

Recommendations for higher education institutions to support returning to studies



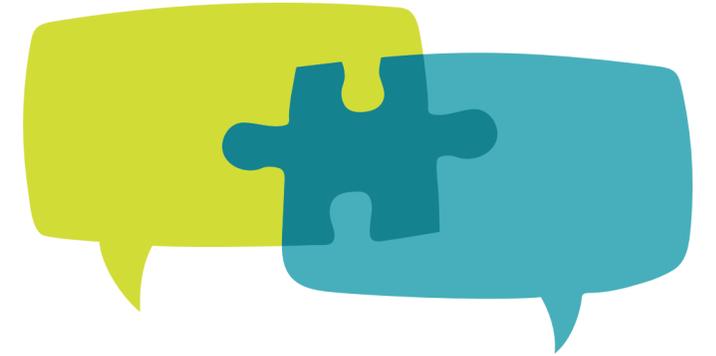
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Welcome to the recommendations!



At the time of writing these recommendations in summer 2022, the mental health situation of students is worrying. According to the latest Finnish Student Health and Wellbeing Survey (2021), one in three higher education students suffer from symptoms of anxiety and depression, and 65% of higher education students who needed mental health services felt that they were not getting them enough. It is also common for students to feel that the support provided by higher education institutions is sufficient (Nori 2021, Korkeamäki & Vuorento 2021). It is important to promote students' mental wellbeing on many different levels. This materials package focuses on the support provided by higher education staff, and its opportunities.

Higher education institutions and their staff have an essential role to play in strengthening students' mental health, both in terms of practical support and in promoting a mental health-friendly environment. These recommendations are particularly relevant for supporting students returning to their studies, especially in situations in which they have taken a break from their studies precisely because of mental health and coping challenges. Returning to studies can be a challenging process for students, and supporting them requires special attention from staff.

Our recommendations are aimed, in particular, at staff in higher education institutions who meet students returning to study or are involved in activities that affect them, such as special arrangements or curriculum design. However, we believe that the package will be useful for all professionals working in higher education. While we focus on supporting returning students, the recommendations will also help other students to study.

Each higher education institution has its own, well-established and individual ways of organising its activities and providing support to students. For this reason, the recommendations are not intended to provide a point-by-point guidance on implementation. Instead, we hope that the recommendations will act as a thought-provoking tool that helps to focus attention. The recommendations can also be used as a checklist to see what is already working or what could be improved. We warmly encourage you to apply these recommendations in ways that are appropriate for your institution!

The quotes used in the sections are from students who participated in the Back to Studies project. They are answers to the question "What are the issues that the education institution or staff should consider when a student is returning from a break to study or has been delayed in their studies?".

Making support available and easy to find

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For me, just getting things sorted out and getting back to my studies takes a lot of energy at the beginning, when studying is new again for a while. It's easy to panic if you're just piling up tasks and deadlines and I, for one, totally freeze then. In other words, it's a good idea to divide up the things to go through and the tasks to be done so that you have a little time to get back into it all.



When returning to their studies, students may need support, for example, in drawing up a personal study plan, choosing courses or generally getting used to the way the university works again. Typically, a clear minority of students experiencing mental health challenges feel that they receive enough support, and student support services are seen as having much room for improvement (e.g. Nori et al. 2021, 42–43; Korkeamäki & Vuorento 2021, 24).

Problems include a lack of resources from support providers, random access to support and a lack of information about what support might be available. Students may not know where to turn for support or advice. If it is primarily the student's responsibility to find support, the finding of sufficient resources can also be a challenge. A common challenge is that support provision practices are not planned in advance. Many returning students may want flexibility and options for their pace of learning and their study plan during the return process.



A study plan to support the return

Study plans that are prepared in advance to support your return are valuable. A study plan that supports the return allows the student to work with the staff to select the right number of courses to suit their return process. When making choices, attention can be paid to issues such as the timing and delivery mode of courses. A lighter pace when returning to studies can also be a good practice for returning students. The return process is individual, but planning policies and, for example, suitable courses in advance can help to tailor a study plan that supports each student's return.

Courses supporting well-being

Courses on supporting one's own well-being may assist the return. However, when designing such courses, the risk of an overload must be taken into account: they do not automatically increase well-being if they are too intensive in terms of the workload or timetable.



