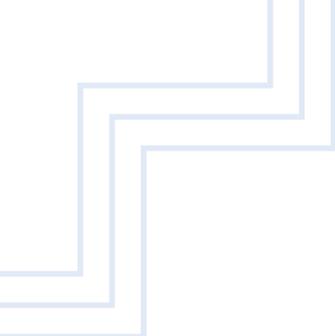


STUDENT HEALTH MEETINGS IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A guide for students,
higher education institutions
and student healthcare



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FINNISH STUDENT HEALTH SERVICE



Student health meetings in institutions of higher education

A guide for students, higher education institutions and student healthcare

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1 Improving study ability together

The ability to study concerns all students. Although students themselves are primarily responsible for maintaining and monitoring their own ability to study, they can turn to student healthcare services and services provided by their higher education institution for help if they need to. If a student's ability to study has become impaired due to health reasons, it's a good idea for the student, the higher education institution and FSHS representatives to discuss effective supportive measures together. This guide explains the procedures related to student health meetings to enable all parties to work together as smoothly as possible.

The ability to study and the factors that affect it should be regularly discussed within study communities. At the same time, when discussing an individual's ability to study the student's privacy must be respected. To ensure early stage support for their ability to study, students need to have the opportunity to discuss their studies and their ability to study within their study community, with their fellow students, teaching staff or other staff in the educational institution, and naturally also with FSHS representatives. It is therefore important to promote a culture of dialogue in study communities and student healthcare concerning students' ability to study.

Illness or injury can't always be prevented, but measures can be taken to mitigate the effect on a student's ability to study. Although recovering from an illness doesn't automatically mean the student's ability to study has been fully restored, the student may still be able to make good progress with their studies. We know from the world of employment that the longer a person has been on sick leave, the more difficult it is to return to work. The same most likely applies to students. That's why it's important to prepare for the student's resumption of studies and begin planning the necessary supportive measures ahead of time.

Even small changes to teaching arrangements or other kinds of supportive measures can improve a student's ability to study. It's important that the student, the higher education institution and student healthcare work together to determine the student's ability to continue studying despite illness or injury. A simple sympathetic chat, including listening to the student's own thoughts about their ability to study and what things are affecting it, can make a positive contribution. Holding student health meetings at an early stage may also prevent studies from being interrupted or prolonged.

*In a student health meeting,
it is the responsibility
of the three parties to find
common goals and solutions
to combine the student's health
and well-being with studying
in the best way possible.*

When organising student health meetings, legislation governing student healthcare, the status and rights of patients, and the protection of privacy have to be taken into consideration. The secrecy obligations governing student healthcare staff also apply during student health meetings. In fact, student health meetings primarily discuss studying and the ability to study, not the student's health as such. All participants are bound by confidentiality regarding discussions in the meetings.

2 The ability to study

2.1 What is the ability to study?

A student's ability to study is a combination of several different mutually interacting factors. Personal resources, good study skills, high-quality teaching and a supportive study environment have a significant positive impact on study progress. Strengths in one or more areas may help the student maintain their ability to study even if they're experiencing problems in another area. In other words, different factors can balance each other out. For instance, time management skills and support for studies can help students progress when their physical or psychological functional capacity has become impaired.

A student's ability to progress in their studies can be improved by addressing all the different aspects of the ability to study and the factors involved. This is the responsibility of all those in the study environment, including student healthcare, the educational institution and student organisations. The model shows each actor's role. It promotes collaboration between the actors and creates opportunities for supporting and promoting students' ability to progress in their studies. It can also be used when looking into an individual student's problems with their ability to study. The model provides a framework for discussion in student health meetings.

