

Hope and despair. Non-traditional students' stories in the transition from HE to the labour market

Paper to be presented at the ESREA Life History and Biography Network Annual

Conference Canterbury, England, Thursday 3rd to Sunday 6th March 2016

'Resources of Hope' The place of hope in researching learning lives

This paper is concerned with the struggles that non-traditional students' experience before graduating from HE. It is the first preliminary results from the Employ-project, aiming at enhancing the employability of non-traditional students in HE (<http://employ.dsw.edu.pl/language/en/>)ⁱ.

Previous research concerning non-traditional students' employability

There is all together very little research if any on non-traditional students' employability in European countries. Concentrating on Sweden we found some studies concerning students' employability and their transition from HE to working life in a variety of occupational and educational areas (see Nyström, Abrandt Dahlgren & Dahlgren 2010; Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz & Abrandt-Dahlgren 2008; Johansson; Hård af Segerstad; Hult; Abrandt Dahlgren & Dahlgren 2007; Johansson, Kopciwicz & Dahlgren 2008; Nilsson & Nyström 2013; Haake & Löfgren Martinsson 2009; Johansson, 2008; Ohlsson 2009). However, there are none which directly are taking the perspective of non-traditional students. In a previous project (RANLHE) we were concerned with the access and retention of non-traditional students but we did not look at the issue of employability. Nevertheless, Edström (2009) shows a difference between general and professional HE programmes where non-traditional students studying to become physiotherapist (professional programmes) were worried about not knowing enough after

graduation, whilst students in biomedicine, which is a general programme, experienced difficulties to convince others about their competencies. Thus, there is definitely a need for further studies regarding the employability for non-traditional students in higher education.

The aim

The aim of this paper is to understand non-traditional students' experiences before their transition from HE to the labour market. More specifically we focus on their hopes and despairs for the future and about the relation between being a non-traditional student and becoming an employable person.

Non-traditional students

By non-traditional students we mean, in the broadest sense, under-represented groups participating in HE (Bron & Lönnheden, 2004). In this paper, as elsewhere (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg 2014), when writing about non-traditional students we refer both to mature as well as young adult students that are the first in their families to enter HE in Sweden (Thunborg, Bron & Edström, 2012).

Employability

In Sweden one way of measuring employability is related to students' establishment on the labour market one to two years after the award of qualifications within the area for the graduate degree (UKÄ 2013). In our case, and in this article, we look at how non-traditional students' see themselves as employable, their perspective on the competencies important to get a job and exercise own knowledge and skills.

Biographical work

In a previous work (Thunborg, Bron & Edström 2012) we used a biographical approach for understanding identity formation and transformation in HE. We further outlined and theorised biographical work in Bron & Thunborg, (accepted):

Biographical work is visualized as a process in which identity struggles give way to processes of floating, i.e. feelings of being fragmented without a past or present, and anchoring, i.e. feelings of belonging to a specific context or grounded in oneself. Furthermore, a process of anchoring is involved in the continuous forming of identities, while floating and anchoring together are engaged in the process of transforming identities. In the processes of anchoring and floating the relationship between situated identities, i.e. a social identity related to a specific group or context, and integrated identities, i.e. personal identities, is central. However, here integrated identities are the focus in the analysis of biographical work. In our studies, looking at examples of the students' work with their own biographies, we recognized three modes of integrated identities amongst the students: an adopted, a floating and a multiple integrated one. (Thunborg, Bron & Edström 2012) In the adopted identity, students hide their social background, previous experiences and other situated identities behind a coherent student identity, anchored in an image of how to be a student in HE. Students expressing a floating identity were floating, in a situation not being able to go forward or back, not knowing who they were and why and not yet able to anchor either in higher education, or in life. Finally, students expressing a multiple integrated identity seemed to handle their social background and previous experiences as well as other situated identities at the same time but with a sense of integration, anchoring in themselves as persons.

The theory of biographical work is sketched in figure 1.

