



RANLHE

Access and Retention: Experiences
of Non-traditional Learners in HE

Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education

Final Report

Public Part

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Executive Summary

This final report will primarily be of interest to those working in the higher education (HE) sector across Europe and beyond. Within higher education institutions it will be of especial interest to senior management and policy makers, middle managers responsible for programmes, lecturers, researchers, those working in student support services, admissions and widening participation initiatives as well as students themselves and the Students' Unions. It is also aimed at policy organisations and bodies working in higher education, such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in England, Government departments and EU policy makers.

The project focused on access, retention and drop-out in higher education institutions in relation to non-traditional students (younger and adults) on undergraduate degree programmes and the factors which promote or inhibit this. With the growth of mass higher education systems retention has become an important and rising concern for policy-makers at national and European levels. It is considered a measure of efficiency of higher education with implications in terms of the needs of the economy and as a return on investment to individuals, society and the whole EU. It is also a key factor in promoting a growing diversification and equity across the higher education sector.

By 'non-traditional' we mean students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This includes, for example, first generation entrants, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, mature age students, and students with disabilities. (This definition takes into account issues of class and gender). We were particularly interested in looking at and understanding why some students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds learn effectively, assume an undergraduate learner identity and complete their degree successfully while others from similar backgrounds do not. We were also interested in identifying the learning, teaching and support processes which help non-traditional students to become effective and successful learners. Institutional cultures and structures also impact on a learners' identity so these aspects were also explored and examined.

The project objectives were designed to help improve the learning experiences and retention rates of non-traditional students in HE (younger and adults). The project outcomes will enable staff in higher education and policy-makers more widely to achieve this through improved policies and practice across Europe. The key objectives included the following:

- To identify the factors which promote or hinder the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students
- To increase knowledge and understanding of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity
- To identify the policy, cultural and institutional processes which help or hinder completion
- To understand more fully, through life histories, the processes of learning

- To assess the benefits for self and society of participating in HE, whether or not study is completed and reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin
- To develop strategies for the development of improved policy and practice across Europe
- To disseminate the findings in diverse ways to practitioners, policy-makers, academics and students.

This project consisted of a consortium of eight universities from a geographical spread from across Europe, representing the south, east, west and north. All partners have extensive experience of research in this field and most have worked together on previous projects, building a good research relationship. Although we work in the field of education and adult education we come from different disciplinary backgrounds such as sociology, education, history and psychology which facilitated a better and broader understanding of the issues. Several partners are experts in biographical narrative methods while others are skilled in policy issues and learning strategies. All partners are members of ESREA – European Society for Research in the Education of Adults - and this network is helpful for disseminating the project's outcomes.

A biographical narrative approach was the prime research methodology used as this method enabled us to see how past lives and experiences, for example, family and education, impact upon present lives and their experiences in HE as well as how aspects of their present life and relationships also impact. This approach allows participants to tell their own story in their own words. Throughout the project we interviewed samples of students who are in their first year of study and tracking them through their HE career, interviewing them on three separate occasions. We also interviewed those in their final year, those who have dropped out and returned and finally those who have dropped-out. In order to obtain the institutional perspective, we also sought the views of a range of lecturers, managers, practitioners and policy-makers in higher education. The biographical narrative interviews were analysed and compared to identify the factors which promote or hinder completion and how a learner identity is constructed (and how this might best be conceptualised) or not across Europe.

Each partner identified three different types of higher education institutions to use as case study institutions. We also produced a literature review and a comparative European statistical analysis of drop-out and retention. The research data was used to produce policy and strategy documents and leaflets at a European level. An interactive website was designed and developed. It contains the outputs of the project such as the literature review and conference papers, an interactive forum for discussion, key emerging discussion points as well as information about the project and partners. The website will continue to function after the project finishes. Dissemination is very important and a range of strategies have been employed to target academics, senior managers, practitioners, policy-makers and students. These include workshops, a European conference, policy leaflets, conference papers and academic publications. The project was evaluated continuously throughout the project life both internally and externally. The External Evaluator was Professor Jocey Quinn, from Plymouth University, UK. She is an expert in this field.

This was a three year project using a longitudinal approach. A large number of results and diverse products have been generated and achieved. The project website was set up at an early stage and was developed further throughout the life of the project. An extensive and comprehensive literature review was established in the first year which was extended and refined to inform the interviewing process. It was also useful for illuminating and exploring issues of access, retention and drop-out. The literature review was ongoing throughout the project in order to ensure that the literature included was both up-to-date but also comprehensive. The literature review highlights the fact that most of the literature on access, retention and drop-out comes from the USA, the UK and Ireland. A statistical profile, based on secondary data, at national and European levels has been produced. The process of compiling the statistical profile illustrated the difficulty in analysing statistical data across Europe because nationally data is collected in different ways. It also points out the need for more coherent collection of data at European level for the statistics to be meaningful and helpful in understanding issues of retention and drop-out. In relation to the student and staff biographical narrative interviews each partner contributed to national reports and comparative European reports and these have been produced. Partners also used the interview material to write and present diverse conference papers, symposiums, sessions at staff development events, and journal articles. The life stories of both younger and adult students illustrate the complexities of retention and drop-out issues. Their stories and experiences were also used to generate the policy leaflets aimed at policy-makers and higher education staff. Each country held a national workshop to disseminate their country's findings as well as European issues. At the end of the project a large European conference was held in Seville where findings were shared and discussed with researchers, policy-makers and practitioners.

