



9th European Quality Assurance Forum

13 – 15 November 2014

University of Barcelona, Spain

Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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Short bio (150 words max):

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Proposal

Title:

Student-centred learning and quality education: the implementation of student-centred learning in quality assurance procedures

Abstract (150 words max):

Quality education and student-centred learning has been one of the top priorities of the European Students' Union (ESU) for years. The results of recent research coordinated by ESU show that not only is student-centred learning an essential component of quality education, but also from the viewpoint of students quality education is to a large extent equal to student centred education and vice versa. As quality assurance is one of the main areas that influence reforms in teaching and learning, the authors explore how the concept of student-centred learning is incorporated in current quality assurance policy and procedures.

This paper looks at the student concept of quality education and the practical definition of student-centred learning developed by the European Students' Union. It compares both concepts and gives recommendations for further implementation of student-centred learning in quality assurance policy and procedures.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

The concept of student-centred learning (SCL) was initially a theoretical model defined as such by education and pedagogy researchers, though attempts at empowering the learner to enhance the educational process have probably always existed wherever educators have strived to improve and reform. SCL was first mentioned in the Bologna Process in 2009 by way of commitments made in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Communiqué. The importance of SCL and learning-outcomes based learning was reiterated in 2012 in the Bucharest Ministerial Communiqué and the European Commission's Communication, "Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic conditions". That same year, the Bologna Follow-Up Group developed its work plan with a specific focus on improving the social dimension of higher education through shifting the attention to students and their learning processes.

In 2010, the European Students' Union (ESU), together with Education International (EI) developed a definition of SCL as part of the project Time for Student-Centred Learning (T4SCL), based on an analysis of existing research and theoretical material, as well as a survey for teachers and national unions of students. It reads "Student-Centred Learning represents both a mind-set and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which [...] 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 2010, p. 4).

SCL touches on all aspects of the higher education system: governance, funding, quality development and quality assessment, internationalisation, access and the social dimension, lifelong learning, research, learning outcomes, teaching and assessment



methods, and the list goes on. The benefits are many; SCL has an immense impact on the process of acquiring learning outcomes, responds to the diversity of students' needs and profiles, and therefore improves full and equal access to higher education from start to finish. The learning and teaching methods used in the SCL-approach stimulate students' self-reflection and critical thinking in the learning process, by giving them the freedom to choose what they learn, how they want to learn and how their learning will be assessed. As opposed to the teacher-centred method, where knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student in a hierarchical manner, the student-centred approach involves building upon students' previous knowledge and experience, and views students as an equal part of the academic community, or co-producers of knowledge.

This article will begin by presenting the policy and work completed by ESU concerning SCL, as well as the current work being done to continue the implementation of SCL in higher education institutions. The concept of quality and how it is linked with SCL, as well as how SCL can be included in quality assurance mechanisms and procedures will then be further elaborated upon.

2) ESU's policy and work with SCL

Quality and access to higher education are of utmost importance for students, higher education institutions and society. The issues are two sides of the same coin; the value of a high quality education is only observed if society's population has access to it and the conditions to complete their education, whilst ensuring access and success to higher education only benefits society if the education provided is of high quality.

To ensure high quality and access, SCL is key, and therefore it has been one of ESU's main interests and priorities for years. ESU's 2013 policy paper on quality of higher education goes on to explain that, "This system must also be braced by adequate student support services; ensuring links between learning, teaching and research activities; individual, social and civic training for responsible and active citizens; mobility opportunities; academic freedom; and where students are considered full members of the academic community and competent, constructive partners."

In December 2006 ESU (then ESIB) defined its vision of a SCL education system where it called for a shift towards a student-centred approach of learning where the goals of a learning process from the student's perspective are in focus. ESIB reaffirmed its support of a credit transfer and accumulation system based on learning outcomes and student workload as core principles and stressed that curricula of study programmes should be designed in a flexible way and allow for maximum student choice. Students must be fairly assessed with a multitude of assessment methods that are aligned with the learning outcomes agreed upon by students and teachers, as well as the learning and teaching activities. ESIB also reaffirmed support of the development of qualification frameworks and stated that recognition of prior learning is an important pillar of a student-centred education system (ESU 2006).

