



Professional career guidance for women in management positions in the field of digital competence

TESTING THE UP-SKILLING PROGRAMME

Report on pilots and expert review



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1 INTRODUCTION

Pilots and expert reviews were conducted to test and improve the up-skilling concept developed within the second Work Package of the Erasmus+ project DIGIGEN. The piloting and expert review were part of Work Packages 2 and 3 in the DIGIGEN project. Because their outcomes equally affected the improvements in the up-skilling concept, their results are presented combined in this report. In detail, this report assesses various aspects of the programme, such as content relevance, structure, presentation, and practical applicability.

2 METHODOLOGY OF TESTING

The **expert review** took place in December 2023. Six independent experts took part in a focus group meeting via Microsoft Teams and discussed the concept and curriculum of the up-skilling programme. These experts had backgrounds and expertise in higher education institutions (HEIs) and counselling institutions. (cp. Figure 1)

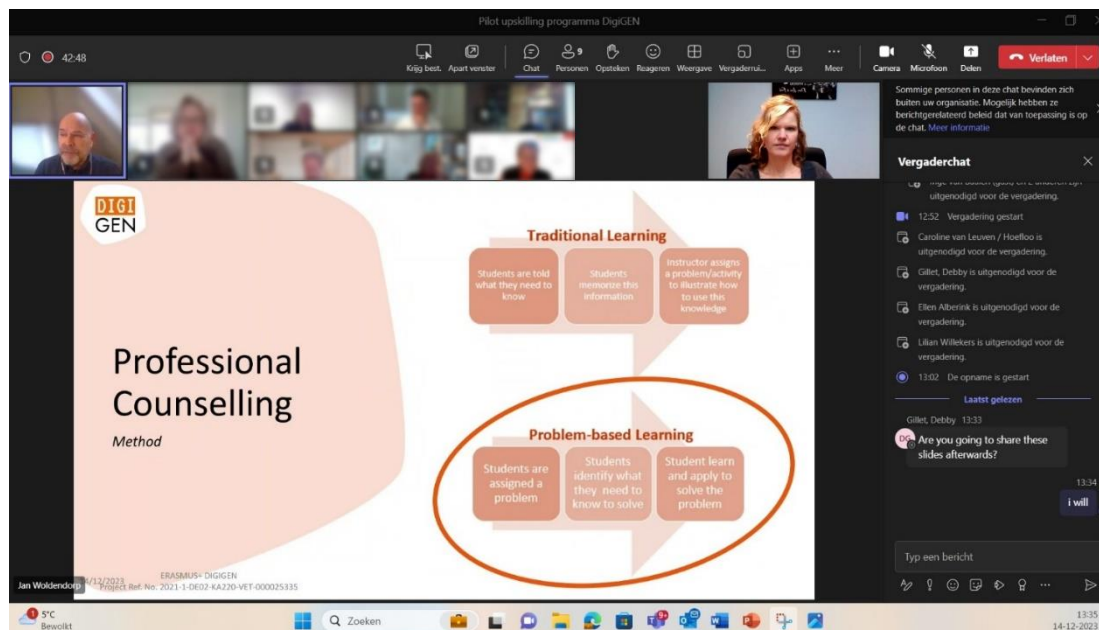


Figure 1: Sequence from the expert review.

The piloting was split into three similar events, one in Germany, one in Hungary, and one in the Netherlands. Each event reached a minimum of ten participants¹ with a counselling and/or training background. The Dutch pilot took place in December 2023, the German event in March 2024, and the Hungarian event in May 2024. The subject of these pilots was the up-skilling programme's concept in general.

The sessions were similarly carefully designed to maximise feedback and engagement. The Dutch session, for example, began with an introduction to DIGIGEN, setting the stage by contextualising the programme within the broader landscape of digital transformation and female leadership. This was followed by a detailed overview of the up-skilling programme, where participants were walked through the structure and objectives, providing a clear picture of the programme's scope and potential impact. After the introductory segment, the focus shifted to an in-depth exploration of the programme's content. The five modules of the up-skilling programme were presented dynamically, encouraging active participation and feedback from the attendees. This interactive approach was vital in gathering diverse perspectives and insights.

