



Time for a paradigm shift: Student Centred Learning Final Report



Executive Summary

The following report is addressed to all stakeholders and potential readers interested in the topic of student centred learning, or in the development and work conducted during the T4SCL project of 2009 – 2010. The target group is particularly composed of students, staff and representatives of higher education institutions.

The main objectives of the project included:

- a. Better development and synthesis of pre-existing knowledge on SCL.
- b. Empowerment of students and staff to change approaches to educational policies in their home institutions.
- c. The improved valorisation of already existing knowledge on SCL.
- d. The provision of readily accessible information on SCL for the target groups.
- e. Increased impact on the political discourse on education, for the benefit of students and staff.
- f. Adding a more student-centred approach to the European, national and institution-level discussions on life-long learning (LLL) through research on topic areas where SCL with LLL overlap.

The project objectives were tackled via a variety of approaches. The main activities conducted during the project included:

- a. Research and publication of research results in three distinct publications, including a content toolkit aimed at promoting change and use by potential practitioners.
- b. A training component, including a training of trainers, as well as one directed at national experts.
- c. Wide-audience events, including a launching conference for the first two publications, as well as a stakeholders forum at the end of the project.

Another important dimension was the dissemination work. It included the active use of a website (www.t4scl.eu) for the provision of web resources; active promotion of project outcomes at conferences and events which have been attended by ESU and EI representatives, and dissemination of printed and online versions of the project publications via mail and e-mail. These events have been both local, national and European.

The stakeholders that have taken part in the events of the project or have read the project publications, have in most cases expressed their interest in future efforts for the implementation of student-centred learning as the main pedagogical concept within their national and local contexts.

The follow-up of the project has already started, as several national level actors have shown interest in the use of some of the project outcomes in order to initiate changes in educational approaches within their home contexts. Also, ESU representatives that have been invited to educational events have used project outcomes in their presentation as an integral part of ESU's message.

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1. Project Objectives

- a. Contributing to a profound understanding of the SCL concept and the tools and strategies needed for its successful implementation, at a European level. This objective was linked both to the training component, as well as to the publication and the dissemination efforts within the project.
- b. Empowering the academic community to start a debate on opportunities and benefits of SCL, as well as on the best approaches make SCL a reality. This objective was tackled via extensive dissemination through ESU and EI's network of members and affiliates respectively.
- c. The use of existing successful SCL approaches and critical reflections for the purpose of a capacity building process for student and teacher representatives. This objective was tackled via the use of existing research and practitioner experience, and its inclusion at the basis of the research work of the project. There was one entire publication dedicated to secondary (desk) research of existing experiences and this also fed into the toolkit developed within the project.
- d. The use of online materials for easier dissemination and broader impact. This included the creation of a purpose-made website (www.t4scl.eu) and the use of downloadable versions of project publications.
- e. The use of project outcomes to feed into policy work at multiple levels, ranging from the national level (with ESU and EI members acting as the main agents for change) to the European level, including the dissemination of the project results within the Bologna process structures. Also, through fostering a proper and comprehensive understanding of SCL, the T4SCL project aimed at helping the policy makers to better address societal needs, while at the same time contributing to higher education institutions' work to adapt to the 21st century's need for skills and knowledge.
- f. The project aimed at giving a new dimension to the current European debate on life-long learning focusing on high-performance, innovation and a European dimension to the concept. Student centred learning, having as some of its core components flexibility, adaptability to a diverse student body, use of learning outcomes and recognition of prior learning, is highly conducive to educating better, more autonomous life-long learners from the beginning of higher education studies.

2. Project Approach

Considering the lack of pre-developed knowledge and resources available on student centred learning, one of the most important components of the project was the synthesis of existing research and reports on student centred learning practices in Europe. Another important aspect was gathering the views and inputs of ESU member unions and EI affiliates from across Europe.

The following approaches, including research methodologies and promotion and dissemination strategies, have been used for achieving project goals:

- a. **Surveys.** One of the first elements used within the project was a survey which was sent to ESU and EI members. The aim was to get a clearer picture of the attitudes of EI and ESU members towards student-centred learning, as well as an idea about the state of implementation of SCL related concepts at national and local level.

