ERASMUS+
SEKEHE:
Key Findings from Focus Groups on Vulnerability and Inclusion in Higher Education

UNIMIB TEAM

Milan Meeting, 25-26 September 2024

Main objective…

…to **explore** the **meanings** and **perspectives on vulnerability and inclusion/accessibility**, specifically within the **university** context.

The main guiding questions of the focus groups (FGs)…

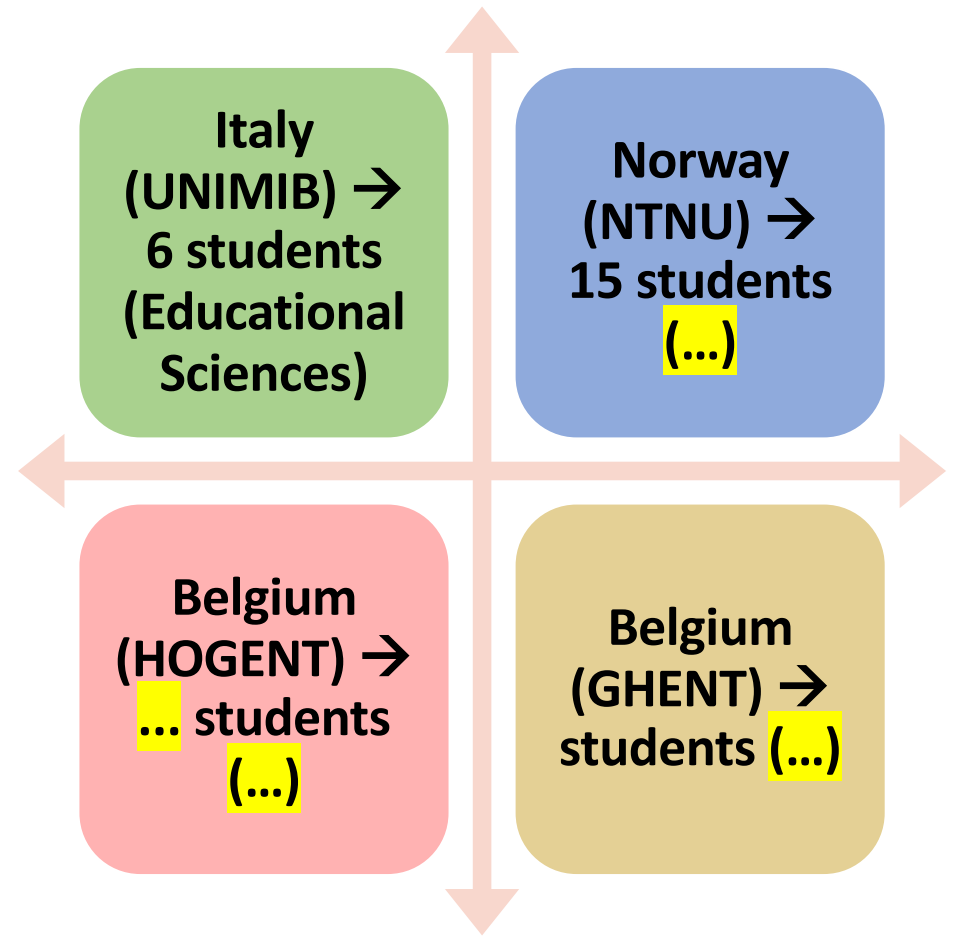**What** does **vulnerability mean** to you?

Thinking about your university context, **what experiences of vulnerability** do you think could **most significantly influence the access and inclusion of students** in the university?

Thinking about your university context, **where** do you believe students can **feel their vulnerability welcomed**?

In your opinion, **how** can the **student population contribute to supporting the vulnerabilities** of students in the university?

Some findings from the focus groups, using Thematic Analysis:

Italy (UNIMIB) → 6 students (Educational Sciences)

Norway (NTNU) → 15 students (...)

Belgium (HOGENT) → ... students (...)

Belgium (GHENT) → students (...)

Main Themes

1. **Vulnerability Related to Personal, Social, and Contextual Aspects**

2. **University-Related Vulnerability**

3. **Inclusion and Accessibility**

4. **Responses to Students' Vulnerability**

1. Vulnerability Related to Personal, Social, and Contextual Aspects

Italy (UNIMIB):

- **Personal fragility** and **sensitivity**, which emerge in response to **new or familiar contexts and relationships**, especially when lacking the means to navigate them.

