Introduction

As demand on higher education grows and student bodies become more diverse, universities seek approaches that will meet new learning needs and ensure the quality of student learning experiences (Hénard & Roseveare 2012; Haywood et al. 2015; Sursock 2015). The conditions universities work in are further challenged by the increased digitalization of societies, globalization, migration flows, increased expectations for higher education to contribute to the skills needed on the labor market, and students' civic and critical competences. In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), these trends are taking place following a decade of negative demographic flows and financial and economic crisis, which have affected many higher education systems’ budgets and autonomy. The economic situation and the increase of youth unemployment have also prompted national authorities as well as the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to call for enhancing the employability of graduates and respond to the economic and social challenges (Sursock 2015). In addition, the age of post-factual politics and a worldwide rise in populist movements have demanded from higher education to play a stronger civic role and enable students to value the role of science and knowledge production, e.g., by exercising critical thinking.

Against this background, the higher education sector and policy makers have continuously grown in the awareness to improve how students are being taught and how they learn. Learning and teaching has gained importance in universities’ agendas, including the most research-intensive ones. While, under the Bologna Process, the Ministers of Higher Education of the EHEA first focused on student-centered learning (SCL) from the angle of curricular reforms, the attention has now shifted toward greater care for the learning and teaching processes themselves. Today, European universities consider the variety of their own approaches to SCL. The chapter explores how universities in Europe seek to embrace SCL in their education provision and argues that context-sensitive and encompassing institutional approaches to SCL are needed to implement it.

First, the chapter introduces the policy work on SCL in the EHEA, based on a review of policy documents and various studies conducted by stakeholder organizations in higher education. It has been a characteristic of the EHEA since start to involve organizations representing the higher education sector: the European University Association (EUA)² and the European
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Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) representing higher education institutions (HEIs); the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), representing quality assurance agencies; and the European Students’ Union (ESU), representing students. These organizations’ experience with both SCL in a policy context and in grassroots (i.e., institutional contexts) makes their contributions on SCL particularly relevant for the purpose of this chapter. Since the concept of SCL started gaining in importance over a decade ago, definitions of SCL have evolved around core characteristics, such as a learning outcomes approach and subsequent curricular reforms. SCL has also been consistently viewed as a means to enable higher education to address societal challenges, such as better grasping competences that are needed for students’ future professional and civic lives. Studies that explored the implementation of SCL at European universities also emphasized the importance of a multifaceted approach when promoting SCL – with consideration to the specificities of the discipline, study programs, and profile and mission of each institution.

The second part of the chapter identifies conditions in place for fostering the implementation of SCL at European HEIs. This part is built upon EUA’s Trends 2018 survey results, which collected responses from 303 European HEIs on their learning and teaching (L&T) policies and practices. EUA, the largest and most extensive association of European universities and the representative organization of national rectors’ conferences, has been publishing the Trends reports since 1999, with the view to contribute to the knowledge base on the developments of European higher education reforms and to feed an institutional perspective into European higher education policy discussions. Next to the Trends 2018 survey results, this part of the chapter builds on the association’s work with its member universities on learning and teaching since 2015, with the aim to engage with relevant university communities and networks, and consolidate a European dimension on the topic.

Finally, the last part of the chapter summarizes the lessons learned from EUA’s work with its member universities, where findings from EUA’s Trends 2018 survey and other activities explore ways to support institutions in the development of strategic approaches to learning and teaching.

European policies for student-centered learning

Policy developments in the European higher education area

In the past decade, SCL came into the policy arena as a way to enhance higher education and to respond to its societal demands. European policy documents have progressively promoted definitions of SCL, and how it is – or could be – implemented in HEIs. The concept of student-centered learning or student-centered education has an almost century-long history in education sciences: there is no doubt that it has already blossomed in research and in practices at HEIs. However, when the concept was first introduced in a modern European higher education policy context and mentioned in policy documents, there was no comprehensive or consensual definition of SCL. Over time, different features were added or were granted a new focus. Therefore, exploring how the most relevant European policy documents describe SCL over time also provides an overview on how priorities have shifted in the past ten years.

The concept of SCL was first introduced in the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process policy context in 2007. The London Communiqué from the European Ministers of Higher Education stated that “a significant outcome of the [Bologna] process will be a move towards student-centered education and away from teacher driven provision” (EHEA 2007, p. 2). The communiqué associated SCL with learning outcomes, together with national
qualifications frameworks, credits, lifelong learning, and the recognition of prior learning (EHEA 2007, point 3.7, p. 7). EUA’s Trends V report, which contributed to this ministerial meeting and communiqué, emphasized the use of a learning outcomes-based approach in teaching – thus laying the grounds for a student-centered concept in higher education learning and teaching (Crosier et al. 2007). However, using learning outcomes as the basic building blocks for reforming higher education dates back prior to 2007. For example, learning outcomes had already been used to describe qualifications (EHEA 2003, 2005) and as “a basis of the generic ‘Dublin descriptors’ for the three European Higher Education Area (EHEA) cycles” (Adam 2008, p. 4).

