Original Article

From Student Engagement to Student Agency: Conceptual Considerations of European Policies on Student-Centered Learning in Higher Education

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Student-centered learning (SCL) has entered center stage on the European higher education (HE) policy agenda after the Yerevan Ministerial Summit of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in May 2015. It has become the key principle underlying the intended reforms toward enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in European HE. Despite the universal appeal, SCL remains poorly defined in policy documents and this ambiguity potentially jeopardizes its implementation. The article addresses the different instances and evocations of the SCL approach in EHEA policies. Furthermore, it seeks to clarify the conceptual foundations of SCL. Two propositions are put forward. First, SCL should be understood as a 'meta-concept'. Such an understanding serves as a corrective to the eclectic use of SCL in association with a broad variety of policy issues. Second, the article questions the suitability of student engagement as a conceptual foundation of SCL. The main argument is that student engagement conceptually fails to sufficiently address student autonomy, self-regulation and choice, all of which have been highlighted by the literature as essential elements of SCL. The root concern of SCL is not propensity to different types of student action as implied in student engagement, but rather student agency as students' capabilities to intervene in and influence their learning environments and learning pathways.
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Introduction

At the Yerevan Ministerial Summit of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in May 2015, European Ministers responsible for higher education affirmed enhancing quality of teaching and learning as one of the key objectives of the EHEA with student-centered learning (SCL) as its key principle. Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment was introduced as a new standard in the

revised European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Europe (ESG), against which practices by European higher education institutions will be assessed in accreditation and external quality assurance procedures (ESG, 2015, 12, point 1.3). ESG has a powerful impact on institutional policies and practices. Higher education institutions will seek to implement SCL to comply with the standard.

SCL appears widely accepted among the EHEA stakeholders. It is portrayed as the antidote of the 'traditional approach' associated with fully guided direct instruction. Despite the universal appeal, SCL remains poorly defined in policy documents. The ESG, as the key regulatory instrument of the EHEA, refers to SCL in rather abstract terms, and the indicators to evaluate the institutional practices are only just being developed. Several other related terms are used — student-centered teaching, student-centered assessment and student-centered learning environments (SCLEs) — without any real attempt to define and qualify them. This ambiguity potentially jeopardizes the intended implementation of SCL (ESU and EI, 2010a; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2012). Without clarity to its meaning and specific set of indicators to assess institutional practice, almost anything can be 'sold' as SCL to the evaluation panels; yet it is less clear whether SCL as a principle systematically permeates all relevant education processes and structures within an institution.

In the next section, the article first addresses the different instances and evocations of the SCL approach in EHEA policy documents and makes a case for developing clear indicators of SCL in policy and policy-supporting documents. Then the article moves to a discussion of conceptual foundations of SCL. Scholarship on student engagement has so far presented the theoretical mainstream underpinning the policy and practice of SCL in Europe; that is in those few European countries, such as the UK and Ireland, which have already purposefully integrated SCL into higher education. The evidence for this lies, for example, in the national policy 'Students at the Hearth of the System' in the UK (2011) or the Irish Working Group to develop guidelines for student engagement in Irish Higher Education (2014). The evidence lies also in the use of student engagement surveys as the foremost tool for data collection on student experience in higher education (Klemenčič and Chirikov, 2015). Policy focus on student engagement has presented a notable shift from the earlier emphasis on student satisfaction, which holds more market-oriented connotations of transactional relationships between students and their universities. Increasingly, surveys include questions that measure students' behavior in educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside classroom (Kuh, 2001). Student engagement is becoming the conceptual tool that policy-makers and higher education professionals across EHEA turn to when developing their national policies on SCL and instruments to guide institutional practices.

This article questions suitability of student engagement as conceptual foundation underpinning policy development and implementation of SCL. It offers a critical and alternative perspective on student engagement in the context of its application to policies on SCL. The main argument is that student engagement conceptually fails to sufficiently address student autonomy, self-regulation and choice, all of which have been highlighted by the literature as essential elements of SCL. Student engagement has been defined as 'the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions to optimize the student experience and enhance learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution' (Trowler and Trowler, 2011). To measure student engagement, survey questions focus on the different types of behavior conducted or experienced by students, for example: 'During the current academic year, about how often have you asked questions in class?' 'Received timely written or oral feedback from teachers/tutors on your academic performance?' 'Tutored or taught other college students?' Such questions, although indicative of student behavioral patterns and propensity of certain behaviors, reveal very little about students' capabilities to intervene in and influence their learning environments and learning pathways, i.e., student agency, which is what student-centeredness is essentially about. The article concludes with a discussion on the application of the concept of student agency in policies on SCL.

