

# Early Childhood Students' Perceptions of Studying by Distance Learning for the Diploma of Teaching (ECE)

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**INTRODUCTION** Traditionally, tertiary teacher education has been delivered in New Zealand through face-to-face teaching courses with students listening and taking notes while receiving instruction from a lecturer. Interaction between lecturer and students in a classroom setting has been considered a vital component in this process.

Today, political and public interest in distance learning has increased in countries where students seeking access to tertiary teacher education are geographically widely dispersed. There has also been a noticeable change in the composition of the student population. No longer largely restricted to school leavers, there has been an increase in mature and employed applicants seeking access to tertiary teacher education programmes. At the same time distance education technologies have expanded very rapidly. Advances in information and computer technology have provided impetus to the growth in distance learning (DL), and have prompted the rapid growth in a new mode of delivery, online learning (OL).

Distance learning instruction can be delivered in a manner as similar as possible to traditional face-to-face teaching. This can be achieved through a classroom with two-way audiovisual

interaction. This is the basis of the Iowa model which provides distance learners with experiences that mirror traditional face-to-face teaching, via a normal classroom setting and live, two-way audiovisual interaction. On the other hand, the Norwegian model combines negotiated distance teaching with local face-to-face teaching (Schlosser & Anderson, 1994). This model could be said to be reflected in the approach adopted by several New Zealand teacher education providers, whereby distance learning students who are considered to be self-motivated are supplied with printed course material by post, some form of teleconferencing, access to further relevant literature via a Website, and use of the institution's library resources. Ongoing support for their studies is provided by phone/email contact by distance. On-campus or regionally located face-to-face study weeks (contact courses) are provided on a regular basis to allow for peer/staff contact and interaction.

This paper is structured as follows: background information is provided on the tertiary institution in which the study was conducted; the major purpose of the study is outlined; the aspects of DL receptivity as contained in the questionnaire are indicated; a description of the sample follows; the results of the

survey are reported and then discussed in terms of recent literature; the limitations of the study are indicated; issues and factors that have influenced the perceptions of students are analysed and future directions are considered in the delivery of this distance learning mode for early childhood teacher education.

**BACKGROUND** New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC) is a private provider of teacher education for the early childhood sector in New Zealand. NZTC resources focus solely on early childhood teacher education. The programmes offered are the Early Childhood Teachers Certificate of two years (for people wishing to work in early childhood centres such as childcare centres, preschools, and kindergartens, etc.) and the three-year Diploma of Teaching (ECE), which is the current benchmark qualification for early childhood education in New Zealand. The Diploma of Education (ECE) is approved for teacher registration by the Teachers Council. These programmes are approved by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority under the provisions of the Education Act 1989, and NZTC is accredited to offer them.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) had approved the Diploma of Teaching (ECE) programme for delivery by New Zealand Tertiary College in September 1996. At that point, the diploma programme was approved to be delivered through two modes only (college-based and field-based). Students in the college-based mode, who were mainly school leavers, attended a full-time programme on campus, and had regular periods of three to four weeks of assessed and supervised teaching practice in early childhood centres.

Students in the field-based mode were required to attend on-campus teaching/learning sessions for two evenings per week, and were required to complete sixteen hours per week of supervised and assessed teaching practice in the centres in which they were employed, and to complete three weeks per stage of teaching practice in another centre. These students had considerable experience as early childhood educators prior to entering the programme.

The college-based and field-based delivery modes appear to have catered adequately for applications received for early childhood tertiary studies from school leavers, and early childhood educators employed in centres in the Auckland metropolitan area. However, a large number of inquiries continued to be received from prospective students in a variety of regions throughout New Zealand. Concern to meet the tertiary study needs of this group prompted New Zealand Tertiary College to consider the introduction of distance learning as an alternative mode for delivery of the diploma programme. This form of delivery met the needs of those students who had limited access to tertiary institutions because of their physical location, family and work commitments. According to the literature, studying at a distance can be as effective as traditional methods of face-to-face instruction provided the methods and technologies employed are appropriate to the performance criteria and learning outcomes of the course design; opportunities are built in for peer interaction; and supportive teacher contact and interaction is readily available to students (Moore & Thompson, 1990; Verduin & Clark, 1991).

