

# Developing teaching professionals' digital competences in European higher education in the time of corona pandemic

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## Keywords

Teachers' digital competences, learning design, digital academy, higher education, cross-institutional, international cooperation, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

## 1. Summary

Digitalization and the changes in education in general challenge both students and teachers in higher education and bring new demands for teachers' competences. The 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are not only required of students but also of the teaching professionals. The idea of life-long or continuous learning has made the student population more diverse and affects also to modes of study and teaching. In addition to these, the corona pandemic brought another challenge. The teachers had to react basically during a weekend and take all teaching online when the first lockdown started in March 2020.

To be able to meet the demands, the teachers need to develop their digital competences, which does not only mean technical but also pedagogical skills. A common training course on teachers' digital competences has been developed in the FORTHEM project for partner universities. The core contents of the training focus on developing the digital competences and using the ABC model on course design. In addition, after the training the participating teachers take a role of a digital mentor in their home universities to help their peers by sharing the outcomes and good practices of the training.

The training was originally planned to be organized face-to-face, but because of the pandemic also this had to be held fully online. Our concern as the training organizers was how motivated and committed the participants are in an online training. We all know how easy it is to multitask during a Zoom meeting, and not really concentrate on the subject. But our concerns were unnecessary, all the participants were active and very engaged in the training.

In this presentation we talk about the experiences of the first training on digital competences for the alliance teachers from the organizers' as well as the participants' point of view.

## 2. FORTHEM ALLIANCE DEVELOPING TEACHERS' 21ST CENTURY DIGITAL COMPETENCES

The University of Jyväskylä in Finland is a member of a European University alliance called FORTHEM (Fostering Outreach within European Regions, Transnational Higher Education and Mobility; 2019-2022). The FORTHEM project enhances the mobility of students and staff members, cooperation with university-external stakeholders as well as the civic activity of students. FORTHEM is an alliance of seven multidisciplinary universities in seven EU countries, based on existing multi-disciplinary, bilateral and trilateral collaborations (Figure 1). FORTHEM is a part of the European Universities Initiative, funded by the European Commission. The FORTHEM alliance is coordinated by Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz in Germany.



Figure 1. FORTHEM alliance partner countries.

One of the FORTHEM project's main activities is mobility mission. FORTHEM improves both physical and virtual mobility by developing and activating student and staff mobility within the alliance and beyond. To enhance virtual mobility, the alliance offers an inclusive FORTHEM Digital Academy digital platform with online courses, and new, tandem-learning and student tutoring facilities. For the alliance teachers a blended course provided by the University of Jyväskylä was planned for developing the teachers' 21<sup>st</sup> century digital competences.

The virtual mobility offered in the form of e-learning has become even more important due to the COVID19 pandemic, as physical mobility stopped in an exceptional situation caused by the corona. All forms of physical mobility already planned and agreed on were cancelled and alternative ways had to be considered.

### 3. EUROPEAN FRAMEWORKS TO TRAIN THE TEACHERS

The main themes of this "Tools and tips for teachers for course design" course are the training of digital competence of educators (DigCompEdu) and the ABC model on course design.

From the DigCompEdu framework three core educators' competences are included in this training: teaching and learning, assessment and empowering learners (Figure 2).

The ABC model on course design is a hands-on workshop where a visual storyboard of the course is created. This discipline neutral model has been developed by the University College of London and has been trialled with success over a range of programmes over the world.

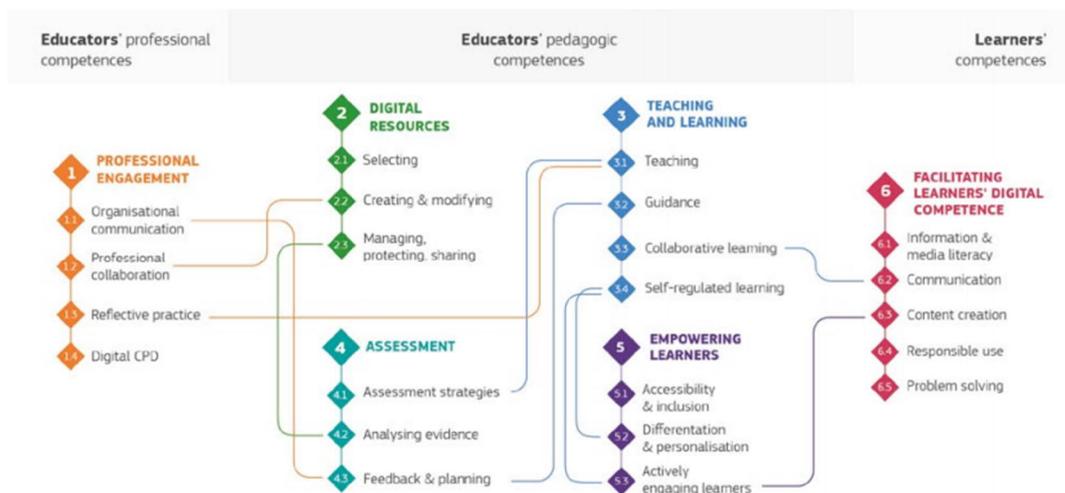


Figure 2. The DigCompEdu framework.

### 3.1. Learning goals

The aim of the training is to give tools and knowledge for pedagogical design of online/blended courses. After the training the participant:

- understands the concept of digital competences
- is able to use a range of digital resources in teaching in a flexible, comprehensive and effective way
- knows how to use the ABC model in learning design
- is able to act as a digital mentor for colleagues in the home university

Originally, the training was planned to include both online and face-to-face meetings but because of the corona pandemic it had to be organized fully online. The participants are from various disciplines and can be newcomers in using ICT in teaching or more experienced teachers. They come to the training with a preliminary plan of a blended or an online course. The participants use a self-assessment tool to assess their starting level and knowledge of ICT in teaching before the first synchronous meeting online. The digital competence framework has been used as a basis for developing the assessment tool.

## 4. SHARING GOOD PRACTICES AND BUILDING NETWORKS FOR THE FUTURE

The ABC model is discipline neutral and there are no specific requirements for the participants' knowledge of learning design or the use of ICT in teaching. However, the home organization's level of digitalization and the different organizational and educational cultures of participants can be a challenge in carrying out the training. The different background can also affect on how the participants assess their starting level with the online self-assessment tool.

The aim of the training is to benefit from learning together from your peers and sharing good practices in an international and cross-institutional group. After the training the participants form a network of digital mentors and share what they have learned to their colleagues. The training model will not only be of use for the teachers, but also for the teams of digital learning support or learning design. Lacking the physical face-to-face meetings and informal get-togethers challenged both the participants and the organizers in the training. When fully online, the commitment to the training may not be as strong as when you are physically in the same room. But then again, everybody has had to reorganize their teaching, so the peer feedback and peer support in the training is very valuable.

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