The Meanings of SCL in EHEA Policies and SCL as a 'Meta-Concept'

The Bologna Implementation Report states that 'genuine SCL is a complex matter that is difficult to integrate into everyday higher education reality' (European Commission/Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)/Eurydice, 2012, 52). Quality assurance bodies and higher education institutions across Europe are presented with the task to develop common interpretations of the approach. The former seek to come up with a list of meaningful indicators to evaluate and measure quality of SCL in practice. The latter are developing institutional policies and practices to implement SCL. This section examines the different meanings attributed to SCL in the key EHEA policy documents. Through content analysis of these documents, the different instances and evocations of the SCL approach are investigated. The policy documents consulted include the ministerial communiqués published biennially following the Ministerial Summits; and the two declarations: Bologna Declaration (1999) and the Budapest-Vienna Declaration formally establishing the EHEA (see EHEA, 2010). Also reviewed were the two other policy documents adopted at the ministerial summits: all three versions of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Europe (ESG, 2005, 2009, 2015) and the User Guide to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (2015). For positions and practices of the key

members of the Bologna Process/EHEA, content analysis has been performed on: national governments' implementation reports, including the Bologna Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2012); policy documents of the three key stakeholders, European University Association (EUA), Education International (EI) and European Students' Union (ESU), and the key policies of the European Commission (2003, 2005, 2006, 2011), including the High-Level Group reports on improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions (European Commission, 2013, 2014).

SCL has been first introduced into policy documents of the Bologna Process by this name in 2007 (London Communiqué, 2007). Among the earlier Communiqués, Bergen Communiqué (2005) takes a note that structural changes have an effect on curricula and that 'the introduction of innovative teaching and learning processes' should be ensured, but there is no mention of a shift in learning systems design toward SCL. London Communiqué (2007), in the part discussing the progress toward the EHEA, states explicitly that an outcome of the Bologna Process will be a move toward student-centered higher education and away from teacher driven provision (London Communiqué, 2007, 2.1). SCL as a policy objective is reinforced in the following Leuven Communiqué (2009) which draws a normative link between SCL and students developing 'the competences they need in a changing labor market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens' (Leuven Communiqué, 2009, 2.1). SCL becomes an explicit policy priority with an expanded suggestion as to its meaning: 'SCL requires empowering individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance structures and a curriculum focused more clearly on the learner in all three cycles' (Leuven Communiqué, 2009, 14).

Following Leuven, SCL also emerges in the template for national implementation reports that need to be submitted to EHEA secretariat prior to each summit. The new section on SCL includes questions whether member states' steering documents mention SCL, or other concepts linked to SCL, and how SCL is defined in national steering documents. The template also refers to 'SCL categories' and asks respondents to assess their importance in the national steering documents. Concretely, six 'SCL categories' are mentioned: independent learning; learning in small groups; training in teaching for staff; assessment based on learning outcomes; recognition of prior learning; learning outcomes; student/staff ratio and student evaluation of teaching; indeed, a rather eclectic selection of evocations of SCL.

While most member states reported to have some elements of what is now referred to as SCL in their national steering documents (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015), the more far-reaching and universal implementation of this policy objective commenced only after 2015. The newly adopted ESG, the key regulatory mechanism in the EHEA, introduced an entirely new standard on student-centered learning, teaching and assessment (ESG, 2015, 1.3).

There are several other standards in the ESG which refer to SCL. For example, standard 1.1 explicitly mentions that students as internal stakeholders are jointly responsible for internal QA, that they and other stakeholders should be involved in designing and continuous improvement of QA methodologies (ESG, 2015, Part 2), and that quality assurance agencies and accreditation bodies need to ensure involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work (ESG, 2015, Part 3). Furthermore, standard 1.2 stipulates that students and other stakeholders should be involved in the design of the study programs (ESG, 2015, 1.9). Standard 1.5 on teaching staff has been revised in 2015 to emphasize the need for student-centered teaching and the changing role of teachers in SCL (ESG, 2015). Standard 1.6 on learning resources and student support mentions that SCL and flexible modes of learning and teaching need to be taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support (ESG, 2015).

