# **Students as Actors and Agents in Student-Centered Higher Education**

*Manja Klemenčič*

Harvard University, United States

0000-0003-4956-2584

## **Abstract**

This chapter theoretically advances the concept of student actorhood and student agency in student-centered learning and instruction (SCLI) in higher education. The conception of students as actors presupposes student agency which refers to students’ capabilities to actively participate in both the learning processes and the design of the learning environment. In line with this definition, this chapter analyses student agency in SCLI in two distinct, yet interrelated domains. First, in line with constructivist education theories, the chapter explores issues of students’ autonomy, power relations between teachers and students and students’ responsibilities in the co-construction of knowledge. Second, drawing on perspectives from neo-institutional theories and higher education politics, the chapter analyses student agency in institutional governance of teaching and learning by exploring the concepts of power relations between students and institutional decision-makers, students’ sense of agency in institutional governance and student impact. Student agency is one of the central tenets of the contemporary scholarship on student-centered education and this chapter elaborates and advances the conceptions of student agency and actorhood in SCLI. The chapter also introduces a novel perspective on students as agents to bring about change in institutional strategies and culture toward more student-centeredness, a view that has so far been neglected in scholarship.

## **Introduction[[1]](#endnote-1)**

Student-centered learning and instruction (SCLI) in higher education refers to enhanced actorhood of students in teaching and learning processes and places emphasis on the acts of learning as opposed to the acts of teaching. Students have agency when they have the capabilities to participate in the construction of knowledge and of their learning environments.[[2]](#endnote-2) They become actors when they use the agency available to them to act in learning processes toward achieving their learning goals or when they are called to input into curriculum planning. Student actorhood in SCLI presupposes student agency, i.e. that students are subjects not objects of teaching and learning processes, that students are self-directed not solely dependent on directions of others, and that students are conceiving their own goals and realizing them (cf. Berlin 1969).

When students act to disrupt and change the existing institutional framework, they emerge as *agents of change*. Unlike students as actors who act within and thus sustain the existing institutional practices, students as agents work purposefully towards changing these practices. In other words, as “institutional entrepreneurs” (Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum 2017) students as agents work towards changing what the university community considers and values as “normal” practices possibly in face of overcoming potential resistance from other members of university community. For example, to bring about the institutional change from teaching paradigm to student-learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg 1995), students can be important agents (although undoubtedly not sole agents) of such changes.

Student agency in SCLI has *intrinsic value*: students are able to pursue acts of learning or shape learning environments as actors and drive changes as agents rather than as objects of teaching and learning processes. The intrinsic value of student agency is compatible with the view of those who see the purpose of higher education to prepare students to become agentic individuals as central to the functioning of political democracies and open market economies. There is wide acceptance of the idea that (higher) education has a contribution to make in the maintenance and development of democratic societies and that the development of democratic citizenship is inherent in the idea of the university.

While some scholarship has focused on how democratic citizenship education is or can be integrated into higher education curriculum to educate students for active citizenship and civic competence (Fernández 2005; Wynne 2014; Veugelers, de Groot & Nollet 2014), scholars and practitioners have also argued for considering higher education institutions (HEIs) as “sites of citizenship and democratic involvement” (Bergan 2004, Huber & Harkavy 2007, Biesta 2009, Zgaga 2009, Klemenčič 2011). The argument for the “universities as sites of citizenship and civic involvement” is that to impart students with dispositions to active citizenship and civic involvement is to involve students in democratic governance and in civic service in their own institutions; i.e., to support and enable students to enact their political and civic agency, to enact university citizenship within their own university communities. Students as university citizens become aware of their self-efficacy and effective opportunities (and limitations thereof) as well as their responsibilities to be able to pursue – alone or in collectivity – the goals important to their lives.

Furthermore, student agency in SCLI has *instrumental value* since it, arguably, enhances student learning. There is ample empirical evidence of the effectiveness of SCLI practice for improved student learning and student motivation (Hoidn 2017), all of which are necessary based on the principle of strengthened student agency. Student agency implies students’ reflective engagement with their learning which affords more focused, more strategic and better aligned engagement with the students’ wider learning goals. If students are involved in making decisions about their learning, if they are purposefully and actively participating in learning activities, if they are supported as self-regulated autonomous learners, and if they have clear learning goals, their learning behavior is more likely to result in improved learning outcomes, in deeper learning processes and outcomes. Of course, to realize the instrumental value of student agency depends on many conditions which will be discussed in later sections.