The survey was sent to all members of EI's Higher Education and Research Standing Committee (HERSC) and ESU's member unions in January 2010. The student and staff unions both received identical questionnaires, albeit with a few insignificant changes of wording (given the different terminologies used in both constituencies for different notions).

The answers to the survey were analysed in March and April 2010 by the research team of the T4SCL project. In total, these comprised 23 answers (20 countries) from 45 ESU members and 15 answers (13 countries) from 36 EI affiliates in Europe. In a number of instances, multiple answers were received from one country, if more than one union existed there. As the unions in these countries represent different parts of the higher education system, they are analysed as two separate answer categories. While the population of the countries where unions answered was not big enough ($N < 30$ for both surveys) to assume a normal distribution in the answers, the sample is geographically quite dispersed (North, West, East and South) to give a geographical relevance to the results.

The sample does give some indications about how higher education students and staff in Europe think about student centred learning. The conclusions drawn in this report should therefore be seen as indicative, rather than conclusive, and should be further correlated with the results of the desk research conducted within the project framework.

- b. **Secondary (desk) research.** The T4SCL project has been, both for ESU and for EI, the first major project specifically tackling the subject of learner-centred education. As such, it was very important to analyze current experiences and existing research, conducted by both theoreticians and practitioners, and reflecting the topic of SCL.

The desk research was designed as the first step in the research envisaged for this project in order to be able to set the backdrop to the topic of SCL, based on the premise that the various forms of SCL that exist are very diverse and good practice examples in the area are very heterogeneous. Based on an analysis of the literature found, this study breaks down the concept of, and approach to, SCL into four key components:

- i) A discussion of the definition of SCL;

- ii) An assessment of the conditions that need to be in place in order for an SCL approach to be implemented;
- iii) An examination of the professional development and training that is required for academic staff in order to implement an SCL approach to teaching and learning;
- iv) An analysis of student perceptions to, attitudes to and experiences of the learner-centred approach to education.

The results of the desk research fed into a publication called “An Insight into Theory and Practice”, which was the main research-based publication of the project and the basis for further work on the toolkit and on other activities. The publication and the main conclusions were also used for the materials of the training component of the project.

- c. Discussions and debates** were undertaken during workshops and events of the project, and most often involved participants from student and staff unions from across Europe. Numerous experts and practitioners in the field of SCL have been invited to the project events, during which they have given presentations on institutional contexts, implementation experiences and links between theory and practice in SCL.

The discussions and debates managed to bring forward views from different regions as well as from students and staff. For the stakeholders’ forum organized in Belgium, invitations were also sent out to other stakeholders, with representatives of institutions and mobile students also bringing their input at the event.

Most of the SCL-themed debates occurred during the main events conducted at a European level. There have been two such events organized, one to launch a debate after the release of the first two publications and the other to conclude the main activities of the project.

- i) **The Bucharest Launching Conference** included the release of the first two T4SCL research publications (the *T4SCL Survey Analysis* and *An insight into theory and practice*) and presentations, debates and workshops involving students and staff representatives from across the continent. The event set the stage for future activities within the project and fed into the development of the SCL Toolkit via direct input from participants.
- ii) The **Leuven T4SCL Forum** gathered student and staff representatives, as well as representatives of the institutional management and Erasmus students. The event also launched the SCL Toolkit developed by the project research team, and included debates on the potential follow-up to the T4SCL project.

- d. Training**, both primary (for trainers) and secondary (for further national dissemination) was used as a tool for the enhancement of grassroots level dissemination of project results and for the promotion of SCL as a practical concept for education. The initial training of trainers, organized in early July 2010 in Malta, was based on the results of the initial project research, while the second training, organized in September 2010 in Bratislava implied the use of the initial toolkit results and the co-organization of the event and information dissemination by the trainers prepared during the Malta ToT event.

- e. **Development of the SCL toolkit.** The prior research, the discussions and the debates of the launching conference that took place in Bucharest (May 2010) fed into the development of the *Student-Centred Learning: Toolkit for students, staff and higher education institutions*. This publication was one of the main tools for the maximization of project impact. The toolkit included a checklist, introduced at the recommendation of the project advisory board, which checked which provisions generally deemed as part of student-centred learning as a concept, *are present or can be introduced in university policies*. Also, the publication included elements on the management of change and on content necessities needed to succeed in enhancing educational approaches in a student-centred fashion. Furthermore, some of the concerns expressed by participants during the launching conference in Bucharest and some of the ones found as a result of the survey were also addressed in the toolkit content.