Since 2007, the definitions and approaches to SCL have vastly developed and have continued to include learning outcomes as one of its vital elements. The following ministerial communiqués reiterated the connection between SCL, learning outcomes, and curricular reforms. In addition, several communiqués referred to the role of SCL in developing competences that are needed in a changing labor market and in forming students as active and responsible citizens (EHEA 2009). The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) reaffirmed the importance of the teaching mission of HEIs and set a vision of how to address SCL: it would require curricular reforms geared toward the development of learning outcomes, but also empowering individual learners, curricula focused more clearly on the learner in all cycles, as well as effective support and guidance structures (EHEA 2009). As from 2009, another aspect was introduced: SCL should provide solutions for flexible, individually tailored learning paths (EHEA 2009, 2010, 2015). Most recently, the 2018 Paris Communiqué referred to SCL in the context of enabling flexible learning paths that can foster social mobility and lifelong learning (EHEA 2018), thus reiterating the value of SCL in a wider higher education policy context.

At the European Union level, in 2017 the European Commission (EC) issued its Communication on a Renewed Agenda for Higher Education, stating its vision and priorities in supporting European cooperation in the higher education sector for the upcoming years. Without using the term “student-centered learning,” the EC emphasized the importance of “well-designed higher education programs and curricula, centered on students’ learning needs,” targeting effective skills development (EC 2017, p. 5). Higher education should allow students to acquire skills and experiences “through activities based around real-world problems,” such as work-based learning. Technology may also offer new ways to structure the organization of learning and teaching and increase the flexibility of learning paths and teacher-student interaction. The use of open educational resources (OER), digitally enabled open science, and learning analytics holds an underexploited potential in this regard. The EC additionally saw teachers’ training and systematic investment in continuous professional development as important factors in developing the aforementioned study programs. Last, but not least, the agenda noted that national and institutional strategies to improve career opportunities and reward good teachers are still far from standard (ibid.). On this point, the conclusions of the agenda share the concerns noted in the Paris Communiqué, where the EHEA Ministers committed to promote and support initiatives for pedagogical training and continuous professional development and to explore ways to better recognize high-quality and innovative teaching in career paths (EHEA 2018).

This policy context shows that while structural reforms received a continuous and substantial emphasis in the Bologna Process, there is still a need to pay more attention to the process of learning and teaching itself. Addressing SCL takes place in a context where policy attention has shifted from structural reforms to include the enhancement of learning and teaching as well as L&T practices at institutions and in the classrooms.
Definitions and concept mapping by European stakeholder associations

Parallel to discussions in the European policy fora, several European studies have proposed definitions of SCL, thus contributing to understanding better the concept for the higher education sector. EUA defined SCL as referring to pedagogies focused on the learner, where the learning process is not only, or not primarily, about transfer of knowledge, but about a deeper understanding and critical thinking. In this approach, teachers are viewed as facilitators who share the responsibility for learning with their students and focus on their learning autonomy, encouraging them to construct their own meaning through proactive independent learning, discovery and reflection (Sursock 2015; Sursock & Smidt 2010; Gaebel & Zhang 2018). The Trends 2010 report also identified common characteristics for a student-centered approach:

- Learners seen as individuals – taking account of their particular backgrounds, experiences, perceptual frameworks, learning style and needs;
- Often an emphasis on interdisciplinarity;
- Involvement of learners in determining what is learned;
- Formative assessment and continuous feedback;
- Blended teaching models;
- Recognition of prior learning, thus benefiting both traditional and non-traditional learners and providing the flexibility to learn throughout life.

(ibid.)

Furthermore, Trends 2015 connected SCL with interdisciplinarity and ICT-supported and research-led teaching (Sursock 2015, p. 96).

In its position paper published in 2017, EUA underlines the importance of learning and teaching as a core mission and responsibility of universities. In the paper, SCL forms an integral and implicitly evident part of higher education learning and teaching. The first key message is that “universities should ensure that their L&T activities are geared towards student learning and success” (EUA 2018a, p. 1). Student learning needs and success are pinpointed as core to the universities’ educational mission. Such focus on student learning is strongly tied to the development, assessment and achievement of learning outcomes. The EUA position paper also grants an important role to staff development and better recognition of teaching. Indeed, student-centered learning and teaching embrace a variety of methods and approaches, and the engagement and competence of academic staff is crucial in this context. Measures aiming to foster innovation in learning and teaching, and incorporating it into the academic work, are required for such engagement. In calling for these measures, and the synergies between them, EUA emphasized the currently most cited pitfall in learning and teaching: presently, not all higher education systems grant sufficient attention to the value of the education mission. Its lack of prominence to date in political and institutional contexts correlates with the lack of recognition for teaching in academic staff careers.

