



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union
FAVILLE: 2019-1-SK01-KA204-060711



Professional Competences of Virtual Learning Facilitators – The FAVILLE Competence Profile

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FAVILLE is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership project. It aims to enhance the quality standards of facilitation in virtual learning environments and to provide skills and competences that facilitators of virtual learning need to develop or improve their activity. More information at: <http://faville-project.eu/>



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Acknowledgement: FAVILLE is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union under Grant Agreement n° 2019-1-SK01-KA204-060711

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1 Introduction

The FAVILLE competence profile for Virtual Learning Facilitators was derived from a needs analysis that was conducted in the five partner countries of the FAVILLE project: Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and the Slovak Republic. For the needs analysis, desk research was first conducted, in which relevant documents of various kinds (research reports, theoretical literature, practice reports, policy papers, etc.) were evaluated. Secondly, expert interviews were conducted in all FAVILLE partner countries to collect specific expert statements on the task profile and competence needs of Virtual Learning Facilitators.

The Needs Analysis revealed competence needs for VLFs in five areas

1. Technical and legal competence (related to e-learning)
2. *Socio-communicative competence*
3. *Professional awareness and adult learning principles*
4. *Didactic-methodical competence*
5. *Managing, Planning and Organisational competence*

Competence in FAVILLE is understood as a complex construct which comprises a combination of factual knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as personal skills and (professional) attitudes. Competent professionals in this understanding possess a relevant base of theoretical knowledge on which they are able and motivated to draw upon when mastering the practical tasks and challenges of their professional activity. They are able and willing to responsibly act in their own field, both autonomously and in collaboration with others. Finally, they are able and willing to critically reflect and analyse their own actions and are motivated to further improving their professional competence.

This understanding refers to a holistic understanding of competence, which is widely recognised in the international discussion. The OECD for example proposed the following definition as early as 2005:

A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. (OECD 2005, p. 4).¹

Such an understanding can also be linked to the European Union's definitions and understandings of competence which are reflected in European transparency instruments such as the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)² or the European Qualifications Framework

¹ OECD (2005). The definition and selection of key competencies. Executive summary. Online: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/61/35070367.pdf>

² European Parliament & Council (2009). Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). Official Journal of the European Union C 155 of 08.07.2009, p. 11-18. The ECVET system uses the categories of "knowledge", "skills" and "competences" in order to describe units of learning outcomes resulting from a given training opportunity.

(EQF)³. All these instruments refer to concept of competence which includes at least the categories of “knowledge” and “skills” as well as a third – variously named – category that refers to the way in which this knowledge and these skills are actually applied in a real professional context

2 The FAVILLE Competence Profile

Following the above outlined understanding of competence and based on the findings from the needs analysis, the FAVILLE competence profile is defined as shown in Table 1 below.

Area 1) E-learning Competence (Conceptual, Technical, Legal)
<p>The VLF is familiar with the conceptual, technical and legal foundations of e-learning. He/she knows the most important basic concepts and common course formats in the field of e-learning and is able to explain them. He/she know the most common ICT applications and learning management systems and their respective characteristics. He/she is able to use different tools and devices with confidence. He/she is familiar with existing legal data protection regulations and applies them. Furthermore, he/she is also able to act in a legally correct manner when using or creating own materials (OER) and to take appropriate account of prevailing copyright regulations etc.</p> <p>Competence Aspects</p> <p>In this area 1 the following competence aspects are distinguished:</p>
1a) Theoretical knowledge of e-learning concepts
1b) Application of E-Learning Tools
1c) Data protection
1d) Work with Open Educational Resources (OER)

³ Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. Official Journal of the European Union C 189, 15.06.2017, p. 15–28. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN). The EQF uses the categories of ‘knowledge’, ‘skills’ and ‘responsibility and autonomy’ in its description of qualification levels.

Area 2) Socio-communicative and facilitation competence

The VLF knows the specifics of communication in virtual space. He/she is able to communicate and interact appropriately with the learners in the virtual space, taking these particularities into account. He/she is able to facilitate discussions and group work in a productive way by creating and sustaining positive working relationships and by efficiently guiding the discussions or the group work.

Competence Aspects

In this area 2 the following competence aspects are distinguished:

2a) (Specificities of) Virtual Communication in an online environment

2b) Creating and Sustaining Learner Motivation and Engagement

2c) Facilitation of (online) discussions and group learning processes

Area 3) Professional awareness and adherence to adult learning principles

The VLF is aware of and shows a positive attitude towards his own role as a supporter of learning processes among his students. He/she is familiar with the principles of adult learning and learning guidance and is able and willing to apply them in his/her courses. He/she is able to support learners in taking control of their own learning and to foster their autonomy and self-organisation skills by acting as a mentor for his/her learners. Furthermore, as a professional he/she regularly reflects on and critically evaluates his/her own performance and strives to improve it continuously.