Division of responsibility

The division of responsibilities between staff in providing support should be made clear in advance. Ideally, the university should have designated persons to plan and guide the studies of returning students. Working hours would have been resourced for this. In the best case, the university's support services are centralised so that the student does not have to visit different people in different places often to explain the same things. This may also help to build a relationship between the student and the person providing support, and by building trust, it can make it easier for the student to talk more openly about their challenges.





Other sources of support

It is also worth bearing in mind the support that is available outside the university (e.g. FSHS and low-threshold services provided by organisations). To support the student's return, a student health meeting can be organised to discuss the necessary support measures between the student, the representative of the higher education institution and the student healthcare worker. A guide to the student health meeting can be found on the FSHS website.

Providing information

It is important to provide clear information about the support that is available, combined with other information about returning to studies. Information must be accessible and easy to find. It is important to have information on the website about who students can contact about study planning. You can also create a dedicated section on the website for people returning to studies. The same applies to the terminology used when returning to studies, which can often be difficult to understand. At the end of this guide, you will find a glossary for returning to studies to help you define the terms.



Special arrangements to make studying smoother

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It would be nice if the school staff would tell us more about where it is possible, for example, to be a bit more flexible in the timetable, if necessary. There are often many reminders of what needs to be done and by when. It can be good if not everyone is careful, but the possibility of flexibility or alternative ways of doing things could also be mentioned.

It is common for a returning student to need special arrangements to complete their studies. If the break has been caused by mental health challenges or learning difficulties, special arrangements can be of significant benefit to the studies even after the student's return, as the challenges do not disappear overnight.

The possibilities of special arrangements and the practices involved in applying for them can easily blend in with all the other information. Information about special arrangements can often be inadequate, and a large proportion of students do not feel that they receive enough information about their opportunities for individual arrangements (Korkeamäki & Vuorento 2021). There can be a great deal of variation in the possibilities for special arrangements between teachers and courses, which can be confusing for students. In addition, the process of applying for the arrangements may feel complicated, burdensome or stigmatising.



Definition of special arrangements

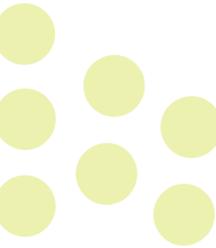
Options for special arrangements should be defined and announced in advance, preferably, for example, in the description of each course. The student then has a “menu” from which to choose the most appropriate arrangements for their situation. This can simplify the process of applying and preparing for special arrangements, thus easing the burden on both the student and teacher.

Individual special arrangements

Typical desired arrangements may include flexibility in delivery dates and absences, alternative examination methods and opportunities for remote participation. However, it is not advisable to define special arrangements in too much detail in advance, so as to leave flexibility for the individual arrangement that best supports the student’s situation.

Clear information

As with all other information related to a return, students should be clearly informed about the possibility of special arrangements – you should not assume that this information will automatically reach those who need it. Information about special arrangements can be provided, for example, at the course introductory lectures, at orientation information sessions, and on a separate page of the study guide. In addition, information on how to apply for special arrangements can be targeted towards those returning to studies.





Support for staff

It is also important for teaching staff to receive guidance and advice on how to make special arrangements, where necessary. When planning special arrangements, cooperation with, for example, guidance counsellors and educational psychologists can be useful.

Communicating equality

The tone of voice in which special arrangements are discussed is important. Special arrangements do not mean an “easier version” of the coursework, but take into account the diversity of students. In order to maintain motivation and promote equality, it is important that students who use special arrangements do not feel that their performance is of secondary importance.

Monitoring and intervening in time

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During my own long sick leave, I might have wished for the university to have some kind of outreach counselling. The threshold to come back was high, and I had to carry out all of the research, e.g. on support services, by myself.

In the event of an academic stagnation due to mental health problems or similar, early intervention would be important. But often, even those who could offer support to the student may be overlooking the problem. The pace of academic achievement is usually mainly monitored by Kela, and the tone of the monitoring is more like monitoring leading to sanctions than caring about the student's situation.