In addition to the position paper, in 2017 EUA and an international consortium of partners gathered under the EFFECT project launched the ten European Principles for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (see Table 34.1) to inspire and facilitate the development and enhancement of institutional strategies on the topic, and to exchange and cooperate between universities and between national and European initiatives on learning and teaching. The principles underpin the need to re-emphasize the education mission of the university, and aim to serve institutional leaders working with staff, students and external stakeholders. The second Principle states that “learning and teaching is learner-centered.” Universities are expected to
provide learning opportunities that are tailored to the needs and capabilities of the diverse learners. SCL should nurture a culture and an environment in which reciprocal learning between students and teachers can take place. The active role of students as co-creators in all aspects of the learning experience is underlined. Students are expected to share the responsibility for their own learning in partnership with the staff of the institution. The principles also underline that learning and teaching is a collaborative and collegial process across the university and with the wider community.

The European Students’ Union (ESU) and Education International (EI) have defined SCL as both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution, and a learning approach that broadly relates to, and is supported by, constructivist theories of learning (Gaebel & Zhang 2018). This approach can be characterized by innovative methods of teaching, aiming to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners, and taking students seriously as active participants in their own learning (ESU & EI 2010). Most importantly, SCL should not be viewed as limited to a certain methodology; as pointed out by ESU, it is rather about a cultural shift in the institution (Todorovski et al. 2015, p. 4).

One challenge related to the implementation of SCL is how to ensure that a flexible, multifaceted approach to learning offers high-quality learning and ultimately could be quality assured. Since 2015, standard 1.3 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area states that “institutions should ensure that the programs are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach” (ESG 2015, p. 12).

Institutions and quality assurance (QA) agencies thus worked on their QA provision to align it with the ESG. However, research shows that, across institutions and countries, there is still a lack of formalized definition or common approach to defining SCL (Gover & Loukkola 2018, pp. 24). Likewise, there is no common understanding of what features or indicators would demonstrate the presence of SCL at institutions, even when institutions do implement SCL, and
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internal policies are explicit on the need for SCL. These findings confirm that SCL is a complex, multifaceted concept, which requires internal and external stakeholders to engage into developing a common understanding of how institutions could feature it, and how this would translate into their education provision (ibid.).

**Beyond Definitions: A Complex and Multifaceted Implementation in the EHEA Countries**

As demonstrated, over the past decade SCL moved from being associated with a learning outcomes-based curriculum to including other aspects of learning and teaching. This can be noticed when examining the Bologna Process stocktaking, or implementation, reports that have been issued since 2007. The stocktaking exercises, based on national reports or collection of national data, cover periods leading up to the next ministerial conference and aim to provide an overview of implementation of the Bologna reforms in the EHEA countries.

In the *Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2007*, SCL received only two mentions, for Slovenia (committing to “promoting student-centered learning,” see Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2007, p. 75), and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, now North Macedonia (“working towards student-centered learning,” ibid., p. 77). This does not necessarily mean that the approach was not of interest to other countries of the Bologna Process, but it may have meant that examining its implementation beyond structural reforms may have proven to be difficult at the time. The finding is not surprising, considering that SCL was brought up in a Bologna Ministerial Communiqué only that same year.

Two years later, the next Bologna Process Stocktaking Report provides a different picture. The report explicitly mentions that, in 2007, the ministers recommended that the next stocktaking should address several themes in an integrated way so as to develop more active learning approaches (Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009, p. 21). The themes in question were the establishment of the national qualifications frameworks, linking programs and credits with learning outcomes, a paradigm shift toward SCL, lifelong learning, and the recognition of prior learning. In the country reports, Austria, Cyprus and Switzerland explicitly referred to working toward SCL.

The *2012 Bologna Process Implementation Report* still mostly related a student-centered approach to the implementation of learning outcomes. SCL, together with qualifications frameworks, internal quality assurance and other important Bologna action lines, are all described as being dependent “on successful implementation of learning outcomes” (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice 2012, p. 50). Learning outcomes and assessment based on learning outcomes are found to be the most important elements in SCL in the EHEA countries, followed by student evaluation of teaching, student-staff ratio, independent learning, recognition of prior learning, training in teaching for staff and learning in small groups (which received the lowest mark of 3.3/5). The report noted that

> genuine student-centered learning is a complex matter that is difficult to integrate into everyday higher education reality. It should comprise actions that ensure that students learn how to think critically, participate in all kinds of academic life, and are given more independence and responsibility.