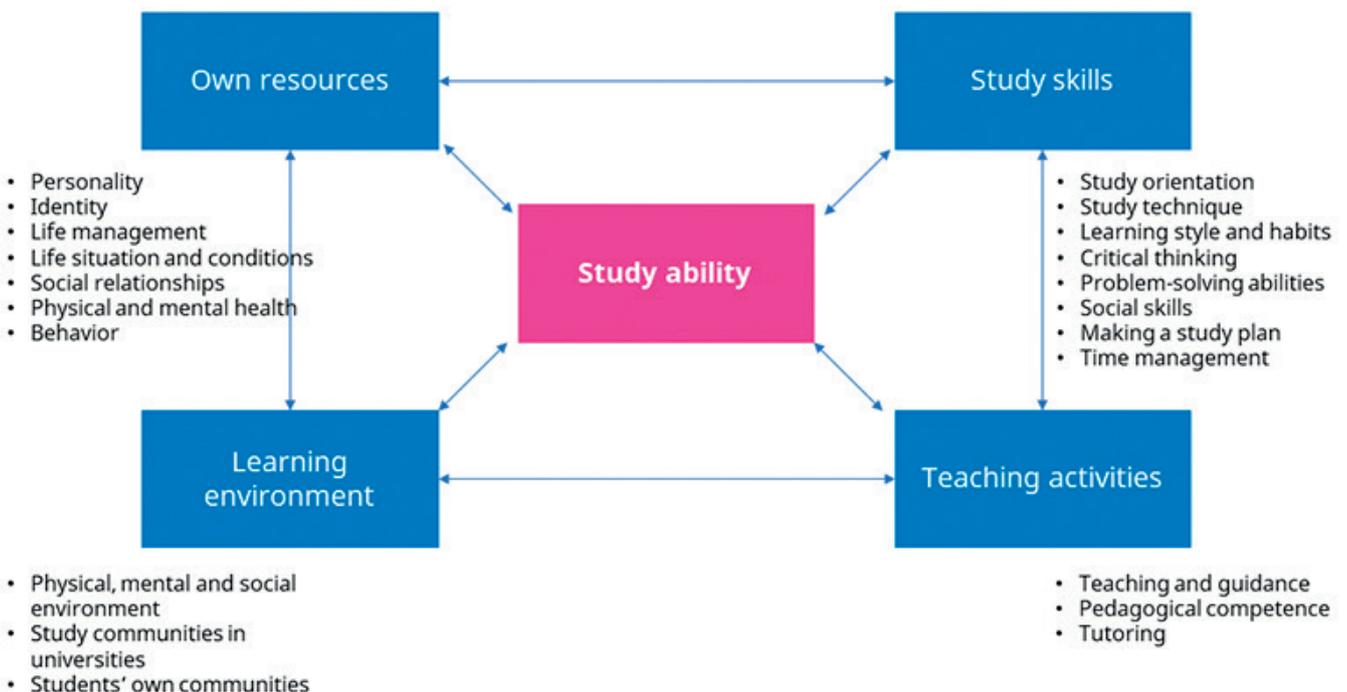


Figure 1. The study ability model

This model for the ability to study portrays the different factors that affect a student's ability to study and the interactions between them. It's an aid to understanding the complexity of study problems and the role of different actors in promoting students' well-being. (Kunttu 2005)

2.2 The ability to study does not only depend on health factors

Personal resources

“In the study ability model, personal resources refer to the student’s personality, life situation, social relationships, health and habits that affect their health. These resources are added to, used and renewed throughout our lives through our individual experiences, physical and psychosocial environment and genes.” (Kristiina Kunttu, Opiskeluterveydenhuollon opas [‘A guide for student healthcare’] 2021.)

Although the majority of students consider their health to be good, there are plenty of signs to the contrary. Depression, anxiety, nervousness, difficulty concentrating and sleep disorders are among the most common mental health problems, and in a significant number of cases, it is mental health problems that adversely affect ability to study. However, physical illnesses and injuries can also affect a student’s ability to study to different degrees. A sense of life management, faith in one’s own capacity and support from friends or family are important in promoting well-being and study progress.

Study skills

Study skills include discovering one’s own learning style and understanding oneself and one’s own knowledge and skills. Problem-solving skills and critical thinking are also necessary for studying, as are communication skills, such as those needed for participating in discussions, group work and oral presentations. A personal study plan and paying attention to time management also promote study progress. Technical and creative study skills include information retrieval and data processing skills, such as studying for an exam, creating presentations, taking lecture notes and using information sources.

