency (Neirotti, Paolucci & Raguseo, 2012). Factors that are crucial to telework include technological, organizational, environmental and family/home factors. Technological factor requires access to operative information, ability and
knowledge to perform the job since information systems support jobs that could be disaggregated from the central unit (Neirotti, Paolucci & Raguseo, 2012). These are obviously in short supply in the Nigerian University System, constituting a hindrance towards effective teaching and learning.

Organisational factors include scope, activities, human and technical capital. Organisations with knowledgeable and skilled human capital are more likely to adopt telecommuting as their jobs would not always require physical presence in the workplace. Capital intensive firms may not adopt telecommuting since the jobs would require physical presence for production or service delivery (Peters, Tijdens & Wetzels, 2001).

Environmental factors concern the extent environment can sustain growth, technological dynamics and propensity to telecommute. In this regard Martini, Laugen, Gastaldi & Corso (2012) believe that dynamic organizations would adopt work flexibility and decentralization. Universities are equally, dynamic organizations concerned with manpower development. Academic staff of some Universities such as Madonna University that operate multi-campuses and study centres could connect the campuses through telecommuting.

The family/home factors relate to family type, domestic relationship, number of children and other ambient family issues (Scott & Marshal, 2005) increase challenges facing most organizations and workers. However, it is arguable that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is likely to improve domestic relationship in most families at the expense of productivity. Telecommuting has abridged the expenses occasioned by the lockdown in the sense that it has sustained academic activities in some institutions through television, radio, virtual learning among others. For the single campus universities, the bottom line is that following the imposed COVID-19 protocols that bar large numbers of people from congregating in a place, the only option left for academic activities to go on is through online learning. This is what telecommuting for academic staff entails, to say the least.

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, University of South Africa (2013) conducted a survey on telecommuting among academic groups: the office-based academics and telecommuting academics. About 154 academics and 156 students were used in the study. The survey shows that 80.6% academic telecommuters indicated high satisfaction while 19.4% was less satisfied. Academic telecommuters confirmed that they worked more productively, concentrated better and had less stress which contributed to the overall work quality and healthier workers. 76.2% academic telecommuters indicated that the major challenge was network connectivity, 19.0% cited lack of office equipment as a major impediment to telecommuting while 4.8% cited bad posture as a result of working at makeshift offices. Social interaction with colleagues was key factor missed for not working at the office. This also was evident in the response of one of the teaching staff at Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu who enthused “What I miss from in person, physical presence is the laughter, conviviality and camaraderie. You can’t buy this working from home”.
The survey presented high support for telecommuting and that telecommuting practices enhance productivity, dedicated and satisfied workforce (Tustin, 2013). The study indicates that telecommuting academics encouraged learning and inspired students. Equally, Hill, Hawkins, Ferris & Weitzman (2001) found that employees with job flexibility work longer hours as outcome of work satisfaction. Telework survey on 242 employees of a Chinese Travel Agency by Stanford and Beijing Universities found that within 9 months telecommuters increased their output by 13.5% and achieved higher job-satisfaction (http://wikipedia.org/wiki/telecommuting). Peters, Tijdens & Wetzels (2001) in their study in Amsterdam found that out of 881 respondents, 466 (52.9%) had preference for telecommuting.

Similarly, the respondents expressed mixed feelings with respect to their level of satisfaction. One respondent in Godfrey Okoye University opined “I am happy with what I have been able to achieve. Although there are challenges of network, but I managed to cover my course outline even with the pandemic” (Male, 49). Another respondent however differed, noting that the usual banter between colleagues, and even among students was absent. This made the interaction to be too formal since you are working strictly to hold your lectures within the allotted time. “I am not too pleased with the online lecture thing” (Female, 37). Another said, “This is like starting school afresh, from the scratch. You need to have some knowledge of ICT for you to enjoy and be satisfied with your work under this new environment” (Female, Paul University, 64). Another staff member of Madonna University said, “Some of us here are analogue” (Male, 67).

Access to infrastructure may be a problem, as one respondent noted, “Yes, it is true that students in private universities are usually those whose parents are rich, and therefore can have android phones, what of those who may not have these devices? How will they cope?” It therefore becomes an issue of concern when you deal with students from very diverse backgrounds. The problem of bandwidth is one that is of huge concern. Even the private universities with limited number of student enrolment are experiencing difficulties, universities or colleges that have tens of thousands of students, and with decrepit, unreliable technological infrastructure, distance learning may be a nightmare. For several staff too, home environment may not be conducive to carry out their academic activities. With primary/secondary school going children at home due to the forced closure of all schools, this may be a distraction. One respondent complained bitterly that “with very young children at home, and not having the services of house helps, working from home has been troubling” (Female, Paul University). This is understandable for young families, as the familial home environment is subtly invaded by the officialdom of office bureaucratic activities.

