Chapter 8

South Africa

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Introduction

Widening access was and still is one of the foundational characteristics of distance education (Peters, 2001), increasingly optimising the affordances of technology (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Kilfoil, 2015a). While the affordances of online distance education are not disputed, current evidence seems to suggest that there is a real danger that online distance education could increase, rather than decrease inequalities (Rohs & Ganz, 2015; World Bank, 2016). In discussing the affordances but also the limitations of educational technologies, we cannot underestimate or ignore the role of context. We are “condemned to context” (Tessmer & Richey, 1997, p. 88) and we ignore the variety of factors indigenous to a particular context at our own peril. The proposal that “[c]ontext is everything” (Jonassen, 1993, in Tessmer & Richey, 1997, p. 86) therefore provides a useful interpretive lens on this overview of the evolution of online distance education in the South African *higher education* context.

In the South African context, it is impossible to understand and assess the state (and future) of online distance higher education without due consideration of the history of education prior to the first democratic elections in 1994 and various attempts to address the continuing inter-generational legacy of apartheid (Badat, 2005; Baijnath & Butcher, 2015). As a result, South African higher education is “sandwiched between systemic contextual problems inherited from past educational policies ... and a generation of limitless possibilities” inherent in increasing access to a range of emerging technologies (Bozalek & Ng’ambi, 2015, p. 3).

In the context of South African higher education, the evolution of correspondence distance education to *online* distance education is a fairly recent and emerging phenomenon. Currently distance education (at the most still off-line/correspondence) as

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a subsystem to higher education in South Africa contributes up to 40% of headcount students and approximately 30% of full-time equivalent students (DHET, 2014b). Online distance education is, however, foreseen to expand as more and more traditional campus-based higher education institutions provide online learning opportunities (DHET, 2014b).

In order to present a national, but also critical overview of online distance education in South Africa, it is vital to map the evolution of distance education in South Africa with special reference to the historical role and mandate of the University of South Africa (Unisa). I will then discuss the re-imagining of the South African post-school system as envisioned by the “White paper for post-school education and training” (DHET, 2014a) before engaging with the “Policy for the provision of distance education in South African universities in the context of an integrated post-school system” (DHET, 2014b). I will briefly discuss the provisions and implications of these provisions for online distance education before concluding with some examples of the different nuances in online distance education provision by private and public providers.

Notes on the Research Methodology

This analysis focuses on a directed content analysis (e.g., Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of policy and regulatory framework documents referring to (online) distance education, the websites of public and private higher education institutions and personal communication. The sampling strategy involved convenient sampling, analysing publicly available documents and websites and communicating with a number of institutional role-players (such as the South African Institute for Distance Education, SAIDE) and individuals in various higher education institutions for input (see acknowledgements). This chapter does not attempt to present a comprehensive multiple-case study analysis of the forms and nuances of online distance education provision, but rather use a selection of institutions (public and private) to illustrate key trends.

The first draft of this chapter was sent to a number of individuals for comments and verification of the analysis. Respondents’ input and suggestions were incorporated and are acknowledged. Though care was taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, I acknowledge that another researcher may have emphasised different elements or chosen a different approach.

Limitations to This Study

Except for the limitations already acknowledged, it is important to note that the data were collected in the middle of 2016 to the end of 2016. I acknowledge that there may have been developments since the end of 2016. This chapter focuses predominantly

on post-school distance and online provision and do not take into account distance and online provision on school level (see, for example, Niemann, 2017).

A Brief Overview of the Evolution of (Online) Distance Education in South Africa

The Early Beginnings

Distance education in South Africa is synonymous with the evolution of Unisa. Unisa is one of the mega universities in the world with a student count of close to 400,000 (Bajinath & Butcher, 2015). Unisa has evolved in three relatively distinct phases—first as an examining body (called the University of the Cape of Good Hope in 1873), followed by being a correspondence institution in 1946 with the establishment of a Division for External Studies (Boucher, 1973) and then merging with two other distance education providers in 2004 (Ngengebule, 2003).