The previously mentioned T4SCL-project brought together students and teachers to work together in developing a comprehensive definition of what SCL means in the context of the Bologna Process, its direct and indirect benefits, and the preconditions for its implementation. The aim of T4SCL was to assist policy makers in designing sound SCL strategies and approaches, and to increase the capacity of students and staff to be active partners in spreading a culture of SCL in higher education institutions across Europe.

A survey developed for teachers and students in 22 countries both helped in mapping SCL-related policies and practices, pinpointing barriers for the implementation of SCL, and identifying key players, such as university leadership and quality assurance agencies. The project became a catalyst for national debates on mainstreaming SCL that took place



in more than 10 countries. In 2010, the T4SCL toolkit was developed with the aim of empowering higher education institutions, teachers and students in implementing SCL. The toolkit has been translated to more than 7 other languages (French, German, Dutch, Lithuanian, Albanian and other) and is used by various higher education stakeholders. The toolkit includes an SCL checklist, guidelines for teachers' and universities' implementation of SCL and recommendations for maintaining a culture of SCL.

Following up on the success of T4SCL, ESU launched a new project, Peer Assessment of Student-Centred Learning (PASCL), which is to run until Autumn 2016. PASCL aims at assisting the implementation of sound SCL strategies at institutional level and fostering a culture of SCL in higher education institutions across Europe. The goal is to bridge the current gap in prestige between research and teaching by developing a framework for assessing higher education institutions' implementation of SCL, and awarding excellence in teaching. The framework will consist of standards and criteria for the assessment, guidelines for higher education institutions, and a training scheme for peer experts, peers being both students and staff. Institutions that fulfil the defined SCL-criteria developed within the project will be awarded a label of "student-centeredness". Based on the outcomes of the assessment, the experts' team will prepare a set of recommendations for future development, and good practices will be promoted through the "Student-Centred Institution" award to create visibility around excellence in teaching from the side of policy-makers, institutional leadership and students.

3) Student centred learning in quality assurance

3.1. SCL and quality education

In this part of the article the authors will answer the question of whether and to what extent SCL corresponds with students' views on quality education. Two sets of research will be used. The first research exercise was carried out in the T4SCL project (2009 - 2010) where national unions of students and teachers' trade unions were asked to reflect on their definitions of SCL. The second set of research is taken from the Quest for Quality for Students (QUEST) project (2010 - 2013), where students and student representatives were asked to define what quality education means to them.

Defining a shared concept of quality of higher education has been a persisting challenge as stakeholders have a wide variety of views on it. Perceptions of quality depend largely on perceptions of what purpose higher education serves, whether it be for personal development, professional enhancement, discipline-oriented teaching or employability, for instance. Lately, the debate about quality education has been strongly linked with what governments expect from it (i.e. employability of graduates, efficiency in costs), however that understanding of quality in the policy-making arena has often been challenged by the higher education community of institutional leadership, staff and students.

The outcomes of the QUEST project show that quality in the eyes of students is a much wider concept than the sum of different attributes and is built upon trust, participation and ownership. Students' core expectations for quality centre upon the teaching content and learning process, while conditional expectations concern the environment and conditions thought to be necessary in order to realise core expectations, i.e. support services, facilities and system structures for studying, as well as the academic environment and culture (ESU 2013).

Relevant aspects that should be considered in order to understand how quality is perceived, are the following: an adequate curriculum with clearly-defined expected



learning outcomes, the learning and teaching process (SCL), learning environments that respond to students' needs and resources and facilities (including student support services) (ESU 2013a).

