

Chapter 15

Exploring the Effectiveness of Student–Centeredness in Universities: Informing Higher Education Policies in Europe

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ABSTRACT

The Bologna Process initiated by the European Commission in 1998 has stimulated change through the implementation of several education reforms. These reforms placed into action a series of curricular improvements geared towards the European Higher Education Convergence. More specifically, the introduction of the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ECTS) aims to support more student-centred, more flexible, and more individually tailored education tracks. However, the student-centred policy, as a fundamental pillar towards the improvement of teaching, has been applied in a very simple and unclear fashion (Reichert & Tauch, 2003) without being properly understood by the academics themselves. This chapter reports on the importance of the conceptual change approach in the professional development of academics by arguing that the design of an effective student-centred learning environment may not be effectively achieved in practice in the absence of the academics' own conceptions of how they conceive, experience, and understand teaching. The possible mismatch between conceptions of teaching and actual teaching practices may prove to be an obstacle for the effective implementation of the student-centred reforms. Thus, the main purpose of this chapter is to explore the likelihood of how conceptions of teaching could encourage an environment that supports student learning and contribute to the effectiveness of convergence of the European Higher Education.

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INTRODUCTION

The process of the convergence of the European Higher Education systems began in Sorbonne on May 25th 1998 when several Education ministers signed a 'Joint Declaration for Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System' with the aim of creating a European area of Higher Education. The Bologna Process, (now referred to as the European Higher Education Area, EHEA), was signed in June 1999 by the ministers of 29 European countries. In 2005, the Declaration was extended to include a total of 45 countries. This Declaration became the primary document used by the signatory countries to establish the general framework for the reform and the restructuring of European education. As already mentioned above, part of the reform was the development of a more flexible approach to teaching, where students are able to acquire the knowledge, skills and competences they need to succeed as lifelong learners and future employees in an ever changing society. The reforms were also embedded in the European Union Strategy for 2020.

Yet, in spite of the widespread support for the reforms in many European universities there are firm evidence to suggest that traditional teacher-centred and content-focused practices still remain and dominate the higher and further education arena (Healey & Jenkins, 2009).

One of the ongoing challenges, for convergence in Higher Education, is the actual support of academics in the implementation of efficient learning procedures that lead to effective learning outcomes and bring about a student-centric setting. This is particularly difficult, however, as many university academics seem to have different and varying perceptions of what is student-centric teaching and have also limited instructional training in non-traditional transmission pedagogies. On the other hand, many academics underestimate the value of teaching since they have to secure employment contracts or promotion through productive

research, rather than teaching approaches (Reid & Johnston, 1999).

Moreover, empirical evidence is still scarce as to how effective universities have been in providing, student-focused, knowledge-centric, interactive, flexible and personalised learning experiences (Molebash, 2010; Plants & Rose, 2010) that move away the emphasis from the teacher to the student.

Furthermore, over the past two decades the massification of Higher Education coincided with a record high unemployment rates. In fact, the European graduates of 2013 especially from South/East Europe are facing one of the most difficult employment challenges of the last century. Yet, few attempts have been made to examine the effectiveness of the learning experience these students receive. Higher Education has the responsibility to prepare its students with adequate skills to cope with unpredictable challenges that may not even exist at present. The acquisition of these new competencies requires a commitment from the policy makers that places students at the heart of HE (Shapiro et al., 2008). These cannot be achieved through traditional teaching means.

At the same time the need to cultivate a learning culture that requires closer attention to the different ways in which students learn more effectively is more apparent now than ever before. The on-going advances in technology, in a rapidly changing society that is overwhelmingly influenced by the current social and economic problems calls for much needed improvements in the quality of teaching. This creates some of the most immediate challenges for lecturers to question the ways in which they teach and consequently improve the quality of learning, and in doing so to close the gap between teaching practices and the learning experiences acquired by students (Leoni, 2011). In the global economy, Europe can only compete on the basis of knowledge, skills and ability for innovation. In a recent statement outlined by the European Commission (2011) it was clearly stated that Europe needs to increase the levels of qual-

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