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# Student Centered Learning

## SURVEY ANALYSIS TIME FOR STUDENT CENTRED LEARNING



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## IMPRINT

### **Student Centered Learning**

A survey on the views of national unions of students and higher education staff

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# **Student Centered Learning**

**SURVEY ANALYSIS TIME FOR STUDENT CENTRED LEARNING**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The student centred learning project, undertaken jointly by the European Students' Union (ESU) and Education International (EI) aims to research the attitudes of student and staff unions towards the issue of student centred learning. By understanding the perceptions at the national level, more concrete activities can be initiated at European level to improve the quality of higher education.

At the start of 2010, a survey was sent to the member organisations of ESU and EI with three aims: to find out what the unions think, to see what is happening on the national level and to provoke them to think about what should be done in near the future. This short report is an analysis of the survey, and shows quite a strong support for the idea of student centred learning. So far, however, policies have not been very effective in mobilising change.

The survey is analysed in six short chapters, each addressing one aspect of the discussion. The analysis will start by attempts at defining the issue, then move to the role of national policies, and will then discuss future strategies. To make the discussion a little bit more concrete, a chapter has been added with three case studies, being Croatia, Sweden and the United Kingdom, which have all undertaken some steps towards student centred learning in their own way. In the final section with conclusions, some concrete recommendations are made for the work of ESU and EI and their members in the coming few years.

## 1. Methodology

The survey (see annex 1) was sent to all members of EI's Higher Education and Research Standing Committee (HERSC) and ESU's member unions in January 2010. The student and staff unions both received identical questionnaires, albeit with a few insignificant changes of wording. The survey was also introduced at a meeting of the members of the HERSC in Brussels on 10-11 February 2010 and at a number of ESU meetings. Responses were received from 15 EI affiliates and 25 ESU member unions (see annex 2).

The answers to the survey were analysed in March and April 2010 by the research team of the T4SCL project. In total, these comprise 15 answers (13 countries) from 36 EI affiliates in Europe and 23 answers (20 countries) from 49 ESU members. In a number of instances, multiple answers were received from one country. As the unions in these countries represent different parts of the higher education system, they are analysed as two separate answer categories. Still, the sample is neither representative, nor is the population big enough ( $N < 30$  for both surveys) to assume a normal distribution in the answers. Yet, as the sample is geographically quite dispersed (North, West, East and South), the sample does give some indications about how higher education staff in Europe think about student centred learning. The conclusions drawn in this report should therefore be seen as indicative, rather than conclusive.

## 2. Defining student centred learning

Unions were asked about a definition of student centred learning in two different ways. First, they were asked to define the issue in an open question. Then they were asked to associate different statements with student centred learning. This resulted in a long list of issues that have a link with student centred learning (see Figure 1). Staff and students' unions generally have a positive view on the idea of student centred learning. The general response is that teaching should no longer be seen as a 'one way process' from teacher to learner. Real education can only come about through 'discussion, projects and challenging the critical mind'. Student centred learning is therefore about seeing students as 'active participants' in the classroom, as partners who contribute to reaching the required outcomes of a course or programme.

In many cases, student centred learning is seen as an almost holistic subject that ranges from questions of practical organisation to issues of philosophy. Therefore, to give a clearer definition, we should try to make two demarcations. First of all, in terms of organisation, any definition of student centred learning has both an *academic* and a *social dimension*. Some students' unions point clearly to this fact, such as SYL Finland, which stressed that student centred learning cannot be realised without the right support mechanisms. Such mechanisms range from social and financial support to healthcare and are an integral part of a student-centred approach to education. A second demarcation, in terms of its philosophy, is that any definition of student centred learning has both an *ontological* and

an *epistemological* dimension. It is ontological, because it requires a fundamental concept of a student as a human being. It is epistemological, because this concept requires a specific approach, a method to bring about learning.

Student centred learning requires seeing students as people who have a certain 'personal autonomy'. By the time that they reach higher education, students have reached a certain age in which they are fully-grown individuals. This requires them to be seen as responsible citizens, as adults who can take charge of their own lives. This ontological position, a position on the *raison d'être* of a student, can be juxtaposed against a vision of a student as a consumer, who is empowered for the sole reason of taking care of his own interests. Clearly, no staff union associates student centred learning with a move to an education market. This ontological view on students as citizens is justified by two developments. First of all, modern societies require educated, free and critical citizens. Secondly, lifelong learning asks students to develop personal and professional interests in a more autonomous way.

The epistemological shift, a change of method, required by the paradigm of student centred learning is a move from teaching to learning. Education should be seen as a 'constructive and collaborative process', a 'democratic' process between teachers and students as well as between students themselves. This has two types of implications. On a practical level, studies should be organised differently; curricula and everyday university life should be focused more on the students' needs. Practically, most salient issues are the freedom to choose components within curricula, small

classrooms and teaching groups, a low student-staff ratio and more counselling services (both study and career). On a higher level, it requires to change practices in the classrooms themselves. Students should learn to become critical citizens, to challenge the status quo.