In all three piloting events, participants were asked to evaluate the suitability of the chosen topics with regard to training guidance professionals in counselling digital female leaders. They also evaluated the content of each topic and whether the content lives up to the initial expectations towards the up-skilling programme. Lastly, feedback on the appearance and structure of all the created material was collected. An evaluation questionnaire supported the project partners in gathering this information (see Appendix). The answers to the questionnaire were collected orally during and after the presentation, and a digital questionnaire was also used.

¹ The Hungarian event had 13 registrations, but only 9 participants due to cancellations at short notice.

3 RESULTS OF THE TESTING

This section examines the feedback received from the piloting events and the expert review. By analysing and combining the input, we identify both strengths and areas for improvement.

3.1 Expert review

The feedback received from the expert review highlights several key areas where the programme excels. Among these **strengths** are:

- **Content Relevance:** The programme successfully covers all the necessary content for training professionals in counselling female leaders, as confirmed by participants. The content matches the expectations set by the programme's title and provides sufficient detail on the subject matter.
- **Structure and Design:** The order of topics and the structure of the programme's materials are well thought out, facilitating learners' success. The materials' overall appearance, including colour and design, is appealing and conducive to learning.
- **Trainer's Material:** The Trainer's Material is clearly explained, ensuring that trainers fully understand the up-skilling programme and can effectively convey the information to learners.
- **Interlinking Between Modules:** The feedback highlights the interlinking between modules as a strong point, contributing to a coherent and integrated learning experience.

On the other hand, the expert review uncovered **areas of improvement**. Among those areas are:

- **Practical Application:** The feedback suggests the programme needs to focus more on practical application rather than theoretical concepts. Suggestions include reducing reading material and increasing the focus on learning from case studies, linking them to all models, and ensuring that reflection comes first.
- **Theoretical Content:** There are concerns about the amount of theory, considering the target group's needs. The programme might benefit from distinguishing between recommended and essential materials to reduce the workload and increase practical engagement.
- **Professional Counselling Focus:** While the programme's focus on professional counselling is appreciated, some feedback suggests that it should run in parallel with other content to ensure a balanced approach.

3.2 Piloting events

The oral feedback throughout the piloting event revealed many points of appreciation. Among those are the following **strengths**:

- **Depth and Relevance of the Content:** The programme was praised for its comprehensive approach to digital leadership. The German participants especially praised the extensive theoretical foundation and inclusion of scientific background. On the other hand, they liked the many opportunities for interaction and the workshops in Topic 4 and Topic 5.

- **Relevance Across Genders:** The importance of understanding different responses to change between genders was highlighted.
- **Potential to Enhance Existing Initiatives:** The programme's ability to complement current efforts for women re-entering the labour market was acknowledged.
- **Quality of Educational Materials:** The professional presentation of the programme's materials received positive feedback. The easy-to-understand language was also emphasised.

Suggestions for **enhancement** were:

- **Integration of Mentoring and Sponsoring:** The need to include aspects of mentoring and sponsoring to support the promotion of women leaders was emphasised.
- **Focus on Language and Leadership Styles:** The importance of addressing language nuances and unconscious male leadership biases was stressed.
- **Clarification of Programme Delivery:** Clarity regarding the target audience and programme delivery methods was requested.
- **Incorporation of Assertiveness Training:** Adding training on assertiveness, specifically on how to assertively say "no," was suggested as a crucial skill for women leaders.
- **Balanced Approach to Empowerment:** Concerns about ensuring female empowerment without disadvantaging others and avoiding overemphasising tools that might promote male leadership styles were raised.

In addition to strengths and weaknesses, the German piloting event tested how well the **content matched the titles of the topics**. This was to identify whether the up-skilling programme meets its target group's expectations. To test this, participants wrote their expectations on a Topic's content on a digital whiteboard. The content of a topic was only explained after these expectations had been gathered.

The results showed a high similarity between the expectations and the actual content covered by the topic. Although German, see Figure 2 for the answers given.

