Distance Education Opportunities for Mature Women in Greece and Cyprus: Comparative Perspectives and Implications

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Greek Abstract

Η εισαγωγή προγραμμάτων εξ αποστάσεως και ηλεκτρονικής μάθησης στην Ελληνική και Κυπριακή ανώτατη εκπαίδευση τα τελευταία χρόνια συνοδεύτηκε από παράλληλες ρητορικές οι οποίες επικεντρώνονται στην αναγκαιότητα προσφοράς ευέλικτων ευκαιριών μάθησης σε ομάδες ενήλικων φοιτητών που πολλές φορές βρίσκονται στα όρια κοινωνικής περιθωριοποίησης. Σε αυτό το άρθρο επιχειρούμε να συγκρίνουμε τις εμπειρίες και τις αντιλήψεις ενήλικων επαγγελματιών γυναικών που συμμετείχαν σε δύο πρωτοποριακά μεταπτυχιακά προγράμματα στο Πανεπιστήμιο Αιγαίου και στο Ανοιχτό Πανεπιστήμιο Κύπρου. Τα εμπειρικά δεδομένα συγκεντρώθηκαν με δύο τρόπους: μέσα από συνεντεύξεις βάθους με δύο ομάδες μεταπτυχιακών φοιτητριών από τα δύο πανεπιστημιακά ιδρύματα και με ημι-δομημένα ημερολόγια. Στα ημερολόγια οι μεταπτυχιακές φοιτήτριες είχαν κληθεί να καταγράφουν συστηματικά τη συναισθηματική τους κατάσταση και τις εναλλαγές που παρουσιάζονταν κατά τη διάρκεια των σπουδών τους. Τα αποτελέσματα της ποιοτικής ανάλυσης των δεδομένων που συγκεντρώθηκαν υποδεικνύουν ότι στο χώρο της εκπαίδευσης ενήλικων οι έννοιες 'δια βίου εκπαίδευση' και 'εκδημοκρατισμός της εκπαίδευσης' θα πρέπει να τύχουν περαιτέρω εξέτασης από φορείς εκπαιδευτικής πολιτικής. Και αυτό γιατί, όπως εφαρμόζονται τώρα, είναι δυνατό να αποτελέσουν πεδίο εμφάνισης νέων κοινωνικών ανισοτήτων, ειδικά όταν δεν συνοδεύονται από πολιτικές κοινωνικής στήριξης ευάλωτων ομάδων. Οι γυναίκες με πολλαπλούς και συγκρουόμενους κοινωνικούς ρόλους αποτελούν μια τέτοια ομάδα και για να γίνει πραγματικότητα η ισότιμη συμμετοχή τους σε καινοτόμες μορφές εκπαίδευσης απαιτείται η προσαρμογή των υπαρχόντων αναλυτικών προγραμμάτων και η εισαγωγή πολιτικών κοινωνικής και άλλης στήριξης τους.

Introduction

The introduction of distance and e-learning education programs in the Greek and Cypriot higher education systems in the past few years has often been accompanied by parallel rhetoric. This rhetoric evolves and focuses primarily around the need for the state to offer flexible educational provisions to groups of mature students who would otherwise be at the risk of social marginalization or even exclusion. Marginalization is the result of social processes that require new and a constantly updated body of knowledge and skills to adapt in a social environment that is changing day by day and transforms the fundamental conditions of our social existence (Grummell, 2007). Often, perhaps not surprisingly, the rhetoric of equality of opportunity and social inclusion may inadvertently contribute to further marginalization of some social groups. Good intentions are rarely 'good' enough.

Our goal in this paper is to focus on the complex ways in which the rhetoric of opportunity and social inclusion is materialized in two innovative educational programs—one at the University of the Aegean in Greece and the other at the Open University of Cyprus. We will attempt to engage in a comparative study of the social contexts within which these two programs have been introduced in the past three years, evaluate the current state of their implementation, and analyze whether they actually fulfil the rhetoric of their introduction. The focus of our comparison is on the perceptions of mature professional women who at the time of their study have to accommodate multiple and often conflicting social roles with expectations stemming from traditional ideologies which place women within the private rather than the public social sphere. We want to explore, then, how exactly these women experience the rhetoric of adult education in their societies.

