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Investigating the Challenges of Student Centered Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Eritrea

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Abstract:

The mode of teaching and learning followed by the HEIs in Eritrea are dominantly teacher-led, as opposed to SCL. However, the effectiveness of higher education and its relevance in a dynamic economy requires a shift from the traditional form of teaching towards SCL. The purpose of the study was to investigate the major challenges of introducing SCL in HEIs in Eritrea taking the case of the College of Business and Economics at Halhale (CBEH). The study used a case study design and focused a population a of senior students attending four-year degree programs of study offered by the college in five disciplines; namely, Economics, Finance, Accounting, Business Management and Public Administration. The study used a sample size of 200 subjects and applied stratified and systematic random sampling methods to select study respondents. The survey questionnaire was designed to gather information required by the study. Data collected were entered and processed using statistical package of social science (SPSS) version 21. Processed data were then presented using simple frequencies and percentages, and summarized in tables to show the main outcomes encouraged by the mode of teaching followed by the academic departments and the challenges of SCL in CBEH. The study concludes that more effort is needed to consolidate and expand the introduction of SCL in HEIs in the country and in particular; teaching aids, digital library, internet connectivity, student support services need to be invested upon. The study recommends that there is a need to shift towards SCL in HEIs in Eritrea and in this process lecturers need to encourage students to become more focused, self-directed and involved. The study findings are of great use in areas of education development in higher institutes of learning.

Keywords: *Student centered learning (SCL), teacher-led pedagogy, higher education institute, professional development, Student Centered Learning challenges*

1. Introduction

Student Centered Learning (SCL) is a term commonly used by educators and education policy-makers, which is based on the philosophy that the learner or the student is at the center of the learning process. The SCL approach recognizes that students have a wide range of opinions,

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abilities and strengths and in this sense it empowers students to make their own choices about their education and future career. It is argued that beyond the rhetoric, possibly the most noticeable changes that can be seen are a greater emphasis on the development of skills, and in particular, general transferable 'life' skills (and the notion of lifelong learning) (Rust, 2002). SCL, as a theory of learning, is based on the theory of constructivism, which is formulated on the idea that learners must construct and reconstruct knowledge in order to learn effectively. The benefits of SCL to the student are many and varied which include making students an integral part of the academic community, increased motivation to learn, independence and responsibility in learning, and it offers due consideration for student needs. However, the benefits of SCL are not restricted to the student. It has benefits to the teacher, to the institution, as well as to the society at large for the main reason that it fosters a life-long learning culture (Attard *et al*, 2010).

SCL is a concept created within the field of educational pedagogy and has been a topic of discussion in many HEIs. The SCL approach tends to discourage the traditional teacher-led form of learning and favors more flexible learning methods which should be available for students. Traditional learning, also referred as conventional learning, tends to consider students as passive receptors of information that do not actively participate in the learning process. On the other hand, the SCL is diametrically opposed to the philosophy underlying the conventional method of learning as it allows students to shape their own learning paths. By definition, the SCL experience is not a passive one, as it is based on the premise that 'student passivity does not support or enhance learning' and that it is precisely 'active learning' which helps students to learn independently (Machemer & Crawford, 2007). Moreover, there has been a general rejection of the traditional teacher-led method by researchers, decision makers, teacher trainers, educational support staff, parents and class room practitioners, in favor of SCL (Oinam, 2017).

SCL has a number of advantages, and the superiority of SCL as a pedagogical approach becomes more relevant when it is applied in HEIs. The challenge of SCL has been with the transition and the paradigm shift required to move from the traditional teacher centered approach to SCL, and this challenge has been more pronounced in the educational systems of most of developing countries (De La Sablonnière *etal*, 2009). In Nigeria, a major Sub Saharan African country, for instance, the challenge of making SCL practical in HEIs include low quality educational system, low level of pedagogical understanding among educators, large class sizes, demands of the curriculum, assessment challenges, and challenges related with infrastructure, electricity and internet connectivity (Anyanwu & Iwuamadi, 2015).

An examination of the relevant literature on the conditions which are necessary for SCL to be implemented within a HEI shows that within the classroom, practical implementation of an SCL approach can include different components such as group project work and presentations, case studies and analysis, problem solving and classroom workshops. It can also include student-centred active learning involving internships and use of web-conferencing environment to enhance student discourse and interaction in distance education.