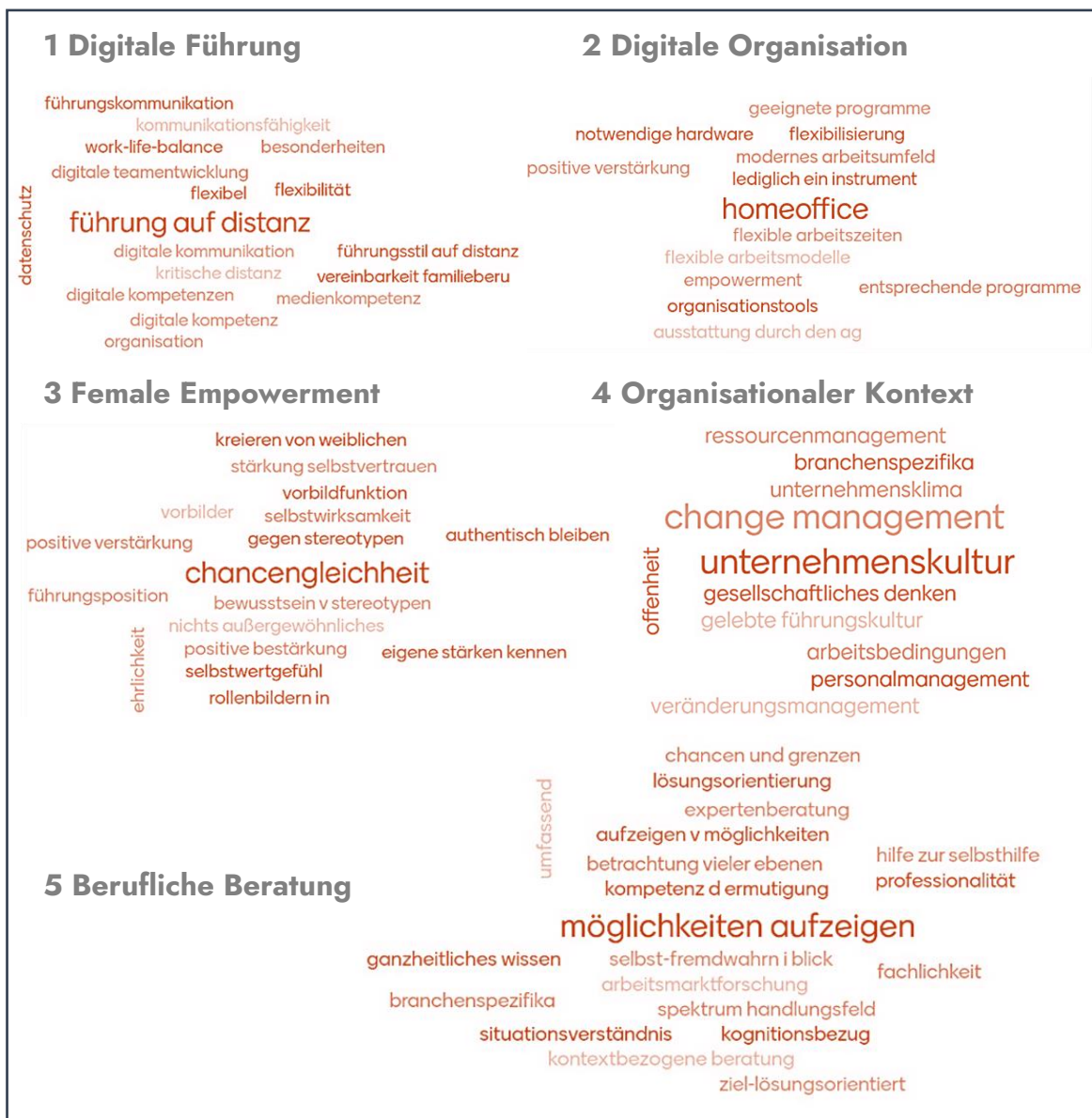


Figure 2: Results of the expectations query from the German piloting event.

