

## **DR. IRENA MARINKO: STANDARDS FOR STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING AT TERTIARY LEVEL**

### **Povzetek**

Za lažjo in hitrejšo uveljavitev na študente osredotočenega pristopa bi bila potrebna trdna in široko sprejeta definicija in standardi na študente osredotočenega učenja. Prispevek, ki je nastal na osnovi projekta »Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach«, daje predlog za definicijo in standarde na študente osredotočenega učenja, ki temeljijo na učnem procesu, ocenjevanju, uvajanju drugih oblik personaliziranega pristopa do študentov in izobraževanju predavateljev.

### **Abstract**

A solid and largely accepted definition and standards of the student-centred learning would be necessary for easier and faster introduction of the student-centred approach. The paper that was written on the basis of the project »Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach« suggests the definition and standards of the student-centred learning based on the process of learning, assessment, introduction of other forms of this pedagogical approach and teachers' education.

Ključne besede: na študente osredotočeno učenje, definicija, standardi

Key words: student-centred learning, definition, standards

### **1. Introduction**

Student-centred learning has been in use for a long time but there is still no consistent and solid identity and/or standards on the basis of which universities could claim that they use the student-centred approach. The teachers need a generally agreed model that is better defined, based on a combination of theory and practice, and is underpinned by effective learning and assessment strategies, that supports students also in other ways of personalised learning and develops teachers' knowledge (Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach, 2016).

Projects such as "Time for a New Paradigm Shift in Education: Student-Centred Learning" (Attard et al, 2010), have begun the process of defining and standardising SCL planning, practice and assessment by creating student-centred checklists and step-by-step diagnostic strategies for policy makers and practitioners. The work covers different aspects of implementation and advice to all stakeholders on creating and maintaining a consistent SCL environment: consultation with students, European credit transfer system, quality assurance, mobility and recognition of prior learning, the social dimension, teaching and learning methods, student assessment methods, learning environment and professional academic development. The project "Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach" (2016)

made a large descriptive study of the literature and practice and has categorized the most important elements of the student-centred approach in four groups: the learning process, assessment, other forms of personalised approach to students and teachers' education. These aspects and/or categories represent a good basis to develop both the definition as well as the standards of the student-centred approach.

## 2. Literature survey

**The learning process** organized on the basis of the student-centred learning should according to Harkema and Schout (2008) give considerations to individual learners' experiences, perspectives, their backgrounds, interests, capacities and needs. Teachers should discuss with students which study activities lead to good results, expose students to looking for alternatives and trying to find their own solutions (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, 2000; Protheroe, 2007). Teachers should focus upon what students should learn and emphasize why (Bransford, Vye & Bateman, 2002). According to Harden and Laidlaw (2013) teachers should engage students in active learning, individualise the learning to the personal needs, capabilities, motivation and career aspirations of students. The curriculum should include experiences in the early year of the course, encourage a problem-based approach, use virtual problems related to the subject. Mclean and Gibbs (2010) think that students should be included in curriculum design and implementation, that schools should support student diversity and individual learning needs, the psychological and social aspects of student diversity, develop students' self-learning skills and regularly review the core curriculum content. Çubukçu (2012) recommends that teachers should emphasise tasks that attract students' interests, organise content and activities around subjects that are meaningful to the students, that teachers should develop global, interdisciplinary, and complementary activities, support challenging learning activities even if the learners find them difficult, introduce activities that encourage students to work with other students in cooperation and that study materials offer them a chance to activate their background knowledge. European Students' Union (2010) emphasizes especially the rights of the students that they can give feedback on the quality of the educational process, curriculum content, teaching methods used, that students are informed on the learning outcomes before they start a course, that goals of the learning process are agreed upon between teachers and students, that students should be consulted when learning outcomes are designed, that the learning process uses group-work, problem-based learning, student-centred active learning, resource-based learning, the case method, role plays, classroom workshops, web-conferencing, small-group work, etc.

