



# **WORKBOOK OF STRENGTHS-BASED FUTURE GUIDANCE**

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# INTRODUCTION

With the ongoing diversification of working life and career paths, students in higher education are expected to have an increasingly flexible and extensive understanding of the content of their expertise. Personal preparation for the future is a process covering all stages of studying and career development. Students who are able to identify their strengths are well positioned to progress on their career paths through consciously using their unique resources.

Strengths-based future guidance relies on research-based knowledge of the links between using strengths and wellbeing. It refers to guidance thinking in a broad sense as covering identification of the aspects that contribute to strengths and work readiness and the ways in which these can be integrated into successful career planning. This thinking is underpinned by the idea that the ability to select positive life and career strategies is based on the individual's ability to identify and use their strengths. A strengths-based mindset helps us to make decisions that have positive consequences for wellbeing and career development. When planning their career pathways, students will be able to consciously and individually utilise their own resources and strengths in a way that supports planning. It is not that individuals either have or do not have

strengths, but rather, we all have strengths and some of them are more characteristic to us than others. An individual's most characteristic strengths are referred to as signature strengths. Identifying and utilising signature strengths has been shown to be linked with wellbeing and a good life (Seligman 2011). Identifying strengths as part of future planning reflects our positive psychological capital (Luthans et al. 2004), which has also been recommended as part of higher education studies (Määttä & Uusiautti 2018). Acknowledging the significance of strengths-based guidance is quintessential to higher education studies.

Human strengths are understood as those of our individual characteristics that allow us to express our best selves. By using our strengths, we experience joy and fulfilment. Our strengths help to enhance our wellbeing, resilience and optimism. Strengths and positive resources belong to us all. Our culture, worldview and values influence our ways of acting and associating value with things – including strengths. It is, thus, important that the people providing guidance are aware of these considerations and pay attention to them in their guidance efforts.

Strength thinking is not based on the idea of merely focusing on strengths while excluding negative characteristics, difficulties or hardships. It is about strengthening positive resources and being able to make use of them even in challenging life situations.

# 48 | AFTERWORD

## THE STRENGTHS-BASED FUTURE GUIDANCE (VAHTO) MODEL

This workbook provides a practice-based overview of the Strengths-Based Future Guidance model, the purpose of which is to support teachers and counsellors in providing support for higher education students in identifying their signature strengths, defining their career goals, and in making successful transitions between studies and work life. Strengths-based student guidance work uses and combines different methods to attain its goals.

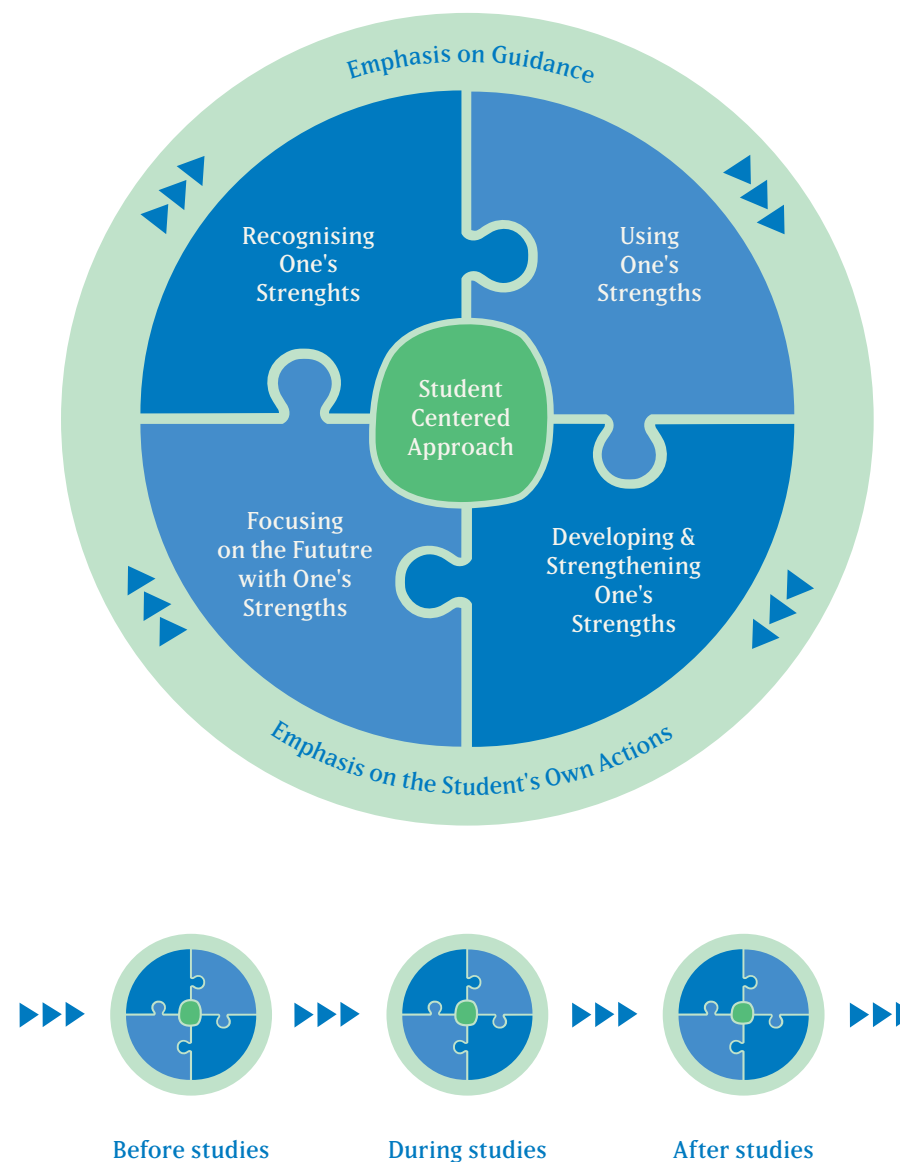
The Strengths-Based Future Guidance (VAHTO) model is based on a profound understanding, identification and use of human character strengths in such a way that allows the participant to reflect on and make positive decisions regarding their future from their own starting points and based on their needs and strengths. Guidance is a collaborative process with the aim of enhancing the participant's agency. At the level of praxis, the student-centeredness of guidance manifests itself as thought and action that places the student's own active involvement at the centre of the process. The student-centered approach in higher education encourages the student to take an active role in their learning, e.g. by fostering their motivation, self-evaluation skills, and wellbeing, as well as by offering flexible study paths (KARVI 2019). In order to spark the student's interest in such active engagement, the counsellor's own interest and ability to resonate with the experiences of the participant are essential. Thus, strengths-based guidance is formed in and through genuine, mutually respectful encounters, presence and listening. To make the guidance model work, the counsellor, too, is required to familiarise themselves with the principles of the strengths-based approach and learn to identify and use their own strengths. It is only through this that the counsellor will be able to help others. The VAHTO model thus functions as a tool of the counsellor's personal and professional development, too.

