SEKEHE

STUDENT SUPPORT

Handbook Part 3/4

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Introduction

1.1 Why experimenting with student support?

This chapter focuses on creating support systems within higher education institutions that genuinely consider the students' lived experiences, with particular attention to those living in vulnerable situations. While traditional support structures in higher education typically draw on professional and academic perspectives, they rarely integrate insights from lived experience.

Our objectives are to:

- Foster an inclusive culture where students feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences.
- Create supportive spaces for students to openly discuss their experiences and insights, making room for peer-to-peer support and innovative support formats.
- Engage teaching and support staff in collaborative support approaches that blend professional, academic, and experiential knowledge.
- Create supportive spaces for students to develop their experiential knowledge in relation to their professional growth and development.

By building these inclusive support systems, we aim to strengthen social inclusion in higher education and encourage a more holistic approach to student support.

1.2 How did we work?

Each Academic partner in the SEKEHE project developed at least one student support format. After these formats were created and tested, the next step was to document the process, reflect on lessons learned, and share these experiences through various methods:

- Qualitative questionnaire: We created a framework to help each team reflect on their practice, highlighting key elements and challenges. This questionnaire guided their writing and is included as an attachment.
- Visual posters: Each partner produced a poster that visually represented their student support format. These posters offered a clear overview of the format, its implementation, lessons learned, and ongoing challenges.
- Key incidents: Partners identified one or two meaningful moments—key incidents—that had a significant impact. These incidents served as analytical tools, revealing pivotal moments that inspired change or highlighted critical aspects of the project.
- Group discussion in Milan (September 26, 2024): An evaluation meeting was held where partners reflected together on the meaning and impact of the developed student support formats, focusing on key challenges and takeaways.
- Photovoice: This participatory method allowed teams to continuously reflect on the development of their student support format through photography and storytelling, providing a complementary evaluation perspective.

These methods generated a wealth of documentation, resulting in a layered and detailed picture of the student support formats created during the project. By carefully reading through the materials and using thematic analysis, we identified common challenges, key discussions, and recurring elements. This document is the result — a comprehensive synthesis of reflections, lessons learned, and shared experiences.

1.3 What to expect?

In the following chapter you will get an overview of the student support formats developed by the different SEKEHE partners. This will give you a brief insight on the why, how, and what of these student support formats.

The next chapter focusses on key elements. This chapter is written in such a way to support your own search. It sets out the different questions you need to address.

Finally, the chapter goes into key discussions and challenges

Photo 1: The shared battle – teacher

Photo 2: Embracing reflection - teacher

Photo 3: Exchange - teacher/reseracher

2 Overview of student support formats

2.1 Student Support Labs (UniMib)

The Student Support Labs were designed as an innovative peer-led initiative, where senior students played an active role in co-designing and facilitating workshops aimed at supporting their peers in reflecting on and navigating their university experiences. The central idea was to leverage students' personal experiences as a resource to foster shared learning, self-reflection, and mutual support within the academic community.

The process began with senior students reflecting on their own academic journeys, identifying challenges, resources, and strategies they used to overcome obstacles. These insights were then shared and used to design a workshop format for their peers. The Student Support Labs aimed to create a space for open dialogue, enabling students to connect, share their experiences, and identify practical solutions for common struggles.

While the initiative proved valuable for the senior students involved, providing them with opportunities for personal and professional growth, it faced significant challenges in terms of engagement from the target student group. Despite efforts to promote the labs, participation was extremely low, with only a small number of students registering. This lack of engagement was attributed to a combination of factors, including the overwhelming number of available extracurricular activities, which diluted students' interest, and the lack of a clear connection between the labs and their academic or professional objectives.

In conclusion, while the Student Support Labs highlighted the power of peer support and shared learning, the experience also underscored the importance of aligning such initiatives more closely with students' academic needs and motivations. Integrating student support into the academic curriculum or making it more directly relevant to students' studies could enhance engagement and improve the overall impact of such programs.

Photo 4: Student Support Lab - Student

2.2 Webinar based student support (NTNU & KBT)

The student support format was created to align with the project's ideals of user involvement and co-creation, combining organizational policy with innovative practices. We also want this format to be sustainable and to continue even after the SEKEHE's deadline. We want our organization to have changed and developed for the better.

This format is a webinar-based support system conducted via Zoom, featuring two monthly sessions led by alumni with relevant experiential knowledge. These sessions focus on navigating student life, study techniques, and exam preparation, with alumni sharing their experiences and current students participating in Q&A and discussions.

The steps taken to create the student support format include designing a feedback-based teaching format, conducting surveys, crafting the support format, advertising, and recruiting alumni. Furthermore, formalizing alumni contracts, training and preparing the alumni, implementing the webinars, and collecting feedback for further development. Experiential knowledge is embedded through alumni sharing their lived experiences and active student involvement in the creation process.

The development of student support initiatives at the organization faced several challenges, including scheduling sessions within the curriculum, ensuring student engagement, managing limited capacity, coordinating with alumni, and dealing with planning disruptions due to illness and scheduling misunderstandings.

Central premises included not taking the task at hand for granted, respecting the tasks demands, to listen to and base the product on the student's wishes while keeping a realistic scope regarding time frame and resources, including manpower.

2.3 Self-support group (University of Ostrava - UO)

We saw that students did not have a peer space in the Faculty to share their experiences or difficult personal situations. Before we started the group, we created a short questionnaire for the students to define what the group should focus on and what days or times would suit them best. We run a self-support group once a month. It was co-facilitated by a PhD student and an expert by experience. But the attendance was rather low, and therefore, we changed the group to a workshop format. We piloted the workshop on boundaries in a professional-client relationship. We feel that in order for a self-support group to become a viable tool for responding to student vulnerability, more work would be needed with the whole Faculty atmosphere. We would also need appropriate spaces where students feel comfortable and welcomed and can exercise 'ownership' over them.