One thing should be noted from the start. The realization of the basic aim of these programs is made possible with the extensive use of modern ICT innovations which allow for breaking away from space and time constraints (Keegan, 2001). One factor, however, remains always at the fore of many scholars and researchers—the authors of this paper amongst them—who approach and study these developments with a critical view in order to theorize their implications for effectively tackling issues of contemporary social inequalities. And this refers to the students themselves and the conditions within which they are carrying out their studies in order to take advantage of the opportunities on offer. This is precisely why we focus on mature professional women that from the start emerged as an extremely interesting group for the purposes of assessing the effectiveness of the two aforementioned programs.

Theoretical Perspectives

Lifelong learning and *democratization of education* are now important components of educational policy at international bodies such as UNESCO, OECD and the European Union. The field of adult education has witnessed growing demands for equal opportunities and democratization of education in the last thirty years. These demands require the extension of educational opportunities to adult learners who are non-traditional students, by stressing the importance of offering new forms of education. These new forms of education arising in recent years are raising significant challenges to traditional definitions of learning, knowledge, and the role of the adult learners. Concerns related to an emphasis on productivity, the dynamics of continual change, and the emerging social and professional roles of individuals are some of the resulting challenges.

In theory, these changes are transforming the production, validation and communication of knowledge, and are re-conceptualizing the meaning of learning (Lyotard 1984; Usher & Edwards 1994); thus 'lifelong learning' has become the new trend. *In practice*, these changes have been enacted through a variety of new interventions such as modularization; pre-packaged open and distance education opportunities; increased emphasis on professional practice and the deployment of notions such as the 'reflective practitioner' (Sch�n 1983); new modes of assessment such as portfolio development and performance-based assessment; and, the pursuit of 'relevance' in learning through the tailoring of programs to individuals' needs (see Harris, 2000).

On the one hand, one may point out that there is in process a *destabilization* or subversion of traditional academic practices, a new 'politics of learning' (Usher & Solomon, 1999) in which more opportunities are

created for *all*. On the other hand, such changes may also signify a 'myth' in the sense that neoliberal demands for knowledge 'adapt' these opportunities for particular economic and political purposes such as self-regulation and increased productivity (Zembylas, 2006). Not surprisingly, these complexities become more evident when one considers the emerging economic, social and gender roles for adult learners.

In particular, the decision of mature women to enter or return to higher education is not a decision easily taken. As Johnson and Robson (1999) remark, this decision is often "depicted in the literature on mature women students as a time of change which has psychological consequences" (p.274). Pascall and Cox (1993) and Edwards (1993) highlight the issue of 'identity' pointing to contradictions and discontinuities in mature women's identity when they become students. And this happens because often this identity has to fit with pre-existing social roles and commitments. One of the most important paramount issues in this process is managing time amidst conflicting responsibilities as women returning to higher education struggle to balance themselves between the public and private spheres, generally resulting in anxieties and tensions. In their study Davies et al. (2002) reported that the decision of mature students (of both sexes) to enter higher education is a complex one. In particular, they highlighted the barriers that made life difficult for this group of students. Barriers were linked to the realities of mature students' lives: a multiplicity of roles, costs of study, the importance and value attached to caring responsibilities, and time management problems. Similarly, Reay (2002) argues that in their effort to make the transition to higher education, mature students face constraints of class, gender, ethnicity and marital status. Focusing specifically on mature working class women Reay (2003) illustrates vividly that in making the decision to pursue higher education mature women were juggling extensive working commitments or childcare and domestic responsibilities with studying. Moss (2004) has also shown that once women entered higher education the whole experience is an ongoing struggle to create time and space for studying. This in the end has serious consequences for issues relating to widening access and participation to higher education for mature women, something that is of primary concern to the authors of this paper.

Issues of mature women's participation in higher education in societies such as Greece and Cyprus, become a sociological conundrum given the position of women in most areas of social life (i.e. family, education and labour force). This connects to the current state of gender relations in both societies and the chances brought about by society's move towards modernization. Green and Vryonides (2005) argue that when such a change occurs in a space of just three generations where by societies transform from pre-modern traditional societies to societies that exhibits many characteristics found in developed Western societies, contradictions are inevitable. And this is so because as Green and Vryonides (2005) contend modernization is not a linear development replicating a simplistic and idealized model of Western social, political and economic transformation. Rather, what actually happens is that numerous features of pre-modern attitudes and practices co-exist with modern ones and are sources of social tensions. For example it has often been reported 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 (Maratou-Alipranti, 1995; Cavounidis, 1996; Mousourou, 2003). As a result, for most women fulfilling familial responsibilities while working full-time is a subsequent burden in terms of time and energy spent. This in turn has serious consequences for their choice to pursue educational opportunities.

