Learning and Teaching Requirements in the European Higher Education Area

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Looking at some of the changes and challenges in modern societies, this paper argues that the Bologna Process and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area have evolved as a specific European answer to key developments of our age. Focusing on the internal dynamics of the Bologna Process in their interaction with external challenges, I will examine the transition from merely structural reforms (e.g. comparable degree structures) to qualitative aspects of higher education, and identify outcome orientation as an essential driver of the reform processes that will give us truly innovative approaches in teaching and learning. The resultant call for student-centred teaching and learning and enhanced student support is embedded in attempts to ensure that the specific qualities of academic learning – e.g. deep learning and self-reliant reflection integrated in personal development – prevail in the reality of mass higher education. The underlying hypothesis is that this kind of learning will facilitate the building of bridges between higher education and the world of work, and thus link the university and higher education (HE) more closely to the challenges of 21st century societies.

With this background in mind, I will argue for a basic process model for student-centred learning on the one hand, and for a cooperative approach to learning support on the other. In conclusion, I will outline some challenges and promising fields for future European debates, research, and policy development on academic learning.

Higher education: target and driver of modernization in European societies

The discourse on "knowledge societies", in which knowledge has become an essential element in the production of wealth, as well as the increasingly globalised market of the world economy have led to a strong focus in public debate both on the universities and on policy development. Internationalisation of the universities and international education has become a relevant feature in the development of universities. Although the internationalisation of universities and HE, including student mobility, has various driving rationales (Knight, 2008, p.8f.), and is conceptually and in practice clearly distinct from market globalisation (Knight, 2008 and Teichler, 2008) it nevertheless interacts with the

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influences of globalisation on economies and societies. These tendencies are embedded in a perspective in which the universities have been seen as an essential producer of advanced innovative knowledge derived from their engagement in research and transmitted in the form of an HE offer for an ever-increasing number of students. In this dual function the universities can be seen, therefore, as both fosterers and developers of human resources.

In this sense Scott identifies enhanced access as a "primary driver of higher education development" (Scott, 2006, p.20), which, despite differences in the policies and effects of widening qualitative access, has brought about "mass higher education systems" (ibid., p.2) in both the US and Europe. In Scott's view, this development towards mass HE, which is interwoven with social demands as well as economic and social change, "represents the fourth decisive epoch in the long history of the university – equal in significance to its first foundations in medieval Europe" (ibid.). In this development, which Scott refers to as a "push-driver", access is closely associated with the "pull-driver […] the increasing demand for graduates with expert and professional skills" (ibid.). Thus the success of graduates in the job market has become an important expectation and an essential criterion for evaluating the impact of HE in modern societies.

These aspirations and demands are also reflected in the new relationship of the universities with enterprises and with society. Financial crises and related policy developments have resulted in more cautious approaches to the market orientation of HE (Scott, 2011). At the same time new complexities are arising in the relationship between the production and the transmission of knowledge, which is typically described today as "a reflexive rather than a linear process with multiple actors" (ibid., p.19). Reflecting and balancing these complexities with the perspectives and interests of relevant stakeholders, the EC has again emphasised the need to improve "the quality and relevance of higher education" (European Commission, 2011, p.4) in its agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems.

The Bologna Process: initiation of ongoing reform processes

The Bologna Process and the development of the European Higher Education Area define the framework in which such an enhancement of the quality and relevance of higher education may be shaped. One might perceive the Bologna process as an attempt to find a European answer to balance and to strengthen the role of Higher Education while responding to the economical, social and environmental needs of European societies in the 21st century. (Rott & Aastrup, 2013 – forthcoming). Beginning in 1999, the Bologna process sought to achieve these aims – at first with the limited objective of improved student mobility through the introduction of comparable degree structures at Bachelor's and Master's level. However, the ambitious aim to achieve a European Area of Higher Education by 2010, and the clear understanding by many of the important stakeholders that success could only be achieved by a step-by-step communicative as well as integrative process of advancement and failure, led to deeper reflection on the conditions required to achieve the outlined objectives. The very strength of the Bologna Process has been that it initiated a European debate on HE reflecting essential challenges of HE in the 21st century. These debates resulted in bottom-up processes, in stakeholder involvement, and in ministerial decisions broadening common ground on concepts and assessing the barriers to and the essential challenges of Higher Education.