Inadequate study skills directly impair not just study progress but also the student’s perception of themselves as a learner. Students

may feel their results don’t reflect their hard work, and may feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work. Higher education requires a different set of study skills than secondary education does. This is why it may be necessary for the student to examine their study skills upon entering higher education and, if necessary, to seek help from a study psychologist or other professional to improve these skills. Institutions of higher education may also arrange classes to help strengthen specific study skills. Study skills are skills just like riding a bike: there’s always room for improvement.

THE ABILITY TO STUDY IS INFLUENCED BY

- Personal resources
- Study skills
- Teaching and counselling
- The study environment

Teaching and counselling

Competent teaching and adequate study counselling in educational institutions support students’ ability to study. Well-planned teaching arrangements can also motivate and inspire students who are uncertain about their field of study. Students also benefit from good feedback mechanisms and the opportunity to interact with teaching staff, as well as tutoring and help integrating into the study environment. Institutions of higher education also have ways to support students whose ability to study is impaired. The special teaching arrangements and other support measures available vary from one institution to another.

The study environment

“A study environment includes the physical, psychological and social study environments. It consists of different learning environments, physical studying conditions, teaching aids, break rooms and the way studies are organised. The interactions between and among staff and students, the study atmosphere and the student

community activities in the study community are also part of a study environment.” (Kristiina Kunttu, Opiskeluterveydenhuollon opas 2021.)

A sense of togetherness in the study environment, being part of social circles, and encouraging a community spirit all promote students’ ability to study. The values and culture, such as traditions, customs and structures, within an educational institution also play a background role. However, studying independently and replacing face-to-face lessons with remote studies make it more challenging to build study communities.

2.3 Measuring the ability to study

As the ability to study is a combination of many different factors, there is no one index that measures ability to study as a whole. However, ability to study can be assessed from various different angles. The best overall assessment results from a combination of different assessments.

Self-evaluation by the student

A self-evaluation by the student is a good way to begin the assessment of study ability. To get an initial idea of a self-evaluation, the following two-question study ability index can be used:

1. Let’s assume that at its best, your ability to study has been 10 out of 10. How would you rate it now on a scale of 0 to 10? (0 = no ability to study, 10 = maximum ability to study)
2. Do you think you’ll be healthy enough to study for your current degree a year from now?

The following questions, or similar, can be used to continue the assessment::

- You rated your current ability to study at 7. Why that number? Why 7 and not 5? What would have to happen for your evaluation to be 8?
- You said you didn’t think you’d be healthy enough to study for your current degree a

year from now. How likely (0 to 100%) do you think it is that you’d be able to study a year from now? What made you say 30% and not 0%? What would make the likelihood rise to 50%? What about 70%?

- What are you willing to do to improve your ability to study? What kind of support would improve your ability to study?

The answers to these questions will shed light on the student’s own opinion of their ability to study and their self efficacy, the factors influencing them, and the student’s preparedness to improve their ability to study.

MEASURING THE ABILITY TO STUDY

- Self-evaluation by the student
- Study credits as an indicator of ability to study
- Assessing ability to study in student healthcare

Study credits as an indicator of ability to study

In higher education institutions, study progress is the primary indicator of a student’s ability to study. The students themselves are primarily responsible for completing their studies according to their study plan, but study progress can also be supported by the educational institution checking study progress at predetermined intervals. This allows institutions to step in at an early stage if a student isn’t making progress. The student’s life situation and well-being can then be examined together, and the need for any supportive measures can be evaluated.

Kela requires that higher education students receiving financial aid complete at least 5 study credits (“opintopiste”) on average for each month of aid and at least 20 credits during each academic year. This means that a student present for both the autumn and spring terms

should complete a total of 45 credits in order to receive financial aid. It's important to note, however, that completing a higher education degree within the target schedule requires an average of 60 credits per year. It's then possible to evaluate a student's ability to study on the basis of completed credits, with the assumption that completing less than 20 study credits in a term may indicate impaired ability to study. All higher education institutions should have a procedure in place for the early recognition of slow study progress.

