Guidelines for Peer Assessment of Student Centred Learning

The PASCL Consortium

European Students' Union	ESU	BE
Network of Universities form the Capitals of Europe	UNICA	BE
University of Jyväskylä	UJ	FI
Central European University	CEU	HU
Melius s.r.l.	MELIUS	IT
Knowledge Innovation Centre	KIC	MT

Contents

1 Introduction

These guidelines pertain to the peer assessment of student-centred learning (further: PA/SCL) in European higher education institutions. They outline the philosophy and overall focus of peer assessment of student-centred learning.

The following sections gives tools for conducting the peer assessments of student centered learning.

- Section 2 briefly outlines the philosophy of the peer assessment of student-centred learning, based on the principles of student-centred learning as defined by the previous work done by the European Students' Union (ESU) and the Education International (EI); enhancement-led evaluation; and Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

- Section 3 describes the peer assessment process and preparations needed on the part of the assessment team and participating institution before the peer assessment visit.

- Section 4 suggests a set of core meetings that should take place during the peer assessment visit to give the peer assessment team information on the teaching and learning related policies and practices in the institution. Similarly, drawing from the European Student Union and the Education International joint publication 'Student-Centred Learning – Toolkit for students, staff and higher education institutions' (Further: SCL Toolkit)[1] the potential discussion themes for each meeting are outlined in section 4.

2 Philosophy of the peer assessment of student-centred learning

The peer assessment of student-centred learning rests on the triple foundation of

- focus on student-centred learning as a culture and mindset pertaining to students as active and autonomous learners

- enhancement-led evaluation

---

[1] http://www.esu-online.org/resources/6068/Student-Centred-Learning-Toolkit/

- European standards and guidelines for quality assurance

2.1 Definition of student-centred learning

The principles of Student-centred learning are outlined in the SCL Toolkit.

Student-centred learning is defined as follows:

»Student-Centred Learning represents both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterised by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking.« (SCL Toolkit, 5)

Student-centred learning is characterized by

- Flexibility and freedom in terms of the time and structure of learning;

- More and better quality teachers who strive to share their knowledge;

- A clear understanding of students by teachers;

- A flat hierarchy within higher education institutions;

- Teacher responsibility for student empowerment;

- A continuous ongoing improvement process;

- A positive attitude by teachers and students with the aim of improving the learning experience" (SCL Toolkit,2)

The SCL toolkit also provides a checklist of elements of student-centredness, that maybe useful in conducting the peer assessment. These comprise consultation with students, ECTS and learning outcomes, quality assurance, mobility, recognition and prior learning, social dimension, teaching and learning methods, learning environment   and professional academic development.

2.2 Enhancement-led peer assessment of student-centred learning

The peer assessment of the student-centred learning (PA/SCL), is based on the tradition of enhancement-led evaluation and the guidelines defined by the European Association for

Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) . Assessment in this context means the aim of supporting higher education institutions to develop their activities in dialogue and interaction with them. The aim of PA/SCL is to help the participating institutions to recognize their best practices with regards to student-centred learning and to develop their educational philosophy and practices related to teaching, learning and student participation. The aim is not to accredit, judge or criticise the institution, but help the institution to look at and analyse ~~at~~ its own practices and to consider ways in which those can be changed, if the institution wants to become more student-centred. The PA/SCL process should be based on open and candid discussions between the peer assessment team and the participating institution. The biggest benefit of the PA/SCL to the institution is based on the ~~own~~ self analysis and contemplation of the participating institution; not any statement or report of the peer assessment team. The peer assessment team should work as a catalyst for the institution's own process.

The focus of the PA/SCL will be on the aspects that the institution does in order to provide the students the best possible educational experience and learning environment, the support it gives to the teaching staff in order to enable them to enhance their teaching, and the involvement of students in the different aspects of the teaching and learning processes in the institution.

The peer assessment teams should follow high ethical standards and integrity in their work. They must keep confidential all discussions had during the visit, as well as all background information they receive from the institutions. During the visits they must behave respectfully and refrain from making evaluative comments or refer to their own countries or institutions as examples to be followed. The reports written by the peer assessment team should always represent the view of the entire team.

2.3 European standards and guidelines

Focus on structuring and improving the quality work of European higher education institutions is based on principles established ~~in the~~ in the 'Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ESG)[2] , adopted by the Ministerial conference of the European ministers responsible for higher education and promoted also by ENQA.

These principles aim to improve the processes of HEIs and quality assurance in higher education, as well as promote mutual trust between European higher education systems by

---

[2] https://revisionesg.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/revised_esg_2015_adopted.pdf

setting standards and providing guidelines for internal and external quality assurance and for quality assurance agencies. Three of the standards for internal quality assurance are of special importance for the PA/SCL. These are the standards of Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; Teaching staff; and Learning resources and student support.

> "Standard 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
>
> Institutions should ensure that the programmes 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.
>
> Standard 1.5 Teaching staff
>
> Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.
>
> Standard 1.6 Learning resources and student support
>
> Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided." (ESG 2015, 9, 11)

3 Peer assessment process

The peer assessment process comprises four stages: 1) training of the peer assessment teams and institutions 2) preparation of the visit 3) peer assessment visit and 4) feedback session.