Adult learners have a wide variety of reasons for pursuing studies through distance learning. These include constraints of time, distance from institutions providing early childhood teacher education programmes, financial considerations, and the ability to come into contact with other students from different social, economic, and experiential backgrounds. Provision of contact courses (block courses) of twenty hours each, which students attend twice for each stage of the programme, goes some way towards gaining new knowledge and the opportunity for social interaction with other students. Distance learning students are encouraged to set up informal networks with other students to share and discuss written material in study guides, and concerns and problems in dealing with the content and assignments. To reduce feelings of isolation, regular meetings of small groups of students in the local area and email or phone contact within this group of students also assist students to deal with their studies more effectively.

Often face-to-face teaching focuses on teacher-centric instruction in which the teacher is the primary intermediary for transmission of knowledge to the learner. In contrast, distance learning programmes need to focus on learner-centric instruction in which content is manipulated by the learner, with the teacher acting as a catalyst and a facilitator of student learning (Sherry, 1996).

These above considerations were incorporated in the design of the NZTC distance learning mode. This mode of delivery of the Diploma of Teaching (ECE) was introduced in February 1999, and approval for teacher registration purposes was received from the (then)

Teacher Registration Board (TRB) in March 1999. The author brought a decade of experience in design, coordination, and monitoring of an early childhood distance learning programme in an Australian university to the formulation of the NZTC distance learning programme. Print materials, plus video material, form the basis of the programme. Each student is allocated a distance learning tutor to provide guidance and support, and regular interaction occurs via phone and email. Practice teaching experience follows the same pattern as that required for the field-based mode. Also, students are required to attend two block courses per stage. Attendance at block courses is compulsory and provides students with a face-to-face flexible and individualised programme that allows for the monitoring and assessment of student progress, an opportunity for student networking and shared learning experiences, material and knowledge that supplement and complement the learning outcomes embedded in the courses for the diploma programme, and knowledge related to specific courses that is best gained through experiential learning (e.g., Maori courses). These block courses are held in a variety of locations each year.

Once underway, approximately 100 students were enrolled by the latter half of the second year. This has since grown to more than 200 enrolments in the distance learning programme.

NZTC was concerned to put an effective process for programme evaluation in place. Throughout their studies, distance learning students complete an evaluation form on the completion of each course, but the block courses provided an opportunity to monitor and evaluate the

perceptions of students about the effectiveness of studying by a distance learning mode. Over the past two years while attending block courses held in Auckland, Rotorua, Napier, Christchurch, and Blenheim, distance learning students completed a questionnaire designed to evaluate their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of studying by distance with NZTC. Suggestions provided by Willis (1993) for evaluating distance learning courses were utilised in the design of the questionnaire.

## PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The major goal of this study was to gather data on students' perceptions of the effectiveness or otherwise of study by distance learning for the NZTC Diploma of Teaching (ECE). The basic assumption underlying this was that student perceptions would assist staff in estimating the effectiveness of delivery of a distance learning programme, and that these perceptions would assist in evaluating student learning and provide data that could inform future directions for the delivery of the programme.

## SURVEY INSTRUMENT

### *Method*

A questionnaire was designed to gather student perception of distance learning as a mode of study. These early childhood students were asked to comment on the following aspects of distance learning as a mode of study:

- print material (student handbooks, study guides and assignment requirements, value of the accompanying readings per course, most helpful material per course);

- degree of support provided by distance learning tutors, colleagues, and parents;
- the perceived effect of new knowledge on centre programmes; and individual learner characteristics.

They were also asked to identify the overall advantages/disadvantages of studying by distance, and to make suggestions to improve programme delivery.

The majority of the questions were open-ended in order to encourage students to consider the issues in some depth. Pre-coded questions sought information on students' previous academic studies, age, and gender.