Kela checks students' study progress in October every year. This check applies to the preceding academic year (1 August to 31 July) and the entire duration of the student's higher education studies. Credits earned in August of the same year are not taken into account until the next time study progress is monitored. If the student hasn't made satisfactory progress, Kela will send them a request for information, to which they must reply explaining the reasons for their slow progress. If progress was slow due to an acceptable reason, the student may continue to receive financial aid.

Assessing ability to study in student healthcare

At the FSHS, ability to study can be assessed in several ways. One assessment to include ability to study is the MT-toimintakykymittari ('The mental health functional ability index'), a simple assessment tool designed to measure functional disability caused by mental health disorders. For this index, a healthcare professional assesses the student's functional ability in four areas of life – free time, studies, social relationships and personal care – on a 4 point scale based on an interview. The assessment of "studies" is an assessment of the student's ability to study by a healthcare professional.

The Study Burnout Inventory (SBI 9, Opiskelu-uupumusmittari) is a concise and reliable method for recognising study burnout in higher education students. It evaluates three different dimensions of study burnout: 1) extreme burnout-grade fatigue (exhaustion), 2) a cynical and negative attitude to studying, and 3) feelings of inadequacy with regard to studies. The inventory assesses these three factors separately and the risk of study burnout as a whole. It's easy to use and can be used as a quick and reliable way to recognise burnout in higher education students.

3 Student health meetings

3.1 Purpose

The purpose of a student health meeting is to find ways to improve the student's ability to study and to enable them to study. This is done by assessing the situation and the options available together from different angles.

- It's important that the meetings determine in what way the ability to study is impaired, where in the student's studies in particular the impairment manifests itself, and what factors influence their ability to study.
- The goal can also be to find ways for the student to be able to continue or return to studying without further risk to their ability to study or health.
- A student health meeting should always be solution-oriented, with no blame placed on the student or others involved.

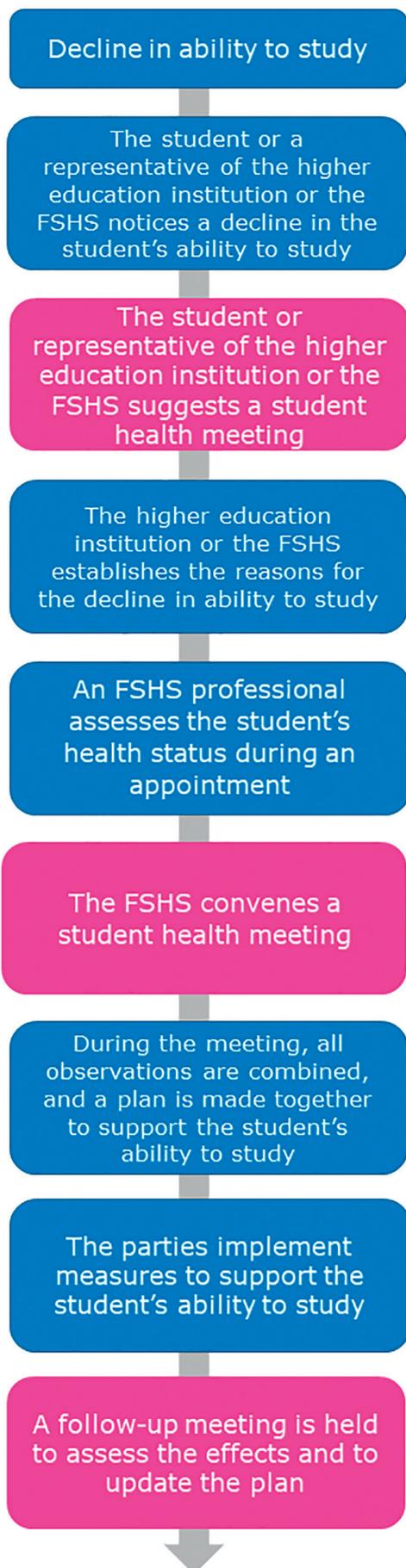


Figure 2. The student health meeting process.

