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Abstract: **The Finnish eLearning Quality Mark**

The Association of Finnish eLearning Centre (later: Finnish eLearning Centre) started in 2005 a project to develop the “Finnish eLearning Quality Mark”. The objective of this development work was to emphasize the importance of the quality approach in developing the eLearning business, and it had also as a central aim to initiate the “internal quality movement” within Finnish eLearning actors.

The Finnish eLearning Centre has organized already for few years the *eEemeli* quality award competition for eLearning products and services. It was agreed from the very start that the Finnish eLearning Centre would also in the future organize these two complementary activities. The eLearning quality award clearly has its own criteria and it is targeted to recognize and reward innovative eLearning products and services. The eLearning Quality Mark is directed to develop the working methods and mechanisms of the various actors in eLearning and provide for the critical support and assistance in the development of their daily work.

From the very start it was decided that the development of the Finnish eLearning Quality Mark must be a participatory process within the Finnish eLearning Centre. The Centre more than has 30 organizational members, and it was seen important that they would grow into ownership of the eLearning Quality Mark and also thus commit themselves to the deployment of the eLearning Quality Mark in practice.

The actual work consisted of the written reports (authored by Mr. Ari-Matti Auvinen), work of the expert panels (based on an open invitation to the members and stakeholders of the association) and the work of the steering group of the project. The work was divided into four parts, which were the following

- benchmarking of general quality systems and quality marks and eLearning quality work (what can we learn from others?)
- definition of eLearning quality mark criteria (how do we define quality?)
- definition of eLearning quality mark processes (how is the Finnish eLearning Quality Mark awarded?)
- business plan for the Finnish eLearning Quality Mark (how can this work be also financially sustainable?).

It has been decided that the Finnish eLearning Quality Mark should have two different sets of criteria. These are

- company-specific criteria (later in the text the term “company” describes also other organization, such as educational institutions)
- product-specific or service-specific criteria.

By accepting these two sets of criteria, we wanted to communicate to the various actors in the eLearning field, that we want to develop this area with a long-term view, which requires also sustainable, well-performing companies. Only if a company can pass the criteria of good business conduct, can it produce and maintain good products and services.

The important work in defining the criteria can assist the Finnish eLearning field only, if we publish and distribute widely the various criteria, as the main use of these criteria is in the self-assessment within companies and organizations. Thus in actual work the awarding of the quality mark is an important factor, but not the only one.

The awarding of the Finnish eLearning Quality Mark will always be based on application by the company. As stated above, first the company must pass the company-specific criteria. First after this, the company can apply a Quality Mark for its products or services – the Quality Mark is awarded to a well-defined product (such as a web course) or a service (such as tutoring). After the company has passed the company-specific criteria, it can apply several Quality Marks for its various products and services, and the assessment of the company-specific criteria will be done only once.

It was useful, however, also to define the period of validity of the Quality Mark. Thus it was discussed that the company assessment would be valid for five years (before it should be renewed) and Quality Mark for a product or service would be valid for three years.

The Finnish eLearning Centre has started also to plan the next steps in the implementation of our quality work. This means refining and polishing of the criteria as well as fine-tuning the actual application and awarding process. In late 2006 Finnish eLearning Centre (assisted by HCI Productions Oy) will start a regional pilot in Finland to develop the various aspects of the Quality Mark further.

A critical success factor is the training of the various assessors, which is planned to be started in early 2007. The trained assessors can then start their actual work, and it is expected that we could also start the training sessions for the actual applicants during the year 2007. Thus we can expect that we will have the first full applications for the Finnish eLearning Quality Mark by late 2007 and then start the awarding process.

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