Dissemination will continue beyond the life of the project. Dissemination activities will include continuation of the project website, further conference paper presentations and journal articles, a book as well as dissemination through discussion with relevant research and policy networks and adult education networks at national and European levels.

The project website is: <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl>. The website has been developed and expanded during the project period and will remain active after the end of the project. The website contains several items some of which are available in different European languages. There is information about the project itself - what it is about and its aims and objectives. The partners and their contact information are listed. Following each team meeting key issues arising from the meeting were placed on the website. Documents / products by the project are also available for download such as the literature review, information about the case study institutions and the statistical profile. Dissemination activities such as conference papers and publications can also be viewed. An interactive forum has been established to encourage debate and discussion not only within the team but also externally with academics, policy-makers, practitioners and students. A contact facility (email) is available for people to write to the project team.

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1. Project Objectives

The overall aim of this project was to examine issues of access, retention and non-completion in relation to non-traditional undergraduate students (young and adults across a wide age range) in higher education institutions and on a comparative European basis. These groups of students included those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, first generation entrants, married women, single parents, disabled people and minority ethnic groups. The project sought to ask how and why some non-traditional undergraduate students assume a learner identity in higher education that enables them to succeed, what this means, subjectively, and why some, despite objectively coming from a similar background, fail to complete and drop-out. We were also looking at why some people drop-out but at a later stage decide to return to higher education. In doing so we were looking at how such non-traditional students develop a learner identity or not. Based on our findings, we have developed strategies and policies at institutional, national and European levels which will enable the improvement of access, retention and the experiences of learning in higher education. The key objectives were:

- To identify the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender, ethnicity, disability and age issues) to HE
- To increase knowledge and understanding through interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education
- To identify the policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures, which help or hinder completion
- To illuminate and theorise, using in-depth biographical and collaborative methods, the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in student's lives
- To assess the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed, and reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin
- To consider the implications of the study for the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups
- To disseminate the findings of the research through regional workshops, national and European conferences and a range of publications aimed at practitioners, policy-makers and academics.

The project sought to benefit primarily higher education institutions and its community but also further education institutions and post-compulsory institutions where undergraduate degree programmes are taught. Specifically the beneficiaries include non-traditional students (younger and adults), academics / lecturers, policy makers and senior and middle management in HE as well those working in student support and widening participation services. The project will also be of benefit to organisations and bodies who work in the higher education field, for example,

Students' Unions, government policy-makers (national and EU) and national organisations such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFCE) FOR Scotland, Irish Higher Education Authority, and the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MNiSW of Poland. Research networks (national and European) such as the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA) offer an important forum for discussion and dissemination. These objectives will also ensure that the findings and products will be of interest to higher education institutions and policy-makers outside of Europe. The materials, outputs and products produced are largely derived from the voices of non-traditional students and the staff who participated as interviewees. Their feedback on documents produced such as the policy leaflets and reports will also be of value. Some participants were involved in workshops and the European conference.

This comparative project aimed to have both short-term and long-term impacts upon the target user group. The comparative research study identified good practice and developed policies and strategies to improve the quality of higher education for non-traditional students. Listening to the voices and perspectives of, primarily, students but also lecturers, practitioners and policy-makers was central to this process. The comparative research reports on the student and staff data highlighted and raised awareness of the issues in relation to access, retention and drop-out to both students and those working in the higher education sector as well as relevant organisations at national and European levels. Each case study institution has received feedback with the aim of improving policy and practice in those institutions. National and European conferences were held towards the end of the project. These raised the issues, strategies and policy suggestions to a wider audience. The policy leaflets – produced towards the end of the project and published in the partner languages - were targeted at policy makers, lecturers, managers and practitioners in higher education institutions and relevant national and European organisations. The policy leaflets will continue to be distributed after the project has finished by each partner working closely with a key national policy organisation as well as European ones. Relevant people have also been targeted through papers at conferences and this will continue after the project finishes. National and European networks, such as ESREA, where partners have links is also an important medium for promoting the impact and benefits to the target user group.