Given the demographics of the student population in private universities, where most reside in cities, urban centres the problem of electricity (that is mostly non-existent in rural areas) is somehow overcome. Besides, majority of these students as stated earlier have parents with high socio-economic status
which enables them to meet the high tuition and other fees. One wonders what the scenario will be for students in public universities.

Criticisms have been levelled against telecommuting that appears justified is the permeability of work-family roles. Hawkins, Soe, Raghuram & Wiesenfeld (2004) maintain that work-family boundary flexibility is regulated by telecommuting since it enables employees harmonize demands of work and family. Boundary flexibility is the degree to which the location and timing of work are under the employee’s control (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000). Work flexibility mitigates the effects of permeability by allowing employees to schedule work optimally to minimize work-family interference. Attractiveness of telecommuting derives from commuting time since time gained is devoted to additional working hours (Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001). Improved productivity in form of quality teaching is probably the best benefit of telecommuting in the academic sector because performing tasks remotely reduces disruptions and increases productivity by modifying work environment to ensure effectiveness. Isolation is often identified as a weakness to telecommuting especially where collaboration is required. This could affect career development and office dynamics. Indeed, most companies use different approaches to address the problems such as regular briefings, phone calls, meetings, description of monitoring and evaluation of telecommuters (McCloskey & Igbaria, 2003). While most public universities have lost ample time, some private universities have continued with their academic calendar barely affected through telecommuting. The private universities have concluded lectures and their examinations, preparing for online external defence of their projects/dissertations. They also hold their Senate and Departmental meetings online. “We have since concluded our lectures, and to a great extent are in line with our academic calendar for 2019/2020” (Admin Staff, Madonna University).

The pressure of modern life, traffic pressure, work, commute time, etc. impact on work-family relationships that could result to strains such as spouse battering, drug habits, depression, health problems, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and its effect such as boredom, isolation, social distancing among others may have adversely affected employees and productivity. Telecommuting was adopted to address some challenges of the pandemic lockdown such as ensuring that organisations do not completely collapse and continued provision of critical services.

The fact that these private universities continued to operate through telecommuting in the main lends credence to the increasing relevance and utility of telecommuting. Its successes compel a redefinition of work, as some academics are already eulogising on the myriad achievements made possible by telecommuting. As one respondent asserted “Our students have not really missed much, infact they are happy with their studies and programme. I just finished my courses this semester. If not for COVID, I will take my vacation and travel abroad” (Female Lecturer, Madonna University).
Telecommuting may be the new normal in developing countries where problems such as unemployment, instability, labour unrest, transportation chaos, etc. often occur. Most African countries lack competitive abilities needed in global socio-economic affairs. This reality may be one of the major reasons for low performance of most organizations in Africa. Nigeria could be better off by embracing telecommuting which is capable of enhancing teaching and learning (Anugwom, 2006). Such innovation unarguably would reduce industrial disharmony, and improve social relationship in the workplace as well as production processes (Okey & Onyishi, 2011). For instance, organization’s computer network could be linked to the staff home or satellite centre which serves as performance driven mechanism to achieve higher productivity.

Isolation was considered a major problem faced by telecommuters (Cross, 2015) but this has been disproved with the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Telecommuting had been adopted to provide support for employees by generating psychological commitment which lowers boredom (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Organizational factors such as managerial control and supervision problems that were considered impediment to telecommuting because of employers’ apprehension that it could increase vulnerability of the organization (Tung, Palvia, Huei, YeMeng & Yee, 2012) equally have been allayed since no report has emerged from organisations that telecommute in the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The implication is that telecommuting is a veritable work mechanism that could help academic staff to perform their roles and stay healthy in the post COVID-19 pandemic.

Workers often express apprehension to work innovations such as the introduction of new technology (teaching devices) and other changes in work behaviour (working from home) that have not been tried out before. Besides, telecommuting involves information handling which many employees are not equipped to handle because they are not ICT compliant, as commonly said in Nigeria. Also some employees are not covered by the formal bargaining machinery which exposes many to managerial manipulation (Stanford Administrative Guide, 2013). Evidence suggests that policies guiding ICT in Nigeria are not comprehensive to deal with ICT-employee related issues (The Ministerial Committee on ICT Policy Harmonization Report, 2012). Trade unions are often cautious not to be involved on issues outside their statutory functions, although the gamut of events outside the formal workplace have a way of impacting on the wellbeing and wellness of employees. Thus, analogue teaching methods are still applied in most universities across the nation. This may not be in sync with the push to embed technological application and innovation. These inadequacies have been addressed by most countries through legislation, cheap production of ICT equipment, steady power supply, human resource development and digital literacy. Academic pedagogy is likely to change in the very near future given the promising successes of telecommuting in private universities during the pandemic occasioned by COVID-19.

