Representation of the Student-Centred Learning Approach on University Website

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Abstract

The topicality of the change of the educational paradigms in the national and global context forms a necessity and challenge for the higher education system to undergo the dynamic change in moving towards more individualised education process. The student-centred learning (SCL) approach as a topical form of implementation of the educational process conforms to the needs of contemporary society and as such advances growth at both individual as well as institutional level. The University website provides an insight into the implementation of the educational process by representing the mindset, values, and positions of individuals at the University. The aim of the research is to evaluate the representation of SCL approach on the Rīga Stradiņš University (RSU) website, thus offering conclusions and recommendations for its development. The results from the analysis of the descriptions of study programmes confirm that the representation of student-centred approach is taking place, however, it should be improved in such aspects as students' and lecturers' relationships, lecturers' competencies, implementation of the partnership, and the digitalisation of the study process.

Keywords: Student-centred learning; university website; representation.

1. Introduction

In recent years, educational paradigms experience more gradual worldwide changes. Alongside the shift from the *instruction paradigm* to the *learning paradigm,* the mission and aim, criteria of achievements and structures of learning/teaching in the higher education have been restructured (Barr, Tagg, 1995). More often in education documents, research and in practice the topicality of SCL approach is emphasized (European Commission, 2013; The European Students' Union, Education International, 2011; UNESCO, 2010; Prensky, 2001). The institutional policy of European Universities emphasizes that the SCL approach both improves the study process and results and provides background to the sustainable development of universities (Sursock, 2015). By placing the student in the centre of the learning process, this model of studies complies with the nowadays needs of students and society (Froyd, Simpson, 2010).

However, the implementation of SCL alongside with the digitalization advances the development of institution and individual, as well as presents unexperienced challenges. As the content of digital space enlarges the audience becomes more competent and consequently, demanding. The university's website is one of the digital aspects used to modernize education system in macro level (Diminikou, 2013), becoming a significant platform for representation. The research problem is the inconsistency between ambition to integrate SCL in the learning process and its representation on the University website. The aim of the research is to explore evidence of the SCL approach in RSU website and to work out recommendations to improve the representation of the SCL approach. Therefore the main research question is: how the SCL is represented on the RSU website and how to improve it?

2. SCL Approach

One of the main advantages of the SCL approach is the conviction that learning is no more a "one-direction process" – from lecturers to students (Robinson, Neergaard, et al., 2016; European Students' Union, Education International, 2011; Froyd, Simpson, 2010). The transformative learning is intended to improve students' skills by enhancing critical competencies (European Students' Union, 2015; European Students' Union, Education International, 2011). The organization of studies and the study process are focused on students' needs by persuading them to become more responsible and by diminishing their dependence on lecturers, other students and administration (Spooner, 2015). In such study approach students have an influence on the content, activities, materials and learning process in general. Lecturer becomes a coordinator, assistant in the study process and instructor who offers a possibility to learn from one another and individually, as well as develops effective learning skills. (Spooner, 2015; Froyd, Simpson, 2010) To achieve the

aim of changing the process of knowledge creation, during lectures, students mainly create new comprehension of materials studied thus implementing a new proactive approach to knowledge construction (Spooner, 2015; Haber-Curran, Tillapaugh, 2015).

The integration of information technologies in the study process and digital literacy, which are currently undervalued, play a significant role in implementation of the changes in the process of knowledge creation (Walton, 2016). The SCL model is an effective framework for meaningful ICT knowledge and vice-versa (Scheuermann, Pedro, 2009). Integration of ICT in the study process is one of the tools for implementing the SCL approach by simultaneously developing the technology competency. It correlates with one of the most significant competencies of the individual, such as digital media literacy, as well as with practical, cognitive and emotional competencies that are used to acquire, analyse and create content of media in different circumstances (Vanwynsberghe, Verdegem, 2013).

3. Methodology

The empirical part of the research consists of several stages. Namely, the following nine general SCL principles were used as a basis to set criteria and measurable indicators characterizing the SCL approach (European Students' Union, 2015): 1) ongoing reflexive process; 2) not a one-size-fits-all solution; 3) different learning styles; 4) different students' needs and interests; 5) choice; 6) diverse experiences and knowledge; 7) student-controlled learning process; 8) enabling, not telling; 9) cooperation between students and staff. After the nine criteria with indicators were designed, the focus group discussion was organized to analyse the developed criteria and adapt the measurability of indicators to the context of the study process and university website. The seven-person focus group consisted of representatives of the Latvian Student Association, experts of pedagogy, experts in the field of education marketing and development. The method of qualitative content analysis has been used to acquire and process empirical data. Mixed selection, i.e. stratified and accidental methods, has been used to select data. Description of the section "On study programme" of RSU website has been studied taking into account the proposed criteria and their indicators. In total, eight descriptions of the Undergraduate study programmes have been researched: four Social Science and four Health Care programmes, three of them Academic and five Professional. Parts of the text and the message of narrative corresponding to each criterion and indicator have been selected and content of the selected text has been analysed.