Follow-up of studies to help

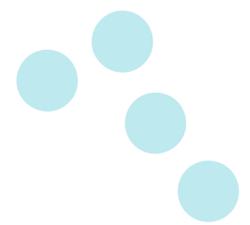
Systematic monitoring can be used to detect if a student's studies are stalling. One way of responding to this could be to send a targeted information pack to the student on the different forms and channels of support available – so that the student knows that help is available if needed.

Making the most of systems

In the best case, the monitoring of academic performance can be integrated into a system that registers academic performance (e.g. SISU), so that the monitoring of the slowing pace does not necessarily have to be done manually.

Support instead of pressure

Students have a variety of reasons for slowing down their studies, so monitoring should by no means automatically lead to action. The aim is not to control or place more pressure on students, but simply to target information about available support that could potentially be useful.



Strengthening understanding of mental health challenges



” Particular attention to the fact that there can be a lot of tension and feelings of inferiority. Positive feedback when the studies are progressing again, but no special treatment. To be included as an equal student with others.

” In general, I feel that what the student experiences or how things go for the student is completely unknown in the system. It is very difficult to make changes if you just offer the same ‘crap’ to the student without really trying to understand why things are the way they are.

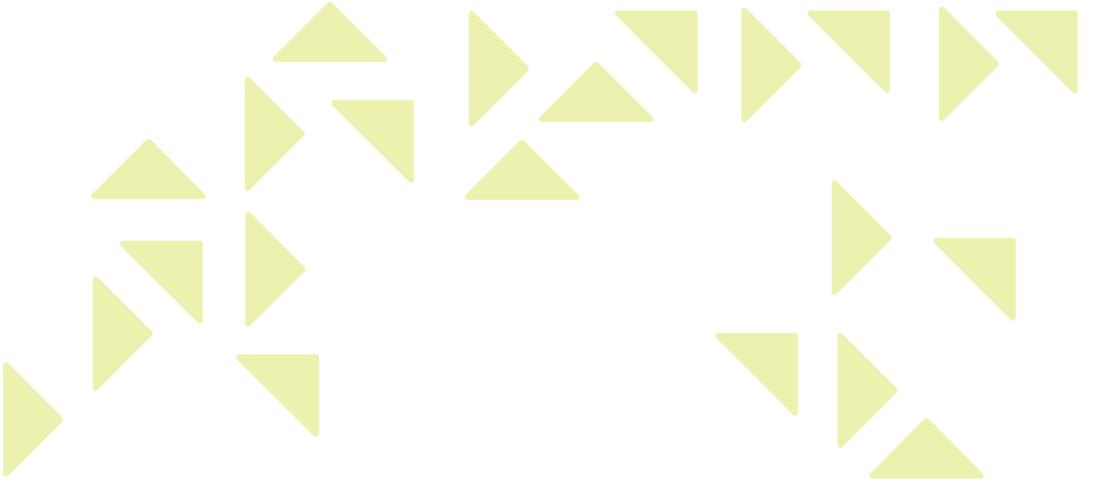
Staff working with students returning to their studies do not always have specific knowledge or understanding of the impact of different mental health problems and learning difficulties on learning. In such cases, the student may encounter attitudes or misplaced prejudices that make it difficult to return to studies. This can lead to the student not feeling safe to tell the staff about their situation or the support they need.

Perceptions of mental health problems and their impact on learning may be outdated or based on generalisations. Many mental health problems are associated with changes in how people process information and learn. In particular, difficulties often arise with memory, concentration and alertness. Executive functions, initiative and decision-making skills may also be impaired, and possible side effects of medication may interfere with learning. There are also differences in the persistence of the effects, depending on the illness. Above all, however, each student’s situation is unique. The same diagnosis does not mean the same teaching and learning needs.