The Social Context and the Post-Graduate Study Programs

Greece

The University of the Aegean, Greece is a unique institution of higher education in Greece and possibly Europe. Its distinctiveness lies in the fact that it is located in five islands of the Aegean Sea with each island hosting one of the five Schools. Its foundation in the early 1980's was part of the Greek government's policy for regional development. One of the challenges that the university faces is to try and offer competitive programmes and innovative educational "products" in order to attract students from the various parts of Greece. In that framework during the academic year 2004-5, a new post-graduate program entitled 'Gender and the New Educational and Employment Environments of the Information Age', was launched by the University of the Aegean, Greece, within the context of promoting and implementing European Union policies on new educational structures as well as on gender equality under the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training (OPEIVT). This programme was particularly designed to address the academic and professional needs of groups of professionals who otherwise would have been marginalized (socially and geographically) in terms of accessing further personal and professional development. The courses of the programme are delivered by means of new educational technologies of distance learning (through an e-learning educational platform) allowing participants to remain at their homes with their families and other professional commitments (Vryonides et al, 2006). The programme is quite distinctive from other programs offered in Greece, in a number of aspects: (i) It is *multi-thematic*, as it is comprised of modules that focus on new forms of education, new forms of employment and new technologies in the new information age, as autonomous study units but also as they are all related to diachronic as well as newly emerging forms of gender inequality. (ii) The modules are *interdisciplinary*, drawing upon diverse social science disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, etc. (iii) Each module is *co-taught* by an average of three experts from these various disciplines, but most importantly, (iv) the courses are taught by means of an *e-learning setting* (e-distribution, e-interaction, e-collaboration, Weber & Ribold 2005), combined with "live", on-campus seminars and workshops.

In the first academic year that the programme was launched (September 2004), 40 students were admitted in the course (29 women and 11 men) following a selection process that dealt with over a 150 applications. In the two subsequent years the programme proved to be quite popular and successful as each year the selection committee dealt with around 180 applications for the 40 available positions. Most of the people admitted are usually employed as full-time professionals in education, public service, IT and engineering sectors. Their age range varies from 25 to 50 and they reside at different areas of the country (urban, rural, islands, etc.). The majority of them at the time of their enrolment in the programme normally have no experience of distance learning procedures or of e-learning processes. Hence, for most of them, this program is their first attempt to participate in alternative forms of education.

Cyprus

The Open University of Cyprus was founded in 2003 and accepted its first students in 2006. It is the first university in Cyprus that offers degrees through open and distance learning. Part of the reason for the establishment of an open university in Cyprus had to do with the government's efforts to respond to the increased demands for lifelong learning and continuing education. The Open University of Cyprus currently runs four programs, mainly at the postgraduate level; its postgraduate program in Educational Studies is the most popular program with almost 1500 individuals applying for 120 positions in 2007.

The postgraduate program in Educational Studies is different from any other graduate programs offered in

Cyprus in two major aspects: (i) The modules are year-long ones, multidisciplinary and tailored to the form and specifications of distance learning; (ii) the courses are taught electronically, blended with face-to-face seminars (once every six weeks). The program is tailored to experienced teachers (primary and secondary) who are employed as full-time professionals in education and thus there is a great demand for its perceived convenience. The process of selection is very competitive and is based on an application process that asks for information related to years of teaching experience, first degree grade point average, relevance of present job with education, an essay on prospective plans, knowledge of foreign languages, knowledge of computers and social service. The applicants' responses are assigned points (everything is done electronically except the essay) and then the overall score is put in order; depending on the available positions the students who accumulate the highest points are selected.

In the first academic year that the programme was launched (September 2006) 100 students were admitted in Educational Studies (80 women and 20 men); their age range was between 25 and 53 years old. The participating students resided at different parts of Cyprus (both rural and urban); 20% of the students came from Greece. The majority of them had no experience on distance or online learning process. As part of the present investigation it had been confirmed that for most students saw this program as the only opportunity they had for graduate education because of its convenience.