The continuation of the website will be one way in which impacts and benefits will continue to be aimed at the target groups. Conference papers aimed at academics, policy-makers and practitioners will also be written and presented after the project has finished as well as journal articles and a book which will be written collaboratively. These strategies will raise awareness of the issues. Another strategy for doing this will be by all partners promoting the findings through national and European university and adult education research organisations which they belong to, such as ESREA. Dr Barbara Merrill convenes the ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identities network while Professor Linden West co-convenes the ESREA Biographical and Life Histories network. Professor Ewa Kurantowicz co-convenes the ESREA Between Local and Global: Adult Learning and Development. The ESREA network conferences will provide an arena for continued dissemination. ESREA conferences will offer a space for partners to continue to meet and maintain long-term impacts and benefits. Professor Agnieszka Bron is involved in the Nordic

Education Association which involves several countries while Dr José González Monteagudo. Like Professor Linden West, has links to the Francophone life history network – Association Internationale des Histoires de Vie en Formation (ASIHVIF). One of it's focus is research and information about RANLHE has been placed on the webpage of ASIHVIF. Professor Peter Alheit is a member of the biographical section of the German Sociological Association and the educational biographical research section of the German Society of Educational Sciences. Dr Ted Fleming is a member of ESREA, the EuropAdEdAssoc (EAEA) and AONTAS (Irish National Adult Education Association). Professor Ewa Kurantowicz is head of a publishing house - The University of Lower Silesia Press (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnoslaskiej Szkoły Wyzszej) which is helpful for publications in English for Europe as a whole but also for publications in Poland and Eastern Europe. Most of the partners are members of editorial boards of journals (both European journals and non-European journals) and this has the potential for organising special editions of a journal on access, retention and drop-out and the outcomes of this project. Several partners are presenting papers at the 9th International Transformative Learning Conference in Athens, May 2011.

2. Project Approach

This project employed mostly qualitative methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches (sociology, psychology and education) in order to obtain in-depth understanding of access, retention and drop-out in higher education in relation to non-traditional students and the complex issues involved. There is a growing differentiation of higher education institutions across Europe. For example, at one end of the spectrum some are what can be termed 'elite' and traditional while others are reform or new universities. In order to capture these differences each partner identified three contrasting case study higher education institutions to reflect these divergences and the hierarchical structure of higher education systems. While the main focus was on biographical narrative interviews other contrasting methods were used to provide further and background information and to place narratives in context, to identify and illuminate policy issues as well as complement the biographical material.

The first step involved each partner to identifying three case study institutions and to write a brief context paper describing the institution. This was followed by an in-depth and extensive literature review which identified the scope of literature in the field as well as any gaps in research. Importantly the literature review highlights the different theoretical and conceptual approaches to understanding access, retention and drop-out. It also includes a section on literature and approaches to biographical research in adult education. The review helped to expand our knowledge of the field as well as help to inform the interview themes for students, lecturers, managers, policy-makers and practitioners. Discussions about relevant literature at team meetings led each partner to write a brief outline about higher education differentiation in the partner countries as higher education institutions are becoming increasingly differentiated across Europe due to policy pressures, different levels of funding and student demand. This work was then summarised and included in the literature review. The literature review was also constantly updated throughout the life of the project.

In relation to the interviewing of non-traditional students we focused on three groups of learners in higher education: those who drop-out, those who stay in and those who drop-out but later return and re-engage with learning. Within the 'staying in group' we interviewed people in their first year of study and followed a cohort through a three year period (10 in each case study institution). We also interviewed a group in their last year of study (10 in each case study institution) to identify the factors which 'keep them going on'. Those who drop-out and those that drop-out and later re-enter involved a sample of 10 in each case study institution. The sample of students was also distinguished in terms of age, social class, gender, ethnicity, disability and geographical areas as we examined the interplay of such factors.

Biographical approaches were used because they enabled us to locate individual stories within broader policy and contextual as well as sociological and psychological analysis. Biographical approaches also involve participants centrally in the research process by giving them voice. The nature of the interviewing process also means that there is a more equal relationship between the researcher and the researched. Normally interview transcripts are also returned to participants for further comments/ amendment, if they want to. Biographical narrative interviews also reveal, particularly

in adult students, the links between experiences of initial education and higher education. A biographical approach also illuminates the experiences of access to higher education and how learner identities develop (or not) in the context of changing identities as well as resistance to these. They also highlight the complexities of access and retention as well as revealing that although biographies are individual people also share experiences in common, for example, inequalities of gender, class or ethnicity. The project also sought to explore how structural factors such as these impact upon a learner identity. At the same time biographical narratives also reveal how non-traditional students are able to change their lives through the use of their own agency.