In 1980, Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) was established as the second public distance education institution in South Africa, followed in 1981 by Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) as a unit within a contact institution, namely Vista University. In terms of *private* distance education, the first to be established was INTEC College “targeting students that required skills development, vocational training and personal growth training” (Ngengebule, 2003, p. 3). Other early private providers included Lyceum College (1917), Rapid Results College (1928), Success College (1940) and Damelin College (1948)—the latter using a range of full-time, part-time opportunities. It is worth mentioning that distance education provision at this time was guided by the Correspondence Colleges Act (1965) which only applied to private provision and created a kind of self-regulating private sub-system (Davis, Goh, Malcolm, & Uhl, n.d.). Ngengebule (2003) points to the fact that when Unisa was established as a *public* distance education provider in 1946, the move was met with fierce opposition from these private sector providers (Ngengebule, 2003).

In 2001 the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) was published by the Ministry of Education allaying fears “by recognising the rapidly blurring distinction between contact and distance education programme provision resulting from a significant range of media used in education delivery resulting in the continuum of educational provision ranging from *pure* correspondence to face-to-face” (Ngengebule, 2003, p. 11; emphasis added). The NPHE also recognised the “increasing number of distance education programmes [that] were being offered by face-to-face institutions—also as a result of changes in information and communications technology and the search for cost-efficiency” (Ngengebule, 2003, p. 11). Already in 2001, the NPHE warned that distance education was not the panacea for the various challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa. Also of importance is the fact that up to 2002 there was a moratorium on face-to-face institutions that prevented them from offering distance education programmes. With the moratorium lifted, all higher education

providers could offer distance education on a number of conditions. Mays (2016) point to the fact that the Council of Higher Education put mechanisms in place to ensure the quality of these provisions. Davis et al. (n.d.) state that in 2001 there were 65 institutions that provided distance learning in higher education. It can safely be assumed that most (if not all) of these offerings would have been correspondence education or at the most correspondence plus a range of media and online support.

In 2004 the three public distance education providers, namely Unisa, TSA and VUDEC were merged as one, dedicated, public, comprehensive distance education provider, Unisa (Badat, 2005; Blunt, 2006; Jansen, 2004). Already in 2005 it was foreseen that “any dedicated distance institution should not attempt, in terms of provision, to meet *every* higher education need, but should concentrate on areas where there is express national, social and educational need, and where economies of scale can be achieved” (Badat, 2005, p. 194; emphasis in the original). Re-imagining distance education served the explicit cause as to provide “opportunities for social advancement for historically and socially disadvantaged social groups through equity of access, opportunity, and outcomes” (Badat, 2005, p. 194).

Re-imagining Post-school Education in South Africa

In 2014 the South African post-school education landscape consisted of 23 public universities (with two more being established in 2014); 50 public technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges (formerly known as further education and training [FET] colleges); public adult learning centres (soon to be absorbed into the new community colleges); and several private post-school institutions (registered private FET colleges and private higher education institutions). There were also Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), a National Skills Fund (NSF) and various regulatory bodies responsible for qualifications and quality assurance in the post-school system such as the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and Quality Councils (DHET, 2014a). The “White Paper for post-school education and training” (DHET, 2014a) stipulates a number of aims for the future of post-school education in South Africa, *inter alia*:

1. a post-school system that can assist in building a fair, equitable, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa;
2. expanded access, improved quality and increased diversity of provision;
3. a post-school education and training system that is responsive to the needs of individual citizens, employers in both public and private sectors, as well as broader societal and developmental objectives (p. xi).

One of the strategies to attain the above objectives is to “...encourage all universities to expand online and blended learning as a way *to offer niche programmes*” (DHET, 2014a, p. xvi; emphasis added). The White Paper categorises e-learning “on a continuum, ranging through categories including digitally supported, digitally dependent, Internet-supported, Internet-dependent and fully online” (2014a, p. 49).

It furthermore defines its vision for blended and online learning as follows: “The DHET will also encourage all universities to expand online and blended learning as a way to offer *niche programmes*, especially at *postgraduate level*, to those who are unable to attend full-time programmes, either due to their employment status or their geographical distance from a campus” (DHET, 2014a, p. 51; emphasis added). The role of online learning is therefore very clearly defined (and possibly limited) to the provision of *niche programmes*, especially on postgraduate level. It is important to note that state funding for distance education programmes is far less than fully residential offerings. There is also a conflation between online courses and online programmes or qualifications. The regulatory framework refers to the latter and not the former. *This raises the possibility to have a fully online course as part of a non-distance programme or qualification* (Czerniewicz, 2016). In the context of this chapter, it is therefore almost impossible to get a true reflection of the exact penetration of online distance education.