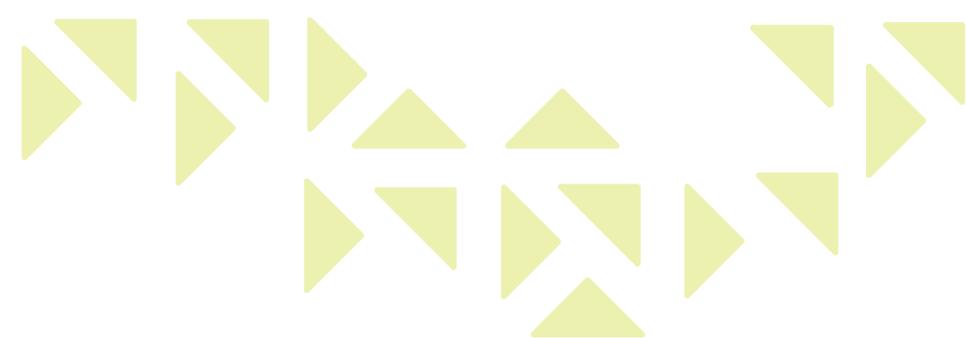
Strengthening mental health skills

Up-to-date knowledge on the impact of mental health problems and, for example, neurodiversity on learning should be maintained. Good sources of information can be, for example, MIELI's Mental Health First Aid courses, Nyyti's webinars on mental health and study ability, consultations and presentations by experts by experience, and the website mielenterveystalo.fi. Cooperation with student health services or educational psychologists can also be helpful in developing knowledge.



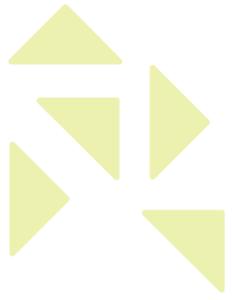
Reflecting on your own perceptions

You should critically reflect on your own perceptions of mental health problems and their impact on studies, and consider the sources on which they are based. It is common that there may be underlying assumptions or generalisations based on stereotypes. It is important for staff to be aware of such effects and understand their causes, so that they are not seen, for example, as student laziness.



Encouraging attitude

Understanding students' situations also means that it is important for staff to encourage students to tell the staff about their need for support, but, at the same time, without putting pressure on them. It is essential that students do not have to fear negativity or lack of understanding when they return to their studies.





Cooperation and encouragement

” On many courses, I would just wish that teachers would say out loud that they know that many students are exhausted and that they understand that the students cannot put the same effort into all schoolwork.

” Cheers, encouragement and small acts of kindness to help you get through the university course jungle and help you integrate and get to know other students. Feeling ashamed of your condition and the fact that your studies have slowed down can be hard and it's a high threshold to return back to your studies.

” Especially when it comes to returning from sick leave, the university (staff) should remember that recovery often continues even after the actual sick leave.

In addition to support with study planning and other practices, students may need social support when returning to their studies. Returning students may experience stigma and alienation from the university environment and community. The providing of support and encouragement plays an important role in alleviating such feelings and increasing hopefulness.

When returning to their studies, students may feel that they are inadequate or inferior because of their situation. If staff interactions with the student do not show interest or appreciation for the student, a safe return that reinforces positive feelings is made more difficult. This is an essential aspect of students' experience of a lack of support; unpleasant encounters raise the threshold for them to tell about their situation and their hopes for the return process (Korkeamäki & Vuorento 2021, 32). Another typical interaction problem is that students' autonomy and agency are not recognised and they are not genuinely involved in planning their studies and their return process.

A positive encounter

It is important to approach returning students with a positive and supportive attitude that fosters hopefulness. The key here is to notice even “small” successes and show appreciation for them, for example, by praising them. Registering for a course or completing a course component can be worthy of attention and praise. The student hopes that you are interested in their situation and thoughts – even a simple “How are you?” may be of great importance.

Involving the student in planning

Students should be given the opportunity to participate in the planning of their studies in cooperation with the staff. To enable participation, it is a good idea to ask the students what support or information they feel they need, and to show that you genuinely listen to their wishes and opinions.

Equal tone of voice

At the same time, avoid a tone that presents the returning student as being inadequate or in need of tutelage. The returning student is an equal and capable, active participant. The tone of the encounter also helps to alleviate any stigma that a returning student may face, which also allows the student a safe space to talk about their challenges and coping.

Back into the learning community

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Academic freedom is a heavy responsibility to bear. The university should actively offer study circles, and other similar activities, so that students are not left alone.

Often, students who have taken a break from their studies find themselves in a situation where they have to rebuild their contacts with the study community when they return. Their course mates are further along in their studies or have already graduated. In this case, the person returning to their studies will no longer have familiar friends with whom to continue their studies. In addition, the teaching staff may have also changed.