This chapter next addresses definitional and theoretical issues associated with the concepts of student actorhood and agency. Put forward is a conceptual account that conceives students in higher education as having different degree of agentic capabilities. Students can act within given institutional frameworks to pursue their learning goals to contribute to the design of learning processes and environments. Or students as agents can initiate divergent changes to the existing norms and values underlying the structures and processes of teaching and learning. Student actorhood and agency are addressed in two intertwined yet distinct domains: in teaching and learning practices and within the institutional governance of teaching and learning. In the former, the questions of the students’ autonomy, balance of power between teachers and students, and the responsibilities over student learning are highlighted. The latter discussion revolves around the questions of power relations between students and institutional decision-makers, students sense of agency in institutional governance and impact of students on their institutions. Before concluding, the role of students as agents driving institutional change and conditions that enable such agentic behavior are addressed.

## **Student Actorhood and Student Agency**

When students have opportunities to participate in the construction of knowledge prompted by the teacher who designed active learning activities, and when they purposefully act on these opportunities, they emerge as actors in teaching and learning processes rather than passive and docile recipients of knowledge. This is what actorhood refers to. When students are asked for their input on course design and they choose to offer such input, again, they emerge as actors in decision-making on the course design.

Student agency is built on agentic possibilities and agentic orientations (Klemenčič 2015, 2018). *Students’ agentic possibilities*, i.e., effective opportunities and positive freedoms to do and to be what they have reason to value as students within learning contexts, are exogenously given (they originate outside the individual). Universities and colleges as organizations have structures, rules and procedures that bestow students with more or less agentic opportunities for active participation in learning and teaching processes or to shape learning environments. HEIs also house ideas, beliefs, values which influence students’ beliefs and behaviors – including their sense of agency and efficacy as participants in teaching and learning processes and institutional governance.

*Students’ agentic orientations* are students’ internal responses to external states of affairs; such responses include students’ predispositions, efficacy beliefs and will or motivations to enactments of agency. Predispositions refer here to the broad array of internalized routines, preconceptions, competences, schemas, and habits of mind (as suggested by Emirbayer & Mische 1998). Students’ efficacy refers to student judgment of, and belief in, their capabilities to exercise some degree of control over their own functioning as learners and over higher education environments that affect their lives as students (cf. Bandura 2001). Self-efficacy is also a central element of students’ self-regulation as the process by which the students control (make conscious decisions about) their learning trajectories; which includes various functions, such as task analysis, self-control and self-evaluation (Zimmerman 2008).

Actorhood is not automatic even if students have agentic opportunities. Students’ will to enact agency, that is students choosing to participate in the learning processes or in shaping their learning environments, is an essential precondition for the achievement of actorhood.

Tagg (2003, 2010) explains student choices in academic setting as *“the cognitive economy” of student learning choices* which involve balancing between learning gains and learning costs. He makes a distinction between “the cool economy” when students take a surface approach to learning and “the hot economy” when they take a deep approach to learning. Tagg (2010) suggests several conditions that help changing the cognitive economy for students. One such condition is enabling students to select their own learning goals, which reinforces intrinsic motivation. Another is sense of self-efficacy when confronting learning tasks. And yet another is monitoring and regulation of learning strategies, i.e., reflectivity over personal learning objectives and learning strategies, which allows students more strategic enactment of agency toward specific learning goals. All of these also constitute self-regulated and self-motivated learning (Zimmerman 2008).

To move from the classroom to the students’ role in the larger institution, the cognitive economy of students’ learning choices, however, does not necessarily apply to *students’ choices to engage in institutional governance of teaching and learning*. Of course, in choosing whether to fill out the course evaluations, midterm course feedback, apply to be a member of the curriculum committee, or act as a course representative, students weigh costs (such as time investment, potential risks) and gains of such involvement (such as CV building, social networking, getting a better course experience). However, engagement in institutional governance of SCLI is also a reflection of a students’ sense of university citizenship.

University citizenship here is not understood merely as political participation in student elections with the students relegating the power to act on their behalf to elected student representatives, i.e., being passive constituency with rights and duties that lie within the domain of study and student life. University citizenship refers to students’ having rights and responsibilities to participate in university life towards the betterment and wellbeing of the university and its communities. It implies a shift in the university culture and underlying discourses from “*What can the university do to meet the students’ needs, to satisfy the students*?” to “*What students as full members of the university community – as citizens of the university – can do for their university*?” (Klemenčič 2015). Agentic disposition to university citizenship is analogous to the self-regulated learner disposition: we ask self-regulated learners to think strategically about what they can do to advance their own learning and we ask students as university citizens to think purposefully how they can contribute to the betterment and wellbeing of their university and its communities.

Such sense of responsibility towards the university and university communities implies having a sense of belonging and also a sense of psychological ownership of the university (Klemenčič 2015, 2018). Students’ university citizenship is not important only for the public service outcomes of their engagement – contributing to some collective goods and to collective well-being. It is also important – purely instrumentally – for students’ learning processes. Students learn about how to be an active member of a community, about how to be an active citizen. Enactment of citizenship indeed presumes some sense of belonging, but it also reinforces the sense of belonging through building relationship, finding a purpose and sense of mattering (Strayhorn 2019). Such engagement may be particularly important for students from first-generation or lower socio-economic background who have additional challenges in navigating student life, integrating into and developing a sense of belonging to the university (Reay, Crozier & Clayton2010).

