



## E-QUALIFIED: AN IN-DEPTH INVESTIGATION OF AN INNOVATIVE GRADUATE PROGRAMME AT A GREEK UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract:

In the definition of learning strategic objectives in recent educational legislation in Greece, it is claimed that a successful implementation of lifelong learning (LLL) strategies will contribute to increasing employability, social inclusion and fulfilling individual needs and aspirations. Among the most significant steps of these LLL strategies has been the proliferation of graduate study programmes across the Greek Higher Education Institutes in the last decade. This paper attempts to investigate the extent to which the above goals are satisfied, by focusing on an innovative graduate programme at a Greek University, offered through a “blended-learning” methodology. The data were derived from an empirical investigation that adopted a mixed method approach, in the form of on-line self-completed questionnaires, supplemented by group interviews. The findings of this investigation are expected to have policy implications that relate to the effectiveness of graduate programmes in Greece, especially those offered through a “blended-learning” approach.

**Keywords:** distance learning; blended learning; graduate studies; Greece

### 1. Introduction

In March 2000, the Lisbon European Council set out the goal for the European Union (henceforth EU) of becoming “*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*”. The strategy for this purpose entailed the promotion of Lifelong Learning (LLL) and the creation of an *information* society for all (European Commission, 2000). In Greece, among the most significant evidence of this strategy has been the proliferation of graduate study programmes across the higher education institutions (HEIs) in the last two decades (Ballias, Kamarianos, Kyprianos & Stamelos, 2016, p. 63).

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In our paper, we will attempt to investigate the extent to which the above goals are satisfied, based on a case study of an innovative graduate programme, offered through a combination of traditional and distance learning methods, at a Greek University. Our data will hopefully help everybody involved (individuals, faculty, HEIs and policy-makers in Greece) to: a) improve the distance-education settings in Greece, administratively, technologically and pedagogically; and b) to make fruitful interventions on the “blended-learning” models in the country.

## **1.2 Distance learning methods and graduate studies**

Distance learning is a new way of learning, which is characterized by features such as the *distance* between the trainer and the trainee, using technical means for transferring the curriculum content. Alternative terms commonly used for this kind of learning include *on-line learning*, *e-learning*, *internet learning*, *distributed learning*, *networked learning*, *tele-learning*, *virtual learning*, *computer-assisted learning* and *web-based learning* (Ally, 2008; Holmberg, 1986, 1995; Keegan, 1988).

In recent years, due to pedagogical and practical/technical concerns over the possibilities of distance learning, there has been a widely-used model, which is called “blended learning”. This model of adult learning involves mixing *formal*, *informal*, *open* and *distance* learning formats, *synchronous* and *asynchronous* communication, *face-to-face* teaching practices, various kinds of teaching materials and educational technology applications. It is a hybrid model which “marries” the traditional frontal (F2F) education, with one based on online services (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

As one recent report by the EU showed, one of the basic measures to increase the overall participation of adults in LLL is to support new modes of delivering learning content, among which distance learning is one of the most important policy levers, with promising results (European Commission, 2013, chapter 4). On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the United States Department of Education (2014) estimated that almost 30% of students enrolled in distance education courses are at the graduate programme level” (Allen & Seaman, 2014, in Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson & Young, 2015, p. 311).

## **1.3 Factors related to and affecting adult participation in graduate studies through distance learning**

Currently, there is a multiplicity of perspectives and theoretical attempts to highlight the most important factors (psychological or social) that may be linked to, or affect the adult-population participation in graduate studies, using distance learning methods. This is partly due to the fact that many of the existing theories give different considerations on how the *internal processes* (fundamentally learning needs) and *social factors* are involved in cognitive development, motivation framing and/or decision-making (i.e. behavioural) processes regarding adult learning (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ally, 2008; Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Kanuka, 2008; Keller, 2008; Merrill, 2002), whereas other theories focus on the “supply side” of the equation, such

as the availability of a *solid institutional framework* and the creation of *sophisticated and challenging learning environments* (Cuban, 2001; Jaber & Moore, 1999). Other theoretical attempts try to combine “demand-side” and “supply-side” approaches, and stress that what matters is the *interaction* between the general (dominant) *culture* of the educational organization and *individual attitudes* of teachers/instructors and/or learners/trainees (Ally, 2008; Collis, 1996; Illinois Faculty Seminar, 1999; Tearle, 2004).

This paper is an exploratory and policy oriented piece of work, since it attempts to evaluate the implementation of a graduate blended-learning programme, with many distance-learning features, and not so much on testing any explanatory theoretical model. However, a lot of the aforementioned factors will become evident through the analysis and discussion of our findings, and certain explanatory insights will be offered for future research.