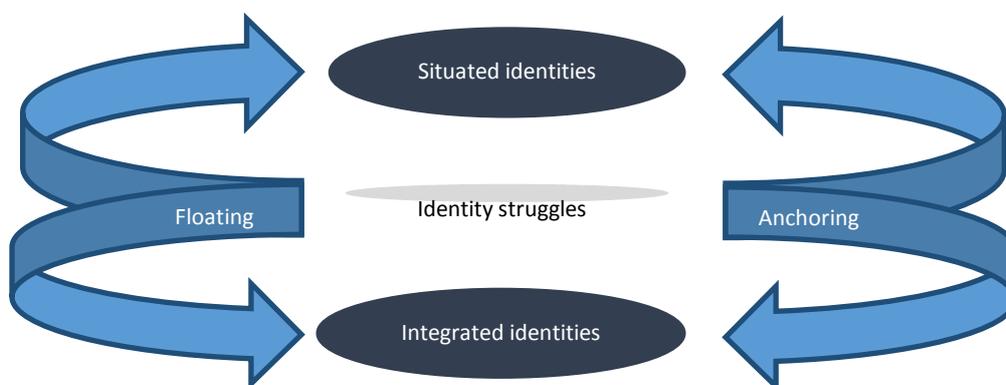


Figure 1. A process of biographical work (from Bron & Thunborg accepted)

We use biographical approach as methodology and the theory of biographical work for understanding non-traditional students' identity struggles in the transition between HE and working life.

The Swedish part of the project

As Swedish partners we choose non-traditional students' participating in a three-year BA programme in Personnel, Work and Organization (PAO), an interdisciplinary programme related to Human Resource Management (HRM), at Stockholm University. It involves studies in Education, Psychology and Sociology, Economics and Law. During the fifth semester students choose to specialize in education, psychology or sociology with special intermediate courses, and write their BA-thesis. The programme is within the spectrum of behavioral sciences and develops students' competencies for preparing to work with the issue of recruitment, personnel development and leadership at the work places including state, private and voluntary organizations. However, it is a general academic programme and offers no internship. Choosing this particular programme we want to gain knowledge not only about non-traditional students' perspectives, but also to be able to get insights to the work places that graduates are going to be employed, and become responsible for employing other, including non-traditional students. Thus, the tricky question could be how these non-traditional graduates are keen to recruit other non-traditional graduates when starting to work.

To find non-traditional students on the programme, we conducted a survey study with all of the students at the last two semesters i.e. 150 people, asking about age, gender, social and ethnical background and asked for their approval to be interviewed. Up to now we have interviewed 17 students (October-November 2015) employing a biographical methodology (Bron & Thunborg 2015). Some of these students are going to be interviewed once again after a half year.

Vignettes

In this paper we show our preliminary analysis and results from interviews with three non-traditional students being in the last year of their studies: Anastasija, Alexandra and Amanda. All of the students are female, mature i.e. 37, 32 and 25 years old, and two of them have an international background and have moved to Sweden from other European countries. They live and study in Sweden and want to work here. The third student was born in Sweden. All three are the first in their families to enter HE in Sweden.

Anastasija

Anastasija has an international background coming from an EU-country. She has had a close connection to both Sweden and her “other country” all along. Her mother was brought up in Sweden, moved back to her country of origin, moved to Sweden again with her husband and daughter and moved back again. Thus, Anastasija’s mother considers herself partly Swedish or having a double affiliation. Anastasija grew up as a child in Sweden and went to school here. However, when the family moved back to the other country, Anastasija had problem with the new language and the school. She thereby deliberately wanted to forget to speak Swedish not to be seen as a stranger. She came back to Sweden eight years ago already as a grown up, and started to learn the language again from the beginning. Today, both her mother and brother have moved back to Sweden. Her father is dead and her grandmother has been here all the time. The whole family is in Sweden, and they speak their mother tongue with each other. Anastasija worked, studied and lived in Sweden for many years, having a Swedish partner and a Swedish house. Nowadays she is divorced from her boyfriend but they still share their property with each other. Anastasija’s parents were educated in their country of origin, and had an artistic touch, her mother graduated there, and her father was employed by international companies. For her family education played the most important role in life – “nobody is going to take it from you”, she used to here from her father. Thus, for Anastasija it was obvious that she was

going to study. Anastasija has been involved in many HE programmes and free courses, as she loves to study. However, as 38 years old she felt strange to be so old and to continue to study. Moreover, her former boyfriend discouraged her to continue to study due to the fact she was not earning while studying. With the PAO programme that she attends now at the last year she pins great hopes to be able to establish herself on the labour market. Anastasija's struggles are concerned with her identity and the issue of language seems to be connected to these struggles, while she fears not being good enough in Swedish for being able to become like anyone else. Her moving back and forth between the two so called home countries has been complicated emotionally and culturally, as she sees her life as double. It seems difficult to approach her old country, her culture and everyday life seems far away. Sweden is her home, but she also owns property in her country of origin and in Sweden.

