A Sociological Inquiry into Time Management in Postgraduate Studies by e-Learning in Greece

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings from a small scale sociological investigation which studied the way mature students manage their time while attending to postgraduate studies by e-learning. Thirty postgraduate students from the University of the Aegean, Greece, were asked to record their daily activities using a semi-structured time-use diary over a period when the demands of the course were at their peak. Follow up interviews with the students were conducted once they handed in their diaries whereby they were asked to reflect on their recorded activities. Two groups of students have emerged from analysing the diaries as having distinctive patterns of time usage; namely, married women with children and married men and single individuals. Policy implications are discussed, as the disparities in the experience of attending to e-learning programmes while at home constitute a severe source of resistance to the stated aim of e-learning programmes, which is to overcome social and geographical marginalisation.

Keywords: e-learning; Greece; postgraduate studies; time-management; widening participation

1. Introduction

This paper draws from on-going research carried out at the University of the Aegean, Greece, into how postgraduate students respond to new forms of education recently introduced in the Greek educational context. In this case new forms of education refer to distance e-learning which is used in the delivery of a postgraduate course. It builds on other work recently undertaken at the University of the Aegean by a group of researchers, namely: an exploration into the decision of mature students to pursue postgraduate studies by e-learning (Vitsilakis, Efthymiou & Vryonides, 2005), how working mothers are experiencing this new form of education (Vryonides & Vitsilakis, *in press*) and how e-learning in general has addressed geographical and social marginalisation in Greece (Vryonides, Vitsilakis & Efthymiou, 2006). The purpose of the present paper is to demonstrate the conditions and the various ways with which postgraduate students attempt to manage their time in order to create space for realising life long aspirations (i.e. to pursue postgraduate studies) to allow them to advance educationally, professionally and socially.

Managing time is an issue that draws the attention of many researchers and social scientists. In its core lies much of the social inequality found in contemporary societies as some groups are more disadvantaged than others in managing it amidst multiple and conflicting social roles. Often these roles are structured by the way contemporary societies are organised in the post-industrialist world whereby various institutions (i.e. the family) attach specific expectations on them. Within this framework managing time in post-graduate studies by e-learning becomes paramount as individuals who tend to opt for this kind of studies have a unique profile. This profile of potential students, which mostly refer to working individuals with familial responsibilities, had been a primary concern for the initiators of a pioneer postgraduate e-learning programme at the University of the Aegean who targeted this specific clientele in an effort to tackle social and geographical marginalisation (Vryonides *et al.*, 2006).

2. Time management and domestic responsibilities

There has been considerable research in many social settings on time management that indicate that time allocation in contemporary societies is gendered. Substantial evidence from this kind of research point to the growth of new forms of inequalities at the expense of women who aspire to succeed in the public sphere without being relieved from traditional domestic responsibilities particularly those connected with caring for children. As Peters (1999) indicates for the Dutch context, gender plays a crucial -albeit not a unique- role in the way time use patterns are shaped. Situational factors such as having children tend to influence the way men and women organise and control their time. Further, as Peters (1999) writes, the combination of having children and performing market work could only be realised at the expense of free time. This was particularly true for higher educated women who were being 'made' to spend more time in the paid work sphere without being 'willing' or 'able' to reduce unpaid work (i.e. domestic responsibilities and caring for children) proportionally. So, women's unpaid work acted as a time buffer when more time was allocated to paid work. Contrary to women, men's free time rather than unpaid work time assumed this function.

Sullivan (2000) studied the nature and pattern of change in the domestic division of labour amongst couples in Britain on nationally representative time-use diary data covering the period 1975 to 1997. Sullivan found that even though in 1997 women still performed the bulk of domestic work there was a significant increase in men's participation in domestic work. However, men's contribution to domestic labour, when women entered employment, only partially and incompletely substituted for the domestic labour of women. The overall result was that women ended up doing more work than before. Also, as Sullivan (2000) remarks, when men did take on more of the domestic work, it was women who tended to retain responsibility for the management of domestic tasks.

Individual time use in relation to household time use is often connected with quality of life. Camporese et al (1998) performed a study in Italy, which they characterised as a society where the division of roles is heavily asymmetrical in that the burden of domestic work concerns almost exclusively women, regardless of age or employment status. They argue that once life as a couple begins, with marriage and the birth of children, there is a kind of institutionalising of the female role within the household. On the other hand, life for males is not changed by marriage or by having children. In their case the turning point is the job. This, according to the authors, represents the beginning of rigidity for time use in life, a reduction in free time, a sequential and hierarchical structure for the organisation of time.

