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Mapping and analysis of student-centred learning and teaching practices: usable knowledge to support more inclusive, high-quality higher education

Executive Summary



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ABOUT NESET

NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training.

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture initiated the establishment of the network as the successor to NESET II (2015-2018), NESSE (2007-2010) and NESET (2011-2014).

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Executive summary

This report defines student-centred learning and teaching (hereafter also referred to as SCLT) as an overarching approach to designing higher education processes, which is founded on the concept of student agency. SCLT primarily concerns the capabilities of students to participate in, influence and take responsibility for their learning pathways and environments, in order to have a transformative learning experience and thus achieve deeper learning outcomes. Furthermore, we conceive SCLT as an approach that moves beyond classroom practice to construct inclusive and supportive learning and teaching environments – student-centred learning and teaching ecosystems – within higher education institutions (HEIs) and their subunits, as well as in broader higher education systems at regional, national and supranational levels.

This report achieves two main objectives. First, it maps notable real-world practices of student-centred learning and teaching – namely, those practices with proven potential to contribute to the quality and inclusiveness of higher education. This mapping has identified a catalogue of best-practice examples of SCLT, the most interesting of which are presented as case studies in the report. We believe that these real-life examples, which have been successfully applied by universities, will allow stakeholders to move beyond abstract theoretical ideas, and to encourage the adoption of SCLT practices by drawing the attention of European universities to the most effective practices of their peers. To ensure relevance in the European context, when mapping the practices, we focused in particular on those applied by the universities that are now part of the European University Alliances – the Commission’s policy initiative designed to build networks of European universities working in line with the best practices in higher education. We have also examined best practices in SCLT applied as part of the Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ projects.

Annex 3 of the report provides a self-assessment tool that enables higher education institutions to assess the existence and effectiveness of student-centred learning and teaching elements within their own institution. This Annex includes a list of considerations regarding each core element of an SCLT ecosystem, and a list of indicators to assess whether these elements exist within a given higher education institution. Higher education institutions are guided through the Annex via the use of questions they can ask themselves in order to ascertain if they are already part of the student-centred learning and teaching paradigm.

The second key objective achieved in the report is to put into context the SCLT practices that have been mapped, by reviewing recent, top-level academic research on SCLT. Insights gained from this research have allowed us to explain how and why certain practices work, what benefits they provide, as well as to identify any negative side-effects they may give rise to. Furthermore, these insights have deepened our understanding of the conditions necessary for SCLT to succeed, and the potential bottlenecks in policy and practice that can prevent the successful implementation of SCLT as a learning and teaching approach. Among other sources, the report has drawn substantially on the forthcoming Routledge Handbook on ‘Student-Centred Learning and Teaching in Higher Education’, co-edited by Sabine Hoidn and Manja Klemenčič. This Handbook gathers together the latest thinking on student-centred learning and teaching in higher education by renowned scholars and presents case studies from around the world.

To achieve the two objectives mentioned above, the study was guided by three central research questions:

1. What are the core elements and examples of high-impact practices in the student-centred learning and teaching in higher education that ensure transformative learning experience for all students?
2. How can high-impact practices of student-centred learning and teaching ecosystems be implemented by higher education institutions, and how should their impacts be assessed?
3. How can student-centred learning and teaching practices support inclusive and supportive higher education in the sense of removing barriers for all students to access, actively participate in, and achieve transformative learning experiences in higher education?

Below, we list and explain the main conclusions of the study. We hope these will guide policy makers at European and national level, as well as higher education institutions and other stakeholders, in making student-centred learning and teaching an everyday reality for learners and teachers all over Europe.

Student-centred learning and teaching is an overarching approach to learning and teaching in higher education that is founded on the concept of student agency. It is based on a framework of 10 mutually reinforcing core elements.

There are two key paradigms for learning and teaching in higher education: teacher-centred learning, and student-centred learning. At present, the former paradigm is giving way to the latter. Teacher-centred learning and teaching tends to consider students as passive recipients of information, without considering the need for them to construct their own knowledge and thus actively participate in the educational process. In such an approach, the teacher occupies a privileged position as the student's main source of knowledge. Within student-centred learning and teaching, students are given opportunities to shape their own courses, and to choose distinct learning pathways within a course. Often there is also some built-in flexibility for students to choose particular units within their study programme. Thus, the application of student-centred learning and teaching within higher education institutions requires a shift in focus from what teachers are teaching, to what students are learning.