Alexandra

Alexandra is 32 years old. She came to Sweden seven years ago with her husband who got a job at an international company. They both come from one EU-country. In Alexandra's family there was no tradition to study at HE, but her mother dreamed of education and made an exception later in her life, went to HE and graduated. She also encouraged her daughters to do the same, and both perused HE successfully, but nobody else in their extended family went to HE. Alexandra studied literature (her mother tongue philology) in her country to become a secondary school teacher, that was her dream. As she could not get any employment, she continued on the PhD level, for three semesters, but when her husband got an appointment in Sweden they moved. To be a researcher was not her ambition, though. She worked as shop assistance, and in a travel agency. In Sweden she could not work in the teacher profession, so she looked both for a job and a study. She started studying Swedish as a second language, continued with Swedish on a higher level and took vocational courses to become an assistance nurse. This gave her an opportunity to work in the health care system for elderly people, and

learnt to speak Swedish even better. Nevertheless, she felt that the work with elderly care did not have a meaning to her, as she wanted to do something more demanding and better. In the University catalogue she found about the PAO programme, which seemed to suit her perfectly. It was only three years and gave possibilities to work with HR issues which she found closely related to teacher profession. She could also be able to choose psychology as a specialisation, the discipline she studied extra in her country, and liked. During her studies she learnt that psychology is the most demanded discipline within the programme and as such more appreciated by the employers, and thus easier to get a job. She started to study psychology, which she is happy about, and today she has only one semester to go. The choice seemed great, and after a short period of study, she could be employed. However, this is exactly what scares her. She is very uncertain if she gets a job at all. The competition is enormous. She is a foreigner which makes her situation especially difficult. Alexandra in parallel with her studies is both working and doing some voluntary work within the Red Cross, helping kids with their homework.

Amanda

Amanda is 25 years old, born in Sweden. She is the first and the only one in her family to peruse HE. The family was surprised that Amanda left her well established job, with prospects to become a manager, for HE. Her parents were proud of her as having that kind of job. Yet, she just wanted to study but did not know really what. As her interest in leadership questions grew, especially after experiencing ill functioning work groups, she started to look at a suitable programme on the internet, and found the PAO programme. She quit her job, and started to study, first at Linköping University but then she moved to Stockholm. She chose her specialization in Education as she learned that there were opportunities to go abroad as a part of the study. She stayed, as an exchange student, for a semester in New Zealand which contributed to her competencies being international. Now she is in her last semester, pleased

with her choice of the study and looking forward to an exciting employment. As PAO-programme is very popular, she is aware about the difficulties in finding a job. Because of that she has started to work extra during her studies. The job is in recruitment, that is required as experience, she knows about. Her job experiences before HE are not counted at all. She loves to study, and would prefer to be engaged in 100 per cent but this is not possible. "Everybody is taking an extra job to get experience and secure chances to find employment". She is ready for employment, but still lacking the practical skills. The general university knowledge is not sure to help her in real life at work, she feels. Now it is only the BA thesis left before getting on the labour market. Her boyfriend is 27, not an academic, and she dreams to have a family with him, buy a house and have a good job. But before that, they both would love to travel. However, for that they need money. Thus finding a job is necessary. Actually, she is not expecting any problems with finding a job eventually, yet she would prefer to get it in her place of residence (100 km from Stockholm) which she thinks is not going to be easy. But finally there will be a job there as well. Meanwhile, she dreams to work for the police force as HR personnel, dealing with personnel issues, education and helping out with group dynamics. She hopes that one day she will be working there.

Analysis

Out of the stories from these three students, it is clear that they are involved in struggles connected to both being a non-traditional student and starting a transition from HE to working life. In the three female stories we can see both similarities and differences. Being non-traditional makes them somehow similar. All of them describe their way to HE from the perspective of really wanting to study. For both Anastasija and Alexandra, it seems to be a necessary part of their life as adults. For Amanda it was a huge step to leave her position on the labour market to start study. All of them are also open for to continue education, even if at the moment they prefer to take a job for being able to fulfill other dreams in life. Anastasija

and Alexandra both have struggles connected to language as a core issue of their identity. As Anastasija expresses:

I couldn't think of living here without being able to function as all the others, to be a part of society, in such language is very important for me.