Studying Australian statistical data taken from time use surveys Graig (2006a) has concluded that women are increasingly allocating time to the paid workforce, but there has not been a corresponding change by men allocating equivalent time to domestic and caring labour. In the absence of sufficient institutional and domestic support, women continue to supply the bulk of time required to care for children. The results of their analysis show that the time impact of becoming a parent is considerable, but very unevenly distributed by sex. Having children markedly intensifies gender inequities in time allocation by increasing women's workload. In another study Graig (2006b) has indicated that compared to fathering, mothering involves not only more overall time commitment but more multitasking, more physical labour, a more rigid timetable, more time alone with children, and more overall responsibility for managing care.

All the above have consequences for individual psychological state of health. Nomaguchi et al (2005) examined gender differences in feeling time strain for children, spouse, and oneself and the association of these feelings with psychological well-being among dual-earner parents in the US social context. Among their findings was that mothers were much more likely than fathers to express a lack of time to spend on themselves. Women's lack of time to care for the self can often be accumulated into feelings of time pressure. The latter had been studied by Mattingly and Sayer (2006). Using U.S. time diary data from 1975 and 1998 surveys, they examined the relationship between free time and time pressure. They found that women's time pressure increased significantly between 1975 and 1998 but men's did not. This finding, according to them, suggests that persistent inequality in gendered time-use patterns was paralleled by gendered experiences of time pressure. Despite greater egalitarianism in the labour force women tended to feel more pressure to combine a high level of domestic output with paid work hours. Sayer (2006) used representative time diary data from 1965, 1975 and 1998 to examine trends and gender differences in time use in the US. She found that women continued to do more household labour than men even though men have substantially increased time in core household activities such as cooking, cleaning and daily child care. At the same time, access to free time has emerged as an arena of time inequality. An explanation that she put forward contends that the reallocation of women's and men's time has stopped well short of true similarity because the male identity is still entangled with being the breadwinner, while the female identity is still enmeshed with being the caregiver.

A study that utilised a more qualitative approach in trying to identify the meaning of time use to individuals concerned was Nordenmark and Nyman (2003) study involving Swedish couples. Their aim was to analyse how time use, individual resources, distributive justice and gender ideology influence perceptions of fairness concerning housework and gender equality. Their approach to this issue was quite distinct from the studies presented so far in that their analyses were based both on survey data and on in-depth interviews. This mixed method approach allowed the researchers to investigate the issue at two levels. First, using a quantitative approach they showed that factors connected to time use (division of housework and leisure time) were significantly correlated to both perceptions of fairness concerning division of household labour and gender equality. Then, using interview data they showed that there were several factors and mechanisms at work in influencing perceptions of fairness and equality that were not possible to identify from the quantitative analysis alone. As the researchers suggest, both quantitative and qualitative studies should be included in studies of family life in order to truly increase researchers' understanding of the various aspects of fairness and gender equality.

Davies (1990) has adopted a qualitative methodology to explore women and time in higher education in the context of Britain. She too argues that a multiple theorization of time (including both quantitative and qualitative concepts) facilitates research as it is important on the one hand to measure clock time to map and quantify women's academic studies and on the other to explore the values associated with time (as, for example, well spent or wasted) in order to reveal the way personal space and time for higher education is organised. In her study she showed how women's time for studying had to be carved from space and time for other things and from space and time that is often in the control of other people. In particular, she demonstrated the dominant routines of everyday life which provide a framework for higher education, the hierarchy of values associated with the use of space and time that women students must negotiate; and the rhythmic complexity of women students' actions as higher education is woven into their everyday lives (Davies, 1990).