The feedback and/or **the assessment** process should be according to Bransford, Brown, Cocking (2000) and Protheroe (2007) organised so that examination questions refer to real-life situation and do not lead to categorising students with regard to their scores or grades. Harden and Laidlaw (2013) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) claim that students should receive constructive and enough specific feedback, an explanation and that the language used in doing so should be non-evaluative, given in time and frequently and should help learners to plan further studies. Mclean and Gibbs (2010) suggest that students should be included in

evaluation. European Students' Union (2010) claims that students must be consulted on evaluation methods used and procedures for students to appeal decisions regarding their academic attainment or progression should be provided. Peer and self-assessment should be used as a method in the student assessment process (self-assessment comments, peer-assessment feedback comments, suggesting self-assessment grades and negotiating self-assessment grades). Projects should be used in the assessment of students, simulations of tasks and real life situations are used in the assessment of students.

**The personalised approach** and/or individualisation can according to Mc Combs et al. (1997) be achieved so that teachers take care that learners feel safe and accepted. New understandings should be adapted to the individual students' pace of learning. Harden and Laidlaw (2013) think that the time allotted for an individual student should not be fixed, but should be supposed as the length of time necessary for the student to master the required skills. Teachers should arrange the teaching programme so that students can choose to attend a lecture on a subject, view a podcast of the lecture, engage in collaborative problem-based learning with their peers or work independently using an online learning programme. Learning resources or learning opportunities should be adapted or prepared so that the students' learning experience, as they work through the programme, is personalised to their individual needs. Also the curriculum should be designed so that it helps students' individual requirements e.g. by including experiences in the early year of the course, by encouraging a problem-based approach, by the use of virtual problems related to the subject (Harden and Laidlaw, 2013). Mclean and Gibbs (2010) say that the basic conditions for an effective learning situation are the learning environment in which learners feel safe and accepted; numerous opportunities for students to confront new information, experiences, and personal discovery of new understandings that are all adapted to the individual students and their pace of learning (Mc Combs et al., 1997). They also claim that the school should allow time for independent learning and pursuing areas of interest. Çubukçu (2012) suggests that various institutions and outside-class activities are incorporated to support students' learning, that the time dimension should be evaluated in psychological terms - so that the students have enough time to construct the information cognitively and connect the new knowledge to real life. Locations of studies should include all the places where students learn: school, library, museums, work place and home. European Students' Union (2010) claims that students must be involved in periodic programme quality reviews and be treated as full and equal members in committees. Prior learning (in non-formal learning environments) must be recognised by the institution for the purpose of access into educational programmes the process of recognition is easy, recognition of prior learning can be done without significant costs or bureaucracy. There should be special support measures in place in order to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Learning paths should be flexible enough so as to permit combining work/family life and studies. Students should have access to appropriate research and study facilities.

The higher education institutions should provide for development of **the teachers' education** in the field of the student-centred approach and promote **a culture of student-centred learning**. With the change in the education paradigm where the focus is on the students'

independent learning, a special emphasis should be put not just on the teacher's pedagogical and scientific activities but also on their self-development. The teacher in student-centred learning has become a facilitator and/or mentor of studies but he/she still has the main role in forwarding the education. The research »Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach« investigated the teacher's role and found that this new teacher's role requires plenty of new knowledge which can be acquired by encouragement of teachers to use the student-centred approach, development programmes for personal growth and exchange of good ideas. The teachers in this new teaching and learning paradigm should develop different main abilities: holistic thinking and practice to integrate different subjects, cultures and the points of view at the same time taking into account local and global perspectives; strategic thinking (ability to foresee different future alternatives as well as their implementation possibilities based on the critical analysis and understanding of the past and current situations); implementation of changes and innovations (teacher's role, teaching and learning methods, organization of studies and changes in the study system). Teachers do not need only didactic knowledge but should develop also their abilities to work in team, to communicate with international partners, they must be able to prepare the study materials, provide distant learning possibilities, participate in scientific activities etc. The teacher's professional performance is also conditioned by psycho sociological aspects which are important both for the teacher's scientific activities as well as study quality and the relation between higher education institutions and society (Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach, 2016).

### **3. Definition of the student-centred learning**

The above quoted relevant scientists mention a number of the characteristics of the student-centred learning that can be broadly divided into four categories: the learning/teaching process, the process of assessment, other forms of the personalised approach and teachers' education.