3.1 The matrix of the SCL approach criteria and indicators

Orientation on the self-driven study process. High achievement motivation, active involvement of student, co-responsibility, and autonomy of student. 2) **Orientation on diversity in the study process**. The diversity of students' needs and interests, flexibility of the study content and organization, diversity of lecturers, social support, activities for individual's development. 3) **Systemic study process**. The content of study courses and programmes are developed on a regular basis; outcome evaluation and assessment methods; regular improvements in organization of studies; continuity of study courses, study year and study level and application of theory in practice. 4) **Implementation of partnership**. Regular and content-based feedback between student and lecturer, mutual cooperation between students, students' involvement in administrative activities. 5) **Choice of study content**. Possibility to choose themes, learning methods and type of assessment, interdisciplinary choice of elective courses. 6) **Effectively systemized study resources**. The diversity of didactic materials, study environment, and technologies used in the study process. 7) **Digitalization of the study process**. Use of digital media in the study process: access, analyses, evaluation and formation of media content, video lectures, webinars, transmission of lectures, communication on the e-study portal, digital correction of study papers and verification of the content authenticity (checking plagiarism). 8) **Competence of lecturers**. General and specific knowledge, skills, attitude, experience, personal approach in the study process, professional development. 9) **Study results and future perspectives**. Clearly defined study results, correspondence of the study results to the content and aim of the programme, mutual correlation between study programme and study courses, life-long education possibilities, and career opportunities.

4. Results

In the course of the survey, the following results have been acquired (they are enumerated according to the sequence of the set criteria):

Orientation on the self-driven study process. Seven of the eight descriptions of study programmes contain word "competitiveness" (in total 12 cases). Six descriptions display ambition to prepare highly esteemed professionals. The main keywords of the self-driven study process: comprehension, analytical and critical approach, knowledge synthesis, forecasting, active attitude, innovation, research, evidence-based decision making etc. In order to ensure primarily the co-responsibility of students and that they are engaged in the supervision of the ongoing processes in the society, they have to analyse, assess and clarify needs and priorities. High expectations are set in order to reflect the autonomy of students - students think both analytically and critically (10 times/cases), they identify problems (three cases) and predict processes and development (one case), consult (two cases) and

work independently in the chosen profession (three cases). The level of independence in the study process is reflected by individual work (six cases), research (four cases) and presentation of prepared projects (six cases).

Orientation on diversity in the study process. The descriptions of study programmes do not directly represent individual needs and interests of students. They are partly represented in the comments of the students and graduates published in the description of each programme. Two graduates emphasizes the topicality of knowledge and necessary competencies promoted by the University. The individual work, wide scope of themes, possibility to learn different languages (one case in each) are those which mainly reflect flexibility of the of study content. The level of flexibility in the study process organization is rather low as it mainly includes lectures (eight cases) and seminars, in two cases laboratory work. None of the mentioned/ of them represents the diversity of lecturers. One study programme indicates the possibility to work in the student radio.

Systemic study process. The learning methods used in various programmes are equal – lectures, seminars, laboratory work, individual work, abstracts, essays, and reports. In two cases, discussions and group work are mentioned as the learning method. In general, regular improvements in the study organization are not reflected. There is a general information regarding the application of theory into practice mentioning that practical lessons and praxis are realized (four cases). However, there are no descriptions on by what means they are accomplished and which are the possible opportunities for practical training. In addition, there is a lack of information on whether the University itself ensures a place for practice. Only once a definite practice opportunity is mentioned.

Implementation of the partnership. The feedback between student and lecturer is not displayed. Only once the student's practical work under the supervision of a lecturer is mentioned. In three study programmes, the video material is used to represent the cooperation of students. There is no reflection on students' involvement in the administrative processes.

Choice of the study content. Four out of the eight descriptions of study programmes contain information on the possibility to choose study courses, however, only in one case specific study courses are mentioned. Variety of possible learning methods consists of oral and written (two cases), independent work (six cases), abstracts, essays, reports (five cases), laboratory work (two cases) etc. Overall, there is a lack of information on the choice of the content.

Effectively systemized study resources. Didactic materials or information upon them are not reflected in the sections of study programmes. Description of the study environment expresses homogeneousness and general information, such as in the auditorium, laboratory, medical institution and place of practice. In two cases the definite study environment is

given. The diversity of technologies is represented in four descriptions of study programmes, namely by mentioning the pharmaceutical technology, industrially produced medicine, computers, usage of the latest communication technologies, specifically the Internet and e-mail (one case in each).