3. Time management in e-Learning

Within the frameworks set by the conditions described above time management often becomes one of the most crucial issues that potential students with familial responsibilities need to organize and balance in order to engage with academic work. Previous studies have indicated that the decision of mature students to enter or return to higher education is a decision that has to be waved against responsibilities stemming from various social roles and responsibilities (Pascall & Cox, 1993; Edwards, 1993 and Johnson & Robson, 1999). Managing time amidst conflicting responsibilities is paramount in this process as students struggle to balance themselves between new and on-going obligations generally resulting in anxieties and tensions. Appropriately, Davies *et al* (2002) report that the decision of mature students to enter higher education is a complex one and barriers to entry are linked to the realities of their lives which include: a multiplicity of roles, costs of study, the importance and value attached to caring responsibilities, and time management problems. Similarly, Reay (2002, 2003) and Moss (2004) studied the lived experiences of mature women who entered higher education highlighting the importance of time management amidst extensive working commitments, childcare and other domestic responsibilities and studying. In many ways e-learning provides a unique setting to study time-use patterns amongst students because studying from home means tending to responsibilities stemming from ongoing duties as parents, spouses and working persons at the same time. In an e-learning situation individuals organise their free time in such a way that often they have to negotiate with family members in order to create space for studying.

The e-learning programme at the University of the Aegean, Greece was designed as a full time e-learning postgraduate course with extended use of e-content and advanced network-based interactions supported by a modern academic electronic platform. "Lessons" are distributed through the Internet as e-packages and students have the opportunity to access them throughout the day and respond to assignments and coursework within tight deadlines. It was hypothesised that because of the stereotypical structure of the contemporary Greek family setting and the vast amount of evidence from previous research, women with familial responsibilities would find themselves in an immensely disadvantaged position compared with other groups of students to tend to their studies. It has often been reported (Maratou-Alipranti, 1995; Cavounidis, 1996; Mousourou, 2003) that in Greece the "traditional" division of labour within the home has not essentially changed, even when women in large proportions have entered the labour market. As a result, for most women fulfilling familial responsibilities while working full-time continues to be an ensuing burden in terms of time and energy spent. This in turn has consequences for their pursuit of better opportunities in terms of educational and career development. Hence, the degree to which women, compared with men, were in a position to pursue further education for professional advancement so as to break the vicious circle of gender inequalities, was the main focus of this study.

4. Methodology

Many of the studies presented earlier (Camporese et al, 1998; Peters, 1999; Sullivan, 2000; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003; Graig, 2006a; Graig, 2006b; Mattingly & Sayer, 2006; Sayer, 2006) have utilised structured time use diaries to produce rigid quantitative statistical models of time usage in order to demonstrate the disparities that can be found in the way men and women time structure their daily lives. Other studies have also used diaries to record time use patterns of family life (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997; Nock & Kingston, 1988). Without rejecting the value of highly structured quantitative approaches and coming from a theoretical position that deems it important to get the respondents own reflections on the social processes within which they are embedded, it was decided to develop a strategy for data collection that took on board this concern in a similar fashion with Davies (1990), Nordenmark and Nyman (2003), Reay (2002, 2003) and Moss (2004). Moreover, because this study in many ways was pioneer addressing a novel institution in the Greek educational system, thus having by and large an exploratory character, it was decided to form a semi-

structured time use diary where students would be asked to fill and to make comments as well. Guidelines set by Corti (1993) and Elliot (1997) were followed in order to construct a semi-structured diary with clear instructions on how entries should be noted. In particular, a student day was broken in six loosely defined time-slots covering a 24 hour day, namely: Morning (6 – 12), Noon (12-3), Afternoon (3 – 6), Evening (6 – 9), Night (9 – 12), Early hours of next day(12 – 6). Students were asked to record their daily activities over a two-week period in the middle of their course when tensions, pressures and stress were at their peak. Once students were filling their dairies they were asked to post them anonymously to be used for research purposes in the electronic platform used in the delivery of the courses. Follow up conversations with some of the students were conducted once they handed in their diaries whereby they were asked to reflect on the whole task. Overall the aim was not to get strict measurable data but rather to get a feel of the content of each individual's working day in order to understand their priorities and the contexts and processes surrounding their involvement in e-learning.

Thirty students in total were eventually included in the present study as they responded positively to the request to participate in this small research project by keeping a diary in a consistent manner. The students came from various socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds and the majority were employed as full-time professionals in education, public service, IT and engineering sectors. Their age range varied from 23 to 50 and they resided at different areas of the country. Nearly half of them resided in large urban centres (16), whereas others lived in smaller towns (9) as well as in isolated areas such as small islands (5). The majority of them at the time of their enrolment in the programme had no experience on distance learning procedures, let alone on e-learning processes. For most of them, this program was their first attempt to participate in alternative forms of education.