The most important elements of the learning process mentioned by a number of relevant scientists are engaging students in active learning, giving consideration to individual learners' experiences, perspectives, their backgrounds, interests, capacities and needs, and the rights to give feedback on the quality of the educational process, curriculum content, and teaching methods used. The main elements of the assessment aspect are that students should be included in evaluation and that examination questions should refer to real-life situation. There are also several similar opinions regarding other forms of personalisation: students should be given enough time to understand and/or master the skills, the teaching programmes and learning resources should be individualised, students should be involved as full and equal members in committees and have more rights: prior learning (in non-formal learning environments) should be recognised, there should be special support measures to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds and permit combining work/family life and studies. Teachers should develop holistic thinking, practice to integrate different subjects, cultures, ability to take into account local and global perspectives; strategic thinking,

implementation of changes and innovations, abilities to work in team, to communicate with international partners, they must be able to prepare the study materials, provide distant learning possibilities, etc.

In short it is possible to identify the student-centred learning as a learning approach that considers individual learners' capacities, needs experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, and interests, that includes students in evaluation, enables examinations based on real-life situations; gives students enough time to master the skills, individualises the teaching programmes and the learning resources, offers help to students from disadvantaged background, permits to combine work and family with studies and gives students rights to decide about their studies. The institutions that introduce the student-centred approach should develop the teachers' education and promote a culture of student-centred learning.

Although a number of authors claim that there is no clear definition of the student-centred learning available, the toolkit of the European Students' Union (2010, p. 4) proposes the following definition: »Student-Centred Learning represents both a mind set 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.«

The two definitions are similar in many aspects. The first does not mention the constructivist theories on which student-centred learning is based (although this is of course true). It also does not stress innovative methods of teaching and communication with teachers nor does it speak about fostering transferable skills. On the other side the first definition is more concrete when listing the most important characteristics of the learning process, assessment in especially includes other forms of individualisation of studies.

#### **4. Standards for the student-centred learning**

The standards for student-centred learning are suggested on the basis of the already mentioned four main categories described in the research »Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach« (2016): the learning/teaching process, the process of assessment, other forms of the personalised/individualised approach, teachers' education and culture of student-centred learning.

Standards suggested for evaluation of the learning/teaching process:

1 The teachers often use problem-based learning, project-led education, self-directed learning, inquiry learning, group project work, resource-based learning and include in the learning process in-class discussions, group presentations, projects, role plays, classroom

workshops, solve practical problems, and introduce small group work (Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach, 2016).

2 Considerations are given to individual learners' capacities, needs, experiences, perspectives, their backgrounds and interests, so that teachers speak with students and take them seriously, that educational institutions take into account students' informal education, enable accelerated and slower pace of studies, and help students who find teaching/learning activities difficult.

3 Teachers prepare different forms of study materials: textbooks, slides, research articles and popular scientific literature. Besides students get used to search for and use different statistical data.

4 The school annually reviews the core curriculum content and students are included in curriculum implementation. This standard is suggested because science develops quickly in there are always new innovations that should be included in the learning process.

5 Students are able to give feedback on the quality of the educational process and on the teaching methods used (by annual quality evaluations).

Standards suggested for assessment of students:

1 Examination questions refer to real-life situations and do not require learning by heart.

2 Teachers provide constructive and enough specific feedback to the student (they discuss strengths and weaknesses, explain mistakes, give advice how to improve etc.).

3 The language of feedback is non-evaluative, given in time, frequently, and helps learners to plan further studies.

4 Peer and self-assessment are used as a method in the student assessment process (self-assessment comments, peer-assessment feedback comments, suggesting self-assessment grades and negotiating self-assessment grades).

5 Procedures for students to appeal decisions regarding their academic attainment or progression are provided. These procedures are easy to make and do not require too much bureaucracy.

Standards suggested for personalised/individualised approach:

1 Teachers take care that learners feel safe and accepted: teachers show that they value students and are aware how to express their respect of students (who are their clients).