Language is also an essential issue for Alexandra and even if she feels at home at the university, she has to work emotionally on her identity, having difficulties to find herself:

When I think about my study, I am nervous all the time, as I am unsure of how to express myself as good as I would like to, this brings continuously anxiety, it is difficult to talk in front of others, and it seems that I am another person when I speak my mother tongue.

Both Anastasija and Alexandra work extra with improving their language and are very ambitious. However, they do have different motives. Anastasija wants to feel Swedish, as she struggles very much with her double identity, while for Alexandra the most important thing is to establish herself on the LM and contribute to her family life in Sweden. Language is thereby seen as an obstacle in getting a job. For Amanda the struggles with leaving her job for starting to study was the most difficult step related to struggles concerning her identity as she was the first in her family to enter HE.

The second struggle relates to being in the beginning of a transition from HE to the labour market. This struggle is both related to the relation between general knowledge and competencies required on the labour market and to becoming a non-traditional graduate.

The three students appreciate the general knowledge provided through the educational programme and also all the communications skills learnt, but they all are worried about how these competencies are going to be valued on the labour market. For Anastasija and Alexandra, the crucial issue, both during the study and when thinking about being employable, is language, while Amanda is missing practical skills in the education. Both Alexandra and Amanda are

working in parallel with their studies to get the practical experiences they think are needed on the labour market.

When working with becoming employable, the struggles with identity, including how to prove to be accepted, how to blend in, are crucial in stories of Anastasija and Alexandra. Being a foreigner is to deal with the language, to be aware that your foreign name contributes to being recognised as a stranger, and the age which adds to the feeling of being old for the labour market and have to compete with much younger graduates.

Everything goes quickly, there is only one year left which makes me anxious, I am nearly out of my mind. I think it will be very difficult, I do not know what I can say, but I talked to my classmates and some of them think it will be very nice to get a job, while I think it will be very tough. I am scared, as I do not know how it is going to be *like*.... This relates to different issues, in some way because I have Swedish as a second language, I am probably frightened, how, and who my employers will be, what kind of attitude are they going to have towards me. And partly because I am a little older – *laughing* – I am 38, but I think that everybody has different point of departure, different lives, so will be in my case too, so I am scared, I am scared really.

But Anastasija stresses why it is so important to get a job at once when she graduates.

... I need a job more than others at the programme, as I am older and have other financial worries ... When I am ready with my study I have to find a job. I have to work at once to be able to support myself.

Alexandra expresses similar fears when it comes to become employable and leave university.

I have studied the whole of my life and now I know that there will be no more of that, and this is terrifying. The school is a form of some security for me, do you understand, to leave it is scary, I can tell, this is the only thing I know. Second, I am very frightening or worry about if I can get a job. ... It is difficult to leave the school in three months, it is unbelievable, it went so quickly, especially when I was studying and working at the same time. First I worked at the retirement home, with short hours... but I am not sure I want to work in care profession.

She has some preferences for a future job:

I would prefer to work in an employment office... there is a lot to make a difference and change... I have a lot of energy and want to help those who are exposed, and combine that with a regular work, therefore employment office would be an alternative.

Alexandra is aware of being an immigrant gives her less chances at the labour market, she was reading about it in her courses.

I am on the bottom of employment list, I am an immigrant, this shows from my name, this is not so good, I am a female, neither so good, I am over thirty which means that I soon can get children, not so good, I do not have any experience working on HR job... and I am not Swedish I am not really fluent in Swedish either and this is frightening employers. There are such ways or borders at the labour market that make me not even having a chance to prove myself or show my qualifications, I cannot get a chance to come closer to employers, and this makes me really terrifying Expectations are growing not because of myself, but also my poor boy (her husband), not easy for him, when I am studying all the time.

For Amanda, the youngest of the three, being an ethnical Swede, the identity struggle is to move on to an academic job. She does not have an experience of being an academic, neither from home nor from work or relationships. She left a secure, permanent job for HE. She does not express the same worries with her employment as Anastasija and Alexandra. She worries about her employability of having the right competencies for practical work. Even if she has a confidence in herself, she is uncertain if her theoretical education can contribute to her work and she feels she is missing practical skills. Amanda would prefer to study more intensive, but as others, she chose a strategy with an extra job which helps her to be employable:

I am very curious about what the job will be, it is a very popular programme so there will be many who are applying, and this is a kind of stress, also that I have chosen an extra job within recruitment as I feel I have to have it to be able to get a job later on, and there are very many of the students who have already a relevant extra job.