#### **1.4 The case study framework**

Up until the early 1990s taught, graduate studies in Greece were practically nonexistent (Stamelos & Kavasakalis, 2017). Greek students relied on HEIs abroad for their graduate studies, as the supply of positions at Greek public HEIs (i.e. universities and Technological Education Institutes / TEIs) historically fell short of the student demand (Vryonides & Vitsilakis, 2008). The situation changed dramatically during the mid-1990s when there was an expansion of taught graduate programmes, mainly because of external EU funding (Gouvias, 2011; Vryonides & Vitsilakis, 2008).

It should be noted here that distance learning programmes in Greece is a relatively new phenomenon, in educational, as well as in technical terms. Greek HEIs have embraced the new technologies, if not else for reasons of cost-effectiveness and for overcoming geographical, pedagogical, time-management, bureaucratic and other institutional barriers (Lionarakis, 2006; Rossiou, 2010). A PhD study in 2012 (Pagge, 2012) estimated that across the country HEIs were offering 19,699 distance-learning, at under- or post-graduate level, using “open-access” or “closed” (i.e. proprietary) Learning Management Systems / LMS (p. 128). It should be said that although the aforementioned electronic platforms support distance learning, this does not mean that all the HEIs are entitled to offer integrated distance learning programmes that lead to the award of tertiary degrees (levels 5 and 6 of the ISCED classification). The only HEI that was granted, from 1997, the power to award degrees exclusively through distance learning is the “Hellenic Open University” (HOU), based in Patras, in Southern Greece. Nevertheless, many other HEIs have been implementing *non-formal* educational programmes through e-learning (at post-secondary level, ISCED level 4), some of them from the early 2000s (Agorogianni et al., 2011).

The examined case is a graduate programme (MSc), which was launched in 2004 by a public university in the eastern part of Greece, with a special focus on *ICTs*, as well as on *gender equality* (Intzidis, Karantzola, Gouvias & Vitsilakis, 2008). The modules of the programme were delivered: a) by means of new educational technologies of distance learning, through an advanced *LMS* (the “Blackboard-VISTA”™, a proprietary

learning environment had been initially used, and later on it was replaced by the "MOODLE", a known open-source platform); b) by *face-to-face meetings* at regular intervals throughout the academic year.

The particular university (with campuses in 6 different Greek islands in the north and south Aegean Sea) has a total enrolment of more than 15,000 students, with approximately 2,100 classified as "graduate students" (doing MSc, MEd or PhD studies), 327 faculty members, 65 teaching assistants and 267 administrative personnel (latest figures for academic year 2014-15). The institution offers (autonomously or in collaboration) 39 graduate degree programmes, with an increasing number of them incorporating distance-learning features.

The examined programme was implemented for a decade (academic years 2004-05 to 2013-14), and offered opportunity for advanced studies to more than 300 adult students, allowing participants to remain most of the time "*at their homes, with their families and other professional commitments*" (Vryonides & Vitsilakis, 2008, p. 200).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 The sample

An on-line self-completed questionnaire was sent to *all* those who have participated in the specific Master's programme during the period 2004-05 to 2012-13, amounting to a total of 313 persons (there were no data for the academic year 2013-14).

Participants were invited via e-mail to respond to an online survey (provided by the *Google-docs*<sup>TM</sup> platform) and were given two weeks to respond. The response rate was satisfactory for surveys, especially one administered by distance, since 38.5% (121 out of 313) of the contacted persons filled in the on-line questionnaire. The completion of the questionnaires was done in the spring of 2015.

Later, and based on the findings of the questionnaires, a more "qualitative" second stage followed, to corroborate the findings of the first stage. More specifically, two group interviews were performed online during May 2016. The selection of individuals and the timing of the interviews were made in such a way as to engage individuals who participated at different time periods in the MSc program and had diverse occupational profiles. An additional criterion for choosing the interviewees was the need to preserve a "gender balance". We ended up with nine (9) individuals (one group of six and another of three), who were interviewed, during two different weekends of May, through the use of the well-known teleconference software "Skype"<sup>TM</sup>.

### 2.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire contained initially basic *demographic data* of the respondents. More specifically, the participants provided information about their: *gender, age, current occupation* (a 5-category classification based on the 12-category Hellenic Statistical

Authority's [HSA] classification), *job status*, and *level of education completed by the respondent's parents* (based on the ISCED2011).

