Article title: Quality, Context, and the Repositioning of Continuous Knowledge-Based Innovation in the Learner Support Frameworks of ODL: An African Perspective

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Quality, Context, and the Repositioning of Continuous Knowledge-Based Innovation in the Learner Support Frameworks of ODL: An African Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, we question the assumptions related to the increasing exertion of continuous innovation within decentralised support structures for learners in open and distance learning (ODL).

In 2011, 26 decentralised centres of learning initiated a standardised national quality process in the Department of Tuition and Facilitation of Learning at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Its purpose was primarily to foreground and explore quality support models within learner support services, outside of academic and departmental support directorates. In an attempt to standardise services, the importance of innovation and remodelling of support frameworks was then considered based on the four generative elements mentioned by Anand, Gardner and Morris (2017) in knowledge-based and/or continuous innovation. These four generative elements are socialised agency, differentiated expertise, defensible turf, and organisational support (Anand, Gardner, and Morris 2017).

Knowledge-based innovation is premised on the assertions made by Martin-de Castro (2015) referring to knowledge related to resources that may form part of technological innovation based on the dynamic capabilities within “knowledge management, organisational learning, intellectual capital” and continuous innovations (Martin-de Castro 2015). However, amid the work of Anand, Gardner and Morris (2017) and the advocacy of dynamic capabilities needed to ensure dynamic and continuous innovation one critical element was not included, namely, the overarching element of regional context.

In the past five years, context and innovation have become the most critical, dominant and inclusionary themes throughout decentralised staff and student reflections and submitted document interrogations. These conversations and reviews led to the realisation that it was the regional context that would ultimately dictate the pace of knowledge-based and continuous innovation, in line with the conceptual and institutional forecasting of the Unisa institutional Agenda of 2030.
In this article, we use a qualitative research methodology and explore the linkages between knowledge-based and continuous innovation and the framework of previous and existing quality governance models in learner support. In addition, we explain the literature, document and policy analysis procedures in the context of actual research experiences.

The research findings suggest that, despite institutional pressures to encourage throughput, retention and impact analyses in learner support and spaces of innovation should be based in drawing connections and socialised agency. This should be done by using regional expertise and context as situational resources and finding ways to harness closer collaboration and to enhance institutional support to complement innovation in decentralised and/or regional contexts.

**Keywords:** continuous innovation; knowledge-based innovation; learner support; quality; open distance learning

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