In 2014 the DHET also published the “Policy for the provision of distance education in South African universities in the context of an integrated post-school system.” To understand the factors that resulted in this Policy, it is necessary to point out that there was an increasing realisation of the impact of the convergence between distance education and face-to-face modes of delivery (Glennie, 2013) owing to, but not limited to the affordances of technology, assumptions about the cost of distance and online education provision, and increasing competition. Using the notion of geolocation of the *site of learning* as main variable, Glennie (2013) points to the different possibilities in the range from campus-based education with no digital support, to campus-based with digital support, to campus-based with Internet support, to remote or distance education that is Internet-dependent to fully online and distributed.

Despite (or at least amid) the increasing convergence and blurring of the boundaries between traditional face-to-face and (online) distance education, distance education provision is still seen as “a distinct subset of provision” (DHET, 2014b, p. 6). The Policy (DHET, 2014b) recognises the fact that the post-school sector has to expand dramatically and that access to ICT is not yet ubiquitous and the costs of access not always affordable to large sections of the population. It is interesting to note that the Policy does not refer to online as an essential part of distance education provision (DHET, 2014b, p. 11), but online learning is *not* excluded (see Fig. 8.1).

The Policy does not *exclude* online delivery, but opens up the space to include a range of possibilities for the use of an “appropriate combination of different media” (DHET, 2014b, p. 11). The Preamble makes it clear that the Policy is committed not only to the “appropriate integration of ICT to enhance distance education provision in both public and private universities as well as other post-schooling institutions” but also commits the government to “ensure that every post schooling student has reasonable access to affordable connectivity” (p. 7).

Addressing the increasing convergence of, or blurring of, the boundaries between different forms of delivery and increasing access to ICT, the Policy illustrates different options of technology-enabled learning as follows (Fig. 8.1).

Figure 8.1 illustrates three of the many possibilities envisioned by the Policy (DHET, 2014b, p. 9). Position ‘A’ presents distance education that is digitally *sup-*

Fig. 8.1 An overview of different modes of delivery (adapted from DHET, 2014b, p. 9)

ported, while position ‘B’ presents a distance education scenario that is *fully online*. Position ‘E’ represents the possibility of a campus-based offering that is Internet-dependent with fully online elements.

In terms of the future development of these different options, the Policy (DHET, 2014b) foresees that the two main descriptions of delivery namely ‘campus-based’ and ‘distance’ will be a reality in the South African context for the “foreseeable future” (p. 9). In order to provide some more specific guidance with regard to the classification of the different nuances or possibilities as envisioned in Fig. 8.1, the Policy (DHET, 2014b) states that the notion of ‘distance education’ will specifically refer to a form of educational provision where “students spend 30% or less of the stated Notional Learning hours in undergraduate courses ..., and 25% or less in courses” at honours and postgraduate courses that are “staff-led, campus-based structured learning activities” (p. 9).

The unique contribution and purpose of distance education as clarified above is therefore foreseen to

- Widen flexible access and meaningful, successful participation in post-school education.
- Provide “low enrolment niche programmes that have a high impact and a required by small numbers of students across the country” (DHET, 2014b, p. 12).
- Offering opportunities to students at contact institutions who need one or two outstanding modules to complete their qualifications.

- Find ways to recognise prior learning as part of widening access and create space for alternative learning pathways into post-school education.

Getting to a New Dispensation

In order to get a glimpse not only of how online distance education will continue to evolve in the South African post-school landscape, the Policy (DHET, 2014b) addresses, *inter alia* planning, funding, and quality assurance.