1st stage: training of the peer assessment teams and institutions

Training the peer assessment teams and the representatives of the participating institutions in the goals and processes of PA/SCL is crucial to ensure a successful peer assessment process. A shared training for the peer assessment teams and for the representatives of the participating institutions is both financially cost-effective and beneficial in terms of establishing personal contact between the peer assessment teams and the participating institutions, and for ensuring that both the teams and the institutions have a shared understanding of the goals of the process. The training will lay a foundation for understanding the concept and philosophy of student-centred learning and enhancement-led evaluation. It will help the members of the peer assessment teams to prepare for the

visit and ensure an understanding how to facilitate meetings with the different members of the participating institutions. Similarly, it will help the participating institutions to prepare the necessary background material, to organise the meetings taking place during the visit and to get most out of the process. Finally, it enables the peer assessment teams and the institutions to establish rapport before the visit, thus supporting the enhancement-oriented focus of the process.

2nd stage: preparation of the visit

The second stage is preparation for the peer assessment visit. In the preparation stage, the peer assessment team and the participating institution must share enough information with and about each other and their expectations for the visit for it to be successful. The chair of the peer assessment team and the university contact person will liaise about the practicalities and preparation of the visit. It is important to agree, for example, on the background information delivered by the institution to the peer assessment team before the start of the visit, as well as on the scheduling of the various meetings to be held during the visit.

The participating institution must prepare a short background report for the peer assessment team. This report should contain two sections, briefly outlining the following issues. The first section should contain the basic information about the institution: the description of the institution's organisational structure (including a list of faculties/schools/departments), programmes taught (discipline/level), basic figures concerning staff (teaching/research/administration) and students (BA/MA/PhD) by faculty/programme, and introduce the governance structures (including the absolute numbers or relative shares of the representatives of different groups in each governing body). The second section should focus on the teaching and learning: it should outline the institution's teaching and learning philosophy; introduce teaching and learning facilities, including physical facilities and electronic learning platforms, library and IT services; as well as give a short description of the institutional quality assurance system and procedures regarding the quality of teaching and programmes. It should include a short description of the teaching methods used in the different faculties, highlighting especially the student-centredness of the teaching methods and those teaching and learning practices the institution considers particularly innovative.

The peer assessment team members are expected to study the background report carefully. The team members will hold a preparatory meeting between themselves before the visit. The preparatory meeting can either be held online, for example on Skype, before the visit; or organised in the visit location before the start of the actual visit. In the preparatory meeting

the team members should agree among themselves which issues will be raised at which meeting, and who will raise which issue, in order to ensure that all relevant points are discussed.

3rd stage: peer assessment visit

The visit of the peer assessment team to the participating institution should normally last 2 full days. Budget permitting, an additional day could be allocated for the peer assessment team's internal work. The visit will comprise a series of meetings between the peer assessment team and the people representing different parts of the participating institution (see further information in section 4). The peer assessment team members should attend the meetings together, and avoid splitting the team. Each meeting should start with the peer assessment team introducing themselves and the purpose of their visit. The peer assessment team members should agree amongst themselves who will chair each meeting and thus ensure that all relevant topics for the given meeting are addressed. One meeting will typically last about an hour, although it may be necessary to consider whether more time is needed in cases where an interpreter is used (if there is otherwise no common language between the team and the representatives of the institution).

4th stage: report and feedback session

After the visit, the peer assessment team will write a short report (approximately 10-15 pages), describing the practises, strengths and weaknesses of the institution with regards to the different elements of student-centred learning, as outlined in the SCL Toolkit; and identifying potential "best practices" used in the institution. As each higher education institution is different, the specific features and foci of each given institution should be taken into account in writing the report In order to support the institution enhancing their student-centredness. The peer assessment team should also write suggestions to the institution how they can improve their practices in teaching, learning and student involvement. The recommendations should be practical and possible for the institution to apply within the legal framework of the country and statutes of the institution. All team members should participate in writing the report. The draft report will be sent to the participating institution for comments, and their comments taken into account in finalising the report.

After the visit and writing of the report, a joint feedback session should be organised for the peer assessment team and participating institution. The feedback session can be organized by Skype or face-to-face in the form of a short second visit of the peer assessment team to the institution, or as a wider feedback seminar where all of the participating institutions and peer assessment teams come together to discuss how student-centred learning can be

enhanced and promoted. The aim of the feedback session or seminar is to support the stated goal of PA/SCL, which aims at genuine enhancement of and support for the institutions in student-centred learning, instead of summative evaluations. In the feedback session, the peer assessment team and the institution can jointly think of ways to implement the peer assessment team's recommendations on improving student-centredness in the institution. The feedback session also enables the institution to give feedback to peer assessment team on the conducting and usefulness of the PA/SCL process.