The respondents provided information about their previous (i.e. before the examined MSc Programme) *LLL experiences*, their *attitudes towards LLL* and the *main reason* that forced them to pursue graduate studies (6 different questions, on a 0-4 Likert scale: 0= "totally disagree", 4= "totally agree"). They were also asked to evaluate some *criteria*, according to which a person might choose the particular graduate programme, on a scale from 0 ("not at all important") to 4 ("very important"). Then, they were asked to assess how satisfied were they with the *outcomes* of their graduate studies, again on a scale from 0 ("not at all helpful") to 4 ("very helpful"). Additionally, they were called to *rate the particular MSc programme* according to certain dimensions of "quality" (e.g. infrastructure, cost of studies, etc.). The scale ranged from 0 ("totally unsatisfied") to 4 ("totally satisfied"). Finally, the respondents were asked to provide a general picture of the *quality of graduate programmes in contemporary Greece* (on the same a scale as above).

### 2.3 The Group Interviews

As opposed to the individual interview, a group interview's strength depends on the interaction between the interviewer and the respondents, with the latter reflecting on their own experiences in a more dynamic –compared to an individual interview– way (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Patton, 2002).

The interview guide included the following topics:

1. Profile of the respondents
2. Prior experience with LLL
3. Factors that influenced respondents to engage in graduate studies
4. Expectations and emotions regarding graduate studies, in general
5. Expectations and emotions regarding the specific graduate programme
6. Time management during graduate studies
7. Experiences after graduation.

We tried to include individuals from different academic cohorts of the specific graduate programme, in order to grasp as many *occupational, family* and *personal* profiles as possible, and to sketch certain life-transitions and developmental tasks that confront the individual in various life cycle phases (Cross, 1981). Although we kept the aforementioned sequencing of the main topics, the ordering of the persons replying to those questions was changing from one topic to another, in order to avoid "order effects" in the answers provided, as well as boredom or even feelings of unequal treatment on the part of the respondents.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 The questionnaire

Most of the respondents were *women*, the vast majority (82.5%) were *salaried employees*, working mainly in the *public sector*, and a significant number of those were *teachers* (in

primary or secondary schools). Their *age-range* was from 24 to 60, and the median age was 35 years. The median level of *education* of the respondents' parents was "4", that is six years of secondary education completed.

The majority of the respondents stated that they had previous *experience* with LLL programs before their enrolment in the particular post-graduate programme. Approximately 60% of them had already participated in 2 programmes. Their *attitudes* towards LLL were overtly positive, with most of them expressing "strong agreement" with statements like "LLL is a human need", or "LLL is a human right", etc.

They were ambivalent as far as it concerns the *factors* that influenced them to follow graduate studies. Although they (said that they) had not been interested in *finding a job*, or *raising their salaries* (mean score 2.28, in a range from 0 to 4), on the other hand, they *had aimed at improving their position in the current job* (mean score 3.18, in a range from 0 to 4). They had also been interested in enriching their *cognitive development* and *boosting their self-confidence* (mean scores: 3.71 and 2.97 respectively).

**Table 1:** Factors for following graduate studies

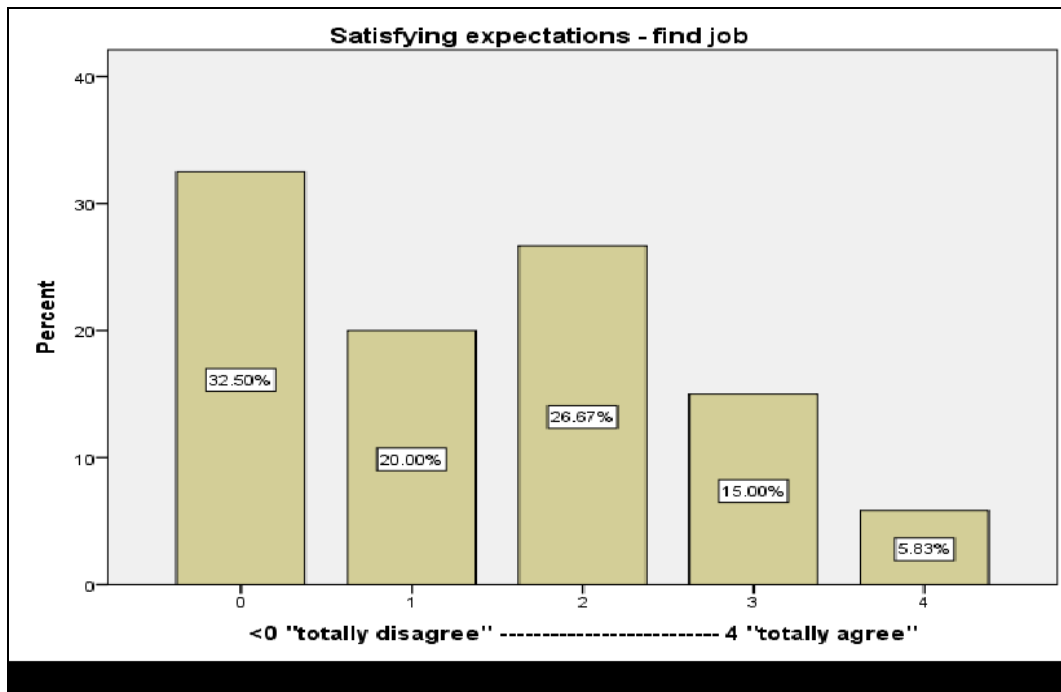
	Finding Job	Raising Salary	Improving Position In Current Job	Cognitive Development	Proving Self-Worth	Boosting Self-Confidence	Sensitization In Social Issues
N Valid	120	120	119	120	118	119	119
Missing	0	0	1	0	2	1	1
Mean	2.18	2.29	3.18	3.71	.86	2.97	2.99
Median	3.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	.00	3.00	3.00