Most unions understand student centred learning as activity-based learning (e.g. project-based learning, case-based learning, etc). A more democratic classroom also needs student evaluations of teaching methods and student participation in the development of these

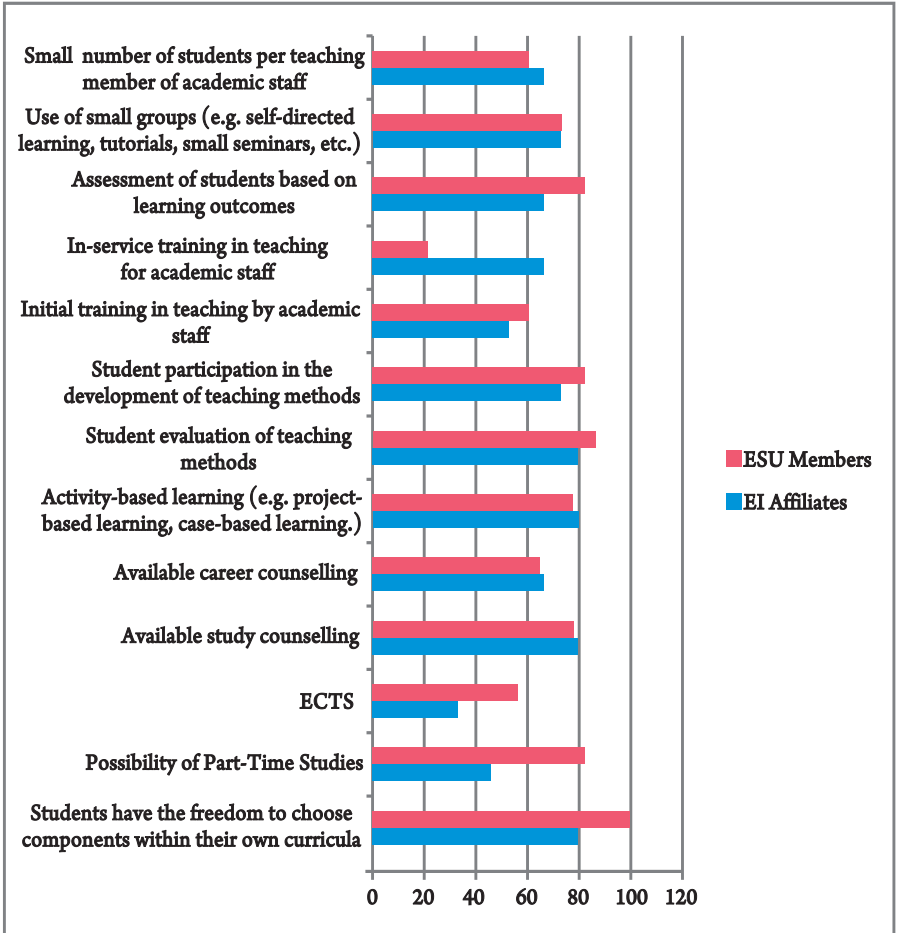


Figure 1: most salient aspects of the concept of student centred learning, in percentages (only showing the issues receiving a higher than 50 % response rate from any of the two groups).

methods as crucial components. Changing the practices in the classroom itself finally requires teachers to change their attitudes. Training for lecturers is therefore a last important element of the concept.

It becomes clear from Figure 1 that there are some differences between responses from students' and staff unions. One example is that staff unions associate student centred learning much more with in-service training in teaching for academic staff. This probably has to do with their field of work, as they are increasingly negotiating conditions of professional development. Students on the other hand put more emphasis on issues of flexibility (ECTS, the freedom to choose components within their own curricula and the possibility of part-time studies).

It is important to underline that the ontological and epistemological position taken by unions indicates that student centred learning really is a specific paradigm. The students' union KSU Malta, for example, noted that *student centred learning is a concept that requires a paradigm shift from a lecturer-oriented classroom to a more interactive and practical approach to teaching and learning*. Seeing students as partners in the construction of knowledge is a radically different view to seeing them as consumers, or as individuals who simply reproduce knowledge. This paradigmatic stance then requires that a certain philosophy be woven into the mission of higher education and the methods it uses to educate its students. Although this doesn't mean that all higher education institutions will have to use a single philosophy or method, they will have to commit to a fundamental understanding of who and what they are dealing with. After all, a paradigm is not an inclusive system of thinking; it must reject some methods and approaches!

### 3. National Policies

It is in the classroom where students and teachers interact, where they can really define what their partnership means in practice. For this reason, the issue of student centred learning is often seen as a competence of faculties or higher education institutions. Indeed, in a context of university autonomy and academic freedom, the state has nothing to do with the content or methods of delivery within higher education. However, as will become clear in this section and the next one, policy at national level can facilitate the move to student centred learning.

In the survey, unions were asked to identify policies that exist (currently) at national level to promote student centred learning. They could choose from a list of eight different measures, as well as add any suggestions of their own. As can be expected from the way that higher education is governed, not many existing national policies were identified.