Photo 5: Creating space for self-support group – Iveta Kowolová

2.4 Self-reflective tool (UO)

We have had the experience of engaging experts with lived experience at the Faculty since 2018. We noticed that students tended to evaluate (in most cases) positively the experts' stories and experiences. But they were less likely to relate what they heard to their practice as future social workers, to their attitudes and beliefs. We wanted to encourage students' self-reflection in relation to experiential knowledge and their awareness of their own positionality. Therefore, we developed this tool. Students are presented with the life stories of experts by experience in the form of a living library. An essay assignment follows. Students choose one story and describe what they heard. They then reflect on questions that focus on six areas: causes and solutions of social problems, the illusion of innocence of theories used, approaches to work with social problems, discourses, and discourse of risks. In the last session, they meet again with experts by experience in small discussion groups and reflect on shifts in their approach to working with people in difficult life situations based on essays they have written. We found this format to be very effective towards the development of self-reflection. Students also related their own lived experience and vulnerability in their essays.

2.5 The W.R.A.P. (HOGENT)

The WRAP stands for the Wellness Recovery Action Plan. This format, guided by experts by experience, focusses on students and their lived experiences. It aims to strengthen their mental well-being through peer-to-peer support. The project explores how experiential knowledge can be structurally embedded in student support and what impact this has on students, facilitators, and the organization.

An increasing number of students are struggling with mental health issues. WRAP offers a strengths-based, experience-driven format that helps students enhance their well-being and successfully complete their studies.

WRAP consists of eight sessions with a fixed group, facilitated by two experts by experience. The methodology is grounded in sharing lived experiences, and focuses on safety, recognition, and the development of personal tools. Participants build their own WRAP, with attention to daily routines, triggers, crisis plans, and recovery.

Students reported that WRAP brought them hope, insight, and a sense of connection. Facilitators learned about the specific needs of students and the challenges of implementing such a format within a large institution. WRAP proves to be a valuable tool, but structural embedding and improved communication between students and the institution is needed.

This student support format revealed that informal communication is more effective than formal channels. When students experience peer support, it enhances their well-being and 'academic' success. The structural embedding of experiential knowledge does however require vision, space, and bridge-builders. There is a strong need for more recognition and support for the practices that explicitly work with experiential knowledge

Photo 6: Reflection on intention and result - Lukáš Roman

2.6 Professional Practice and Internship in Special Needs Education (UGent)

The student support format is grounded in the transformative potential of integrating personal experiences into professional development. Experiential knowledge, drawn from students' lived experiences, is a crucial element in shaping a coherent professional identity. To effectively embed this knowledge into learning, the format relies on intentional, transparent and inclusive approaches that normalize reflection and dialogue on experiential knowledge. By catering to all students equally and avoiding stigmatization or specialization, the framework fosters a collective learning culture where diversity of experiences becomes a source of growth.

At the heart of the format are two complementary models: the personal reference framework and the Theme-Centred Interaction (TCI) model. Together, they encourage students to explore and align their personal and professional dimensions. The Personal Reference Framework helps students situate their actions within their biographical context and worldviews. At its core is the 'centre', which represents the individual's personality and is explored through several thematic layers: primary (core values and beliefs), secondary (learned roles), organisational (institutional influences) and period (historical or cultural contexts). This model is not intended as a rigid checklist but rather as a flexible guide to support meaningful reflection. The Theme-Centred Interaction (TCI) Model complements this by examining how students' personal frameworks interact with three key elements: the 'we' (team dynamics), the 'it' (shared tasks or goals) and the 'global' (broader societal and contextual processes). This approach emphasizes the dynamic interconnections between these elements, with a focus on the 'hyphen'—the space of interaction and balance among them. Through this lens, students are supported in cultivating a professionalism that is both reflective and adaptive.

By integrating these models into the curriculum through recurrent group supervision sessions, reflective reports, and smaller, safer spaces for sharing, the format provides a structured yet flexible environment for reflection. These methods encourage students to connect their personal histories with their professional development, supporting growth not only academically but also as professionals who recognize how their lived experiences shape their work. The impact of this approach is visible in student outcomes. Participants report a stronger alignment between their personal experiences and professional growth, resulting in a more coherent and authentic professional identity. Reflection practices foster deeper insights into how personal histories shape roles, team dynamics, and professional decision-making, while group discussions and written reflections enhance both collective and individual learning.

However, reflection must be a continuous and integral part of the academic journey, rather than limited to isolated moments. Tools like the personal reference framework and TCI model provide students with a foundation for critically examining their behaviours and roles within professional contexts. Establishing a shared vocabulary and normalizing practices that value experiential knowledge as a legitimate and valuable source of learning are vital for addressing the hesitation and vulnerability often associated with sharing personal insights.

Finally, flexibility in how and when students engage with reflection is essential to ensure inclusivity. By accommodating varying levels of comfort and providing options for engagement, the framework empowers students to take ownership of their learning, fostering personal and professional growth that equips them to navigate the complexities of real-world practice with confidence and authenticity.

3 Key Elements

3.1 Working with and from your context

3.1.1 Start from your local context

Before developing new student support practices, it is crucial to understand your local context and the existing visions and policies. This means reviewing current documents to determine the focus and direction of student support. In larger institutions, it is not uncommon for various projects to run in parallel without a unified policy. Sometimes pioneering initiatives exist but are not reflected in official documents.

At HOGENT, for example, we discovered that several student support projects were operating independently—without even knowing about each other. This highlights the importance of mapping what is already happening. One effective way to begin is by having conversations with those responsible for student support policy and practice.

