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Encouraging actions in tackling higher education pandemic challenges

Innovative impact

This article gives an encouraging example of how higher education policies and practices can adapt to totally unexpected paradigm changes in a short time.

The viewpoint of Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) in Finland, is likely to resemble the situation in many other European universities. The institutional Covid-19 pandemic emergency measures taken at TAMK represent the short-term impact, of which we already have collected some data and feedback.

The governmental educational pandemic support programs reflect the long-term impact expected on higher education in Finland. As these governmental support and recovery programs are largely based on the EU-based Covid-19 financial assistance to EU governments, the article can also prove to be useful in other European countries and higher education institutions.

Introduction

This article is based on information collected from actors in Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK). TAMK Education Development Services has collected comments and feedback from their lecturers, educational and curriculum developers and students. The Covid-19 pandemic situation at TAMK is reflected from the point of view of the educational staff, as well as governmental emergency actions and nationwide development projects taking place in Finland.

Blended, hybrid and online education in the pandemic situation

At TAMK **blended learning** has been an integral part of the institutional strategy since the beginning of the millennium. Blended learning has an equal role besides **online learning** or **contact teaching**, and all these modes have been deeply embedded in the educational practices in our institution.

During the Covid-19 pandemic exceptional situation, since March 2020, blended learning suddenly appeared to be less in the focus than before. Instead, the concept of **hybrid learning** appeared in active use among TAMK teachers and educational support staff. The teachers at TAMK mainly seem to understand the hybrid learning as a setting, where the teacher has a face-to-face group in a classroom on the campus, and distance students online simultaneously. A demand for pure online learning has also inevitably increased due to the pandemic situation.

Nearly all teaching at TAMK shifted to online and distance mode when the Finnish Government declared a state of emergency in Finland over the coronavirus outbreak on 16 March 2020 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). However, many of the laboratory assignments, and studies of the first-year students remained on the campus. The state of emergency ended in two months, on 16 June (Finnish Government, 2020).

Widened opportunities to develop online and hybrid teaching skills

Since the beginning of 2020 Tampere University and Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) constitute **the Tampere Universities community**. The staff from these two institutions cross-attend increasingly each other's staff training.

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To mention a few of the typical types of staff training, TAMK is arranging **Moodle Masters studies**, comprising thirteen 90 minutes training sessions online, covering comprehensively various Moodle-related themes. Similarly, eleven different training sessions on **video and podcast technologies** were offered to the staff shortly after declaring the exceptional situation. Online training series on the technically monitored **EXAM electronic examination system** included four one-hour online webinars (EXAM-consortium, 2021). Taking part in these training sessions was highly recommended to the teaching staff, but fully voluntary.

In addition, teachers had initially the opportunity to receive **real-time online guidance** from online pedagogical support team every working day, Monday to Friday from 9 to 10 AM. As the emergency has gradually calmed down, the number of real-time online support sessions has been decreased to one session per week.

The Tampere Universities community has arranged online trainings focusing on how to quickly transform existing contact teaching to online learning, how to flexibly leap to a pandemic mode of teaching. The recordings of these training sessions are available for all the Tampere universities community staff. Additionally, full-day or half-day training sessions on various Microsoft tools or social media apps are provided by a commercial partner company.

The portfolio of staff training related to blended and hybrid learning appears to be well-aligned considering the rapid pandemic change of the teachers' professional landscape.

Sharing digital education practices

TAMK has a few established ways to share the educational practices between its staff members. **TAMK conferences** are organized annually. Practically no presenters, keynote lecturers or even attendants come from outside to this conference. Selected presentations are collected into a TAMK Conference printed publication. In February 2020 the TAMK conference was organized in a traditional face-to-face manner, but in 2021 the conference went online.

TAMK **Staff Days** are usually arranged four times a year. Besides the management sharing the latest organizational information, a case or two of the best teaching and digital learning practices usually fit into the program. **TAMKjournal (2021)** in an open access web journal focusing on research, development, innovation, and education. The journal also shares best educational practices to some extent.

Tampere Universities community has a network of **Digimentors**, who are teachers mentoring their peers in the same school, faculty or team. A digimentor is the first point of contact, when a pedagogical approach to a blended, hybrid or online learning issue is required. Digimentors are close enough professionally to their peers. The digimentors maintain a Digital Toolkit which is available for anyone (Tampere Universities community, 2021).

[olevan-poikkeusoloissa-koronavirustilanteen-vuoksi](#)

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Digimentors

Digimentors at the Tampere universities community are teachers mentoring their peers in questions of digital education.

<https://sites.tuni.fi/digitaltoolkit/digimentors/>

Governmental policies and programs

Blended education is regarded as one of the standard modes of implementing education in Finland. **The vision for the Finnish higher education and research in 2030** paper was published by the Ministry of Education in October 2017. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017).

The current government in Finland has launched a **Digivisio 2030 project** based on the vision paper (Digivisio 2030, 2021). These initiatives focus on digital education in all its forms and modes. To give an idea of the extent of the investment in digital education in Finland, the budget of the Digivisio 2030 project is about 120 million euros for the timespan 2020-2040. (Digivisio 2030 application, 2020).

Well-being of students

It evidently is a wrong assumption that all students have an easy access to proper IT systems, and they have broadband connections. The pandemic situation is a challenge for many students. Finnish Government has on 14 Oct 2020 announced a special grant that is aimed at universities, student organizations, student unions, student unions and actors within the administration of the Ministry of Education and Culture, whose main goal is to promote the well-being of university students. The grant can be used, for example, to alleviate the students' experience of loneliness, to develop support activities or strengthen community spirit. (Valtioneuvosto, 2020.)

Conclusion

As the Covid-19 emergency started in the middle of March 2020, universities were practically ordered to switch to online and distance mode in Finland. The shift was based on the emergency legislation. Although the state of emergency has legally ended, the distance and online mode seems to continue at least until August 2021.

The Finnish Ministry of Education is making a significant investment in digital education with their Digivisio 2030 project and the related vision paper. The significance of physical campuses and spacious university buildings will be further questioned after the Covid-19 situation. We have experienced that working and studying in the distance and hybrid modes is a real option for an increasing number of people.