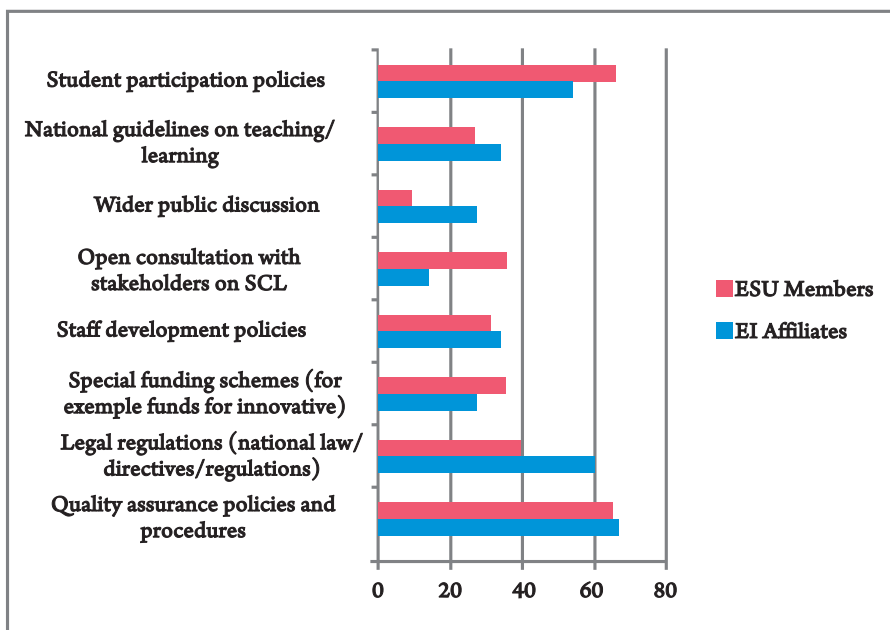


Figure 2: Most cited examples of existing national policies to promote student centred learning, in percentages.

Quality assurance, legal regulations and policies for student participation are the three most cited examples of policies to promote student centred learning at national level. It is not difficult to imagine why each of these are related to the issue. (1) Quality assurance, when aligned to the ‘European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ (ESG), should be based on learning outcomes, evaluation of teaching and participation of students. The many reports on the implementation of the Bologna Process show that quality assurance procedures are successfully being set up in most member states. (2) Legal regulations usually define a mission for a higher education system, while also stipulating quality assurance procedures.

(3) Student participation policies give a voice to students in institutions, who can participate in shaping the institution according to their needs. The three are also highly related. When assessing the effectiveness of these national policies, a critical note should be kept in mind. While national policy might exist in some countries, they might not have much effect in practice on the ground. For example, in Portugal the staff union FENPROF reports that while legislation exists, it is not very effective. Also, in some cases, the regulation might actually mask the fact that no substantial policy exists to promote the issue. In Serbia for example, student centred learning is mentioned in the legislation, but is not backed up by any other national policy.



Students' unions are particularly critical of national policies. In Switzerland for example, the students' union VSS-UNES-USU states that the paradigm shift requires a lot of work and resources. Even in a situation where different stakeholders are willing, funding and pushing to change, the paradigm shift doesn't necessarily happen. The main issue is that the concept of learning outcomes is not properly understood and applied. The students' union SYL adds that there are public debates on social support issues (tuition fees, student welfare, etc) but that these are not linked to the idea of student centred learning. Moreover, as academic subjects are not seen as a hot topic by the media, they do not get the attention that is needed. The French students' union FAGE reports that students are simply not a priority for higher education institutions and academic staff (and their unions). Since academic staff primarily consider themselves as researchers, the students and their problems are often pushed to the side. Finally, as universities are receiving more autonomy in France the union is losing confidence in the capacity of the state towards the learning paradigm.

There are, however, also some positive cases, most notably in the United Kingdom (see case study below). Here, student centred learning is being promoted along two main lines. (1) The Higher Education Academy, created in 2004, exists to promote student centred learning for example through staff professional development programmes. (2) The UK's quality assurance agency (QAA) promotes student participation in its own affairs, as well as in the steering of academic affairs at the university and programme level.

As not many issues are highlighted, it is also interesting to understand which policies

do not exist. Substantial policy to stimulate change such as staff development policies and special funds for changing teaching practices are not yet widely used. More worrying is that policy has not even reached an initial state in most countries. While there is wider public discussion in four countries on student centred learning a consultation of stakeholders has only been organised in two of these countries (Finland and United Kingdom). Moreover, two staff unions (Croatia and Ireland) and three students' unions (Bulgaria, Hungary and Luxembourg) do not recognise any national policy to promote student centred learning. Staff unions in two countries (Denmark and Serbia), and students' unions in two other countries (Romania and Switzerland) identify only one existing policy.

It can therefore be concluded that little is done to promote student centred learning at national levels. Where policy does exist, it can be found in quality assurance procedures, regulations and in policies to stimulate student participation.

#### 4. Barriers to Change

From the previous section it might be concluded that states do not fulfil their responsibility to stimulate the move to a higher education system that is more focused on the student. But before reaching such a drastic conclusion, alternatives to this conclusion should also be evaluated. One alternative, as has already been stated, is that university autonomy and academic freedom might mean that states have little to do with student centred learning. In this case, the attitudes of actors on the ground would inhibit change. Therefore, the survey included a question which asked unions to identify barriers to change.



One primary conclusion is that the surveyed groups saw students' unions as being positive agents when it comes to applying student centred learning. In fact, from the survey result data, it seems that there is a consensus amongst both students and academics that student centred learning is a good thing. Academics clearly state that attitudes of students, staff and individual higher education institutions are not barriers to change. Students' unions on the other hand, seem to see a problem in the attitudes of academic staff (see below). For example, some unions responded that student centred learning should be the natural state of being, where teachers would like to take the time for their students, as they perceive this as one of their primary missions. Moreover, unions don't experience a lack of expertise or educational research to make the necessary changes. Barriers should therefore be sought at another level of policy.

