

STUDENT CENTERED LEARNING

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Abstract: Student-centred learning is an educational conceptual framework that is currently actively promoted. Today higher education is profoundly different from what it was a few decades ago. The idea of placing the student at the center of the study process brings profound changes in higher education system. Labour market and the globalisation process require a thorough rethinking of the educational process and changing of the learning values. Student becomes an active participant in the learning process. The main aim of such approach is not only to assimilate the curriculum but to develop professional skills that market demands. The students manage independently their own learning. All this leads to a shift paradigm, necessary at the micro level – in teaching, learning and assessment. Adoption of student centred learning changes the roles and responsibilities of the teacher and student. Student centred learning also involves changes in the role and responsibilities of the learners and students, in the program materials delivery and in the learning process itself. Learning becomes personalised, students engage in different ways and in different places. Students benefit from individually paced, targeted learning tasks that formatively assess existing skills and knowledge and that address the student's needs and interests. Learning is based on the outputs of the knowledge and engages students in their own success, students support one another's progress and incorporate their interests and skills into the learning process.

Keywords: student-centred learning, teaching approach, studying, learning process, active learning.

Student-centred learning has been actively promoted as an education concept lately. The idea of placing the student at the core of the education process has been topical in the recent years, given the significant change of the higher education system, which is currently way different from what it used to be a few decades ago. This model is however often underestimated by political decision-makers, the higher education institutions, and the teaching staff themselves.

The engagement of the labour market and the globalisation process call for thoroughly rethinking the processes that take place in the classrooms, as well as the value of the teachings. It is not just about fashion; there is a strong rationale behind this need for changing the paradigm at micro-level, in the teaching, learning, and evaluation process.

A new dimension in the education process is student-centred learning. This concept relies on a new approach from both sides – the teachers and the students – and implies “personal autonomy” of the students. When they enter higher education, students have an adult age, which means they should be treated as responsible individuals, who are concerned about their future career. They are not any more consumers who only have their own interests. This ontological perception of students as citizens is justified by two reasons: first of all, the modern society needs higher education, free citizens with critical attitude, secondly, the lifelong learning approach requires citizens to develop their personal and professional interests in a more independent way.

The paradigm of student-centred learning requires shifting the education method from teaching based on memorising to education based on learning. Education should be seen as a constructive process of cooperation, a democratic process between teachers and students, as well as between students themselves. This involves two types of implications. In practical terms, education has to be organised in a different way. The education programs and the university life should focus more on students' skills. Concentration on optional courses, on group work, an optimal relationship between the teacher and the students increase the number of education and carrier counselling services. At a higher level, the teaching and learning practices should be changed. Students should learn to become critical citizens in order to challenge the status-quo.

Student-centred education requires effective evaluation of the teaching methods and participation of students in the development of such methods. The change of teaching practices infers eventually a change in the teachers' attitude. It is essential that the academic staff is trained in the new teaching-learning methods; there needs to be continuous training throughout the teaching process. Student-centred education is a specific paradigm, which calls for a shift from the lecturer-based approach to a more interactive and more practical teaching/learning method revolving around the competences of the learner. The teaching staff should no longer look at and treat students as consumers or as individuals who just reproduce knowledge. This approach should be at the core of the higher education system's mission and a basic method for student education.

The business environment of the 21st century calls for a radical change in the education of future professionals. The university should produce graduates who are ready to face the future and to meet the current requirements of the business. The university should facilitate learning through means and methods aligned with these requirements. The way of studying and the learning capacity of each student is different, what is similar though, is the fact that all students wish to gain skills in order to have access to the labour market.

However, this does not mean that all education institutions will have to use a single philosophy or method. Each of them has to reach a fundamental understanding of the competences that the future professionals need to achieve and how to reach this objective. Student-centred learning should be learning based on activity (i.e. project-based, case-based, problem-based learning, etc.).

