

FROM “VULNERABLE GROUPS” TO SITUATIONAL VULNERABILITIES: EMERGING CATEGORIES AND PARTICIPATION BARRIERS IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES

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Abstract

European higher education internationalisation has been reshaped by European University Alliances, which expand students' access to joint curricula, blended mobility, virtual courses, and collaborative projects. While these formats aim to democratise international experience and foster transversal competences, they also shift participation conditions: students must navigate multiple institutional contexts, administrative systems, and pedagogical norms simultaneously. In this context, vulnerability cannot be treated only as a fixed attribute of predefined groups but must also be understood through the concrete conditions of participation in alliance-level activities. This paper proposes a conceptual framework of “new vulnerabilities” in university alliances, drawing on documentation and mixed-method evidence from eBelong2, a three-year Erasmus+ project on inclusive culture change and sustainable inclusion in the CIVIS alliance, involving five universities from Bucharest, Madrid, Aix-Marseille, Athens, and Tübingen.

Keywords: European University Alliances; CIVIS; situational vulnerability; inclusion; belonging; eBelong2; internationalisation.

1 INTRODUCTION

European higher education has entered a new phase of integration with the consolidation of European University Alliances [1], [2], [3]. Through joint curricula, blended and short-term mobility, virtual classrooms, and collaborative projects, students are increasingly engaged in academic activities that transcend the boundaries of any single institution [1], [2], [4]. As a result, inclusion and vulnerability are no longer shaped solely by conditions within a single university but by how effectively students can access, understand, and participate in alliance-level opportunities, where they must navigate multiple institutional contexts, administrative systems, and informal academic norms simultaneously [2], [4].

This shift raises a central question: do existing frameworks for understanding student vulnerability adequately capture the kinds of exposure that arise within alliance-level participation? Traditional categorisations, grounded in fixed demographic or socio-economic attributes, remain indispensable, yet they tend to underplay the situational, relational, and temporal dimensions of vulnerability that emerge when students operate across institutional borders [5], [6].

Vulnerability in this context cannot be treated only as a property of predefined groups; it must also be understood through the concrete conditions of participation that alliances create [2], [6]. This paper proposes a conceptual framework of “new vulnerabilities” in university alliances, drawing on documentation from eBelong2, a three-year Erasmus+ project on inclusive culture change and sustainable inclusion within the CIVIS alliance, involving the University of Bucharest, the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Aix-Marseille Université, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen. Our research question is: what situational forms of vulnerability do alliance-level participation conditions produce that are not fully captured by traditional vulnerable-group categories?

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 A rights-based understanding of vulnerability

UNESCO [7] conceptualises vulnerability within a human-rights and educational-inequality framework, emphasising that “*all people have the right to non-discrimination and equality in education.*” Vulnerable learners are described as those most likely to suffer educational inequalities and face discrimination, including individuals who have suffered prolonged discrimination on the basis of identity, characteristics, or circumstance. A defining feature of marginalisation is that those affected are highly likely to experience multiple, compound, or intersectional forms of discrimination [7, p. 86]. This rights-based framing anchors vulnerability in patterns of structural disadvantage [5], [6] and provides a normative horizon — equality in and through education — against which inclusion practices can be assessed. At the same time, it is primarily oriented toward identifying who is vulnerable via group-based categories, an orientation that needs supplementing with attention to how vulnerability is produced through participation conditions themselves [2], [4], [6].

2.2 From vulnerable groups to situational vulnerability

Recent scholarship reframes vulnerability as dynamic, relational, and situational rather than solely a stable property of individuals or groups [8], [9] — a condition emerging from the interplay between students and institutional, infrastructural, and temporal contexts [2], [4], [6]. The literature on belonging similarly suggests that inclusion cannot be reduced to formal access but depends on meaningful membership in academic communities [10], [11], while internationalisation research shows how language regimes, administrative procedures, and informal information infrastructures shape unequal participation [2], [4].

European University Alliances intensify these dynamics: students must operate across institutional rhythms and norms simultaneously, often without commensurate scaffolding [1], [2]. Vulnerability in alliances is therefore best understood as relational exposure to participation conditions — institutional rhythms, administrative procedures, and informal infrastructures of information and support [6]. Our analysis combines two lenses: a rights-based attention to structurally disadvantaged groups and intersectionality [12], and a situational lens asking how alliance-level conditions generate exposures not coinciding with national-level vulnerability categories [5].

3 METHODOLOGY

This paper is conceptual in character. Rather than reporting new primary data, it develops a framework for understanding emergent forms of vulnerability in European University Alliances on the basis of project documentation. The empirical anchor is the eBelong2 project, whose work programme combined four streams of evidence: a mapping of institutional capacities for student inclusion across partner universities; the development of a shared conceptual framework and common analytical criteria, with adapted and translated research instruments; mixed-method data collection (surveys and focus groups) with students from vulnerable categories and students engaged in CIVIS and Erasmus activities; and workshops on teamwork and collaboration, together with consortium reports on inclusion, diversity, motivation, stress, and collaboration. The present paper does not re-analyse the primary data but draws on the consortium’s reports, instruments, and synthesised findings as documentary material for conceptual development.