In the view of academic staff unions, attitudes are thus not the most fundamental problem. Some unions claim that the system exhibits 'reform fatigue', which means that the issue of student centred learning gets buried among the many other reforms that governments are introducing. In Sweden for example, the ministry doesn't seem to care much about the reforms in the Bologna Process. In the Netherlands the higher education system is 'too focused on high value for money mainstream education of 18-22 year olds'. Flexible learning paths and lifelong learning are not part of this agenda. Also, the warning from the previous section that policies at national level might not be substantial enough is reiterated by a number of respondents. Although these warnings are made in a number of countries they still cannot be generalised. The effectiveness of policy is evaluated with a great degree of variance in the European region.

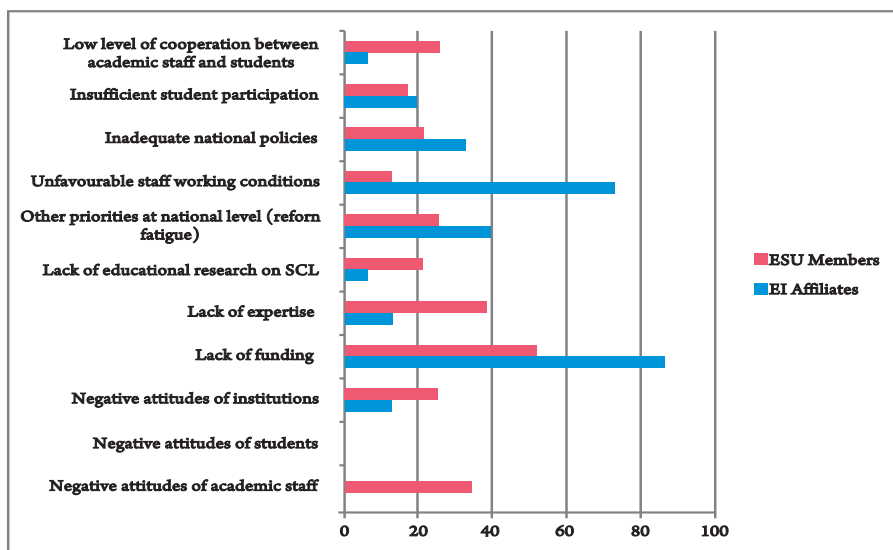


Figure 3: National barriers for change.

As already mentioned, students seem to include the problem of staff attitudes and a lack of expertise, among others, as barriers for change. There exists a perception that the people in the system might not have the capacity to change by themselves. Several students' unions in fact reported the negative attitudes of academic staff as well as the low level of cooperation between academic staff and students as problems. This either shows a somewhat negative perception from the side of the respondents towards the level of support for a switch to SCL, existent in the wider academic community, or a low level of communication between the two stakeholders (students and staff).

A category with very high response rates shows that other problems at national level prevent the paradigm shift from taking place. These are more material issues such as inadequate funding and unfavourable working conditions. Unions report that student centred learning is expensive, and that the funding required to change doesn't match current funding arrangements available for higher education. Even in Sweden, which has one of the highest per capita funding levels in Europe, there is now a yearly reduction in per capita allocations for higher education, which makes the situation for university teachers worse every year. Both teacher and students' unions in Sweden reported lack of funding as a major obstacle. Moreover, the materialistic conditions can overshadow other problems; it is a *condition sine qua non* for reforms. For example, the Croatian unions state that due to a lack of money it is difficult to assess any other barriers. In short, the structural lack of funding for higher education in Europe means that the paradigm of student centred learning remains in its infancy.

It is almost redundant to say that student

centred learning requires adequate resources. In the definition of the issue, materialistic conditions are already a concern: classrooms need to be relatively small to allow for real exchange between learner and teacher. A central responsibility of governments, who want to make the move to a student centred learning paradigm, is to provide adequate resources, and it is in this way that states are not taking their responsibility. Secondly, governments, higher education institutions and unions should make sure that working conditions are aligned to facilitate this kind of learning. Realistic working hours, a good division of tasks and possibilities for in-service training are important elements to take into account when negotiating collective agreements. Student centred learning requires that these conditions take proper account of the interests of students. One lesson could be that teaching loads should be realistically assessed when drafting up a collective agreement.

The most central conclusion perhaps is that students and staff also have a pro-active role to play themselves. There exists a perception that staff and students do not cooperate well enough, and that staff have a negative attitude towards change. Projects such as these could change this perception, as both staff and students are suggesting ways to change the status quo. On the national level, such projects could be replicated to address these perceptions more effectively at the source. The next section is therefore dedicated to what students' and staff unions are doing and what they would like to improve in the future.

## 5. Promoting Student Centred Learning and Future Strategies

Although student centred learning is perhaps a very traditional aspect of good quality higher education, it is only recently moving up the political agenda. This provides an opportunity to make coalitions with other actors. There are two reasons to adopt a strategic point of view towards the topic. Firstly, the issue provides a useful venue to cooperate with new partners. As student centred learning is generally viewed as very positive by staff unions, students' unions and higher education institutions, it can be an issue that unites the academic community around a common interest. Secondly, taking action on student centred learning means taking action on a number of other areas. As an example, if student centred learning is to become the main paradigm in European classrooms, then action is needed on working conditions and funding for higher education.

Hence, student centred learning is a useful concept for realising other long-standing needs of the higher education system as well.

