

Universities in the era of Student Centred Learning

by Ligia Deca, Chairperson of the European Students' Union (ESU)

Please receive my warmest gratitude for inviting the European Students' Union to give a contribution to the opening of the academic year of the Luxembourg University. It is rare that I am invited to speak directly in front of academic community members and it is also rare that I see so many decision-makers and national renowned personalities attending the opening of a university. I interpret this on one hand as recognition of students as equal partners in decision making, but also a responsibility of our national members to make the European Students' Union present in the life of the students in all European universities. But why should they?

Well, partly because the European Students' Union is the representative and democratic student structure which reunites 47 National Unions of students from 38 countries. We are representing the educational, social, cultural and economical interests of more than 11 million students across the continent and ensure that students' views are effectively transmitted to bodies such as the Council of Europe, European Commission, UNESCO, The Bologna Follow-Up Group etc. From Luxembourg, we have one member - UNEL and a candidate member – LUS, and thus representing through their democratically elected representatives the interest of the students in Luxembourg. But mainly because we want to be your students' voice at the European level, while trying to give them the force of the collective support from millions other students in Europe.

The beginning of the academic year is a reason for joy, hope and curiosity for students and this is why I choose to speak about universities in the era of student centered learning. Student centered learning should not be only about changes in the number of professors compared to the number of students and about pedagogical improvements, although these are arguably 2 very important elements in the process.

Student centred learning is a new mode of seeing the university's role. In the traditional higher education system, study programmes, courses or modules, teaching and learning methods as well as student assessment have been predominantly designed, organised and carried out from a teacher perspective and around the question "Which issues will be taught to students?". Hence it has not always been clear and explicit which are the goals of a learning process from the perspective of a student.

Let me try to explain this starting from a basic element: the Luxembourg University website: I was trying to search for information as if I would be a student aiming at coming to the Luxembourg University to study. But what I found was an upper panel that had only one of the sections titled: "Students". The others were related to neutral titles such as Faculties, Research etc. In a student centred perspective the menus should be: "Becoming a student in the Luxembourg University", "What will I learn as a student in this or that faculty or programme?",

“Who are my teachers?” etc. Even in the financial section (yes, I checked that too ☺), I hardly found the webpage centered on “how can u afford to be a student in the University of Luxembourg?”, but rather on “How much will it cost to be a student in the University of Luxembourg?”. And especially, what I missed were the clear descriptions of the pedagogy methods: it is not the same for me if I will attend lectures in a 200 student aula or if I’ll have focus groups of 15 students. It is also not the same if I receive 2 tutoring hours per week so that I can deepen my understanding on the topics and guide my academic progress or if I am just evaluated in the end. How many of you have been facing the same problem when searching for the information as students?

All this said, student centred learning is not only about the website of the university. But this can be a window to a state of mind. But let’s see what student centered learning is about...

Well, I’m afraid I created some false expectations with the last sentence. There is no clear, comprehensive and universally accepted definition of student centered learning, even though you hear about it in every other speech of progressive higher education policy makers. The European Students’ Union’s vision on regarding this concept stems from the fundamental belief that the learning process should have at its core learning objectives as they are prioritized by each individual students. We are not the same, we do not operate in the same environment, our personality and background are also usually quite different and hence – why should we be fed with information in the same manner and expected to develop in the same way? As mentioned before, the fundamental question that was posed by higher education institutions when setting up a new programme was “which issues will be taught to the students?”. And this is indeed a teacher perspective that is designed, organized and carried out according to what the beliefs, knowledge, teaching skills and interests of the academic staff. If we are to empower the students to achieve their full potential, something needs to change.

If we look at how one makes progress in life as a student, you’ll probably notice that a number of other areas are instrumental to achieve the learning outcomes you were aiming at. Firstly, it should be about the learning outcomes, not about the teaching objectives. Secondly, we should look beyond teaching methods and underline the importance of curricula reform, quality of studies, student financial and logistical support, freedom for mobility and the list could surely go on.

One of the building blocks of student centred learning is the concept of learning outcomes. Their definition is not always easy and it should be independent of the context and mode in which the learning takes place. In this regard all forms of learning are to be treated equal: formal, informal and non-formal. If the learning outcomes are well defined, they are easy to use as the basis for a programme’s design, planning and operation. If we are to achieve this, students and staff must work together in the definition process, in consultation with experts coming from the social partners that can bring meaningful contributions that will help students integrate better as a graduate in society. But what is clear is that if learning is to be a cooperative and mutually beneficial process for both students and staff, the work on pinpointing learning outcomes cannot be done without the students’ contribution, as they have

a unique perspective, impossible to replicate by any other dialogue partner. And to this end, students should be empowered to participate in all the stages of the process, not just as feedback providers to already defined concepts. Specific training on the definition of learning outcomes should be provided and it is our firm belief that this measure would be welcome for more than the students involved in the process.