While the constructivist traditions are more concerned with the constitution and construction of students as actors in learning and teaching processes, the neo-institutional traditions focus on students as organizational actors and what role they play in institutional stability and change of universities and colleges as organizations. Both strands of scholarship have in common the idea of students as legitimated actors in higher education due to their inherent self-interest in quality teaching and learning practices. Namely, quality education is a goal and expected consequence of the shift to student-centered and learning-centered practices in higher education.

The conception of students as agents of institutional change emerges from the scholarship in organizational change that recognizes the political nature of the change processes in organizations (Battilana 2006; Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum 2009) and suggests that for actors to become agents “they need to overcome potential resistance from other members of the organization and encourage them to adopt new practices” (Battilana and Casciaro 2012, p. 3). Citing Marsden and Friedkin (1993), Battilana and Casciaro (2012, p. 3) conceptualize change implementation within an organization as “an exercise in social influence, defined as the alteration of an attitude or behavior by one actor in response to another actor’s actions”.

## **Students as Actors in the Teaching and Learning Processes**

The constitution of students as actors in teaching and learning processes has implications for how we conceive the balance of power between teachers and students in terms of the degree of their control over teaching-learning processes, the division of responsibilities in teaching and learning processes, and students’ autonomy. As suggested by Van Lier (2008, p. 163), in SCLI,

learning depends on the activity and the initiative of the learner, more so than on any ‘inputs’ that are transmitted to the learner by a teacher or a textbook. This does not, of course, diminish the need for texts and teachers, since they fulfil a crucial mediating function, but it places the emphasis on action, interaction and affordances, rather than on texts themselves.

This conception of SCLI opens questions about students’ autonomy, the power relationships between students and teachers, and who is responsible for students’ learning.

### *Students’ Autonomy*

Students’ autonomy is one of the central concepts in SCLI. Learner autonomy was originally defined by Holec (1981) in the context of foreign language learning as the learner’s ability to take charge of his/her own learning. Little (1991) developed the concept further suggesting that learner autonomy implies willing, proactive and reflective involvement of students in their own learning (Little 1991, 2007). Little (2004, p. 1) suggests that students as autonomous learners “understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness” (see also Little 2004).

In the literature, learner autonomy is addressed in two ways: (1) as a learning objective, especially within the reflective teaching and learning approaches (Sugerman 2000, Brockbank & McGill 2006) and (2) as a way to improve student learning achievements in the scholarship on self-regulated learning (SRL) (Zimmerman 1989).

*Reflective learning* is an educational approach whereby teachers design activities that prompt students to purposefully reflect on their learning experience as part of the teaching and learning processes. Such reinforced metacognition about their learning process is expected to help students to achieve and even go beyond the expected and self-defined learning goals. Reflective learning practice can be part of classroom teaching and learning practices but can also be supported outside of the course work, for example, through students’ academic advising.

Zimmerman (1989, p. 329) submits that students can be described as *self-regulated* to the degree that they are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process and direct their own efforts to acquire knowledge and skill rather than relying on teachers, parents, or other agents of instruction.

Three elements are essential for SRL: that students have developed SRL strategies, have self-efficacy beliefs in their performance skills, and are committed to academic goals (Zimmerman 1989, 1990).

In line with an SRL approach, students’ autonomy implies a number of elements both intrinsic and extrinsic to the learner, such as knowledge of different learning strategies that can be developed into personal SRL strategies; commitment to academic goals and motivation to learn; ability to identify and set their own learning goals within and beyond the course learning goals; understanding one’s own learning needs, skills and routines; and knowledge of support resources that can be employed, if additional help is needed. These dispositions develop throughout students’ learning trajectory and are influenced by the sociocultural learning context in which students are embedded, including institutional support to learners.

### *Power Relations Between Students and Teachers*

Student-centered practices highlight more cooperative relations between teachers and students and more participatory roles of students in all aspects of course design and implementation. Little (2004) highlights this by suggesting that it is the responsibility of the teachers to help learners to become more autonomous. As discussed earlier, learner autonomy does not imply independence of students from the teachers and from the other students, but rather acknowledgement of their interdependence in learning of an inherently social learning (Bandura 1977). So, the power shift is more about sharing responsibility for learning between students and teachers than teachers fully ceding control to students (Weimer 2013). As Weimer (2013, p. 94) suggests: “Faculty still make decisions about learning, just not all of them, and not always without student input.” Teachers can give students choice over classroom policies, assignments and assignment deadlines or might ask students to help create assessment criteria, for example.