The survey therefore included four questions on how the issue can be moved forward. First of all, it asked unions to identify the actors that are most actively promoting student centred learning. The most obvious answer is the students themselves, in fact the only group which generally promotes the issue. Although higher education institutions are also mentioned (7 cases), they do not actively promote the issue in the majority of countries surveyed.

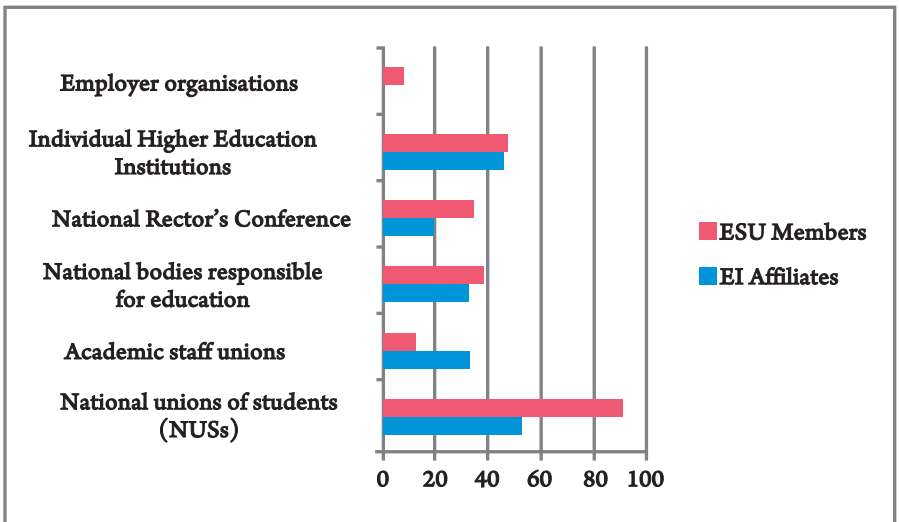


Figure 4: Actors who promote student centred learning on a national level

Students' unions and staff unions are usually positive about their own activities in promoting student centred learning. The vast majority of students' unions see themselves as the main promoters of the concept, something that was confirmed by just over half of the staff unions. Many also reported that they view individual institutions as generators of change. As expected in the analysis above, students' unions are a little more sceptical of efforts by staff unions. However, both agree strongly on the absence of any positive contribution by employer organisations. This could be important for the Bologna Process or recent initiatives to increase cooperation between higher education and businesses, as these might greatly overestimate the role of employers.

When judging the level of promotion, we need to adopt a slightly self-critical view. In some countries the support given to student centred learning is more lip service than substantial. In the Netherlands, even as many stakeholders speak a lot about the need for student centred learning the number of part-time studies is actually decreasing. In the United Kingdom, while the Higher Education Academy promotes a substantial concept of student centred learning, politicians promote a radically different concept. The latter understand it as a consumerist issue, and point to student satisfaction websites (such as [rate-my-professor.com](http://rate-my-professor.com)) or to proxies such as detailed information on staff – student contact hours. But some unions are also self-critical, by saying that it is *certainly not* the students' and staff unions who promoted student centred learning. This self-critical attitude could be useful for changing attitudes towards the issue in the future. Many students' unions added that the level of support for student centred learning from various actors

depends a lot on external factors, including the financial situation of the actors. Also, some actors such as institutions only support some components of student centred learning, rather than the concept as a whole.

When staff unions are asked what they do to promote student centred learning in a more qualitative way, very diverse answers emerge. Most unions report that in reality, not so much is done, except some personal time investment and support for students' needs. The cooperation with students' unions is cited as an important aspect. Also, as most unions are involved in negotiations on the higher education budget, working conditions and higher education reforms, they feel that they are already involved through their regular activities. However, some unions are more proactive and have started interesting projects. In France, the staff union UNSA-Éducation has an educational project to promote student centred learning at all levels of initial education and Lifelong Learning. The German staff union GEW has adopted a policy paper on teaching and learning, which is used to address both other stakeholders and to encourage its own members to change their practices. In Sweden, the staff union SULF has a programme called 'the pedagogical development and promotion of university teachers' which lead to a publication and a short pamphlet. These were distributed to all local trustees, higher education institutions and their pedagogical training centres. In the same country, the staff union Lärarförbundet elaborated a paper on ethics for teachers, which puts students in the centre.

When it comes to taking a stand on the issue of SCL, most student organisations consider it as an important educational issue, but the number of activities remains rather limited. In

some countries, debates are the main form of promotion, while others try to use opportunities of student participation to influence practices more directly. In the United Kingdom, the National Union of Students (NUS UK) has been more pro-active, launching a project called the 'Student Engagement Project' which promotes a partnership approach to promoting student centred learning. Other students' unions, such as SAMOK Finland, have undertaken lobbying activities among national actors such as the rectors' council. Some also create a framework for the promotion of the idea at local level by training some of their local member unions on the issue, as is the case with EUL Estonia. This in turn enables local members to take action at institutional level, where they can have a more direct influence on pedagogical practices.

When asked what more could be done by the staff union in their national context, several unions mention that more internal work could be done. Debates with members on policy and on the different elements that student centred learning entails. A few unions mention that it would be a good idea to develop a policy document, perhaps containing a few good practices. The German union GEW mentions that more internal training could be provided for members.