The points taken in were: an increased focus on the practical benefits of SCL, the tackling of the numerous misconceptions on SCL and the SCL concepts' implications to institutional governance and functionality. Also, the publication tried to define what a functional culture of student-centred learning would mean and imply for higher education institutions, in terms of teaching, research and attitudes within the academic community.

Lastly, the toolkit was also linked with the Bologna process and other relevant European political developments which are largely conducive to more flexible learning processes.

The complete structure of the publication included the following chapters:

- 1 Principles and Definition – *attempt at defining SCL as a concept*
- 2 The Benefits – *presentation of the main benefits of SCL*
- 3 An SCL Checklist – *the before-mentioned checklist aimed at assessing SCL implementation*
- 4 Changing the Mindset – *necessary steps in changing academics' perspectives on learning*
- 5 Implementation by Teachers – *role of teachers in fostering SCL*
- 6 Implementation by Institutions - *role of institutions in fostering SCL*
- 7 Maintaining a Culture of SCL – *defining how an SCL culture looks within institutions*
- 8 Common Misconceptions 9 SCL and the Bologna Process – *SCL misconceptions discussed*
- 9 Sources for further Reading – *a look at other sources for further reading*

The toolkit was formally launched during the Stakeholders Forum in Leuven, in October 2010. The toolkit has proved to be popular, with one student union already requesting a translation into Estonian, and with several requiring approval to print some more copies of the online-based versions.

- f. **National events.** Complementary to the development of a toolkit and the use of trainers for better dissemination of project messages, several national-level events were organized by local members of ESU and affiliates of EI. Such events took place in Finland, Latvia, France and Austria and included debates and workshops involving local stakeholders. As most events took place late in the project, the resources prepared for the toolkit were made available to the unions organizing the events and representatives of ESU who worked in the project travelled to three of the organized events to support and help local organizers.
- g. **Online dissemination.** This component included both the setting up of a permanent website (www.t4scl.eu) as well as dissemination via the use of available communication channels of the individual unions (mailing, regular updates, information feeds). In order to make the project publications more accessible, downloadable versions of the project publications were included on the official website.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

- a. The three main project publications have greatly enhanced the existing base for further work, dissemination and the attainment of the project's goals and outcomes. These three publications have been:
- i) **Student Centred Learning: An Insight Into Theory and Practice** – the main desk research report of the project, aimed at synthesizing pre-existing knowledge on the topic and ensuring a knowledge background for future work.
 - ii) **Survey Analysis Time For Student Centred Learning** - the main survey analysis publication, which centralized the results of a questionnaire on SCL sent to ESU members and EI affiliates.
 - iii) **Student Centred Learning: Toolkit for students, staff and higher education institutions** – the main project publication, meant to feed into follow-up and advocacy work at all levels.
- b. The project research component developed and improved the level of knowledge available on SCL for the use of the beneficiaries. The research looked into the benefits, prerequisites, conditions and practices that are needed in order to have functional student centred learning at the institutional level. The project has highlighted links between SCL and other aspects of education (such as life-long learning, qualification frameworks, ECTS, social dimension of education).
- c. The project has greatly contributed to an improved understanding of SCL, primarily among ESU and EI members and affiliates, but is set to extend benefits among other stakeholders in the European Higher Education Area, especially with the further dissemination of project publications and outcomes.

The training component provided knowledge to the future experts who could be readily available to national-level stakeholders for national-level centred projects and activities.

Lastly, the national events, which took place in languages other than English (French, German, Finnish and Latvian) meant that dissemination was not limited to European-level active student and staff representatives and stakeholders, but also trickled down to the grassroots level as much as possible. The national events themselves were oriented at gathering national-level stakeholders and including them in the debate on the implementation of more learner-centred forms of teaching and learning within institutions. In the French national event, for example, the invitees included the president of the national rectors' conference. This helped establishing communication with the authorities gathering institutional level leaderships.

