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Short bio (150 words max):

As Senior Advisor and Head of Analysis in the Danish Accreditation Institution, Rikke is managing the agency's department of thematic analysis. She has just finished a comprehensive analysis on Student Centred Learning and is starting up a new analysis on the knowledge basement of Danish higher education. Rikke also plays an active role in building up the Danish Accreditation Institution's international relations and networks.

Name: Petra Frydensberg

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Short bio (150 words max):

As an accreditation consultant, Petra has conducted both programme accreditations and institutional accreditations, and has contributed to the development of the institution's accreditation methods through analyses and workshops. Petra has previously worked at a university college, conducting analyses of student satisfaction and learning outcome. Currently, Petra is working on an analysis of approaches to gathering and producing knowledge in different areas of the Danish educational sector.

Proposal

Title:



Principal in Own Learning - Student Centred Learning Viewed Through the Eyes of an External Quality Assurance Agency

Abstract (150 words max):

Student Centred Learning (SCL) has been given a new and distinct role in the European understanding of education quality. Agencies and HEIs are in the process of discussing how the new ESG 1.3 will manifest itself in their local environments. ESG 1.3 is also making itself felt in Denmark, where we have a long tradition of active student participation. In spite of being well-placed to live up to ESG 1.3, SCL has yet to be explicitly addressed in our external quality assurance system. In order to expand our knowledge of Danish HEIs' understanding and practice of SCL and qualify our future evaluation of quality assurance of SCL, the Danish Accreditation Institution (AI) has just completed an extensive thematic analysis, *Principal in own Learning – European and Danish Perspectives on Student Centred Learning*.

In the paper session AI will present the report's findings and discuss how agencies can go about meeting ESG 1.3.

The paper is based on:

The paper presentation will be based on practice. The paper will present the practices of the 11 HEIs which have participated in the analysis. The paper will summarise how Danish HEIs understand and practice SCL and highlight the broad understanding of SCL in a Danish context. The paper presentation will include several examples of the HEIs' practices.

The paper presentation will also address how the Danish Accreditation Institution is approaching the new ESG 1.3 and discuss how agencies can address SCL in a suitable manner.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.

No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Principal in Own Learning - Student Centred Learning Viewed Through the Eyes of an External Quality Assurance Agency

In 2015, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESGs) were revised. The focus placed on clearly addressing the requirement for SCL, which is now incorporated in ESG 1.3, has given HEIs the task of clearly addressing SCL as part of their internal quality assurance systems. This requirement has given the external quality assurance agencies what for some is a new task, namely that of assessing how HEIs live up to ESG 1.3. In addition the external quality assurance agencies have also been given the task of presenting the new ESG requirements to the HEIs and clarifying how student centred learning will be incorporated into external quality assurance.

As a response to the new focus on SCL in ESG 1.3, in 2016 the Danish Accreditation Institution (AI) implemented a thematic analysis to elucidate current European and Danish understanding and practice of SCL, and contribute to resolving the question of how ESG 1.3



will be addressed both in the external quality assurance system and in HEIs' internal quality development work in Denmark. The present paper is based on the findings of the analysis and the reflective questions it has raised.

Background to the analysis of SCL

In Denmark, SCL has not been directly addressed in educational or institutional accreditation to date, and our understanding of the dissemination and meaning of the concept has consequently been based on expectations and ad hoc checks rather than systematic knowledge gleaned from our accreditations.

In 2016, AI renewed its membership of ENQA and EQAR, and was one of the first agencies to be assessed according to the revised ESGs. In our ENQA self-evaluation report, we addressed SCL via the focus placed in our institutional accreditation system on students' feedback on teaching, students' access to a complaints procedure and teachers' organisation of teaching. During the ENQA panel's site visit, we found that there was not a great deal of focus on ESG 1.3 and the point concerning SCL. However, it is our expectation that ESG 1.3 is going through a teething period and that in our next ENQA and EQAR admission process we will be able to clarify and address ESG 1.3 in our external quality assurance system. We at AI are currently in the process of putting forward proposals for what form the next version of the institutional accreditation system should take. In this connection we place a major focus on what role SCL will play in version 2.0 of the institutional accreditation system in Denmark. The findings of the analysis are an important tool in this work.