(*ibid.*, fig. 2.19, p. 52)

By 2015, the steering of SCL and the use of learning outcomes in curriculum development had substantially grown across the EHEA. The Bologna Process Implementation Report of that
year noted that, in countries struggling with the paradigm shift to SCL, the most critical problems remained a lack of recognition on the value of student evaluation of teaching, independent learning, and the use of learning outcomes (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice 2015, p. 18). The report also noted that, to achieve a student-centered approach based on learning outcomes, the attainment of learning outcomes and of the ECTS credits associated with them need to be assessed in a consistent and transparent way (ibid., pp. 71, 76).

The most recent Bologna Process Implementation Report, published in May 2018, investigated SCL through four distinct areas: credits and learning outcomes, modes and forms of study, learning in the digital environment, and teaching (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice 2018). The report noted that significant progress had taken place in adopting learning outcomes across Europe. Most of the HEIs in the EHEA reportedly ensure flexibility in studies through part-time or alternative study paths. The report also underlined, once again, the importance of developing new ways of student assessment that go hand in hand with the learning outcomes approach, thus reinforcing student-centeredness in learning and teaching. In line with the Yerevan Communiqué of 2015, the report also recalled that ministers would support and encourage HEIs and staff in promoting “pedagogical innovation in student-centered learning environments” (ibid., p. 83; EHEA 2015, p. 2). However, it remains difficult to grasp how institutions address innovation in pedagogy or, more generally, work on higher education pedagogies with the perspective of achieving SCL.

The analysis of Bologna Communiqués and Implementation Reports confirms that the concept of SCL was first introduced in the EHEA policy context as a paradigm shift that goes hand in hand with adopting a learning outcomes approach. Since 2015, as learning and teaching practices, and more specifically innovation in learning and teaching, started to receive a renewed interest, the concept of SCL progressively shifted toward including considerations regarding pedagogy and learning and teaching practices – namely, considerations regarding active learning.

While SCL and active learning may sound interchangeable in the EHEA policy context at least, they should be differentiated. SCL is not a pedagogy or a range of pedagogies per se. It designates an approach, a philosophy, or a vision of education, which, in the Bologna Process, first concentrated on structural reforms (implementation of learning outcomes, ECTS, and curricular reforms). Moreover, it encompasses different aspects and conditions related to learning and teaching, including learning and teaching processes themselves, and active learning pedagogies as part of these processes. On the other hand, active learning primarily refers to an ensemble of pedagogical approaches that activate students at the center of learning processes.

The Trends 2015 report concluded that the efforts to promote SCL take different shapes, depending upon the discipline, the type of program, its level and learning outcomes, and, very importantly, the profile and mission of the institution in question (Sursock 2015). ESU and EI also underlined that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for SCL (ESU & EI 2010, p. 3). Therefore, to bring a paradigm-shift approach such as SCL to life, institutions need to agree on an operational definition of SCL within their own institutional environment (Gover & Loukola 2018).

### Student-centered learning at higher education institutions

Policy documents from the EHEA set SCL as a significant characteristic of European higher education, grounded in learning outcomes-based curricula. However, the distribution of roles...
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among stakeholders (institutional leadership, students, staff, faculties) in fulfilling the purpose of SCL may appear fragmented and blurred due to the multiple functions that SCL is expected to fulfill and the number of actors involved – thus adding to the challenge HEIs have in implementing SCL.

EUA’s work with universities has shown the need for an institutional approach to the implementation of SCL. The importance of embedding SCL into institutional strategies, procedures and frameworks has been also identified by students (see Todorovski et al. 2015). This certainly does not mean that a single approach should prevail in classrooms. On the contrary, universities that acknowledge the variety of learning and teaching practices in their institutions and manage to build on them to offer a clear vision of their institutions’ common goals and strategy will ultimately make the most out of SCL.

Findings from the Trends studies and the work with thematic peer groups demonstrate that SCL appears as a cross-cutting topic, which is still difficult for institutions to grasp (Sursock 2015; Loukkola & Dakovic 2017; Gaebel & Zhang 2018). SCL encompasses several challenges that the institution faces (Loukkola & Dakovic 2017). For instance, adopting and implementing research-based learning, which promotes students’ active learning through inquiry and research, contribute to foster the nexus between research and teaching at institutions. Student-centered, practice-based and flexible teaching approaches also encourage active and personalized learning suitable for diverse student bodies. In this context, the question arises about how to grasp the most out of SCL, i.e., how to develop the modes of delivery related to more structural attempts to enhance education through curriculum design and development, and the learning outcomes approach. EUA’s work with its membership identified several conditions that are relevant for consolidating an institutional setting to support active learning:

1. Institutional strategies, policies and procedures;
2. Curriculum design and implementation, and assessment of learning outcomes;
3. The status of teaching in higher education;
4. Role(s) of technologies and learning environment;
5. Empowerment of learners and teachers.

These conditions have been addressed by European universities to different extents and could be built upon to further develop SCL.