As far as it concerns the *criteria for choosing the particular programme*, the respondents stated that they had been attracted by the combination of the dimensions of "gender", "ICTs" and the focus on the "New Working Environments" of the particular master's programme.

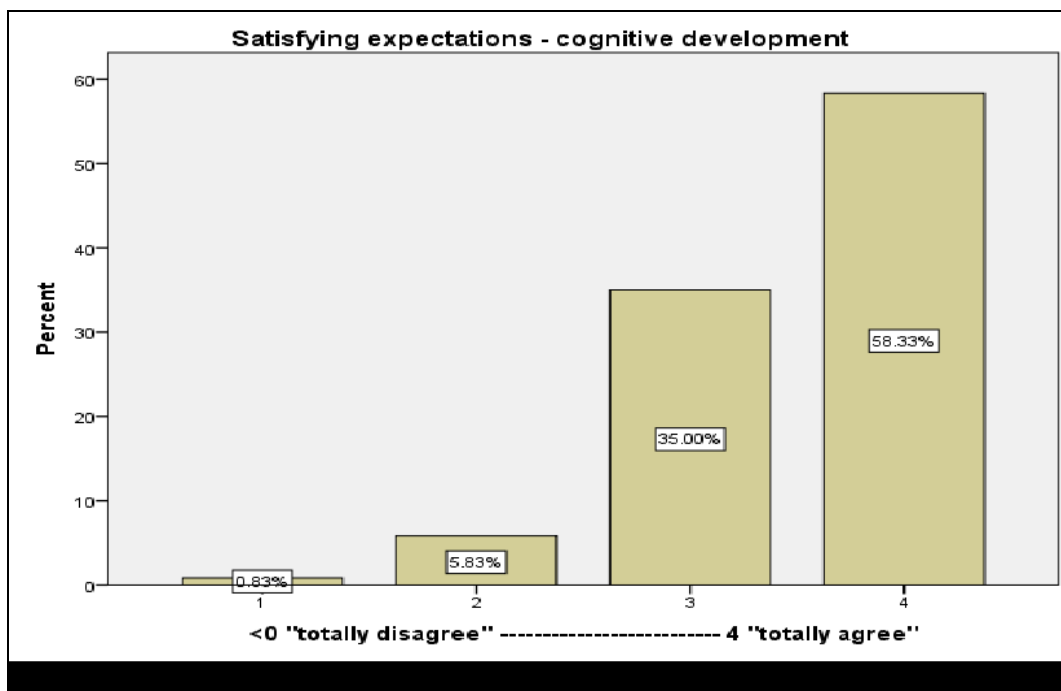
**Table 2:** Criteria for choosing the particular programme

	Interest in Gender	Interest in ICTS	Interest in New Working Environments	Interest in All Three	Grim Working Conditions	Distance Learning Opportunities	Reputation of The University	Reputation of The Department	Reputation of Instructors	Proximity to My Home	All The Above
N Valid	119	119	120	120	118	120	119	120	118	118	119
Missing	1	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	2	1
Mean	2.91	2.91	3.08	3.14	1.25	3.73	2.78	2.71	2.60	1.18	2.78
Median	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	1.00	4.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	.00	3.00

Most of the respondents replied that the most valuable things they got from the particular graduate programme were the *improvement in their cognitive development* and their *sensitization about various social problems*. As far as other "external rewards" are concerned, their responses showed more ambivalence and more negative overall assessment. Figures 1 & 2 below show responses to selected questions regarding the fulfilment of the participants' expectations.



**Figure 1:** Degree of meeting expectations after the programme (“finding a job”)



**Figure 2:** Degree of meeting expectations after the programme (“boosting cognitive development”)

The respondents’ views were generally positive regarding a number of dimensions of the operation of the particular graduate programme, with more emphasis given to the *flexibility* it offered them to pursue their studies partly from a distance (see Figure 3 below). However, their views on the graduate studies in Greece were less enthusiastic,

and sometimes negative, especially as it concerns the *degree of flexibility* (see Figure 4 below), the *cost* and the *occupational rights* that advanced studies confer to those who complete them.