The academic requirement of the study program (the major or the concentration) continue to organize the content and schedule of courses. The teacher still decides what students read for the course, although students might have options to introduce further reading to the class. If courses are research-based, students still need to learn how to develop a research methodology and carry out the research, but they might have a choice to select their research questions. Weimer (2013, p. 94) suggests that “power is redistributed in amounts proportional to students’ ability to handle it.” The more autonomous students are as learners, the more choices they can handle, that is the more freedom over content and organization of learning they can get. For example, there is a difference between how much choice a teacher should grant to a first-year student as opposed to a PhD student. Transferring some decision-making power is one of the factors that boosts students’ motivation to invest time and effort in the learning activity (Pintrich 2003).

### *Responsibilities Over Students’ Learning*

As discussed earlier, SCLI does not make teachers redundant and students’ learner autonomy does not imply independence from teachers and self-instruction. There is a sense of shared responsibilities over teaching and learning processes based on mutual trust and interdependence of interests and resources teachers and students contribute to teaching-learning processes. To further develop what shared responsibilities mean in the SCLI context, one has to distinguish between the responsibilities for the design of teaching-learning processes and how these unfold, and the responsibilities for the act of learning as engagement in the learning activities, assignments and with the learning materials.

In the former, the responsibilities clearly tilt to the side of the teachers, whereas in the latter, the principal responsibilities lie with the students. It is the teachers with subject matter expertise who have the main responsibility over curriculum design. However, the curriculum needs to be flexible enough to allow for changes based on input from students along the way (“responsive curriculum”).[[3]](#endnote-3) Hoidn (2017) suggests that in student-centered higher education classrooms students are positioned for active participation in knowledge construction and interactions – as accountable authors, active and vocal participants, and responsible co-designers. As it will be discussed in the next section, students are actors in teaching and learning, also as co-designers of the curriculum. In student-oriented practice, the teacher will seek input from students before, during and after course design and create opportunities for students to co-construct learning processes. Courses (and study programs) will have a range of such built-in flexible learning pathways, some giving more agency to students, some less.

When it comes to students’ cognitive economy of learning choices regarding how much time and effort to invest in a course or a particular learning activity and what learning strategies to employ, the responsibilities lie largely with the student. Again, in student-oriented practice, it is the role of the teachers to help students to develop as self-regulated, self-motivated, i.e., autonomous learners. The teachers devise ways to induce students’ intrinsic motivations to engage in learning activities, such as helping them understand the value of the learning activity for their learning goals or creating opportunities for self-assessment (Boud 2003) or peer-assessment (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 1999), both of which are known to potentially boost student motivation to perform better in learning activities. But the bulk of responsibility to enact agency – to fully and purposefully engage in the learning activities offered to them in the classroom and outside of it – lies with the students.

The student’s responsibility for learning at this stage is not optional or theoretical.[[4]](#endnote-4) If the student does not take the responsibility, nobody else will. Teachers cannot make students learn, even if they want to. Marton and Säljö (1976)’s distinction between students’ deep and surface approaches to learning explains this point well. Students either approach the task of studying an academic article to reproduce information from it, which Marton and Säljö termed as the “surface approach” or they try to understand it for its meaning, implications, underlying concerns, which they termed as “deep approach”. In other words, the student who adopts a deep approach has an intention to understand the material, interacts with the material vigorously, critically relating ideas to previous knowledge, examining the logic of arguments, and organizing ideas. In contrast, the student who adopts a surface approach seeks to minimize the investment of effort and thereby trivializes the learning experience[[5]](#endnote-5). Of course, the difference between the approach students take is not necessarily only based on student motivation (e.g., the student cares merely about passing an exam and getting a grade vs. the student wants to do really well and learn as much as possible from that course). How teachers design the course, how they prompt students to engage with the material, what expectations they raise and how they motivate students is equally important.

## **Students as Actors in Institutional Governance of Teaching and Learning**

While it is a common practice to have students participate in the structures and processes of decision-making in their HEIs (i.e. institutional governance), the degree of student involvement in institutional governance varies significantly across institutions. At the very least, students’ input is sought through course evaluations and student surveys, which are regarded by most institutions as relevant information sources for evidence-based policymaking. Or student representatives are consulted by their departments; at least during the external evaluations. In systems with a strong tradition of democratic governance of HEIs, students are full voting members of governing bodies and hold a share of votes in the elections of institutional leaders. Even in private HEIs, administrators are pressured to involve students to inform policy formulation, legitimize adopted policies, and to show accountability in external evaluations (Klemenčič 2015).

Student affairs and teaching and learning, because they have direct impact on student experiences, are most likely to increased opportunities for student involvement. This section discusses how students participate in institutional governance of SCLI by exploring power relations between institutional decision-makers and students, students’ sense of agency in institutional governance, and through what mechanisms students have impact on institutional decisions regarding SCLI.