Institutional strategies, policies and procedures

Trends 2018 shows a clear convergence among European HEIs that are placing more emphasis on learning and teaching than in the past (Sursock 2015; Gaebel & Zhang 2018). Eighty-six percent of the institutions that were surveyed under Trends 2018 have an institutional strategy or policy for learning and teaching, mostly at central level (46%), or at both central and faculty level (38%) (see Figure 34.1, Gaebel & Zhang 2018).

The top three elements included in these strategies and policies are academic staff development (86% of respondents who have a strategy/policy), providing international opportunities (87%), and general measures to improve teaching (84%) (see Figure 34.2). These findings confirm that universities are adopting a strategic approach to enhancing learning.

HEIs have also developed structures to support the development of learning and teaching. According to Trends 2018, 65% of responding institutions have a dedicated unit or center for the development of learning and teaching for the entire institution, and 19% have such a unit or
Figure 34.1  Does your institution have a learning and teaching strategy or policy?

Table 34.2 What is the [unit for higher education teaching development]'s role and function? (Question 12.1, N = 254, Gaebel and Zhang 2018.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role and function of the unit/center for teaching development</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offering academic staff development courses and material</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing consultations and advice to academic staff on improving teaching</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting innovative teaching initiatives (through advice, financial incentives, logistical</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing student feedback/performance and/or results of teachers’ evaluations</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting research in higher education pedagogy and didactics</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing teaching awards/prizes</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing and/or implementing personalized staff development plans</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

center at both the institutional and faculty or departmental level (Gaebel & Zhang 2018). Such structures can offer valuable support to teachers to innovate in teaching: this is the case for 54% of institutions with such structures (see Table 34.2). The findings point to the rising importance of teaching enhancement, and to the role that institutions play in supporting learning and teaching in a systematic, structured way. This constitutes a solid ground that would contribute to encourage the implementation of student-centered approaches, should the institution clearly point in that direction when describing its vision of education provision offered, and consequently adopt operational plans.

**Curriculum design and implementation, assessment of learning outcomes**

There is already considerable literature dedicated to the role and importance of learning outcomes and curriculum for SCL – including studies on how a learning outcomes-based approach is being progressively implemented at European HEIs (Bologna Stocktaking Reports and Implementation Reports, 2007–2018). SCL in higher education builds on the alignment of learning outcomes with pedagogy when developing a study program. According to the constructivist perspective of learning, the curriculum design and implementation serve to ensure that the learning outcomes are formulated, carried out, and assessed so as to support the learner in constructing, owning and applying the knowledge (see for instance Biggs s.d.; Biggs & Tang 2011). Students' roles in the design of the learning process becomes vital through active involvement in curriculum design and development. EUA’s work emphasizes that the clearly defined learning outcomes form a basis for an effective implementation of a curriculum through SCL methods (EUA 2018b; Gaebel & Zhang 2018). Active learning methods are particularly relevant in this regard, as they enable the development of learners as active and responsible citizens, critical thinkers, and problem solvers, equipped for lifelong learning (EUA 2017, p. 1, Principle 1).

**The status of teaching in higher education**

A recent EUA report noted that the higher education sector “clearly emphasizes the value of research over teaching . . . [with] many incentives for staff to engage in research (research
sabbatical, research funding, impact of research on career prospects), [while] this is not the case for teaching” (Loukkola & Dakovic 2017, p. 5). In such a context as this, teachers would tend not to value investing in improving their teaching, which consequently undermines the development of SCL.

The university experience shows that acknowledging “the impact of student-centered learning on the role of teachers and supporting staff in moving away from the classical role of the teacher as a ‘transmitter of knowledge’ toward focusing on student outcomes and active learning, in a holistic approach to supporting student development” is a crucial step in addressing this imparity of esteem (Loukkola & Dakovic 2017, p. 6). Such approaches also have the potential to renew the indispensable interconnection between education and research. In research-based learning, for instance, students stand at the center of knowledge production, at the same time as learning becomes a shared effort between the teacher and the student.

Several initiatives, at the institutional or national level, recognize and value the status of teaching. They range from institutional support for teachers to manage their workload more efficiently, to the development of national-level incentives that recognize efforts in teaching (for instance, as part of career progression in academia) (ibid.). Any such initiative takes place in a context of established academic and organizational cultures. To be successful, HEIs should consider the value of research in teaching, where learning and teaching enhancement measures would be “based on sound knowledge on student learning patterns and how effective learning can be promoted. For this to happen, research on these matters and, importantly, dissemination and use of the research results, must be encouraged” (EUA 2018a, p. 2).

Role(s) of technologies and learning environment

EUA’s work with university communities also pinpoints the design and adaptation of teaching places and learning spaces, and the role of technologies, as conditions for consolidating the institutional setting to address SCL. Digital learning has been a much-discussed topic in higher education policies, especially since the rise of massive online open courses (MOOCs) when, by 2012, it had captured the attention of European HEIs (Gaebel 2013, 2014). While the enthusiasm for MOOCs has subdued since then, digitalization in higher education learning and teaching still stands high on agendas at the European, national, and institutional levels. In 2015, the EHEA ministers called to encourage and support HEIs and staff to fully exploit the potential benefits of digital technologies for learning and teaching (EHEA 2015, p. 2).