The four key elements of the VAHTO model are (1) Recognising one's strengths, (2) Using them, (3) Developing and strengthening them, and (4) Focusing on the future with them. These elements can be actualised at any phase of the study path: prior to its beginning, during or at the end of the study path, or after its completion. The model places the student at the centre, with the empowering guidance relationship as the driving force. The guidance process is dialogical by nature, which means that the counsellor and the student create understandings of strengths-based thinking together. Dialogical guidance enhances the student's agency and enables inclusion. Dialogue is also essentially linked with reflection, which is characterised by wondering, inquisitiveness and working with and assessing experiences.

Strengths-based future guidance is always structured around the participant's prior knowledge of their strengths, i.e. built into the participant's situation, needs, and goals. When starting from the first level of the model, the guidance process begins with identifying strengths and proceeds towards using them. Once the participant develops a deeper understanding of their strengths, the guidance process proceeds towards application and future, the best possible outcome being a situation in which continued development of strengths and orientation towards the future have been translated into the individual's willingness to act on their own initiative.

The reader interested in an in-depth understanding of using the VAHTO model and its underlying ideology will find useful information in this workbook, in the article *Fostering a Successful Life through a Strength-Based Approach in Higher Education Guidance*, and in the final publication of the VAHTO project entitled *Vahvuusperustaisen tulevaisuusohjauksen kehittämismatka ja VAHTO-malli Lapin korkeakouluissa* (available in Finnish only).

## The Strengths-Based Future Guidance (VAHTO) model



## INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE USER

The Strengths-Based Future Guidance workbook will be your and the participants' guide on your journey to the world of strengths. The workbook includes a variety of exercises you can use to help the guidance participants to identify and reflect on their strengths and to verbalise their competencies. You will find tips for facilitating their process of making plans for the future and making use of their strengths in different situations. The purpose of the exercises is to enhance the individual's understanding of their potential and the ways of using it, as well as to help them to become aware of and explore their strengths in greater depth. The exercises are designed to offer starting points for enhancing the individual's self-knowledge and to provide an arena for dialogue, as well as to develop a diverse skill set that is applicable to studies, work, and life more generally.

The exercises presented in the workbook provide an example of how the strengths-based approach can be utilised throughout

studies, both in individual and group guidance. The strength exercises featured in this book have been compiled, collected and developed on the basis of guidance pilot sessions and theory-based utilisation of different guidance exercises and designed to support the implementation of the VAHTO model in guidance of students in higher education. The workbook is also applicable to other guidance contexts across various educational settings.

The strength exercises are subdivided into four categories according to the VAHTO model: (1) Recognising one's strengths, (2) Using them, (3) Developing and strengthening them, and (4) Focusing on the future with them. The exercises can be utilised individually or in combination, and applied to fit various work contexts and guidance situations.

It is our hope that this book will be a valuable companion to you and the guidance participants on your path towards new insights.

# STRENGTH EXERCISES

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Exercises presented in this workbook have been subdivided into sections according to the key elements of the VAHTO model, for which reason the exercises are also closely interlinked. We want to encourage you to try out the exercises and combine them into a whole that suits your needs!



# STRENGTHS TESTS

## Target group:

Those interested in higher education studies, students, and those in the process of career planning

## Goal

To help the user to gain insight into their strengths, to provide perspectives on educational choices, to assist the user in clarifying views on career planning based on strengths

## Context of use

Individual and group guidance

## Tools and materials

Strengths tests of your choice

## Description

Strengths and personality tests provide insight into human strengths and personality types. The VIA (Values in action) test is based on theories of positive psychology and personality psychology and intended as an aid to identifying human personality traits and character strengths. The personality type tests reveal something about an individual's strength areas. Tests concerning educational choices help the user to reflect on educational alternatives from the perspective of character strengths.



## Using tests for guidance purposes

### Individual guidance

The tests can function as preliminary assignments to be completed prior to guidance sessions. Provide the guidance participant with a link to the test(s) of your choice and ask them to bring the test results to the guidance session. During the guidance session, you may focus on the participant's life situation and discuss the test results and structure the guidance situation around them.

### Group guidance

The tests can be used e.g. during student guidance sessions, and when working with career guidance groups, with persons planning to undertake higher education studies, or with students who have already embarked on their studies. Each

participant can begin by completing the test independently. After this, the participants may first discuss the test results e.g. in small groups or with the person next to them and then with the whole group. On the basis of the results, the group may agree to do further work and search for further information independently.