Methodology

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study had been developed from the reviewed literature and addressed the emotional experiences of women who had taken an online course in the above two programs: The questions posed then are: (1) How do mature women students *feel* about their participation in these new forms of education? (2) Do distance education programs *really* offer opportunities for women to break out of their other responsibilities during their participation in these programs?

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, the participants in both programs were asked to reflect on their first-year experiences through in-depth interviews and diaries. The focus of interviews and diaries was on examining how the two distance education programs addressed, if at all, the concerns raised here. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight female students from each program (one interview at the beginning of the program and one at the end). The purpose of the interviews was to find out about women's emotional experiences in balancing different social roles and commitments while studying. The interview questions emerged either directly from the research questions or from findings of our previous research (Vryonides, Vitsilakis & Efthymiou, 2006). All the interviews were approximately one hour in length, were recorded and transcribed.

The diaries were completed once a month (October-April) and focused on women's emotional experiences during the month, as these experiences were relevant to the new forms of their learning. The participants also wrote a final report in May of 2007 in which they reflected on their emotional experiences as a whole. These diaries were kept electronically and sent to the instructor on the last day of each month. The diaries were valuable in documenting the social-emotional context of the distance learning course as well as the women's emotional journey throughout the year. Despite the limitations of diaries in their reliance on self-report, the personal nature of this source brought attention to areas of their emotional experiences that were not evident from 'traditional' sources, such as individual/group assignments or emails.

Data Analysis

All phases of data analysis were grounded in the theoretical perspectives of this study. For example, we constantly looked for evidence that showed women's efforts to make sense of their emotional experiences and the struggles to respond to their multiple commitments. The theoretical perspectives were particularly helpful in allowing multiple interpretations of incoming data as an ongoing part of the data collection process, because attention was paid to contextualizing the ways in which women's emotional experiences were constituted within the social terrain in which they had been studying.

To ensure validity, we worked separately and collaboratively, using an interpretive method of coding (Erickson, 1986) to ascertain confirming and disconfirming evidence of assertions arising from data sources. We independently read and coded all the data following the open-coding techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). For triangulation purposes the diaries were also coded and analyzed with the help of an independent researcher. All the texts were examined looking for evidence of women's emotional experiences in relation to their participation in the program. Building on this analysis, we interpreted the data by developing themes, categories and tentative hypotheses. The themes that were developed in our analyses were explored in greater depth and were put into broader categories. The overarching themes and categories began to illustrate various aspects of the research questions we posed. This analysis narrowed down the categories down into the following two: *Positive feelings about the program; Struggles to balance multiple roles and responsibilities*. These categories were used as the basis of the development of our analysis and discussion presented here.

Findings

Case 1: Greece

Positive feelings about the program: The first feelings women had about returning to an organized educational process were that of excitement and enthusiasm. Many saw their participation in the distance learning program as an opportunity they were long seeking to renew themselves, personally and academically, without a major upset in their lives. There was also an element of excitement for participating in a novel –for Greece- e-learning program. This excitement was retained for a short while once they got actively involved in the actual educational procedure, as they found the e-learning platform effective and user friendly. As we will see later on it after some time things started to appear as problematic. So, at the beginning this is how some women described their participation in the program.

> I really needed this at this stage in my life ... some kind of renewal and repositioning my priorities ... I feel that by doing this I will get a new meaning in my personal quest, I will gain new motives and move on to other things. (Primary head teacher, 45 years old)

> After so many years getting the student ID in my hands made me feel a strange feeling of achievement ... even though some of my friends laughed when they saw it .... (Secondary school teacher, 36 years old)

> I am so happy and excited about this... and the feelings gets so much stronger when I see people like myself doing a similar thing. (Primary teacher, 43 years old)

> This fulfils life long aspirations to get more education ... Basically it was made possible because of the way the programme is delivered ... the d-learning mode allows me to tend to my existing responsibilities (familial, professional, social). I could not do it otherwise... and this makes feel very happy. (Social worker, 34 years old)

> Any other mode of delivery would have made it impossible for me to participate as I am limited by my familial and social responsibilities ... as well as the fact that I live in an island... (Nursery school teacher, 38 years old)

The positive feeling extended to other aspects of the program as well. For example some students commented on their anticipation to be part of a community of people with similar social characteristics. The extract below is one that captures that feeling very vividly.