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Given the new roles for both the teacher and the student, the key factor in implementing a new approach to learning is motivation of both teachers and students. In this sense greater involvement with students by the teacher is central to student motivation which also requires continuous professional development for teachers (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). Another important area for the SCL approach to higher education is the role of Information Technology, Libraries and Information Systems. As methods of teaching and learning develop over time, so do the ways in which knowledge is imparted and the tools that students use to learn. The internet gives teachers and students opportunities and multiple paths for understanding and communication (Arko-Cobbah, 2004). The wireless internet has a positive and significant influence on SCL in three dimensions: pedagogical, technological and cultural learning (Lu, 2005). Libraries in HEIs play crucial role in SCL and are expected to adapt to changes that catapult them into a central role within the teaching and learning environment (Arko-Cobbah, 2004). Moreover, the importance of research in SCL is well recognized and the theoretical notion that institutions of higher education should have three pronged functions of instruction, research and public service is well known. The real question, however, is to make those functions a reality (Tesfagiorgis, 1991).

In the case of Eritrea, the Declaration of Policy on Education which was issued immediately after independence (in 1991) states that education policy will reflect the government's perception of education as a human right and as a means by which equity can be achieved (PGE, 1991). Accordingly, education of youth and narrowing the gender gap was given attention at all levels, including in higher education. After almost ten years of experience, in 2002, a concept paper was prepared to act as a starting point for discussions and actions of implementation to reform the Eritrean educational system. This was because it was believed that the educational system as a whole was found to have some major deficiencies. Among these were access to education, in general, was low for the country as a whole; the opportunity for higher education within Eritrea, even at the undergraduate level, was very low; the products of the education system at all levels, elementary school, middle school, high school and even at university level were not prepared well for employment and there was perennial complaint of employers; not only was access to education very low at all levels, but also the existing educational system was wasteful (GOE, 2002).

Following policy reforms made, the GOE took a number of measures to reduce wastage through increased access to education at all levels and reduced drop outs. Moreover, efforts were undertaken to incorporate learner centered systems as well as curriculum reform that is broad, balanced and relevant to national development plans and priorities of the country. The intention is that educational provision will be facilitated through an integration of academic and practical subjects (GOE, 2010). At the same time the GOE allocated huge budget towards the education sector and indicated in its educational policy that Learner Centered Interactive Pedagogy (LCIP) will be followed in the teaching and learning process at all levels (MOE, 2011).

Student Centered Learning (SCL) in the HEIs in Eritrea remains to be of paramount importance but needs to be developed. This is because there is a widely held view that traditional form of

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teaching and learning is still dominant in HEIs in Eritrea. SCL is a fundamental basis for Life Long Learning (LLL) and aims to provide practical skills and competencies for students and helps to reduce wastage of educated manpower due to mismatch of labor market. Given this background, the overall objective of this paper is to identify the key challenges and constraints to the development and expansion of SCL in HEIs with reference to the College of Business and Economics at Halhale (CBEH), Eritrea.

2. Methodology

The design used in the study was a case study with focus on CBEH which is one of the seven HEIs in Eritrea. CBEH is the only college in the country that offers four-year degree programs of study in five disciplines; namely, Economics, Finance, Accounting, Business Management and Public Administration. Its graduates are employed by public and private enterprises and it is a college that strives to implement SCL approach.

The study target population were senior students namely 3rd and 4th year degree students of the five academic departments. These students were expected to have stayed in CBEH for more than two years and to have taken more than 75 credit hours by the end of 2016-2017 Academic Year.

The list of 3rd and 4th year degree students of the five departments which served as a sampling frame was obtained from the registrar office of the College. A sample size of 200 subjects was used in the study.The study applied stratified and systematic random sampling methods to select study respondents. Sample allocation to departments was based on proportional to size.

The survey questionnaire was designed to gather information on the experiences and practices of students with SCL, and the challenges of SCL in the teaching and learning process of CBEH. Data collected were entered and processed using statistical package of social science (SPSS) version 21. Processed data were then presented using simple frequencies and percentages, and summarized in Tables to show the main outcomes encouraged by the mode of teaching followed by the academic departments and the challenges of SCL in CBEH. The researcher observed ethical and legal issues in research like the principle of confidentiality, anonymity, and acknowledgement of other people's input throughout the whole study.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study sought to establish the demographic characteristics of the the respondents. About 40 percent of the respondents were female students, and as to the age distribution of the students, about 83 percent of them were within the age range of 19-23 years; 9 percent of them were in 24-30 years, and the remaining 8 percent were aged 31 years and above.