With respect to teaching and learning, one driver of the debate, as well as of policy

development, has been that to compare degrees one needs a common understanding of the results of study programmes and their quality. Consequently, the orientation on outcome and the development of quality assurance and qualification frameworks have started to play a prominent role in the debate. With the focus increasingly falling on how students acquire "what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning" (European Commission, 2009, p.11) it has been a logical consequence that the learning process itself has gained relevance and that the concept of student-centred teaching and learning has taken a central position in the Bologna Process.

The other driver has been the discourse on what kind of qualifications and competences are expected to be important for future economic, technological and social development, as well as for "a graduate's relative chances of success in obtaining employment at an appropriate level" (Yorke, 2006, p.2 drawing on Brown & Hesketh, 2004), and for the corresponding enhancement of "international professional mobility" (Teichler, 2007, p.11). Although considered "misleading" (ibid., p.31) by some researchers, the term "employability" has become an essential policy category to describe the transition from HE to the world of work. That the concept of employability is or should be linked with student-centred learning is one of the essential theses of this paper.

A focus in the European Higher Education Area: student-centred teaching and learning

As described above, the inner logic of the Bologna Process has led, with some inherent consequences, to a more student-centred perspective. The Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education underpinned this result in their perspective on the Bologna Process 2020: "Student-centred learning requires empowering individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance structures and a curriculum focused more clearly on the learner in all three cycles." (European Ministers 2009, p. 3).

However, the inner logic of the Bologna Process is not the only source of interest in student-centred approaches. These are also "a reflection of what is happening worldwide" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p.13). Already in the mid-nineties an important expression of the renewed focus on student learning in modern times was the call by the Americans Barr and Tagg for a "shift from an Instruction to a Learning Paradigm" and the demand for reconstruction of HE for what "we need for the 21st century" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p.14).

In a certain sense the movement is worldwide. Biggs and Tang (2011) describe steps taken in student-centred learning in Canada (p.96), Hong Kong (p.118), and Australia (p.325). In a comparative analysis Yoop (2009) claims that HE reforms in the US have been "increasingly focused on student-centred learning and problem based learning with accountability linked to learning outcomes" (p.5), while the Bologna Process has itself become an important driver "towards a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning […] in **W**estern and some Asian countries" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p.9).

These tendencies mirror social changes that have been accelerating during the last sixty years. With the increasing openness, flexibility and complexities of our societies, in which the construction of our human realities and natural environment rely more and more on innovation, reflective knowledge, consciousness and ethics embedded in reflective views of the world, the opportunities for – but also the demands on – the individual have vastly increased. In this context, HE plays an important role in coping with

change processes. However, in order to fulfil these expectations HE must foster students' and graduates' acquisition of discipline-based knowledge and methodologies in such a way as to be supportive of self-reliant and reflective learning and thinking embedded in personality development.

The advancement of learning environments that will allow students to develop approaches of creative knowledge production and to generate the competence to transfer knowledge into new contexts can be seen as a core criterion of success for HE in this century. HE has to be a space of what Biggs and Tang call "deep approaches" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p.26) in learning and studying; it has to open up pathways for methodologically based learning on how to learn. Both "declarative" or "content" knowledge and "functioning knowledge" – or knowing how "to put knowledge to work" – (p.81f.) will predictably undergo "increasing structural complexity" (p.87). And the ability to acquire such kinds of knowledge has the potential to foster the transfer of knowledge to new contexts, typically including the world of work.

Widening perspectives on student-centred learning and teaching: building bridges to business and society

Today more than ever, the universities and HE are expected to build bridges to business and society in the fields of research, teaching, and learning by constructing new ways of cooperation and coordination in the context of globalised knowledge societies (cf. European Commission, 2011). These expectations presume that the world of work will respond proactively with its own capabilities. As far as technological and economic innovation is concerned, these bridges are already becoming stronger; and for sustainable development, ethical standards, as well as ecological mindfulness and the improvement of social equity, are becoming crucial criteria. It is especially in these contexts that the joint contribution of enterprises with the universities is becoming visible. Urgency is added to the process by the current financial and economic crisis, with its budgetary restrictions and the demands it places on problem-solving abilities.