> I've read all the entries students made on the e-board [*one which asked students to present themselves to the others*] I am so excited to be part of an "e-group" with such a positive attitude, appetite for learning and humour... Technology has done its miracle bringing all of us together ... I am so anxious to start ... I feel like a school girl ... at the end of the day each grownup has a child in them. (Primary teacher, 40 years old)

There were also positive comments about students becoming experts in ICTs because of the extended use during the course or becoming fluent in the English language. It has to be pointed out that a large chunk of the e-material of the course was offered in English as there is very limited literature on the content of the course in the Greek language.

> It wouldn't surprise me if we all become "stars" in the English language after we study so many sources and material in English ... another positive outcome of participating in the course. (Social worker, 34 years old)

Struggles to balance multiple roles and responsibilities. However, once the "real" courses came on line, "reality hit" the students. Many of them began to express shock, as they felt swamped by "*too many texts to read*" and "*too many activities to participate in*". The technology-mediated access to the learning procedures which at first appeared "*a game*", came to present itself as an additional burden, especially to the less experienced students. It soon became clear that students had to develop personal strategies to deal with the problems which arose. The first major problem was that of managing the heavy work load, and at the same time meeting the fixed deadlines for handing in assignments or completing other activities. Most of them ended up covering only material which was necessary for the assignments, but they expressed serious concern about missing out on important material that they did not have the time to go through "properly".

> I try my best to respond in the best possible way to the demands of this particular program. I want to participate in everything that goes on but unfortunately it is not humanly possible ... Time shortage does not allow me to do that. (Secondary teacher, 35 years old)

Another strategy was to structure their day in such a way so as to fit the demands of the program. However, any attempt to construct a typical day out of our respondents' narratives would most probably not accurately capture the actual details of particular cases. In a day which usually started as early as 5 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. During the day and depending on the children's age they needed to tend to different responsibilities: from taking and picking up toddlers to and from nursing schools, to assuming the role of a chauffeur driving teenagers to private lessons in the afternoon. For some women this was a strenuous activity on top of everything else, particularly because the burden was not equally shared with their husbands. It soon became evident to all of them that studying from home was not a 'convenient' way to pursue postgraduate studies as they might have originally thought. For many this raised concerns for their ability to balance themselves between their diverse obligations. Thus, each day was a continuous struggle to find time and space to engage with their studies. The comment below is typical of many of the answers our respondents gave:

> 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. (Secondary school teacher, age 40*)*

As these women were working while studying for their courses, they were simultaneously trying to accommodate various obligations and other people's needs struggling to respond to the requirements of what all of them described as 'a very demanding course'. Frequently, this was resulting in an unmanageable task. At best it was loading them with frustration, depriving them of sleep and affecting what many regarded as their very personality and self-esteem. The remarks below are worthy of note at this point:

> 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 40)

Two other participants also give vivid answers about the things that they had to 'sacrifice' for their studies:

> 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)

> 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)

The above comment seems to be in line with what Davies (1990) wrote a decade and a half ago that 'space and time to study are both socially and personally constructed out of others' time and time for other things' (Davies, 1990). Similarly, Moss (2004, p. 299) reveals 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'.

Case 2: Cyprus

Positive feelings about the program. At the beginning, the successful acceptance at the Open University of Cyprus made many students feel joy, pride and a sense of accomplishment. Their success offered them the opportunity to fulfil their dream for postgraduate studies—a dream that had been inconceivable until recently. As far as the methodology of distance learning was concerned, and despite initial feelings of uncertainty, the students revealed feelings of relief since the program required no physical presence. The nature of distance learning methodology created positive expectations, especially for the female students who pointed out that they would be able to combine family responsibilities and student obligations. The excerpt below is taken out of the first diary:

> I feel an immense relief due to the fact that distance learning requires no physical presence. This is an important advantage of the program, because I don't have to spend many hours driving to and from the university [...]. At the same time, I appreciate the fact that I can study in my own private space, at the time *I* choose, while I can still be with my family when I take a break. I feel empowered that I can cope with both my student and family life. (Primary school teacher, 38 years old)

During the second month of the program, the students were given their first assignment. During the research and writing process, many students made comments on the convenience of using the Internet from home. In an interview, Kris pointed out:

> To my great surprise, I realized that it was very convenient to do your work from the comfort of your home! Without even moving from your computer screen! [...] The use of the internet in education can offer many advantages, particularly for those who work and do not have the time to go to the library. (Primary school teacher, 35 years old)

