

# E-learning and access to higher education: A gender perspective

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## Abstract

E-learning in higher education has been a solution to some segments of population that time and space are a barrier to learn and for the needs of modern societies where learning through the whole life becomes crucial. In this context, women workers and with family/home responsibilities can be one of those segments of population that e-learning can suit very well.

In this study, we wanted to know if e-learning suits better to female than men. To accomplish this objective, data from the Ministry of Education and from Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) was compared and a questionnaire was sent to all the students that enroll UOC for the first time to know their motivations and time available to study.

Results show that comparing UOC to the whole system of higher education in Spain and in the same fields that UOC has degrees, the composition of men and women are very similar.

### Focus on topic

#### Explosion of e-learning

Distance universities are a **new model of distributed education** that allow to **overcome traditional barriers of time and space through a flexible and personalized system**: Advantages in terms of **social inclusion** and in terms of **cost-efficiency** (Crook, 2002). For these reasons it may "suit students who have to fit their studies into a crowded schedule that includes **work as well as caring responsibilities**" (Enoch and Soker, 2006: 100)

#### E-learning satisfies at least two needs of modern societies:

- **Access to knowledge to segments of population** that are not the main segment of traditional universities (i.e. workers, mothers, adults in general)
- **Access to education through the whole life**

**Women still have more caring responsibilities** than men in most countries of Europe and specially in southern Europe like Spain (Maccines, 2005). Although **women have been joining the labour market en masse** still, employment rate of male is higher than female although the gap is narrowing over time.

#### Each day in Spain...

- Women spend 4h and 27 min. To home and family duties while men spend 1h and 30 min.
- Men spend 3h and 37 min to remunerated work while women spend 1h and 44 min
- Men and women spend the same amount of time to study: 1h and 44 min

Source: Encuesta de tiempo de empleo 2002-2003

### Main research questions of the study

- 1. Female students value more than male students the fact that e-learning may help to balance work and life** by having more flexibility in terms of time. Previous studies have highlighted the suitability of distance learning to those persons that because of their responsibilities, have less time or this time that they have is distributed in such a way that cannot attend to traditional education.
- 2. There are more female students in distance universities than in traditional universities.** Again, as it has been said by previous studies e-learning suits better to those with caring responsibilities.

### Methodology

**Questionnaire** to all students that enroll Universitat Oberta de Catalunya for the first time to know why they have chosen distance learning.

Data from the **Ministry of Education in Spain** of higher education and data from **Universitat Oberta de Catalunya**

#### Some characteristics of Universitat Oberta de Catalunya:

- 38.842 students (academic course: 2006-07).
- 19 official degree programs.
- 15% of the students of Catalanian higher education system.
- 2,9% of the students of Spanish higher education system.
- Average age of students: 32 years old.
- More than 95 % of the students works.

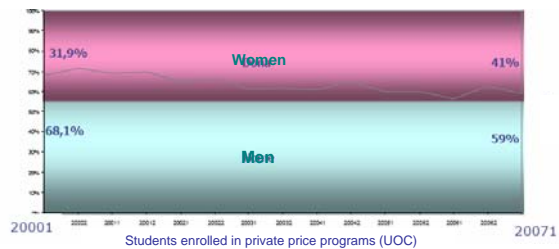
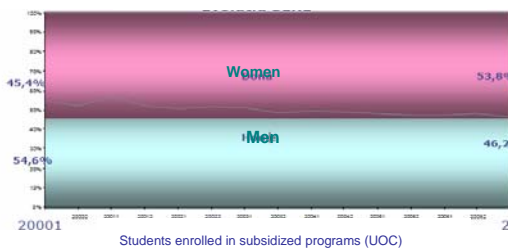
% Women	Health Sciences		Natural Sciences		Socials & Law Sciences			Humanities			Engineering		
	SHES		UNED		SHES	UOC	UNED	SHES	UOC	UNED	SHES	UOC	UNED
	2001/02	77,35%	60,86%	29,25%	64,86%	52,10%	61,32%	64,63%	53,72%	51,89%	27,20%	15,75%	20,41%
2002/03	76,96%	61,29%	30,29%	64,78%	54,20%	59,10%	64,35%	61,79%	49,79%	26,26%	15,48%	18,82%	
2003/04	76,54%	61,37%	34,69%	65,29%	56,56%	63,66%	64,76%	55,96%	62,80%	26,89%	13,65%	18,17%	
2004/05	76,59%	60,90%	39,38%	64,83%	56,32%	62,65%	63,12%	54,62%	56,94%	26,67%	12,70%	14,73%	
2005/06	75,78%	59,74%	38,22%	64,38%	58,75%	61,20%	63,33%	57,90%	54,36%	25,91%	11,42%	15,96%	

SHES: Spanish Higher Educations System, excluding UOC&UNED

There are no more female students in distance universities than in traditional universities.

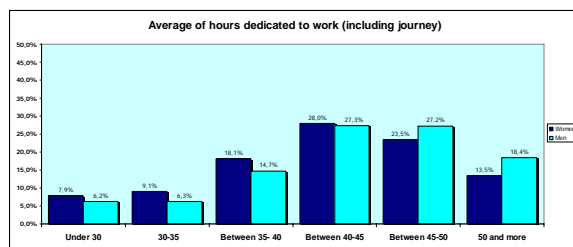
The universities that offer e-learning seem to reproduce with certain years of delay the students' composition (men - women) of the traditional universities (higher age average of students).

UOC students: Rent effect: the percentage of women is more reduced in those programs by higher prices.

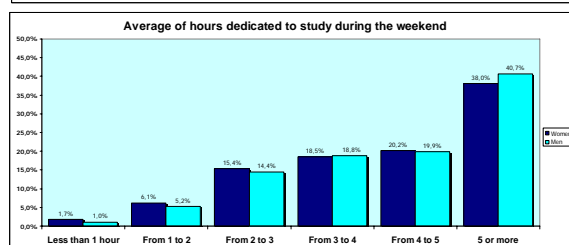
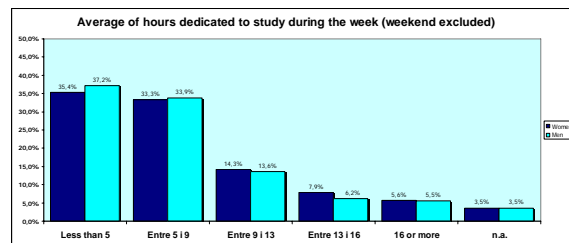


Nowadays the percentage of women who join to the programs subsidized is higher than that of men, upside-down of what happens in case of private prices programs.

But there exists a positive trend of the percentage of women who join to no subsidized programs.



UOC students: There is a non significant difference between the average numbers of hours dedicated to work and to study by men and women



## References: knowing more about the issue...

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