An acid test of the interface between the universities, business and society is the success of graduates in the job market. This immediately involves the question of how students are trained in HE and how they prepare themselves to cope with the requirements of the 'real world'. The increasing flexibilisation and globalisation of markets, as well as the ongoing knowledge-oriented modernisation of European societies, places extremely high demands on individuals and organisations alike (see Rott, 2010, p.2). This situation is reflected in both the theory and the practice of career development in the growth of process- and development-oriented perspectives focusing on non-linear career paths (Lee & Johnston, 2001, p.181) and on career responsiveness (Rott, 2010, p.5f.) in contrast to more traditional concepts of vocational guidance.

The competences needed to cope with these demands resemble those recommended in the debate on student-centred teaching and learning in HE. In the Bologna context, the EUA Trends V report already emphasized that it is essential for students to "become the engaged subjects of their own learning process" (Crosier et al., 2007, p.8). This would facilitate many problems, among them "[…] the labour market" (ibid.). The Communiqué of the European Ministers (2009) also states that "Student-centred learning and mobility will help students develop the competences they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens" (European Ministers, 2009, p.1). The EUA's 2010 Trends report sees student-centred learning as an approach in which

"learners 'construct' their own meaning by pro-active learning, discovery and reflection"; furthermore, this approach is often interdisciplinary, with the goal of attaining higher level generic skills and knowledge reflection (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, p.31). Such competences foster students' problem-solving abilities and intellectual ambition, and far from opposing knowledge transfer into the world of work, they may well support it.

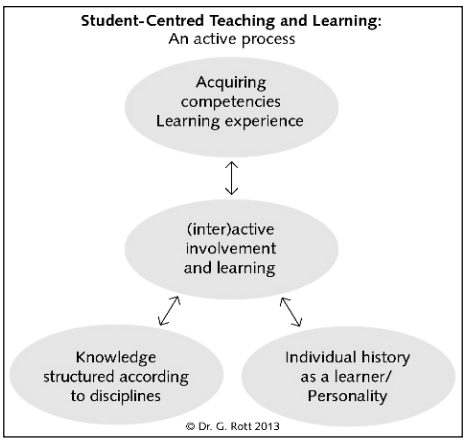
Conversely – as Yorke (2006) demonstrates in a model that goes beyond a mere skills-based perception of employability – taking into consideration "employers' requirements" (p.5) can be supportive of the essential aims of HE. He argues that work on those requirements by teaching staff and students alike does not stand in contradiction "to good academic learning" (ibid.). On the contrary, it can "align well with it and have the potential to enrich it" (ibid.). Broader personal effectiveness, skill practices in context, self-efficacy, meta-cognition and subject understanding can be "mutually influential in various ways" (ibid., p.6). To view employability in this sense as enhancing the inherent qualities of study comes close to Teichler's concept of the "professional relevance of study" (Teichler, 2007, p.1).

The concept of career management competence in higher education (Rott, 2010) describes how deep learning approaches can connect an understanding of the world of work, in which work-based learning plays a significant role, with the enhancement of students' knowledge and abilities. The key concept here is the linking of content and methodological knowledge with strategic perspectives. The network of European governments on life-long guidance puts an emphasis on such strategic perspectives "to overcome fragmentation and to integrate existing bottom-up and top-down processes" (Vuorinen & Watts (Eds.), 2012, p.22), and it identifies the interaction with student-centred learning as a key tool "to integrate the demands on student-centred teaching and learning, student support and the enhancement of employability in a meaningful way" (ibid., p.22).

The following model (consisting of two schemes, A and B) illustrates these complex interactions:

Integration of perspectives: a learning-centred process model of HE

Scheme A describes student-centred learning as an active personal process. Scheme B looks at how this personal learning process might be fostered in an institutionalized framework by a cooperative approach seeking to consistently provide better learning opportunities.