Digitalization of the study process. Only two descriptions of study programmes contain information on digital media, such as theory and practice in new media (access, analyses and assessment), as well as information on the usage of computers, multimedia and the Internet in the study process. Three descriptions of study programmes contain video sections "Portrait of a Student" made by students of the Multimedia Communication programme. One description of the study programme contains a video featuring the head of the study programme addressing prospective students. All eight descriptions of study programmes contains various hyperlinks which lead to both internal and external resources of the website.

Competence of lecturers. Description of the study programmes does not contain information on lecturers' competence. The study programmes' description contains a hyperlink which leads to section of the Faculty's website, where the centralized information on the professional experience of a lecturer is given.

Study results and future perspectives. The compliance between the study results and programme content is high. In five of the eight cases, there is a consistent sequence of tasks and results of the programme. The lifelong learning perspective is reflected by identifying particular Master's Degree programmes, offering the possibility to continue further studies (seven cases). Seven study programmes' descriptions cover information about the fields and professions students can work in after the graduation, as well as hyperlinks to the descriptions of the chosen professions.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study found out that the descriptions of study programmes published on the RSU website provide incomplete information on the formulated criteria of the SCL approach. The data covered is ambiguous. Namely, there is a lack of some indicators, and both of the study programmes are demonstrated - those which successfully reflect the SCL approach and the ones requiring precision. The weak representation of digitalization of the study process confirms that in the course of developing the programme descriptions, the University's staff does not identify clearly with the recipient, i.e. prospective student or a "digital citizen", who has a need for the innovative learning space, as well as the connection and participation in the University and surrounding community (European Commission, 2013).

The most important characteristic indicating the implementation of the SCL approach that should be reflected both in the study process and on the University website is placing a student in the centre of the study process. Programme descriptions generally include high ambitions of the result, but it is important to note that in the SCL the process is central (European Students' Union, 2015). The expert of the pedagogy of the focus group emphasized that the main goal is the skills acquisition rather than the study programme acquisition and it should be taken into account for the SCL representation. Thus, it can be concluded that in the study programme descriptions there must be a balance between the information of the results achieved and the "road" to their achievement. There must be a possibility for a prospective student to find out information on the website about what and how he or she will learn.

Self-responsibility and ability to advance student's own knowledge is considered to be the base of the student-centred study process (Spooner, 2015; European Students' Union and Education International, 2011; Froyd, Simpson, 2010). The research results show that there are various ways of how to represent them, namely through learning methods, descriptions of study forms and students' practical engagement etc. Expert of the education development mentions that in order to promote the self-directed study process of a student, it is important that the student is aware of the common objectives and can personalize them. The representative of the Latvian Student Association stresses that the study descriptions must include course descriptions and defined learning outcomes. This will allow a student to feel if someone cares about whether he or she understands or not in which direction he or she is going.

As the research shows, implementation of the partnership is one of the most challenging criteria to be represented on the website, nevertheless, it is one of the main SCL aspects. In addition, information about the lecturers is not reflected in the descriptions, which leads to the conclusion that creators of the content are more focused on the objectives of the programme than on the individual. However, if the information about the lecturers is published on another website section, which is conveniently accessible, it is not a disadvantage. For this criteria, expert in the field of education development emphasizes that the University's staff must figure out what they want to say directly about the teachers, i.e. whether they have different teaching or communication styles etc.

Following the results of the study, several measures for the improvement of the study programme descriptions on the website to comply with the SCL can be set. The subject, namely as a student and a lecturer should not be underestimated. In addition, their roles and various opportunities for cooperation during the study period should be displayed. In order to develop a proper description of the study programme it is important to answer the following questions: "what will be learned?", " which career opportunities the students can have after graduating the programme?" etc. Nevertheless, it is also important to answer the

question on how the development of the individual will be promoted within the University. The variety of digital solutions cannot be too large. For instance, videos created by students can provide an excellent example of how the students' creativity, a possibility of choice and cooperation can be implemented in the study process. The capacity of the study programme is reflected in the presentation of the academic staff, therefore, it is recommended that each study programme description contains up-to-date and attractive portfolio of a lecturer.

The present study is an introduction of the SCL approach representation raising the topicality and promotion of the larger research in the broader context both nationally and internationally. The study shows the trends, but it does not allow to draw generalized conclusions on the SCL representation in the University and on the website in general. Therefore, the in-depth research should be continued, revealing the students' perspective. It would be necessary to carry out the survey among the current and potential students of the University to find out what aspects of the SCL they expect and how they perceive the information that the University offers on the website.

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