3.1.2 Identify and understand student needs

A strong foundation for student support practices includes developing an understanding of what students need. Institutions have taken different approaches to this: some use surveys to collect direct input from students, while others rely on conversations with teaching staff or student service teams. These staff members often gain valuable insights through their daily interactions with students and can help paint a more comprehensive picture of student challenges and expectations.

3.1.3 Build relationships with key stakeholders

Creating sustainable student support practices requires collaboration with stakeholders. For example, if your goal is to improve support during internships, it is essential to engage with the people who oversee student internships. Building these relationships involves understanding the stakeholders' roles, priorities, and the challenges they face.

It is also important to recognize that stakeholders may have different capacities and limitations. For instance: At the University of Milano-Bicocca, staff members are expected to contribute actively to student support initiatives. This approach has led to a broad range of initiatives but also places a significant burden on staff. At HOGENT, the student support service operates with limited resources and well-defined responsibilities set by policy. While they are eager to innovate, they face constraints in how much time and energy they can invest in new initiatives while maintaining their existing services.

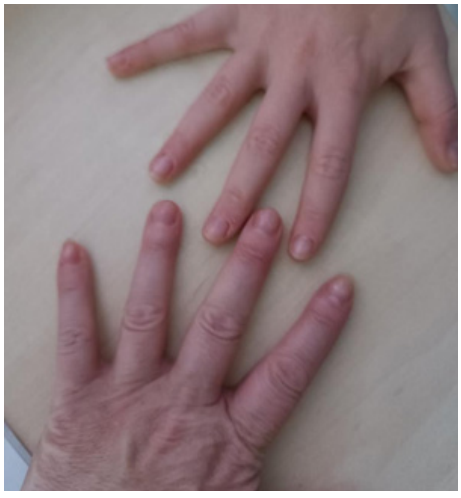

Photo 7: Understanding student's needs - Iveta Kowolová

Photo 8: Hands of the 'client' and the social professional – Unknown student from University of Ostrava

3.1.4 Assess your context's readiness to work with lived experience

Another key element is understanding where your institution stands in relation to working with lived experience and experiential knowledge. If your context is characterized by strong hierarchies, a focus on professional distance, or a lack of participatory practices, introducing innovative forms of student support might be met with resistance.

Ask yourself: Is my context ready to work with lived experience? This reflection is essential for gauging the level of openness and adaptability within your institution and for determining the best starting point for change.
Possible actions:

- Evaluate your institution's culture: Is it open to participatory practices and lived experience?
- Identify potential barriers: Where might resistance arise, and how can you address it?
- Balance innovation with existing resources: What small, actionable steps can you take without overwhelming current services? Document and evaluate progress: What worked, what didn't, and how can the practice be refined?
- Identify relevant stakeholders: People who are already on board with the idea or motivated to actively support it.

3.2 Understanding the why: the foundation of student support

Before developing a student support format, it is crucial to ask yourself: Who do we want to support, and to what end?

A clear starting point is understanding the problem, issue, or challenge you want to address. This requires defining your vision and clarifying your purpose. Knowing your 'why' is fundamental, because it shapes both the 'how' and the 'what' of your practice. More importantly, a strong 'why' inspires people and unites them around a shared goal.

For example, possible 'why' statements might include addressing a lack of lived experience or experiential knowledge in student support services. Alternatively, you may want to create spaces where students feel safe sharing personal experiences or ensure that students living in vulnerable situations receive the support they need to thrive. Or you want to address the lack of spaces for the development of community student life.

Once you have established your 'why,' it is easier to define the 'how'. Some teams have integrated lived experience into every step, ensuring that all decisions are made collaboratively with stakeholders. Others emphasize shared ownership, creating safe environments that encourage learning and transformation. No matter the context, focusing on cross-pollination of perspectives and continuous reflection helps build a richer support system.

Your 'what'—the concrete tools and actions you will use—flows naturally from your why and how. These tangible outcomes might include surveys, group discussions, or experience-sharing formats like WRAP sessions. You might also develop self-reflective tools, webinars, or peer-support groups. The key is to avoid jumping straight into the 'what' without taking the time to explore your purpose.

Before moving forward, take a moment to reflect:

- Have we taken enough time to clarify our 'why'?
- Does our 'how' align with our core vision?
- Are our 'what' elements accessible, inclusive, and rooted in student needs?

Defining your why is the heart of building meaningful student support. A well-articulated why keeps your team aligned and ensures your work has a lasting impact. It shapes your approach, inspires collaboration, and makes your outcomes purposeful. By starting with your 'why', you can build student support practices that are thoughtful, responsive, and transformative.

3.3 Co-designing/co-creating solutions

Co-design and co-creation are powerful methods to bring about meaningful change, but they do not happen on their own. These processes require someone to take the lead—someone who can guide and nurture the collaboration. At its core, successful co-design is about creating an inclusive process that meets the needs of all stakeholders.

First and foremost, co-design takes time, energy, and engagement. It cannot be treated as an afterthought. When participation is voluntary, maintaining momentum can be challenging, especially when life or work pressures arise. If you truly believe in the change you want to create, it is important to identify who can take responsibility for leading this process within their role or project.

Co-design is also about creating a shared language and understanding. When people from different backgrounds collaborate, they may not share the same frame of reference. Being mindful of the language and concepts used is crucial to ensure that everyone feels included and able to contribute meaningfully.

In educational settings, co-creation can be transformative. It shifts relationships between stakeholders toward more equal partnerships, where every voice matters. Staff and students, for instance, move beyond traditional roles and hierarchies. Every stakeholder brings valuable expertise, creating a richer and more inclusive process.