### *Description of the Sample*

One hundred and five distance learning students responded to the questionnaire. All students were female and were employed in either part-time or full-time positions in early childhood centres throughout New Zealand. Forty-eight percent were mature age students. Previous academic studies had been undertaken by 26 percent of the students (e.g., NZTC Early Childhood Teachers Certificate, MIT Certificate in Childcare, NZ Playcentre Supervisors Certificate, National Nanny Programme, Seacoh Certificate or Diploma, and Diploma of Nursing). Several students had completed some papers through Massey University, or had overseas early childhood qualifications, or diplomas/degrees in unrelated areas.

## RESULTS

### *Value of Print Material*

Seventy-five percent of the students rated the student handbooks as useful to very useful as a source of information about the programme (study and practicum

requirements). Responses included: "helped me to get started," "good to keep, I refer to them often," "helpful on how to write my essays and how to do a bibliography," "good, clear guidelines and precise instructions," and "kept it beside my computer and used it as a constant guide." A number of students made the comment that they were using them much more after they were advised to do so while attending block courses.

Ten percent did not make comment on the usefulness or otherwise of the handbooks. Fifteen percent said that although the handbooks provided useful information, they thought the handbooks would have been improved if they had been combined into one handbook with one table of contents; that they needed to provide more material on referencing and citing of resources in the body of an essay; more information on report writing; provision of samples of student assignments which would have helped them understand the grading system better; needed to be more firmly bound; and needed to have included a summary of the content of each course in the section on the outline of the programme.

The general opinion (93 percent) was that the study guides were reasonably easy to follow, particularly when the material was presented in a standard organisational format (where a study guide did not do this, one student complained that she was completely thrown by this and had to seek a great deal of help from her distance learning tutor).

Several of the respondents during the first six months of the survey reported several "glitches" in the content of the study guides. These included incorrect page numbers for the edition of the texts

issued, reference to graphs not included, etc. However, responses recorded later in the delivery of the programme were more positive. For example, "took me a while to understand what was involved," and "should have read through the study guide more carefully at the beginning, but once I did this I found the tasks and reflections built up knowledge to do the assignments," "very interesting and I learned so much about children's development," "confusing at first but after reading more carefully the articles included gave me lots of the answers," and "found the accompanying readings per module very valuable."

Assignment requirements were considered to be clear, although one student claimed they were "ambiguous." Several others agreed with the student who maintained that the "amount of work in each module was overwhelming," and another who said she "found the questions hard to understand and struggled to know what was meant." The opportunity to complete reflections and practicum tasks interspersed throughout the course study guides was seen by 75 percent of the students as "very helpful to understand the content," "helped make sense of what I had read," and "helped me to try out new approaches to learning and teaching."

### *Support and Interaction Provided*

Students were asked to comment on the degree of support provided by distance learning tutors, colleagues, and parents.

Ninety percent of the students were very positive about the help and support they received from their distance learning tutor and the feedback received on assignments. They said their tutors were easy to contact and returned their calls

promptly. They commented: "struggled initially, but my tutor put me right," "kept having to ask my tutor to explain, but this was my first module and I've been away from study for a long time," and "should have phoned my tutor more at the beginning, but once I started doing this found everything so much easier."

A high level of satisfaction was expressed by students concerning the willingness of their tutors to assist them with understanding content and requirements, and being sensitive to different communication styles and cultural backgrounds. Tutors are expected to contact each of their students by phone on a regular basis, and to make themselves available at set times (usually evenings and weekends) for students to contact them by phone, and make regular contact/visits to their centres.

Where centre colleagues provided considerable support for their studies, 22 percent of the students said they valued this highly. This support had included discussing assignment requirements with them and offering helpful advice and resources; willingness to employ relievers to enable students to have study time, to complete practicums at centres outside of their home centres, and to attend block courses; increasing their confidence in their studies; and being willing to complete questionnaires and take part in surveys being conducted by students as part of their coursework. The support and interest shown by parents varied considerably. Some parents (10 percent) were reported as having very little knowledge of the programme being completed, and several commented that the student "must be mad" to undertake study on top of her work commitments. On the other hand, some parents were delighted that

students were updating their knowledge, were very willing to have students complete child studies with their children, and were eager to have well-trained staff in their centres.