Previous detailed reviews of the literature have revealed that the majority of student-centred learning and teaching definitions have emphasised a similar list of inherent characteristics. The three elements often used as a foundation for defining student-centred learning and teaching are: (1) student satisfaction; (2) student engagement; and (3) student agency. The literature review carried out for the present study has convinced us that student satisfaction and student engagement may be also achieved within a teacher-centred paradigm; student agency is the element that is exclusive to and inherent in the student-centred learning and teaching paradigm.

Our analysis reveals that, in order for higher education institutions to fully and successfully implement student-centred learning and teaching ecosystems, such ecosystems must encompass 10 mutually reinforcing core elements, namely:

- Policies, rules and regulations enabling student-centred learning and teaching.
- Student-centred curriculum and pedagogy.

- Student-centred assessment.
- Flexible learning pathways.
- Learner support.
- Teaching support.
- Active learning spaces and academic libraries.
- Learning technologies infrastructure.
- Community learning connections and partnerships.
- Quality assurance supporting student-centred learning and teaching.

By 'mutually reinforcing', we mean that these elements work together as parts of or 'gears' in an ecosystem. The more of these elements are present, the more likely it is for a learning and teaching system to function effectively as a student-centred learning and teaching ecosystem. For example, if a higher education institution begins to use more student-centred classroom activities, it will need to introduce a greater level of teaching and learning support. This will subsequently necessitate the drafting of SCLT-focused institutional policies, rules and regulations, and the adjustment of quality assurance procedures to ensure that they are suitable for the student-centred learning and teaching context. Thus, the specific elements of the learning and teaching systems present in a higher education institution tend to converge towards either a student-centred or a teacher-centred process.

The EU and its higher education sector would benefit from reaching an agreement among EU and national policy makers, stakeholders and higher education institutions on the core elements that constitute a student-centred learning and teaching approach to higher education, as well as how to measure and facilitate their implementation.

As Klemenčič (2017, p. 70) puts it, 'without clarity as to its meaning and specific set of indicators to assess institutional practices, almost anything can be 'sold' as student-centred learning.' She also points out the need to develop an overarching policy framework for student-centred learning and teaching that defines the core elements of student-centred learning and teaching in an institutional environment, as well as the indicators required to measure student-centred learning and teaching presence at institutions, which would guide the implementation and quality assurance. This report can be viewed as a kind of 'white paper' for such a policy framework. It outlines the 10 core elements, discusses their key aspects, and suggests indicators to measure their implementation. However, such a policy framework will require the 'buy-in' of various stakeholders involved in higher education policy and practice – in particular, national policy makers and higher education institutions themselves.

At present, there is a number of different definitions of student-centred learning and teaching used by key EU-level stakeholders working on higher education policy. The definition with the greatest policy relevance is the one established in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). However, the European Commission and key stakeholders may consider leading the way in expanding this definition beyond the field of quality assurance and agreeing on its core elements with other stakeholders.

For the most part, we are still living in a teacher-centred paradigm.

Student-centred learning in higher education has already entered the actual work programmes of the key EU financial instruments. Elements of innovative learning and teaching methodology, equity and inclusion are embedded in the Erasmus+ programme. For example, the inaugural call for proposals within Erasmus+ to establish the European Universities, launched in 2018, requires institutions to offer 'student-centred curricula jointly delivered across an inter-university campus, where a diverse student body can build their own programmes and experience mobility at all study levels.'

Hoidn (2017a, b, 2019a, b) points out that higher education is still centred on teachers and traditional teaching methods such as lectures, seminars and assessment. Even the terminology we use, such as 'going to a lecture', or even describing a class format as 'a lecture', along with lecture-based classroom setup, reinforces a culture of teacher-centred practices. Despite some positive changes, the shift in focus from the teacher-centred to student-centred learning and teaching faces various obstacles. The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching is hindered by deteriorating working conditions in higher education, such as increased teaching workloads and expanding class sizes; recruitment and promotion policies that favour research over teaching; declining investment and job security in tertiary education; an increase in the number of bureaucratic tasks; as well as a strong existing tradition of teacher-centred practices (ESU, 2010; Hoidn, 2016, 2017a; Lea et al, 2003). Moreover, both teachers and students may be reluctant to engage in SCLT due to a lack of knowledge, interest or motivation, or due to prior bad experiences with the methods of student-centred learning and teaching (Hoidn, 2017a). As a result, mature student-centred learning and teaching ecosystems are not widespread across Europe. Instead, numerous but highly fragmented 'pockets' of student-centred learning and teaching practices exist within European higher education.