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Distribution of the study respondents by departments and the year of study was was also determined as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage distribution of respondents by field of study and year

		Number	Percentage
Department	Accounting	48	24.1
	Economics	29	14.6
	Finance	43	21.6
	Business Management	40	20.1
	Public Administration	39	19.6
	Total	199	100.0
Year	3rd year	94	47.2
	4th year	105	52.8
	Total	199	100.0

As shown in Table 1, slightly more than half (52.8%) of the study respondents were 4th year students while the remaining 47.2% of them were 3rd year students. Additionally, the study respondents were distributed evenly in various departments. Nearly a quarter (24.1%) of the respondents came from accounting department, 21.6% from finance department, 20.1% from business management department, 19.6% from public administration department and the remaining 14.6% were from the department of economics. This implies that the study respondents were uniformly distributed by both year of study and department of study.

3.2 Challenges of Student Centered Learning in Higher Education Institutions

The study investigated the major challenges facing Student Centered Learning in Higher Education Institutions in the context of CBEH. The hypothesized challenges that were investigated by the study included Modes of Teaching in the Department Attended, Students' Assessment Approaches used in CBEH, Instructor's Attitude and their Classwork, Mode of Teaching and the Level of Adequacy of Facilities and Services in CBEH.

3.2.1 Modes of Teaching in the Department Attended

The opinions of the respondents on the modes of teaching and learning followed in CBEH is summarized in Table 2.

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Table 2

The modes of teaching in the department attended

Mode of teaching	Number*	Percentage*
Lectures	157	78.9
Participatory (Group work)	68	34.2
Laboratory based	6	3.0
Research based	29	14.6
Student internships (Company visits)	35	17.6
Guest lectures	5	2.5
Assignments based	99	49.7
Presentations	75	37.7
Total	199	100.0

**The sum of the cells exceeds the total because of multiple answers*

As shown in Table 2, lecture is the dominant method of teaching in CBEH as indicated by 78.9 percent of the respondents and this is more related to traditional teacher-led form of teaching. Other key teaching approaches used are assignments (49.7%), presentations (37.7%) and group work (34.2%), all of which have some form of relations to SCL.

3.2.2 Students' Assessment Approaches Used in CBEH

The study sought determine the approaches used to assess students in CBEH. According to 41.7% of the respondents, the assignments mostly given by instructors involve individual work and activity, while 58.3 percent of them reported that the assignments given mostly involve group work and activity. The assignments were shared and presented in class according to 57.8 percent of the respondents and were graded by instructors according to 73.9 percent of the respondents. This is indicative that a mix of student centered and teacher-led form of teaching was practiced in the College.

As regards to whether the course offered require the preparation of term-papers, about 67% of the respondents were in agreement. This is in line with the SCL approach that encourages research and helps students to conduct research and develop research capacity. Moreover, senior students in the College are required to write term papers and prepare a final senior research paper as part of the requirements for graduation. The final research paper can be prepared on individual basis or in group depending on the requirements of the department.

Some of the courses offered by the departments require students to write term papers and the respondents have written term papers for the courses they attended. By the time this study was conducted, it was found that, among those who reported to have written term papers, there were

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more 4th year students reported to have written term papers than 3rd year students as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Term papers written by year of study

Year			Number	Percentage
3rd year	Term papers written	1	16	45.7
		2	4	11.4
		3	9	25.7
		4	1	2.9
		5	2	5.7
		6	0	.0
		8	2	5.7
		10	1	2.9
		Total	35	100.0
4th year	Term papers written	1	22	29.3
		2	15	20.0
		3	24	32.0
		4	6	8.0
		5	2	2.7
		6	2	2.7
		8	1	1.3
		10	3	4.0
		Total	75	100.0

From Table 3, nearly half (46%) of the 3rd year students reported to have written only one term paper by the time this study was conducted as compared to 29% of the 4th year students. Another (26%) of the 3rd year and 32% of the 4th year students reported to have written three term papers by the time when the research was conducted.

One of the key practices associated with SCL is group work or activity by students. Thus, what teachers or instructors think of group work as a method of teaching and learning has important influence on student understanding of SCL. About 77 percent of the respondents indicated that instructors in the departments encourage team or group work activities. As shown in table 4, it is found that group work activities are commonly practiced at the College.

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Table 4
Summary statistics on number of group/teamwork activities conducted by year of study

	Number of group or teamwork activities conducted				Students	
	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Missing	Total
3rd year students	6	5	1	25	14	94
4th year students	7	6	2	20	7	105
Total	-	-	-	-	21	199

3.2.3 Instructor's Attitude and their Classwork

Another key factor in SCL is changes in attitude of instructors and the way instructors organize their classes and what they do in classrooms. This is indicative of the' readiness of instructors in HEIs to move away from the traditional form of teaching to a more student centered teaching and learning. Among the respondents, about 58 percent have indicated that they conduct class presentations, seminars and discussions in the departments, which are activities more related to SCL. In addition, the respondents were asked about their opinions as to whether SCL or teacher-led approaches best explain the mode of teaching and learning followed by the departments. It was found that 49.5 percent of the respondents reported that SCL best explains the mode of teaching/learning, compared to 50.5 percent for teacher-led approach. The result indicates that the mode of teaching and learning in the departments of CBEH is best explained by a mix of the two approaches.

