

# **Engaging in spaces: How mature distance students fit study into their homes and lives**

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In order to fit study around family and work, a third of mature aged tertiary students in New Zealand study by distance. By enabling students to study when and where they want, distance study is said to overcome the barriers of space and time. But space and time must still be found and the blurring of the physical boundaries between study and home creates new challenges. While much has been written about how distance students juggle time, little has considered how they manage space; yet it is often the availability of an appropriate learning space that determines not just when and where they study, but the quality of their engagement. This qualitative study, following 19 mature aged distance students and their families through their first semester, examines how the students carved learning spaces from their busy lives, the nature of those spaces, and the impact this had on their engagement. For some, a space without other people was the essential characteristic and they achieved this through either a physical separation strategy such as studying at work, or a temporal separation strategy such as studying only when children were at school. For others, isolation was a barrier to their engagement and they gravitated to shared living spaces. Individual lifeload, context, and personal preference mean there are no right or wrong choices, but family support is a critical influence on the success of different strategies.