- d. The development of the SCL Toolkit has been a major achievement of the project. First of all, it has created the premises for the empowerment of the members of the academic community willing to contribute to changes in educational models within their home institutions by coming up with examples of potential benefits (arguments for change), models (objectives for change) and strategies (means for change). Secondly, the toolkit has attempted to define SCL as less of a theoretical approach and more as a practical agenda for institutional change and reform.

- e. The creation of a large array of readily accessible resources for SCL development, including the use of electronic dissemination portals (www.t4scl.eu) has facilitated access to topical information in a centralized and systematic fashion. This has democratized access to the research results of the project beyond participants at T4SCL trainings and conferences.
- f. The dissemination of the project outcomes via a multitude of channels has been used to further disseminate the project message. ESU and EI are both recognized European stakeholders on educational issues, and the content and research output of the project has been used to feed into presentations and communication with externals, thus further strengthening the message sent by the project. In the long run, one of the objectives is to get more stakeholders to quote the project outcomes, given the lack of extensive research or capacity development initiatives currently existing on SCL.

Due to the workload and the requirements of the long distance communication between the partners, some of the objectives of the project have been delayed.

The research component, which was considered for subcontracting, at the end, was conducted by a joint ESU/EI research team. This has implied significantly higher workload for ESU and EI, although it was dealt with efficiently, despite some minor delays as compared to the initial research plan timeline.

The timing of the project (with the summer season being in the middle of the project timeline) has also presented some problems in the liaison with stakeholders and potential event participants, as for the duration of the summer, student and staff unions, as well as higher education establishments as a whole, have a period of reduced activity. This has, for example, impacted the number of attendees for the training of national experts held in Bratislava in September 2010, with the call being sent over the summer.

Overall, the project has attained the majority of its goals. Feedback received from the beneficiaries and participants to T4SCL events has been overwhelmingly positive and the reaction to the publication and the research results has also been overall good. The main hope is that the project outcomes will continue to be used as resources in the further development of SCL policy at local and institutional level.

4. Partnerships, their role in the project

The partnership that was at the core of the T4SCL project was that between ESU and Education International. Student-centred learning is based on the involvement of both students and teaching staff in a comprehensive and honest partnership. As such, any initiative on the furthering of a pro-SCL agenda did not make any sense without the involvement of these two important stakeholders.

Another added value of this partnership is that both organizations have had a tradition on focusing on an agenda aimed at improving the quality and value of education for the learners and for society as a whole.

The choice for EI as the main project partner was also strategic. EI aims at promoting peace, social justice, democracy, and equality through the development of education and the collective strength of teachers and education employees, improving work and employment conditions of teachers and building solidarity and mutual cooperation among member organisations. As the largest general union of teachers and education workers, EI supports members by organising conferences, seminars and trainings, and providing information, thus it has significant experience in some of the event formats that have existed in the T4SCL project.

The partnership was reflected in all aspects of work. For example, the research team included an equal number of persons delegated by EI and ESU and EI contributed to the organization and preparation of each individual event, from helping with practicalities with drafting or offering feedback for event contents and preparatory materials.

Complementary to this partnership, ESU and EI benefited from the support of some local unions that helped further the goals of the project. These included ANOSR Romania – who supported the organization of the Launching Conference in Bucharest, KSU Malta – who backed the organization of the training of trainers held in Saint Julians of Malta, SRVS Slovakia – who backed the organization of the training of national experts in Bratislava and VVS Belgium – who supported practicalities for the Stakeholders Forum held in Leuven.

This cooperation was further followed-up by the work done together with unions from France (FAGE), Latvia (LSA and LIZDA), Finland (SYL and SAMOK) and Austria (OH) for the national events on SCL. All of these cooperative activities have helped project dissemination and have contributed to the more direct involvement of national-level actors into the project framework.

5. Plans for the Future

The T4SCL project had a very large component dedicated primarily to the development of resources that are usable in the long-run. These include trainers and experts who were trained during the training component of the project, as well as online and printed resources with research-based information, tips and models for SCL development.

The trainers and experts who took part in the Malta training of trainers and the Bratislava training are for the most part members of national unions of students and staff/education workers. They remain a valuable human resource for their home unions in the dissemination process but also for those unions that want to work on spin-off projects on the topic. Several unions have included SCL in their plans of work for 2011 and 2012, and one (Estonia) has already requested translation rights for project materials.