### Tests can be found by using e.g. the following search terms or strings:

- VIA Character Strengths Survey
- Strengths-based study path test
- Personality type test
- Personality test

## Tip!

You can begin to work on the discovered strengths by entering them in the Table of Strengths presented in Part II of this workbook.

# STRENGTHS IN THE EVERYDAY

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Identifying one's strengths and how they manifest themselves

## Context of use

One-on-one discussion

## Tools and materials

Discussion template and tools for taking notes

## Description

An exercise based on cue questions and sentences for opening up the discussion

## Research-based knowledge

Donaldson S. I., Csikszentmihalyi M. & Nakamura, J. (Eds.) (2011). Applied Positive Psychology: Improving Everyday Life, Health, Schools, Work and Society. Routledge.

## I Recognising One's Strengths



### Questions

The counsellor selects questions from the list below and modifies them according to the requirements of the situation. The student answers the questions and takes notes.

- What kinds of things did you enjoy doing as a child and a teenager?
- What were your favourite subjects at school?
- What was your dream job when you were a child?
- What did you dream about? What have you always been interested in?
- What activities leave you energized?
- What gives you joy now, as an adult?
- What do you enjoy doing? What inspires you?
- What skills have you acquired through your studies, hobbies and by experience?
- What kinds of activities let "the real you" shine?
- What do you get compliments for? What are you good at?
- What do you tend to pay attention to naturally?
- What do you learn easily and effortlessly?
- What are the things that come naturally to you?
- What are you doing when you do not have to think about other people or your responsibilities?

### Completing sentences

The counsellor asks the student to complete the following sentences, after which the counsellor and the student together reflect on what the sentences tell about the student's strengths.

- Others have thanked me for...
- What I value in myself is...
- The things that come naturally to me are...
- The skills that I have used to help others are...
- Already as a child or a teenager I enjoyed activities such as...
- Since childhood, I have been...
- I have always liked...
- I am good at...
- I am most myself when...
- I couldn't imagine...
- I can't...
- I appreciate/I love/I enjoy...

### Reflection

Reflect on the answers and work out what they have in common. If verbalising strengths feels difficult, use strength cards or some other tool to support the work. On the basis of the answers, try to crystallise a few signature strengths. When identifying the strengths, you will notice that the things the student enjoys doing and the things that come naturally to them are indicators of the student's signature strengths.

# STRENGTH STORY

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Identifying and naming one's own strengths and those of others

## Context of use

Group discussion

## Tools and materials

Work instructions and tools for taking notes

## Description

Instructions for group work in four phases

## Research-based knowledge

Niemiec, R. M., & McGrath, R. E. (2019). The power of character strengths. Appreciate and ignite your positive personality. VIA Institute of Character.



## Assignment description for the student

### Phase I:

Begin by thinking about situations in which you have felt that you were successful, positively excited, or which you enjoyed engaging in. The experiences may be related to your studies, work, leisure activities such as a hobby or active involvement in associations, or family life.

### Phase II:

Of the situations you thought about in Phase I, choose one example and present it briefly to the others. You can tell, for example, what your goal was, what you did, what means you used, and who you worked with to attain the goal, and what the outcome was. What was meaningful for you in the experience or what gave you joy?

### Phase III:

The other participants focus on listening without interruption to the participant who is presenting his or her experience. While listening, they take notes about their ideas of what strengths the activity has required or what strengths have probably contributed to the successful completion of the activity.

### Phase IV:

After all participants have presented their story, and the story has been commented on by the others as described in Phase III, the group will discuss the discovered strengths and collectively reflect on the experiences of the assignment.



# MY STRENGTHS THROUGH THE EYES OF OTHERS

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Identifying and naming one's strengths through feedback and other people

## Context of use

Group work

## Tools and materials

Work instructions and tools for taking notes

## Description

Instructions for outlining and categorising one's strengths

## Tip!

Students may find this assignment useful during a traineeship or at work. You may ask a work colleague to help you with the assignment and to give you feedback on your strengths and competencies.



## Assignment description for students

### I) Interview:

Conduct an interview with a study colleague following the instructions presented below. You may use the VAHTO strength cards, lists of strengths, or some other relevant tools in identifying and verbalising strengths.

- "Give an example of a time when you were particularly successful or a time you particularly enjoyed during your studies. What was it about the situation that made you feel successful or fulfilled?"

### II) Reflection:

What is your study colleague good at, i.e. what strengths, skills and competencies does he or she have?

### III) Discussion:

After having reflected on each other's strengths and competencies, discuss them together.

### Strengths

### Skills and competencies

# POSITIVE REFLECTION

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Identifying and naming one's strengths through feedback and other people

## Context of use

Group work or a preliminary assignment completed independently + discussion

## Tools and materials

Work instructions and tools for taking notes

## Description

An assignment with three phases for the purpose of identifying positive feedback

## Research-based knowledge

Soria, K. & Stubblefield, R. (2015). Knowing Me, Knowing You: Building Strengths Awareness, Belonging, and Persistence in Higher Education, *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*.

## I Recognising One's Strengths



### Assignment description for students

#### I) Independent reflection: Experiences and positive feedback

Think about a time when you have received positive feedback. For example, think about the things you have been thanked for at work or during your studies. For what kinds of things do your friends and family members compliment you?

Continue by writing down how you would describe yourself on the basis of the positive feedback you have received.

#### II) Group discussion: Strengths

Tell your group or counsellor for what kinds of things you have received positive feedback. Positive feedback is an indicator of your strengths: Make your strengths visible through discussion. Then, tell the others what kind of job you envision yourself doing after completing your studies. What could the role of your strengths in your future work tasks be?