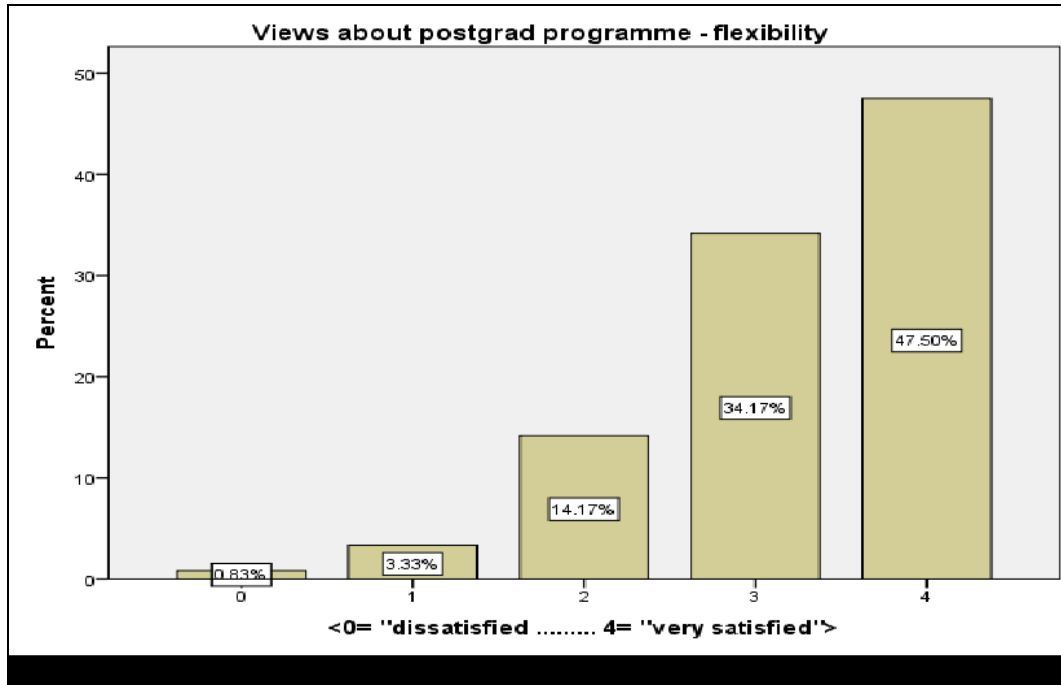


Figure 3: Respondent's view about the programme's flexibility

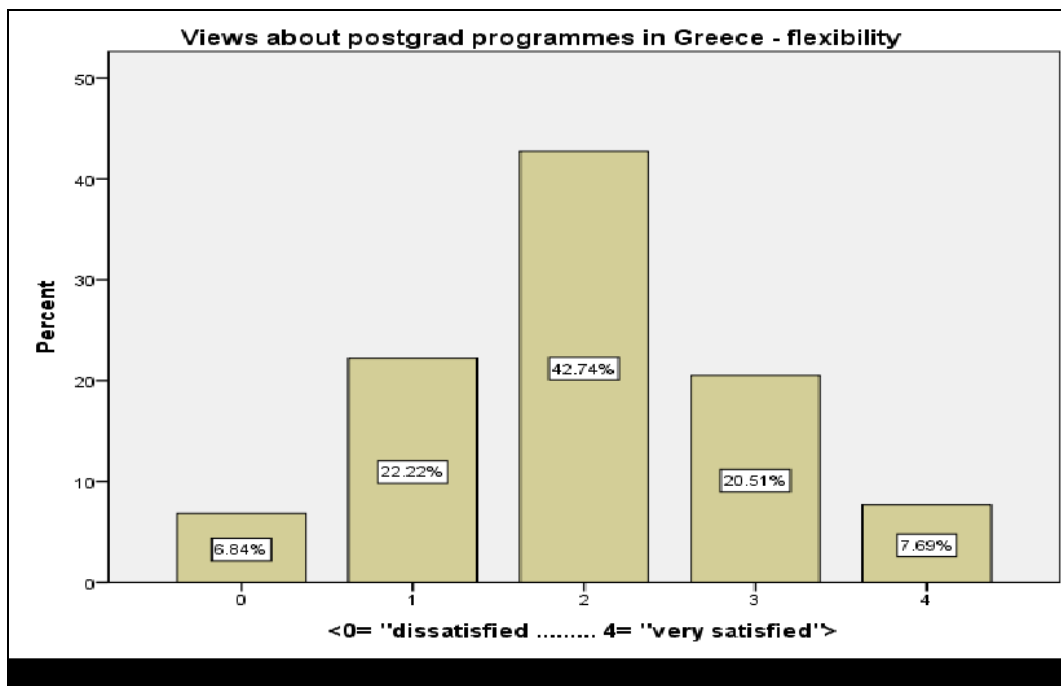


Figure 4: Respondent's view about the flexibility of post-graduate programmes in Greece

Correlational analysis between various *demographic variables* of the respondents and the different dimensions of their studies showed no statistically significant results. Only the *age* of the respondents was negatively correlated –not very strongly though– to the



importance of “finding a job” as a factor that leads people to graduate studies ( $r[119] = -0,274$ ,  $p = .003$ ). More specifically, in our sample older people seemed to value less the direct and tangible returns of graduate studies (the search for a better job, or the improvement of working conditions), compared to younger ones.