For students, co-creation can be especially empowering. They move from passive learners to active contributors, taking on roles that go beyond the classic student-teacher relationship. This shift transforms the process from teaching to shared learning and promotes deeper engagement.

It is essential to recognize that the process itself holds great value—it is not just a means to an end. Co-design places collective learning at the heart of your work, fostering an environment where all stakeholders can grow and evolve together.

Photo 9: Complexity of change - teacher/reseracher

Photo 10: Building the road together - teacher

3.4 Different ways of integrating lived experience / experiential knowledge

There is no single way to work with lived experience or experiential knowledge in social studies. Each approach has its own value, and each stem from a specific purpose for building student support. Often, these approaches overlap or blend, creating crossovers that enrich the work. This chapter is not a list of methods to choose from but rather an invitation to explore and strengthen how you engage with lived experience, experiential knowledge, and experts by experience.

A key starting point is to reflect on how and why you incorporate lived experience into your student support formats. Here are some approaches to consider:

- All lived experience: Emphasizing the broad range of personal experiences students bring with them.
- Lived experience as a student: Focusing on experiences specifically related to higher education, such as navigating institutional barriers or feeling like 'just a number in the system.'
- Lived experience related to social issues: Exploring experiences connected to broader societal challenges—such as mental health, poverty, or discrim- ination.

Another decision is whether to work with the lived experience present within your stakeholders (e.g., students, staff, or alumni) or to collaborate with external experts by experience or organizations that centre experiential knowledge in their practice.

When cooperating with experts by experience or volunteers with experiential knowledge, they can take on various roles:

- Co-designer: Helping to shape student support programs.
- Reflective listener: Offering feedback and holding space for others' experiences.
- Storyteller: Sharing personal experiences to inspire reflection or change.
- Facilitator: Guiding conversations and workshops around lived experience.

Interestingly, students can often take on similar roles within support programs. Recognizing and supporting their evolving roles is essential in creating an inclusive and dynamic environment for learning and mutual growth. At the same time, it is important that training and support is available for people to engage with these evolving roles.

Before implementing any approach, reflect on these guiding questions:

- What constitutes a safe environment for sharing lived experiences? Safety and trust are crucial in ensuring that participants feel comfortable and respected.
- What is the goal of sharing these experiences? Are you aiming to foster personal growth, build a supportive community, or drive institutional change?
- Who benefits from sharing these experiences?
- Think about the direct and indirect outcomes: who will gain new insights, and how will this work influence policies or practices?

Without these foundations, the process risks becoming tokenistic or even harmful. Clarity on your purpose will shape the way you engage with lived experience and set expectations for everyone involved. Being intentional about these outcomes helps prevent unbalanced power dynamics and ensures that the knowledge shared serves a greater purpose. Creating. Safe environment is thus supporting clarity on the purpose of working with lived experience.

A critical distinction to make is between developing experiential knowledge and institutional learning. Developing experiential knowledge is about supporting students and staff in reflecting on and learning from their own experiences to build personal insight and resilience. This approach focuses on the individual and their growth through storytelling, reflection, and self-awareness. Institutional learning, on the other hand, uses lived experiences as a resource to inform and improve policies, services, and organizational culture. This approach is broader and aims at systemic change. Both are valuable, but they require different methods and levels of commitment.
Working with lived experience is not about following a single formula—it is about balancing multiple approaches to serve different purposes. Some institutions may prioritize student support and personal growth, while others may focus on policy change and institutional learning. The key is to be intentional, reflective, and adaptive. Each approach has the potential to transform individuals and institutions alike, but only if it is accompanied by thoughtful planning and an openness to learning from mistakes and successes.

Photo 11: To be made up of - student
Photo 12: Examining the inside – expert by experience

3.5 Engaging with lived experience: learning, connecting, and transforming

Engaging with lived experience and supporting mutual learning is not a casual endeavour. It requires commitment, intentionality, and readiness to embrace its consequences. In what follows, we reflect on the outcomes and lessons learned from our own practices.

3.5.1 A focus on normalizing the sharing of lived experience

A simple way of normalizing lived experience is addressing its presence. Students emphasized the need to normalize experiential knowledge, not necessarily the sharing of it. Simple phrases like “maybe someone in the class has experienced this too” help raise awareness among a broader group that experiential knowledge is widespread and may also be present within the classroom.

Another element can support the sharing of lived experiences. Those who have experienced that approach highlight how it creates spaces where people feel seen and heard—not just by individuals but by institutions as well. For some students, this has helped ease feelings of isolation and alienation. Instead of feeling like just a ‘number in the system,’ they felt acknowledged as whole individuals.

Sharing lived experiences helps build connections, reminding people that they are not alone in their struggles. For example, in the WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) program, a community of students emerged and continued meeting even after the official program ended. This is however not a given. In other attempts of organizing the WRAP, a community of students did not emerge.

This approach can also destigmatize experiences by focusing on what unites us as human beings rather than what divides us. In an internship context, sharing lived experiences becomes a bridge between professionals and clients, fostering empathy and mutual understanding.

The ripple effect of this work can extend beyond students. At HOGENT, it inspired self-care workshops and the use of WRAP tools for staff members, who expressed a need for spaces to share their own work and life struggles.

Photo 13: Leading the way – staff member

3.5.2 A focus on professional development

For some partners, the connection between learning, listening to lived experience, and personal growth became a focal point. In the self-reflection tool of the University of Ostrava, students were encouraged to explore their own experiences rather than solely evaluating others.

At UGent, it became clear that supporting students to learn from their own lived experiences enhances their sense of agency and ownership over their professional development.
This approach integrates theory, practice, personal beliefs, and attitudes, creating more holistic learning.