#### III) Counsellor's summary for students:

- Other people may see your competencies and character traits more clearly than your self. Others may also value your strengths more than you can imagine.
- Some things that seem self-evident to you may actually be your strengths that are worth showcasing in your work life.
- You can draw on the positive feedback you have received when preparing for a job interview or when presenting yourself.

### Tip!

The assignment may be modified according to the theme of the course or used in planning studies. You can begin to work on the discovered strengths by entering them in the Table of Strengths presented in Part II of this workbook.

# STRENGTHS IN PLANNING TEACHING

## Target group

Teachers and counsellors of higher education students

## Goal

To learn to identify study-related situations in which students' strengths can be considered and used

## Context of use

All study-related situations and events

## Tools and materials

The counsellor's creativity and ideas

## Description

Tips for the work of teachers and counsellors

## Research-based knowledge

Leskisenoja, E. & Sandberg, E. (2020). Positiivinen pedagogiikka ja nuorten hyvinvointi [Positive pedagogy and well-being of youth]. PS-kustannus.

Stebleton, M.; Soria, K. & Albecker, A. (2012). Integrating Strength-Based Education into a First-Year Experience Curriculum, *Journal of College and Character* 13:2.

## II Using One's Strengths



## Tips for teachers and counsellors

### Planning study units:

The teacher or counsellor can take the diversity of student strengths into consideration in planning and implementation of study units. While one student is a strong team player, another excels in working independently. Some are gifted writers, whereas others are eloquent speakers.

### Assignment descriptions:

Using strengths or encouraging the participants to reflect on them, for example by completing exercises presented in this workbook

### Finding a traineeship:

When a student is looking for a traineeship, the counsellor may have discussions with the student about jobs or work tasks the traineeship involves. The student's strengths can be used as a starting point in finding a suitable traineeship position. This enables the student to remain inspired and motivated during the traineeship.

### Projects and working life connections:

You may encourage the student to seek a traineeship position that enables them to work in addition to their studies in a project or an event which involves their strengths.

### Thesis:

When the student is in the process of choosing a thesis topic and searching for potential collaboration partners, it is important to encourage the student to rely on their strengths and to follow their interests.

### Teaching situations:

Positive, constructive feedback encourages the student to express their strengths in different situations during their studies.

# REFLECTION ON STRENGTHS DURING THE THESIS PHASE

## Target group

Higher education students at the thesis and final project phase

## Goal

To help the student to plan and pursue their studies through using their strengths

## Context of use

Planning and discussions with the supervisor at the thesis and final project phase

## Tools and materials

Form template and tools for taking notes

## Description

A form around which a reflective dialogue on strengths can be structured

### Tip!

For an even more rewarding experience, the student can prepare for this exercise by completing one or more of the exercises on identifying strengths.

## II Using One's Strengths



### Work instructions

When choosing a topic for their thesis or final project, the student should follow their interests and rely on their strengths. The thesis or final project process consists of several phases and the strengths-based approach can be applied throughout the process. Guidance discussions proceed through reflective questions around the student's signature strengths.

**How can you use your strengths during the different phases of the thesis or final project process?**

Analysis  
Planning  
Implementation  
Evaluation  
Publication

**What are your key strengths relevant to your studies? Choose the top 3 to 5 most important ones**

**How do you express your strengths in your studies and planning them?**

*Discuss and reflect with the counsellor:*

**How will your strengths help you in the process of completing your thesis or final project?**

*Discuss and reflect with the counsellor:*

**Can you think of more ways to emphasise your strengths during your thesis or final project process?**

# TABLE OF STRENGTHS

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Outlining and using strengths

## Context of use

Individual and group guidance

## Tools and materials

The Table of Strengths template and tools for taking notes

## Description

A versatile exercise applicable to a variety of contexts such as coursework, job seeking, finding a traineeship, or planning studies and study guidance

## Other things to note

The Table of Strengths can be easily used in combination with the other exercises in this workbook as it allows collecting the results of the exercises in one place. The Table of Strengths can be modified to suit different needs, so please feel free to make your own Table of Strengths by selecting items suitable for the purpose.

## II Using One's Strengths



### Assignment description for students

In the column on the far left, enter your strengths. Then, for each strength, fill in the rest of the columns as instructed in the title of each column. For an even more rewarding experience, you can prepare for this exercise by completing one or more of the exercises on identifying one's strengths.

Discuss in a group or with the counsellor how strengths manifest and how they can be used.

Strength	The results of a test or an assignment regarding the strength	What kind of feedback have you received regarding the strength?	Where did you first identify the strength?	How do you apply the strength during your leisure time?	How do you apply the strength in your studies?	How do you apply the strength in the work you do?

### Emerging strengths

# STRENGTHS AND COMPETENCIES IN WORK LIFE

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Identifying, developing and using study and career-related skills and competencies

## Context of use

Individual or group guidance, a preliminary assignment completed independently

## Tools and materials

List of competencies and tools for taking notes

## Description

A list of strengths and competencies categorised from the perspective of studies and work life as existing strengths, emerging strengths (strengths to be developed), and strengths to be used

## Research-based knowledge

Linley, A., Willars, J., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). The Strengths Book. The CAPP Press.

Rath, T. (2007). StrengthsFinder 2.0. Gallup Press.

## II Using One's Strengths



### Assignment description for students

#### Strengths and competencies:

Your personal strengths can be, for example, character traits and characteristics that are representative of you. Your competencies are what you can do (with what you know) during your studies or at work. It is important to identify those of your strengths and competencies that are the most relevant to your future career.