Her big worries are about getting a job in a place of her residence. Amanda is sure that it will be found in Stockholm, perhaps not as good as she wants, but she dreams of a more general HR position, preferably in the Police force. She would prefer to work with planning their work conditions, with employees' health, planning. Yet, she feels safe and confident that there will be HR jobs everywhere, even in other countries.

Still it feels a little strange that I have chosen to study at the University after all. Perhaps strange is a bad word, but I had a lot of work and a family that did not push me to study... Well, this step was very good to take ... I listened to myself and left the safe job, if not I could not have learned new things despite them.

We presented here three non-traditional students working biographically with their identities both during their studies and lives in general, as well as becoming employable. There is a difference between students born in Sweden and those coming from other countries as mature which affects their employability chances in several ways. Yet, students' voices give us insights into their perspectives on hopes and despair when in transition. HE became a place where they felt safe. Yet to imagine future work as non-traditional, mature and especially foreigner feels scary and to become employable is like a threshold which requires biographical work. This includes issue connected with feeling of belonging, anchoring with oneself, dealing with double identity, and having enough competencies for a future work, just to name few.

Hope and despair of non-traditional students

The aim of this paper was to understand non-traditional students' experiences before their transition from HE to the labour market. More specifically we focus on their hopes and despairs for the future and about the relation between being a non-traditional student and becoming an employable person.

Previous research on employability and transition from HE to working life shows that students in general academic programmes do experience more struggles related to what to do with their knowledge and a fear of lacking the practical skills needed on the labour market (Nyström Abrandt Dahlgren & Dahlgren 2010). Edström (2009) has also shown that non-traditional

students in Bio-medicine felt they had to show others their competencies. In this article the students' fear is related to the competition on the labour market due to the attractiveness of the PAO programme. From this perspective they also see their non-traditional background as an obstacle.

The transition from HE to working life is not easy for any one. During their studies, students have found a secure space for learning in the educational programme, that is functioning well, but the unknown future, is scary. In the students' stories the three women express their striving in becoming employable, to leave the university and look for a job. They are in the process of forming and transforming their identities, where two processes are involved: floating and anchoring. The process of biographical work can be employed here to understand their efforts. Having another ethnical background gives rise to identity struggles, in relation to being non-traditional in society as a whole. Language seems to be a core issue for becoming Swedish, or a competent employee. Even if having different motives for working with their languages both Anastasija and Alexandra want to prove to be accepted, and not sticking out too much. They are trying to transform themselves as persons, not only between HE and the labour market but to form an identity to adapt to being Swedish, that we recognized in other studies and named it as an adopted identity (Thunborg, Bron & Edström 2012).

Being the first in her family to enter HE, Amanda struggle with being competent in practice. As she has experiences of working life before she struggles with how to integrate herself into working life from an academic perspective. From the biographical process she is in a stage of anchoring between being a student and becoming an employee identity and she is about to form an integrated identity as a person.

In our previous study (Bron, Thunborg & Edström 2014) we claimed that class and ethnicity both mattered when entering HE, but that students being the first in their family to enter HE more often saw HE as a battle field, while students from other ethnic backgrounds instead viewed it as a free zone from other prejudices in society. This study shows that another ethnicity seems to give rise to identity struggles in being judged on the labour market and in society again.

There are more analyses to be done about non-traditional students' transition between HE and the labour market, their identity formation and transformations in forming an identity of employability. The theory of biographical work can further help us when theorizing and conceptualizing employability of non-traditional students.

Becoming employable both during the HE study and looking for chances at the labour market bring hopes. To quote Vaclav Havel, we can say that:

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

Thus, hope not necessary is in opposition to despair but can be easily included in it, and both can feel like a double edged sword of the biographical work. Despair is possible to concretise as anxiety, fears and uncertainties. Thus, biographical work, when becoming employable in non-traditional students' stories includes both hopes and anxiety.