The most significant discrepancies occurred within the expectations and content of Topic 3 and Topic 4. For Topic 3, the piloting participants wished for more concrete strategies to empower women. Also, they expected to find the existing gender stereotypes mentioned in the presentation. For Topic 4, they hoped for input on how to lead a team digitally, how to combine private and professional life, and how to fulfil health and safety instructions for working from home.

The feedback from the **evaluation questionnaire** (see Appendix) is excellent. Participants rated their perception of the structure, content, and comprehensibility of the DIGIGEN up-skilling programme and its topics. Answers were given on a scale from 1 ("disagree "with a statement) to 5 ("agree "with a statement).

The answers were similar in Germany, Hungary, and the Netherlands. Therefore, the feedback presented within the following figures is a combined mean value from all three countries. The overall programme was rated with mean values between 4 and 5 points. (see Figure 3)

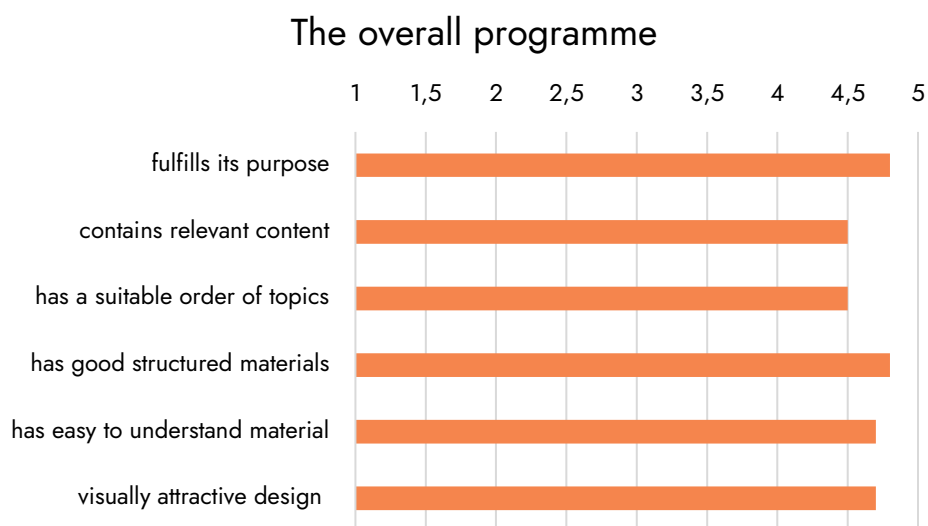


Figure 3: Ratings (mean value) of the overall up-skilling programme.

Besides the overall up-skilling concept, participants also rated each of the five Topics' title, content, and didactics. (see Figure 4)

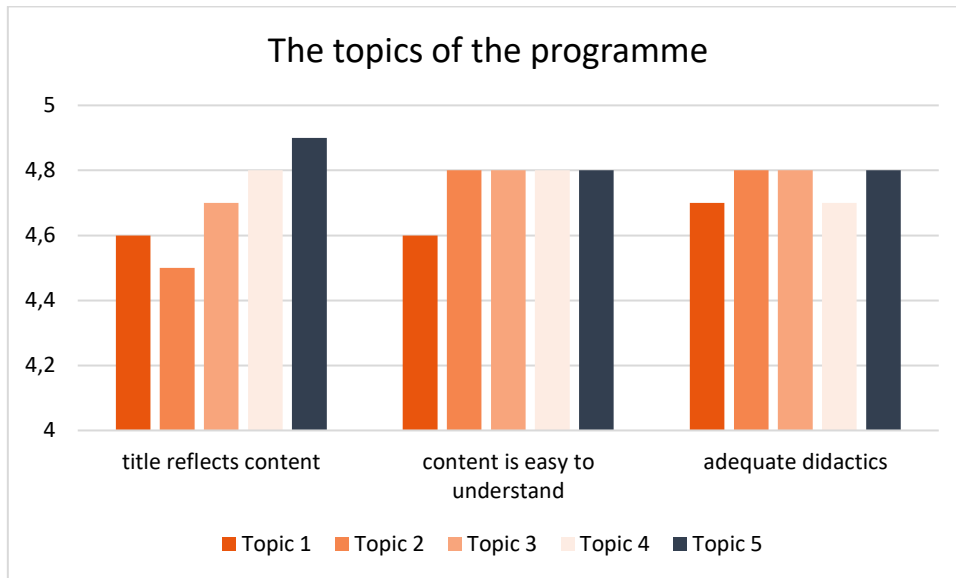


Figure 4: Results (mean value) for the feedback on each topic.