Working with lived experience also benefits staff members. Several partners found that their colleagues gained a deeper understanding of their own positionality and challenged traditional student-teacher dynamics, ultimately reshaping their professional perspectives.

3.5.3 A Focus on institutional learning

E For all partners, working with lived experience led to rethinking their approach to student support. It became clear that simply sharing lived experiences is not enough—there must be structures in place to support these processes responsibly and respectfully.

Creating a safe environment is essential. Trust, openness, and non-judgment are key elements that allow people to share their experiences authentically.

The University of Ostrava found that fostering safety and trust encouraged students to share complex and deeply personal experiences. Staff members observed students engaging in self-directed learning and reflecting deeply on their own experiences and those of others. This type of learning, free from formal assessment, was both powerful and transformative.

While working with lived experience can inspire change, it takes time and persistence. Mindsets and structures don't shift overnight, and pioneers often face resistance. It is crucial to have dedicated individuals who continue leading the way, pushing for change from within.

The University of Milano-Bicocca demonstrated how individual experiences can become a valuable resource for institutional learning. Lived experience enriches the institution by bringing fresh insights, making it easier for students to learn from their peers who share similar challenges and experiences. The WRAP program is built on this principle of mutual listening and learning. Different partners saw how listening to students lived experiences offers the institution a rare and valuable perspective.

Photo 14: To become human and a professional

Photo 15: Vision is what keeps you going between the start and the destination - Miroslava Slívová

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What does it mean to be a student today?
- How do students experience current services?
- How do they navigate higher education systems?
- How accessible are these services for them?

For institutions, this feedback provides an opportunity to become more inclusive and democratic. Policy workers at HOGENT noted how they had lost connection with students' realities and welcomed this reconnection as a way to improve services.

3.5.4 A focus on power, stigma, and inequality

Engaging with lived experience inevitably raises questions about power, stigma, and inequality. This work challenges the dominance of professional and academic perspectives but does not eliminate these inequalities overnight.

In one case, experts by experience suggested changes to the curriculum, only to face resistance—until a staff member proposed the same ideas, which were then more readily accepted. This experience highlights the persistent hierarchies and biases that need to be addressed.

Several partners also wondered whether the broader institutional culture was ready to embrace professionals who integrate lived experience into their work. Or how do we address students who consciously hide their experiential knowledge out of fear of 'academic' repercussions?

Something that emerged, alongside academic repercussions, was the concern of being reduced to your story. When you share your story with fellow students or professors, there's a risk that they remember only that story and no longer see you as a person with your own abilities and interests. This highlights that stigma exists not only within academic structures but is also embedded in students and faculty themselves.

It is essential to remain mindful of how these cultural dynamics can place people in difficult situations. Staying reflective and critical of your own practice is key to avoiding these pitfalls.

Photo 16: To put our heart and humanity in social work

4 Key Discussions/Challenges

4.1 What do we understand by support and to what end?

Each project partner had the freedom to develop a student support format that best suited their local context. This flexibility led us to an important realization: there are countless ways to approach and define student support. These different starting points sparked a deeper discussion about how we define 'needs' in student support and how lived experience plays a role in shaping those definitions.

When we look at existing services across the participating countries, there is a strong focus on practical aspects like academic performance, student life, accommodation, disability support, financial aid, short-term psychosocial help, and training for personal or educational development. However, in most cases, student support policies and visions rarely acknowledge the value of lived experience or experiential knowledge. At best, there is an understanding of the benefits of peer-to-peer support. This was precisely the starting point of the SEKEHE project: recognizing that most student support practices are framed from professional and theoretical perspectives. We believed that embracing lived experience could help create more accessible and inclusive higher education.

At UGent, a unifying perspective on support emerged. The team focused on internships, a crucial moment in a student's professional development. Internships can be stressful and confronting, particularly for students in vulnerable situations, where existing challenges may become more intense. The original focus of the SEKEHE project lied on students that are being confronted with vulnerable living situations.

However, the UGent team quickly realized that an exclusive approach to building internship support risked being stigmatizing. Instead, they shifted towards offering all students support in working with their own lived experiences. The starting point became twofold: first, many students have learned to hide their lived experience; second, they often struggle to see how these experiences could shape their future professional identity, attitudes, and beliefs as professionals in the broad domain of special needs education.

A similar focus was reflected in the work of the University of Milano-Bicocca. They emphasized the importance of anchoring learning in real-life experiences and responding to the actual needs of students. KBT also followed the idea of needing to understand the needs of students. To better understand those needs, KBT conducted a survey to gain insight into students' lives and experiences. This approach placed lived experience at the core of their work.

Photo 17: Non-linear trajectories - teacher

At the University of Ostrava, two student support formats were developed. The first responded to the lack of a peer space for students to share their personal challenges and experiences. The second focused on integrating insights from experts by experience into students' training. The team noticed that students often struggled to connect these valuable lessons with their professional development as future social workers.

HOGENT offered the WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) program. Their starting point was the observation that some students live in socially vulnerable situations, which impacts their mental well-being—a key factor in completing an educational program. The project also addressed a gap in the institution's social services: the lack of experiential knowledge and involvement of experts by experience in shaping support services.
For the University of Milano-Bicocca, peer learning and support were essential. They emphasized that students learning from one another can be a powerful way to navigate university life. Peer support becomes a tool not just for well-being but also for personal and professional growth.

These student support formats illustrate the variety of possible starting points for thinking about student support. Understanding your 'why' is crucial. It connects people around a shared goal and drives action and change. Through these experiments, the idea of 'support' has been expanded. Support isn't just about mental well-being; it's also about providing the pedagogical guidance necessary to become a competent professional. Clarifying how we define support is key to aligning efforts within a team or institution.