### *Effect of New Knowledge on Centre Programmes*

It was of interest to note that the majority of students believed their studies contributed to their work in their centres and to relationships with the community. They commented: "in the biggest way—now am tenfold more effective across the whole spectrum," "much more reflective in my teaching practice," "have gained more awareness of theories to back up my teaching," and "our centre is trying out new approaches much more and making much more use of Te Reo with children."

### *Learner Characteristics*

Students were asked about their motivation for undertaking this mode. Responses included the following: "to better myself," "for personal professional development," "to gain a higher rate of pay," "to meet Ministry, Teacher Registration Board, and NZQA requirements," "learning more that will help my own children as well," "to complete a formally recognised qualification," "improve my skills, confidence, and self-esteem," "to become more effective in my role as an EC teacher," "encouragement and support from my employer," "fits round and complements my role with my family," "to develop and continue learning and acquiring skills and gain more respect as an EC educator," and "to widen my career options." For these students, and for those who made similar comments (46 percent), motivation centred on enhancing their professional role as early childhood educators.

Most mature aged students maintained that the programme had assisted them to add a professional outlook to their experience as mothers and teachers; that life experiences had equipped them well to undertake studies, to understand issues more deeply, and to be self-disciplined and maintain focus on their studies. Younger students said they had more energy as they had fewer commitments in terms of child rearing, housework, and preparation of meals, and had not moved away from the study mode as they had not long left school. Those who had completed other tertiary studies before starting the programme felt these experiences had meant they were more confident about meeting study requirements, and were strongly motivated to pursue further education that would enhance their performance in the role of an early childhood educator.

### *Future Goals*

With regard to future goals that students had in mind, they commented as follows: "to continue to learn and develop," "gain greater insights on EC teaching," "make more money," "be able to run my own centre," "to be a better role model for my own children as well as the children in the centre." Twenty-six students indicated their intention of pursuing further studies at degree level, specialising in some area of ECE (e.g., special needs, becoming involved in ECE teacher training). Opportunities to widen their horizons and experience through teaching in another country, or to travel and observe children and centres in other countries, were sought by ten students.

### *Study Habits*

The study habits of students studying at a distance were of particular interest to staff involved in the delivery of this

mode. These varied from comments indicating that they preferred to study in complete silence and without interruptions to the preference for studying while listening to quiet flowing music. Strategies these students said they employed to study effectively reflected considerable understanding of the factors involved. Apart from six students who said they preferred to study in the early morning (when their brains were fresh), almost all students who responded studied most evenings and weekends, while some indicated that they were fortunate in having been given a study day a week by their employers. They said that they laid out study tasks for the next night early in the morning, tried to set specific goals about what they wanted to achieve in one session, needed to mull over questions/tasks ahead of study time, formulated plans before doing essays, organised study time to take a break every hour to allow information to sink in and review the material covered. Even when tired, one student commented that she tried to complete at least one task she had set for herself per study session. This group of students work either full- or part-time, and many have families of their own, so it was not surprising to learn that they studied late into the night only when facing pressure from deadlines. Many commented that they were able to study only when the children were in bed. Women in this situation have to be well organised and adopt strategies that will free them to study. This is evident in comments such as the following: "have to keep housework to a minimum when the pressure is on," "need to clean and tidy the house before I can concentrate," and "have one day off a week and use it to the full for study while the children are at school." Several students commented that having a supportive husband or

partner was an important factor in coping with their studies.

### *Positive Aspects of Distance Learning*

Seventy-five percent commented on the positive aspects of being a distance learning student. These included "as there is no teacher education course available in my area, it answered the need to complete an early childhood qualification," "great for someone who is an independent learner," "experience what I am learning as I go, not feeling pushed," "study timetable negotiated and organised one-on-one with DL tutor," "able to work full-time while gaining a qualification," and "being able to work at my own pace and manage my own time." Two students said it meant there was no need for a babysitter. Six were grateful there was no need to travel after working hours, twenty-five students said they appreciated access to a quality institution since there was not one available locally, and ten were relieved they could work part-time while studying and coping with a family. A large number of students commented on the supportiveness of their DL tutor and said they did not miss contact with other students but enjoyed it very much during block courses. The networks established meant students could discuss and share concerns with a group of their peers on an ongoing basis. An increasing number appear to be making use of email for this as well as making use of phone contact. The use of free postcards to make requests for resources from the NZTC library was commented on favourably, as were the resources available through the NZTC Website.