Some core aspects of SCL have been agreed upon in relevant literature and are often referred to as the parameters of SCL. These parameters are innovative teaching, learning outcomes, a system of transfer and accumulation of credits and flexible curricula and learning paths. In the T4SCL survey, respondents were first asked to define what SCL means to them, and afterwards identify statements that can be associated with it. Most respondents defined SCL as activity-based learning (e.g. project-based learning, case-based learning), with student evaluations of teaching methods and student participation in the development of these methods as crucial components, alongside training of teachers. Statements that received more than 80% agreement rate from student unions were assessment of students based learning outcomes, student participation in the development of teaching methods, student evaluation of teaching methods, possibility of part-time studies and student choice in the selection of curricular components (Geven, Santa 2010).

The table below shows a comparison between the concept of quality education as identified in QUEST project, and the two interpretations of SCL. The first description of SCL comes from previous scientific research, the second from ESU's T4SCL project.

SCL (components from previous scientific research)	Quality Education	SCL (components identified in T4SCL)
Use of learning outcomes	Adequate curricula (organized in learning outcomes)	Students have the freedom to choose components within their own curricula
Innovative teaching	The learning and teaching process (student-centred learning)	Activity-based learning/ Student participation in the development of teaching methods
	Learning environment (responding to students' needs)	Use of small groups (e.g. self-directed learning, tutorials, small seminars etc.)/ Small number of students per teaching member of academic staff
	Resources and facilities (including student support services)	Available study counselling
System of transfer and accumulation of credits/ flexible curricula and learning paths		Possibility of part-time studies/ECTS
		In-service training in teaching for academic staff/ Initial training in teaching by academic staff



		Assessment of students based on learning outcomes/ Student evaluation of teaching methods
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The comparison shows that the practical definition of SCL is more explicit and covers aspects that are difficult to include in the scientific definition. This confirms that definitions of SCL to a large extent depend on the practical implementation of it and the perceptions of those directly involved in the teaching and learning process.

There are many similarities between the student quality concept and the practical definition of SCL. Only two aspects of the practical definition of SCL have not been included in the student quality concept. These are training of teachers (initial training in teaching by academic staff and in-service training in teaching for academic staff) and assessment and feedback procedures (assessment of students based on learning outcomes and student evaluation of teaching methods).

SCL is also included in the student quality concept. However, other components not directly characterising learning and teaching process are considered part of the quality concept. This confirms that SCL goes beyond the teaching and learning process itself and can also be divided into core and conditional expectations.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this comparison exercise is that whether SCL is understood as an element of quality education or the concept of quality education itself represents the SCL concept, a strong correlation between quality and SCL exists. This correlation implies that quality assurance procedures must be designed to assess SCL. The question is whether current quality assurance policy and procedures properly take SCL into account, and if not, how this can be done.

3.2.) SCL in quality assurance policy and procedures

The survey undertaken in the T4SCL project brought to the fore a number of policies and areas impacting the advancement of SCL. Quality assurance was one of the areas most frequently identified as a tool influencing the reform of teaching and learning and quality assurance procedures were identified as one of the ways to foster implementation of SCL. Because quality reviews influence institutions in many ways, including with respect to funding and institutional prestige, they act as an incentive for reform more than any other action line of the Bologna Process.

To fully cover the quality assurance policy and procedures we need to look at them from three different levels - European (international), national (external quality assurance) and institutional.

European quality assurance

When aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), quality assurance should be based on learning outcomes, evaluation of teaching and participation of students (ENQA 2005). Many reports on the implementation of the Bologna Process show that quality assurance procedures are successfully being introduced in most member states, however quality assurance reviews seldom cover teaching and learning, and focus mainly on the overall



management of an institution and its internal quality assurance mechanisms, despite the clear reference to teaching, student assessment procedures in the ESGs. It has been pointed out that the current ESGs do not take into account issues of teaching and learning in an adequate way, as the scope of quality assurance process remains highly procedural and focuses largely on mechanisms and regulations as such, rather than establishing a quality culture at all levels. This is because the higher education system has experienced a great paradigm shift since 2005 when the current ESGs were adopted.