In Denmark, the response to the increased focus on SCL with respect to ESGs has, on the face of it, been low-key. In the world of Danish education there prevails a general understanding that SCL is an integrated element of the educational approach to teaching and to the role of students in the teaching process which has characterised the Danish education since the 1970s. Thus, many of those who have contributed to the analysis have stated that Denmark has a long tradition of consulting and listening to children and youths and taking their contributions seriously, and this approach also manifests itself in higher education in the form of various initiatives via the active involvement of students in their own learning. AI has also been of the fundamental impression that SCL has been integrated throughout the institutions and that there is a good basis for fulfilling ESG 1.3.

So why then prepare a thematic analysis on a matter which, on the face of it, seems to be functioning very well in Denmark? In connection with the revised ESGs and our considerations regarding our ongoing compliance with ESG, a range of questions arose which we wished to investigate further. These include:

- How does SCL work in practice at Danish HEIs?
- How can we go about addressing SCL in an external quality assurance system such that it suits the institutions' practices?
- Do our expectations concerning the role of SCL at Danish HEIs accord with the reality?
- Where do Danish HEIs stand with respect to the integration of SCL and quality assurance?
- Why does joint European education policy focus so much on SCL?

The analysis carried out has failed to answer all of our questions. In broad outline, we have expanded and added nuance to our understanding of SCL. It has been confirmed that there is broad support for SCL and for the expansion of SCL at Danish HEIs. We were surprised at how broad a range of understandings the term SCL covers in practice. Not least it has been illustrated that, despite the educational system's support for and expansion of SCL, there is still some way to go as regards addressing SCL both in institutions' internal quality assurance systems and in the Danish external quality assurance system.

Findings of the thematic analysis ‘Principal in Own Learning – European and Danish Perspectives on Student Centred Learning’

The study ‘Principal in Own Learning – European and Danish Perspectives on Student Centred Learning’ is based on interviews with 24 participants from Danish universities, university colleges, academies of professional higher education and a Swedish university college. In addition, we have conducted 4 interviews with representatives from the Danish Students’ Union, the European Students’ Union (ESU), ENQA and the European University Association (EUA). Other key sources of knowledge comprise a range of publications which has been published in recent years.¹ The analysis is divided into two parts: A focus on the European scene and a particular focus of the understanding and practice of SCL in Denmark.

Student centred learning as a European megatrend

The analysis shows that at the level of European education policy there is broad support for the requirement for student centred learning and that the desire to place students at the heart of their own learning may be said to be part of a current European megatrend. European interviewees also stated however that at some HEIs, there is local resistance to SCL and various obstacles associated with the implementation of the new ESG 1.3. This may be due to the fact that in some places there are teachers, administrators and even students who are not prepared to adapt to a new method of teaching which challenges old habits as regards the learning process and the relationship of authority between teacher and student. These challenges are partly cultural in nature, but there is also concern that retraining of teachers will be costly and that institutions lack the specific tools necessary to ensure that student centred learning is a success.

At the same time, the interviewees drew attention to the fact that student centred learning also encompasses many potential key benefits: more motivated and engaged students who will contribute improved academic skills and analytical expertise to the labour market and to research.

As a basis for investigating its national significance and practice, AI has condensed knowledge from various European sources into a definition of general features of SCL:

Student centred learning:

- Is a matter of developing students with the ability to reflect and act independently with a view to acquiring skills of relevance to the labour market.

