

# Quality for online language courses – a coaching program for teachers

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**Abstract.** Finnish universities of applied sciences are building a shared digital course offering, and therefore, digital pedagogy and teachers' competences are being developed via the eAMK project which provides a nationwide coaching program. The program started early in 2018 to ensure that the staff competence in digital pedagogy is timely and that the quality of the courses offered through CampusOnline.fi is consistent and as high as possible. Language teachers take part in the coaching program as a subgroup in which the focus is on language specific topics and issues. The aim was to cover all language competences and to offer suitable digital solutions for them all. The coaching program includes webinars, online and face-to-face meetings, and guidance and workshops. The participating language teachers considered the coaching program beneficial; especially peer feedback, webinars, and workshops were regarded as supportive. The sessions were arranged according to the teachers' timetables which enabled regular participation.

**Keywords:** digital pedagogy, higher education, professional development.

## 1. Introduction

Finnish universities of applied sciences are building shared digital courses which “enable open, year-round studying and more flexible specialization and cross-studying opportunities between the educational institutions for the students” (<https://www.eamk.fi/en/project2/>). Furthermore, students nowadays tend to combine work and study, and therefore flexible study opportunities are needed. The digital course aims “to shorten [study] times, make study paths more versatile and, ultimately, secure better employment. The new educational solutions meet with the competence needs of the future and ensure smooth [e-learning] study paths for

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students” (<https://www.eamk.fi/en/project2/>). The year-round digital courses offer will work under the name CampusOnline.fi.

## 2. Coaching program

The coaching program is based on the quality criteria for online implementations, which consists of 11 topics: target group and users, learning objectives, learning process and pedagogical solutions, assignments, contents and materials, tools, interaction, guidance and feedback, evaluation, development, usability and visuals, and support services. The quality criteria were developed in the eAMK project, which was funded by the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education. In creating the criteria, the expert team utilized the already existing Finnish and European online quality criteria, such as quality cards (Aarreniemi-Jokipelto et al., n.d.) and EOCCS (2019) standards and criteria cards.

The quality criteria are available online in several languages and it is free of charge. It can be used for organization-wide development work as well as for self-assessment by teachers. The coaching program engages participants to experiment with practical ways to use the quality criteria. In addition to the coaching program, several Finnish universities of applied sciences have utilized the quality criteria in their internal quality development.

In the autumn term 2018, 77 teachers and 24 higher education institutes participated in the program, resulting in 60 e-learning courses. In the Finnish education system, higher education is provided by traditional universities and universities of applied sciences, and in this program, 23 universities of applied sciences and one university were involved. The number of language teachers was ten and they formed a subgroup of the coaching program. The coaching program provided five webinars, two nationwide training days, four subject-specific video conference sessions, and two face-to-face meetings for the participants. The duration of the program was six months and the teachers for the training program were selected via applications.

In the first webinar, the whole training program and the quality criteria were introduced, and the notion of the pedagogical model was presented. Further, the importance of visualizing the learning process with deadlines and tools at the beginning of the course or module was emphasized. The first assignment was to (1) evaluate participant’s own course according to the criteria, (2) choose the important elements of the criteria in order to develop a course for the CampusOnline offer, (3) set one’s own goals, methods to reach them, and describe needed support, (4)

write down questions and ideas on development points, (5) ask questions e.g. in the small group or in the LinkedIn group, and (6) in the upcoming webinars write down new ideas.

The second webinar provided information on task design and the aspects that should be taken into account, and suitable learning material was discussed. The second assignment was given: the teachers were to estimate their digital pedagogy competence and create a Padlet-virtual wall and use it as a reflective tool for their own development. A week after the second webinar, the language teachers had a Zoom meeting where Padlets were presented and discussed.

The topics of the third webinar were guidance, feedback, and evaluation according to the quality criteria. Team teaching, evaluation of a collaborative project, and a five step model of guiding was presented (Salmon, 2013). Regarding guiding, the importance of scheduling and tools were highlighted and examples of pedagogical scripts with activities, timing, guiding, and assessment were provided. Various tools and types of evaluation were covered: self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, and teacher evaluation. For the third assignment, the teachers were asked to continue with their own Padlets and post a question in the LinkedIn group of the project.

The fourth webinar focused on interaction, communality, collaboration, and gamification in e-learning. The benefits of synchronous and asynchronous interaction were presented as well as relevant tools for interaction. The participants were asked to prepare themselves for peer assessment and to present their own plan or implementation. After the webinar there was the subgroup meeting on Zoom where the teachers presented the phase of their own course and peers provided valuable feedback.

Thereafter, a two day face-to-face seminar with all participants was organized in Helsinki. Besides workshops and subgroup meetings, the program included topics such as learning analytics, context, and materials, as well as tools for guidance. In their own subgroup, language teachers presented their own courses with pedagogical scripts and implementation plans. They also gained teacher and peer feedback.

The fifth and last webinar covered the topics: tools, usability, and visuals. In addition, students' workload and timing of the assignments were discussed. It was stressed that the teacher needs to schedule time for guidance sessions throughout the course which should be taken into consideration when planning the teachers' workload for the term. The last assignment for the teachers was to make a

development plan of their own course in relation with the quality criteria, and to finalize their own course according to the received peer and trainer feedback.

In the last subgroup online meeting, the language teachers presented their finalized courses and implementation plans. In addition, the benefits of the training program were discussed and development ideas were gathered.

During the spring term 2019, the created courses were implemented in the CampusOnline platform and student feedback was collected from the pilot courses. The teachers were also asked to conduct self-evaluation and further development plans of their courses.

The final webinar of the eAMK project was organized in June 2019, six months after the training program had finished. The topics covered CampusOnline student feedback, the current news from CampusOnline, and perceptions and feedback of the coaching program. In addition, the concept of badges was introduced.

### **3. Feedback**

In the last webinar, the advantages and disadvantages of the coaching program were discussed. According to the feedback, the language teachers considered the coaching program beneficial for their digital pedagogy competence improvement. In addition, the design of the program with its various phases and subject-related online guidance sessions were appreciated. The trainer and peer feedback and expertise were valued. All participating language teachers would recommend the coaching program for their colleagues. However, the teachers complained that alongside with their work they had limited recourses to concentrate on the program. The language teachers in turn had received positive feedback from their students on the courses created or improved during the eAMK project. The students appreciated especially the flexibility online courses provided, enabling the students to combine their studies with working life.

### **4. Conclusions**

The nationwide coaching program, the eAMK project, improved language teachers' digital pedagogical competences. Further, the coaching program scaffolded the teachers to create or improve already existing online language courses with field-specific webinars, seminars, and video conference guiding and feedback sessions.

The implemented language courses received positive feedback from the students. The feedback from the participating teachers and their students will be analyzed in more detail.

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