Almost three-quarters of Trends 2018 respondents agreed fully, or to some extent, that the possibilities offered by e-learning have boosted their education provision. Importantly for SCL, digital learning is used for innovating learning and teaching, and increasingly in regular teaching, by respectively 93% and 87% of all respondents (see Figure 34.3 – aggregated positive answers). The findings of Trends 2018 show that institutions already see digital learning as a useful, strategic area for enhancing learning and teaching, while not granting a full plebiscite for online learning programs per se. Against this background, developing purposeful, context-sensitive learning and teaching approaches and curricula, which embed digital technologies, would make a more significant contribution toward improving the education offer (Gaebel & Zhang 2018).

Changing learning and teaching practices to make them more student-centered also requires adapting physical spaces. In the Trends 2018 data, apart from libraries and computer labs, less than 40% of institutions have implemented learning resource facilities and collaborative spaces for the entire institution (see Figure 34.4). Given the diversity of institutional contexts and situations, it is not easy to draw general conclusions on the consequences of physical spaces for learning and teaching. The fact that 64% of Trends 2018 respondents stated to have “rooms where
### Figure 34.3 What are the main trends at your institution regarding digital learning in the last three years?

**Source**: Question 25, N = 293, Gaebel and Zhang (2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trend</th>
<th>Yes, it is the case</th>
<th>Yes, to some extent</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Information unavailable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General acceptance of digital learning has improved</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital learning becoming part of the institutional strategy</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More strategic use of digital learning</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used for innovating learning and teaching</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased use in regular teaching (e.g. through blended learning)</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures are available on video/podcast</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More online learning – for non-degree purposes</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More online learning degree programs</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 34.4 Are the physical spaces at your institution well adapted to new forms of learning and teaching?

**Source**: Question 26, N = 292, Gaebel and Zhang (2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Yes, for the whole institution</th>
<th>Yes, to some extent for some parts of the institution</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Information unavailable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer labs</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science labs</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaces for student-student interaction and collaboration</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning resource centers</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rooms where chairs and tables can be moved – depending on the teaching approach</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaces for staff-staff interaction and collaboration</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaces for increased student-staff interaction</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
chairs and tables can be moved” only partly available, could mean that teaching predominantly takes place in theater-style rooms. But it could also mean that institutions continue to have few lecture halls, or simply that there are diverse attitudes and approaches in different parts of the institution. These findings tend to confirm that the dynamism and initiatives for innovating learning and teaching approaches appear to lie with sub-institutional entities (Sursock 2015), which may have the flexibility or autonomy needed to adapt and even shape the learning environment according to teaching innovation and methods used in the classrooms.

**Empowerment of learners and teachers**

Empowering students to take responsibility for their learning first requires institutions’ acknowledgment of students’ ownership in knowledge acquisition. Students who engage in the learning process from the very beginning are able to include their own understanding and expectations on learning into the curriculum, as well as discuss the learning outcomes and co-create the overall study program (EUA 2018c). Such an approach enables students to actively shape their own learning paths and generates trust toward SCL methods. When discussing the issue in a thematic peer group, based on existing practices in the respective institutions, EUA’s member universities also identified other attributes that are relevant for empowering students with active learning once the learning outcomes and the curriculum have been set (ibid.). Smaller learning groups tend to enable better communication among learners and teachers, leaving sufficient opportunities for teachers (i.e., academic mentors) to regularly discuss, guide and evaluate students’ learning progress. An encouraging and rewarding attitude in teaching, as well as a positive learning atmosphere have generally been identified as highly influential in stimulating students’ engagement in active learning. Moreover, learners were found to engage better in active learning

![Figure 34.5](https://example.com/figure345.png)

**Figure 34.5** Which of the following approaches has your institution found useful for enhancing student learning?

*Source: Question 24, N = 290, Gaebel and Zhang (2018).*
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Each teacher can decide for his/her courses 77%
It is decided at the level of the faculty/department 43%
The institution has set up guidelines or policies on teaching methods for teachers 36%
Authorities specify some methods in some disciplines or programs 14%
Authorities generally specify all or most methods 1%
Other 5%

Figure 34.6 At your institution, who decides which teaching methods are to be used?

methods if the purpose of using those methods has been clearly presented and explained to the students. Finally, universities highlighted the importance of carefully balancing students’ workloads by regularly monitoring the learner’s engagement in active learning methods.

The responding institutions in the Trends 2018 report show that in many cases methods that are promoted as active learning are being explored and are found useful for enhancing student learning. As Figure 34.5 shows, teaching in small groups, problem-based learning, peer learning, community projects and flipped classrooms were all found useful by at least half of the respondents – to various extents.