Scheme A

Scheme A emphasizes the two main resources in students' learning processes. The first is the individual student. The second is academic knowledge, with its various disciplines. Being an "extremely complex phenomenon" (Jarvis, 2007, p.9), any kind of learning process is an "internal psychological process of acquisition and elaboration" (Illeris, 2007, p.89), as well as an "external interaction process between the learner and his/her […] environment" (ibid. 89). The shift towards a

learner-centred approach "entails taking into account students' motivations and volitions as well as the interplay of their emotions, cognitions and behaviour" (Rott, 2011, p.269). Students' individual histories as learners influence these psychological processes. Their learning histories include past formal, informal and non-formal learning, as well as their personality development. They can be summed up as the "developmental process in which students try to find a balance between inner and outer worlds" (Rott, 2009, p.2).

It is a specific characteristic of academic knowledge that it is based on logic and methodology and on the communicative exchange of past and present research. Its structure and processes are disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, and all these processes are inherently open, limited, and subject to further development. In their development and communication the university faculty plays an active and responsible role.

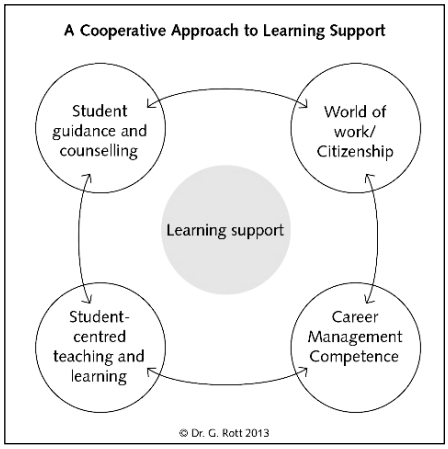
A prime aspect of this role is to determine the learning outcomes of degree programmes and modules, and Biggs & Tang propose "as an excellent collegial exercise for the programme committee" (2011, p.83) a prolongation of this work into the identification of threshold concepts. Originally described by Meyer and Land (2003), a threshold concept is seen as "opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (ibid., p.1). It must be differentiated from a core concept, which "has to be understood but […] does not necessarily lead to a qualitatively different view of subject matter" (ibid. p.4). Although often troublesome for students to learn, threshold concepts are challenging opportunities for them to acquire "deep approaches to learning the subject" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p.83).

This type of reflection, together with general didactic knowledge and "discipline specific pedagogical knowledge" (Berthiaume, 2009), has fostered the development of teaching and learning activities in which students can play an active role. In this student-centred approach work in the classroom frames a shared cooperative activity of student and teacher in which both are responsible, with their different contributions, to achieving success in the student's learning process. The university teacher has to clarify intended or desirable learning outcomes, and the level of understanding aimed at, as well as design teaching and learning activities that "are specifically attuned to helping students achieve levels of understanding" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p.20). She or he then has to design assessments for the students that are "aligned" (ibid. p.105) to the intended outcomes. And the teacher continually has to reflect on how to create a supportive classroom climate and how to improve his or her own teaching. A supportive classroom climate, however, is the joint task of student and teacher.

Learning activities are an engagement that both student and teacher, in the course of their communication (including feedback, asking of questions and exploration of difficulties), develop further into a personal learning process. In this interactive involvement students build on what they already know and what they are able to do, and use the potential of the learning opportunity to take further steps. If they learn not only how to apply this knowledge, but also how to integrate it into their own individual learning history and personality development, they will acquire enduring competences that will allow them to transfer it creatively to new contexts. Student-centred learning approaches are able to enhance such crucial attitudes and abilities in the context of mass higher education.

As Barr and Tagg (1995) have pointed out, the implementation of student-centred learning requires a paradigm shift. Such a shift takes time. Students and teachers alike must develop new attitudes and competences. But new concepts, frameworks and organisational

patterns are already supporting these changes of mindset. For students it is especially important that the university as a whole should develop a coherent policy framework. A cooperative approach, as outlined in scheme B, aligns the institutional settings in which students can find support for the necessary steps towards self-reliant and reflective learning.



Scheme B

A cooperative approach based on conceptual and practical common ground can make it easier for students to grasp the crucial 'how' issue: how to get involved in their own learning process and competence development.