In the following months, students seemed to become more familiar with the distance learning methodology. As a result, the communication among the students and the instructor became more frequent. Many students wrote in their diaries that using e-mail made them feel more secure that any question they had could be answered right away. Moreover, students began to form small study groups that gradually brought them closer to one another. As Joanna wrote in an e-mail:

> Gradually, I am realizing that the stress for not knowing how to use the Internet is minimizing. I must confess that after learning to use email, I am much more confident and I am proactive in communicating with my classmates and instructors. Now I exchange ideas, bibliographical references, and friendly greetings and we arrange face-to-face meetings and online chats! The close relationships I have managed to form with some of my classmates, perhaps due to the nature of this program, help me tremendously to deal with my feelings of stress. [...] If I had been told at the beginning of this course that I would have formed such strong relationships with some of my classmates, I would never have believed it! It's paradoxical, but I feel that I have managed to create stronger relationships in the context of this online program than I ever did in my face-to-face classes. (secondary school teacher, 47 years old)

Struggle to balance multiple roles and responsibilities. Alongside the positive feelings that these women expressed, there were also many negative ones that generated a lot of emotional ambivalence about distance learning. As it was already mentioned, the first negative reactions had to do with the ability to overcome the challenges of distance learning methodology. Feelings of stress, anxiety, and desperation were present since all of the students had been confronted with the demands of an unfamiliar methodology. The following excerpt comes from Celia's first diary:

> To be honest, I am terribly anxious because of this methodology of distance learning. This is something completely unknown to me. Registration from a *distance*, *distance* teaching, *distance* learning—all of these make me question the effectiveness of this methodology. So far, I have to say that the lack of face-to-face communication with my instructors and my limited inexperience with using technology make me feel like a lonely traveller. [...] I don't know where to start... (primary school teacher, 34 years old)

The feelings of isolation and loneliness were dominant in many students for almost half-way through the course. As another student writes in her journal:

> The written communication through a machine does not satisfy me completely, because I feel that it does not fit my character. In communicating with people, I pay great attention to facial expressions, bodily posture and mannerisms. Clearly, these elements are absent in online communication. Sometimes, I feel embarrassed because I think my email messages to classmates and my instructor are too 'cold' and 'formal'. I also feel that this kind of communication leads me, unconsciously perhaps, to the application of very formal rules of writing. Some other times I am overwhelmed by feelings of isolation because I want to chat on something I don't understand, yet I *cannot* do this over the Internet. The computer cannot take the place of personal human contact... (secondary school teacher, 49 years old)

The most serious obstacle that these women seemed to face was their struggle to combine their professional, family and social life; this struggle made it harder for them to cope with the numerous demands of the program. In particular, there were systematic references in their diaries and emails how much they felt immensely stressed out. Feelings of isolation seemed to make things even more difficult. The following is another excerpt from a diary half-way through the course:

> On the one hand, the feeling of isolation invokes intense feelings of stress because of the lack of face-to-face communication. On the other hand, I have so many other responsibilities—I am a mother, a wife, a professional [teacher] *and* a student—I *cannot* cope with all of those. I feel guilty for paying no attention to my husband and children. I am beginning to wonder if I have made the right choice to enrol in this program.. (primary school teacher, 35 years old)

Another student also notes:

> I feel that my *private space* has been taken over and it is now a *study space*, something that

makes me feel a lot of discomfort [...]. Also, I cannot study until late at night, that is, until after the kids sleep and I clean the house, cook for the following day and take care all of my other responsibilities. For these reasons, studying is always the last thing to do. So I wonder with what frame of mind one can concentrate to study at ten o' clock at night, being exhausted after a very long day? (primary school teacher, 37 years old)

It is important to highlight that similar comments about studying late at night until after all of their other obligations are fulfilled, were made by all of the women in this program. Many months into the program and the women still referred to their despair and frustration about the multiple roles they had to fulfil simultaneously. As Christine said very poignantly:

"I feel I am always running towards something that I cannot reach. There are many times that the stress of the day does not allow me to study. Moreover, I have pushed aside my family and I feel very guilty for that..."

