

# 11. Student-Centred Learning

## 11.1 Introduction

Student-centred learning (SCL) is hardly a novel concept. While some would argue that it already appeared in pedagogy and educational science as far back as the beginning of the 20th century (Sullivan 2004), it certainly developed more strongly in the context of the constructionist paradigm since the 1980s (O'Neill and McMahon 2004). However, the European Students' Union (ESU) has always perceived student-centred learning as a broader concept which is to be applied to all elements of higher education and not only to pedagogy in a narrow sense (ESU 2012). Even though student-centred learning is notoriously difficult to define precisely, the following tentative definition was developed through two Europe-wide projects on SCL led by ESU (T4SCL and PASCL):

*“Student-Centred Learning represents both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterised by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking.”* (ESU 2015)

This definition clearly recognizes SCL as a concept on a high level of abstraction and generality (“a mindset and a culture”). Operationalizing this concept and assessing its implementation can therefore be challenging, but it is a necessity as student-centred learning necessarily has to be context-sensitive if it is to fulfil its role. Indeed, the fact that there is no one-size-fits-all solution is one of the most important recommendations of the two aforementioned projects. However, this statement needs to be clearly distinguished from a relativistic position, that it is impossible to determine whether a certain institutional culture is student-centred or not.

Finally, it is important to note that with its introduction in the revised ESGs in 2015, student-centred learning has also become recognized as an objective measure of quality of higher education institutions (ESG 2015). This helps establish that SCL is not about satisfying the immediate demands of the student body, but about truly empowering students to become competent and autonomous learners for their whole lives, benefiting their personal learning and the quality of education across their institution.

## 11.2. Student-centred learning and the Bologna process

### History

Student-centred learning has a relatively long history of presence within the Bologna process, starting with the London Communiqué in 2007 which predicted that one of the outcomes of the Bologna process “will be a move towards student-centred higher education and away from teacher driven provision” (Communiqué 2007). The term “student-centred learning” was first explicitly used in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué of 2009 in which it was listed as one of the future goals (Communiqué 2009). This commitment has been reaffirmed in the Bucharest Communiqué (Communiqué 2012) and Yerevan Communiqué (Communiqué 2015).

Importantly, the Bologna process is a natural environment for implementing the paradigm shift that SCL demands. Firstly, the Bologna process has already resulted in a multitude of reforms and therefore provides a platform for further innovation. Secondly, there is a more substantive potential for SCL in the Bologna process which relates to the connection between student-centred learning and fundamental Bologna tools. As we have already stated in Bologna with Student Eyes in 2012:

*“However, it is often the other set of Bologna tools and measures that help create and foster an environment conducive to SCL. The main reason behind this is that some of the policy measures encourage the use of learning outcomes and increasing flexibility and comparability for various procedures. Thus, the shift to outcomes-based educational policies is needed to fulfil several different Bologna commitments and also offers an excellent opportunity to promote SCL at institutional level.”*

In the same version of Bologna with Student Eyes publication, ESU also made specific recommendations as to how these fundamental Bologna tools can be used to foster the culture of student-centred learning:

Figure 11.1: Bologna elements which can facilitate the development of SCL (BWSE 2012)

| Action line         | Elements/opportunities that can foster SCL   |
|---------------------|--|
| Learning outcomes   | <p>Students can be consulted when learning outcomes are designed.</p> <p>Students' needs and characteristics of the student population are taken into account when designing the learning outcomes.</p> <p>The student population's characteristics can be analysed and taken into account upon drafting of learning outcomes.</p>   |
| ECTS                | ECTS correlated with defined learning outcomes in the various courses and modules. Credits are measured based on student workload, independent of contact hours.   |
| QA                  | <p>Both staff and students can be consulted with regards to the institutional QA process.</p> <p>QA methodologies and guidelines can and should take into account elements of teaching/ learning.</p> <p>External evaluations can be reformed by also placing a focus on educational issues</p>  |
| RPL and Recognition | <p>Prior learning should be recognised by institutions, if relevant to the expected study outcomes. If so, it needs to go beyond waiving entry conditions wherever possible. Outcomes-based education is truly understood by all actors when institutions no longer claim a monopoly to learning.</p> <p>Competences gained outside the formal system should be recognised by the institution. They should also feed into gaining recognition for qualifications.</p> <p>The recognition process should be facilitated so as to be automatic if major differences in study tracks are not present.</p>   |
| Mobility            | <p>Mobile students should benefit from support in coping with the different cultural/linguistic environments, so as to avoid reducing the degree to which they attain expected learning outcomes over a set period of studies and are at the same time able to cope with a different cultural and learning environment.</p> <p>Students who study abroad should get their studies recognised easily.</p> <p>Mobile sta should use mobility experiences as a basis for sharing good practices across borders. Communities of practitioners are increasingly becoming a useful method of disseminating experiences and innovative approaches to teaching and learning.</p> |
| Social dimension    | Special support measures should be taken to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Learning paths should be made flexible enough so as to permit combining work and study, to better help students from non-traditional backgrounds integrate into higher education. Special counseling services need to be provided to students who are not used to an educational model in which they take control over their own education, as well as for those who have studied in poor quality secondary education institutions.  |