Ask yourself: Who do we want to support, and why? What do we mean by support, and what do we hope to achieve?

4.2 Intra- or extra-curricular?

The development of student support formats revealed a common challenge across all participating countries: how to effectively reach students. Many teams struggled with the 'reach' of their initiatives, particularly those that were extracurricular and voluntary. These formats often faced difficulties in communicating with students, attracting participants, and maintaining consistent attendance.

This was surprising, given that several of the formats were based on real student needs identified through surveys. For instance, at the University of Ostrava, a workshop on boundaries in the client-professional relationship attracted significantly more students than other activities. This led us to consider that many students may be so focused on fulfilling academic expectations that participating in extracurricular support activities feels like an additional burden, even if those activities address their needs. On the other hand, students who participated in the WRAP sessions at HOGENT unanimously described them as highly beneficial, despite the longer commitment required.

Photo 18: Reflection on challenges and potential – Iveta Kowolovál

These observations prompted deeper reflection on how students navigate higher education systems and how accessible institutional social services really are. Another recurring theme was the overwhelming amount of (often digital) information students are expected to process.

When student support becomes part of the curriculum, it naturally increases participation. However, integrating support into the curriculum raises new questions. In structured academic settings, students are accustomed to being assessed. Does this create a barrier for them to openly share their lived experiences? How does the pressure to perform academically affect their ability to engage with these initiatives? And does this pressure leave enough space for extracurricular support options?

A practical issue raised by several partners was the challenge of finding an appropriate physical space for student support activities. Many struggled to secure a safe, comfortable, and inviting space for self-help sessions, peer-to-peer support, or sharing lived experiences. As a result, some sessions were held outside the institution, which led us to ask: Do students feel more comfortable in non-institutional spaces? Furthermore, this opened a deeper challenge: the lack of community building in several higher education settings.

Building a student support format inevitably means facing these kinds of challenges. These experiences opened up important discussions about what should be voluntary and what should be mandatory in student support. The focus of these discussions was twofold:

1. How do we support students' professional development through their lived experiences?
2. How do we ensure well-being, inclusion, and equal opportunities for a diverse group of students, especially those in vulnerable situations?

For example, at HOGENT, the discussion centred on whether a course on mental well-being should be integrated into the curriculum. At UGent, the debate was whether support during internships should focus solely on the most vulnerable students or be made available to all students.

These experiences show that integrating student support into the curriculum is not just a practical solution to increase participation—it also signals a deeper shift in how we understand education. It shows that learning is inseparable from who you are, what you go through, and how you experienced. There is tension embedded in academic structures: students want to share their experiences but often feel held back by the evaluative nature of the educational institutions. This raises the question of how we can create safe spaces within systems that are built around assessment.

By making room for experiential knowledge, we acknowledge that vulnerability is not a weakness, but a source of strength and connection. Ultimately, this leads us to two fundamental questions: What is our responsibility as an educational institution in supporting students' professional development, especially in relation to their lived experiences? And what type of support do we believe is essential for a diverse student body, with special attention to those living in vulnerable circumstances?

By integrating experiential knowledge into the curriculum, you're not just making space for it—you're making a clear statement: this is knowledge we cannot afford to ignore.

4.3 Defining lived experience and experiential knowledge: an ongoing debate

An ongoing debate within social professions is how to define 'lived experience' and 'experiential knowledge.' On the one hand, everyone possesses lived experiences related to personal life, social roles, and professional growth. On the other hand, experiential knowledge, as a concept, challenges the dominance of professional and academic knowledge. It emerged as part of broader social movements aiming to reduce inequality and power imbalances in social work, education, and research.

In this context, experiential knowledge seeks to give voice to those whose experiences have been overlooked or undervalued. It promotes a more inclusive way of understanding the world while recognizing that knowledge is shaped not only by formal education but also by lived realities.

The SEKEHE project embraced this complex debate, exploring different focusses of working with lived experience and encouraging reflection on what it means to work with one's own experiences while learning from those of others. Several approaches emerged:

1. Lived experience in becoming a social professional At UGent, a framework was developed to help students reflect on their own life histories and contexts of which experiential knowledge is an important part. As such students were supported to raise awareness of their personal blind spots, sensitivities, and assumptions. This approach encourages students to become more self-aware as future professionals and to remain open to continuous personal growth. At the University of Ostrava this took shape in the form of a self-reflective tool for students.
2. Lived experience as a student The support Lab of the University of Milano Bicocca built a peer-to-peer support initiative that tapped into students lived experiences within higher education. This approach emphasized that students could be valuable resources for each other, fostering a sense of community and shared understanding. A similar practice was developed in KBT where alumni share their experiences and insights on how to navigate student life.
3. Creating space for social issues and experts by experience Some initiatives created dedicated spaces for individuals with lived experiences of specific social issues, whether they were students or external experts by experience. These spaces served as platforms for mutual learning, empowerment, and connection between different forms of knowledge. The University of Ostrava, for example, focused on connecting students' professional development with the lived experiences (of people in socially vulnerable situations). Students were encouraged to reflect on how these experiences challenge and reshape their beliefs, attitudes, and professional practices.

A recurring challenge in working with lived experience is finding the balance between a universal and a specific focus. Should institutions focus on the lived experiences of all students to avoid stigmatization? Or should they give particular attention to those in more vulnerable situations, acknowledging the injustice and inequalities they face?

Photo 19: Continuous reflection - teacher/reseracher

C A universal approach risks diluting the specific recognition and support that some students need, while a narrowly targeted approach may feel isolating or stigmatizing. The challenge lies in creating an inclusive ‘and-and’ approach — a framework that recognizes the needs of all students while providing tailored support for those facing systemic disadvantages.

