

## INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

As we stand on the threshold of a new millennium South Africa is undergoing a political, social and economic transition from minority rule and apartheid to a democratic society seeking to position itself in the wider international economy and community. In this process all existing practices are being rethought in terms of their relevance to the new situation. Higher educational institutions, as providers of high-level manpower, face telling challenges in these changing times.

A number of factors create a complex backdrop against which transformation in education is taking place. For some time there has been a mismatch between education and employability. South Africa does not have an education system that can support a high-technology environment needed to stimulate an economy that has been performing poorly for some time. There is a low general level of education with an adult functional literacy rate of only 50 percent. The educational profile of the working population is that of a developing country: 30% have no education, 36% have primary schooling only, 31% secondary schooling only, and only 3% have degrees or diplomas (Hofmeyr & Buckland, 1992). The population growth rate of the white, coloured and Indian communities is static or declining whereas the population growth rate of the African population is 2.8% per annum (Hofmeyr & Buckland, 1992). The already changing student profiles, especially at historically white tertiary institutions, will continue to change radically into the future. Huge inequalities and backlogs have resulted in education due to decades of apartheid education and rising pupil numbers. Education has also been a site of struggle and crisis during the last decade. African students entering tertiary institutions often come from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. An enormous challenge faces tertiary institutions to provide high-level skills training and human resource development to equip a larger and more diverse student population as flexible, lifelong learners able to meet the needs of a changing labour market which needs to be internationally competitive.

The draft white paper on higher education (Ministry of Education, April 1997)

introduced a higher education bill that seeks to address the legacy of inadequate training in South Africa. It is proposed that the entire higher education sector will be governed by a single national law. High-level skills training: *"the creation through higher education of professionals and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills to strengthen this country's enterprises, services and infrastructure"* (p.11) as an aim of higher education is highlighted, as is a requirement for expanding enrolments that will lead to a more diverse student body. Furthermore, the ministry intends *"encouraging new learning and teaching strategies, in particular, modifying traditional models of discipline-based and sequential courses and qualifications with a flexible credit-based system, with multiple entry and exit points and a range of delivery mechanisms, including distance education and resource-based learning."* (p.16). The enabling mechanism for this approach will be the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the statutory body, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), that will regulate the functions of the NQF has been established.

## 1.2 PROBLEM FORMULATION

The choice of an occupation is a major decision and has far reaching consequences for the individual. Work occupies a sizable part of most people's lives. A satisfactory choice of occupation can lead to personal growth and well-being. Levitz and Noel (1989) reported that uncertainty about what to study is the most frequent reason high-ability students give for dropping out of college. Uncertainty about career choice is typical of students entering higher education. Higher education institutions should make provision for helping students with their career development. It is also important for the economy of the country that people's talents and potential be maximally utilized. For high-level manpower, preparation for an occupation usually entails study at a higher education institution. In this context it is important to provide learners with optimal learning experiences and provision should be made for diversity within the student population. Acknowledging and making provision for different learning styles is one aspect of good undergraduate practice in institutions of higher education. This study aims to explore the relationship between vocational personality and learning style. This could lead to identifying characteristics that could be used in career counselling to ensure the best possible "fit" between the individual and his or her career options. Utilizing information on learning styles could provide optimum development of academic potential in the individual's preparation for a career.

*"Institutions that impart transferable skills and relevant knowledge, bolster confidence and creativity, and engender social responsibility and self-directed learning are needed more than ever."* (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 44).

The theories and assessment instruments of John Holland (vocational personality types) and David Kolb (learning abilities and styles) were developed mainly within and for people of the Northern American or Western culture. This research project proposes to explore the applicability of these theories and assessment instruments to students at a South African university who represent different cultures. There is a need for career counselling theory and assessment instruments applicable to all culture groups. Academic development for diverse student populations is a necessity in higher education provision. It is also proposed that these two theories could be integrated resulting in a useful framework for career counselling and academic development.

### 1.3 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The broad aims of the research project are the following:

- to integrate John Holland's model of vocational personalities and David Kolb's model of learning abilities and styles;
- to use subjects representing different cultural groups from two fields of study at the University of Pretoria in an empirical study to investigate the possible integration of the two models;
- to investigate the psychometric properties of two normative forms of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory.

### 1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH REPORT

To clarify the complexity of the concepts used in this research project (such as the six vocational personality types as defined by Holland, and the four learning abilities and four learning styles as defined by Kolb) a detailed literature study will be undertaken. Concept clarification will be provided in the following chapters.



To achieve the stated aims the following steps are taken.

- In Chapter 2 a literature study on student development is undertaken. Theories on student development are described and factors affecting student development are identified. Student development is represented by academic development, career development and personal development. Kolb's theory of experiential learning as an aspect of academic development and Holland's theory of person-environment interaction as an aspect of career development are further investigated in this research report.
- In Chapter 3 John Holland's theory of vocational personalities and work environments is described. A review of the literature on the concepts and assumptions of the theory is done, some practical uses of the theory are highlighted and criticism of the theory is given.
- In Chapter 4 David Kolb's theory of experiential learning and learning styles is described. Characteristics of experiential learning and learning abilities and styles are described. Special attention is paid to the literature on the Learning Style Inventory, the instrument Kolb devised to assess learning abilities and styles. Some practical uses of the theory are highlighted and criticism of the theory is given.
- In Chapter 5 a theoretical integration of Holland and Kolb's models of vocational personality types, and learning abilities and styles is proposed.
- In Chapter 6 the research design and procedure for the empirical part of this research report is given.
- In Chapter 7 the results of the empirical study are given and discussed. Results pertaining to the integrated model of vocational personality types, and learning abilities and styles proposed in Chapter 5 are discussed.
- In the final chapter (Chapter 8) a brief summary of the research report is given and recommendations based on the findings of the study are made.