Once the diaries of the students were collected an analysis was performed along two axes, namely (a) the kind of activities reported by various groups of students and (b) how these activities were organised during a typical working day. The analysis of the diary data followed a qualitative content analysis procedure (Altheide, 2004). Diary entries were first coded and then grouped and summarised to produce distinctive patterns of day management. The coding process involved marking the activities that were directly linked to the postgraduate programme in the diaries and the ones that referred to other daily activities such as: paid work, tending to children's and other family member's needs housework, socializing etc. This was done manually using coloured highlighters and this was creating visual representations of the schedules of each individual student. In the end this allowed us to locate how central the programme with its requirements was for the students and consequently whether the programme was well integrated in their daily lives. After this activity was performed some very interesting patterns of time management emerged to which we now turn.

Table 1: Students participating in the study

	Married or cohabiting	Single	Total
Male	4	1	5
Female	12	13	25
Total	16	14	30

5. Patterns of time organisation while attending to e-learning

The first very distinct observation that was made by examining the information from the gathered diaries was that time management for two groups of students emerged as quite distinctive; namely, women married or cohabiting with familial responsibilities and married men and single individuals (male and female). The way these two groups organised their daily lives in order to fit the demands of the postgraduate programme was quite unique. For the first group of students the emerging pattern was that the programme was often 'squeezed' amidst various other activities stemming from familial and professional responsibilities. On the other hand for the latter group activities stemming from familial and professional responsibilities appeared to be secondary to the e-learning programme which frequently appeared to be the dominant activity in their working day. This was so even when these students were in their workplace. This connects to an interesting observation that cuts across all groups. There were a lot of students who had the opportunity to access the programme's electronic platform from their workplace. This was possible when there was an available Internet connection and relatively not very tight schedules or supervision at work. Thus, it was not uncommon to report in their diaries that they were tending to various activities of their course during coffee or lunch brakes or when their working load was light. It could be assumed that by accessing the e-platform during their paid work hours students from the first group were trying to create time for studying. For other students however for whom time was not an issue the reason for doing so was probably financial as they did

not have to log on from home for many hours downloading study material, something that for many entailed a considerable cost (especially when they were using dial up connections).

5.1 Married women with familial responsibilities

In a previous paper Vryonides and Vitsilakis (2005) focused extensively on this group of students and remarked that when the programme was at first set off women with familial responsibilities were soon realising that studying from home was not as 'convenient' a way to pursue postgraduate studies as some may have originally thought[1]. Each working day appeared to be a continuous struggle to find time and space to engage with their studies while accommodating various needs of the household, husband, children etc. thus making any attempt to construct a 'typical day' with steady routine pursuits not possible. In a day which usually started as early as 6 o'clock in the morning and frequently ended up in front of a computer screen in the early hours of the next day, these women tried to attend to their familial and professional responsibilities and respond to the on-going activities, assignments etc. from their courses. In their diaries they recorded activities such as the following:

- Preparing daily meals often for the next day as well
- Shopping
- Looking after elderly parents
- Supervising children's homework
- Driving children to private afternoon lessons (*frontisteria*)
- Bathing and getting children to bed
- House chores (washing, ironing, cleaning up etc)

The extracts from a diary kept by a 36 year-old primary school teacher married with two young boys aged 9 and 4 are quite characteristic of the above.

5.1.1 Extract 1

Wake up at 6:45 a.m.

Getting the children ready for school. Washing, dressing, preparing breakfast for everybody, checking older son's spelling homework. Rushing the children to school and then going off to my school.

8:00 – 13:00 Work at school [… Makes reference to various activities at school*]*

13:15Pick up children from school. Return home. Preparing family lunch. Feeding the younger son. Clearing the table, put everything in dishwasher and taking the older son to a private English lesson. 15:30 Return home and tend to some more house chores for an hour.

16:45 Pick up the older son from his lesson.

17:00 Help older son with next day's homework.

18:00 Start preparing family dinner while watching some TV at the same time.

19:30 Dinner and then clearing the table.

20:00 Watch some TV and getting children ready for bed.

21:00 FINALLY children are in bed and I can open my PC to study for my MA course until 24:00 or until words start "dancing" on the computer monitor.