- How do we define and distinguish the different types of lived experience?
- What is the role of experiential knowledge in professional training and institutional culture?
- How do we avoid instrumentalizing the lived experiences of students for institutional goals?

If the goal is to prepare students to learn to value and develop their experiential knowledge as social professionals, they require dedicated training. Integrating experiential knowledge into an institution also demands cultural change. This means building a welcoming team, defining clear roles, and supporting both experts by experience and the wider team. It’s not simply a project — it’s a culture shift that takes time and sustained effort.

Institutions must also ask themselves: Who learns from whom, and to what end?
While there is immense potential for institutions to become more inclusive by learning from lived experiences, this process must be intentional and respectful, ensuring that those experiences are not co-opted or tokenized.

The discussion around lived experience can quickly become overwhelming. It’s easy to get lost in definitions or confused by the various ways to engage with it. For institutions considering this path, it’s essential to stay clear on the purpose:

- What kind of lived experience are you working with?
- Why are you working with it?
- How will it contribute to the growth of individuals and the institution?

Organizing open discussions on these questions can help clarify intentions and ensure that everyone involved shares a common understanding. Most importantly, remain aware of the nuances and avoid flattening lived experience into a single, uniform concept.

4.4. What is the ‘social’ role or responsibility for the faculty/department?

Experimenting with student support formats while working with the lived experiences of students and experts by experience has brought several key discussions to the forefront. Two main approaches dominate the debate:

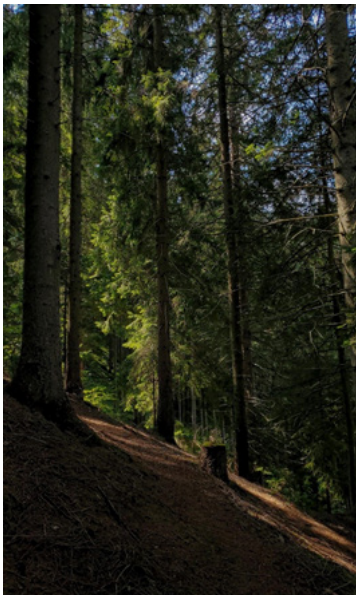

Photo 19: A place where to feel part of something bigger - Vladimíra Osadníková

Photo 21: Inconsistencies, contradictions - teacher/reseracher

4.4.1 The institution's role in professional development and lived experience

What is our responsibility as an educational institution in supporting the professional development of our students regarding lived experience — both their own and that of the people they will work with?
If we acknowledge that we do have a responsibility in this area, it raises important questions. Where and when in the curriculum does this belong? Should working with lived experience be integrated at every stage of the educational process, or should it be optional? Some students might prefer to leave their personal history behind and start fresh in higher education. What happens when sharing lived experience becomes mandatory?

What is a safe environment? Creating a space where students can share without fear of judgment or exploitation is crucial. There's a thin line between respectfully working with lived experiences and unintentionally instrumentalizing them or turning students into unpaid labour in the name of experiential learning.

A recurring concern is that peer-to-peer support or working with lived experience might cross into therapeutic territory. These concerns are often framed by those reluctant to engage with experiential knowledge. The "We are education, not therapy," is then a common refrain.

Both therapy and education are forms of learning — just different ones. While therapy often focuses on personal healing and emotional insight, education emphasizes intellectual and professional development. Yet, the boundaries between the two are not always clear-cut. This raises an important question: how do we differentiate between emotional growth as a natural part of professional development, and emotional work that belongs in a therapeutic context? Recognizing this distinction is essential for creating learning environments that support the whole person, without overstepping the role of education.

4.4.2 Supporting a diverse student body: accessibility, inclusion, and well-being

Several partners notice how there seems to be a growing number of students that experience mental health challenges. What kind of support is necessary for a diverse group of students, especially those living in vulnerable situations? For students facing social or financial vulnerability, succeeding in higher education is significantly more challenging. This raises a host of questions.

Is our curriculum truly inclusive? Do we recognize that some students are more prone to exclusion and marginalization within higher education? What role do we, as institutions, play in reducing these inequalities?

Are our services accessible? Depending on the local context, institutions report different realities. Some acknowledge that there are limited resources compared to students' needs, while others point to an abundance of initiatives. But even in the best-case scenario, services might not always be as accessible or inclusive as intended.

One of the partners addressed that for self-support groups to become a viable tool for responding to student vulnerability, more work would be needed with the whole faculty atmosphere. Even more, there is a strong need to have appropriate spaces.

From a rights-based perspective, the question becomes: How far does an institution's responsibility go in supporting the right to learn? What structures are needed to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have an equal chance to succeed?

These questions challenge us to confront some uncomfortable truths. Do we acknowledge that our departments and faculties are spaces where inequality is being reproduced? If we accept this, the next step is to consider how we can transform our institutions into spaces of greater inclusion, support, and genuine equity.

4.5 Are we ready for unboxing?

A specific discussion arose at UGent, but it resonates with other partners as well. It centres around a recurring question: Are we ready for the unboxing of lived experience? This debate resonates with experiences at HOGENT.

At its core, this debate reflects a deeper concern about whether institutions are fully prepared for the consequences of explicitly working with students lived experiences. One fear is that such engagement may destabilize students emotionally, blurring the line between education and therapy. What happens when students start sharing their mental health struggles or reveal challenging personal circumstances? How far does the responsibility of staff go in such cases?

For many staff members, these concerns are rooted in a feeling of being unequipped. Without clear policies, visions, or adequate training, they worry that working with lived experience might open a 'Pandora's box' — one that cannot easily be closed. This fear is often framed as something dangerous or unpredictable. Yet there is a deeper narrative at play here: a perception of lived experience as primarily negative, equated with problems, vulnerability, and instability. When people express these fears, it is not because they immediately associate the unboxing with positive outcomes like growth or resilience. Instead, there is a focus on the disruptive potential, the added workload, and the uncertainty of what might arise.