The education/training courses are characterised by:

- Taking into consideration differences between students in the planning of education/training courses and in the preparation of individual learning processes
- Making use of various educational and didactic approaches and adapting them to the specific learning situation
- Teachers being conscious of their role as teachers in various learning situations
- An assumption of mutual respect and dialogue between teacher and students
- Students being allowed to actively participate in their own education by being offered flexibility and elective courses as part of the learning process

¹ *Student-Centred Learning – Toolkit for Students, Staff and Higher Education Institutions*, Education International and European Students’ Union 2010
Overview on Student-Centred Learning in Higher Education in Europe, European Students’ Union 2015
ESG part 1: Are Universities Ready, European University Association 2015

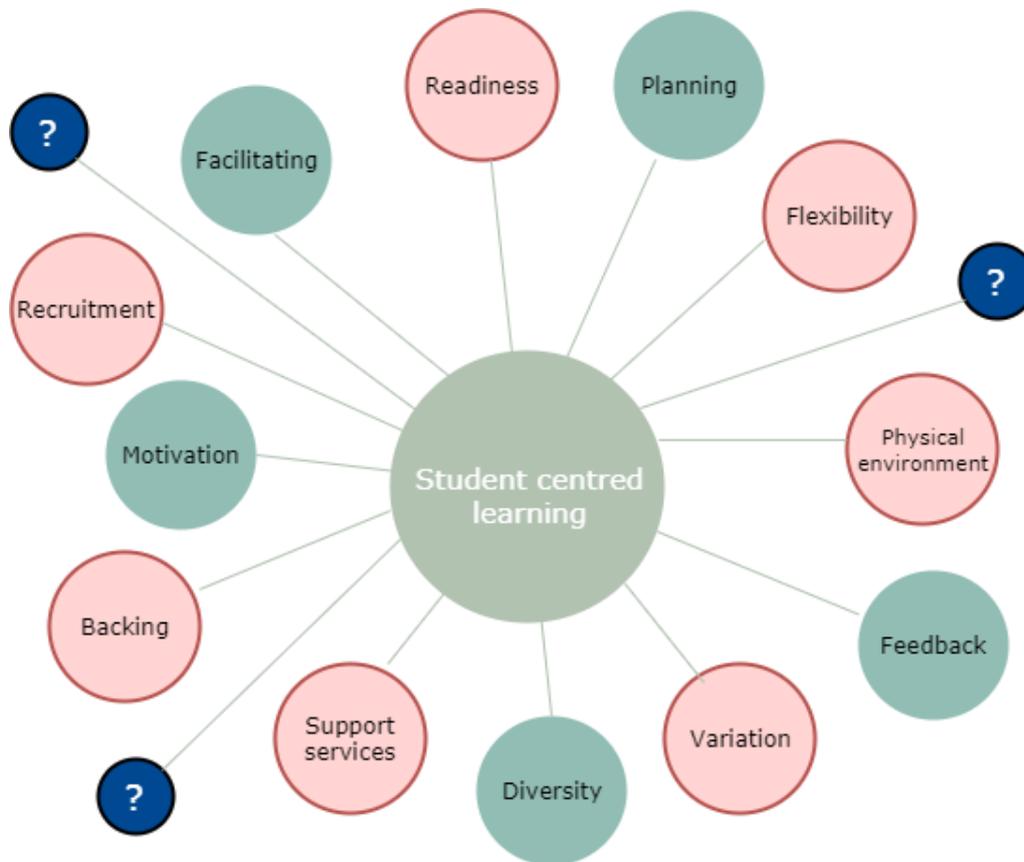
- Ensuring that students receive adequate feedback both on their ongoing academic development and on their performance in exams.