If we are to achieve the set out learning outcomes, then the learning and teaching methods, as well as the assessment methods must be appropriate. For instance, a combination between a lecture and a written exam will hardly support learners in improving their oral presentation skills or their quick critical thinking.

Learning and teaching methods have to consider that different learners have different ways to learn and must allow learners from all different backgrounds to be successful in a study programme. And this is where quality assurance mechanisms come into the conversation: internal and external methods of quality assurance have to consider whether the chosen teaching, learning and assessment methods as well as available resources, infrastructure and support systems are appropriate to achieve the described learning outcomes of a study programme.

And finally, on this specific topic, learning outcomes should be transparent for all current and prospective students, employers, interested parties – this is to say that they are no business or military secret to be carefully kept.

One of the declared most successful tools of the Bologna Process is the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). But their implementation is meaningless if it is not based on real learning outcomes definition and rigorous student workload measurement. If learning is to be student centered, we cannot allow for ECTS to be ignored in recognition decisions and sometimes we see individual staff members or even faculty representatives looking rather at the name of the course and its exact chapters, rather than at ECTS with their learning outcomes. A proper use of the credit accumulation system should allow non-full-time students, for example, to study without obstacles. With a system of credit accumulation it is not necessary to structure a study programme strictly by study years or semesters with strict progression rules. Instead credit accumulation should provide more flexibility for individual students.

We often learn a lot in extra-curricular activities or voluntary activities. For example, for those active in a student organization of any kind, the team work, leadership and communication skills are significantly improved and this is not easy to recognize formally, although informally mutually accepted by our professors and later on by our employers. As such, recognition of prior learning should be available for both the purpose of entry of a certain education programme, as well as for the purpose of replacement of certain parts, such as courses or modules, of an education programme – comparable to the academic recognition of study periods abroad.

I must admit I am worried when I hear statements such as “we have some good students and some bad students”. This categorization is profoundly based on a teacher perspective and it usually involves that some students react to a specific teaching method or curricula and others don’t. The labeling is also an excuse not to explore the specific nature of every learner’s need and instead to “blame the student”. Student centered learning is a way of thinking about higher education and not just a collection of tools.

And if we are to move forward with this paradigm shift, we need everyone to familiarize oneself and to deepen the concept. I’ll take another simple example – when are we going to see more job advertisements using competences as criteria and not formal qualifications? For this to happen the employer world needs to be taught of the relevance and usefulness of the tools universities are sometimes only timidly learning how to use. And this is why we have a long way to go...

I chose to make the case for student centered learning here – in a relative new university, set up in 2003, because I truly believe that it is easier to start things on the right foot, than try to change them later on. Your university has a unique chance of being constructed and consolidated with a new paradigm in mind – that of student centered learning and to be one of the pioneer universities in this regard in the European landscape.

The European Students’ Union is also bringing its contribution to the paradigm shift by starting a new project on November 1st, titled “Time for a Paradigm Shift: Student Centered Learning”. In this project we have as partners Education International, the representative teachers’ trade union at the European and global level, as we firmly believe that the change should happen in classes, through dialogue between teachers and students on their needs and views, and we are trying to give an example through this European level cooperation. The project will gather the existing knowledge on this topic, make a survey among national student unions and teacher trade unions on the status of student centered learning and then produce a toolkit for student and teacher representatives to be able to gain more knowledge and be better active partners on the topic. The project will also feature trainings for student and staff representatives as a way of capacity building and will aim at promoting the importance of working for student centered learning as well as the ways of doing that through a Stakeholder Forum in Brussels in the fall of 2010.

I would like to close my relatively short speech by quoting Mr. Germain Dondelinger, the Luxembourg Bologna Follow-Up Group representative, who was giving a contribution to a Council of Europe conference on student participation in Moscow in 2006. He was asked about decision making and the participative role of students and I still remember his answer, as it inspired me in my work as a student representative. He said: “When in doubt, always ask the students!” and I believe this is a useful quote to use as well when it comes to the paradigm shift towards student centered learning.

I wish you a successful academic year ahead and enthusiasm proceeding along the path of student centered learning!