- From the list below, select the strengths and competencies that you are using during your studies.
- Then, examine your strengths as they apply to your future career. What strengths will you need in your future work? Which ones of these do you already have and which ones would you like to develop further?
- Conclude by reflecting on how you will be able to use this compilation of strengths and competencies in career planning (for example, finding a traineeship, preparing job applications, engagement in student associations, and social media)

#### Work life competencies

- presentation skills
- customer service skills
- group work skills
- sales skills
- organisation skills
- information search skills
- management skills
- conversation skills
- language skills
- problem solving skills
- listening skills
- written expression skills
- mediation skills
- logical reasoning
- independent work skills
- negotiation skills
- IT skills

#### Strengths

##### Wisdom and Knowledge

Creativity  
Curiosity  
Open-mindedness  
Love of Learning  
Perspective

##### Courage

Bravery  
Perseverance  
Authenticity  
Zest

##### Humanity

Love  
Kindness  
Social Intelligence

##### Justice

Teamwork  
Fairness  
Leadership

##### Temperance

Forgiveness  
Modesty  
Prudence  
Self-Regulation

##### Transcendence

Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence  
Gratitude  
Hope  
Humour  
Spirituality

#### Extras

Ability to organise   Openness   Ambition   Sensitivity   Hard work

# STRENGTHS IN JOB SEEKING

## Target group

Higher education students preparing for job seeking

## Goal

Successful use and presentation of one's strengths in job seeking situations

## Context of use

Individual guidance or an assignment to be completed individually

## Tools and materials

Work instructions and tools for taking notes

## Description

Cue questions to support a job seeker's self-presentation

## Research-based knowledge

Familiarise yourself with the Strength-based Career Counseling model developed by Littman-Ovadian, Lazar-Butbulin and Benjamin!

## II Using One's Strengths



### Assignment description for students

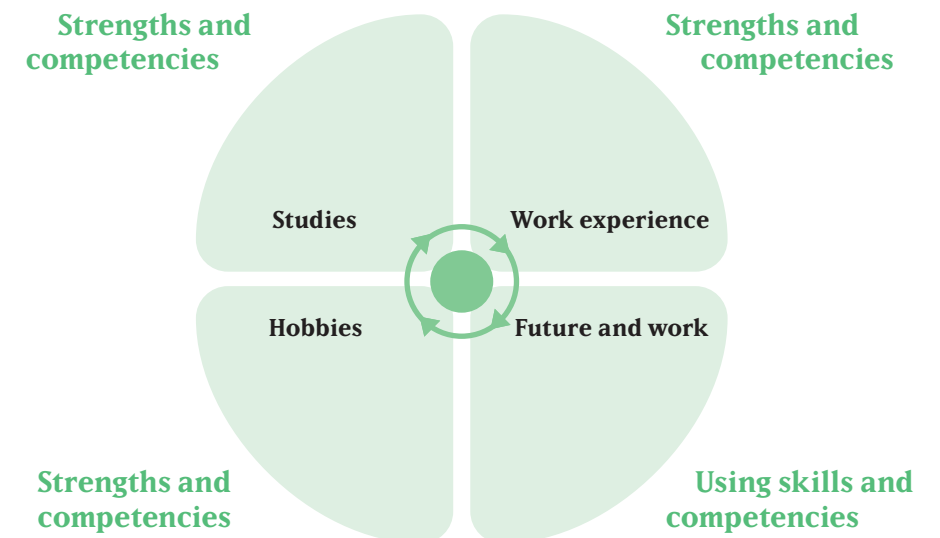
#### 1. Reflection

Use the below questions to reflect on what strengths and competencies you use. Think about how you could use them in work life.

- **Hobbies and leisure time**  
What do you do in your leisure time? What strengths and competencies do you develop in your hobbies and leisure time?
- **Work experience**  
If you have work experience, think about how your supervisor and colleagues have described you and your work contribution. What strengths can you find from these descriptions?
- **Studies**  
Reflect on what kinds of experiences of joy and success you have had in your studies. What were they related to? What kinds of experiences or feedback made you feel successful? What strengths and competencies are related to the success?
- **Strengths at work**  
How and in what kinds of tasks can you use your competencies? When applying for a job, tell about the positive feedback you have received regarding your strengths. Describe also how your strengths manifest at work.

#### 2. Map of Strengths

After reflecting on the questions, make a map of strengths using the example map below. The map will serve as a basis when contacting potential employers, preparing job applications or getting ready for a job interview.



# STRENGTHS IN WORK AND CAREER

## Target group

Students who are working in addition to studying

## Goal

Identifying one's career-related strengths

## Context of use

Individual guidance, group discussion or an assignment to be completed independently

## Tools and materials

Work instructions and tools for taking notes

## Description

A set of questions regarding one's signature strengths and how they manifest in career

## Research-based knowledge

Uusiautti, S. & Määttä, K. (2015). The psychology of becoming a successful worker: Research on the changing nature of achievement at work. Routledge.

## Tip!

For an even more rewarding experience, the student can prepare for this exercise by completing one or more of the exercises on identifying strengths.

## II Using One's Strengths



## Assignment description for the student

With the help of the set of questions below, reflect on your strengths from the perspective of your career. You may present the answers by writing an essay or you may discuss the themes in groups.

### **How do your signature strengths manifest at work? How could you make even more use of them?**

Give concrete examples of how you could use a particular strength when performing specific work tasks and what positive added value it would create regarding your work or career.

### **How have your signature strengths guided you in your career so far?**

Think back to your choice of field of study, the jobs you have had, and reflect on your job satisfaction and your level of satisfaction with your choices.

### **Think about your career so far and recall one positive and memorable event.**

It is irrelevant whether the event is a major or small-scale event: What matters is that the event has been meaningful to you and has affected your career. What character strengths were involved in this situation and how did you express them?

### **What kinds of challenges, turning points or contradictions have you experienced during your career?**

How are these situations related to your signature strengths? Sometimes career failures or crises may indicate that we are working against our signature strengths.