## Figure 11.1: Bologna elements which can facilitate the development of Student-centred learning

### Where are we now?

Examining these examples of potential improvements six years after their publication, and nine years after SCL was first explicitly mentioned as a goal in the Communiqué, it is disappointingly clear that there is still a long way to go. Student-centred learning in many ways depends on a shift towards outcome-based education and the use of learning outcomes methodology in general, but to date, not enough progress has been made in the implementation of these basic tools of the Bologna process, nor in implementing student-centred learning, which is an even more ambitious goal.

While ECTS points seem to be thoroughly implemented across EHEA, the situation with learning outcomes is more worrying. As chapter 9 on structural reforms demonstrates, the majority of the systems use student workload as the basis of allocation of ECTS, but only seven of the respondents stated that amount of ECTS are always based on the formulation of learning outcomes. Satisfaction with implementation of ECTS points system very much varies between different national contexts.

Quality assurance has also only fulfilled its potential role as facilitator of student-centred learning to a certain extent. Chapter 4 shows that even though the vast majority of the student unions report that students are involved in internal quality assurance at their institutions, in over a quarter of countries students are only a source of information for quality assurance. This is in no way aligned with the ideal of student as co-creators of their education.

In the domain of recognition of prior learning, higher education still has not achieved desired flexibility of study programs. Indeed, as the data presented in chapter 7 indicates, in a very significant number of countries (around a third) there is no possibility for the students to get their learning outcomes which they achieved outside of formal education recognized.

Overall, it is clear that even though in some areas there is an improvement towards a more student-centred learning, as in, for example, the implementation of ECTS points, in general the fundamental Bologna tools are implemented superficially and without a serious commitment to make them instruments of achieving student-centred education.

### **11.3 Individual learning path and student ownership**

One of the most important principles of student-centred learning is that the learning and teaching process should be as individualized as possible and therefore offered to each student in the best way to achieve intended learning outcomes. Although this research does not engage in in-depth analysis of the learning and teaching process and methods it uses, as it surveyed national-level student representatives, several potential contributing elements can be explored.

Firstly, as already stated in chapter 7 on Recognition, the European Students' Union has always viewed recognition of prior (informal and non-formal) learning as complementary to formal higher education. This is primarily due to RPL's potentially very beneficial role toward enabling students to create their own learning paths. If learning outcomes methodology is applied to the fullest extent, then it shouldn't matter how students achieved certain competences (through formal, non-formal or informal learning) provided there are reliable methods of assessment. In this way, RPL could simultaneously bring about several benefits: individual learning paths, fostering lifelong learning, facilitating practice-oriented learning and boosting employability. However, in order to fulfil this positive role, it needs to be recognized by higher education decision makers as valuable and potentially extremely beneficial.

Unfortunately, as chapter 7 on Recognition demonstrates, higher education is still too closed towards the idea of complementarity between formal and informal/non-formal learning. In a large number of EHEA countries, students do not have available procedures for the recognition of prior learning, which certainly significantly diminishes their capacity to create their own learning paths.