Taking into consideration these varied evocations of SCL in ESG, a proposition is put forward that SCL should really be understood as a 'meta-concept,' a concept at a higher level of abstraction. Such an understanding serves as a corrective to the eclectic use of SCL in association with a broad variety of policy issues and domains of application, such as pedagogy, assessment, curriculum development, qualification frameworks, flexible learning paths, student and teacher resources and services, and student involvement in governance and quality assurance. SCL can be parsed into different meanings, which can be linked to specific 'fields' of application and associated with specific 'agents' whose agency is invoked in a given field.

The key references to SCL in EHEA policy documents depict three distinct yet overlapping conceptions of SCL: *a pedagogic concept to foster individual learning*, *a cultural frame for developing communities of learning* and *a lever supporting learning systems.* Analytically distinguishing between these different conceptions of SCL can help us to engage with this meta-concept more critically both conceptually and in policy. Following from these three fields of application of SCL, an alternative definition of SCL emerges. SCL approach promotes active learning activities and ensures ample learning resources and student support. Furthermore, SCL nurtures culture of mutual respect and collaboration in pursuit of knowledge among members of the academic community. Finally, SCL fosters students' capabilities to shape their learning environments and define their learning pathways.

SCL as a Pedagogic Concept to Foster Individual Learning

The overwhelming emphasis in policies and regulatory instruments on SCL is pedagogic. The ministerial communiqués refer to SCL as fundamentally a pedagogical concept 'characterized by innovative methods of teaching that involve

students as active participants in their own learning,' which is essential for students' self-formation toward 'intellectual independence and personal self-assuredness alongside disciplinary knowledge and skills' (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012). ESU and EI conceive SCL as 'characterized by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking' (EI and ESU, 2010b). Thus, SCL is made synonymous with active learning, i.e., involving activities that all students in a class session do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes of the lecture. Furthermore, the references in documents explicitly dichotomize SCL against 'more traditional' approaches centered around teacher's input. This contrast has been accentuated to such an extent that it may no longer be obvious that SCL is actually not expected to obviate 'traditional' lecture-based approaches, but to complement them. Indeed, SCL is understood by scholars to comprise 'interactive, complementary activities that enable individuals to address unique learning interests and needs, study multiple levels of complexity and deepen understanding' (Land *et al.*, 2012).

The clarification that SCL is intended to complement, rather than supplant, fully guided direct instruction is of high significance. In training events on implementation of SCL, a question of effectiveness of SCL is consistently raised. Another frequent question is whether it is feasible to implement SCL in mass study programs and mass classrooms. These questions do not come as a surprise. Among scholars, controversies exist concerning the effectiveness of constructivist learning environments, such as SCL; specifically, as to how much guidance is desirable in instruction and how knowledge can be best aquired — through experience of procedures of disciplines or instruction based on facts and theories (Kirschner *et al.*, 2006, 78). There are several researchers that strongly argue in favor of 'direct, strong instructional guidance rather constructivist-based minimal guidance during the instruction of novice to intermediate learners' (Kirschner *et al.*, 2006, 83). The more recent interpretations of SCL and its related approaches now make sure to emphasize that they do not advocate for a withdrawal of teachers or indeed for a diminished role of teachers; in fact, to the contrary (Hmelo-Silver *et al.*, 2007). To put it simply, SCL in pedagogy means that the fully guided direct instruction is complemented — as appropriate — by specific techniques of active learning, such as assigning open-ended problems, involving students in simulations and role plays, and enabling self-paced, self-directed and/or cooperative and or peer-to-peer learning. Such techniques can be applied in any-sized classroom settings, and obviously they do not diminish the role of the teachers but demands from them a further consideration of a carefully conceived learning designs specific to the knowledge area and expected learning outcomes.

SCL as a Cultural Frame for Developing Communities of Learning

SCL is seen as an 'underlying principle' of the EHEA (London Communiqué, 2007, 3.7; Leuven Communiqué, 2009, 2; European Union, 2015, 14); indeed, as a cultural frame in the sense of providing an interpretative lens through which individual agents — both students and teachers — could or should encode their expectations about how to relate to one another in context of a HE institution. ESU and IE suggest that 'SCL represents both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution' (EI and ESU, 2010b). The ECTS Users' Guide defines SCL as 'a process of qualitative transformation for students and other learners in a learning environment, aimed at enhancing their autonomy and critical ability through an outcome-based approach' (European Union, 2015, 26). The same document suggests that SCL requires 'an open dialog and reflective feedback between students, teachers and the relevant administrators, through which their needs and aspirations can be expressed and discussed' (European Union, 2015, 26).