3.2 When is a meeting needed?

Absences due to illness

- A student health meeting is usually necessary after a sick leave of over two months, or during such leave if the student does a small amount of studying despite their sick leave.
- The meeting should be held before the two-month mark if it's known at an early stage that recovering from illness will take more than two months. This will allow time for an appropriate individual study plan to be made for the student, including the necessary supportive measures.
- Having a student health meeting is also justified if the student isn't officially on sick leave but hasn't been able to study due to illness.
- A student needing a certificate from student healthcare when Kela is considering recovery of financial aid is also indicative of the need for a student health meeting.

Prolongation of studies

- A student health meeting is also useful when a student hasn't been able to graduate within the target schedule for health reasons
 - if the student has exceeded their target time and their right to study is set to expire before they'd be able to complete their studies
 - if the student needs to submit a certificate to their institution of higher education to extend their right to study.

Changes in the student's behaviour or ability to study

- A student health meeting may be helpful if there are problems with changes to the student's behaviour or ability to study, recurrent absences through sickness or the known or suspected use of intoxicants.

Assessment of unsuitability for study as set out in SORA legislation

- An assessment of unsuitability for study requested by an institution of higher education normally includes one or two student health meetings. The first meeting should take place when the institution is considering requiring a medical statement to determine whether the student fulfils the health requirements set for their field of study. The second meeting should be held once the assessment has been completed.
- A student health meeting may also become necessary after the drug testing prescribed in SORA legislation.
- A treatment referral meeting, as mentioned in the educational institution's substance abuse prevention programme, can also be considered a student health meeting.

3.3 Who can request a meeting?

The request to hold a student health meeting can be made by the student, student healthcare staff or a representative of the teaching staff, student welfare services or administration of the higher education institution concerned.

The student

- can request a meeting by talking to teaching staff or a representative of the administrative staff or student welfare services (such as a study psychologist, social worker, teacher, teacher tutor or study counsellor) in their educational institution
- can also request a meeting during a student healthcare appointment or by making an appointment specifically to discuss the need for a student health meeting.

The student may notice that a meeting is needed if, for instance, they are failing to progress according to plan, have a large number of uncompleted courses, fail to complete their studies in time or experience a considerable drop in grades. Naturally, a known illness and its effect on ability to study are valid reasons for requesting a student health meeting.

The institution of higher education

The thought of holding a student health meeting may arise when staff at the higher education institution notice situations such as

- slow study progress (number of completed credits below target)
- a drop in grades
- changes in the student's behaviour, or a large number of absences.

It's important for the institution to discuss the reasons for the impaired ability to study with the student before arranging a student health meeting as the reasons behind the slow study progress may be self-explanatory and unrelated to health and ability to study, examples being family leave or working while studying. If, however, the institution considers the impaired ability to study is related to health issues, the student should be instructed to make an appointment with the public health nurse of their FSHS healthcare team.

Student healthcare

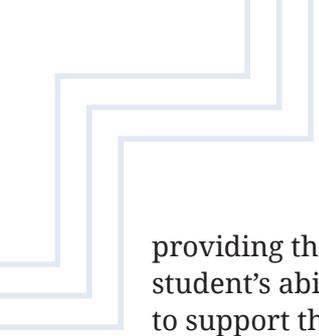
Any healthcare professional involved in the student's care within the student healthcare system, including a public health nurse, psychiatric nurse, physiotherapist, general practitioner, psychologist or psychiatrist, can request a student health meeting.

- A meeting should be requested when, during a treatment contact, a student healthcare professional notices a decline in a student's ability to study.
- In such cases, the professional should suggest arranging a student health meeting for the student and should, provided that the student consents, convene the meeting.

3.4 The meeting procedure

A student health meeting can comprise just a single meeting, although usually several meetings are held as part of the process of supporting a student's ability to study.

The first student health meeting begins with an assessment of the situation, with all parties



providing their observations regarding the student's ability to study. Then, a plan is made to support the student's ability to study. Follow-up meetings begin with an assessment of how well the plan has been implemented and what kind of effects it has had.