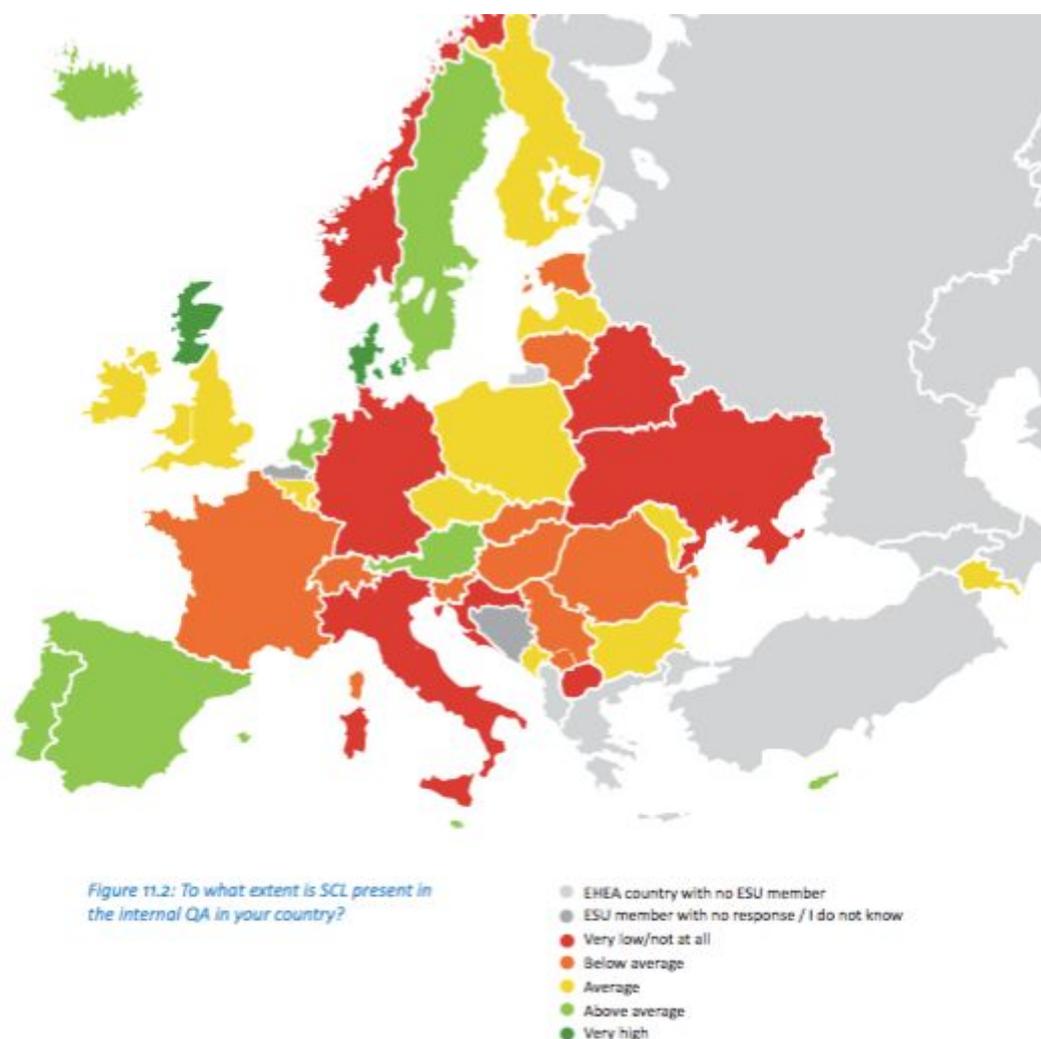
Another, probably uncontroversial, operationalization of the SCL concept states that students should be co-creators of their curricula. However, the problem is visible when we

assess this ideal against the quantitative data relating to the level of student participation in governance.

The students' unions were asked to assess the state of their representation within bodies of various levels of education (national, institutional, faculty, programme). The disturbing finding is that the situation is by far the worst at programme level where students are supposed to participate in co-creating the curriculum - only 36% of the students' unions (15 out of 43) reported that their students are equal partners at this level. This is thoroughly disappointing both in relative terms, considering that representation improves at higher levels of governances (Chapter 4), and in absolute terms of ensuring an equal student partnership in modern higher education as the current state is not even close to where we would want to be in 2018.

## **11.4 Student-centred learning and quality of higher education**

Since the revision of the ESGs in 2015, student-centred learning has become one of the recognized standards of quality. Revision of the ESGs also ensured revision of the national quality criteria and, hopefully, change at the level of internal quality assurance. As already mentioned, research like Bologna with Student Eyes is somewhat limited in collecting reliable data from the institutional level because our respondents are national unions of students. However, most of these unions have reliable methods of gathering perspectives and opinions from their local students' unions and individual unions, through their own surveys, research, and through official representation channels. This has ensured that Bologna with Student Eyes has collected representative input. Unfortunately, the results are far from encouraging. As it seems to generally be the case with SCL, implementation of these changes has been very slow, unsatisfactory and uneven - as many as one fifth of the unions (8 out of 40) finds that SCL is present in internal quality assurance to a very low extent or not at all, and further 22,5% (9 out of 40) finds its presence is below average. Only one quarter of the unions (10 out of 40) believe that the presence of SCL is above average or very high.



**Figure 11.2: To what extent is student-centred learning present in the internal quality assurance in your country?**

When asked to elaborate in more detail about the presence of SCL in the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions, students' unions often echoed the usual challenges to a move towards student-centred learning. Rigidity and traditional mentality, especially in some regions of Europe, are still the biggest barriers. On the other hand, in those instances where respondents were positive about the presence of SCL at the institutional level, they usually cited examples in which students and teachers together create and manage the learning and teaching process.