### *Redefining Power Relations Between Institutional Decisions-Makers and Students*

The student voice literature has been normative in arguing for granting students more opportunities to voice their opinions and to participate in decision processes in the higher education context (Taylor & Robinson 2009). Student voice as student involvement in institutional governance has been conceptualized in the literature through three perspectives (Klemenčič 2018).

The practices of involving students in institutional governance vary notably between private (i.e. independently financed or endowed) and public (i.e. state-funded or otherwise state-supported) HEIs. Largely a consequence of the 1960s protests calling for the democratization of university governing structures, the democratic governance model places significant decision authority in the hands of academic staff and students as key internal constituencies of HEIs. Students are the key constituency in the higher education enterprise since they are directly affected by the education provision and therefore – by default – are legitimate actors in institutional decisions.

In board-type governance (or corporatist variation of shared governance arrangements) the authority over decisions lies in the hands of the administration. The administration can decide to delegate decision authority to academic staff through academic committees, which in turn might involve students. Student involvement here is justified through the efficiency argument: in complex cases of decision making, especially those concerning student academic experience and student life, input from students is needed for better decisions. In other words, students are recognized to “have unique perspectives on educational processes, that their insights are valuable, and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape the education processes” (Cook-Sather 2006, p. 359).

The third perspective conceives student voice as an extension of student engagement in educationally-purposeful activities (Kuh 2009) and thus associates participation in institutional governance with learning and development gains usually associated with student campus engagements and public service roles, such as better integration in the community, lower risk of drop out, and development of professional competences (Kuh 2009).

The above perspectives have informed institutional decisions on how and to what degree to involve students in institutional governance of SCLI. The following categorization depicts different modes of student involvement; each mode implying different strength of agency afforded to students: (1) students serve a data source; (2) students are consulted on specific decisions; (3) students have a granted presence in all decision bodies and processes concerning teaching and learning; (4) students are full partners in institutional governance of SCLI (adopted from Klemenčič 2018).

(1) *Involvement to provide information* is the default and the weakest form of student involvement. It can be achieved in two ways. One is when the student body at large is solicited to provide data on their experiences through student surveys and course evaluations.

(2) *Structured consultation* with student representatives is a more formalized form of involvement, yet still weak in terms of student agency. Student capabilities to influence the processes and outcomes are limited since the flow of information from students happens at the discretion of administrators, under the terms set by the administrators, and based on information that administrators provide to student representatives. Ultimately, the administrators (and faculty) have full power to decide whether or not to take student views into account.

(3) A more advanced form of involvement is *structured dialogue* whereby students and administrators hold regular (formal or informal) meetings. Practically this means that

student representatives are involved in various consultative committees where they perform advisory functions or are informally consulted on a regular basis. They have opportunities to launch their own agenda issues. They do not, however, have formal decision-making powers, i.e. voting or veto rights (Klemenčič 2012, p. 639).

(4) Student involvement in institutional governance can be ascribed as *partnership*, as the strongest form of involvement, only when students have decision rights equal to other members of the structures in which they participate. Students can initiate new policies, which may or may not be adopted based on the consent of other members – teachers and administrators. Students are involved in each step of the decision-making processes.

Another key question here is: what are the objects of student involvement in institutional governance of SCLI? In the report *Engagement for Partnership: Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014, p. 24) put forward a model of students-as-partners and offer four objects of engagement in:

* learning, teaching and assessment
* subject-based research and inquiry
* generating scholarship of teaching and learning
* curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy.

The first two objects of involvement are very much in line with the previous discussion on student agency and actorhood in teaching and learning processes. The latter two highlight two interesting domains of involvement: students can be involved as co-researchers investigating the teaching and learning they receive (Werder & Otis 2010, quoted in Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014) or students can act as pedagogical consultants (Cook-Sather 2011, 2013, quoted in Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014), such as, for example when students of color and faculty members work together toward a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Cook-Sather & Agu 2013).

Emergence of students as actors in institutional governance depends on “others” who are willing to accept it as an institutional norm and support it as institutional practice. Both teachers and administrators are those significant “others” who at least initially define the conditions they set on student agency in institutional settings.

Furthermore, student actorhood is not equally accepted in each organizational community, and different communities have different expectations as to the role of students and different legitimation process of students as actors. For example, in curriculum planning it is teachers who shape the culture and define the norms for legitimation of students as actors. In centers for teaching and learning or in academic support services, it might be a combination of administrators and teachers who define student roles. It is possible, however, that the understandings and behavioral scripts for student actorhood travel from one intra-organizational community to another. This diffusion of norms happens either through academics or administrators who move through these communities or through students whose role in one community creates expectations and pressure for similar roles in another intra-organizational community. Moving through different communities, however, does not necessarily lead to diffusion of roles since students are susceptible to following the given rules and norms of each organizational subunit or particular community of practice.