Students returning to their studies may feel ashamed of their situation. Joining student communities and becoming part of student life is not always easy. It is, therefore, important that members of the study community facilitate the return to the community.



Welcome back!

Send a message to the returning student that they are welcome back. The student does not necessarily need special attention and should be able to say as much as they want about their situation. The most important thing is to be straightforward and to show that “you are our student, just like everyone else”.

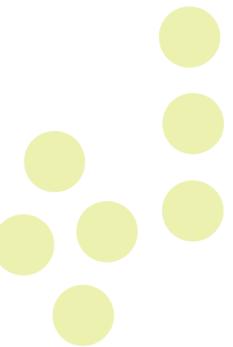
Increasing community understanding

It is important to strengthen understanding of mental health and the impact of mental health challenges on learning throughout the learning community. This will reduce prejudices within the community and contribute to a more compassionate atmosphere. Mental health knowledge and skills can be strengthened by offering MIELI’s Mental Health First Aid courses to student communities, and by including mental health topics in the curriculum.

Strengthening community spirit through courses

It is not always clear on a course that a participant is returning from a break from studies. That is why it is important to include things in the curriculum that strengthen the sense of community of all students. At the beginning of each course, it is a good idea to take a moment for an introductory or orientation discussion, even if most of the students are familiar with each other. This does not mean bringing up or asking the returning student to tell others about their situation, but, above all, to go through any previously agreed on practices together, rather than brushing them aside by saying “you already know that.”





Group divisions

If the teacher creates group divisions for group work, this makes it easier for each student to find a group.

Information on student community activities

Information about opportunities to participate in events, hobby clubs or student organisations should be clearly available. It is also important that the returning student has links to the study groups' discussion groups.

Small groups to support studies

Universities offer small groups where to study with others, such as thesis groups. These provide students with both the opportunity to study with others and to pace their own independent study tasks. There are also different kinds of workshops (where students can work on assignments from missed courses) or co-study sessions that offer opportunities to study with others. These groups can also take the form of online meetings. Different ways to strengthen community spirit are compiled in the materials of the Yhdessä yhteisöksi project.

Tutoring and mentoring

Returning students can be assigned their own tutoring or mentoring. Back to study mentoring involves another student mentoring a student returning to study for one semester. Guides to Back to Studies mentoring can be found in the list of references.



Making assumptions about being a student visible



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I think it's important to point out that not everyone is progressing at the planned pace and that's perfectly OK and doesn't make anyone inferior. Efforts should be made to reduce performance stress.

”

It should never be assumed that everyone can complete the same number of tasks and deadlines at the same time. People have a wide range of backgrounds and resources that affect their ability to function in studies.

In a higher education environment, there are assumptions and expectations about what a student should be like, and what traits are valued in a student. The “ideal student” is typically self-directed, progressing at the expected pace, committed to their studies, proactive and self-reliant (e.g. Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars & Dingwall 2021; Wong & Chu 2018). In addition, students are often expected to do things like networking, part-time and summer jobs, and self-development in their free time.

There are also assumptions about the background for a students' studies, and often do not take into account the different life situations. When returning to their studies, it would be more important for students to take care of their resources and find ways of studying that suit them, rather than striving to meet expectations. Slower progress does not indicate a lack of motivation or interest. A student who deviates from the assumptions may still feel that they are not as valuable or as much a part of the learning community because of their situation.

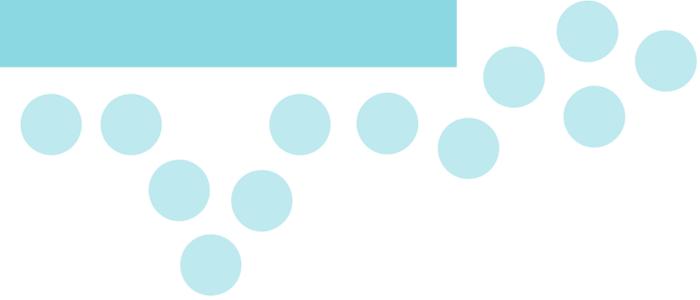


Identifying assumptions

The existence of ideals is natural and not harmful in itself, but it is important to be aware of them. The first step to reduce the harmful consequences of assumptions is to identify them. What are the staff's assumptions and expectations of students? Do they also recognise the different situations and backgrounds of students? Do students who do not conform to the assumptions have the opportunity to be valued and recognised? It is important to consider such issues openly, as staff play a major role in maintaining assumptions and promoting diversity.

