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## Student-Centred Learning (SCL)

### Latest trend or integral part of good teaching?

This factory article deals with the topic of student- or learner-centred teaching and learning. There are no fixed criteria in quality assurance or general guidelines offered by higher education institutions that focus on student-centred learning. The different aspects of SCL, however, are increasingly emphasised on the European level. In this article, FIBAA Consult has gathered the existing information on SCL and conveyed it to university and quality assurance practice.

#### *Where does SCL come from?*

Depending on its interpretation, Maria Montessori's pedagogics can already be seen as a precursor of SCL. Theorists such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who investigated the functioning of learning, also suggested a paradigm change towards learner-centred teaching in the sense of a constructivist learning theory.<sup>1</sup> Constructivism assumes that knowledge is not transported into the learner, but is inherent in the learner: the process of learning is strongly influenced by personal experience and interpretation and it depends on the learner's motivation.

Since 2009, the European Student Union (ESU) has intensively dealt with SCL<sup>2</sup> and suggested the following definition: *"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."*

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<sup>1</sup> Neubert, Reich, Voß, (2001). Lernen als konstruktiver Prozess. In Hug (ed.): Einführung in das wissenschaftliche Arbeiten. Hohengehren, Baltmannsweiler: Schneider-Verlag. <http://www.uni-koblenz.de/-didaktik/voss/prozess.pdf> last access: 25/05/2016.

<sup>2</sup> Documentation and results of the project "Time for a New Paradigm in Education: Student Centered Learning" (T4SCL) can be found here: <http://www.esu-online.org/projects/archive/scl/> last access: 25/05/2016.

## What does SCL mean?

Student-centred learning means reversing the traditional teacher-centred understanding of learning processes and putting students in the centre of the teaching/learning process. In teaching-centred lectures, the teachers are the most important sources for knowledge. Student-centred learning promotes active (self-) learning. Armstrong (2011) even states: *"The traditional teacher-responsible design for education in universities conflicts with what we know about how people learn. In contrast to natural learning, it substitutes teacher for learner responsibility. As it is based on extrinsic rewards, it undermines intrinsic interest in learning."*<sup>3</sup>

In student-centred learning processes, teachers serve as companions instead of instructors. It is their vital task to lead the students towards (re-)interpreting the subject matter and thereby "experiencing" its contents.

In the area of examination, SCL deviates considerably from the traditional approach. SCL uses more formative (feedback-giving) and less summative (concluding) forms of assessment. In SCL, the students help to shape their examinations, that is, they decide on how they will demonstrate their skills. This manner of assessment enhances the success of student-centred learning.

## Who supports and demands SCL?

In 2015, the ministers of the "Bologna States" have adopted three documents in which SCL is addressed: the Yerevan Communiqué, the ECTS Users' Guide (2015) and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). See info box for wording.

## What are the criteria for SCL?

Criteria for SCL have been most explicitly defined in the ESG.

The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching:

- respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths;
- considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate;
- flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods;
- regularly evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods;
- encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher;
- promotes mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship;
- has appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the importance of assessment of the students' progression and their future careers, quality assurance processes for assessment take into account the following:

- Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field;
- The criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance;
- The assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process;

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<sup>3</sup> J. Scott Armstrong. Natural Learning in Higher Education. Forthcoming in the Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning. Heidelberg: Springer (2011) . [http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1151&context=marketing\\_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1151&context=marketing_papers) last access: 25/05/2016.

<sup>4</sup> Cf.: Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), p.12. [http://www.fibaa.org/uploads/media/ESG\\_2015.pdf](http://www.fibaa.org/uploads/media/ESG_2015.pdf). Last access: 01/06/2016.

- Where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner;
- The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances;
- Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures;
- A formal procedure for student appeals is in place.<sup>5</sup>

### *What are the advantages of SCL?*

In the realm of higher education, SCL appears to be effective through offering a constructivist approach to didactics. SCL's characteristics include innovative teaching methods that define learning as a constant exchange between teachers and students (as well as between students among themselves), with students as active participants who assume responsibility for their own learning process. This approach to learning particularly promotes problem-solving and transfer skills as well as critical and reflective thinking.

### *Practical examples of SCL's possible implementation*

- Student-centred learning can be part of the HEI's overall strategy and be included in the mission statement in order to signalise to others that students can be seen as responsible partners in the teaching and learning process.
- Offering options such as specialisations, elective subjects and optional subjects in the curriculum can have motivating effects, since parts of the subject matter are engaged with by choice.
- Choosing topics for project and group works is motivating in a similar way as free course choices, but it furthermore offers flexible learning paths and enhances independent studies, which are necessary in order to arrive at the project's or a group work's results.
- To include heterogeneous previous skills leads to experienced or less experienced students being able to take the roles of teachers and learners. They can thereby apply practical skills independently and learn on eye level.
- Students can study and prepare for exams in correspondence to their own learning style by means of using various different formats such as attendance seminars, recorded lectures, accompanying scripts, group discussions etc.
- Student evaluations should also be used to improve SCL. Questions relating to the didactics and forms of assessment applied in the modules can, if asked properly, contribute to a larger variety and to fitting teaching methods.

### *How is SCL assessed in accreditation?*

The Assessment Guides for accreditation procedures according to the international Quality Standards of FIBAA include questions related to student-centred learning, which means that in FIBAA's procedures, the experts already assess the extent to which an institution has implemented SCL. Study programmes that receive the FIBAA Quality Seal or even the FIBAA Premium Seal have thus demonstrated that they value SCL and that they have successfully implemented all relevant aspects of student-centred learning.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf.: Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), p.12. [http://www.fibaa.org/uploads/media/ESG\\_2015.pdf](http://www.fibaa.org/uploads/media/ESG_2015.pdf). Last access: 01/06/2016.

## Info box: Wording Yerevan Communiqué and ECTS Users' Guide

### **The Yerevan Communiqué names as education policy's primary objective:**

*„Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching is the main mission of the EHEA. We will encourage and support higher education institutions and staff in promoting pedagogical innovation in student-centred learning environments and in fully exploiting the potential benefits of digital technologies for learning and teaching. We will promote a stronger link between teaching, learning and research at all study levels, and provide incentives for institutions, teachers and students to intensify activities that develop creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. Study programmes should enable students to develop the competences that can best satisfy personal aspirations and societal needs, through effective learning activities. These should be supported by transparent descriptions of learning outcomes and workload, flexible learning paths and appropriate teaching and assessment methods. It is essential to recognize and support quality teaching, and to provide opportunities for enhancing academics' teaching competences. Moreover, we will actively involve students, as full members of the academic community, as well as other stakeholders, in curriculum design and in quality assurance.“*

### **The ECTS Users' Guide explains:**

#### *„Student-centred-learning (SCL)*

*Student-Centred Learning (SCL) is a process of qualitative transformation for students and other learners in a learning environment, aimed at enhancing their autonomy and critical ability through an outcome-based approach.*

*The SCL concept can be summarised into the following elements:*

- Reliance on active rather than passive learning;*
- Emphasis on critical and analytical learning and understanding;*
- Increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student;*
- Increased autonomy of the student;*
- A reflective approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both the student and the teacher.“*

The ESG expect higher education institutions to implement SCL and external quality assurance to assess it.

#### *„Standard:*

*Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.“*

#### *„Guidelines:*

*Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. This means careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes.“*

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