In addition, respondents to Trends 2018 identified other initiatives, such as gamification, work placement and internships, which confirm institutions’ dynamism in testing and implementing various teaching approaches (Gaebel & Zhang 2018). The results also illustrate how difficult it can be for institutions to state the success of these approaches in absolute terms – as already pointed out in previous studies (Sursock 2015; Gaebel et al. 2014). Only very few stated that the approaches are not at all useful. At the same time, based on the Trends 2018 data it is difficult to see how widespread these teaching approaches are across the institution.10

Depending on the faculty, the discipline, the study program, or the teachers themselves, any of these active learning approaches could be found useful or not. Teachers may also find such approaches to be more or less useful, depending on the student audience they have. This is confirmed when looking into the profiles of Trends 2018 respondents: large11 institutions, with an institutional mass, a diversity of fields covered and the capacity to explore new teaching approaches, tend particularly to find all approaches to some extent, but not fully, useful (Gaebel & Zhang 2018).

As regards empowerment of teachers for SCL, the autonomous role of teachers in higher education first needs to be acknowledged. As shown in Trends 2018, about 77% of surveyed HEIs reported that the teachers decide for themselves on teaching methods (see Figure 34.6;
Gaebel & Zhang (2018). In other words, institutions could be, or are, ready to strategically support SCL, but in practice there may be various forms of SCL within institutions that are already in place in various contexts and at various scales, depending on teachers, disciplines, and teaching cultures. Therefore, the role of individual teachers should be acknowledged and taken as a starting point when supporting SCL. Institutions should then build up additional support measures for teachers to enhance SCL, such as training, rewards, enhancing communication with students, mentoring or assessment, to name a few (EUA 2018c).

Enhancing student-centered learning: lessons learned from EUA’s work

Policy documents, studies and discussions in the EHEA identify SCL as a key characteristic of European higher education today. The policy relevance of SCL stems from encompassing structural reforms, rather than promoting itself as a pedagogical method or approach. This way, SCL allows to better bridge the education provision with social and societal challenges – be it by better addressing a diverse student body – that require new skills and competences from graduates.

Structural reforms seem to be on track in many countries and learning outcomes have gradually become the norm rather than the exception across the EHEA. However, there is still little common understanding, at European level, on how SCL could be further, or better, implemented. Policy makers tend to see SCL as a game changer in learning and teaching, without much detailed attention paid to supporting universities for SCL to become a widespread reality. The European HEIs should seize this opportunity and drive the process of reaffirming their crucial role in redefining what kind of learning and teaching is most fit for purpose in their respective contexts. SCL requires a comprehensive, encompassing approach in each institutional context: it needs to be reflected in the institutions’ mission and vision of the education offer.

The importance of institutional contexts should not undermine the autonomy of teachers in deciding on their teaching methods. As Trends 2018 showed, teaching methods are still a highly personal matter (Gaebel & Zhang 2018), and the earlier section has emphasized this as a starting point for building up change. Nevertheless, each institution could explore what it can do to increase commitment toward SCL. In this process, the value and importance of dialogue with the whole university community (staff, students, faculties etc.) should not be underestimated. SCL can fulfill its potential only if the pedagogical paradigm is accepted, rooted and nourished within the higher education institution. Therefore, each institution needs to agree on its vision for education that includes the operational definition of SCL, specific to a university community, while respecting the disciplinary specificities. In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all format applicable for SCL.

EUA’s thematic peer group on promoting active learning (EUA 2018c) discussed elements of an institutional vision for education, identifying the following essentials that may be useful for HEIs that aim to promote active learning:

- SCL requires clear objective(s) and goal(s) within each institution, allowing actors involved in the learning processes to understand why SCL is important, and why it is in place.
- Institutionally supported empowerment of students and teachers in SCL is vital. Students are sufficiently informed about the purpose, goals and benefits of active learning methods, as well as being trained in a particular active learning method and given the ownership of their learning. Teachers are offered the development of teachers’ competences based on characteristics of the student body and provided with opportunities for careers in teaching. Systematic research on teaching (i.e., scholarship of learning and teaching) is an important...
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element of teachers’ empowerment for SCL. The workloads of both students and teachers for SCL is carefully monitored.

- The institutional setting in which SCL is implemented requires the recognition of the value of the administrative and technical staff, leadership and middle management, and external stakeholders in creating an institutional culture that honors, sufficiently funds, administratively manages and provides practical case-studies for SCL. Where relevant, the institution enables the participation of the whole institutional community and engages all disciplines.

- Institutions should build on the dynamism of teachers’ individual active learning initiatives and embed these activities into the purpose and vision of the program curriculum.

- The design of a physical learning environment is considered together with its users (i.e., students and teachers). Both physical and virtual learning environments support the digitalization of learning, where relevant.