Finally, the notion of students as legitimate actors in SCLI is contested (Klemenčič 2018). Accepting students as “peers” in decision processes goes against the established norms in many institutions. Teachers might categorically reject students as members of decision-making bodies on grounds of students’ lack of expertise and institutional memory. Or they might see students as having short-term perspectives placing own immediate self-interests over the long-term institutional goals. Or teachers might expect students to hold an adversarial stance and disrupt or stall the decision process.

Another common pitfall of student involvement is domestication of student representatives: students are involved in the meetings, but they remain supportive of the administrative or faculty proposals even when these are at odds with student interests. Students are co-opted into becoming allies with the administrators and faculty since they depend on keeping the positions of involvement (which improve their CVs) or rely on favorable letters of recommendation. Or students are so deeply socialized into the community of decision-makers that they internalize common goals as theirs without a critical stance reflecting student interests.[[6]](#endnote-6)

### *Students’ Sense of Agency and Efficacy in Institutional Governance*

Emergence of student actorhood in SCLI depends on students’ sense of agency as “*I believe I can act*” and efficacy in these processes as “*I believe I can achieve a goal*” and students’ motivation to individually or collectively enact their agency. In other words, student actorhood is linked to students’ perceptions that they are in control of their lives as students and their study/learning trajectory or that their studentship lies outside of their control. Of course, these perceptions are not binary, but exist in a continuum and vary with time, issue at hand and context. As discussed in the introduction, student motivations to act in the context of institutional governance go beyond immediate student self-interest. For genuine, conscientious involvement, students need to feel a sense of belonging defined as a feeling of attachment and allegiance to one’s university and psychological ownership of the university (Klemenčič 2015, 2018).

The differences in students’ perceptions of their agency and efficacy can be significant across HEIs and even as students move within their institution. Furthermore, students in different parts of the HEIs or in different roles will experience different degrees of actorhood in SCLI. Some students, such as elected student representatives, have more opportunities through authority invested in their role and consequently also perceive more opportunities to influence decisions than ordinary students.

However, student representatives’ sense of efficacy depends on a number of factors. Both the institutional memory of student efficacy influencing decisions and personal experiences in decision processes influence students’ perception of what is possible and likely for students to achieve. For example, students who sit in a university committee where they have full voting rights are more likely to demand voting rights in another committee where this is not the case. Students who have experienced efficacy in their agentic involvement – when their work or contribution was affirmed by others – will have a stronger sense of agency and might enact agency even in circumstances which on face value appear constraining to their action. In other words, these students will be more prone to disrupt institutional norms and bring about institutional change. Seeing successes or failures of other student representatives at the same or a different institution also forms a student’s perception on efficacy. Furthermore, administrators and faculty as the main decision-makers explicitly or implicitly signal what possibilities students have to influence decisions. Students also interpret institutional documents stating rules of student involvement and form perceptions based on scholarly literature on student involvement. Thus, students develop a sense of agency and efficacy from any or all of these sources.

### *Student Impact on the Social Structures of Academic and Social Life on Campus*

Much of research in sociology of higher education has focused on college outcomes as a function of the characteristics of institutions and of their educational programs. This scholarship is concerned with identifying causal linkages between various aspects of the postsecondary experience and the different dimensions of student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Kuh 2009; Mayhew *et al.* 2016). There are a number of notable theories that have been developed in this area and informed the massive empirical research (and industry of student engagement surveys) on student engagement in college (Kuh 2009). This body of literature has failed to recognize students’ potential and actual contributions to academic and social aspects of college life, i.e. impact that students have on their HEIs.

A corrective to this limited perspective is work on *student representation and activism* as two interrelated yet distinct forms of student politics (Klemenčič & Park 2018). The European Students Union and its member national unions are a prime example of highly impactful involvement of student representatives in national and institutional policy making on teaching and learning (Klemenčič 2017, 2018).

The *quality of teaching and learning* is an issue area that is less likely to mobilize students to activism than, for example, rising tuition fees or cuts in public funding for higher education (Cini & Guzman-Concha 2017, Klemenčič & Park 2018). However, we find examples of student activism that directly target teaching and learning, such as the Black Studies movement (Rojas 2017) or student movement for multiculturalism (Yamane 2002).

Another domain for student impact on HEIs is the *service domain*, referring to students in volunteer and paid jobs at their universities. Volunteer positions include leadership in student organizations and unpaid internship opportunities at the university. Campus student employment refers to different types of part-time, paid positions available from the university (as the employer) to students enrolled at that university (Perna 2010). The opportunities for students to work or volunteer on campus, however, vary significantly across institutions and countries.