The proposal for revised ESGs to be adopted at the Bologna Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015 fully takes into account this changing context. Student involvement is stressed in all standards and guidelines; students need to be involved in defining quality assurance policy, designing and approving study programmes, monitoring study programmes and external quality assurance. SCL, teaching and assessment of teaching are proposed as a separate standard (E4 2014).

National quality assurance

The results of the T4SCL survey showed that national quality assurance policies and procedures promote SCL, but still there has been little progress on the national level to introduce strategies on rewarding excellence in teaching. Current external quality assurance mechanisms do emphasise the importance of teaching (interaction between teacher and student, the design of curriculum, learning outcomes and assessment schemes), however the current procedures have their limitations. Institutional reviews, performed by the quality assurance agencies, rarely signify the aspect of teaching and learning as a core one, which also give a false signal to the institutional leadership about priorities in management. Programme level evaluation can give better understanding on the methodological set-up of the individual study programme. However, SCL is not limited to certain methodology; rather, it is a cultural shift in the institution.

Institutional quality assurance

There is, however, no one-size-fits-all solution to SCL. SCL practices are most commonly implemented at the course level and sometimes at programme level, but there is a lack of understanding and agreement on the institutional level as to how SCL should be implemented. The results of the T4SCL survey showed that there are not many institutions putting effort into developing and implementing staff development policies across the whole institution. Some institutions and/or student representatives, have created teaching awards to recognise individual teachers' achievements in teaching, however many institutions lack procedures that systematically recognise excellence in teaching.

4) Conclusions & Recommendations: How to further incorporate SCL in quality assurance

With a student population growing in size and diversity, higher education institutions must adapt to the many different needs and experiences of a heterogeneous student population, while at the same time continue to improve quality in learning and teaching. SCL requires shifting the attention to the needs of the student, and is crucial in achieving a high quality and accessible higher education system.

When it comes to quality assurance and SCL, there is a clear indication that from the students' point of view quality education *is* student-centred education. Quality is understood as the result of interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment.

Since the current ESGs were adopted in 2005, higher education has experienced a strong shift towards a culture for SCL by reacting to the growing expectations for higher



education. Incorporating SCL in the revised ESGs, as well as in all levels of quality assurance is therefore a natural next step in the development of the higher education system.

Essential in further development of SCL is to create a common understanding and a shared responsibility for it. The practical implementation of SCL takes place within the classroom, between teacher and student, however institutional leadership must support new endeavours and provide guidance, as well as an institutional strategy for the implementation of SCL, designed and adopted by the university community itself, especially students and staff. Obligatory teacher training, continuous staff development and rewarding excellence, in the form of awards or other forms of recognition are also vital elements in creating a culture for SCL. Finally, national governments must provide the required funding for reducing classroom sizes, updating infrastructure and providing adequate student financial support, amongst other necessities.

The implementation of SCL involves giving students increased ownership and responsibility for the learning process, and fostering a mutual learning process between the teacher and researcher and the student. Students must therefore be considered equal members of the academic community and as such, full partners in governance on all levels of the higher education system, from the boards of the national quality assurance agencies to the institutional evaluations to the programme evaluation panels. Recognising the important role that student-run democratic bodies play in this is essential, and providing support in form of funding for them to hold trainings for student members of quality assurance panels for instance, is necessary in ensuring their success.

Implementing these recommendations will ensure a full transformation of the higher education system to one based on equality and the constant drive for quality in education. Meeting the needs of students is meeting the needs for society, and this transformation is therefore key for any democratic society and undertaking tomorrow's challenges and opportunities.

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Questions for discussion:

What concrete procedures can be implemented in quality assurance (especially external) to evaluate and support student-centred learning?



Are there any examples of a common approach on SCL being included in the institutional quality concept (strategy)?

Have you encountered any supportive (as opposed to restrictive) mechanisms for recognising and promoting the student-centred approach as an element of quality education? What role do students have in these mechanisms?

Does the current external quality assurance system support and/or recognise teachers/institutions implementing the student-centred-approach? Do teachers/institutions/society feel that they benefit from implementing the student-centred approach?