Students' unions responded to this question with considerable variation. Most points addressed the need for a coherent approach, with adequate information on the issue on all levels. Some students' unions (in Ukraine, Luxembourg and Hungary) identified the need to move to the grassroots and engage local-level students in order to make an impact. Going a level further, NSU Norway stressed the need to engage the 'ordinary' student. Other students' unions, such as NUS UK (see case

study), focused on the need to promote best practice examples as a starting point for more student centred learning in practice within institutions themselves. NUS Scotland (see case study) was particularly keen on the need to make individuals themselves the main actors, as their needs and learning experience determine whether the approach to studies is student centred or not.

At the European level, staff unions naturally see EI an important actor to further promote and develop the issue of student centred learning. Practically, EI should disseminate information, promote common areas for discussion and focus on good practices and policies. On the other hand, EI can work with other organisations. Specifically, a link should be made with other aspects of the Bologna Process, such as Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance. A link can also be made with teacher education and its proper funding, as student centred learning requires a change in teaching methods. Finally, a technocratic approach should be avoided. Instead it should be argued why student centred learning is a good thing for society as a whole, even when it will be hard to 'measure' and 'quantify' the issue. Students' unions also view ESU's contribution towards fostering student centred learning as important. Most respondents stated that they view ESU as a platform for networking on the issue, where they can exchange good practices and policies, as well as policy approaches. Some unions stressed that ESU has an important role to lobby for the acceptance of the concept of student centred learning at a European level (Finland, Bosnia, Switzerland), and that increasing acceptance of the issue in the Bologna Process can trickle down to national level, or at least offer an extra incentive to institutional and local actors.

## 6. Case Studies

To get an overview of how students and staff see the issue of student centred learning, three countries are analysed a bit more in depth. We have selected three different countries as case studies, which provide some more concrete examples on what is happening 'on the ground'. Each case study provides some unique characteristics of how student centred learning can be promoted at the national level.

### Croatia

#### Quick Facts: Croatia

EU: candidate member

Bologna Process: member since 2001

HEI's	54
Students	170.000
GDP per capita (2008)	USD 15.6333
Spending on tertiary education (2004)	0.7 % of GDP

Responses from Croatia were provided by the staff union IURHEEC and the students' union CSC. The responses indicate that student centred learning has not been a clear priority for the higher education system recently. However, as the country is making quick pace in its accession to 'Europe', European policies and ideas are now more easily adopted than before. *Croatia is an interesting case of a country where there is some willingness to change, but where a chronic lack of resources is inhibiting any substantial improvement.* The two unions are both positive towards the paradigm shift, that must start with a proper definition of what student centred learning is, which fits with 'generally accepted university rules and values'.

For both the staff and the students' union, student participation is a key to moving the system in that direction. The students' union defines student centred learning as 'learning based on student participation while forming the curriculum and other activities'. The staff union reports that the participation of students in the governance of universities is currently perhaps the only policy that exists to stimulate a change in teaching. The students' union is slightly more positive about the policies, claiming that there has been a stakeholder consultation and that there are some formal policies in place such as a quality assurance policy, legal regulations that speak about learning. However, these policies have not yet brought about any substantial change. The views of the unions diverge on the question of barriers for change, except for the lack of funding for the system. While for students the attitudes of academic staff and insufficient student participation is part of the problem, staff see more problems in reform fatigue and inadequate national policies. The staff union adds that it is difficult to perceive any other barrier when the system is not funded properly.

The staff union is also slightly sceptical about the future, as no national institution is strongly promoting student centred learning. There are only some good practices in individual higher education institutions. The union is self-critical by saying that it has not taken any action so far, but proposes to start by defining the issue and adopting a policy paper. The students' union is slightly more positive about national policy, as it sees that some national bodies and the rectors' conference are arguing with the students' union to promote student centred learning. It tries to work on all levels, both inside the higher education institutions and at national level,



claiming that student centred learning is the mission of the students' union. The unions both ask EI and ESU to help, as a proper definition in a policy paper on the European level can help their work. Moreover, the students' union claims that as Croatia is a small country therefore pressure from Europe can have a great influence.

## Sweden

### Quick Facts: Sweden

EU: member

Bologna Process: member since 1999

HEI's	49
Students	348.000
GDP per capita (2008)	USD 52.181
Spending on tertiary education (2004)	1.6 % of GDP

The two staff unions SULF and Lärarförbundet as well as the students' union SFS provided responses. The unions have a long tradition of cooperation with each other, both on the Bologna Process and on more domestic issues. The unions stress the move from teaching to learning and the concept of learning outcomes in their definitions. On the national level, quality assurance policies, legal regulations and student participation all exist to contribute to student centred learning to some extent. Recently, a discussion has been launched on linking learning outcomes to the resource allocation system, although no bill has been presented so far. There is a lack of clarity for the different unions concerning the existence of a consultation of stakeholders, the existence of staff development policies and national guidelines on teaching and learning. This is

perhaps due to the fact that none of these policies have been a real priority, or have not been applied consistently throughout the sector. Indeed, the unions are univocal about the lack of funding for the higher education sector recently. The staff union SULF claims that in recent years the per capita funding allocations in higher education have been reduced significantly. The staff unions add that the deteriorating working conditions of academic staff also have a very negative effect on the possibilities for teachers and lecturers to implement any concept of student centred learning. The students' union adds that there is a lack of expertise and some reform fatigue in the system.