The respondents' *gender* seems to have played a mildly differentiating role on the attitudes towards graduate studies, as well as on various aspects of the evaluation of the specific programme. After we ran an Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U test, it emerged that women, as compared to men: a) are more prone to having taken part in previous LLL programs; b) are more interested in gender studies; c) stated more frequently that the specific programme boosted their self-confidence; d) expressed more positive views regarding the graduate programmes in Greece.

Quite surprisingly, people coming from different *cultural environments* (according to Bourdieu, having different “cultural capital”), in the sense that they originate from families with different *parental educational level*, do not show any statistically significant differences, as far as their attitudes towards graduate studies are concerned (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013; Wakeling, 2005).

## 4.2 The Group Interviews

As stated earlier, the group interviews were used as a means for triangulation/validation of the findings of the on-line questionnaire, but at the same time, as a means of uncovering “hidden” dimensions of the lived experiences of the respondents, and as a way of looking “behind the numbers”.

Most of the interviewees were *civil servants* and held *permanent teaching posts* in public (i.e. state) education, whereas three were employed on a temporary basis. One individual was working as a music tutor in a private music school, and another one was –at the time of the interview– unemployed, despite the fact that she had quite high qualifications (holder of 2 master's degrees and being a Ph.D. candidate). All of them were married (one of them had taken divorce at the time of the interview), and most of them (seven out of nine) had at least one child, although two of those seven persons gave birth to their children after completing their master's degree. The majority were over the age of 30, with only two respondents being 29.

In the direct quotations from the interviews' transcripts, as they are placed below, “R” denotes the respondents, and “I” the interviewer.

### A. Prior experience with LLL

There was a clear indication that the respondents were all interested in LLL, and most of them had already participated in at *least one* adult-education programme, whether in formal or non-formal settings. Most of their LLL experiences dealt with short-term seminars on ICTs, which had been on offer by the Ministry of Education.

## **B. Factors that influenced respondents to engage in graduate studies**

There was a recurrent account of respondents seeking opportunities for strengthening their *academic profile* and promote their *career advancement*. However, for some of them the “life transitions” and various “situational opportunities” (see Cross, 1981; Scanlan, 1986) were the most important factors that made them apply for the graduate programme.

R3: *At that time, I was working as a Greek-language teacher in Rhodes, and my wife was doing her PhD [...] I heard the title of the Master's program [...] since I had been using the ICTs in the classroom [...] I saw the course content and then I decided to take part.* (Male, 50 years old, Greek-language teacher in upper-secondary school, Graduated in 2008)

## **C. Expectations and emotions regarding graduate studies**

There was a clear understanding and recognition of the *changing landscape* in terms of employment opportunities on offer. In a rapidly changing labour market(s), graduate studies, in the eyes of the respondents, seemed the best possible –and plausible– strategy for securing a better future.

R1: *Generally speaking, a graduate programme is surely very useful [...] That does not mean that you must necessarily utilize it as a tool to find a job, although, normally, this should be the most crucial criterion today.* (Female, 44 years old, Greek-language teacher in upper-secondary school, Graduated in 2008)

Many respondents voiced their frustration about the lack of opportunities in the past, since graduate studies had not been available at Greek HEIs. However, they admitted that during the last decade (from 2004 onwards), an increasing number of graduate programmes have spread around the country (Papadopoulou, Arsenis & Zmas, 2010; Stamelos, 2013, chapter 3). It is interesting to note that the respondents recognized that the “explosion” of graduate programmes inevitably have had negative effects on the *quality* of many of them.

R4: *[...] I just want to remind that, until a few years ago, graduate degrees were a rare phenomenon. [...] I simply cannot believe that all those programmes have high quality [...]* (Male, 51 years old, Teacher in public primary school, Graduated in 2009)

Finally, all the respondents expressed very positive *attitudes* towards distance learning or e-learning methods, and they referred to them as the “future” models of delivering learning material. Nevertheless, there was still appreciation for face-to-face interaction.

