

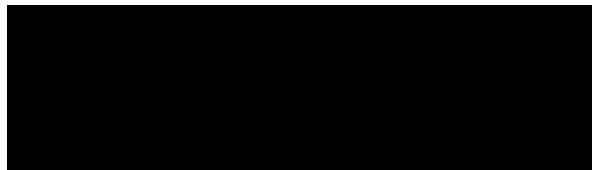
**ATTRIBUTES, LEARNING PREPAREDNESS AND STUDY DISPOSITION
OF ADULT VOCATIONAL DISTANCE LEARNERS AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC
AS INFLUENCED BY THEIR PERSONAL,
SITUATIONAL AND STUDY ENVIRONMENTS**

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work, and that the substance of the thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree.

I certify that all sources used in the preparation of this thesis have been acknowledged.



ABSTRACT

This study examines the general question: to what extent do personal and situational variables, and variables within the study environment of adult learners at the University of the South Pacific (USP), influence their disposition and preparedness as distance learners. The USP Region encompassing 12 island nations and covering more than 30 million square kilometres of ocean in the South Pacific, represents diverse local environments - physically, politically, socio-culturally and economically - from which USP students are drawn. The genesis of the study is the concern that variations in student milieus, born of this diversity, are not given due consideration as a significant dimension of the USP's distance education programme. The answer to the study question is intended to provide direct and relevant information about adult distance learners at the USP and their learning needs, in the interest of the appropriate and effective targeting of distance learning materials and study support facilities and services. This objective is embodied in a conceptual framework derived from principles of adult learning and distance education, and from interaction theory in particular.

A self-completion questionnaire was designed to elicit responses to variables in five categories: personal and demographic; cultural and social; economic; education, past and present; and study environment and support. The questionnaire was sent to 1,213 students enrolled in the Diploma in Accounting Studies (DACs) and the Diploma in Management Studies (DMS) across the USP Region. Two hundred and seventy-eight usable responses were returned and analysed in four major phases: cross-tabulation in a series of two-dimensional contingency tables; factor analysis; cluster analysis; and multiple regression analysis. The outcomes of these statistical procedures were complemented by qualitative data from the interview of 22 students in eight countries of the USP Region. These were analysed as a composite group and in five individual case studies. This methodological approach was intended to represent both an 'outside' and an 'inside' view of the students under survey, thereby presenting a more holistic perspective of the situation.

In this study, data analysis showed that although, as expected, the USP students shared features in common with adult distance learners elsewhere, they also had characteristics derived from

environmental dynamics which were context- and culture-specific and which set them apart from students in other locations. These results were useful in several ways. Foremost, they reiterated the need to be cautious about the relevance and applicability of extraneous research results and hence the need for local research to appropriately inform local efforts. The study also identified information unique and significant to distance learning at the USP. Descriptive data allowed the identification of features and attributes common to the majority of USP students under survey who were found to be comparatively younger than counterparts in the western world in particular, and different in many socio-cultural, economic and educational features. Multivariate statistical procedures enabled the identification of significant variables within the contexts of the USP students that were determinants of successful performance for them. A notable finding was the lack of inferential significance of the educational disposition of the USP group with respect to their academic performance as distance learners. More significant to performance was the impact of personal and environmental variables such as family situations, economics and socio-cultural obligations on determining the amount of time and effort that USP students were able to put into their studies. Interview data served to provide detail to these statistical outcomes and to the specific nature of the interrelationships among the variables under survey.

An important outcome of this study was the identification of areas in need of further investigation that would help to provide a more comprehensive picture of the adult distance learner in the context of the USP Region.

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