The analytical strategy was iterative. An initial reading of consortium documents surfaced recurrent inclusion challenges that did not map cleanly onto traditional vulnerable-group categories; these were re-examined through theoretical resources on situational and relational vulnerability, intersectionality, and belonging, allowing provisional categories to emerge. The categories were then tested against further consortium material — survey-based reports, focus-group accounts in deliverables, workshop outputs — and refined through cross-partner discussion. Two limitations should be acknowledged. First, because the analysis works from documentation rather than primary data, the typology is a conceptual map for inclusion design, not a basis for prevalence claims. Second, the framework is shaped by the institutional configuration of CIVIS; transferability to other alliances remains an open empirical question.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Traditional vulnerable categories: a baseline

The initial mapping confirmed the relevance of well-established vulnerable-group categories across partner institutions, while revealing significant variation in how they are recognised and supported. Building on partner contributions, the project shifted from “standard” definitions of vulnerability to more nuanced “aspects of inclusion” grounded in academic practices across all partners. The categories identified include first-generation students; non-traditional students (mature and working students); students with disabilities, including hidden disabilities such as chronic illness or mental health challenges; neurodivergent students; socio-economically disadvantaged students from rural or low-income backgrounds; international and mobile students, including refugees and short-term Erasmus+ exchange students struggling with “temporary belonging”; and a residual category of structural/institutional vulnerability produced by institutional arrangements rather than individual characteristics. Table 1 summarises this baseline by primary barrier and reporting strand. These long-standing forms of disadvantage continue to shape participation in alliance activities, often intersecting with and intensifying newer situational vulnerabilities.

Table 1. Baseline categories of vulnerable students in eBelong2.

Category	Primary barrier
First-generation students	Academic capital
Refugee / migrant students	Legal / cultural integration
Working students	Time poverty
Neurodivergent students	Social interaction / anxiety
Rural / low-income students	Digital / economic divide

4.2 Three conceptual shifts

Three conceptual shifts emerged across the data streams. They reorient how vulnerability is conceptualised in alliance contexts and underpin the typology below.

4.2.1 From static to dynamic vulnerability

Vulnerability in alliance contexts often appeared as situational, temporal, and reversible rather than as a stable property. Students who would not be considered vulnerable in their home institution could become exposed during specific transitions — onboarding into a partner institution, a short-term mobility, the early weeks of a virtual classroom — and then move out of that exposed position. “Temporary belonging” in short-term exchange formats is the clearest example.

4.2.2 From individual deficit to relational exposure

Vulnerability emerged less as a deficit located “inside” the student than as a condition produced relationally by participation arrangements: misaligned calendars, opaque procedures, fragmented information channels, and uneven institutional capacity to support international engagement. The same student can be supported in one configuration and exposed in another.

4.2.3 From access to belonging

Inclusion cannot be reduced to formal access. Students differentiated between being formally enrolled in an alliance activity and feeling like a meaningful participant in the academic community around it. Inclusion in alliances therefore needs to be assessed not only at the threshold of access but along the longer arc of belonging.

4.3 A typology of emergent vulnerabilities

Four families of emergent vulnerabilities were identified on the basis of these shifts (Table 2). The categories are not mutually exclusive: intersections were frequent, and a single student could move in and out of several over the course of an alliance activity.

Table 2. Typology of emergent vulnerabilities in European University Alliances.

<i>Family</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Primary barrier to alliance participation</i>
Intersectional	Intersectional / double-burden vulnerability	Vulnerability arising from the cumulative effect of belonging to two or more vulnerable categories.	Cumulative disadvantage and fragmented institutional support across overlapping needs.
Access	Informational vulnerability	Limited, uneven, or overwhelming access to information and tacit knowledge needed to navigate academic environments.	Unequal access to informal channels and reliance on implicit knowledge that is not formally documented.
	Digital vulnerability	Limited digital skills, inadequate access to technology, or difficulty navigating digital learning environments.	Reduced participation in online and blended international activities; digital invisibility in transnational teams.
	Intercultural and linguistic vulnerability	Linguistic, cultural, and academic differences that hinder participation and integration.	Lower confidence in cross-border discussions; selective self-exclusion from mobility opportunities.
Temporal & life-course	Temporal / transitional vulnerability	Time-bound vulnerability during critical transition phases (entry, mobility, exam periods).	Misalignment between alliance calendars and students' transitions; fragile early belonging.
	Time-poverty vulnerability	Severe constraints on available time due to work, caregiving, or legal obligations.	Incompatibility between life constraints and the rhythms of alliance activities.
Structural & institutional	Field-restricted limitations	Disciplinary structures and curricular requirements that limit participation in mobility and blended formats.	Curricular rigidity and reliance on physical presence in practice-based fields.
	Administrative vulnerability	Complex, slow, or opaque administrative procedures conditioning access to alliance opportunities.	Administrative complexity, lack of cross-institutional coordination, and uneven support structures.
	Institutional positioning vulnerability	Vulnerability linked to an institution's structural position within higher education systems and alliances.	Unequal institutional capacity to support internationalisation; asymmetries in visibility and resources.