### *Disadvantages of Distance Learning*

The major difficulties of studying at a distance were seen as having less opportunity for discussion with others,

getting hold of extra resources, lack of easy access to resources since local libraries do not always have relevant academic books, sense of isolation from other students, maintaining motivation, and time management in terms of balancing study with other commitments. Six students reported they needed a great deal of clarification (regarding concepts/questions) but their DL tutors were very willing to help. However, as two students commented, "not all DL tutors know everything about every module."

### *Concerns and Suggestions for Improvement in Programme Delivery*

Sixteen percent of students made no comments about concerns or gave suggestions for improvement. However, NZTC was urged by 48 percent of the students to keep up block course workshops on theorists, resource making, child development, prejudice, child abuse, Te Reo. These block courses were seen as a very valuable aspect of their programme in providing the opportunity to network with other students and getting to know college tutors and gaining information first hand. A further group of students said they would like to view examples of essays that have been graded at pass, merit, and distinction levels. Several others requested more contacts with visiting tutors. Twelve students asked when NZTC would be offering a Bachelor of Education (ECE) programme, and indicated interest in enrolling in it. They were pleased that the cost of textbooks was built into their fees, but asked for more texts to be sent out with each course from the NZTC library.

Quite a number of students complained about the financial difficulties they experienced because of the requirement of three weeks practicum per stage

in a centre other than the one in which they were employed. They appeared to be unaware that this was a Teachers Council requirement.

**CONCLUSIONS** In the main, students found that print materials supported their learning very satisfactorily. The suggestion that summaries of course content should be in the student handbook has now been followed through. Print materials have been a significant component in the delivery of the programme by distance learning. Print materials have the advantage of being cost and time effective to prepare, easy to review and revise (Misanchuk, 1994). While the intention is to add to the repertoire of tools through greater use of other technological developments, print is likely to continue to form the basic feature of future delivery.

Beare (1989) has pointed out that the provision of a toll-free telephone line, prepaid library request cards, and a satisfactory assignment turnaround are important factors in distance learning. These facilities were noted and appreciated by the students. An important factor in the effective delivery of distance learning courses is the opportunity for regular interaction with supportive teachers (Sherry, 1996). Students' comments indicated that their distance learning tutors were using effective strategies to motivate and meet the needs of students in terms of both content and individual needs.

For the majority of these students, motivation to complete the programme centred on enhancing their professional role as early childhood educators. These comments reflect those factors highlighted by Schlosser and Anderson

(1994) as contributing to successful learning at a distance.

The differences between adult learners and younger learners as described in the literature are reflected in the student responses. Adult learners bring "a rich background of life and work experience to the classroom," and unlike younger learners "are more likely to identify the skills they wish to acquire" and are more likely to have "an increased awareness and appreciation for new knowledge" (Needy, Niemi, & Ehrhard, 1998, pp. 72-73).

When commenting on the positive aspects of DL, students stressed the importance of ongoing interaction with their instructors. This is consistent with the comments made by Christensen, Anakwe, and Kessler (2001) that such interaction contributes substantially to the quality of distance learning programmes because of the high level of support and guidance provided. Further, access to distance learning was seen as very important to these students who have employment and family responsibilities and cannot travel easily to campus-based courses. This supports comments made by Christensen, Anakwe, and Kessler (2001) on the growing trend towards a greater percentage of employed college students with increased outside commitments who are seeking other than the traditional education mode in order to meet their training needs.

Overall, students believed studying by distance learning to be effective. This is in direct contrast to the findings of a study conducted at a medium-sized university where students seemed to have negative beliefs about studying

by DL and did not see DL as offering many benefits (O'Malley, 1999).