Telecommuting would enable workers who have health challenges or are experiencing different bouts of illness, to be as productive as their condition
allows them. This further benefits the organisation because it quarantines the sick worker, making it less likely for the illness to ravage other personnel. In event of crisis such as pandemic, terrorist attack, or fire outbreak, telecommuting increases the survival of such agency since the workers can continue operations from alternative work locations (Cross, 2015; Tung, Palvia, Huei, YeMeng & Yee, 2012). The future of work is becoming increasingly information driven, therefore jobs that require manual strength are becoming less common and physical location less important. Similarly, telecommuting makes learning student centered, removes undue lecturer-student relationships which have been a contentious issue, as the legislative upper chamber in Nigeria, the Senate passed a bill on sexual harassment in Nigerian universities.

Conclusion

The experience of the global pandemic has compelled work organisations to think out imaginative ways of dealing with the workforce and ensuring the smooth running and operations of work organisations, universities inclusive. The study has shown how some private universities responded to the forced closure of universities and workplaces by adopting online learning. These experiences have been varied but impactful. It is now evident that teachers can now deliver their lectures, from anywhere, in any setting, whether in person, or far removed from actual classroom situation. It is also clear that the resort to online learning was not planned, but a byproduct of managerial decisions of the different private universities to respond to an emergency, which hitherto had not been experienced in Nigeria.

Perhaps the size of the student population, within acceptable Teacher-Student Ratios (TSR) helped in making the online learning less cumbersome. It is hoped that the universities will build on what has been achieved by putting in place the necessary technological infrastructure that will make telecommuting a pleasurable experience. Rather than abate, COVID-19 is intensifying, following the onslaught of the second wave and with a likelihood of future lockdowns and national closures. Universities, whether public or private should develop a masterplan to deal with these unintended events, without which in such scenarios, we shall witness a total ransoming of teaching and learning. In other words, necessary provisions, not only in gaining access to networks, but improving the technological backbone that can drive these operations seamlessly.

As has already been observed, it would be illogical to ask someone who does not have internet access, or own the basic computer/telephones to be part of an online classroom. It will be like going for a horserace without a horse, or going to play football without the ball. This will be the achilles heel of telecommuting in Nigerian Universities.

It is imperative that aside the provision of infrastructure, there should be periodic workshops/seminars on online and distance learning. This shall adequately enable teaching staff to be properly exposed to the nuances and
workings of online platforms. Good orientation programme for staff is a route that should be taken.

Telecommuting, should not be encouraged only during periods of pandemic or lockdown, as there are positive outcomes associated with working from home. The permeability between workplace and home environment is further strengthened by sustaining the link between telework and one’s daily lifestyle. The works by Ferreira & Oliveira (2018), Thulin, Vilhemson & Johanson (2019) are eloquent testimonies to the critical balance between family and work (Tavares et al., 2020). It is, given the right environment, a plausible way to undertake work, particularly in universities.

Telecommuting is likely to become embedded in the near future as a pattern of work, even in a hybrid arrangement, where on certain days of the week, employees are allowed to work from home, and on other days have physical contact with the students. This, in our mind is a win – win situation for both staff and students, where annuities of travel etc., and meeting up with other social relationships within the workplace are managed harmoniously. A whole lot of changes are being observed in the Nigerian University System, where Conferences, Seminars and Workshops, Post Graduate PhD and MSc defence are virtual, signposting the new normal following the ongoing ravaging effects of the novel corona virus disease. The paranoia usually associated with telecommuting in developing societies is gradually being eviscerated. The end of the ten-month old strike by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the umbrella body of teachers in Nigerian Universities, may likely see a shift towards embracing telecommuting to meet up with lost time even in public universities. The COVID-19 lockdown and the ASUU strike combined, have unwittingly, and inadvertently made a case for telecommuting in the Nigerian University System. Given the dearth of resources in universities in Nigeria like office spaces for staff, where several lecturers are hemmed in, in one office, inadequate classrooms and hostels with outrageous costs, particularly those off campus, decrepit furniture, etc., telecommuting may be an appealing option for University Governing Councils and government to explore.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed the vulnerability, lack of preparedness of most federal institutions as they lack the most basic and fundamental devices necessary for telework and online or distance learning. As noted by the World Trade Organisation (2020: 1), “the increased use of online services during the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated technology and connectivity disparities, as online classes are not feasible for students without computers, and telework is not an option for employees without broadband.”

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Overcoming Workplace Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic

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