In general, distance learning methodology seemed to be an exhausting and hard-working learning process for the women of this program; they had to deal with intensive negative feelings about not being able to fulfil their multiple responsibilities. The last excerpt from the second interview raises an interesting and unexpected dimension of open and distance education for adults:

The open and distance learning program ends up being a painful and exhausting process for someone who works, and especially for those who have family and professional responsibilities. This shows how difficult it is to put an end to social and educational inequalities [...]. On the one hand, I was given an opportunity to study, one that I did not have in the past, so I truly appreciate this. On the other hand, however, I cannot benefit from this and so I am deeply disappointed. I have so many responsibilities on my shoulders (family, professional, and social) and the demands of this programs are unrealistic, in my view. So, I wonder: To whom is this program really addressed? If you want my opinion, I don't think it is addressed to women professionals. (primary school teacher, 38 years old)

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this investigation provide two important insights for both programs under investigation: (1) It is shown how emotional experiences essentially reveal the effects of power and societal relations, that is, how distance education programs may indeed provide opportunities to women to break out of domesticity imposed on them by their other roles and the expectations attached to them (Edwards, 1993; Davies, et al., 2002), yet studying 'at home' has heavy demands as a result of conflicts with other responsibilities; (2) The results of this study indicate that although both programs are situated in different settings, women's experiences are manifested and expressed in *ambivalent* ways, that is, both positive and negative emotional experiences co-exist. These insights and their implications are briefly discussed below.

Studying 'at home' for women often means that it has to be carried out both in the physical space of domestic responsibilities and within the time frame set by pre-existing roles. To cope, women students develop various strategies of time management in order to balance their conflicting responsibilities frequently resulting in stress, pressure and feelings of frustration. All these appeared to be a common and recurring theme in the stories of women in both programs under investigation. As Reay (2003, p.301) points out "in such circumstances, when any sort of social life is sacrificed, what becomes visible is time poverty, and, in particular, a lack of time for 'care of the self'". In another study we have indicated that the need for support becomes paramount for whether the whole experience would develop positively or negatively. In particular, the role of the immediate familial surroundings and particularly that of the husband appears to be crucial as his supportive or indifferent and unconstructive stance might affect to a great extent women's educational experiences (Vryonides & Vitsilakis, *in press*).

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 when they decide to return or enter higher education. 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. Women such as the ones presented in this study can not make the most of this innovative opportunity simply because they have little control and freedom to structure their day in terms of time and content. This inevitably may result in grounding women within the confines of domesticity and consequently to the reproduction of gender inequalities even when opportunities for widening access to further education are set up. So, even when positive feelings about the program were expressed, those seemed to be at a general level and focused on the *potentiality* of distance education programs to serve the needs of working women, especially the needs in relation to communication.

Furthermore, the analysis in this study locates women in social and power relations to multiple sources of pressure or support. It is shown, for example, how societal expectations for women in both Greece and Cyprus—i.e. women teachers must advance their careers but they must also take major responsibilities in their families such as childcare and housework—shape women's experiences with new forms of education (see Vryonides, Vitsilakis & Efthymiou, 2006). Based on the assumption that every aspect of social life is governed by power, it is naïve to expect that power relations can be relieved easily in any way. However, studies such as the one presented here can indeed reveal the effects of power and thus specific measures may be taken to deal with the implications. For instance, the issue of how new forms of education should be designed for working women requires further careful exploration. The demands of distance learning, as revealed in this study, confirms von Prümmer's (2000) findings that women are less likely to be relieved of other responsibilities such as childcare and housework when they take up studying. The real issue, then, is what can be done to address the perpetuation of gender inequalities despite the opportunities offered through new forms of education (Kramarae, 2001). Or to put this differently: where should the boundaries of education be set so that the tensions between private and public spheres of women's life do not end up extending marginalization, contrary to the proclaimed rhetoric of social inclusion?

Given that there is not a clear boarder between private and public spheres, especially in adult learning (Usher & Edwards, 1996), concepts such as 'lifelong learning' and 'democratization of education' need to be further scrutinized by education policymakers. In other words, we need to interrogate whether new forms of education really address old inequities and whether they provide less access to education, rather than more. The rhetoric of democratization of education is appealing. Yet, some traditionally marginalized groups such as women cannot succeed in meeting the demands of new forms of education, if support measures (e.g. paid time off) are not provided at the policy level. Ideally, these forms of education need to

be sensitive to women's needs, rather than the market's needs; educational policymakers need to create the space and support structures for this to occur. Access to these programs is not enough; accomplishing the goals of social inclusion will require changes in curriculum *and* social policies.

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