While the focus of the study was to understand the issues from the student perspective the project also looked at the institutional perspectives in order to obtain a fuller picture of how students interact with lecturers and the institution more widely. The literature shows that institutional cultures and structures do impact on students' attitudes and behaviour. This approach included interviewing people working at different levels and areas in universities. Specifically this involved a sample of lecturers, senior and middle managers and those working in student support services /widening participation (15 in total per case study institution). These in-depth interviews provided us with staff perspectives, attitudes and insights on access, retention and drop-out in relation to non-traditional students and helped us to identify examples of good practice and policy. Both the student and staff interview data were analysed at national levels and then comparatively across the partner countries to build a European perspective. To help us analyse the students' stories we identified three key sensitising concepts which offer a framework to the research. These sensitising concepts were: habitus (Bourdieu), transistional space (Winnicott) and recognition (Honneth).

A statistical profile was undertaken to help inform the literature review and to provide statistical data through the collection of secondary data at national and European levels on the retention and drop-out of non-traditional students in higher education. While the overall aim of the research process was to improve policy and practice across the EU the project also aimed to develop theory and methodology, and in particular a reflective approach to biographical narrative research.

The added value of our biographical approaches is that they enabled non-traditional student participants to reflect upon their learning and experiences in higher education, often at quite a deep level. This process enabled them and the project team to identify what really facilitates their learning or not and identify strategies for improvement at an individual, departmental and institutional and EU policy level, to help students develop a successful learning identity and subsequent career. Many students at the end of their interview stated that they found the reflective process of the interview very helpful and meaningful. The learning diaries being written by the year one cohort during their three years of study also facilitated this process. Undertaking three interviews with this cohort was very fruitful because it enabled us to explore in-depth issues raised in the first interview so that students became more conscious of the evolution of their learning, experiences, feelings and sense of self. The student interviews also allowed them to reflect on their learning careers and their future (short / middle / long-term) and think about their possible future personal, learning, vocation and goals.

The interviews also had a value added impact on lecturers. Some said at the end of an interview that 'It has been interesting' and 'Usually we don't have time to reflect in relation to these issues'. Others have said that they have implicit, everyday ideas / approaches / perspectives about our teaching / students/ institution but lack time and space for promoting a more reflective approach about their educational work. The staff interviewed found it interesting to make connections about past experiences, professional identity, disciplinary specialisation and teaching students and educational success.

Comparative reports on the student and staff interview data at national and European level were produced which identified key policy and practice issues in relation to access, drop-out and retention. All partners held a national conference to disseminate the findings. A large European conference was held 7 -8 April at the University of Seville attended by 80 people. These events were aimed at policy-makers, academics and practitioners and higher education organisations. Policy leaflets were produced towards the end of the project. These are aimed at senior and middle management, policy-makers and academics in higher education and national and European organisations involved in higher education. All partners will continue to write and present conference papers and journal articles. After the project a book will be produced. In the long term relevant networks and organisations will be identified and contacted such as the Rector's Conference of the Spanish Universities.

The project was evaluated both internally and externally. The internal evaluation was led by the partners at the University of Seville. It focused on the processes and management of the project. After each team meeting (held every six months) a questionnaire was sent to each partner co-ordinator and their researcher. The areas covered on the questionnaire included:

- communication and interaction between partners
- overall management of the project
- identifying any problems/ issues/ difficulties / conflicts
- the management and process of the team meeting
- communication, interaction and language issues during the meeting
- key issues and / or new ideas emerging for you and your country arising from the meeting
- issues / debates / proposals that you have found useful and productive during the meeting for the successful development of the project
- suggestions for how the work could be developed during the next six months

The questionnaire was analysed by the Spanish team. On the whole the internal assessment has been positive. Communication was felt to be good and there was a feeling that the team is inclusive and involved both at team meetings and in relation to the project work. Members felt that everyone was sensitive to the language issue. There was a recognition that there are differences amongst the team in relation to biographical narrative approaches but this was also viewed as being an enriching experience. The internal evaluation enabled us to reflect on the processes and management of the project in ways which helped us to improve the project and our work collectively.

The external evaluation was undertaken by Professor Jocey Quinn, Plymouth University, UK. She has written and published widely on access, retention and drop-out. Her role complimented the work of the internal evaluation. She helped in and guided with the methodological issues primarily, as well as with the management of a large European project. Regular meetings were held with Professor Jocey Quinn. She also attended three team meetings in Wroclaw, Canterbury and Seville where she was able to observe and participate. She also had access to all the project's documents and outputs. In her interim written report she stated that 'That this is an excellent project' and felt that the project team worked very well together and that we had a collaborative approach to working and finding solutions. She felt that the project produced significant outputs and that it generated rich qualitative data. She also raised some issues such as problems in accessing some participants in some elite institutions and the need to handle vast amounts of data carefully.