One important element that is needed in order to guarantee long-term impact for the project is the availability of content resources and research outcomes to the general public. This will be largely guaranteed by the maintenance of online resources (such as the SCL Toolkit) in an accessible format to the wider public. The dedicated website will be complemented by the new ESU website, which will include the project publications in an easily accessible format as of March 2011 as will the EI website.

One other aspect of future dissemination is made up by the use of project outcomes to feed into policy development and input offered on SCL by the project partners. Already, after the official end of the project, ESU representatives have presented the results of the project and some of the content conclusions in a series of educational conferences, fora and events and have used the results of the T4SCL project in their presentations. The general report of the project will be disseminated to ESU and EI partners as well as among general stakeholders in education.

For future follow-up, ESU plans to include SCL as a topic for the general questionnaire that is to be sent to its member unions for its traditional Bologna stocktaking exercise (*Bologna with student eyes*) that is going to take place in late 2011. Such stocktaking reports have been prepared before ministerial conferences in 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2010, but only the one in 2010 has included any provisions on SCL. The questionnaire that is going to be sent will mirror the survey used for the T4SCL project in January 2010, in order to try to gauge the level of progress in fostering SCL at national and local level.

6. Potential contribution to European policies

- a. The T4SCL project has succeeded to contribute to various elements that are linked to EU policies. The project has come up with a significant contribution to the development of quality lifelong learning procedures and to the promotion of a European dimension to lifelong learning via the identification of links between student centred learning and educational elements that feed into the provision of lifelong learning (flexible curricular paths, use of learning outcomes, adaptation of teaching and learning to a diversified body of learners, etc.)

Project research identified student centred learning as a crucial element in the success of lifelong learning strategies, by allowing the learner to have a flexible and personalised learning and professional path. The project aimed at the increase of the understanding of student centred learning tools and elements among policy makers and student and staff representatives at both the national and European level. This was tackled by opening the debate that occurred during the project through sharing good practice and research. The publications deal with the topic of life-long learning and flexibility to a great degree and elements on SCL will be included in LLL topical presentations by the representatives of ESU engaged in external representation.

- b. The facilitation of the development of innovative practices in education and training at tertiary level, and their transfer, including amongst participating countries has been one of the major achievements of the project. This has been heavily linked with the research component of the project, and the dissemination components.

The project's desk research and survey aimed at identifying the relevant research on student centred learning (eg. learning outcomes, innovative pedagogical methods, modularisation etc.) and centralized some of the previously existing conclusions of theoreticians and practitioners. The conference in Bucharest has facilitated the debate among an array of stakeholders on the topic, and this has been followed-up by the launch and dissemination of the toolkit, which has also served the purpose of knowledge development and transmission, with a particular focus on change in educational strategies.

- c. The project aimed at facilitating the European-level exchange of good practices in educational policies, including lifelong learning, Bologna process implementation and institutional governance. The exchange of good practice was facilitated mainly via the two major events that had an emphasis on debate and discussion – the Bucharest Conference in May 2010 and the Leuven Stakeholders Forum in October 2010.

Also, for the duration of the trainings included in the project framework, there has been an emphasis on participants learning from each other and the shared construction of knowledge in order to have the participants benefit from a shared European perspective on pedagogical developments.

- d. The project aimed at further enhancing the European Higher Education Area via the creation of more common standards in teaching and learning. Often, the differences in pedagogical approaches and teaching/learning techniques have been the major hindrances to the adaptability of the area to an increasingly mobile and demanding learner.
- e. The project has managed to support the development of innovative ICT-based content, services and pedagogies via the extensive use of online dissemination. While most articles written on SCL development are either accessible only through online libraries of higher education institutions, the publications of the T4SCL project

are freely accessible to the public domain, and translations or use of the publications at local level is encouraged.

Reports of the project events have also been made available online, thus also contributing to improved transparency of the project and complementing the ICT-based content by also making event conclusions public.

- f. The project has been to a large degree complementary to the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme. This is largely because the project has contributed to the creation of tools that enable a fuller implementation of national lifelong learning strategies, as a primary long and short term objective of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme. The project knowledge building and dissemination activities helped improve student representatives', stakeholders' and policy makers' awareness regarding the action needed for establishing flexible learning paths, validation of non-formal education, and use of adaptability-conducive learning outcomes.