R9: *I consider distance learning as the “future” on graduate studies. [...] However, I think that there is a need for a certain part of the programmes to be offered through face-to-face meetings.* (Female, 29 years old, Graduate of a Department of Preschool Education, Part-time teacher in an adult-education vocational school, Graduated in 2012)

#### **D. Expectations and emotions regarding the specific programme**

All respondents stated or implied that the graduate programme appeared as a convenient choice primarily because of the *mode of delivery* (i.e. the “distance-learning” part), which was very pioneering for the context of the Greek HE institutions, and very convenient for remote geographical areas.

R5: *I live in town A, which is away from Alexandroupolis or Thessaloniki, which host departments of educational or social sciences. [...] The particular MSc offered me the chance to participate by distance.* (Female, 34 years old, Teacher of music in a private school, Graduated in 2014)

The *gender perspective* of the program, although it was stressed as one of the most interesting aspects of the particular MEd in the completed (on-line) questionnaire, it did not emerge as the most attractive feature during the interviews.

#### **E. Time management during graduate studies**

Balancing the demands of a highly demanding programme together with *professional, familial and social obligations* was a conundrum for all participants. In this respect, one advantage that many respondents from the public (i.e. state) sector had is that in the early years of the programme they were entitled, as civil servants, to one-year educational leave (something that is not the case since 2010).

The above pressures were felt mostly by *women*. Greece is a society that stills contains characteristics of uneven balance in the expectations for men and women, as it regards the *occupational, family and general social roles* (Vryonides & Vitsilaki, 2008). When there was a *familial support*, things were much easier.

R1: *At that time, I managed to get an educational leave. So, I had my mornings free to study. [...] I had a one-year-old son, and I could not afford to do my degree without the help of my mother. [...] Generally speaking, it’s very hard to do graduate studies if you’re a woman, because you have multiple roles to fulfil [...]*

#### **F. Experiences after graduation**

All the respondent assessed as very positive the outcomes of their studies. On the professional level, there were people who managed to use this qualification for limited upward professional mobility, such as getting an appointment as head-teachers, or even

securing a modest salary raise. On the cognitive level, almost all of them expressed their positive evaluation of the knowledge and skills they got from this programme.

R1: *The programme helped me to raise my living standards. Professionally, it didn't change much [...] but it surely helped me to change my teaching of literature [...]*

## 5. Discussion

First of all, we can see that the socio-economic environment of Greece has had an undeniable impact on the respondents' decision to participate in a graduate programme, especially when the latter has a flexible character and entails distance-learning features. In a country where participation in LLL is very low according to EU standards (European Commission, 2013, 2016), and the living conditions, after 9 years of austerity (2010-2018), are deteriorating (see EUROSTAT, 2014; HSA, 2015), participation in LLL seems to be a viable solution, not only for better professional development, but also for the achievement of decent living standards.

We need, however, to stress the fact that it has been *those working in the public sector* (especially *teachers*), who have more actively participated in the programme. Thus, this kind of graduate programme seems to *reproduce* already existed social & educational inequalities that relate to the *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986, 1998; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), and a "privileged" *occupational position* in the labour market. Although we must admit that our results do not support any claims for traditional "class" divisions, it must be stressed that people working in the public (i.e. state) sub-sector of the service sector, hold the most privileged positions, due mostly to the job security that civil servants enjoy by constitutional prescription (GCWUG, 2009, pp. 255-257). Especially *teachers in the public sector*, despite the redundancies in teaching posts and salary cuts during the first half of the current decade (CDEP-GCWUG, 2015, chap. 1), have not witnessed a drastic deterioration of their working condition, compared to other occupations in the private sector of the economy (Economakis, Zissimopoulos, Katsoridas, Kollias, & Kritikidis, 2016; GCWUG, 2014, chaps. 4-6; CDEP-GCWUG, 2015, chap. 1).

Although most of the respondents clearly stated that their original attitudes towards LLL structures had been very positive, they highly valued the *distance-learning advantages* of the particular programme. Thus, despite the relatively high tuition fees, they agreed that the programme's *flexibility regarding the delivery method* offset the costs of travel, subsistence and lodging that an alternative traditional programme would entail.

Approaches to LLL and graduate studies were *balanced* between the more "opportunistic" (e.g. *enrichment of CV*) and the more "idealistic" ones (e.g. *sensitization on social issues*), with the former becoming evident during the relaxed atmosphere of the group interviews, and the latter through the completion of the questionnaires. Older participants seemed to value less the direct and tangible returns of graduate studies (the

search for a better job, or the improvement of working conditions), compared to younger ones.

Women showed more positive attitudes, or evaluated more favourably the distance-learning graduate programmes compared to men, and this corresponds to generally evidence of higher levels of female participation in Adult Education in Greece (Boutsiouki, 2006; Fotopoulos, 2013; Giavrimis, Papanis, Mitrellou & Nikolarea, 2009, p. 597; NOCQVG, 2016, p. 17). This had to do, not only with their augmented interest in issues related to their household duties and their disadvantaged position in the labour market, but also with the boost on their self-confidence that such programmes may achieve.