*Sweden is a good case of pro-active cooperation between students' unions and staff unions.* The three unions mention that students' unions and academic staff unions actively promote student centred learning. The staff union Lärarförbundet has published a document on ethics of teaching, which includes a reference to student centred learning. The staff union SULF has issued a publication and a pamphlet on 'the pedagogical development and promotion of teachers', which focuses on the issues of learning outcomes and academic professional development. Finally, the students' union is trying to promote student centred learning to other actors in its normal communication and lobbying activities.



## United Kingdom

### Quick Facts: United Kingdom

EU: member

Bologna Process: member since 1999

HEI's (E, W & N-I)	144
HEI's (Scotland)	20
Students (E, W & N-I)	2.010.000
Students (Scotland)	220.000
GDP per capita (2008)	USD 43.736
Spending on tertiary education (2004)	1.6 % of GDP

Responses from the United Kingdom were provided by the staff union UCU and the students' unions NUS UK and NUS Scotland. As Scotland has its own higher education policy, the territory is dealt with separately in the analysis.

*The United Kingdom is an interesting case where activities have been undertaken by many partners (government, higher education institutions, students' unions) to promote student centred learning.* Clearly, the United Kingdom has seen a lot of debate on the notion of student centred learning in recent years. At the national level, it has taken two significant steps to change practices, by creating the Higher Education Academy in 2004 and letting the quality assurance agency QAA play a very pro-active role in promoting new practices in education. However, according to the staff union UCU, there is not yet a clear definition of what student centred learning means. It notes that there are two competing paradigms, one with a notion of the student as a consumer, where the institution simply has to start listening more to customer needs, demanding 'value for money', making

the student a passive receiver of knowledge. This consumerist view is promoted by the government and the main opposition parties, and materialises in websites such as rate-my-professor.com or in rankings of quantitative information such as student-staff ratios. Instead, UCU wants to promote the idea of students as active participants in the learning process, underpinning student centred learning with academic freedom.

The students' unions claim that cooperation is a key to achieving progress. In 2009, the students' union launched a student engagement project, 'aiming to support local students' unions and institutions in building partnerships to involve students through effective feedback, representation and involvement in curriculum design'. The project followed up on a striking statistic in the National Student Survey, where only 23% of students felt that they were actively involved in shaping their curriculum, while 57% indicated a willingness to be involved. The project is a partnership between NUS and the Higher Education academy, and is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It works with local actors to develop materials and toolkits for institutions to engage their students more effectively.

In Scotland, the students' union works with the quality assurance agency QAA Scotland to promote student participation. The QAA launched a so-called 'Engagement-Led-Institutional-Review' (ELIR) in 2003-2004, which is aimed to enhance students' experiences as learners. Student participation in the quality assurance process is one of the main dimensions of this review programme. A handbook on engagement-led reviews has been published in 2008. The students' union itself runs a training agency called 'SPARQS'



(see [www.sparqs.co.uk](http://www.sparqs.co.uk)) to support students, students' associations and institutions involved in quality assurance. The services are provided free of charge, made possible by funding from the Scottish Funding Council.

The unions however diverge in their views of what are still barriers for change in the country. Negative attitudes of academic staff and institutions, lack of funding, lack of expertise, lack of educational research, unfavourable working conditions, reform fatigue and a lack of cooperation between students and staff are all named as inhibiting more change. This view perhaps exists because of a lack of substantial cooperation between the staff and students' unions. Indeed, the staff union UCU reports that more can be done to work together with other actors to make change happen. However, not only the national dimension is important. NUS Scotland states clearly that "we must move from a focus on representative structures to help to engaging the students individually in shaping their learning experience. Best practices and concrete examples can be very helpful to achieve this aim and EI and ESU can facilitate this by remaining a 'clearing house' for discussion and information on this issue."

## Conclusions

This survey has been undertaken to create an overview of national policies and attitudes towards student centred learning. Student centred learning is a paradigm of thinking about education and learning. It contains an ontological position in which a student is a citizen with his or her own mind, wishes and experiences. On an epistemological level, a more active approach to bring about learning is needed. Here, teachers should become aware of new pedagogies and flatten the hierarchy in the classroom. Learning has to become active, mobilising thoughts and discussions between different learners. It has become clear that staff and students' unions generally support the concept, although this has not always translated into pro-active policies and projects. The survey then translates into several recommendations:

### *(a) Defining student centred learning*

There is some competition between different notions of student centred learning. Some actors promote a consumerist notion of student centred learning, in which a student is empowered to demand 'value for money'. Instead, student and staff unions see the concept as being radically different, with a notion of a student as an active and critical participant in the learning process.

### *(b) Resourcing student centred learning*

Although quality assurance, legal regulations and student participation policies are currently seen as the three most prevalent national policies to stimulate student centred learning, they are often lip-service, rather than a substantial change. States must start to take their responsibility in a materialistic way, by giving the right resources to hire enough staff, creating favourable working conditions and adequate support mechanisms for students.

*(c) Give students a stronger voice*

Staff and students' unions both see the necessity of giving students a strong voice in dealing with academic issues, both in higher education institutions and on the national level. A stronger student voice is a good way to move the quality agenda forward, as has been shown in many countries. Up until now, student participation policies are however not yet very substantial in reaching real engagement.

