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**Learning Styles of First Year Students:
Their Relationship with Success
in Distance Education Courses**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
of Master of Philosophy in Education at
Massey University**

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2000

ABSTRACT

Adults have different learning needs and ways, or 'styles' of learning. Understanding students' needs by knowing who they are, what they bring to a learning situation, and how they learn, should influence how they are taught and the environment in which they are taught, regardless of the method of course delivery. Students' personal circumstances aside, it is often other factors such as teaching style, institutional constraints relating to resources, pedagogy, or administration, which determine their learning experiences.

Accommodating individual learning needs, including learning styles preferences, can be more complicated when courses are delivered in a distance mode as teachers are not physically present to assess or adjust to students' requirements. While research is available concerning the learning styles of students in traditional face-to-face learning environments, little is known or agreed about the learning styles of students in distance education, let alone the teaching styles of the courses which students enrol in. Such knowledge may help to design courses supporting a wider range of individual differences, with a potential improvement in the success of students.

Changing trends in education arising from technology and social-economic developments create further impetus for ensuring that the quality of courses offered can be audited against an empirical base of evidence relating to students' learning preferences. This research study aimed to contribute to such a base by seeking to discover if there was a relationship between the learning styles of students enrolled in a number of first year distance education courses at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, and their success in those courses. The students were selected on the basis of studying for the first time with The Open Polytechnic. The teaching styles of the courses were analysed to assess the degree of match or mismatch with students' learning styles. From the study implications are drawn which are applicable to designing courses and supporting students studying by distance education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study is dedicated to my grandfather, the late George Diver, who showed me that learning is a life long adventure despite the challenges it may present, and that you are never too old to learn something completely new. It is also dedicated to my children, Cameron and Leigha, who give me love and inspiration, along with practical experience in dealing with different learning styles

Thanks are also given to Alison St. George and Kathy Broadley, whose patience and guidance were invaluable.

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