Competence Aspects

In this area 3 the following competence aspects are distinguished:

3a) Theoretical Understanding

3b) Professional Attitude

3c) Adherence to Adult Learning Principles

Area 4) Didactic-Methodical Skills
<p>The VLF has a fairly broad didactic repertoire of methods for use in virtual space. He/she knows which methods are suitable for different purposes (e.g._ presenting content, supporting self-directed learning of individuals and groups, supporting collaborative learning, creating and maintaining motivation of learners, steering/coping with group dynamics, evaluating and assessing learning progress, giving feedback etc) and is able to apply the methods practically in the course. He/she is able to choose appropriate e-learning content for his/her course. He/she is also able to adapt existing e-learning content or create new e-learning content for his/her course with the use of authoring tools</p> <p>Competence Aspects</p> <p>In this area 4 the following competence aspects are distinguished:</p>
4a) Facilitation Methods and Techniques
4b) Didactic Use of E-Learning Content and Media Formats
Area 5) Managing, Planning, Organisational Skills
<p>The VLF is able to plan online sessions and learning sequences (setting learning goals, selecting or creating materials and tools, planning tasks/assignments/activities, establishing timetable), in accordance with general didactic principles as well as with the specific requirements of the given learner group and the given (organizational) context. He/she is able to monitor and evaluate the course progress ongoingly. During the course process, he/she recognises when changes need to be made to the original concept and is able to implement such changes at short notice. He/she monitors student work in terms of time and deadlines.</p> <p>Competence Aspects</p> <p>In this area 5 the following competence aspects are distinguished:</p>
5a) Course Planning and Implementation
5b) Managing Different Courses Phases
5c) Use of Monitoring Tools

Table 1: Professional Competences of Virtual Learning Facilitators – The FAVILLE Competence Profile. Source: FAVILLE Project

3 Proposed connection with relevant European frameworks

a) European Qualifications Framework

The above profile can be referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), that was presented by the European Commission first in 2008 and then revised in 2017. The EQF proposes a framework for assigning qualifications from any subject area to one of eight levels. Considering the EQF level descriptors, it is suggested that the FAVILLE matches (at least) level 5 of the EQF. This means, in other words, a virtual learning facilitator who is fully competent in the sense of the FAVILLE profile possesses competences that are to be placed (at least) at level 5 of the EQF framework, taking into account the descriptors for that level (cf. Table 2).

	Knowledge	Skills	Responsibility and autonomy
Level 5	comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change review and develop performance of self and others

Table 2: Descriptors defining Level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Source: Council (2017).

b) DigCompEdu

The European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu)⁴ was published by the European Commission in 2017. It is a subject specific competence framework that has strong thematic links to the FAVILLE profile. Not all competence areas defined in DigCompEdu are equally relevant for the profile of a Virtual Learning Facilitator envisaged in FAVILLE, nevertheless, the thematic overlaps are so large overall that a reference to the DigCompEdu seems appropriate. Taking into account the level descriptor of the DigCompEdu, the level corresponding to the FAVILLE profile would be (at least) B2 (Expert).

The general description of that level is defined by the DigCompEdu as follows:

“Experts use a range of digital technologies confidently, creatively and critically to enhance their professional activities. They purposefully select digital technologies for particular situations, and try to understand the benefits and drawbacks of different digital strategies.

⁴ Redecker, C. & Punie, Y. (ed.) (2017). **European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators. DigCompEdu.** Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/european-framework-digital-competence-educators-digcompedu>

They are curious and open to new ideas, knowing that there are many things they have not tried out yet. They use experimentation as a means of expanding, structuring and consolidating their repertoire of strategies. Experts are the backbone of any educational organisation when it comes to innovating practice“ (Redecker & Punie 2017, p. 30)

In greater detail, the DigCompEdu level B2 is defined by the descriptors shown in Table 3 below.

	Area 1: Professional Engagement	Area 2: Digital Resources	Area 3: Teaching and Learning	Area 4: Assessment	Area 5: Empowering Learners	Area 6: Facilitating Learners’ Digital Competence
	Using digital technologies for communication, collaboration and professional development	Sourcing, creating and sharing digital resources	Managing and orchestrating the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning	Using digital technologies and strategies to enhance assessment	Using digital technologies to enhance inclusion, personalisation and learners’ active engagement	Enabling learners to creatively and responsibly use digital technologies for information, communication, content creation, wellbeing and problem-solving
Descriptors for Level B2 (Expert)	Using digital technologies for communication in a structured and responsive way. Using digital technologies for collaborative knowledge construction. Using a range of resources to develop one’s individual	Identifying and assessing suitable resources using complex criteria. Adapting advanced digital resources to a concrete learning context. Professionally sharing resources.	Using digital technologies purposefully to enhance pedagogic strategies. Using digital technologies to enhance monitoring and guidance. Using digital environments to support collaborative learning. Using digital environments to	Strategically using a range of digital assessment formats. Strategically employing digital tool for data generation Using digital data to enhance the effectiveness of feedback	Enabling accessibility and inclusion. Strategically using a range of digital technologies for differentiation and personalisation. Using digital technologies for learners’ active engagement with the	Strategically using a range of pedagogic strategies to foster learners’ information and media literacy Strategically using a range of pedagogic strategies to foster learners’ digital communication and

	digital and pedagogic practices. Exploring online CPD opportunities.		comprehensively support self-regulated learning.	and support	subject matter.	collaboration . Strategically using a range of pedagogic strategies to foster digital content creation by learners. Pedagogically supporting learners' use of digital technologies to ensure their wellbeing. Strategically using a range of pedagogic strategies to foster learners' digital problem solving.
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Table 3: Descriptors of DigCompEdu Level B2 (Expert). Source: (Adapted from Redecker & Punie 2017)