Student centred learning in Denmark:

The section of the analysis which focuses closely on the understanding and practice of SCL in Denmark is based on interviews with teachers, heads of studies and heads of HEIs. The interviews highlighted convergence between the Danish understanding of SCL and the aforementioned general features found on the European scene. However, the interviews also demonstrated that beneath the general features there is extensive and pronounced variation in local understandings, nuances and practices associated with the concept. Since we wanted to learn more about how different educational institutions understand the term SCL, AI did not investigate the prevalence of a specific conception or definition of SCL, but instead took an explorative approach with a focus on expanding the concept. The input we received via our interviews illustrates that SCL has many different meanings in a Danish context, such as:

- **Variation** in educational and didactic learning styles
- The teacher's role in **facilitation** and **planning** the learning process
- **Flexibility** with respect to the student's study path
- The student's **motivation** with respect to learning and actively participating in the learning situation
- Providing **feedback** on the student's ongoing academic development and performance in exam situations
- Accommodating **diversity** across the student community
- **Backing** from heads of institutions for the learning style
- **The student's readiness** to engage in independent reflection and action
- An offer of **support services** for students where private/personal factors present an obstacle to learning
- **Recruitment** of teachers with the appropriate educational and didactic skills and a passion for the institution's teaching style
- The right **physical environment** for learning which supports e.g. group work and encourages students to interact with teachers

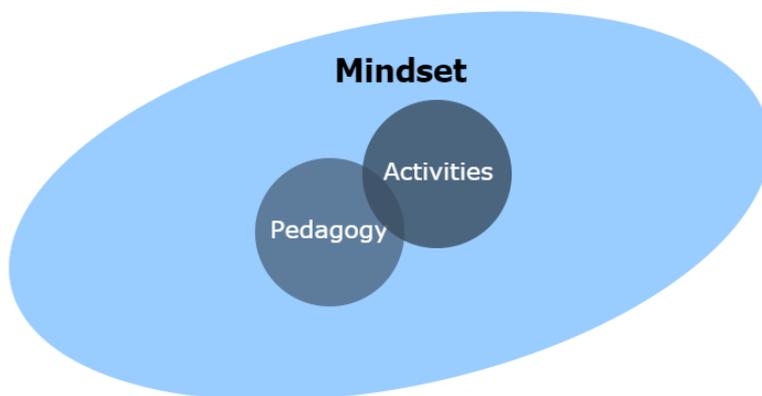
The figure below illustrates the many meanings which are associated with SCL. Since the analysis is based on a sample of interviews, the model does not present a comprehensive survey of the SCL concept in a Danish context. Question marks indicate that there without doubt exist many other local understandings and practices of SCL than those we have encountered.



Two approaches and one mind-set

In the course of the interviews, we encountered many examples of SCL being understood as a specific educational method of planning the teaching situation which focuses on offering flexibility and involving and motivating the students in the learning process. Alongside this understanding, we have encountered examples of SCL resulting in the use of various activities within the teaching process. Viewed thus, SCL is to a greater extent a matter of supporting students under the conditions which lie outside the sphere of teaching proper but which are essential to the learning process. Examples of this are personal circumstances which make it difficult for the student to engage with and participate in learning situations. In a Danish context, SCL embraces both student centred teaching and student centred activities. The interviewees also drew attention to a completely different factor, namely that SCL demands a particular mind-set on the part of both teachers and students. In practice, this requires that both parties must have a desire to engage in student centred learning in order for it to succeed.

The figure below illustrates that SCL demands a combination of a student centred mind-set and teaching situation and/or specific activities.



Student centred learning and internal quality assurance

One of the most striking findings of the analysis is that despite SCL being well-integrated within the Danish higher education system, and despite all interviewees having pointed out that SCL results in improved teaching, we have not encountered illustrative examples of how SCL is directly addressed in HEIs' internal quality assurance systems. Since the analysis is based on input concerning practice and understanding of SCL from interviewees who either teach or administrate programmes of education, we have yet to interview anyone from HEI quality assurance units. It is of course possible that we would have gained a better insight into the matter of quality assurance had we selected other interviewees. It will nonetheless be interesting to see whether SCL will be more clearly addressed in HEIs' internal quality assurance systems as ESG increasingly takes root in the coming years.