The most significant – although still minor – difference occurs when evaluating the topic's title and whether it meets the participants' content expectations. This might be an issue of the language in which the pilot was presented. However, since the number of participants in the pilot questionnaire is low, statistically relevant statements are impossible. Also, despite the differences, the rating is in every case above 4.5, so it is not a pertinent issue.

Lastly, the 4.8 rating on whether the problem-based learning method in Topic 5 is adequate to support learners in finding a counselling approach towards female digital leaders is to be mentioned. The participants in the Netherlands mainly endorsed this approach to teaching and learning.

3.3 Recommendations from all events

During the piloting events, the organising partners also asked for specific recommendations on how to improve the up-skilling programme. The most mentioned recommendations vary depending upon the country of the pilot.

In the Netherlands, participants wished to enhance practical elements by integrating more practical case studies and exercises. This is to reduce the emphasis on theoretical content. The idea behind that wish is to make the learning experience more engaging and applicable to real-world scenarios. In contrast, participants in Germany enjoyed the theoretical background and profound input sequences.

Regarding the theoretical input, participants also recommended having a pre-selection for the target group of guidance professionals. They argued that guidance professionals – as they can either be HR experts or career counsellors – might have very different interests. Participants with HR backgrounds were most interested in Topic 2 and Topic 4, where digital organisations are in focus. Participants with counselling or coaching backgrounds were most interested in Topic 3 and Topic 5, where counselling and female counselees are in focus.

Along with this argument, some participants suggested a greater differentiation between 'essential' and 'recommended' material and literature. Especially in the Netherlands, participants found the amount of material provided overwhelming. They hope this categorisation might help manage the workload and focus on the most critical content for learners.

Lastly, some suggestions for incorporating assertiveness training and a balanced approach to empowerment reflect a specific demand for skills that directly enhance leadership capabilities among women.

4 IMPROVEMENTS

Most areas of improvement and recommendations are concerned with aspects of ensuring a target-group-oriented (in the sense of participants) learning environment. While some target groups prefer more theoretical input, others prefer practical exercise. While some prefer information on digital companies, others prefer information on female empowerment. All those comments were solved with a simple but efficient measure. The materials for the up-skilling programme are already provided as building blocks. Since all topics are stand-alone offers, trainers may select topics for their training according to their learners' interests. This framework-like character of the overall up-skilling programme just needed more emphasis.

The best way to emphasise this at the very beginning of a learner's or trainer's journey through the DIGIGEN material is **mindset statements** at the top of the DIGIGEN self-directed online platform. Within these mindset statements, other uncertainties regarding the scope and content of the up-skilling programme are to be clarified. Among those are:

- the amount of ETCS credits rewarded for the programme,
- the target groups that the up-skilling programme and the online platform address,
- the framework-like character,
- and the options to centre around practical or theoretical approaches during the training.

Additionally to those mindset statements, the DIGIGEN partnership decided to integrate a **Frequently Asked Questions** (FAQ) section into the online platform. There, commonly asked questions are answered, and hints on how to work with the resources provided are given.

In response to the wishes for more aspects of female empowerment (e.g., mentoring and sponsoring), **Topic 3 was extended** by a few slides. However, the partnership decided against listing all commonly known gender stereotypes due to not wanting to repeat those and thereby further consolidate them.

Also, the partnership agreed against including aspects of 'training the trainer'. It is not DIGIGEN's goal to train life coaches for women but to train counsellors. Having aspects such as 'saying no as a woman' included in the programme would shift the focus from counselling as a guidance professional to being a woman. This is not the goal of the up-skilling programme.

