

**CONSTRUCTING THE HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SIX EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET  
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS**

**Introduction**

My name is Rachel Brooks and I am Professor of Sociology at the University of Surrey in the UK. I am writing to invite you to take part in a research project I am conducting on higher education in Europe. The research project, funded by the European Research Council, seeks to explore the understandings of higher education students held by a variety of different groups of people across six different European countries.

Before you decide whether or not to take part, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and ask questions about anything you do not understand. Talk to others about the study if you wish.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

There are currently over 35 million students within the European Higher Education Area and yet, to date, we have no clear understanding of the extent to which understandings of ‘the student’ are shared. A central aim of this project is therefore to investigate how the contemporary higher education student is understood and the extent to which this differs both within nation-states and across them. It is hoped that the knowledge generated by the research will feed into policy debates about initiatives to increase cross-border educational mobility and the wider development of a European Higher Education Area (which often assume that the meaning of ‘the student’ is the same across the continent).

**Why have I been invited to take part in the study?**

You have been invited to take part in this study because you are an undergraduate student studying at one of the higher education institutions in our sample.

To be eligible to take part in the study, you must meet the following criteria:

- An undergraduate student
- 18 years of age or over
- Polish citizen

About 324 participants in 6 countries (54 participants from each of the countries) will take part in this strand of the research.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, you do not have to participate. There will be no adverse consequences in terms of your legal rights and your education, if you decide not to participate or withdraw at a later stage. You can withdraw your

participation and/or request for your data to be withdrawn until 31 July 2018 (when the period of data collection ends) without giving a reason and without prejudice. If you withdraw from the study on or before this date, your data would be destroyed and no further data would be collected or any other research procedures would be carried out in relation to you.

### **What will my involvement require?**

If you agree to take part, we will contact you to agree a mutually convenient date and time for the focus group. At the start of the focus group, we will ask you to sign a consent form. You will be able to keep a copy of the consent form. The research will last for five years (2016-21) but your involvement would only be for the duration of the focus group (i.e. about one to two hours).

### **What will I have to do?**

If you do decide to take part, you will be invited to take part in a focus group (lasting between one and two hours) with about five other students from your higher education institution. We would hope to conduct the focus group face-to-face, at a location that is convenient for you and the other students involved (e.g. a classroom or other public space within your higher education institution).

You will be asked to answer a series of questions about how you understand the role of the student and your experiences of higher education. You may also be asked to create plasticine models to illustrate these issues and to respond to some extracts from government policies, university websites and/or TV shows that represent students in different ways. We will use a similar list of questions with all our focus group participants, and there would be no need for you to prepare any answers in advance of the focus group.

The focus groups will be conducted in Polish. They will be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

We will ensure that the answers you provide remain confidential and that no individuals will be able to be identified in any reports or other publications arising from the research. We will encourage all focus group participants to respect the confidential nature of the topics discussed in the focus groups.

### **What will happen to data that I provide?**

Research data are stored securely for at least 10 years following their last access and project data (related to the administration of the project, e.g. your consent form) for at least 6 years in line with the University of Surrey, UK's policies.

Personal data will be handled in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (1998). This includes details such as names, contact details, and audio recordings containing opinions and descriptions of experiences.

With your consent, to make the most of your participation and support efficient advancements in science, any anonymised data may be used for future research. (At the end of the project, an anonymised dataset will be offered to the UK's Data Archive.) We cannot tell you at this moment in time what this research will entail or what analyses will be carried out but we can assure you that all appropriate legal, ethical and other approvals will be in place. For practical reasons your consent will not be sought again.

### **What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?**

While the research does not cover any particularly sensitive issues, it is possible (although unlikely) that participants may get upset during the focus group (for example, if securing a place at university had been a very difficult process for a student).

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

You will have the opportunity to share your views and experiences of higher education. Although there is unlikely to be any other direct and immediate benefit to you from taking part, you will be contributing to a project that, it is hoped, will have considerable policy relevance and impact. You may consider this a longer-term benefit. We intend to publicise the findings from the project in journal articles and books, and through conference and seminar presentations.

With your consent, we will write to you at the end of the project (July 2021) to provide you with a summary of the main findings from the project.

### **What if there is a problem?**

Any complaint or concern about any aspect of the way you have been dealt with during the course of the study will be addressed; please contact Professor Rachel Brooks, Principal Investigator on +44 (0)1483 570222 or [r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk). You may also contact Ms Lucy Evans, Manager of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences on +44 (0)1483 686348 or [l.evans@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:l.evans@surrey.ac.uk) at the University of Surrey, UK.

### **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

Yes. Your details will be held in complete confidence and we will follow ethical and legal practice in relation to all study procedures. Personal data (name, contact details, audio recordings including opinions) will be handled in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998 and unauthorised individuals will not have access to them.

Your data will be collected, accessed, processed and securely destroyed by members of the research team in order to carry out this research project. Data collected during the study, may be looked at by authorised individuals from the University of Surrey, UK, where it is relevant to your taking part in this research. All will have a duty of confidentiality to you as a participant and we will do our best to meet this duty.

The data you provide will be anonymised and your personal data will be stored securely. You will not be identified in any reports/publications resulting from this research. With your permission we would like to use anonymous verbatim quotation in reports.

### **Full contact details of researcher**

Rachel Brooks  
Professor of Sociology  
Department of Sociology  
University of Surrey  
Guildford, GU2 7XH  
UK



Email: [r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk)

Tel: (+44) (0)1483 570222

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research is organised by the University of Surrey, UK and funded by the European Research Council. The funder has no conflict of interest.

**Who has reviewed the project?**

It has been looked at by an independent group of people, called an Ethics Committee, to protect your interests. This study has been reviewed by and received a favourable ethical opinion from the University of Surrey, UK's Ethics Committee.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this Information Sheet.**