Dissemination and an exploitation strategy and activities were viewed as being important and central aspects to this project in order to ensure that the findings of this research are translated and embedded into policy and practice to a wide audience across Europe and beyond. The overall aim of dissemination and our exploitation plan was to improve the access and widening participation, learning experiences and retention of non-traditional students. Dissemination was on-going throughout and after the project has finished and is aimed at students, lecturers, managers, policy-makers, practitioners, national and European organisations and the EU. A variety of dissemination strategies were /are being applied. During the life of the project dissemination consisted of establishing the project website which includes information about the project (aims and objectives and what the project is about), and products / outcomes so far such as the Literature Review, Statistical Profile and key issues, student and staff interview reports, conference papers and discussion issues. A forum was established for both the project partners and students and those working in higher education to engage to discuss the issues raised by the research. The website will continue to function after the project has finished. Other examples of dissemination include presentations at staff development days, conference papers, journal articles, symposiums, round tables at conferences and mention of the project at meetings and other events. These types of activities will continue after the project has finished. For example, several partners are presenting a range of papers about the project at the large 9th International Conference on Transformative Learning in Athens, May 2011

The above included the following types of dissemination: products, policy issues and European co-operation. We addressed methods in our dissemination through an enhanced understanding of non-traditional students and the development of reflective biographical narrative approaches.

Our exploitation strategy is/ will be important for embedding the work of the project and for developing and initiating policy and practice changes. To achieve this it will be essential to work closely with existing networks as well as to look at the possibility of establishing a new European network in this field. The policy and practice recommendations arising from the research data will be promoted at local, regional, national and European levels. The dissemination and exploitation strategies will contribute to the sustainability of the project results as these processes will be continued both during the life of the project and afterwards. The various strategies

employed will mean that there will be a constant raising of awareness of the projects and its results and recommendations at national and European levels.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

There have been a large number of outcomes and results achieved during this three year project. The results link directly to the project objectives. The outcomes and results achieved are as follows:

- **Website – workpackage 9** (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl>) – This was designed and developed in the early stages of the project. The website includes a summary of the project in each of the partner country's language as well as in French. Information is available under the following headings: about the project, partners, meetings, documents, dissemination, forum, links and articles and finally contact information. All the written outputs from the project are on the website such as the literature review, the statistical profile, institutional profiles, reports on student and staff interview data and policy documents are available on the website. The project website is regularly visited and used by people. Several colleagues (lecturers and those working in support services) across Europe have informed us that they have found the literature review and other documents on the website helpful for their work, including teaching and research. The website served as a key dissemination strategy within the project's objectives and will continue to do so now that the project has finished.
- **Contexts of the Institutional Profiles – workpackage 2** These brief reports outline the context of the higher education institutions used as case studies in this project. The reports describe the type of institution (eg elite or reform or private etc), its culture, type of degree programmes offered, type of students, policies and issues to do with access, retention and drop-out. The reports have contributed to our understanding of institutional cultures and the different types of higher education institutions across Europe. In total there are twenty four institutional profile reports. Most of these are available on the project website (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl>).
- **Literature Review – workpackage 3** The Literature Review outlines comprehensively and extensively key literature on access, retention and drop-out. In it, we also discuss the different theoretical, conceptual and disciplinary approaches used. It also includes a discussion of literature on learner identity, institutional cultures and biographical research. In relation to the project's objectives this output has increased our knowledge and understanding of the issues as well as identifying factors which promote or constrain access, retention and drop-out which were compared to the findings of our research. It has also highlighted how our research has contributed to literature in this field at a European level. The literature review is on the website (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl>) and we have been informed by colleagues across Europe that they have found the literature review useful for their research and teaching.
- **Statistical Profile – workpackage 10** This report used secondary data to compare statistical data on retention and drop-out in the partner countries. Although there were difficulties comparing the data as data is collected differently in each country and at a European level it does provide a picture of rates of retention and drop-out across Europe and the types of non-traditional

students in higher education institutions. However, it does point out that this data could be more useful for use at a policy level across Europe but to achieve this common ways of collecting and analysing data need to be developed at national levels. The statistical profile is available on the website (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl>) and is useful for both policy-makers and researchers. In relation to the objectives it has helped us to identify the types and numbers of non-traditional students who access universities, who completes their study and who leaves before completing both nationally and at a European level.