Planning

The Policy (DHET, 2014b) confirms Unisa “as the dedicated public provider of distance education in South Africa” while supporting the possibility that other institutions, (both private and public) and a variety of partnerships, may offer distance education programs that adhere to the guidelines in said Policy. In the light of concerns about quality and lack of student success in international and South African distance education, the Policy (DHET, 2014a, 2014b) emphasises the need to use student success and completions rates as measures of the efficiency and effectiveness of distance education provision.

Funding

Funding is a key steering mechanism in expanding the provision of distance education. The Policy (DHET, 2014b) commits to “exploit the potential of large-scale provision to reduce per student costs” (p. 13), while emphasising that national accreditation processes will ensure that providing institutions understand the costs (infrastructure and operational) of ensuring the efficient use of appropriate ICTs.

Traditional print-based or correspondence distance education, owing to its exploitation of scale, has always been portrayed as cheaper than traditional educational modalities. With the increasing move to online distance education, there are claims that the iron triangle of access, cost and quality is ‘broken’ and that online distance education can achieve high quality teaching while, at the same time, lower cost and widen participation (Daniel, Kanwar, & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2010a, 2010b). There are, however, other authors who question these claims. For example, Power and Gould-Morven (2011), suggest that the iron triangle has become “dated and fundamentally unworkable, an industrial solution in a post-industrial period” (p. 24). Hülsman (2016) questions the notion that online distance education is, necessarily, cheaper. Hülsman (2016) moots the point that distance education is cost-efficient in terms of “*cost per student*” but that distance education cannot “sustain the claim of being cost-effective in terms of *cost per graduate*” (p. 5; emphasis in the original) (also see Rumble, 2014).

The argument pertaining to the lowering of costs owing to economies of scale applies to a specific form of correspondence and industrialised distance education characterised by “the absence of responsive interaction at a distance” (Hülsman, 2016, p. 5). The inclusion of regular responsive human interaction in online distance education courses cancels the positive effects of economies of scale. Interestingly, the moment (online) distance education moves to a more interactive form of instruction and support, the purported notion of online distance education as a cheaper option becomes clear.

While the costs of online interaction are certain, Hülsman (2016) asks the critical question regarding the benefits of increased interaction specifically with regard to increased success rates. “The benefits that may accrue from STI [Student Teacher Interaction] are more uncertain than early enthusiasts would have wanted to believe. Much depends on the subject matter, educational goals, class size and instructor competence, but also on the attitude of the learners” (Hülsman, 2016, p. 18).

Considering the claims in the Policy (2014b) it is clear that the potential for lowering costs in large-scale provision can, in all probability, only be delivered *in a particular form* of distance education with very little human support and interaction. In the light of ample evidence of the under-prepared nature of distance education students in the South African higher, distance and online education contexts that necessitate (human) support and frequent feedback, the cost implications of widening access through distance education has been underestimated (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011).

Ensuring Quality

All qualifications (whether offered through campus-based or distance education) in the South African higher education context are accredited and quality assured by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE). With the widening of distance education provision, the Policy (DHET, 2014b) is clear that in cases where providers want to offer existing qualifications through distance education, that these programmes need to be re-accredited based on the minimum standards required by the National Association for Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA).

In 2014 the CHE published “Distance higher education programmes in a digital era: Good practice guide” (CHE, 2014) that aims to “assist those involved in programme design and review at institutional level as well as CHE programme evaluators involved in the accreditation process of distance education programmes, whether technology supported or not” (p. viii). The Guide (CHE, 2014) provides information and direction with regard to curriculum design, development and delivery, teaching and learning, assessment, partnerships and collaborations and the management of distance education provision in a digital era.

Some Examples Illustrating the Potential and Tensions in Moving Towards Online Distance Education

I now provide some brief examples of the emergence and evolution of online distance education in South African, private and public post-school education. In 2005, Badat stated that the number of private providers in South African higher education was still relatively small and distance education is primarily delivered by the public universities and universities of technology, and there was no significant change since then (e.g. DHET, 2014b). Online distance education is foreseen to expand as more and more traditional campus-based higher education institutions provide online distance learning opportunities (DHET, 2014b).

This section is structured as follows: I will first briefly share two examples of the state of online distance education in private higher education institutions, before discussing a selection of public higher education institutions.