In terms of energy spent it has to be pointed out that the familial and housework responsibilities were complementing daily paid work schedules that were often quite demanding. What was a very interesting issue to observe is that these students study patterns were developing in two ways. One way was trying to find time and space in between all other daily activities in order to access the e-platform in order to download the weekly course material and to quickly respond to mails and asynchronous discussions. The other way, more common to women in this category, was to devote time for studying at the end of the day, usually around 9 or 10 p.m., when children were tacked in bed and all other matters were attended to. It was at that time of day that they could sit in front of their computer screen to study, write essays in order to meet the programme's tight deadlines. In the interviews that were held after the completion of the diaries what many

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[1] A number of students in an introductory questionnaire when they were first admitted to the programme reported that one of the main reasons for choosing to participate in the particular programme was the fact that they considered it to be a 'convenient' way to pursue further studies (See Vryonides et al, 2006).

women confirmed was their husbands' absence from sharing the burden of these activities. What was also notably revealed in the diaries was what Reay (2003) has described as poverty, and, in particular, a lack of time for 'care of the self' whereby any sort of social life was sacrificed in their efforts to fulfil lifelong educational aspirations. So, in most cases the leisure activities that were reported involved 'watching' TV while doing other things or spending time with children. It was apparent from the pictures that they revealed that successful engagement with e-learning depended on rigid regimes of time organisation and it was only through strict discipline on their part that they were able to keep up with the demands of the course.

> *For us (women students) time for studying is a luxury… Everything else needs to come first and we have to wait until everybody goes to bed … for things to settle at home in terms of noise and then to switch on the computer. It is funny but when I talk with my male fellow-students they never seem to be mentioning things such as home, children, housework… whereas for us it is a common topic of discussion. […] I don't seem to get any free time either in the day or at night … time seems to evaporate so quickly …and there are instances when I feel that I am loosing myself in all these… I realise that I am constantly neglecting myself amidst all the things that I am doing.*
>
> *(Secondary school teacher, age 40)*

Most of these students appeared to be conscious of the sacrifices and compromises that they were constantly asked to make. And there were moments when the whole situation was a taunting task which was creating feelings of quilt as they were frequently asked to set priorities over their different responsibilities.

> *Even though my children appear to be happy with what I am doing they, on one occasion one said to me "Mama, you love your computer more that you love us…" There are moments when I get filled with guilt because my children need me and I wonder if I am steeling the time that is rightfully theirs.*
>
> *(Primary school teacher, age 39)*

Often however, it was apparent that children were not negotiable in the things that they were compromising to accommodate their studies. The words of a 36 year-old NGO worker are very characteristic of the above.

> *Three things fell 'victims' to my studies: Sleep, time for myself and housework… my house seems to be constantly in a mess … but not my child …never.*
>
> *(NGO worker, age 36)*

It was very interesting to remark that in the interviews that were held after the completion of the diaries the dominant topic of discussion related to their effort to find time and space to facilitate their studies. The words of the 40 year-old teacher cited above '*for us it is a common topic of discussion*' vividly capture their preoccupation with this issue. Thus, it was not uncommon to feel the need to help each other and to create informal networks of support. Even though the students of this category were constantly straggling to keep up with their studies while attending to their other roles, other students appeared to be in a much better position to fit the programme in their daily lives.

5.2 Married men and single individuals

These two groups of students have been placed in the same category for a clear reason. The way the programme fitted in their lives was independent of familial and housework responsibilities. From the group of married men four students volunteered their diaries. Of them only one student's activities had scarce references to what was described above as being dominant activities in the lives of married women with children (i.e. taking the child to nursery home, etc). But even then, what was apparent was that these references were reported as a way of supporting the wife. From the other three diaries all these activities were totally missing. Two features appeared to dominate their daily schedules. The bulk of the activities reported tended to focus on their paid work duties whereby all of them appeared to be spending considerable time there often working after hours and overtime. Engagement with the e-learning programme was the other major focus of their diaries. Other activities involved spending time with friends, going out, political activism, watching TV for longer periods and generally having more free time for leisure and other personal activities. In other words, their social life appeared to be quite vibrant and covering various parts of the day. It is also interesting that while married women's study period usually started at 9 or 10 p.m. men's study period was beginning much earlier during the afternoon hours. Time for sleep was also appearing to be longer both at night and in the morning. All the above verify in the most characteristic manner the stereotypical division of labour in the household, which as was mentioned earlier, still appears to be a dominant feature of the Greek family. Moreover, the main points of contrast with women with familial responsibilities was the relative flexibility to time structure their day whereby their perceived needs and priorities were not compromised in any significant way by the needs and priorities of other members of their families. Here is an example of diary extracts from a 42 year old instructor working in a centre for life long learning. He has two children one teenager son 15 years old and a daughter of 9.