4 Suggested meetings during the visit

It is important for the peer assessment team to meet people representing different groups (management, staff, students) and functions (leadership, student and teaching support services, teaching and learning function) within the institution during the visit. The different meetings are aimed to help the team to acquire information about the steering, conducting, supporting and evaluating teaching and learning in the institution, and the involvement of students in these different elements in interaction with each of the groups. The list below is a general suggestion. The peer assessment team and the participating institution's contact person should discuss the final list of people to meet based on the specific structures of the institution.

1. Leadership: rector and/or vice-rectors for education and/or quality assurance

2. Faculties

    2.1.   Dean and/or vice dean

    2.2.   Group of teachers

    2.3.   Group of students

3. Student support services (library, study office (institutional /faculty level), student counselling office, career services…)

4. Representative Committees on education and/or quality assurance, comprising the different groups of the university community

5. Student union

Different meetings pertain to acquiring different types of information from the institution. In the following, the expected information areas for each of the meetings are outlined. This

does not represent the actual questions presented by the peer assessment team to the representatives of the institution, but rather a broader set of themes to be addressed.

4.1 Leadership: rector and/or vice-rectors

This meeting aims to give the peer assessment team information and understanding about the following issues:

- o The institutional principles and practices with regards to student-centred learning.

- o The processes related to steering of the educational process & quality assurance at the institutional level.

- o The involvement of students in the governance structures.

- o The role of teaching in career progression of faculty / institutional policies of this.

- o Institutional support for teachers' professional training.

4.2 Faculties (2-3 faculties)

4.2.1 Dean / vice dean

This meeting aims to give the peer assessment team information and understanding about the following issues:
- o The faculty principles and practices of student-centred learning.

- o The process of steering student-centred learning at faculty level.

- o The involvement of students in governance.

- o The process of defining learning outcomes, curriculum, syllabus and the role of students in this.

- o The quality assurance processes at faculty level.

- o The role of the dean in all this.

- o The student complaint procedures.

- o Description of the role of teaching in career progression and the institutional policies regarding it.

4.2.2   Group of teachers (ca. 6-8 people)

This meeting aims to give the peer assessment team information and understanding about the following issues:

- o The teachers' participation in pedagogical training.

- o The role of teachers in defining learning outcomes, curriculum, syllabus.

- o Teaching and learning methods commonly used in the faculty.

- o The most innovative or student-centred teaching and learning methods used in the faculty.

- o The methods of assessing students commonly used in the faculty.

- o The forms of giving students feedback on their learning.

- o The methods of collecting feedback from students.

4.2.3   Group of students (ca. 6-8 people)

This meeting aims to give the peer assessment team information and understanding about the following issues:

- o The students' knowledge regarding the institution's and faculty's principles and practices of student-centred learning.

- o The role of students in determining the learning outcomes, curriculum, syllabus and quality assurance processes.

- o The involvement of student in governance structures.

- o The students' knowledge on what to do when encountering problems related to studies or student assessment.

- o Students' role in giving feedback on their studies and teachers; perceptions on how this feedback is responded to and how effective their feedback is.

- o Students' perceptions regarding the feedback they receive from teachers.

- o Their satisfaction with teaching and learning methods / facilities / mobility opportunities / social dimension of their educational experience.

- o Their perceptions on the most innovative or student-centred teaching and learning methods used in the faculty.

4.3 Central administration offices related to student support services, study facilities and pedagogical support for teachers

These should be specified separately in accordance with the structures of each participating institution. The different bodies can be met all together, or for example in two separate groups.

This meeting aims to give the peer assessment team information about the following issues:

o   The process of defining learning outcomes, curriculum, syllabus.

o   The principles pertaining to the recognition of prior learning and mobility related recognition.

o   The support services for students: health care, career service, counselling, financial aspects of education.

o   The quality assurance processes at institutional and programme level, the evaluation of courses and teacher performance, the involvement of students in these activities.

o   The processes related to credit transfer and mobility.

o   The pedagogical training for teachers and support offered to teachers for the implementation of innovative teaching and learning methods and ICT-based learning.

o   Student complaints procedures.

Additionally, a tour of the facilities should be conducted, including the computer rooms, library facilities, laboratories and other teaching and learning facilities.

4.4 Committees

The participating institutions are presumed to have representative committees comprising representatives of faculties and students; and discussing issues related to the teaching and learning process, quality assurance etc. in the institution. The specific committees to meet should be discussed between the peer assessment team and the participating institution, respecting the relevant structures in each institution. If the committees are larger than eight people, a selection of the people representing the different groups of the institution should participate in the meeting.

This meeting aims to give the peer assessment team information about the following issues:

o The principles and practices of the institution with regards to educational processes and quality assurance.

o The procedures and role of the committee in question in steering the educational processes (learning outcomes, curriculum), student assessment and quality assurance.

o The role of students in the committee in question.

4.5 Student union

This meeting aims to give the peer assessment team information about the following issues:

o The role and activities of the student union; the selection and mandate of the student union representatives.

o The role of students in the governance of the institution.

o The ways in which the student union consults and communicates with its constituents, i.e. the students at the grassroots level.

o The perceptions of the student union on curriculum, quality assurance, services and support for students, teaching and learning facilities, and potential problem points.

o The relationship of the student union with institutional leadership