Alternatives to familiar assumptions

Once the assumptions have been identified, alternatives can also be presented. When communicating about student life or career stories, for example, it is important to pay attention to the images of students that are constructed. The very mention that different student situations are also recognised and that there is no one right way to be a student is significant. It would also be important to present descriptions of student situations that go beyond what is expected: for example, returning from sick leave or studying with special arrangements are stories that are just as necessary to tell.



Glossary on returning to studies

Special study arrangements

Students can request special study arrangements if they have been identified as having learning difficulties or if they have an illness, disability or other condition that affects their studies. In most cases, the need for a special arrangement is confirmed by a doctor or other specialist (for example, a psychologist or physiotherapist). A special needs teacher can provide a certificate of dyslexia.

Special arrangements may include extra time for exams or assignments, a smaller exam room and alternative ways of completing the course. Special arrangements are not easing, but removing obstacles. They do not make students less able than others, but make them more equal in terms of learning opportunities.

There should be clear information about special arrangements and how to apply for them on the university's website. Some higher education institutions use the terms 'individual special arrangements' or 'individual arrangements'.

Applying for extension of study time

If necessary, the student can be granted extra time to complete their studies. According to both the Universities of Applied Sciences Act and the Universities Act, a higher education institution may, upon application, grant an extension of time for the completion of studies to a student who has not completed their studies within the time prescribed in the sections of the Act. The student must present a target-oriented and feasible plan to complete the studies. In the plan, the student must identify the studies to be undertaken and the timetable for completing the qualification.

The right to study will be extended if the student is able to complete their studies within a reasonable period of time. This assessment takes into account the number and extent of the student's existing and missing credits and any previous decisions to grant extra time. The higher education institution must take into account the student's life situation when granting the extension. Life circumstances that may be taken into account in the decision include, for example, illness or difficult living conditions or social participation during studies. Students do not need to apply separately for extra time to complete their studies due to a statutory absence (maternity, paternity or parental leave, military service or voluntary military service).

Alternative delivery methods

There may be options on how to complete the course in a way that suits the student best. If there are no other delivery methods available, the student should ask the course teacher about the options. An alternative delivery method may be an individual arrangement for a single student. However, offering alternative delivery methods to all students increase accessibility.

Sick leave

If a student falls ill, they can take sick leave. During this period, they can receive sickness allowance. It is, therefore, important to consider sick leave if the studies are not progressing. This way, the student can save their study grant months instead of using them up. During sick leave, some studying is allowed. The amount allowed is around 40% of normal full-time study.

Read more at www.kela.fi/eligibility-sickness.

Rehabilitation allowance

The rehabilitation allowance provides income security during rehabilitation. Rehabilitation can also be training for a profession. Eligibility for rehabilitation allowance is always assessed on a case-by-case basis. To receive rehabilitation allowance, a rehabilitation decision is required. A young person aged between 16 and 19 may be eligible for a rehabilitation allowance for young persons, which requires a personal study and rehabilitation plan. Rehabilitation allowance is applied from Kela. Read more at www.kela.fi/rehabilitation-allowance.

Vocational rehabilitation

Kela can grant rehabilitation as vocational rehabilitation, in which case the student can receive rehabilitation allowance for the duration of the studies. Kela obtains information about the studies from the registers maintained by educational institutions. Rehabilitation allowance cannot be cancelled in advance or refunded on the grounds of income, such as study grant. Read more at www.kela.fi/rehabilitation-allowance-kela-rehabilitatio.

Accessibility

Accessibility means that the diversity of actors is taken into account in the university's practices. Accessibility is the organisation and implementation of the physical, mental and social environment in such a way that everyone, regardless of their characteristics, can participate and function on an equal footing with others.

In an accessible university, everyone can focus on studying or teaching and working without being hindered by structures or environments. The accessibility of a higher education institution can be assessed by evaluating how well its facilities, electronic systems, learning environments, teaching methods and attitudes enable the inclusion and equality of students with diverse personal characteristics and from different life situations (Accessibility criteria for universities).