### **How could you use one of your signature strengths in a new way?**

If you are facing a challenge in work life, how could you use this particular strength to live up to the challenge?

### **Select a few strengths to be developed (your emerging strengths). These may be strengths that you have identified that need improving.**

Think about ways of developing these strengths and envision how they could play out in your work life.



# FOSTERING SELF-DIRECTEDNESS THROUGH GUIDANCE

## Target group

Teachers and counsellors in higher education

## Goal

The counsellor finds motivating ways to engage the student in discussions that support the attainment of the student's goals

## Context of use

one-on-one discussion

## Tools and materials

The counsellor's interaction skills and other expertise

## Description

Instructions for discussion and other activities to encourage motivating interaction in teaching and guidance situations

## Research-based knowledge

Pajares, F. (2000). "Toward a Positive Psychology of Academic Motivation." *Journal of Educational Research* 95(1).

Ryan, R. & Deci, E. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, Vol 55(1).

Rizkallah, E. & Seitz, V. (2017). Understanding Student Motivation: A Key to Retention in Higher Education. *Scientific Annals of Economics and Business* 64(1).



### 1. Sources of motivation

By fostering self-directedness, the counsellor helps the student to identify their sources of motivation. The objective is to help the student to find intrinsic motivation to work towards their goals, both small-scale ones such as completing a course, or major ones such as completing a degree.

### 2. Collaboration and responsibility

When supporting the student's progress, the counsellor collaborates with the student and should try to avoid putting pressure on them. The counsellor expresses interest in the participant's thoughts and ideas, and provides support and tools that support attainment of goals. Ultimately the responsibility for actions lies with the participants themselves.

### 3. Resources and strengths

When the focus of guidance is on identifying strengths and strengthening the feeling of self-efficacy and competency, the participant is more likely to take action that serves the attainment of their goals. Identifying one's strengths opens up the opportunity to find novel and innovative solutions in the face of possible challenges. The counsellor supports the student in setting their personal goals that are proportionate with the student's readiness.

### 4. Empathy and compassion in guidance

When interacting with the participant, the counsellor should be able to see things from the participant's perspective. If the counsellor adopts an attitude that is in any way judgemental towards the participant's study challenges or situation, the participant may withdraw from the collaboration. This is why it is of primary importance to express empathy and compassion and make every effort to contribute towards resolving the challenges the participant may be facing.

### 5. Fostering self-directedness

The purpose of guidance is to foster the participant's self-directedness and guide the participant towards taking responsibility for their own actions. The counsellor may encourage the student to reflect on the obstacles that they will need to overcome to attain the set goals and to seek and try out different ways of overcoming the obstacles.

### 6. Goals and next steps

The student reflects on the main reasons why progress with studies is desirable and focuses on finding better ways to contribute to the progress. The student and the counsellor work together to set the goals, determine the means by which they can be attained, and agree on the next steps to be taken.

## Tip!

By fostering self-directness, the counsellor encourages the student to activate a curiosity-driven mindset. Thus, counselling also guides the student to contribute towards the progress in studies in line with their goals.

## Some examples:

**I would like to complete my studies**  
Great! When do you see yourself doing this and what steps do you need to take?

**I would like to catch up with the group and complete the missing courses**

Great! What exactly are the courses you still have to complete? What could you do to complete them? How should you proceed to catch up with the group?

# PRODUCTISING STRENGTHS

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Development of strengths-based collaborative skills and developing one's strengths further by letting the participants experience how they can develop their own strengths in practice in collaboration with others

## Context of use

Group work

## Tools and materials

Work instructions, VAHTO strength cards or an equivalent tool, tools for taking notes

## Description

Group work in four phases. The participants form small groups and the group members share ideas about each other's strengths through developing ideas for companies or products.

## Research-based knowledge

Johnson, K. 2017. The Importance of Personal Branding in Social Media: Educating Students to Create and Manage their Personal Brand. *International Journal of Education and Social Science* 4(1).

Tuomaala, A. 2020. Verkkoportfolio henkilöbrändin ja työnhaun tukena. [Online portfolio as the support for personal branding and seeking for employment]. HaagaHelia.



## Work instructions

### 1. Choosing strengths

The counsellor divides the students into small groups and provides the groups with VAHTO strength cards or an equivalent tool. With the help of the tool, each member of the group chooses for themselves three strengths, skills, or competence areas that they feel are particularly representative of them. The students write their choices down. It is also possible to choose strengths that are not mentioned in the tool used.

### 2. Collaboration and sharing ideas

The counsellor gives each group a theme around which the group develops an idea for a company or a product. The group members collectively envision what kind of a company or product they could build around their theme while using the strengths and competencies of the group members. The ideas are written down on an idea paper or an idea sharing platform. Every group member's strengths have to be included in the plan.

### Cue questions:

- What kinds of tasks could each group member perform in the company?
- How could the group make use of a member's hobby or expertise in product development?
- What role could the group members' strengths play in founding the company?
- Which group member has marketing savvy? Which member would be able to take care of the company's finances?
- Who excels in communications and who is an idea person?

### 3. Presenting the idea to the other groups

The group chooses from among its members a presenter and prepares to present the idea to the others. The presenter tells the other groups about the planned product or company.

### 4. Feedback

After the group work, the participants agree with the counsellor on reflecting on the work process and giving feedback to others in such a manner that every group receives constructive feedback for their work contribution.

# STRENGTHS-BASED PEER FEEDBACK

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies

## Goal

Naming one's signature strengths and identifying development targets

## Context of use

Group work

## Tools and materials

Work instructions, tools for taking notes, a watch or a timer

## Description

Giving and receiving peer feedback after the group work session



## Work instructions

The assignment is completed after a group work situation or a joint project. The counsellor gives instructions to the students and observes the situation.