3.2.4 Outcomes Encouraged by the Mode of Teaching in CBEH

There are several outcomes that are encouraged by the mode of teaching followed in CBEH. Table 5 shows the distribution of the ranks given for each outcome encouraged by the mode of teaching along with their point scores. Point scoring system of the ranks given by the respondents was used to order the outcomes encouraged by the mode of teaching in CBEH. The point score assigned to each rank is as follows: 1st rank= 10pts; 2nd = 9pts; 3rd = 8pts; 4th = 7pts, 5th = 6pts, 6th = 5pts, 7th = 4pts, 8th = 3pts, 9th =2pts and 10th = 1pt.

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Table 5
Number and point scores of the ranking by respondents on the outcomes encouraged by the mode of teaching

Outcomes encouraged by the Method of Teaching in CBEH	Number of respondents ranking										Point Score	Percent Score
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Memorize subject matter	32	16	24	14	15	9	4	9	10	66	1008	10.8
Be practical and research oriented	30	24	18	13	17	10	10	10	10	57	1019	10.9
Acquire skills and competencies	23	20	32	13	8	15	10	11	2	65	1022	11
Be more academic and theoretical	28	30	20	10	12	8	16	12	8	55	1063	11.4
Acquire knowledge and be critical thinker	50	35	23	16	7	9	8	5	2	44	1293	13.9
Be entrepreneurial minded and innovative	13	17	20	14	16	13	11	11	11	73	874	9.4
Be competitive on grades	13	20	20	10	8	8	13	18	21	68	824	8.9
Study for passing examinations	10	15	16	8	12	7	7	8	16	100	710	7.6
Be computer oriented	10	12	4	8	9	13	17	9	15	102	642	6.9
Group or team work	10	8	15	20	16	23	20	15	11	61	851	9.1
Total											9306	99.9

As shown in Table 5, total point score for each factor is obtained by taking the weighted sum of the number of respondents on each rank. The results are mixed and opinion of the students on the outcome encouraged by the method of teaching is diverse as shown by the ranks and the point scores. The point score of 13.9 is the highest for the outcome 'helping students acquire knowledge and be critical thinkers'. Other point scores are 11.4 for 'students to be more academic and theoretical', 10.8 for 'memorizing subject matter' and 7.7 for 'learning to pass examinations'. The lowest point score of 6.9 is for 'students to be computer and modern technology oriented', which is less encouraged by the method of teaching in CBEH. This is partly due to low level of computerized system of education, and poor IT systems and internet in the college. This has its implications on the education of the students, employability of the graduates, and the jobs of the future. What is important here is the relative ordering of the outcomes and what the students think is encouraged by the mode of teaching.

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3.2.5 Level of Adequacy of Facilities and Services in CBEH

The available facilities, student services and other programs in CBEH are also expected to have influence on the introduction and progress towards SCL. The opinion of students in this regard is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6
Student opinions on the level of adequacy of facilities and services available in CBEH

		Inadequate	Moderately adequate	Highly adequate	Missing	Total
Traditional Library System	No.	36	107	53	3	199
	%	18.1	53.8	26.6	1.5	100.0
Digital library	No.	77	93	27	2	199
	%	38.7	46.7	13.6	1.0	100.0
Computer centre	No.	115	54	23	7	199
	%	57.8	27.1	11.6	3.5	100.0
Database and Software Packages	No.	143	32	17	7	199
	%	71.9	16.1	8.5	3.5	100.0
Student support system and counselling	No.	121	58	13	7	199
	%	60.8	29.1	6.5	3.5	100.0
Academic Advisory System	No.	79	95	19	6	199
	%	39.7	47.7	9.5	3.0	100.0
Study halls or reading rooms	No.	31	101	62	5	199
	%	15.6	50.8	31.2	2.5	100.0

As shown in Table 6, the traditional library system is moderately adequate according to 53.8 percent of the respondents. Nearly two thirds (60.3%) of them were in opinion that digital library was adequate. Availability of database and software package is inadequate according to 71.9 percent of the respondents, and student support system and counselling is inadequate in CBEH according to 60.8 percent of respondents. A vast majority (82%) of the respondents felt that study halls or reading rooms were adequate.