Regenesys is an example of a *private* higher education provider that provides formal and short learning programmes primarily in business education (Regenesys, 2015). At Monash University all courses “are [currently] enhanced through the use of technology including having an online presence” (Cloete, 2016) and “all courses have been scheduled for a purposed blended redesign between 2015 and 2019 in order to ensure we reach an institutional objective of providing students in all programmes with at least a 25% online experience” (Cloete, 2016). Though “a number of our hybrid programmes have a fairly substantial amount of online delivery, none of these programmes currently have 30% or less (undergraduate) or 25% or less (post graduate) of their notional hours in campus based staff-led face to face contact, and thus don’t meet the DHET 2014b criteria for online distance education” (Cloete, 2016).

While all courses at Stellenbosch University (SUN) have an online presence, the university currently offers no “programmes via online distance education as per definition of the DHET, 2014b” (Van der Merwe & Bosman, 2016). SUN is, however, launching its first 4-week MOOC “Teaching for change: an African philosophical approach” on 19 September (BDLive, 2016; FutureLearn, 2016). The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) currently offers a Masters’ degree in Occupational Hygiene using a combination of contact and (online) distance learning (Wits, 2016). Recently Wits announced that it will offer a “suite of online course offerings” and these will “be made available over the next three years” (BDLive, 2016). The University of Kwazulu-Natal (UKZN) currently offers “two completely online Masters programmes coordinated by the Discipline of Pharmaceutical Sciences, viz. Masters of Health Sciences and Masters of Pharmacy. The programme has students from different parts of Africa and the Middle East” (Suleman, 2016). For the last number of years *one* of the modules in the Honours degree in Information Systems was offered online (Blewitt, 2016).

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is South Africa’s premier research and public, campus-based, higher education institution, currently ranked first on the African continent (US News, 2016). UCT’s primary focus is foreseen to remain in the formal

education arena “increasingly including fully online courses as part of traditional F2F programmes, but expanding to fully online postgraduate diplomas and degrees” (Price, 2015). Since 2014, six online distance mode qualifications have been approved with a further 14 postgraduate qualifications “either in planning, in discussion phase, in completion phase or at some approval level” (Price, 2015). UCT furthermore offers 60 short courses online (Price, 2015). UCT was the first African and South African university to develop and offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (htxt.africa, July 2014). These MOOCs have “no entry requirements and are not for university credit” (Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, 2016). Among the MOOCs offered are “Medicine and the arts: humanising healthcare”, “Education for all: disability, diversity and inclusion”, “What is a mind?”, “Understanding clinical research: behind the statistics”, and “Climate change mitigation in developing countries” (also see Walji, Deacon, Small, & Czerniewicz, 2016).

The University of Pretoria (UP) is a public campus-based higher education institution with a student enrolment in 2016 of 56,853, including 9327 distance education students. The University of Pretoria’s Unit for Distance Education (UDE) within the Faculty of Education has been in existence since 2002. Since 2007 UP has adopted a blended learning approach based on a learning management system (LMS), currently Blackboard™ incorporating Blackboard Mobile, Collaborate and Analytics. Students’ learning is supported by technology with more than 81.95% of the undergraduate courses having an online presence in 2014 (Department of Education Innovation, 2015). With regard to fully online courses, UP has at least six fully online Master’s programme, the one in Veterinary Science running for more than a decade already. With the new hybrid model of teaching and learning adopted in 2014, there has been a major drive towards more fully online Master’s programmes. The University has had small, private/professional or self-paced online courses since 2014, offered mainly through Enterprises at UP, and they were branded and launched as professional online development (POD) courses in 2015. Some will be MOOCs but others are commercial continuous professional development courses. In 2014, the Faculty of Veterinary Science launched its completely online Open Educational Resources (OER) platform for continuing professional development (Kilfoil, 2015b) (also see Zawacki-Richter, 2005).

In June 2012 North-West University (NWU) established a Unit for Open Distance Learning (UODL) on its Potchefstroom Campus. Classes are presented by facilitators or lecturers in contact mode or via interactive whiteboard. Currently 34,000 students are registered as open distance students with the majority Educational Science students and smaller numbers for Health Education and Theology students. Several other programmes from the Faculties of Arts, Economic and Management Sciences and Natural Science will be offered as distance education programmes from 2017. The UODL collaborates with the Open Learning Group (OLG) (Open Learning Group, 2016). In their collaboration with NWU, OLG is an *administrative* collaborator while the NWU is responsible for the academic programmes and especially the quality of these programmes (Combrinck, 2016).