5.2.1 Extract 2

7:00 Wake up. Personal hygiene. Watch morning news on TV while having morning coffee. Going to work.

8:00 -14:00 Work. […makes detailed references to work duties]

At regular intervals I log on to the e-platform to download study material, respond to e-mails and contribute to asynchronous discussions [...]

14:30 Pick up older son from swimming lesson and return home for lunch.

15:00 Watch lunch time news on TV, read newspaper and log on to e-platform to check for updates.

16:00 Afternoon nap for a couple of hours.

19:00 Meeting with two friends at a cafeteria for coffee, socialization and trade union activism […]

21:00 Log on to the platform and work for assignments

When asked about how the programme fitted their daily lives during follow-up interviews the following two examples are typical of the responses male married students gave:

Actually the programme fitted very well with my daily routine. It has allowed me to be with my family and my job commitments without having to leave my place of residence. […] it is ideal for people like us who find it very difficult to do it [postgraduate studies] otherwise.

(Teacher advisor, 42)

The programme is demanding but I have the support of my family and my wife in particular … she realizes that doing a postgraduate degree had been a lifelong aspiration of mine and she is doing everything she can to support me.

(Head of personnel department in semi-public organisation, 48)

Single individuals (the majority of them being young women in their mid 20's) either living on their own or with their parents also reported completely different kind of daily schedules from the group of married women. Their daily schedules had more in common with the ones of the male students. Contrary to the women of the first group, for them the postgraduate programme often appeared to be the dominant activity in their lives. Some of the single young women were not in full time employment and appeared to be spending a considerable time on leisure activities such as visiting a gym, going out with friends, reading books and newspapers, watching TV etc, all done within very loose time schedules. In many ways they appeared to be living an extended undergraduate student life. Those single individuals who were in fulltime jobs, like the men presented above, appeared to be spending quite a lot of time in their paid work. On and off throughout the day they would be accessing the Internet and electronic platform to download study material and spent much more time working on essay writing, contributing to discussion forums etc. Their housework chores appeared to be minimal whereas proportionately they would spend much more time than the other groups for sleep. This group of students shared many similarities with the men of the second group in terms of the flexibility to structure their day and the absence of references of tending to needs of other individuals and thus influencing the way they were setting their own priorities. The above were noticeable in the entries of their diaries. Extract 3 is from a diary kept by a 28 year-old ICT secondary school teacher.

5.2.2 Extract 3

07:30 Wake up. Personal hygiene. Morning coffee. Watch TV (Morning news programmes) until 08:30.

09:00 Go to school. Teach my classes at the ICT lab. […Makes references to a variety of activities she engages at her school] During breaks I log on to the e-platform and download study material respond to e-mails and contribute to discussion forums.

14:00 Return home. Have a light lunch and then go to the gym. […]

16:00 Afternoon coffee and some house chores. 17:30 – 20:00 Study for my MA course. […]

20:00 Watch TV and dinner. Talk to friends over the phone

21:30 I go out with friends until 24:00.

Here is another example (extract 4) of a diary extract kept by a 25 year old female student leaving with her parents. She is working as part time teacher while giving some private tuition to school children at home and aspires some day to get a job in the civil service.

5.2.3 Extract 4

08:30 Wake up. Have breakfast and getting reading for work.

10:00-14:00 I work as part time teacher in a school. When I get the chance I use the school computer to log on to the platform and check if anything new has been posted.

15:00 Return home and I have lunch with my parents.

15:30 – 16:30 I log on for an hour to download study material and respond to mails.

16:30 – 19:00 I give private lessons to school children.

19:30 – 21:00 Study for my MA course. […]

21:00 Dinner.

21:30 I study a bit more and I also do preparation for the national examinations for appointment in the civil service.

23:30 Watch a film on TV and I go to bed around 1:00 a.m.