Some elements of student-centred learning and teaching are more widespread than others.

Our review revealed that it is quite common to find instances of at least some of the core elements of student-centred learning and teaching being applied within higher education institutions in Europe. Instructors at many universities tend, at least some of the time, to use student-centred classroom practices or assessment procedures (e.g. formative assessments) that are in line with the student-centred learning and teaching approach. Many other student-centred learning and teaching elements are also common in the discourse of higher education practitioners and university leaders, e.g. flexible learning pathways or learner support (like student-support services), however, many of them are currently not being applied in a way conducive to student-centred learning.

The study also identified elements of the student-centred learning and teaching approach to higher education that currently receive insufficient attention from policy makers and practitioners, despite their importance to the building of effective student-centred learning and teaching ecosystems. Among such elements, we emphasise the need to create active learning spaces and community learning connections – both of which are key to building an effective student-centred learning and teaching infrastructure.

Student-centred learning and teaching practices can contribute to two main aspects of inclusive higher education: better attention to diversity in the classroom, and improved access to (and within) higher education. These can be achieved through the application of an inclusive curriculum and pedagogy; flexible learning pathways; technology-enhanced learning; learning and teaching support; inclusive learning spaces and libraries and community engagement and partnerships.

Student-centred learning and teaching practices can contribute to more inclusive higher education in two main ways. First, SCLT practices can better attend to the needs of diverse students. SCLT helps to ensure that each student, irrespective of their background, can learn in the way that is most suitable to them, and enjoys the flexibility to choose the most relevant subjects and methods for study. Second, SCLT can contribute to improving access to higher education study programmes for all students, as well as improving their access to the most suitable learning experiences (courses) within higher education study programmes. Access and attention to diversity are two separate aspects of inclusive higher education. The question of access deals with whether and how students can get into the higher education process; attention to diversity deals with the issue of identifying the best way(s) to engage in this process for a diverse community of learners.

Student-centred learning and teaching encourage inclusiveness in higher education through:

- Inclusive curriculum and pedagogy.
- Flexible learning pathways and technology-enhanced learning.
- Learning support.
- Teaching support.
- Inclusive learning spaces and libraries.
- Community engagement and partnerships.

Developing and applying an **inclusive curriculum and pedagogy** is the first step to making higher education more inclusive through student-centred learning and teaching. Inclusive curriculum and pedagogy seek to diversify course materials and teaching strategies to best suit the needs of each learner. It also applies appropriate learning technologies and adjusts assessment practices to ensure that they are sensitive to the needs and life situations of the students.

Flexible learning pathways allow students to choose the most suitable subjects to study, and personalised ways to engage in learning. For example, universities may offer evening classes, flexible schedules to take classes or meet instructors, the opportunity for students not to start a course from the beginning (in cases where a student has already learnt part of the course content), among many other practices. It also refers to recognition of prior learning and credentials obtained through nonformal education.

Technology-enhanced learning also contributes to more inclusive higher education by enabling distance learning. This allows students to learn without being physically present in the classroom, or at times that best suit their schedules. The opportunities

for distance learning that are enabled by technologies may attract people to higher education who could not study without flexible schedules or the possibility of learning individually.

Learning support is crucial to ensure that the students who enrol in higher education also successfully complete their chosen study programme. This means ensuring that students do not drop out of higher education due to personal or learning difficulties encountered during the learning process.

It is not enough for institutional leaders to assume that teachers will know how to make their courses more inclusive if asked to do so. **Teaching support** should be offered to instructors to ensure that they are aware of how to make their courses more inclusive.

Inclusive learning spaces and libraries enable mobility and access to learning resources by a diverse student population, including students with disabilities. Inclusive spaces also need to reflect the diversity of the student population in the artefacts they display and the learning materials they offer.

Community engagement and collaboration between higher education institutions and community partners (such as schools, employers, various societal organisations) can provide an effective way to reach out to regional or local communities, and to address existing issues such as underrepresentation, or the low level of participation or attainment of degrees among specific groups.

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