References

- Bron, A & Lönnheden, C 2004 'Higher Education for Non-traditional students in Sweden- A matter of inclusion' *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, no.7, pp.175-188.
- Bron, A, Thunborg, C 2015 Biographical interviewing. The case of non-traditional students in higher education. *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. <http://srmo.sagepub.com/page/help-1/help>.
- Bron, A, Thunborg, C 2016 'Policies for equality and employability. Consequences for non-traditional students' in (eds) Sense Pub. Seville (in print)
- Bron, A, Thunborg, C (accepted) Theorising biographical work, *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology*.
- Bron, A, Thunborg, C & Edström, E 2014 Ethnicity and class matters: experiences in Swedish higher education in *Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education* eds F Finnegan, B Merrill & C Thunborg, Routledge, London, pp. 63-73.
- Edström, E 2009 *Wanting to become something: about forming identities in Higher Education*. Paper presented at the third Nordic conference on adult learning, University of Southern Denmark, Odense.
- Finnegan, F, Merrill, B & Thunborg, C (eds) 2014 *Student voices on inequalities in European higher education: challenges for theory, policy and practice in a time of change* London, Routledge.
- Haake, U, Löfgren Martinsson, M 2009 Mellan verktyglåda och kritisk reflektion. Om personalvetares anställningsbarhet in *Anställningsbarhet: perspektiv från utbildning och arbetsliv* eds G Berglund & A Fejes, Studentlitteratur, Lund.

<http://employ.dsw.edu.pl/language/en/>

<http://www.ekonomifakta.se/sv/Fakta/Arbetsmarknad/Arbetsloshet/Arbetsloshet-efter-utbildningsniva/>

Eurydice Report 2014 *Modernisation of higher education in Europe. Access, Retention and Employability* EC, Brussels.

Fejes, A 2010 'Discourses on employability: constituting the responsible citizen' *Studies in Continuing Education* vol. 32 no. 2, pp. 89-102.

Johansson, K, Hård af Segerstad, H, Hult, H, Abrandt Dahlgren, M, Dahlgren, L.-O 2007 'The two faces of political science studies – junior and senior students thoughts about their education and their future profession', *Higher Education*, no. 55, pp. 623-636.

Johansson, K, Kopciwicz, L & Dahlgren, L-O 2008 'Learning for an unknown context: a comparative case study on some Swedish and Polish Political Science student' experiences of the transition from university to working life'. *Compare*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 219-231.

Ohlsson, U 2009 *Vägen in i ett yrke: en studie av lärande och kunskapsutveckling hos nyutbildade sjuksköterskor* (PhD thesis). Örebro University, Örebro.

Nilsson, S & Nyström, S 2013 'Adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime', *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 171-187.

Nyström, S, Abrandt- Dahlgren, M & Dahlgren, L-O 2010 'A winding road – professional trajectories from higher education to working life: a case study of political science and psychology graduates', *Studies in Continuing Education*, vol.30, no. 3, pp. 215-229.

Thunborg, C, Bron, A & Edström, E 2012 'Forming learning identities in Higher Education in Sweden', *Studies for the learning Society*, vol. 2-3, pp. 23-34.

UKÄ 2013 *Higher Education in Sweden*. 2013 Report 2013:3 Swedish Higher Education Authority, Stockholm,

Yorke, M 2006 *Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not*. The Higher Education Academy, York

ⁱ The Employ-project involves six partners from a range of countries from north and south Europe: Poland, UK, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden, and all the partners have long experience of working together and with the issue of non-traditional students. Moreover, when researching non-traditional students, we use biographical method well-known to us and used by the partners before. The aim is to *promote the enhancement of the employability of students in higher education from a non-traditional background (both younger and adult) through improving the efficiency of transitions into the graduate labour market*. ([2014-1-UK01-KA203-001842-TP](#)).

Agnieszka Bron Ph.D. is Professor in Education at the Department of Education, University of Stockholm. She holds a Chair in Education, is a leader of the research group dealing with adult and higher education issues, she also teaches, and supervises students on second and third cycle of study. She has published extensively on subjects as biographical studies (ethnicity, gender, informal learning and work), comparative studies (blue-collar workers' access to post-secondary education, and non-traditional students in Sweden), active citizenship and civil society. Her research includes engagement in several European projects concerning e.g. mature students in higher education.

Camilla Thunborg is an Associate Professor at the Department of Education at Stockholm University, Sweden. She has been working at both Linköping and Stockholm University, conducting research concerning learning and social identity forming and change in different life settings such as higher education, health care services, work as well as non-work organisations and digital settings. She has a special interest in biographical research as well as case study research designs and comparative research. She teaches, and supervises students on first, second and third cycle of study. She has been director of studies for first and second cycle education.