- **Student Biographical Case Study Analysis – workpackage 6** Each partner produced an in-depth analysis of their student participant biographical interview. These were produced for group discussion at the team meeting in Wroclaw, May, 2009. The case studies helped us with our project objectives as the analyses and discussion increased our knowledge and understanding through interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity of non-traditional students and whether or not they become effective learners. It also helped to identify factors which hinder or promote access, retention and drop-out as well as identifying emerging themes from the narratives. These stories also revealed institutional and policy issues alongside the role of agency in the learning process and the benefits to the self and society. The case study analysis also helped us to develop our methodological objective in relation to using in-depth biographical methods. The Student Biographical Case Study Analyses are not available on the website because of the confidentiality of the material: the narratives are in-depth, full of sensitive material, and we have sought to ensure, on ethical grounds, that individuals could be identified.
- **National and European Reports on the Student Biographical Narrative Data – workpackages 6 & 7** Once all the student interviews were analysed each partner produced a national report outlining the key issues in relation to access, retention and drop-out. The reports were used to construct a comparative European report identifying similarities and differences across the partner countries. Like the student biographical case study analysis the national and European reports identified an in-depth analysis of the factors which hinder or promote access, retention and drop-out as well as increasing our knowledge and understanding through interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity in relation to non-traditional students and whether or not they become effective learners. The biographical narrative data has been used extensively to disseminate the findings across Europe through conference papers, roundtables, and symposiums at several national and European conferences for lecturers, policy-makers and practitioners as well as book chapters and journal articles. Interest was and still is expressed by participants at conferences in our research. The voices of the student participants in the research have also been used to inform the policy leaflets for workpackage 14 and so has helped us to consider, in relation to the objectives, the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups. In terms of methodology it has addressed the objective of illuminating and theorising, using in-depth biographical and collaborative methods, the

structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives. These reports are available on the website (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.pl>).

Institutional Perspectives – workpackage 8 The outputs in relation to the institutional perspectives are based on in-depth interviews with staff in the higher education case study institutions. A wide range of staff were interviewed such as lecturers, student support staff, different levels of management and policy-makers and those responsible for widening access programmes and strategies. Several of those interviewed stated that the interview process helped them to reflect upon the issues of access, retention and drop-out and also to consider the ways they teach in relation to a growing diverse student population. Following the analysis of the interview data each partner produced a report on the data from staff in their three case study institutions. The country reports were then compared for similarities and differences across Europe in relation to institutional perspectives. In terms of the objectives the staff interviews helped us to identify the factors which promote and constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students from the institutional perspective. They were also important in identifying the differing policies employed by institutions as well as highlighting new policy issues and the need for new policy strategies (in relation to both policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learner experiences of students from under-represented groups). This interview data was helpful for constructing the policy strategies (workpackage 14). The reports on the institutional perspectives are available on the website ([www.http://ranlhe.dsw.pl](http://www.ranlhe.dsw.pl)). It meets the following project objectives: to identify the policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures which help or hinder completion; to consider the implications of the study for the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups; to identify the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender, ethnicity, disability); and to increase knowledge and understanding through interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of HE..

Policy Strategies – workpackage 14 Policy leaflets aimed at teaching staff and policy-makers in higher education and other relevant organisations, such as HEFCE in England, SHEFCE in Scotland, Irish Higher Education Authority, National Board of Higher Education (HSV) in Sweden, Polish Higher Education Authorities and national associations for academic teachers (ATA – Academic Associations of Adult Teachers) and associations for non-state HE institutions– were produced towards the end of the project. The content of the policy leaflets is based on the interview data and experiences of the students in particular but also staff. The policy leaflets include the following sections on the importance of student support, the impact of learning on students, funding issues, positive aspects of learning even if they do not complete their study, student induction, peer support and administrative systems. They are published in English, Polish,

German, Swedish and Spanish in order to reach a wide audience across Europe. The aim of the policy leaflets is to make an impact upon our target group of non-traditional students by highlighting policy strategies and practice to enhance the learning experiences of non-traditional students and improve the retention rates. The policy leaflet is also available on the project website (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.pl>). The policy leaflets are aimed at the following project objectives: to consider the implications of the study for the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups and to disseminate the findings to policy-makers, manager, academics and practitioners.

- **Dissemination Activities – workpackage 12** A wide range of dissemination activities have been undertaken throughout the project period and will continue to be undertaken in the future. The key dissemination activities include the presentation of a large number of conference papers, roundtables and symposiums at national and European conferences in order to reach a large number of academics, policy-makers and practitioners. Some of these papers have been published in conference proceedings. This form of dissemination has informed these target groups about the key issues relating to access, retention and drop-out as well as offering strategies for improvement. Each country held a national conference to disseminate primarily the findings from their country but also the findings at a European level. These were attended by academics, policy-makers and practitioners. Towards the end of the project a large European conference was held in Seville to disseminate the findings of the research and share ideas with academics, policy-makers and practitioners. All partners have written and published journal articles about different aspects of the RANLHE project for a range of journals which will impact upon academics, policy-makers and practitioners not only in Europe but worldwide. A book will also be produced by the partners.