- SCL stimulates the use of diversified assessment practices so that students can better present the necessary acquired knowledge, skills and competences. Assessment provides a feedback that goes beyond explaining whether the learning outcomes have been reached. It needs to stimulate the student’s self-reflection on the learning process, preparing him or her for further, lifelong learning.

- The internal quality assurance for learning and teaching considers the overall university’s profile and missions.

As a concept, SCL has the potential to reaffirm the holistic nature of knowledge inquiry, based on research and delivered through teaching. By transforming SCL into a daily practice, HEIs would renew their education provision, and reaffirm their role in educating citizens and future professionals.

Finally, it is worth noticing the role of stakeholder organizations, such as EUA, in shedding light on the concept of SCL in the Bologna Process context. Nowadays, after several ministerial communiqués and even with all the shortcomings of a still-multifaceted concept, SCL has become an undisputed paradigm for learning and teaching in the EHEA. In this context, the role of stakeholder organizations representing the higher education sector was and remains essential, both as drivers for policy developments that are sensitive at grassroots levels, and as facilitators for the much-needed exchanges across institutions and countries, and the spread of good practices.

Notes

1 This chapter was written when Goran Dakovic was working for European University Association (EUA).

2 The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organization of universities and national rectors’ conferences in 47 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Officially, the Association is a Consultative Member and participates in all Bologna activities, including the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). It also engages in dialogue and cooperation activities with members and partners on Bologna topics, including beyond Europe, to explain and promote the Process. EUA works on a wide range of issues that are of central importance for the EHEA and its universities, such as quality assurance, recognition, governance, funding, lifelong learning, student tracking and employability, etc. In close collaboration with its members, EUA contributes to policy development and to building the frameworks and conditions European universities need to thrive. Finally, through projects, events and other activities, the Association also provides opportunities for members for practice sharing and mutual learning. For more information, see www.eua.eu, retrieved December 7, 2018.

3 Over time, the Trends reports have become a landmark publication of EUA and are considered as reference tools for policy makers and the higher education community alike. For more information, see
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https://eua.eu/issues/10:bologna-process.html#sec-trends-reports, retrieved December 7, 2018. The 2018 Trends survey sample includes data from 43 higher education systems across the European Higher Education Area. Countries with the most respondents include Germany (31 institutions), Poland (25), Italy (22), Spain (21), France (15), Kazakhstan (15) and Russia (13). For more information on the methodology and the sample, see Gaebel and Zhang (2018, Fig. 1, p. 12).

4 EUA’s activities in learning and teaching include the organisation of thematic peer groups, bringing small groups of universities together for an in-depth discussion on a chosen topic; the European L&T Forum; and various publications and webinars. In addition, based on the outcomes of these activities, EUA issued a position paper in early 2018. The position paper and reports presenting the outcomes of the groups’ work, as well as information on other activities, is available at www.eua.be/policy-representation/higher-education-policies/eua-learning-teaching-initiative, retrieved December 7, 2018.

5 The Bologna Process brings together 48 higher education systems which, since 1999, implement reforms on higher education on the basis of common tools and structures, with the view to achieve a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Through this process, countries, institutions and stakeholders of the EHEA continuously adapt their higher education systems making them more compatible and strengthening cooperation across national systems. For more information, see www.ehe.a.info, retrieved December 7, 2018.

6 Defined as “data about learners and their contexts used to identify students’ learning needs” (EC 2017, p. 5, fn. 16).

7 The Principles were developed in the framework of the European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EFFECT) project (EUA 2018b), with a broad partnership of European higher education institutions, national rectors’ conferences, and stakeholder organizations in the EHEA. The Principles were also piloted by a group of 11 European universities, selected through a call for interest, who discussed them at their home institutions, in the context of their institutional strategy work on learning and teaching. More information on the EFFECT project can be found under https://eua.eu/101-projects/560-effect.html, retrieved December 7, 2018.

8 The Bologna Process Implementation Reports of 2012 and 2015 refer to Langworthy et al. (2009) to define student-centered pedagogy in the following manner: it “provides learning opportunities that are shaped by the needs and interests of the students. Using this approach, students are active learners, and instructors work to facilitate student learning” (European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice 2012, p. 187, 2015, p. 273).

9 The Trends 2018 survey questionnaire included a glossary that defined a strategy as an “overarching public document that outlines the major directions to be followed in a certain area of policy making, in an effort to achieve successfully an overall goal or objective. It provides a framework for measures and actions.” (Gaebel & Zhang 2018, p. 14).

10 The Trends 2018 survey collected one response per institution, for which a senior institutional representative had to take responsibility. Therefore, Trends mostly reflects the views of institutions at central leadership level.

11 Under Trends 2018, large (and very large) institutions are defined as institutions that have over 25,000 students (Gaebel & Zhang 2018).

References