The student above is typical of a group of postgraduate students which as was commented above appeared to be living an extended undergraduate life having the bonus of living with their parents since the programme did not require them to move to a University campus. The particular student when asked how the e-learning programme fitted her life commented:

This particular programme and particularly the way it is delivered came to me at the right time… because not only am I able to study for a postgraduate course and get what I always wanted… being at home with my parents supporting me allows me to better prepare for the ASEP [Greek government national examinations for appointment in the civil service]… I could not have done it otherwise…

(Part time teacher, 25)

Another 26 year old female student who was working as an employee at a local municipality and produced similar diaries as the last two ones gave another perspective as to why the programme fitted her life so well.

This period in my life is ideal to get a postgraduate degree. I have recently started to work in X municipality getting my position after fierce competition. It's the kind of job one must really hang on to…. Such chances do not come often... [..] When I get married and have children …that's it … postgraduate studies will then have to wait…. probably for ever.

(Employee in a local municipality, 26)

From all the above what comes out as a crucial observation is that being a married woman bringing up children constitutes a substantial impediment for pursuing studies by e-learning. In our study this group of students appeared to have very limited control over the way they were organizing their days in order to create time for study. The way different groups of students have developed their distinctive time use patterns raise serious questions about the basic stated policy of e-learning programmes, which is to address social and geographical marginalisation. It has been reported that through e-learning, groups that would not have had the opportunity to pursue further education either because of their place of residence (islands, remote provinces, etc) or because of familial and other social commitments, could have a prospect of realising their aspirations (Vryonides et al, 2006). Things, however, do not appear to work in such a straightforward manner. For some students who aspire to return to higher education their decision requires: a) endless processes of negotiation with people that depend on them and b) finding ways to simultaneously accommodate existing commitments. And it is not uncommon to observe that when priorities need to be put forward, their studies come secondary to the social expectations that are often attached to other roles (i.e. motherhood). In other words, the question that seems to emerge as crucial at this point is the following: Has the introduction of this new form of alternative education failed to offer better opportunities to those students who were supposed to be served by it? An answer to this question appears to be given by the diaries of the students who experienced this innovation and points to a rather depressing picture.

6. Conclusions

As with other studies (Camporese et al, 1998; Peters, 1999; Sullivan, 2000; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003; Graig, 2006; Graig, 2006b; Mattingly & Sayer, 2006; Sayer, 2006) this study too highlights the disadvantaged position women with familial obligations find themselves to time structure their daily routines. This has serious implications for the policy of widening participation in new forms of educational opportunities especially when these were supposedly designed to address their needs. It appears that e-learning, as one of the most prominent form of current educational innovations which was introduced to address the needs of disadvantaged groups, has not yet done so comprehensively. From the diaries of groups such as men and single individuals without familial obligations it seems that they took better advantage of this innovation. It

fitted their lives much better because the crucial issues were on the one hand their flexibility to structure their daily routines and on the other the fact that other people's needs and priorities did not affect their time management strategies. It is reasonable to assume that these students are more likely to take advantage of conventional forms of education and for them e-learning is an additional potential.

On the other hand married women with children could not make the most of this innovative opportunity simple because they have little control and freedom to structure their day in terms of time and content. It appears that, as Davies (1990) wrote some time ago in another context but on a similar issue, 'space and time to study are both socially and personally constructed out of others' time and time for other things'. Similar remarks have been made by Moss (2004) more recently who argues that for women 'personal space and time for higher education has to be carved from space and time for other things and from space and time that is often in the control of other people.' As the women of the present study were trying to accommodate various obligations and other people's needs struggling at the same time to respond to the requirements of what all of them described as 'a very demanding course', they were frequently finding that this was an unmanageable task. In many ways they found themselves constrained by traditional ideas and expectations about their role in the Greek family. It is this kind of expectations that often ground women within the confines of domesticity and consequently, this contributes to the reproduction of a vicious circle of gender inequalities even when opportunities for widening access to further education are set up.

In a previous article, the need for educational providers to adopt more flexible organisational arrangements was raised as it was thought that in this way, postgraduate studies by e-learning would better fit with the needs of the targeted 'clientele' (Vryonides et al, 2006). It is only by recognising that mature students have inescapable familial and professional responsibilities which put them under serious strains when trying to construct space and time for academic work, that necessary and effective measures will truly fulfil the aspirations of the individuals who enter this process. Under present conditions the disparities in the experience of attending to e-learning programmes while at home constitute a severe source of resistance to the stated aim of e-learning programmes, which is to overcome new forms of social exclusion.

7. References

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