Inclusive higher education

Inclusion is based on the principle of equality. In other words, all students should have the right to participate in quality higher education alongside other students. In inclusive higher education, not only is access to higher education important, but also flexible, ongoing support (such as individual arrangements) during the course of study. The full involvement of all students is an essential aim.



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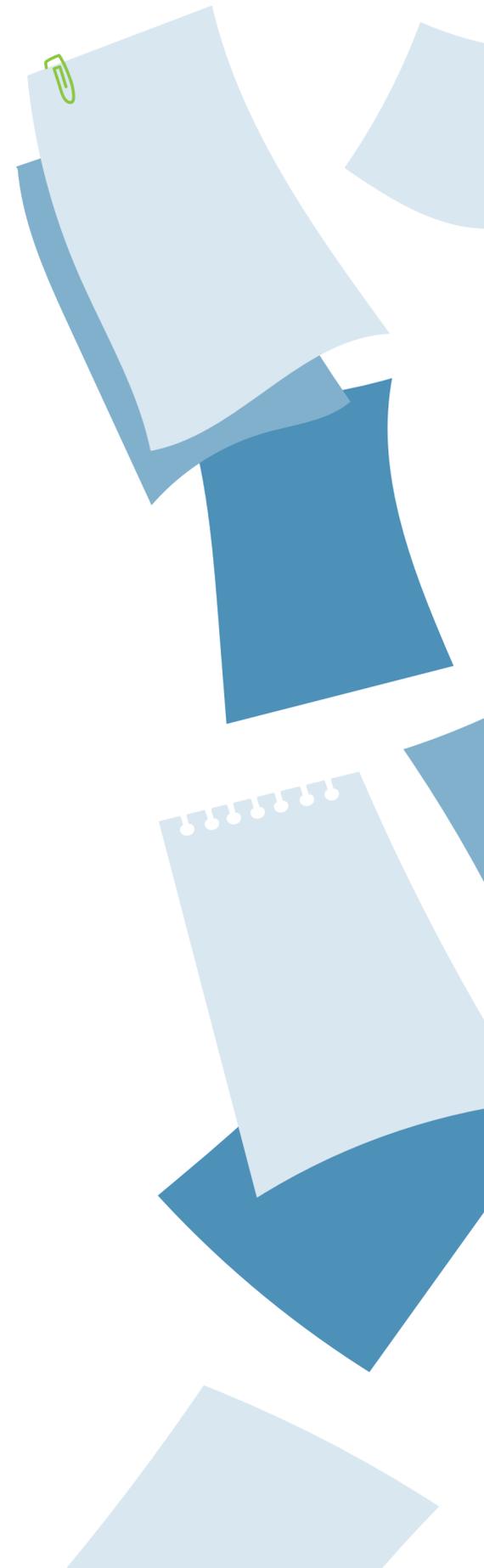
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www.nyyti.fi/hankkeet/takaisin-opintoihin-hanke-2019-2021/kokemusasiantuntija-webinaarisarja

Mental Health First Aid 2 course

www.nyyti.fi/hyvinvointitoimijoille/koulutukset/mielenterveyden-ensiapu2-koulutus

Student health meeting

www.yths.fi/palvelut/opiskeluyhteisotyo/opiskeluterveysneuvottelu

Back to Studies mentoring guides

www.nyyti.fi/hankkeet/takaisin-opintoihin-hanke-2019-2021/vertaismentorina-korkeakoulussa-mentorin-opas

Yhdessä yhteisöksi material bank

www.nyyti.fi/hankkeet/paattyneet-hankkeet/yhdessayhteisoksi/materiaalipankki



“The threshold to come back was high, and I had to do all the research, e.g. on support services, by myself.”

How could higher education facilitate a student's return to studies? How can the diversity of students be taken into account when supporting their return?



Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions to Support Returning to Studies has been published in Nyyti's Back to Studies project. The recommendations are not intended to provide point-by-point guidance on implementations. Above all, we hope that the recommendations will act as a catalyst for change to make the return to studies smoother for students and support their mental wellbeing.

The project is financed by STEA.