Although culture has not been much invoked in policy debates on SCL, it is central to its implementation. In sociological perspectives, culture is conceived as an overarching frame and narrative of common values, beliefs, attitudes within a given context (for example within a higher education system or HE institution) or common understandings that bind actors together and shape their behavior. Institutional culture is of vital importance for implementing an approach such as SCL. To put it simply, SCL reflects some deep cultural norms and culturally unaware policies tend to fail in implementation.

Most important here are the cultural frames regarding teacher–student and university–student relationships. The nature of these relationships differs significantly across higher education systems between 'authoritarian-paternalistic, democratic-collegiate or managerial-corporate arrangements, each of which invokes different conceptions (or metaphors) of students, such as students as pupils, as constituency or as customers' (Klemenčič, 2015c, 531). For example, in educational systems in which teachers enact pedagogical paternalism and in which students are conceived as pupils and as children, SCL as a value does not fall naturally into place. The main issue of contention is the extent of students' intellectual capacity (and perhaps also emotional maturity) to make informed choices on issues, such as content of courses, methodology of class instruction or modes of assessment; and consequently the degree of autonomy granted to students *vis-a-vis* teachers. If teachers believe that their responsibility is to act *in loco parentis* and act in the best interest of students, regardless of what students believe are their best interests, students will have difficulties to negotiate the autonomy that SCL approach implies. Students' agency, their capabilities to influence learning processes are limited by the expectations as to their role and behavior inherent in given cultural frames. On the other hand, student inoculated through paternalistic schooling system (and possibly authoritarianism as part of cultural makeup of their

societies) may have difficulties in accepting the roles that SCL approach envisages for them and enact agency to intervene in the ways SCL approach expects from them, such as self-direction, assertion of preferred learning paths and engagement in decision making.

In democratic-collegiate settings, students are conceived as members of academic community and as such part of the collectivity engaged in the educational process (Luescher-Mamashela, 2012; Klemenčič, 2011; Klemenčič, 2012). Since the emphasis is on collective experience and coproduction of knowledge, such settings make provisions for student involvement in decision-making processes as well as imply expectations of 'student, lecturers and others who support the learning process as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise, which is focused on knowledge, its production, dissemination and application, and on the development of learners' (McCulloch 2009, 181). Hence, such settings are highly conducive to the implementation of SCL.

The contractual relationship between students and teachers implied in corporate university arrangements appears more in tune with student-centered premises, but there is a contentious debate in scholarly circles as to what extent this is actually true. Conceived as customers, students have a high degree of autonomy and are able (and arguably also more inclined) to make demands concerning the contents and methods of instruction (van Andel *et al*., 2012; Klemenčič, 2015a). They also have explicit rights to complain when their expectations are not met or if they are otherwise dissatisfied. However, in transactional relationships, students may also be less likely to assume responsibilities for their own learning and expect knowledge to be provided to them in quickest possible and most effective way (van Andel *et al*.,; Klemenčič, 2015c). The expressive individualism and choice-based values in such higher educational settings may undermine the spirit of collective academic experience which is inherent in educational establishments, and 'puts in question — or significantly alters — the pathways to social integration that have been for long held as essential for student retention and college success' (Klemenčič, 2015a, 537).

In cultural conceptions of SCL, we also cannot ignore the different types of cultural orientations of students. There is a type of students who view higher education predominantly as a way to a degree (the 'credentialists') and neither have strong professional orientations nor a serious interest in learning (Grigsby, 2009). This cultural subgroup of students is not necessarily marginal in higher education settings. Among the various types of cultural orientations of students, it is in fact only the 'academic' type of students, who emphasize academic achievement, and identify themselves as those who enjoy learning and gaining knowledge for its own sake (Grigsby, 2009). At least some of the student representatives qualify as the 'academic' type or at least they have developed the meta awareness of the institutional orientation toward academic achievement through their function. Student representatives might indeed populate a particular student subgroup defined by a heightened sense of collective responsibility, political ambitions and

interest in university matters. Students who are primarily concerned about getting a job ('careerist') or those who thrive on the social activities that are part of student life ('collegiate') or those that are heavily invested in political or civic initiative (the 'activists') (Grigsby, 2009) tend to balance their activities (how they spend their time) in favor of pursuits other than academic and commit themselves to academic work only to the extent this is supportive or compatible with their other goals. Such a diversity of students' identities and dispositions for academic achievement calls for a careful consideration of how to balance granting students choice and freedom do devise their own learning path with a more structured and guided approach to teaching and learning.