Norway (NTNU):

- **Difficulty adap**ting to **new academic environments**, leading to social isolation.

Belgium (HOGENT):

- **Expectations** and **pressures** from **family** and **social context** affecting self-esteem and growth opportunities.

Belgium (GHENT):

- **Loss** of **protective factors**, often triggered by stimuli that expose hidden inner weaknesses, leading to a sense of loneliness.

2. University-Related Vulnerability

Italy (UNIMIB):

- **Struggles** with **academic and organizational dynamics** (e.g., deadline management, navigating information/services, critical interactions with faculty and peers).

Norway (NTNU):

- **Academic pressure**, **information access issues**, and **stress from managing workload**. **Insufficient institutional support** for these challenges.

Belgium (HOGENT):

- **Difficulties navigating formal support services**. **Need to build personal support systems** due to lack of structured community, leading to increased isolation.

Belgium (GHENT):

- Institutional support exists, such as psychological, but **students tend to rely more on friends**. **Limited space for expressing vulnerabilities** in academic settings.

3. Inclusion and Accessibility

Italy (UNIMIB):

- **Lack of awareness and reflection on inclusivity** for people with disabilities. **Barriers** include **physical, economic, and bureaucratic** challenges.

Norway (NTNU):

- **Need for more inclusive environments** and alternative social spaces for greater integration.

Belgium (HOGENT):

- **Accessibility issues tied to economic and social factors**. **Need for** more **welcoming environments**.

Belgium (GHENT):

- **Vulnerabilities discourage potential students** from pursuing higher education. **Barriers** are both **external** (faced from an early age) and **internal university barriers** (physical, cognitive, and relational).

4. Responses to Students' Vulnerability

Italy (UNIMIB):

- Emphasis on **peer-to-peer support and** creating **a welcoming university community**.

Norway (NTNU):

- Importance of **emotional connections with faculty** and **increased institutional engagement during difficult times**.

Belgium (HOGENT):

- Request for **greater institutional involvement** in **creating safe spaces** and **building a supportive community**.

Belgium (GHENT):

Desire for **more safe spaces to openly express vulnerabilities**. Students call for **better integration of experiential knowledge** earlier in their education.

Similarities Between Focus Groups (1)

- **Social Isolation:**

Norway (NTNU), Belgium (HOGENT), Belgium (GHENT): In all three contexts, **students report feeling isolated. Lack of institutional support for building social networks**. HOGENT cites WRAP project as a positive example, but rare, example.

- **Inclusion and Disability/Diversity:**

Italy (UNIMIB), Norway (NTNU), Belgium (HOGENT): All contexts emphasize **insufficient reflection and concrete actions on diversity and inclusion** of people with disabilities.

Similarities Between Focus Groups (2)

- **University Access and Social Stigma:**

Belgium (HOGENT) and Belgium (GHENT): In both contexts, **social stigma plays a significant role in limiting access to higher education**. Vulnerabilities related to **socio-economic backgrounds**, **mental health**, and **physical or cognitive challenges** discourage students from pursuing university studies.

- **Economic barriers**

Italy (UNIMIB) and Belgium (HOGENT): Both countries face **significant economic barriers** that **limit access to higher education**.

- **Vulnerability as Stigma but also Growth:**

Italy (UNIMIB) and Belgium (GHENT): Vulnerability is stigmatized, pressuring individuals to present themselves as strong. However, **it is also viewed as a tool for personal and relational growth**, especially through experiential knowledge.

Context-Specific Issues

Italy (UNIMIB):

- **Social Recognition: Vulnerability** is **linked to** the social recognition of their **academic field** (Education Sciences).

Norway (NTNU):

- **Alcohol-Free Socialization:** Desire for **social activities not centered around alcohol** to create more inclusive spaces.

Belgium (HOGENT):

- **Waterfall System and Social Media Pressure:** The educational system **("waterfall system") creates barriers for students from non-academic backgrounds**. Social media promotes **unrealistic expectations** and **immediate success**, exacerbating vulnerability.

Belgium (GHENT):

- Limited focus on **experiential knowledge**, which students believe should be better **integrated to help address vulnerabilities**. The emphasis is currently on professionalism.

Some conclusions…

- **Similarities** regarding social isolation / Inclusion and diversity / University access and social stigma / Economic barriers / Vulnerability both as stigma both as growth
- **Context-specific issues** that characterize the reflection on vulnerability in every specific FG.