Another metaphor that sometimes surfaces is: 'a can of worms.' This framing reveals an implicit stigma — an assumption that lived experience is messy, unpleasant, and perhaps best left contained. Such a perspective overlooks the full spectrum of lived experience. It isn't just about pain or vulnerability; it's also about hope, strength, survival strategies, and hard-earned life lessons.

Within the student support framework of UGent, they approached experiential knowledge as an integral part of who the student is—without assigning it too much weight—either positive or negative. Through the methods they introduced, they aimed to create space for students to acknowledge and integrate their lived experiences into their professional development, rather than feeling the need to set them aside.

However, when they spoke directly with students, a different perspective emerged. They placed strong value on the power of experiential knowledge, so much so that they named their podcast 'The Power of Experience.' They were tired of seeing their experiences framed as a burden and wanted to reclaim the narrative. For them, experiential knowledge isn't something to overcome. It's something to build on.

Ultimately, the central discussion isn't just about readiness or fear. It's about how we perceive, and value lived experience in education and professional development.

- Are we prepared to see lived experience as a rich, multifaceted resource rather than a risk to be managed?
- How do we support staff and students to engage with this complexity without reducing it to simplistic categories of strength or vulnerability?
- What structural changes are needed—policies, training, and a shared vision—to ensure that this engagement is both safe and meaningful?

This debate invites institutions not only to confront potential stigma around lived experience, but also to engage thoughtfully with the legitimate complexities of embedding it within academic contexts. Hesitation is not always rooted in resistance. It can stem from real concerns about how experiential knowledge fits into existing structures of assessment, curriculum design, and professional standards.

Welcoming lived experience in its fullest form requires more than openness; it demands care, attention, and a willingness to rethink how academic environments can hold space for lived experiences without compromising rigor. It's not just about challenging stigma. It's about designing systems that make integration meaningful and sustainable

Photo 22: No signal - teacher/reseracher

5 Conclusion

The SEKEHE project has shown that student support is not simply a service. It is a relational, social, and pedagogical commitment. When we centre lived experience, we move beyond conventional models of support and begin to reimagine higher education as a space of belonging, transformation, and co-creation.

Across diverse formats—from WRAP sessions and webinars to reflective tools and peer-led labs—this handbook has documented how experiential knowledge can reshape how students learn, connect, and grow. These initiatives have revealed that support is not just about solving problems; it's about recognizing students as whole people, with histories, insights, and vulnerabilities that matter.

We've learned that meaningful support requires:

- A clear purpose rooted in inclusion and justice.
- Structures that are flexible, responsive, and co-designed.
- Safe spaces for reflection, dialogue, and emotional processing.
- Recognition of the power dynamics and institutional barriers that shape student experiences.

But perhaps most importantly, we've learned that support must be shared. It must involve students, educators, experts by experience, and institutional leaders working together to build cultures of care and learning. This is not easy work. It requires time, trust, and a willingness to confront discomfort. Yet it is precisely in this discomfort that transformation begins.

As institutions, we must ask ourselves: Are we ready and willing to engage with experiential knowledge? This handbook is not a final word. It is an invitation. To experiment, to adapt, and to build student support systems that honour the diversity of live experiences and a commitment to social justice.

6 Qualitative questionnaire

1. Key incidents in relation to student support

a. Can you describe one or two key incidents that reveal interesting discussions, challenged your framing, opened new questions or ....

2. Wider context // focus on student support

a. What is the vision and policy on student support in your organization?
b. Can you describe what the vision is on student support? Are there policy documents available? Are there references to knowledge by experience or experts by experience?
c. Which challenges did you experience in the development of student support initiatives? How does this relate to wider challenges in your organisation?
d. Who are the stakeholders in your context that determine how student support is being shaped?
e. as this student support format influenced the vision and/or policy of your organisation?
f. If yes, how and what's the outcome?
g. If no, why not and what do you learn from that?
h. Are there any other lessons or discoveries about the wider context you would like to share?

3. Student support format

a. Can you describe why you've 'created' this form of student support or why it is important? Is this supported by your organisational policy or are you pioneering?
b. Can you describe how this form of student support works?
c. Can you describe what you've done concretely in this student support format?
d. How is knowledge by experience embedded in (the development of) this student support format?
e. How did you document and learn from the process of developing of your student support format?
f. Are there any other lessons or discoveries about the student support format you would like to share?

4. Students

a. How did students experience the student support format?
b. How did you document and learn from their experiences?
c. What did you learn from students regarding the student support format?

5. Experts by experience

a. How did experts by experience the student support format?
b. How did you document and learn from their experiences?
c. What did you learn from experts by experience regarding the student support format?

6. Other staff members

a. How did other staff members experience the student support format?
b. How did you document and learn from their experiences?
c. What did you learn from other staff members regarding the student support format?

7. Key elements

a. Can you synthesise or summarise the content of the previous chapters into key elements? Try to come to the 'essence', central lessons or discoveries.
b. Wider context // focus on student support
c. What are key elements that shape the vision on student support? What would you want to share with others on your experienced challenges and insights?
d. Student support formats
e. What would you want to share with others that want to start building 'new' formats of student
f. What do you learn from the experiences from students?
g. What do you learn from the experiences from experts by experience?
h. What do you learn from the experiences from other staff members?

8. Abstract Student Support Format

a) Can you describe in max. one page the why, how and what of your student support format?

7 List of Images

SEHEKE
Student support
Handbook part 3/4

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