Five topics concerning student centred learning in practice

The analysis concludes by identifying five topics which illustrate five of the understandings of SCL that we most often encountered in our Danish interviews. The five topics are:

Topic 1 - planning the learning process

Planning a student centred learning process is among other things a matter of the teachers preparing learning situations in which students are stimulated to actively reflect and act independently. These learning processes must ensure that students acquire the necessary skills. In many cases this will be specifically achieved by the teacher scaffolding in the teaching situation such that students can move from a dependent to an independent position with respect to the learning process. This can be achieved by combining clear directions for action with more normative instructions. It is in particular during the initial semesters of teaching that there is a need for clear directions for action, whilst in the final semesters students have become accustomed to greater flexibility within the framework specified by the teacher. The increased focus on independence and reflection on the part of the student places new demands on the teacher, who now functions less as an authority and more as a facilitating supervisor and mentor.

Topic 2 – facilitating the learning proces

Facilitation is a situation in which the teacher functions as academic support, enabling the student to complete the assignment independently. The teacher's role is to keep the student on the right track through the learning process and encourage and acknowledge the student. Ideally, facilitation should



ensure that learning takes place via a process of encouraging the student's independence, whereby the student takes and maintains the initiative. The more the teacher facilitates the learning process, the more experience-based the teaching process becomes, while the ideal of imparting the student with knowledge chosen by the teacher takes second place. Another aspect of facilitation is that the student can facilitate his or her own learning or assume the role of teacher in certain teaching situations.

Topic 3 – feedback on the student's performance

Feedback is fundamentally a matter of the teacher articulating and assessing the student's academic level and development, and where necessary proposing areas in need of focus. Danish educational institutions employ a range of feedback models, for instance the one-to-one feedback conversation, feedback following exams, group feedback and peer feedback. Feedback is a central aspect of SCL because it is a key tool in motivating students to make an effort, and ensures that students are on the right track when carrying out assignments independently. Feedback is, however, also associated with conflicting requirements, in that some forms of feedback are undermined by the need students occasionally have for the teacher to assume the role of a prescriptive academic authority who makes a straightforward assessment of the level they are at in relation to learning objectives, and provides guidance concerning what constitutes a good performance in an exam.

Topic 4 - motivating students

SCL focuses on motivating the student. At Danish HEIs one of the ways of motivating students is to explicitly state the goals of study activities. It should be made clear to students that education provides necessary skills and leads to a job related to their studies. Teachers and HEIs achieve this by explaining to the individual student why it is meaningful to participate actively and why and how the student can make use of the things he or she learns. This contrasts with strict forms of educational requirements such as exams and grades. In this way, students' motivation is closely bound up with SCL, since it is a tool to encourage students to seek out knowledge on their own initiative and be prepared to explore new paths. These skills cannot be directly dictated by the teacher, and instead require that the student is motivated to acquire them. However, it is also clear that some students regard themselves as something more akin to customers in a shop, whereby learning is a specific individually tailored package which is delivered and does not require the input of the student over the course of his or her studies.

Topic 5 - accommodating diversity across the student community

Danish HEIs have experienced a boom in intake over the past fifteen years and educational institutions are working actively to ensure that the increased diversity of the student community benefits learning processes. This can be felt in the way that the increased intake of first generation academics increases the need to set out a clear framework for cracking the academic code. The analysis shows that one way of accommodating diversity at an institution-wide level is to provide highly structured welcome programmes which provide a broad introduction to life as a student. Another way of addressing this matter is to take account of students' personal circumstances when planning teaching, for instance when deciding on the composition of groups. Nonetheless, it is clear that throughout the Danish educational landscape there is a wide range of opinions on the extent to which one should, as a teacher, step in to assist students when personal problems make learning difficult. Finally, the analysis indicates that the independence in SCL can prove too difficult to achieve for the students with the weakest academic skills.

