



## **BECOMING PART OF THE LARGER MENTAL HEALTH SOLUTION**

### **'Helsinki Clubhouse Support Study Programs: Impact on the Society'**

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Clubhouses are changing the world. Our Clubhouse work is impacting the societies we live in, and the ripple effect of respect, opportunity, dignity, and high expectations of people living with mental illness is not limited to our Clubhouse communities. All of our Clubhouses have ways that we reach out into the larger society around us, and gradually, our values and ideals are becoming a major part of the larger solution to mental health issues. In Helsinki, our Clubhouse is impacting the world around us through our unique education program.

In Finland, in order to be employed, almost without exceptions one needs to have a degree. As education is free and relatively flexible; it is also an available path to employment for recovering members.

Two years ago a Study Counsellor was employed by the Helsinki Clubhouse. Her main duties were defined as supporting members in their studies and improving the collaboration with education providers in the capital area.

The two main reasons to improve the collaboration were to:

1. make education providers aware of us and our ability to support students with mental health problems
2. support teachers in their understanding of how people in recovery from mental illness are able to succeed in their studies

In order to support our members in their studies, our aim has been to have an impact on education providers. To improve the awareness of our Clubhouse, we organized an Open House day last year. We invited 200-300 counsellors, psychologists and other staff with a supportive role at education providers to visit us. About 30 came, which was a good start.

We believe there is a need for long-term peer support, even though education providers have psychologists to support the students. The psychologists are only allowed to meet with a student about five times and during those times they are able to support the student in motivational or learning related issues. But meeting five times is not sufficient for long term or more versatile support. Thus the first student working on her masters thesis has been referred to us by one of the psychologists at a university. This psychologist got to talk to one of our studying members at the Open House day.

In order to make a difference we strive to give positive feedback where it is due. For example when one of our members applied to study at the University of Helsinki last spring, she needed to, like all applicants, take part in the extensive entrance exam. The exam is usually held in a huge auditorium. We pleaded, referring to her mental health problems, that she'd be allowed to participate in a smaller and calmer room. Her request was granted and she has successfully started her studies this autumn. The student sent a thank you letter to the staff stating that this arrangement was crucial to her success. After the entrance exams, the University of Helsinki has voiced in media how positive their experiences of allowing such special arrangements have been. We at Clubhouse, obviously, want to support this line of improved accessibility to studies.

There are a number of upper secondary vocational special education institutions in Finland, who already offer suitable study opportunities with support to students with mental health and other problems. However, they have a shortage of suitable, supported practical training placements for their students. After our more active reach out to the education providers, the special education institutions have become aware of our opportunities. This year we have already offered supported practical training placements with cleaning, cafe and kitchen duties.

Even though the support in vocational special education institutions is suitable for our members, they do not offer studies in all fields and among others. Because of this our members also study in other institutions. With other education providers our Study Counsellor has a consultative role.

As an example most students in Finland finance their studies with a study allowance that is granted by the government. In order to receive the allowance, the students need to advance in their studies in a rather fast pace that most people recovering from mental illness are not able to hold. By law the education providers need to support the students to keep up the pace, so all staff are aware of the law. However, staff are often not aware of the fact that when our members main source of income is a disability pension, the study pace requirement does not apply to them. Informing staff of this is often enough to help find options for a more flexible study path.

Another frequent scenario the Study Counsellor has encountered, has been a frightened reaction from the staff, when they realize their student have history of mental health problems: "We don't have psychiatric knowledge!" Luckily this is easy to deal with: the Study Counsellor doesn't need to know the diagnosis either. We only need to

know what kind of support the student needs. So, like we do when dealing with learning disabilities, we first find out the strengths of the student, where he or she does well, and then what the wish for support is. Most means to support students with learning disabilities work well for students with mental health problems, too. Teachers know these procedures and they are used to them from learning disabilities. Some of them just need to be reminded of looking at the person, not the diagnosis.

Several of our members, who have fallen ill during their studies, want to finish their studies when they have recovered. After several years, the members often need to reapply, and in order to enter a university, they need to participate in entrance exams that most students prepare for full time for 4–5 months. In 2014 one of our members decided it was time for studies again but after so many years of not studying, he had to first relearn his successful learning strategies. During the first spring there wasn't quite enough time to prepare for the exam. Therefore, the next fall we applied for the Social Services to pay for his studies at the Open University.

The Open University is an education provider that offers university courses for everybody but one will have to pay for them and one can't gain a degree there. However, all successfully completed courses at the Open University will be included in a university degree later. When we first suggested the Open University studies as a part of the path to gain entrance to the university, the Social Worker was sceptical. After some negotiations and a written statement from the Study Counsellor, she granted the money. These studies prepared the member for the entrance exam last spring, and this fall the student commenced his studies at the university. He sent a letter to the Social Worker to thank her for believing in him and to create awareness of the potential among mental health recovers.

The Ministry of Education, the main funder of education providers in Finland, expects institutions to accept more and more the knowledge gained at work. Because of this especially vocational special education institutions have been interested in the work our members do at the Clubhouse. At the moment we are in the process of finding out how to recognize the knowledge and how to communicate this to education providers smoothly.

In the beginning of this century there was a big push to make education accessible for all in Finland. This push made a great difference for people with physical disabilities, ramps and lifts were built, and attitudes regarding potential were changed. We at the Helsinki Clubhouse believe that now is the time to make an impact also on the attitudes and prejudices towards mental health recovers may encounter when studying. The work we do to support studies creates a natural dialogue between the Clubhouse and the surrounding society, and is therefore a way to make this difference.