Lastly, the emphasis on not wanting to discriminate against other genders or any dimension of diversity was placed more in the centre of the 'Introduction' part and the texts on the self-directed online platform. It is DIGIGEN's utmost desire not to penalise someone but to address a widely unknown aspect of counselling to improve the experience of a specific group of counselees. It just happens that this specific group is women.

5 CONCLUSION

The testing phase with career counsellors and HR practitioners was a critical step in enhancing the DIGIGEN up-skilling programme, ensuring it effectively meets the needs and aspirations of women in digital leadership roles. The in-depth assessment of insights from all testing sessions underscores a strong consensus on the programme's content relevance, with a specific appreciation for its comprehensive approach to digital leadership and the nuanced understanding of gender responses to leadership. The programme's structure, design, and interlinking between modules are consistently recognised as strengths, reflecting a well-thought-out curriculum that facilitates learner success.

In conclusion, it's evident that while there's a shared agreement on the programme's strengths. Based on the testing phase, the DIGIGEN up-skilling Programme for HR practitioners and career counsellors has demonstrated a positive reception concerning the programme's relevance, structure, and design for both the direct and indirect target groups. However, a greater emphasis on its framework-like character is recommended to maximise its impact.

The next phase is the actual training stage. Many participants expressed enthusiasm and interest in participating in the face-to-face training and multiplier events. This promises to be a transformative journey, leveraging the feedback from the testing phase to offer tailored, impactful learning experiences. The training will further refine the programme, ensuring it aligns with the evolving needs of women in digital leadership roles. One chance of participating in such an event will be the Dutch Multiplier Event in September. Interested persons can participate within the programme of the NICE Academy in Deventer, the Netherlands.

APPENDIX: PILOT QUESTIONNAIRE

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE – PILOT

Please give us feedback on your perception of the structure, content, and comprehensibility of the DIGIGEN up-skilling programme. The answers should be given in the format:

1 – disagree / 2 – rather disagree / 3 – partly agree, partly disagree / 4 – rather agree / 5 – agree

THE OVERALL PROGRAMME	Disagree					Agree
	1	2	3	4	5	
The programme can support guidance professionals to improve their counselling regarding female leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
The programme contains all the necessary content to train professionals in counselling female leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
→ If disagreed: What is missing?						
The order of topics supports the learner's success.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
→ If disagreed: What should be rearranged?						
The structure of the programme's materials makes it easy to find the information one is looking for.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
The Trainer's Material explains the up-skilling programme so that a trainer understands what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
→ If disagreed: What makes it tricky?						
The overall appearance (colour, design, etc.) of the programme's materials is appealing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
→ If disagreed: What can be improved?						

TOPIC 1: DIGITAL LEADERSHIP	Disagree				Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
The content covers what I would assume from the title.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The content is presented in sufficient detail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What is missing?					
The topic's didactics are appropriate for its content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What should be changed?					
What else? (proposals/comments/suggestions to change something)					

TOPIC 2: DIGITAL TOOLS	Disagree				Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
The content covers what I would assume from the title.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The content is presented in sufficient detail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What is missing?					
The topic's didactics are appropriate for its content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What should be changed?					
What else? (proposals/comments/suggestions to change something)					

TOPIC 3: EMPOWER WOMEN	Disagree				Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
The content covers what I would assume from the title.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The content is presented in sufficient detail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What is missing?					
The topic's didactics are appropriate for its content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What should be changed?					
What else? (proposals/comments/suggestions to change something)					

TOPIC 4: FOSTERING CHANGE	Disagree				Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
The content covers what I would assume from the title.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The content is presented in sufficient detail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What is missing?					
The topic's didactics are appropriate for its content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What should be changed?					
What else? (proposals/comments/suggestions to change something)					

TOPIC 5: COUNSELLING APPROACH	Disagree				Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
The content covers what I would assume from the title.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The content is presented in sufficient detail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What is missing?					
The topic's didactics are appropriate for its content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This topic's didactical approach with Problem-Based Learning is easy to understand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
→ If disagreed: What should be changed?					
What else? (proposals/comments/suggestions to change something)					

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