Through everyday activities in these service roles students directly and purposefully shape the social structures of academic and social life on campus. Social structures are persisting patterns of behavior and interaction: formal and informal norms and values, and student behavior and interactions. While student representation certainly qualifies as potentially high-impact, other service roles, student on-campus employment and leadership roles in student groups and organizations too can be impactful on student communities and institutional practices. Of course, student impact occurs along a continuum: different student roles afford different degrees of impact, and the same student role affords different degrees of impact at different times.

In the context of SCLI, the most impactful service roles are those of student administrators, that is students who are employed part-time in (para)professional roles (rather than merely clerical) or who volunteer in such roles in the administration of teaching and learning. For example, students working in centers for teaching and learning shape learning and teaching practices when they serve as testers of learning activities or audience for teachers to try out learning activities. These student administrators cross the boundaries of being merely students to being involved in institutional decision making or implementation of these decisions.

Furthermore, while teaching roles are common for graduate students, even undergraduate students in many institutional contexts act as undergraduate teaching assistants, thereby transcending studentship with teaching and contributing to course design and implementation. Students who work in advising roles as, for example, peer tutors or in libraries as library assistants also have opportunities to change these practices through the input they offer to their colleagues and through their everyday work. Even though these are examples of fragmented and small-scale contributions students can make to the decisions and practice of teaching and learning, collectively they make a qualitative difference not only to the communities they serve, but also to their own experience of studentship. Namely, through service roles students also get professional development, develop social networks, and can feel validated.

## **Students as Agents of Institutional Change Towards SCLI**

Student roles in university or college contexts are defined by documented rules and regulations and are perpetuated through institutional structures, cultures and processes. Students inevitably interpret these institutional scripts and act in accordance of what they understand as institutional expectations for their behavior. However, they can also try to challenge these scripts through political action – through representative functions or through activism (Klemenčič & Park 2018) or they can transform these scripts through everyday behavior, such as through service roles. It is through such behaviors which transform the established routines and purposefully bring about new ways of thinking and doing that students as actors become agents of institutional transformation.

Teaching and learning is an area where well-rehearsed sets of routine behaviors and institutionalized roles and scripts reinforce the maintenance of existing practices. Teachers are often guardians of the existing practices reluctant to give in to disruptive pressures to change behaviors. The reasons for this reluctance are multiple, including lack of knowledge, convenience, valuation of research over teaching, lack of institutional support, and incentives (see Tagg 2019 for an excellent analysis). Similarly, the administrators alone, even if committed to student-centered approaches (which not all are), cannot alone transform the institutions (again see Tagg 2019). Inevitably, students are embedded within institutional norms and arrangements and students cannot necessarily alone unravel the institutional “instruction paradigm” (Barr & Tagg 1995).

Students can be entrepreneurial in deploying various social networks – of academics, administrators, student groups – to advance a particular policy agenda. And students can employ scholarship on SCLI and literature on students-as-partners, to justify their demands for involvement. The flourishing scholarship on SCLI is lending a helping hand to advocates of SCLI, including students interested in driving changes.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Yet, bestowing students with agency in institutional governance over teaching and learning can disrupt or stall the traditionally consensual decision-making processes. Indeed, students can come with adversary positions. Or they are unable or unwilling to differentiate between their immediate self-interest as students and managing the complexity of various stakeholder demands to the administration. These are real challenges of involving students in institutional governance.

Another consequence of SCLI is the transformation of the collective body of students into a newly empowered interest group which – at least in principle – can pursue shared interests in the area of quality of teaching and learning. But again, student motivations to act collectively in the domain of teaching and learning remain far from certain. One could argue that the potential for collective action was always available to students (and episodes of student activism testify to this); however, the issues that have mobilized students to collective action tended to revolve more frequently around broad political or social concerns rather than educational issues (Klemenčič & Park 2018).

Through representation, students have been much more effective in driving institutional change towards SCLI. The example of the European Students’ Union’s (ESU) involvement in the Bologna Process, the intergovernmental policy process, testifies to how students enacted agency to reconstruct meanings, practices and structures of student involvement in institutional governance of HEIs (Zgaga 2019). Students have also worked towards inclusion of student-centered learning as one of the objectives in the European higher education policies (Klemenčič 2017, 2018). ESU’s emergence as a legitimated actor in the Bologna Process was a combination of policy entrepreneurship of ESU’s representatives, acceptance of the principle of student representation among several members of the Process, and the political momentum that the installation of the Bologna Process created in the European supranational policy space (Zgaga 2019).