*(d) Promote professional development and supporting funds*

Two central policies to change practices in teaching, being professional academic development and funds for innovations in teaching, are available in a very limited number of countries. These policies could be extended if student and staff unions jointly push for them in negotiating on better conditions.

*(e) Working together to achieve change*

Students' unions, academic staff unions, higher education institutions and national bodies responsible for higher education must work together to change practices in higher education in a positive way. A self-critical approach is needed as students' unions do not think that academic staff unions and higher education are doing enough to improve methods of teaching. Joint projects on the national and institutional level could change this perception, as examples of such projects in Sweden or the United Kingdom seem to be good practices.

*(f) ESU and EI: make policy and become a platform for exchanging ideas*

Student and staff unions call upon ESU and EI to define the issue of student centred learning in policy documents and research papers. Both types of unions stress the need for practical

information to move the issue forward on national and local levels. Although ESU and EI can jointly promote the issue on the European level, the real work must be done at the national and institutional level.

The authors of the survey report would like to thank the student and staff unions who have taken the effort to fill in the survey. The results themselves demonstrate clearly that the issue can only be moved forward with the active participation of the unions.

*NB: Information for the 'quick facts' in the case studies was gathered from different sources: Eurydice's 'Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010: The impact of the Bologna Process' (2010), UNESCO's Institute of Statistics overview over national education systems (2004), and the IMF's 'World Economic Outlook Spring 2010'.*

## Annex 1 – The Survey

This questionnaire is designed to create an overview over the situation of student centred learning in the national context of your union. It focuses on both legislation and practice in your country, based on your experience with the topic. Please try to answer as truthfully and as openly as possible. If you do not have sufficient information to answer a particular question, please leave the answer blank. If you have difficulties in understanding the question, please send an email.

There are 8 questions in this survey. They are divided into three parts (introductory questions, survey questions and open questions). It should not take more than thirty minutes to fill in the questionnaire.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to answer the questionnaire.

Please fill in:

Name of the NUS
Name of person completing the questionnaire
Position of the person completing the questionnaire
Contact details

Please fill in your organisation’s political opinion on the matter or a common understanding of it, in case your union has an elaborated policy document.

Open answer
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Based on your understanding, which of the following elements does the concept of “student centred learning” include for you

Answer method: check box(es)

Students have the freedom to choose components within their own curricula
Possibility of part-time studies
Different entry and exit points
Anti-discrimination and outreach policy
ECTS
Available study counselling
Available career counselling
Activity-based learning (e.g. project-based learning, case-based learning, etc.)

Student evaluations of teaching methods
Student participation in the development of teaching methods
Initial training in teaching by academic staff
In-service training in teaching for academic staff
Assessment of students based on learning outcomes
Peer-to-peer evaluation among students
Use of small groups (e.g. self-directed learning, tutorials, small seminars, etc.)
Small number of students per teaching member of academic staff
Market based funding model(s)
Other

Please elaborate:

Open answer
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3. Which of the following exist at the national level to promote “student centred learning”?\*

Answer method: check box(es)

Quality assurance policies and procedures
Legal regulations (national law/directives/regulations)
Special funding schemes (for example funds for innovative teaching, funds for staff development, etc)
Staff development policies
Open consultation with stakeholders on SCL
Wider public discussion
National guidelines on teaching/learning
Student participation policies
Market based funding model(s)
Other

\*The question refers to the national level because of the great diversity existing at local level. As such, we wanted the survey to produce as many comparable results as possible.

Please elaborate:

Open answer
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4. From the following, which three do you perceive as the biggest barriers to the development of student centred learning?

Answer method: check box(es)

Negative attitudes of academic staff
Negative attitudes of students
Negative attitudes of institutions
Lack of funding
Lack of expertise
Lack of educational research on SCL
Other priorities at national level (reform fatigue)
Unfavourable staff working conditions
Inadequate national policies
Insufficient student participation
Low level of cooperation between academic staff and students
Other

Please elaborate:

Open answer

5. Which of the following actively promote student centred learning in your country?

Answer method: check box(es)

National unions of students (NUSs)
Academic staff unions
National bodies responsible for education
National Rectors' Conference
Individual Higher Education Institutions
Employer organisations
Other

Please elaborate:

Open answer

6. What is your organisation doing to promote student centred learning?

Open answer

7. What more do you think your organisation can do to promote student centred learning?

Open answer

8. What do you expect from the European Students' Union/Education International in promoting student centred learning at European level?

Open answer



## Annex 2 – Response received from member unions

Country	Responses from EI Affiliates	Responses from ESU Members
Belgium (Flanders)		VVS
Bosnia-Herzegovina (Rep Srpska)		SURS
Bulgaria		NASC
		UBS
Croatia	IURHEEC	CSC
Denmark	DM	
Estonia		EÜL
Finland	OAJ	SAMOK
		SYL
France	UNSA-Education	FAGE
Germany	GEW	
United Kingdom	UCU	NUS UK
United Kingdom (Scotland)		NUS Scotland
Hungary		HÖOK
Ireland	IFUT	
Israel		NUIS
Lithuania		LSAS
Luxembourg		UNEL
Malta		KSU
Netherlands, The	AOb	LSVb
Norway	NAR	NSU
	UEN	StL
Portugal	FENPROF	
Romania		ANOSR
Serbia	TUS	
Spain	FECCOO	
Sweden	Lärarförbundet	SFS
	SULF	
Switzerland		VSS-UNES-USU
Ukraine		UASS