2 Teachers arrange the teaching programme so that students can choose to attend a lecture on a subject, view a podcast of the lecture, engage in collaborative problem-based learning with their peers or work independently using an online learning.

3 Various institutions and outside-class activities are incorporated to support students' learning: working organizations, firms, enterprises, public sector organizations, libraries, museums etc.

4 Prior learning (in non-formal learning environments) is recognised by the institution for the purpose of access into educational programmes, the process of recognition is easy.

5 There are special support measures in place in order to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds (this does not refer just to students with health problems but also those coming from abroad or from different social backgrounds).

6 Learning paths enable combining work/family life and studies.

7 Students are involved in periodic programme quality reviews, as full and equal members in committees.

Standards suggested for development of teachers and SCL culture:

1 The educational institution offers yearly courses that develop knowledge of teachers and their personal abilities to perform student-centred learning (e.g. holistic and strategic thinking, team-work, communication skills etc.)

2 The institution contributes to promoting the culture of student-centred learning (in front of all by accepting SCL into its strategy).

Attard et al (2010) actually do not use the word standards of student-centred learning but have introduced a checklist of what may be required in terms of successful implementation of the SCL approach:

- 1) Consultation with students: regarding their rights to give feedback on the quality of the educational process, on curriculum content, to be involved in programme quality reviews, in committees, to appeal decisions regarding students' academic attainment.
- 2) European credit transfer system and learning outcomes (checking students' rights to be consulted when learning results are designed, if student needs are considered when designing learning outcomes, if students are informed on the intended learning outcomes, if ECTS credits are used appropriately, if credits are transferable, measured on student workload, if students can get credits for activities outside the institution, if the institution refers its qualification to a Qualifications framework.
- 3) Quality assurance: if staff and students are consulted during the quality assurance process, if the quality assurance reviews take into account the elements of teaching and learning, the use of learning outcomes, the assessment methods.

- 4) Mobility, recognition and prior learning: are studies in other institutions and non-formal learning recognized, is the process of recognition easy, if students get support to cope with their new environment, are good practices of mobile staff disseminated at the institutional level.
- 5) Social dimension: are there special support measures to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds, can students combine their work/family and study life.
- 6) Teaching and learning methods: is there peer assessment and peer learning, activity-based learning, group work, are extracurricular activities recognized, is development of transversal skills introduced in the learning system.
- 7) Student assessment methods: are the goals of the learning process agreed upon between teachers and students, are peer- and self-assessment methods used, are projects and real life situations used in the assessment.
- 8) Learning environment: if students have access to appropriate research and study facilities, information technology, is there cooperation between librarians and teachers, does the institution contribute to promoting a national/regional culture of SCL.
- 9) Professional academic development: does the institution have guidelines on teaching and learning, regular professional development programme for teachers, does it contain discussion on teaching methods, does the programme use an SCL approach

If we compare the suggested standards and the recommendations of the Students' Union we can see many similarities but also some differences. The suggested standards have four main categories within which the learning process and assessment methods are more specified than the recommendations of the Students' Union. The suggested standards contain the category of the personalised/individualised approach that includes all other elements that support students except the learning process and the assessment. The standards do not elaborate students' right to the degree of the Students' Union (do not speak about the European credit transfer system and the mobility of students and teachers). These differences are understandable if we take into account that the Students' Union has to emphasize students' rights and that they were written for different stakeholders. Our suggestions for standards are mainly meant for universities.

## **5. Conclusions**

This article intends to start a discussion about introduction of a more unified definition and standards of the student-centred learning. It is based on the project »Empowering teachers for a student-centred approach« and cites a number of relevant authors to indicate four main categories of elements that should be considered when defining and standardizing the student-centred approach. Besides it takes into account also the project »Time for a New Paradigm Shift in Education: Student-centred learning« which is important as the starting point for a unified definition and standardization and also as expression of the European Students Union.



The suggested definition and standards are only a trial to define and standardize the student-centred approach and the author does not think that it could not be improved. There are many further points to be discussed: is the definition perhaps too narrow, how should the standards be measured, what percentage of positive answers should be used to claim that an institution uses the SCL approach etc.

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