### 1. Groups

The students stay in the same group in which they completed an activity or a project.

### 2. Tools and materials

Each student needs pen and paper.

### 3. Valmistautuminen

Paperin etupuolelle kirjoitetaan yläreunaan teksti "Toimit ryhmässä erityisen hyvin..." ja kääntöpuolelle teksti "Olisin mielelläni nähnyt enemmän...". Tavoitteena on kirjata kunkin opiskelijan paperin molemmille puolille 3–5 asiaa.

### 4. Instructions for giving feedback

Each student receives oral feedback from the group. The group member who is receiving feedback focuses on listening and is not allowed to speak. One of the group members who are giving feedback takes notes. When the next group member receives feedback, the note taker changes, too. The feedback round starts with discussing the positive feedback on the front side of the paper. The time allowed for the discussion is 2 to 3 minutes. The counsellor observes the time limit and reminds the students of how much time is left. Those who are giving feedback discuss what kinds of strengths and

competencies the student who is receiving feedback expressed during the group work situation and how the group benefited from them. The note taker will write down these points on the front side of the paper. The reverse side of the paper is filled in the same way, but this time indicating what could be developed further. Those giving feedback discuss what the feedback receiver could have done more or differently in the group work situation. The feedback should be constructive, as its purpose is to contribute to positive development of strengths.

### 5. How to proceed

The same process is repeated for each member of the group and the feedback paper is given to the feedback receiver.

### 6. Discussion

At the end of the session, there will be a free-form discussion on the feedback among the group.

### 7. Conclusion

After the assignment has been completed, the counsellor presents a brief wrap-up of the strengths discovered together and mentions some key points about the significance of positive peer feedback.

# GUIDANCE DISCUSSION WITH A NEW STUDENT

## Target group

Students at the beginning of their higher education studies

## Goal

To use the student's strengths as a basis for clarifying the student's views on career planning

## Context of use

One-on-one discussion at the beginning of the studies, for example a Personal Study Plan (HOPS) discussion

## Tools and materials

Discussion template, tools for taking notes, an exercise for identifying strengths

## Description

Discussion template and cue questions



## Work instructions

### Background questions

*The counsellor discusses with the student covering the following topics:*

- Educational background
- Work experience
- Hobbies and interests
- Challenges
- Ideas about the direction of studies
- Career plans

### Dialogue about the student's strengths

*The counsellor opens the discussion on strengths by having the student complete an exercise on identifying one's strengths. In the discussion that follows, the counsellor will address the following points:*

- What does the student think about the results of the strength exercise?
- Does the student feel that something is missing?
- Did the exercise yield any unexpected results?

### Viewing the student's strengths as they relate to studies and career plans

*The counsellor asks the student to reflect on their strengths as they relate to studies and career plans.*

- The student reflects on their choice of major and minor subject
- The student's goals related to their choices of study options

### The possibilities of using strengths

The counsellor asks the student to think about the possibilities of using their strengths during and after higher education studies.

### Feedback

The counsellor asks what kind of an experience the discussion on strengths was to the student at the beginning of studies.

## Tip!

Exercises on identifying one's strengths are available in Part I of this workbook.

# GUIDANCE DISCUSSION WITH A STUDENT APPROACHING GRADUATION

## Target group

Higher education students approaching graduation

## Goal

To use the student's strengths as a basis for clarifying the student's plans for the future

## Context of use

One-on-one discussion towards the end of the studies, for example a final discussion with the supervisor/counsellor.

## Tools and materials

Discussion template, tools for taking notes

## Description

Discussion template and cue questions

## Research-based knowledge

Uusiautti, S. (2019). Tunnista vahvuutesi ja menesty [Recognise your strengths and succeed]. Kirjapaja.



## Työskentelyohje

### Background questions

*The counsellor discusses with the student addressing the following topics:*

- The student's situation at the graduation phase
- Future plans
- Dream job upon graduation
- Plans five years into the future
- Interesting jobs or tasks
- Postgraduate study plans

### Dialogue about the student's strengths

*The counsellor opens the discussion on strengths by having the student complete an exercise on identifying one's strengths. In the discussion that follows, the counsellor will address the following points:*

- What does the student think about the results of the strength exercise?
- Does the student feel that something is missing?
- Did the exercise yield any unexpected results?

### Viewing the student's strengths as they relate to work life and career plans

*The counsellor asks the student to reflect on their strengths as they relate to their future work life and career plans.*

- How could the student's strengths play out in their future work life and career planning?

### Possibilities for making use of strengths

The counsellor asks the student to envision how their strengths could play out after completing the higher education degree. The counsellor may also give words of encouragement to the student and motivate them to rely on their strengths in their career development, even if the opportunity to use their strengths to the fullest would not present itself in the early stages of their career.

### Feedback

The counsellor asks what kind of an experience the discussion on strengths was to the student at the graduation phase.

## Tip!

Exercises on identifying one's strengths are available in Part I of this workbook..



# CAREER PLANNING WITH A STUDENT APPROACHING GRADUATION

## Target group

Higher education students approaching graduation

## Goal

Viewing the student's life from the perspective of career planning and future orientation

## Context of use

Individual and group guidance or a preliminary assignment completed independently

## Tools and materials

Career planning template and tools for taking notes

## Description

Work instructions and the career planning template

## Tip!

In individual guidance, the student and the counsellor may fill in the template together during the guidance session, or the student may fill it in independently prior to the session.

## Work instructions

Fill in the career planning template as instructed by your counsellor. The completed form serves as a starting point for discussion about your future career and related measures, such as information search needs, educational or job opportunities, or further career planning advice.