In summary, implementation of SCL requires a careful consideration of the cultural frames implied in higher education institutions' regulations and statutory documents, norms of appropriate behavior and informal sanctions that can be derived from these formal rules and regulations, and values and cultural frames, that shape behavior of students, teachers and higher education professionals. Finally, none of the members of the academic community are a perfectly homogeneous group and their cultural orientations need to be explored.

SCL as a Lever Supporting Learning Systems

Content analysis of relevant EHEA policy documents reveals that SCL is expected to support a number of areas within the institutional learning systems apart from pedagogy. In the London Communiqué (2007), an explicit link is made in terms of 'student-centered, outcome-based learning' and national qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes and credits, lifelong learning, and the recognition of prior learning (London Communiqué, 2007, point 3.7). A more systematic analysis reveals four major areas of application of SCL, apart from aforementioned pedagogy.

One such area is assessment. Policy documents recommend for more formative assessment methods and clarity and transparency of assessment procedures. Another area of application of SCL lies in the areas of curriculum design and qualification frameworks. SCL is specifically associated with more flexible learning paths which imply more inbuilt flexibility in the curriculum in terms of elective courses. It also concerns broadening the curriculum to include multidisciplinary courses to help students to develop a broader set of competences to make them more employable and more flexible in employment. A further objective here is more flexible entry routes to study programs, which includes streamlining recognition of prior and informal learning, and more transient pathways between vocational-, professional- and academic-oriented study programs. More flexible delivery modes, especially in terms of e-learning and online, part-time, and distance education are also aimed for. Both assessment and curriculum design are

conditioned upon the implementation of learning outcomes as statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning within a course of whole study program (European Union, 2015). In policy documents, implementation of learning outcomes and implementation of SCL appear as mutually reinforcing.

The third area of application of SCL refers to student (and teacher) support, guidance and availability of learning (and professional development) resources. As ESG (2015, 1.6) stipulates that SCL needs to be considered when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support. Finally, SCL is applied in the area of student involvement in institutional decision making, in particular in the areas of quality assurance and curriculum design. In the communiqués, student involvement in higher education governance at all levels as well as in internal and external quality assurance procedures and bodies has been regularly mentioned (Prague Communiqué, 2001; Berlin Communiqué, 2003; London Communiqué, 2007; Bucharest Communiqué, 2012; Yerevan Communiqué (see EHEA, 2015); ESG, 2005, 2009, 2015) (for overview see Klemenčič, 2012). Students are also expected to be involved in the design and periodic review and revision of study programs (ESG, 2015, 1.2 and 1.9), and participate in designing and continuous improvement of quality assurance methodologies (ESG, 2015, Part 3).

As a lever supporting learning systems within higher education institutions, SCL is seen to bring about more personalized ('allowing for student choice and relevance to the individual student') and individualized ('allowing students to work at their own pace and according to their particular learning needs') education (Langworthy *et al.*, 2010, 111–112). Furthermore, the policy documents not only grant students stronger agency in their own self-formation, but also in influencing learning system decisions that may only affect future generations (such as in curriculum development). Student agency indeed appears a conceptual foundation of SCL as conceived in the EHEA policy documents.

Conceptual Underpinnings of SCL: Student Engagement or Student Agency?

In the UK and Ireland, which in Europe have most developed policies and institutional practices in SCL, SCL is explicitly linked to student engagement. Initiatives such as RAISE — Researching, Advancing, and Inspiring Student Engagement and new journals, such as Student Engagement in Higher Education, have sprung up to help implement the policies, which seek to place 'students at the hearth of the system' (DBIS, 2011). This conceptual link between SCL and student engagement is likely to be transposed to other European countries which are at earlier stages of development of SCL. Student engagement like SCL is

uncontroversial policy objectives. Both reflect the liberal values of modern (Western) societies according to which agentic individuals are central to social and economic progress (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000). Political democracy, open market economies, cultural freedom are all built around choices and capabilities of empowered individuals (Bromley *et al*., 2011). Higher education is expected to prepare students to become agentic individuals.