These responses show that despite inclusion in the Bologna process goals for so many years, SCL still hasn't been systematically implemented at the grassroots level. Part of the reason for this could be that the nature of SCL makes it difficult to implement top-down, in the way that many other Bologna process tools were embedded. However, this doesn't change the fact that while it cannot be imposed top-down (including from the European level), this paradigm shift towards SCL can be facilitated and enhanced through European level

cooperation and national level incentives and resources. To instead produce such a weak effect over a considerable period of time is surely a reason to worry.

When exploring national level incentives and resources, external quality assurance is of high importance. Here, the national students' unions were asked to assess how important the standard of SCL was considered to be when doing quality reviews. Responses showed that only 17,5% of the unions (7 out of 40) believed the standard about SCL was treated as very important and with the same emphasis as other standards, but a further 30% (12 out of 40) believed that it is still perceived as important. Only 10% (4 unions) thought that this standard is treated as not important or only slightly important. These responses suggest that the situation with external quality assurance is somewhat better than with internal quality assurance in higher education institutions, but further improvement is still needed. Furthermore, such a mismatch between various levels needs to be addressed as innovative concepts such as SCL need to be accepted and promoted at the grassroots level or the implementation will certainly be unsuccessful.

Some possible causes of this problem of (non)implementation of SCL can perhaps be drawn from the findings of the EQUIP (Enhancing Quality through Innovative Policy & Practice) project. This project addressed the implementation of the revised ESGs and examined various stakeholders' experience. According to the final project publication among the biggest challenges for stakeholders were *“ensuring the link between QA and the academic quality of learning and teaching (design and approval of programmes and SCL)”* and *“assessing and measuring the extent to which a programme/an institution has adopted a SCL approach to teaching and learning”*. These answers show that a clear path from policy to practise is still not realised, and even policies and procedures which nominally support SCL are not able to ensure effective improvement of the learning and teaching process. One of the important obstacles the publication reports is that SCL usually remains undefined in the institutional context which creates a lack of understanding.

## 11.5 Conclusions and considerations for the future

Overall, the situation with the implementation of SCL seems to match the progress of the majority of Bologna process goals. This progress is happening, but it is extremely slow, uneven across EHEA and the issue of misimplementation presents a significant danger. This is especially worrisome since SCL cannot be advanced in separation from other Bologna tools which exhibit the same deficiencies. Learning outcomes methodology is an example of a shift towards the learner's competences as the basis of constructing the learning process. This shift, which has often been taken for granted, is in reality far from being the standard and therefore needs to be further developed and implemented more consistently. Indeed, the unevenness of implementation of SCL is problematic to such a degree that it makes questionable whether EHEA level policies even influence national levels to any significant extent.

When it comes to the ideal of students as creators of their own learning process, this is another ideal that is unfortunately still far from fulfilled. Firstly, students are still to a large extent excluded from deciding about the course content, learning and teaching methods, and assessment methods. What makes the situation even more paradoxical is that students

are more represented at higher organisational levels (institutional, national) than at the level at which they can decide about these elements of the learning process. Secondly, recognition of informal and non-formal learning, which, if taken as complementary factors to formal education, could result in a much higher flexibilization and individualisation of the learning process, is still far from being a reality for all students in Europe.

Finally, the role of student-centred learning as an element of quality of higher education needs to be further developed and explicated. As a relatively recent addition to the ESGs, it seems SCL still hasn't achieved full recognition and equal importance. Despite the fact that the ESGs adopt a more narrow definition of SCL than the one ESU is advocating, there is still a high chance that this problem is due to difficulties with operationalizing the concept and then applying it during quality assessment, which, of course, tends to focus on more easily verifiable factors. One important challenge for the near future will be finding ways in which student-centred learning can be reliably operationalised and made more easily measurable or at least verifiable without losing sensitivity for institutional contexts and diversity of students.

## 11.6 Recommendations

- As a prerequisite for SCL, fundamental Bologna tools (especially the learning outcome methodology) need to be implemented fully and systematically
- Students need to become full partners at all levels of their HEI, especially when it comes to decision-making about learning and teaching process
- National-level policies should support and facilitate implementation of SCL through securing resources and knowledge and experience sharing
- Teacher's competencies must be constantly developed as a part of the learning and teaching improvement initiatives
- Learning and teaching needs to be prioritized both in quality assurance and in national level policies
- Internal and external quality assurance systems should value, promote and reward pedagogical innovation

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