The *technological infrastructure* and the *technical support*, contrary to existing bibliography (Davis, Little & Stewart, 2008; Jung, 2011) were not considered as major problems, despite the fact that LMS use in Greek HEIs has been a relatively recent phenomenon, and a great number of students had not had previous (advanced) experience on ICTs (Pagge, 2012).

As far as the *learning context* is concerned, as we move to the “older” cohorts, the assessment of the learning experience was more negative, something generally understandable given the “uncharted” waters of distance learning in which HEIs have been “navigating” in the last twenty or so years since the introduction of the original legal framework (Koustourakis, 2006; Stamelos, 2013).

As far as the assessment of the *teaching method* is concerned, there were generally very positive attitudes towards the distance-learning features of the programme, but there was still appreciation for face-to-face interaction, as an indispensable opportunity to build a “learning community” (Holzwisse et al. 2015).

According to the respondents, the most important problem –raised mainly by those from the most recent cohorts– was the *very demanding nature of the programme*, although the latter was also considered as a “plus” in the wider “academic market”. The very demanding nature of a graduate programme raises a number of questions about the *time management* during graduate studies (see also Vryonides & Vitsilakis, 2008; Vryonides, Vitsilakis & Efthymiou, 2006). It became evident –especially from the group interviews– that those working in the public sector had an advantage. This fact calls for a rethinking of designing graduate courses –and, most of all, those that entail a distance-learning part– so as to accommodate an increasingly volatile labour market and new working environments with very few opportunities for professional development.

Very interesting is the picture that the programme’s participants had for postgraduate studies in Greece. While for the particular programme the views were invariably *very positive*, for the general picture of graduate studies in Greece, the feelings were mainly *ambivalent*, and often *negative*. Although we cannot test the validity of the respondents’ claims because of the limits of the case study, these feelings have been repeatedly expressed in the few research studies about graduate programmes in Greece, especially those offered –wholly or partially– through distance learning

(Ioannidou, 2011; Pagge, 2012). Respondents raised issues about the design of formal, informal and non-formal e-courses that are offered within the Greek academic context and pointed at various “deficiencies”; not only in the design of the courses, but also in the obsolete legal framework of graduate studies offered or complemented by distance-learning methods.

## 6. Conclusions

It seems that education *cannot*, in itself, be a response to the economic crisis, even in the form of very innovative programmes, such as the examined graduate programme. In fact, it might contribute –unintentionally of course– to *reproducing existing inequalities* among the populace, by equipping *already highly educated*, who already possess *a stable and relatively secure job*, with more credentials, knowledge & skills, in a highly competitive and unstable working environment. However, this programme seems to have offered more than just a means for a better enumeration and further professional development. It promoted the cognitive and sentimental improvement of adult learners with many and diverse personal, family and occupational characteristics.

These findings have a number of implications for the HE institution under study (*meso-level*), as well as for the Greek society in general, and more particularly the policy makers in the Greek Ministry of Education (*macro-level*). A new legal framework for distance learning in HEIs needs to be implemented, after extensive consultation with the academic community, professional bodies and expert groups. This framework should be aligned to wider developments in HE institutional planning, with special focus on continuous *quality assurance mechanisms* (Hamid, 2001).

To this end, continued research related to how graduate students view their learning experience is important for the advancement of best practices in graduate education –online or not. From the regular collection of structured questionnaires in large- or medium-scale surveys, to the meticulous qualitative investigation of participants’ comments on the various aspects of distance learning, the graduate programmes’ organizers should continuously try to reflect on their programmes (admission policies, administrative structures, learning material, teaching practices, communication methods etc.), evaluate them in the light of the students’ feedback, and make informed policy decisions about the future. In this attempt, issues of social justice (e.g. the fee policy to various groups of “clients”) should not be downplayed, especially in times of grave financial hardship for increasingly large segments of the country’s adult population.

There are certain limitations of the present study which should be addressed in future studies. The present study is a *case-study*, of only one programme, at a particular university, in a very specific socio-economic context, with a lot of conjectural elements that may affect the generalizability of the results. Further research is necessary to corroborate the results with other distance learning programmes, which, for the time being, are not a widespread practice in graduate studies. A future study should aim to

bring together findings from various distance learning courses offered, either by the Hellenic Open University, or by any other HEI that has adopted a “blended-learning” approach to graduate studies so far. The exchange of good practices among the HEIs, with more good faith and trust, and less “proprietary” and “exclusionary” approaches to academic planning, would greatly enrich the debate on the future of distance learning in this country.

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