However, the implementation of SCLI across European HEIs has been slow and fragmented. Student representatives lack knowledge on constructing student-centered classroom environments and therefore their agency in this domain has been impaired. ESU has tried to overcome this with a series of designated projects on SCLI, but these have not sufficed in generating the know-how that would empower students to be drivers of institutional changes. And, in many institutions, there continues to be resistance or at least not sufficient institutional support by teachers and administrators for such a transformation. Even though in Europe students have been hugely successful in driving policy change, obviously they cannot carry through such transformation on their own. As discussed in *The Instruction Myth: Why Higher Education Is Hard to Change, and How to Change It* by John Tagg (2019), the role of administrators and teachers is crucial in reforming HEIs toward more learning-centeredness.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to strengthen the theoretical foundations about the role and responsibilities of students in SCLI. Thereby, the chapter develops a theory of student agency that accounts for both student involvement in learning and teaching processes (i.e., in classroom practices) as well as in institutional governance of teaching and learning. The chapter first addresses definitional and theoretical issues associated with the concepts of students as actors in SCLI and students as agents driving institutional change. The concept of students as actors presumes that students purposefully use their capabilities, i.e. their agency as both intrinsic dispositions and extrinsic opportunities, to act towards a particular learning goal or goal of influencing their learning environment. The concept of students as agents of institutional change (as institutional entrepreneurs) presumes that students push the existing institutional norms and rules of behavior to bring about ways of doing and making meaning and valuing that are different from the status quo. For example, the student movement “I too am Harvard” has brought about a thorough institutional review of the experiences of students from marginalized groups resulting in a complete overhaul of institutional policies and practices on student inclusion and belonging at Harvard.

Scholarship on SCLI has been instrumental in placing students in the center of learning and teaching processes in higher education. Yet, the existing accounts have focused mostly on the student role in classroom practices rather than within the broader context of SCL institutional ecosystems - notable exceptions are Ashwin and McVitty (2015) and Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014). Further developing our understanding of students as actors in SCLI and as agents of institutional changes is crucial at the time when we are trying both to understand the difficult challenge of reforming HEIs to adopt SCLI (Tagg 2019). What we need at this time is to determine how students can fully embrace their agency in SCLI and how students can be partners in driving institutional transformations towards the SCLI.

Transformation of teaching-oriented institutions into student-centered institutions opens up new agentic opportunities for student involvement in learning and teaching processes and in institutional governance of teaching and learning. For example, when a university introduces or strengthens learning support services (i.e. student academic advising) this opens possibilities for students to act as peer student advisors or peer tutors. Or when a center for teaching and learning is opened, this creates opportunities for engaging students to review the curriculum or give structured feedback on teaching (like the SCOTS (Student Consultants on Teaching) program at Brigham Young University and Utah Valley University[[8]](#endnote-8) or the The Learning Lab Undergraduate Fellows (LLUFs) at Harvard’s Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning[[9]](#endnote-9). In those SCLI service roles, students on a daily basis shape how teaching and learning is practiced in their institutions. And they legitimate and give meaning to student actorhood in SCLI.

The emergence and transformation of students as actors in SCLI in itself constitutes significant institutional change. But the consequence of this change may be that there is less need for students as agents since SCLI ecosystems are based on the idea of universities and colleges as learning communities in which change is an accepted state of affairs (Tagg 2019) and students are accepted as legitimate participants in initiating and contributing to changes in teaching and learning. HEIs are institutional contexts which are enabling of and empower student agency. The more an institution transforms to student-centeredness, the more enabling institutional conditions become for student agentic behavior and the less need there is for students to push the boundaries as agents.

Finally, there is no presumption that student agency within institutional contexts is without constraints as there is no presumption that student agency within classrooms is without constraints. And like interdependence between teachers and students and mutual respect within the student-teacher relationships in classroom practices, so is interdependence based on shared interests and mutual respect also expected between students, teachers, administrators and others participating in learning and teaching processes within student-centered HEIs.

And, there is no presumption that students are always and necessarily motivated to genuinely engage in co-construction of knowledge or to genuinely contribute to the decisions concerning teaching and learning. Students might wish to get through some or all courses to get the degree down the line. And teachers have limited capabilities as to what they can do to motivate students to actively participate in learning processes. But SCLI approaches equip us and help us to try to bring students to learn. Students might be involved in institutional decisions because of selfish reasons of their personal and career advancement rather than service to the community. But the stronger, the more developed the structures of student voice in SCLI are, the more checks and balances exist on student representatives and the purposes to which they serve.

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2. I thank John Tagg for suggesting this formulation and the formulation in the next sentence helping me to distinguish between agency and actorhood. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I thank Sabine Hoidn for noting this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I thank John Tagg for helping me develop this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I thank John Tagg for helping me develop this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See a discussion on how to address these problems in Klemenčič (2015, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This chapter too provides a rationalized account of student actorhood and student agency thus potentially informing students to perceive themselves as actors and contributing to student enactment of agency in SCLI. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I thank John Tagg for this example. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I thank Tamara Brenner for this example. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)