Here, too, the essential element is the student-centred learning in the study programmes, as outlined above, in which students are introduced to activities in which they will acquire the knowledge, abilities and reflection to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Developing courses on career management in such a student-centred learning environment can enhance students' understanding of self-efficacy, self-reflection and personal management as well as work- and life-building by framing career perspectives based on their academic learning and relating this to the world of work (Rott, 2011). Work experience and work-based learning, as well as student projects or projects installed by faculty members to cooperate with civil society, can further clarify and define these perspectives. In this way, they will gain a deeper understanding of the potential of the learning experience and of themselves as learners.

In all the above settings, students experience the dialectics of being a person with own responsibility to develop personal capabilities and the need to cooperate, i.e. to organise their learning process in a social environment. The balancing process accompanying this interactive relationship is part of the ability to learn how to learn. Student support services, which include especially educational, career and psychological counselling, provide an additional opportunity to focus on the student as person and to help him/her to adjust to the demands of this interactive relationship. For example in psychological counselling students might discover how they can take steps to overcome procrastination or how they can cope with choice and responsibility. By relating results of psychological counselling to their learning, students can promote their development of competences, creativity, and innovative coping with challenging differences, and thus cope better with flow and structure (cf. Rott, 2008). In this sense, work on psychological conflicts supports students' abilities to make use of the potentials of the student-centred learning environment in a mature way.

A cooperative approach in line with the four fields described above will gradually enhance students' interactive ability and generate increased conceptual, organisational and practical common ground with the worlds of university on the one hand and work on the other. Such coherence will, in turn, have positive effects on learning support. And for all participants – staff, students and business managers – the university will become more

visible as a learning organization adapted to the 21st century.

Concluding remarks

In comparison to the long history of the universities, European developments from the nineties to the present are young. Scott describes the emergence of mass higher education as "the fourth decisive epoch" (Scott, 2010, p.2) and university history as "accelerating between the sixties and the eighties" (ibid.) of the last century. One might perhaps argue that the attention given to the student-centred teaching and learning approach in this century is a reaction or an attempt to find a good way to ensure the kind of quality development that is essential for HE institutions in the face of mass higher education. Student-centred learning may be perceived as an attempt to safeguard for students an understanding of the wholly traditional ambition to strive for truth and for the enjoyment of deep and thorough reflection in HE. In such a view three fields stand out, in which methodological work, practical improvement, policy development and research can be deepened:

First: the further improvement of the methodologies of student-centred teaching and learning, including their interaction with career and personal development.

Secondly: based on that improvement, a focus should fall on the cost-effectiveness of student-centred learning. In times of extreme financial pressures, it would be myopic not to clarify arguments concerning the financial aspects of student-centred learning, i.e. cost-effectiveness and the financial means necessary to achieve the objectives of outcome-based learning.

Thirdly: it seems the time has now come to reflect more deeply on student-centred teaching and learning from a comparative perspective, drawing on the HE philosophies and approaches developed during the last 200 years, especially in France, the UK and Germany. This could result in a European-wide reflection on HE which – building on a more thorough understanding of historical, cultural and theoretical differences – would seek new and creative ways to substantiate student-centred teaching and learning. This would involve reading the texts of the past hermeneutically in their specific historical contexts and examining – in explicit opposition to the misuse of traditional knowledge – how their insights might inspire us to solve our own problems.

Take, for example the German philosopher Schelling, whose 1803 lectures on the method of academic study became highly relevant to the development of the Humboldtian approach to HE. In one of these lectures Schelling (Schelling 2008, p.19) wonders how Aristotle, whose theories on nature and the history of nature had – in his view – always "inquired of nature" could have been (mis-)used as an authority against Descartes and Kepler by those who had lost all knowledge of this aspect of Aristotelian thought (p.19)[2]. In such a critical spirit it could be enriching to integrate our past European heritage, with a view to establishing deeper and broader common ground in the European Higher Education Area. The resources are there to meet the challenges of this century, and to foster in this way world-wide communication and cooperation throughout the academic community.

2. *The original text passage would read in German: "Aristoteles hatte in seinen Schriften die Naturlehre und Naturgeschichte betreffend die Natur selbst gefragt; in den spätem Zeiten hatte sich das Andenken davon so völlig verloren, dass er selbst an die Stelle des Urbilds trat und gegen die deutlichen Aussprüche der Natur durch Cartesius, Kepler u.a. seine Autorität zum Zeugen aufgerufen wurde." (Schelling 2008, p.19)*

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