4.3.1 Intersectional vulnerabilities

Intersectional or double-burden vulnerabilities arise from the cumulative effect of belonging to two or more vulnerable categories — for example, first-generation students who are also refugees, or working students living with a chronic condition. Indicators include multiple support needs, higher reported stress, and a stronger sense of being “out of place” across several dimensions. In alliance contexts, this translates into reduced capacity to engage in international activities and a higher likelihood of withdrawal. Support structures that address each dimension separately tend to fragment, leaving intersectional students with the weakest scaffolding.

4.3.2 Informational and digital vulnerabilities

Access vulnerabilities concern the conditions governing entry into and orientation within alliance activities. Informational vulnerability arises from limited, uneven, or overwhelming access to information and tacit knowledge — how to apply, whom to contact, how processes “really” work, how to read informal academic norms. The result is reduced confidence, perceptions of being “out of place,” missed applications, and selective self-exclusion. Digital vulnerability emerges from limited digital skills, unstable internet, restricted device availability, and difficulty navigating learning management systems; in formats that depend on virtual mobility, blended courses, and digital teamwork, it produces reduced visibility in international teams and a weaker form of digital belonging. Closely related is intercultural and linguistic vulnerability, arising from non-native instruction languages and difficulty reading implicit cultural norms, which leads to communication avoidance and reliance on co-national networks.

4.3.3 *Temporal and life-course vulnerabilities*

Temporal vulnerabilities concern the alignment between alliance calendars and students' lives. Transitional vulnerability appears at critical transition phases — entry into a new institutional context, the early weeks of a mobility, an unfamiliar virtual classroom — and is exacerbated when alliance activities clash with exam periods, thesis work, or major life events, producing postponed or forgone engagement. Time-poverty vulnerability captures the related but distinct condition of severe time constraints from work, family responsibilities, or legal obligations. For these students, alliance activities become incompatible with life rhythms, leading to selective non-participation.

4.3.4 *Structural and institutional vulnerabilities*

Structural and institutional vulnerabilities concern how alliance participation is shaped by curricular and administrative architectures. Field-restricted limitations affect students in disciplines that rely on physical presence — laboratories, clinical training, fieldwork — or follow rigid nationally regulated curricula, leaving little room for short-term mobility. Administrative vulnerability arises from complex or opaque procedures: visa processes, credit recognition, insurance requirements, and inconsistent funding rules produce frustration and abandoned applications. Institutional positioning vulnerability concerns the structural position of an institution within higher education systems and alliances; students at smaller, less visible, or geographically peripheral universities face restricted access to partnerships and may perceive themselves as “second-tier” participants.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSION DESIGN

European University Alliances expand the opportunities available to students but also reconfigure the conditions under which inclusion is achieved. Recent research on the European Universities initiative shows that alliance formation has been shaped by pre-existing status hierarchies and uneven institutional capacities across European higher education systems [5], [2], with concrete consequences for how equitably participation opportunities are distributed. Against this background, vulnerability in alliance contexts cannot be captured solely through traditional vulnerable-group categories; consistent with broader theoretical moves [9], [8], [13], it is also produced situationally, through the participation conditions that alliances themselves create. The four-family typology proposed here — intersectional, informational and digital, temporal and life-course, structural and institutional — offers a conceptual map for these emergent exposures alongside the long-standing disadvantages documented in research on socio-economic inequalities in mobility uptake [14], [15].

Four implications follow. First, reducing informational asymmetries requires making tacit knowledge explicit through accessible procedural guides, transparent application pathways, and structured peer-to-peer channels — addressing the unequal distribution of cultural capital that disadvantages first-generation and working-class students [16], [17]. Second, strengthening digital inclusion involves both infrastructural support and pedagogical design that makes virtual and blended formats genuinely participatory rather than nominally accessible; the digital divide literature shows that inclusion extends beyond access to skills and to the unequal capacity to derive educational benefit from digital participation [18], [19], [20], [21], with social-class disparities evident in distance and blended learning [22]. Third, improving timing and flexibility means aligning alliance calendars with students' lives through modularity, multiple entry points, and recognition of non-linear trajectories — the flexible learning pathways agenda [23], [7], reinforced by the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy 2021–2027 [24]. Fourth, supporting less resourced partners is a precondition for alliance-level equity: without targeted investment in international offices and administrative coordination, institutional positioning vulnerability will reproduce itself, echoing findings that the EUI risks reinforcing existing stratification [6], [5].

Inclusion in alliances must therefore be designed into participation conditions rather than treated as an add-on to access. This reframing extends the long-standing argument that retention and success depend on belonging rather than enrolment [25], [11], [10], and resonates with recent work on the “mobility capsule” documenting the fragility of belonging in short-term transnational programmes [26]. To fulfil their equity promise, European University Alliances must move from offering access to engineering the relational, temporal, and institutional conditions under which meaningful belonging becomes possible.

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