Assessment of the situation

- Observations by the student
- Observations by the educational institution
- Observations by the FSHS

Plan to support the ability to study

It's important for the plan to be feasible and realistic with regard to the student's situation and personal resources. The plan should be comprehensive and include measures taken by the higher education institution and student healthcare, and possibly other actors (such as social services and public healthcare) involved in the process of supporting the student.

The plan may include suggestions regarding the following:

- special teaching arrangements and other supportive measures by the higher education institution to improve and maintain the student's ability to study
- a personal study plan and options to be considered (including studying at a slower pace, completing courses in a different order)
- the use of teaching aids or help from an assistant during studies
- switching to a different field of study if feasible
- studying in the summer
- having a work ability assessment or an assessment of the need for rehabilitation performed by the FSHS
- applying to have the studies regarded as vocational rehabilitation (by Kela)
- special support by the FSHS.

Follow-up evaluation

Follow-up student health meetings assess the extent to which the plan made in the previous

meeting has been implemented and how much the measures have helped. Based on this assessment, the plan should be updated with regard to the student's personal study plan, the need for special support, rehabilitation in support of the student's ability to study, the work ability assessment and other parts of the plan as appropriate.

3.5 Preparing for a meeting

Initial assessment by student healthcare

- Before the student health meeting can take place, the student should make an appointment with the public health nurse of their FSHS healthcare team. If necessary, the nurse will help the student book an appointment with a general practitioner.
- The purpose of these visits is to make an initial assessment of the student's ability to study, health and ongoing treatment as well as rehabilitation and other supportive measures and the need for them. During the visits, the healthcare professionals and the student should also agree on the purpose and goals of the student health meeting.
- With the permission of the student, healthcare team members can contact representatives of the student's higher education institution to discuss study requirements and possible supportive measures by the institution ahead of the meeting.

How the student and educational institution should prepare

- The student can also initiate discussions with the educational institution about the means available to support their ability to study.
- The student should reflect on the level of their ability to study (how they would rate it) and on the kind of support they hope to receive from their educational institution and student healthcare.
- All parties should try to think of ways to support the student's ability to study ahead of the meeting.

Reserve enough time to avoid feeling rushed

A minimum of 60 minutes should be reserved at least for the first student health meeting. A quiet room should be booked for the meeting, usually at an FSHS facility. Student health meetings should be face to face where possible, but remote meetings are also acceptable. FSHS representatives are responsible for scheduling the meeting and sending out invitations.

- Invitations should be sent to those whose presence is necessary for assessing the situation and finding solutions.
- The number of people invited should be minimised so that discussion can remain open and the student can feel safe, although all those needed to discuss supportive measures should be present. All participants should have something to say about the issues concerned.
- The meeting is confidential, and use of the information gathered will be agreed on together.
- The student must be present, and if they wish, can be accompanied by a support person, such as a friend, a family member or a representative of a student organisation.
- Persons invited from the educational institution should be chosen on a case-by-case basis and may include members of the teaching staff, management, administration or student welfare services. The representatives of the educational institution should be selected together with the student.
- FSHS members present at the meeting usually include the general practitioner of the student's healthcare team and, depending on the situation, a public health nurse, psychiatric nurse, physiotherapist, psychologist or psychiatrist familiar with the student's situation.

The distribution of responsibilities in the meeting

- The student health meeting is usually chaired by the FSHS general practitioner, who

begins by going over the meeting's purpose and goals and asks the participants what things they wish the meeting to discuss.

- FSHS representatives are responsible for producing a memorandum during the meeting. The contents of the memorandum and its recipients should be agreed on during the meeting.

3.6 A successful meeting

For the student health meeting to succeed, all participants should understand its confidential nature as well as its purpose and goals.

Student health meetings don't discuss sensitive information, such as a student's illness or treatment. However, with the permission of the student, these can be discussed if required by the purpose and goals of the meeting. The primary focus of the meeting should be on the student's ability to study, the factors hindering studies and ways to overcome any problems.

How the meeting proceeds

1. The chair begins the meeting by going over the purpose and goals of the meeting and explaining the working methods.
2. The participants introduce themselves.
3. The meeting hears the participants' views regarding the student's ability to study, the factors hindering the student's studies and the measures already taken to address the issue.