Conclusion

The thematic analysis has demonstrated that SCL is now part of everyday life at Danish HEIs, and that there is significant support for and understanding of the positive contribution made by SCL to the



quality of education. Notwithstanding this, there is still some way to go as regards ensuring that SCL is explicitly addressed both in internal quality assurance at HEIs and in the national external quality assurance system which AI comprises. The analysis has made it clear to us that SCL has a wide range of meanings within the world of Danish higher education and that to some extent these meanings include activities relating to the learning process and to activities external to the learning process.

The study of the understanding of SCL in practice in Denmark has provided the AI with a good, solid foundation for its continuing task of addressing ESG 1.3 in the external quality assurance system, and for AI's ongoing work of informing Danish HEIs regarding the significance of ESGs in a Danish context.

In conclusion, the analysis introduces a range of perspectives on questions regarding SCL. A selection of these perspectives will form the basis of AI's discussion questions at the paper presentation at EQAF 2017.

References:

- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, Brussels, Belgium 2015
- ESG part 1: Are Universities Ready*, European University Association 2015
- Hovedperson i egen læring – studentercentreret læring I et dansk og europæisk perspektiv*, Danmarks Akkrediteringsinstitution 2017
- Overview on Student-Centred Learning in Higher Education in Europe*, European Students' Union 2015
- Student-Centred Learning – Toolkit for Students, Staff and Higher Education Institutions*, Education International and European Students' Union 2010

Discussion questions:

1. What is the stance of HEIs with respect to the link between student centred learning and quality of education?

In ESG 1.3, under the heading "Student centred learning, teaching and assessment", it is stated that institutions must ensure that their study programmes are planned in a manner which encourages students to actively participate in the learning process. But are European educational institutions aware that SCL is now to be addressed as part of their internal quality assurance? In Europe, there is a clear expectation that we in northern Europe, including in Denmark, have come a long way when it comes to offering SCL. But does this expectation carry with it the risk that we will allow ourselves to be lulled into the conviction that we have achieved our goal with respect to the ESG requirement, and as a result fail to realise that there are areas where we can strengthen the link between SCL and educational quality?

2. Can extra-curricular activities be included in the sphere of SCL, and if so, how much consideration for students' personal circumstances should the institution have?

At a number of Danish HEIs, activities which fall outside of the learning situation are regarded as SCL. Typically, this concerns activities which have the aim of removing obstacles as regards the student's ability to participate in SCL processes. This may include assistance with personal problems or taking consideration for students' personal circumstances when determining the composition of groups. The extent to which HEIs assist individual students in ensuring a positive student life can vary greatly. This applies to both the social and the academic sphere. On the one hand, there is a desire for the student



to develop skills within the sphere of independent learning and problem-solving. On the other hand, a good deal of support is made available to students. But at what point do student centred activities have the opposite effect, and how can one avoid the scales tipping in the wrong direction? Do HEIs risk supporting and offering help to students to such an extent that they become a kind of helicopter parent to the students, who if anything become more, not less dependent. Can students expect so many individual opportunities and consideration that it comes at the cost of the sense of community on a given programme of education?

One of the goals of offering students a student centred learning process is to contribute to the student developing skills such that they are able to independently identify and complete academic exercises and are able to think and reflect critically and independently. What consequences might it have for students' match with employers on the labour market if, as students, they were used to others showing individual consideration for them, and all obstacles were removed from their path?

3. Does student centred learning transform educational institutions into educational supermarkets in which the students are customers?

A central ambition of student centred learning is to engage students to participate actively in the learning process. But is this a role which each and every student wishes to adopt? Or do students wish to adopt an approach to their studies whereby they regard themselves as customers in a shop and consider it the job of the institution and the teacher to ensure that they have the requisite professional skills when they graduate? Can SCL prove a success for students who do not share the mind-set which underpins SCL?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.