Issues impacting on moving to fully online distance education are, amongst others, infrastructure and limited bandwidth, political and cultural factors, student access to devices, a commitment to opening content, fostering a commitment to new learning models and developing staff capacity (Bajjnath & Butcher, 2015). While all Unisa courses on undergraduate and postgraduate level have an online presence with digitised learning resources and a variation and scope for interactivity, of specific interest is the ‘signature courses’ that are fully online (no print-based materials). These are compulsory courses offered on entry-level and students have to pass the college-specific signature module before they are allowed to graduate. Each of the six academic colleges has its own signature course, introducing students not only to the specific disciplinary knowledges in the college but, more importantly, growing students’ digital literacy and engagement. “Within the context of the UNISA mass access environment (with class sizes ranging between 100 and 22,000 students), students would upon registration be divided into groups of 30. A teaching assistant would then be assigned responsibility for six groups of 30 students (a total of 180 students per teaching assistant)” (Bajjnath, 2013).

While students are warned prior to registration that these modules are offered fully online, these courses make provision for learning *offline* through the provision of ‘digi-bands’ consisting of “a rubber wrist band with a memory stick uploaded with sophisticated software” (Bajjnath, 2013) containing all the learning resources, application software, multimedia programs, and email and web browsers.

Quo Vadis?

From the preceding sections it is clear that there are many opportunities for online distance education, but also many challenges. Among the opportunities are the immense need to use online distance education as a means to not only address the immense disparities in post-apartheid South Africa, but to respond to the huge need for flexible, affordable and quality education (DHET, 2014b). In stark contrast to the potential and need to use online distance education to increase access to quality educational opportunities, are concerns about the impact of changes in funding regimes to public providers, the lack and cost of access to digital networks, the under-preparedness of students for higher education and online distance education only equalled by these institutions’ under-preparedness to provide affordable and targeted student support. It is also clear that public education cannot respond to the opportunities and challenges on their own, and that there is an urgent need for private education providers and alliances of stakeholders to become part of the solution. As South Africa is relatively late in optimising the potential of massive open online courses (MOOCs), recent developments suggest that this is changing (BDLive, 2016).

The above historical overview and examples show that *fully-fledged* online distance education in South Africa is still an emerging phenomenon, deeply influenced by the history of distance education provision, recent changes in the regulatory envi-

ronment and issues surrounding access and cost of access. There is increasing evidence of selected individual course and postgraduate offerings, and a range of informal online distance education offerings as can be seen in the number of institutions that are developing MOOCs.

(In)Conclusions

This case study on the emergence and evolution of online distance education in South Africa provides ample evidence of the claim that “context is everything” (Jonassen, 1993, in Tessmer & Richey, 1997, p. 86). As the exploration of the evolution of online distance education in the South African context has shown, taking context seriously requires the slowing down of discourses and often results in the questioning of ‘universal’ truths regarding online distance education, such as the cost of provision (Hülsman, 2016) and the claim that online learning decreases inequalities (World Bank, 2016).

Currently, online distance education in South Africa is emerging among public, private and alliances to offer niche, short learning and specialised programmes in the formal, informal and professional development contexts. The South African case study shows that, at present, that online technologies are still, and possibly for the foreseeable future, used to *support* learning and provide resources rather than being a mainstream mode of delivery for formal public and private post-school education.

Acknowledgements I would like to acknowledge (in no particular order) the critical input and support by Jennie Glennie, Tony Mays, Fatima Rahiman and Alan Amory (all from SAIDE), Laura Czerniewicz (University of Cape Town), Wendy Kilfoil (University of Pretoria), Martin Combrinck (NWU), Craig Blewitt, Fatima Suleman and Rubby Dhunpath (all from UKZN), Antionette van der Merwe and JP Bosman (Stellenbosch University), as well as Alwyn Louw, Roy Cloete and Nicolene Murdoch (Monash University).

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