Questions for the student:

- How have your studies been going? How's your ability to study? What's easiest about your studies? What's hardest? How many study credits have you been able to complete during the current term? What about last term? How many credits pertaining to this degree have you completed in total? What has helped your studies to progress? How could your studying be supported?

Questions for the educational institution:

- What's the impression that the responsible persons within the institution have of the student's progress? What have you observed regarding the student's ability to

study? How well has the student been able to keep to the study schedule? What are your concerns? What supportive measures has the student been provided with? What more could the institution do to support the student?

An FSHS representative can present the student healthcare's observations about the student's ability to study and any need for special support and, with the permission of the student, any illnesses affecting the student's ability to study as well as the rehabilitation options available to support this.

4. The chair summarises the observations and begins the search for solutions.

5. Searching for solutions

- The search for solutions to overcome or at least circumvent obstacles to the ability to study should focus on special teaching arrangements or other supportive measures within the institution of higher education, and special support or other measures by the FSHS.
- The aim of the discussion is to find solutions that will enable the student to continue studying, following the target schedule as closely as possible, or to safely return to studying, with the lowest possible risk of illness recurrence.

6. The chair combines the appropriate options into a suggestion for a plan.

7. The plan and follow-up meetings are decided on.

- In addition to measures supporting the student's ability to study, the plan should include a follow-up strategy.
- The goals should be concrete, allowing the student's progress to be objectively assessed (such as how many pages the student has added to their thesis, how many previously uncompleted courses or assignments they have been able to complete, or how many credits they have been able to complete during the follow-up period).
- A follow-up meeting to evaluate the implementation and effects of the plan is scheduled.

- The FSHS contact person and the student will monitor the plan's implementation between the meetings.

8. Finally, the memorandum is finalised and approved, and its recipients are agreed on.

3.7 The goal: to maintain and improve the ability to study

The goal of student health meetings is to maintain and improve a student's ability to study, health and well-being to the maximum extent possible.

For good results, it's essential that the search for ways to support the student's ability to study be performed with faith in their abilities and resources, and that their return to studying be supported according to the plans made during the meetings.

Student health meetings should leave the student feeling like the participants were actively trying to solve issues affecting their ability to study. With regard to work, it's known that a timely and well-planned return to work speeds the recovery of work ability more than resting at home; long periods of absence due to illness are known to be associated with an increased risk of permanent or prolonged inability to work. The same can be assumed to apply to the ability to study. Another principle of student health meetings is that the measures taken should be fair to other students by treating them equally.

Checklist for preparing for a study health meeting

These checklists will help students and representatives of higher education institutions to prepare for student health meetings.

How to prepare: the student

- The purpose of the student health meeting is to help you succeed in your studies.
- Reflect on the things in your studies that have caused problems or that you feel need changing, and try to think of concrete examples of how the changes in your ability to study have manifested in your studies. Also try to think of measures you could propose.
- Contact your FSHS team before the student health meeting to discuss preparing for the meeting with your public health nurse and GP. FSHS staff will be happy to help.
- It's also a good idea to discuss the meeting with a representative of your educational institution (a study advisor, a study counsellor, the head of academic affairs, a teacher tutor, another member of teaching staff, a study psychologist etc.). If possible, talk to them ahead of the meeting about which members of the institution's staff should be invited, what kind of support you've already received, and what you need support with in the future.
- Don't be afraid to communicate your experiences and your own view of your studies during the discussions. Reflect on the options and propose new measures.
- You can bring a support person, such as the person responsible for socio-political matters in your student union or subject organisation, or a friend or family member, if you find this useful or necessary.
- Prepare by taking notes ahead of the meeting: write down the things and views you wish to express so you don't forget them during the meeting.