4. Discussion

The study findings indicate that, despite efforts made to promote access and quality of higher education, significant challenges exist in introducing SCL in CBEH. The result of the survey show that 49.5 percent of the respondents reported that SCL best explains the mode of teaching followed, while the remaining 50.5 percent were of the opinion that teacher-led best explains the

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mode of teaching in the college. In addition, according to 41.7 percent of the respondents, the assignments given by instructors in the College mostly involve individual work while 58.3 percent of the respondents reported that the assignments involved group work. Some of the courses offered by the departments in CBEH require preparation of term papers as reported by 67 percent of the student respondents. The term papers were presented in class and results were shared among students according to 57.8 percent of the respondents, and were graded by instructors according to 73.9 percent of the respondents. Thus, this is indicative that a blend of SCL and teacher-led form of teaching is practiced in CBEH while there is a lot to be done towards achieving full SCL.

The results shown by the ranks and point score system are mixed and opinions of the students on the outcomes encouraged by the method of teaching in CBEH are diverse. High point scores are found for the outcomes 'students to acquire knowledge and be critical thinkers' (13.9), 'to be more academic and theoretical' (11.4) and 'to memorize subject matter' (10.8). Low point scores are found for 'students learning to pass examinations' (7.6) and 'be computer and technology oriented' (6.9). The latter is not encouraged by the method of teaching in CBEH as the lecture approach and the use of chalk and blackboard is still in place, which is mostly explained due to inadequacy of SCL teaching aids, facilities, libraries and support services.

The availability of resources and their utilization by instructors affects the practice of SCL. Thus the type of support given to instructors is of importance and there are views that the degree to which a teacher practices SCL is partly determined by the resources and facilities available. The experience of CBEH shows that the library system is in its traditional stage, introduction of digital library is at early stage and facilities, infrastructure and support system are not conducive for SCL. At the same time SCL is influenced by the teacher's beliefs and attitudes which are crucially important. Some of these are attitudes of teachers towards group work by learners as one of the key practices associated with SCL is group work or activity by students. Findings show that instructors in CBEH encourage group work activity and research paper writing. But student motivation within conventional learning settings tends to take the form of competition between students, largely based on grades. Within SCL, students are given options in shaping their courses and in choosing particular units within their study programme. Results from the survey show about 95 percent of the student respondents joined the college of their own choice while 84.4 percent of them joined the department and field of study of their own choice. Students placed in fields of study not of their choices are mostly not motivated and teachers face problems with such students to force them to learn when they are not ready to learn.

It is important to note that SCL was originally developed in Europe and North America and this approach is currently finding its way to other Asian and African countries. This study recognizes SCL as a powerful approach that gives students greater autonomy, empowerment, and control over his or her own learning. The results are similar with other studies such as implementation of SCL in South Africa where librarian's time is crucial and libraries are expected to provide facilities like more spaces for study, more personal computers and workstations, online database and internet facilities (Albert Arco-Cobbah, 2004). Similar findings in Vietnam also indicate the

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need for changes in both school infrastructures and people's perceptions in order to apply a student-centered learning approach (Thanh, 2010). On the other hand, a qualitative study carried out at one selected university in Mozambique showed that the teachers did not feel ownership of the innovation and the students revealed difficulties in taking responsibility for their learning. Traditional 'punitive' assessment culture and the Mozambican 'poverty context' influenced pedagogical practice. But Younger teachers appeared to have more interest in SCL (Mendonca & Popov, 2014). Overall the study is consistent with previous studies on SCL that put students in focus and that does not by any means diminish the role and importance of teachers. But progress in SCL in HEIs in Eritrea seems to be slow compared to SCL in higher education in countries like South Africa and the European countries.

5. Conclusion

This study makes it clear that more effort is needed to consolidate and expand the introduction of SCL in HEIs in the country. But, the key factor is associated with the teachers' readiness to move from the traditional form of teaching to a more learner centered approaches of teaching and learning in colleges with the student at the center. As teachers have been the main focus in conventional learning approaches, it is with them that the responsibility for a shift towards the SCL starts. In this sense, professional development of academic staff plays key role in HEIs. The other important factor is the provision of adequate facilities and services that support SCL. In particular, teaching aids, digital library, internet connectivity, student support services need to be invested upon. Thus, improvements in infrastructure, facilities, and support services needs to be given due attention. Further, a shift towards SCL in HEIs in Eritrea and in this process lecturers need to encourage students to become more focused, self-directed and involved.

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