The disadvantages of distance learning indicated by these students included less opportunity for interaction with their peers. To a degree this has been countered by the provision of block courses and the support given to students to develop local network groups. NZTC has also endeavoured to allocate staff to courses according to their area of expertise to facilitate student understanding of course material.

In response to suggestions for improvement that were made, a recent NZTC initiative has been to have current journal articles for each stage cut to disk and made available through the college library. There have also been improvements made to the college library catalogue available through the NZTC Website, and a growing number of research articles (with abstracts and full text available for downloading) are also being added.

In his closing address to the Distance Education Association of New Zealand (March 2000), Trevor Mallard, the minister of education, stressed the value of distance learning as a means of improving the supply of qualified early childhood teachers in areas of New Zealand that have been hard to staff, particularly Northland and the East Coast. The NZTC distance learning programme can be said to have made a considerable contribution to this end. Further, the information gained from this survey has been invaluable to the college in confirming the value of the design, structure, and organisation of print material provided for this distance learning mode. Although it appears to be reasonably effective in terms of learner

satisfaction, it will be subject to ongoing evaluation and revision. Design and direction for the programme need to be consciously thought through, unlike classroom teaching where content simply needs to be identified and taught in a face-to-face situation. It needs to be pointed out though that the learning outcomes, performance criteria, and assignments per course are identical across the three modes of delivery of the Diploma of Teaching (ECE). Of course, to meet the particular needs of distance learners, the content/topics covered in each course are in written form with accompanying teaching tasks and reflections on the content, complemented by a wide range of readings from the literature and workshops and interactive sessions offered at the block courses.

We have been aware that each section of written material needs to end with questions, tasks, and reflections. These student responses require tutor feedback as it is an important part of the learning process. To assist the learning process, the writers have enabled students to reflect on their own interests, needs, and circumstances as a starting point. An effective system of guidance for students has been put in place, but student feedback on the effectiveness of these provisions will continue to be sought.

It is clear that where DL students are assisted to develop good time management skills and study skills, they experience reduction of anxiety about assignments. Regular phone contacts and/or email contacts initiated by both the tutor and the students will continue to be an important feature of programme delivery. Continuous support from tutors acting as facilitators of learning experiences was very important to this group of learners. Opportunities for

social and academic interaction with their peers through networking, local study groups, phone and email contact, and content and support provided during the block courses will be maintained. Print materials will continue to be evaluated and revised on a regular basis (we have a tutors' feedback form for noting glitches and confusions, inaccurate information, etc.). Although regular telephone contact has been proven to be an effective tool for learner support, techniques that need to be considered for implementation in the future include increasingly available media-based technologies.

The NZTC Website (<http://www.nztc.net.nz>) provides information on NZTC programmes, location, the application process, the student handbook, financial support, and recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures. Links are provided to a college noticeboard, newsletter, online NZTC library, online journals, and ProQuest journals. A browser window allows students access to a variety of early childhood resources worldwide (e.g., NAEYC, ERIC searches, etc.). Further developments including the provision and oversight of chat rooms on the Web and greater use of audio conferencing are planned. Of considerable concern is the degree of access these students have to information and communication technologies (ICT). A postal survey is presently being distributed to gain information on the proportion of distance learning students who do have this type of access and the amount of use that is made of this. On that basis, future directions will be sought to incorporate ICT effectively in the design and delivery of the distance learning curriculum. It is imperative that student knowledge, skills, and attitudes are enhanced through the appropriate

and effective use of ICT. Information and communication technologies need to be woven seamlessly into the curriculum, and driven by educational imperatives rather than by technology.

**LIMITATIONS** This study was restricted to a survey of the perceptions of NZTC students enrolled as distance learners in the Diploma of Teaching (ECE) programme. Results cannot be generalised to college-based and field-based students studying the same programme in this institution, nor to distance learning students at other tertiary education institutions. Aspects of studying by distance learning selected for the survey were limited to those that NZTC had identified as of importance in informing directions for future delivery. Other factors may well be of importance (e.g., an in-depth examination of perceptions of the effectiveness of the programme learning outcomes in enhancing understandings and professional development for the role of an early childhood educator).

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