It is necessary to ensure the quality, the regulations and the policies for students' participation in the higher education process at national level. Quality assurance and alignment to the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" should be based on the results of learning, evaluation of teaching, and participation of students in the education process.

Understanding the importance of this paradigm, everyone understands that change requires a lot of work and resources. Even if a number of stakeholders are willing to implement this model, the paradigm shift cannot happen overnight. The main issue is that the concept of learning competences is not understood and applied properly. The substantial approach for stimulating change resides, first of all, in the development of the staff and the special funds for changing the teaching practices.

One may conclude that not all universities stimulate the shift towards a student-focused higher education system. However, before reaching such a conclusion, some other aspects should also be assessed. One aspect is that academic freedom could mean that universities

may not impose or force student-centred education. In this case, it might appear that the teaching professionals do not promote the change. However, experience shows that there is a consensus among the students and the teachers about the fact that student-centred education is a good thing. University staff states clearly that the attitude of the students, the staff, and the higher education institutions do not represent barriers to change. Student-centred education should be the natural state of the education process; teachers perceive this as one of university's core missions.

The teaching methods are not just dimensions of the study process, but rather an integral part of the teaching concept. The starting point of learning should not be the inputs but rather the outputs of the education process, implying the competences. Therefore, the design of the curriculum may only be established after the final product of education was established.

Another requirement is that teachers should accept the responsibility for establishing the way in which the learning results should be attained. Therefore, the role of the teacher should shift from developing analytical programs describing the contents, as a major responsibility, to developing a dynamic design of the curriculum, which would also include the teaching-learning methods.

The methods for evaluating the results should also be changed. Only one evaluation method at the end of the course is not enough. Students should be given as many opportunities as possible to prove the learning results. Eventually, the learning process is as important as, if not more important than, the content to be learned. Learning should be appealing.

Certainly, in order to implement the student-centred education method and make this a part of the education system, a number of things need to happen, as follows:

- students should be treated as "drivers" of the study process;
- teachers should be promoted and use adequate teaching methods;
- suppliers of education products (books, software, hardware, rooms, etc.) should support the teaching staff in implementing student-centred education;
- there should be an actual academic autonomy in decision-making about the way and the methods of teaching, with a view to creating the competences demanded by the labour market.

The conceptual frame should rely on the hypotheses of the following principles of student-centred education:

- *Learning is customized*: customized learning acknowledges that students study in different ways and in different places. Students benefit from learning, individual tasks and pace. There is differentiation in the assessment of the existing skills and knowledge. Students' needs and interests are different.

- *Learning is based on competences*: Students are promoted when they show proper knowledge rather than when they attend the necessary classes. Learning happens anywhere and anytime: Learning happens outside the ordinary academic hours and even outside the academic year; it is not limited to the classroom.

- *Students take ownership in learning*: in the student-centred education process, students get involved in the education process; they enjoy their success and engage their skills and interests in the learning process.

Currently this approach acquires a new dimension to which other components are attached, such as the teaching strategy, specialised classes, programs, departments, and institutions. On a large scale, a number of descriptors are used, which bring some precision characterising the student-centred teaching.

The integration of students in the process of institutional change may take place in different ways, the focus being on the student's voice or on student's direct involvement. In the first case, the final decision is made by the institution, while the student, as an evaluator of the institutional processes provides feedback. In order to make improvements and changes, students' opinions are taken into account, and final decisions are made at institutional level.

Another approach treats students as partners, co-creators, and experts. Students are cooperation partners in providing information about professional development. The decisions on the development of the institution and the institutional processes are also made at institutional level.

Another, more modern and efficient approach in implementing student-centred education is students' engagement in the process of institutional change. This happens when the student is treated as an agent of change. Students are active participants in decision-making, with a view to influencing the change and development. Decisions are made jointly with the academic staff. Students, in their capacity as change agents, are partners in the professional development. Students also promote decisions on actions at institutional level.

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