If, as Hall and Lamont (2009, 2) suggest, a 'successful society' is 'one that enhances the capabilities of people to pursue the goals important to their own lives whether through individual or collective action'; then education which enables and strengthens student agency is both a condition of a successful society and also one of the outcomes of it (Klemenčič, 2015a). Metaphors evoked in political discourse of liberal education frequently include references to individuals' dispositions to pursue goals important to their lives, such as motivation, intentionality and purposiveness. Furthermore, references are made to autonomy, choice and freedoms, which refer to conditions that enable individuals to enact their agency. Within liberal education model, students have an array of rights and powers — both formal and symbolic — which enable them to enact their agency. Finally, understanding students' interests, preferences, capabilities and choices is seen essential to cater for more student-centered education provision; which is often also made synonymous with more personalized and more individualized education.

Despite the ideological congruence between student engagement and SCL within the frame of the liberal education philosophy, student engagement does not appear perfectly suitable as a conceptual foundation of SCL. Scholars have pointed to numerous problems with the meaning of student engagement and its conceptual viability describing it as a 'messy' concept with many meanings (Ashwin and McVitty, 2015); subject to multiple interpretations (Trowler, 2010) and weakly theorized (Kahn, 2014). When it comes to suitability of student engagement to provide conceptual foundations for policy development of SCL further problems arise. The central problem lies in the focus of student engagement concept on behavioral patterns of students and propensity of students to particular behavior rather than student capabilities which are central to SCL.

Student engagement surveys are designed to measure the extent to which students participate in educationally purposeful activities (i.e., those that are believed by the surveys designers to enhance learning and development), and the support they receive from teachers and institutions to do so (Kuh, 2001; Klemenčič and Chirikov, 2015). Examples of typical questions that student engagement surveys ask include the extent to which students have contributed to class discussion; asked an insightful question; communicated with a faculty member by e-mail, texting or in person; and interacted with faculty during a class session. They also ask about how much assigned reading the student has completed on average and how many hours in a typical week students spend on different activities. A number of questions are devoted to students self-reporting of their learning

outcomes by rating proficiency in various areas (such as analytical and critical thinking skills) at the beginning of the studies and at the time of the survey. Then there are also questions regarding satisfaction with various aspects of academic and social experience. Some surveys also ask about students' goals and aspirations after undergraduate education.

Taking aside the methodological weaknesses of the accuracy of the students' self-reported behavioral patterns over a significant period of time and self-reported learning gains, the selection of standards of educational practice and student behavior that are expected to contribute to student learning are also questionable (Klemenčič and Chirikov, 2015). The key question is what is measured and what is not, and where these 'standards' have been derived from. Typical student engagement survey questionnaires, such as those that have been influenced by the National Student Engagement Survey in the USA, do not collect any insights in students' experiences and beliefs of the freedoms and opportunities they have to influence their learning pathways. The previous section revealed that the key premises of SCL as they emerge from the EHEA policy documents include student autonomy, self-regulation and choice, all of which are linked to students' capabilities to influence their own learning pathways as well as collective learning systems. The existing student engagement surveys do not capture these elements, which indeed are difficult to measure, but rather focus on institutional factors that shape student experience. As such suitability of student engagement concept to underpin the development and implementation of policies on SCL is questionable.

To clarify the meanings of SCL and to further develop SCL policies and policy instruments (such as ESG), it may be more fruitful to employ a concept such as student agency, which focuses specifically on student capabilities to influence their learning environments. As Geven and Attard (2012), both of whom have been involved as stakeholder experts in EHEA policy deliberations, attest, SCL is about generating 'freedom' and 'capability-sets' for students and staff to develop an interactive learning environment, such as opportunity for students to choose different modules and subjects, delivery method (e.g., online) or modes of assessments (Geven and Attard, 2012).