OTHER DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES EG Irish national conference with Tinto & involvement of the policy makers, Polish meeting with the ministry etc

Other forms of dissemination have included using the research findings for teaching purposes. Dr Barbara Merrill used the student biographical narrative data and the research findings in teaching on a Masters' programme on social education at the University of the Algarve, Portugal in February, 2011. Professor Agnieszka Bron, Dr Camilla Thunborg and Eva Edström, University of Stockholm, used the student biographical data and research findings in their Masters' course on Biographical Research and Symbolic Interactionism, spring 2010 and 2011. Professor Linden West has given lectures on the project at the University of Milan Bicocca and the University of Stockholm as well as in his own institution. **Dr José González Montegudo used the literature review, research findings, case studies and biographical data from this project in different teaching activities across Europe: doctoral seminar at the University of Sassari (Sardinia, Italy: December 2009); Conference on Narrative Research (University Federico II, in Naples, Italy: February 2010); Master on Lifelong Learning/Éducation tout au long de la vie (University Paris 8, France: January 2010); and a Master degree on Social Education (University of**

Algarve, Faro, Portugal: in a course on Biographical Approaches, in the spring semesters of 2010 and 2011). These activities have promoted more interest on non-traditional students in the mentioned universities (the university of Naples has coordinated a research proposal (Erasmus Multilateral Project) focused on non-traditional students which is being evaluated now by the European Union; and the University of Algarve has been implementing a research project, at the national level, also centred on non-traditional students. Miguel Ángel Ballesteros created a course at the University of Seville which looked at non-traditional students in higher education between November 2010 and January 2011. for students from different faculties.

Prof. Ewa Kurantowicz and Dr Adrianna Nizinska were involved in cooperation with the Polish Ministry of Science and HE (2009-2010) in actions and projects aimed at promoting Lifelong Learning in Higher Education and designing flexible solutions for a NVQF (National Vocational Qualification Framework). The RANLHE project was presented and its partial results were disseminated. This cooperation focused on non-traditional students and their needs. In 2010 University of Lower Silesia organised three 'bilateral RANLHE seminars' with other colleagues from the projects (Agnieszka Bron, Peter Alheit, Ted Fleming and Fergal Finnegan), where issues emerged from the data analysis and comparative work was conducted with the participation of Polish non-traditional students, academic teachers, HE authorities and young researchers. It resulted in numerous publications in a Polish educational journal 'Terazniejszosc – Człowiek – Edukacja'.

ANYONE ELSE?

The dissemination outputs have been placed on the project website (<http://www.ranlhe.dsw.pl>). The dissemination activities address the following objectives: to disseminate the findings of the research through regional workshops, national and European conferences and a range of publications aimed at practitioners, policy makers and academics; to consider the implications of the study for the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups; to illuminate and theorise using in-depth biographical and collaborative methods, the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives; to identify the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender, ethnicity, disability); and to increase knowledge and understanding through interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of HE..

The project team was also approached by the Higher Education European Funding Services (HEEFS) in the UK to write up the project aims and objectives and key findings as a case study for their website (www.heefs.ac.uk). The case study is also presented in their Bulletins which are emailed to over 600 colleagues in HEIs across the UK.

- **Exploitation Activities – workpackage 13** The exploitation activities are important for embedding the work and outcomes of the project particularly after the project has finished. This has included sharing and exploiting the results with national higher education organisation such as HEFCE, SHEFCE, Irish Higher Education Authority as well as Student Unions through networking and the policy leaflet. All partners are involved extensively in national research organisations such as SCUTREA (UK), the Nordic Adult Education Association, Irish National Adult Education Association, **OTHER EXAMPLES : Institute Paulo Freire of Spain** At the European level all partners are involved in the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA). Several partners are either members of the ESREA Steering Committee or convenors of relevant ESREA networks such as the ESREA Access learning Careers and Identities Network, the Life History and Biographical Network, and Between the Local and Global: Adult Education and Development. Dr José González Monteagudo has links to a French life history network – Association Internationale des Histoires de Vie en Formation (ASIHVIF) while Professor Peter Alheit is a member of the German Sociological Association. Dr Ted Fleming a member of the Sociology Association of Ireland (presented paper). He is also on the Scientific Committee of BERA (refereeing papers for Critical Theory). Professor Linden West has given talks on the project at Paris/Nanterre University as part of a month spent as a Visiting Fellow.

- **PLEASE ADD**

The exploitation activities will impact on students, academics, policy-makers and practitioners. It addresses the following objectives; to disseminate the findings of the research; to identify the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion. of non-traditional students (working class, gender, ethnicity, disability); and to increase knowledge.

Other Outputs and Results

All of the above outcomes / results were ongoing throughout the life of the project. For example, any significant new literature which appeared was included in the Literature Review as well as any new statistical data for the Statistical Profile. Dissemination and exploitation strategies and the project website will continue after the project has finished in order to enhance the impact of the RANLHE project and its outputs and results.

The partnership was approached by another partnership - an EU project entitled 'Eurostudent 111 2005 – 2008' as there are some links between the projects. This has led to an exchange of information. Findings have been used by some partners at staff development events in HE institutions including the case study institutions.