Career planning

Education

Dreams and interests

Skills and competencies

Strengths

Important job qualities

Life situation and health

Competence needs and development targets

Hobbies and leisure time

Future (education/job)

Goals and plans

# INTO THE FUTURE WITH STRENGTHS

## Target group

Higher education students in various phases of their studies, including those planning further study

## Goal

Future orientation and starting career planning based on strengths

## Context of use

An assignment to be completed individually or individual guidance

## Tools and materials

Exercise and tools for taking notes

## Description

Instructions and cue questions

## Research-based knowledge

Ahvenainen, M., Heikkilä, K., Jokinen, L., Miettinen, S., Ollila, J., Pietikäinen, N. & Vuorisalo, K. (2017). Future – Open For Possibilities! Futures Guidance Workbook. Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku.

Niles S. (2011). Career Flow: A Hope-Centered Model of Career Development. Journal of Employment Counselling 48(4).

## Other things to note

If the exercise is completed as an individual assignment, it is important to plan the assignment description in such a way that the assignment is appropriate to the student's situation and allows for reflection on the results. Finishing long-term assignments can be challenging if the assignment is completed independently without follow-up.

## IV Focusing on the Future with One's Strengths

You can think about your career as consisting of experiences gained during your studies, at work, or through your hobbies. Recall a situation related to one of these aspects of your life in which you felt enthusiastic, immersed in and satisfied with what you were doing. Follow the steps outlined below and describe what happened

### Step 1

- What were you doing? \_\_\_\_\_
- Who was with you at that moment? \_\_\_\_\_
- What were your surroundings like? \_\_\_\_\_
- What happened before, during and after the activity?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What physiological sensations (e.g. relaxation, anxiety) did you experience?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What skills did you use? \_\_\_\_\_
- What values or interests were involved in the situation  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Which ones of your strengths played out in the situation and how did you make use of them? \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 2

**On the basis of your answers for step 1, complete the following sentences:**

My ideal career experiences are characterised by my use of \_\_\_\_\_ skills, and the values and interests I express are: \_\_\_\_\_

The following strengths are present in my ideal career experiences: \_\_\_\_\_

Some other meaningful observations I have made in my ideal career situations are: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 3

Next, think about your ideal career situations by answering the following questions:

- Did you work as part of a team? Do you prefer to work independently or in a team?
- In these situations, were you indoors or outdoors? Do you prefer to work indoors or outdoors?
- Did time play a role in the activities? When working on a task, do you prefer to work against a deadline or without a specific deadline?

Please add any other observations about your top career experiences: \_\_\_\_\_

Write a short summary of what happens during these career experiences, what skills, values and strengths are present in these situations, and in what kind of surroundings these experiences typically take place.

### Step 4

Observe and reflect on your own activities for a few weeks. Identify similar or other ideal situations that make you feel enthusiastic or bring you enjoyment. If you notice that certain types of situations are particularly enjoyable to you, they may be relevant to your career planning. These experiences hint at the types of activities through which you can best express yourself.

# AS AN EXPERT IN THE FUTURE

## Target group

Higher education students in the career planning phase, including those planning further study

## Goal

Outlining one's future goals and identifying starting points and competence needs from the perspective of strengths

## Context of use

dividual or group guidance

## Tools and materials

Exercise template and tools for taking notes

## Description

Outlining "The 'me' of the future" by using the designated exercise template

## Tip!

The exercise can be completed during a one-on-one discussion between the student and the counsellor, or parts of the exercise can be completed during a group work session. The exercise can also serve as a starting point for further career planning.



## Assignment description for the student

Envision yourself in ten years and complete "The 'me' of the future" by adding your dreams, strengths, and goals in the template provided. You can also refer to Future Studies resources in envisioning your future.

\_\_\_\_\_ in year \_\_\_\_\_  
*my name*

<b>Education and job description</b>	<b>Dreams</b>
<b>Skills and competencies</b>	<b>Life situation and hobbies</b>
<b>Values</b>	<b>Strengths</b>



# AFTERWORD

As the old sayings have it, “Practice makes perfect” and “Repetition is the mother of learning”. This is true of the present workbook and its exercises, too. The book and the exercises are flexible and can be modified and applied to suit different purposes and contexts. Use the exercises frequently to master the art of strengths-based future guidance.

## Are you already familiar with all the exercises?

For further insights, you may want to consult the works listed in the Bibliography section.

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We all have strengths that play out in every area of our life: study, work, and the everyday. Our strengths are our natural ways of acting, thinking, learning and feeling. It is worth striving towards wellbeing, a successful future, and a good life. Strengths inspire and empower us. They lead the way towards experiences of career success, contribute to a greater comfort at work, and enhance our wellbeing.

The Workbook of Strengths-Based Future Guidance will be your guide into strengths-based future thinking, and identifying, using, applying and developing strengths. In the workbook you will find a variety of exercises and methods that will help you in your efforts to guide the participants towards gaining insights about themselves and their future plans, and to provide them with tools for verbalising their competencies and reflecting on their strengths. The exercises provide a basis for enhancing self-knowledge and for developing skills needed in study, work and life more generally.

This book is intended as a support for strengths-based future guidance and as a tool for study and career counsellors, teachers, and anyone working with young people and adults. The exercises featured in the book offer examples of how the strengths-based approach can be used in various situations, for example during different phases of studies or in an individual or group guidance setting. The strength exercises have been developed on the basis of theory and the project's guidance pilot sessions and tools. They apply strengths-based thinking from the perspective of the individual's situation. The objective is to deepen the individual's understanding of their own potential and the ways in which it can be used, and to help them to develop a coherent picture of their strengths.

It is our hope that this book will be a valuable companion to you and the guidance participants on your path towards new insights.

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Elinkeino-, liikenne- ja  
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