Student agency is built on two premises (Klemenčič, 2015a). One is students' agentic possibilities as students' real opportunities and positive freedoms to do and to be what they reason to value within university context. These are exogenously given — they originate outside the individual. The enabling condition for this premise is students' autonomy (as freedom to act, think, be), which implies that students' behavior is experienced as willingly enacted. This premise is similar to MacFarlane's definition of student academic freedom, 'both as a right to full and free expression and as a means by which learners can experience a genuinely 'higher' education that enables them to become critical thinkers' (Macfarlane, 2012). The other premise is students' agentic orientations which refer to students' predispositions and will to particular enactments of agency. These are

endogenously constructed as they represent internal responses to external state of affairs. They include internalized 'routines, dispositions, preconceptions, competences, schemas, patterns, typifications and traditions' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, 973); and are not unlike Bourdieu's 'habitus', i.e., structure of mind and emotions characterized by a set of acquired schemata (organized pattern of thought or behavior), sensibilities, dispositions and taste (Bourdieu, 1984). There are two enabling conditions for this premise. One is students' efficacy as students' judgment of, and belief in, their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning as students and over higher education environments that affect their lives as students (cf. Bandura, 2001). Another one is students' self-regulation as the process by which a student controls (makes conscious decisions) about own learning trajectory; which includes various functions, such as task analysis, self-control and self-evaluation (Zimmerman, 2008).

Conceptually, student agency is closer to SCL than student engagements since both concepts share the emphasis on autonomy, choice and freedoms of students within higher education context. Conceptualizing SCL policies and instruments within theory of student agency ensures that the emphasis shifts from students' behavior and propensity to specific types of behaviors believed to enhance learning gains to strengthening students' real opportunities and positive freedoms to influence their learning environments. This defines their learning pathways and pays attention to students' sense of their efficacy as their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning in the higher education context.

Conclusion

This article argues that for policy development and implementation of SCL it is more fruitful to conceive SCL as a 'meta' approach whereby the principles of SCL are enacted in specific fields of operation each of which involves specific set of actors and purposes. SCL as a pedagogic concept emphasizes active learning activities such as problem-based learning, computer-supported collaborative learning, learning-by-design, project-based learning, games and simulations. These are introduced to complement the fully guided direct instruction. SCL as an element of culture refers specifically to the student–teacher and student–university power relations and how these serve as cultural frames shaping expectations of members of academic community about how to relate to one another. Finally, SCL as a lever supporting learning systems refers to the four main areas of application of SCL, apart from pedagogy: assessment, curriculum design and qualification frameworks, student (and teacher) support and resources, and student involvement in institutional decision making.

Further argument made is that student engagement is conceptually unfit to serve as theoretical foundation underpinning policy development and policy instruments

in SCL, despite ideological congruence of both approaches within liberal educational philosophy. A case is made that theory of student agency presents a better conceptual framework since it captures and highlight elements of autonomy, choice and freedoms, which are the core premises of SCL. These elements are not captured in the behaviorist-orientation of student engagement. Students agency needs to be developed further as theory, but it lends itself well suited to guide development of instruments such as ESG indicators of quality of SCL. It can provide a framework to align the different applications of SCL under common premises of the extent and conditions under which student agency is strengthened. Perhaps the most important question for policy-makers and practitioners in regard to SCL is how do we know that an institution has implemented SCL. The five areas of application of SCL have been mentioned earlier. Within these areas, evidence is sought that students have (sufficient) capabilities to influence their learning pathways and environments.

Finally, the policy documents and the few projects within EHEA specifically targeting implementation of SCL show little awareness of the ample research on SCL practices, controversies and the myriad of techniques that can be used in design of instruction in a way to 'facilitate student- or self-directed learning by enabling students to productively engage complex, open-ended problems that are aligned authentically with the practices, culture or processes of a domain' (Land *et al.*, 2012, 3). The lack of involvement of scholars on SCL in development of policies and instruments to implement policies on SCL in EHEA poses serious problems for policy implementation, quality assessments and scalability of SCL within EHEA. Those involved in policy development in EHEA often fail to review relevant literature. At the same time, the scientists of learning systems designs have not done enough to communicate 'usable knowledge' to interested policy-makers and practitioners. This problem is not unique to EHEA policy development on SCL. Higher education professionals responsible for teaching and learning and SCL and teachers themselves often do not have access to resources and insight into relevant scholarly literature and latest findings on SCL (Klemenčič and Ashwin, 2015; Klemenčič, 2015b). While quality evaluation panels coming into universities will not be able to test each and every teacher for knowledge on learning systems design, they should be able to request evidence of existence of institutional repositories with resources on teaching and learning methods, which are accessible to all teaching staff and students. Furthermore, there should be evidence of inbuilt flexibility in curriculum design and delivery modes, and so forth.

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