4. Partnerships

The partnership consists of eight partners from the following countries: England (2), Scotland, Sweden, Poland, Spain, Ireland and Germany. This diverse group of partners and countries provide a wide range of different types of higher education institutions and educational, political and cultural contexts for comparing and contrasting the issues of access, retention and drop-out. For example while all the countries have elite universities they all have other types of institutions. For example, there are reform universities in Germany, post-1992 universities in the UK while in Poland the number of private universities is growing. The countries are at different starting points in relation to access and widening participation policy and practice. For example, Sweden, England and Scotland have well established policies and practice while Spain and Poland are less well developed in this. The different countries also have different completion and drop-out rates although the type of higher education institution is also a factor in this. Geographically the partnership is spread across Europe to cover the north, south, east and west which gives us insight into different institutional, regional and national cultures and practices. Although there are three UK partners there are policy and practice differences between Scotland and England. These factors have contributed towards providing a European added value and enabled partners to learn from each other and share and exchange ideas about 'what works' in relation to policy and practice on access, retention and drop-out.

The experiences of working together in a European partnership provided us with different and broader perspectives in relation to methodological and theoretical approaches and higher education policies and practices. A cross European partnership enables us to look at the issues in new ways rather than being entrenched in our national perspectives and approaches. It has enabled us to become more 'eurocentric' rather than 'ethnocentric'. This project has introduced all partners to new theories and literature and the research process has helped to develop and establish a European approach to access, retention and drop-out as it is a field which has previously been dominated by American research. Many of the partners have worked together on previous European projects and this has helped our understanding and knowledge of the different higher education systems across Europe. The partners are also experienced researchers and come from different disciplines such as sociology, education and psychology which facilitated an interdisciplinary approach and a greater and broader understanding of the issues.

All the partners are involved in ESREA (European Society for Research in the Education of Adults). Some partners are on the Steering Committee and/or are co-ordinators of some of the ESREA networks. The ESREA network conferences enabled us (and also in the future) to disseminate the project findings and outcomes to academics, practitioners and policy-makers to a wide number of European countries. These factors have ensured a good working relationship. Working together also raises the awareness of the need for sensitivity in relation to languages. While English was the working language for the project we all acknowledged and valued the richness of each other's language.

SEE THE GUIDANCE NOTES – CAN ANYBODY ADD ‘THE BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIPS ESTABLISHED WITH GROUPS OUTSIDE OF THE PARTNERSHIP WITH TARGET USERS?’

5. Plans for the Future

All the partners will ensure that the work and the findings of the project will be disseminated in the future after the project has finished through an exploitation plan. The policy leaflets will provide a crucial tool for disseminating and embedding the project across Europe. All partners will continue to write and present conference papers, round tables, and publications. We will continue to use our national and European networks such as ESREA to promote the work of the project. A book will be written after the project has finished. A book proposal will be sent to Routledge publishers.

All the partners have access to the materials, findings and data of this project. In relation to intellectual property rights all partners have the right to use the research and project materials for publication purposes. However, journal articles, conference papers and book chapters based on this project written by one or more members of the partnership must acknowledge the EU project and other partners.

Our exploitation strategy will be important for embedding the work and findings of the project. In order to achieve this it will be essential to work closely with existing networks as well as to look at the possibility of establishing a new European network in this field.

The website will be an important aspect of the exploitation strategy- <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl> as this will continue to function after the project has finished. All of the website is public except for a private forum which is available only to team members. Enter your text here

6. Contribution to EU policies

The project contributes to key EU policy, objectives and priorities in a number of ways. It relates to the Lisbon Education and Training Progress Indicators and in particular to the target 'Making Learning More Attractive'. The project does this by looking at issues of retention and non-completion in higher education for non-traditional students. This involved looking at the individual motivation to learn and the process which facilitates a successful learning career for both younger and adult students. A key outcome of the project was the identification of strategies and policies to support non-traditional students in their undergraduate studies and hence improve retention rates nationally and across Europe.

In relation to Lisbon key competences this project drew on the concept of learning identity and career in looking at factors which promote (or not) successful completion of an undergraduate degree. Our findings indicate that non-traditional students in higher education often lack confidence in their learning or make the wrong choice of course or they experience a lack of institutional support at crucial times in their learning career which may lead them to drop-out. Such students need student and teaching approaches which enable them to learn how to learn in higher education. The project has also contributed to the LLP Horizontal policies as it focuses on factors such as age, class, gender and ethnicity. In relation to age, for example, higher education institutions remain largely geared towards the needs of younger traditional students. However, with demographic changes in Europe it is important that adults are able to access higher education. In opening up higher education institutions to non-traditional students we have identified what issues / problems these students experience and what approaches and policies might be useful to help them stay and complete their degree. This would also contribute to European higher education policy.

The project also compliments other policies as studies and comparative research forms part of the EC's research and development strategies to further a European education policy. The findings of this project contribute towards this end and may complement research being undertaken in other strands.

7. Extra Heading/Section

Enter your text here