How to prepare: representatives of the higher education institution

- Keep the purpose and goal of the student health meeting in mind: the goal is to solve problems in the student's ability to study by finding solutions and options worth trying together.
- Write down how the changes in the student's ability to study have manifested in their studies and what measures you could propose. Talk to the student ahead of the meeting to hear their suggestions.
- Find out which stage of studies the student is currently at, what courses they are currently taking, what courses they may have failed to complete, what the student should do next and whether they have progressed within the target schedule. Also confirm if a personal study plan has been made or if any other supportive measures have been agreed on with them.
- Consider which other representatives from your institution need to be present in the meeting – ensure confidentiality.
- Write down the things and views you wish to express.
- Maintain an unprejudiced, realistic and open attitude toward the suggestions for supporting the student's ability to study.
- Don't hesitate to contact the FSHS team assigned to your institution – they can help you prepare for the meeting. Ask any questions you may have. Knowing what's going to happen will allow you to prepare for the meeting and to help find solutions in the best way possible.

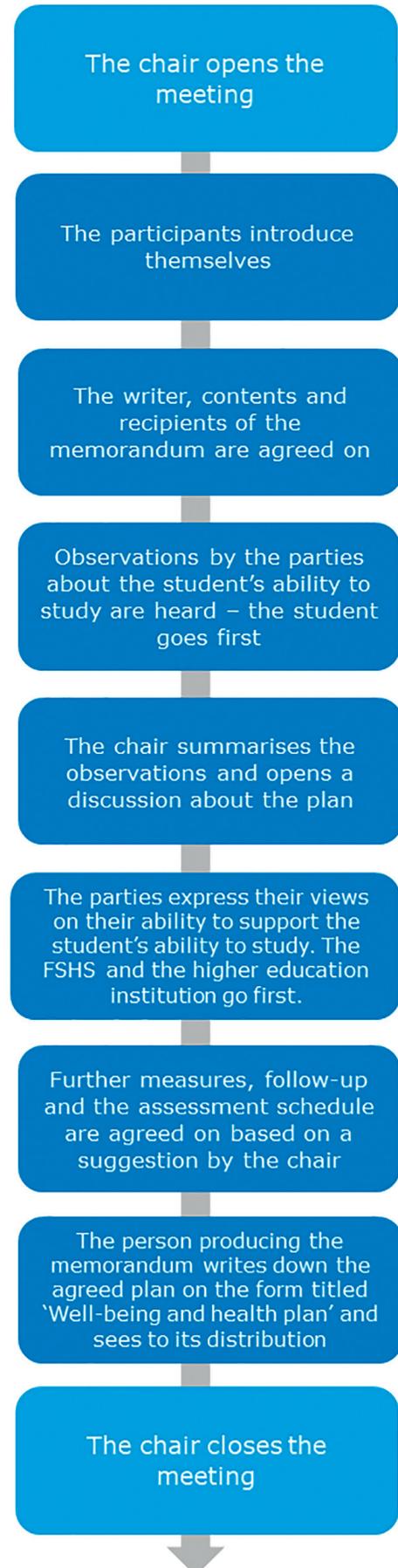
Checklist for participating in a study health meeting

Student health meetings discuss the ability to study

- What parts of their studies has the student been successful in and what parts have they had problems with? Make a list of both.
- Discuss the student's ability to study and its limitations based on how the changes in the student's ability to study have been reflected in their studies.
- Discuss the connection between the student's ability to study and their health and well being. Go over the factors leading to the situation: what kind of factors, related or unrelated to studying, might have affected their ability to study?
- Both the student's own view of their studying and the higher education institution's view of how the student is coping in their studies are important, as are the measures suggested by all parties.
- The student's resources should be valued and their privacy respected.
- The FSHS acts as the expert on the health effects of studying.
- The FSHS is bound by confidentiality obligations.

The student health meeting as a discussion between equals

- In student health meetings, everyone has the right and also the responsibility to bring forth suggestions for finding ways to help.
- For all the necessary observations and views to be brought to light, listen to and encourage each other and ask each other questions.
- Form a common understanding based on the observations from all parties.
- Avoid placing blame on the student or others.
- Don't lose track of the common goal: improving the student's ability to study is in the interest of all parties.
- Keep an open mind while looking together for ways to help – the meeting may also result in proposals that feel disadvantageous to a party at the time.
- Encourage each other to try the ideas out regardless – these aren't final decisions, you're testing them together and improving them along the way.





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