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Higher Education Students’ Attitudes to Student-centred Learning: beyond ‘educational bulimia’?

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ABSTRACT If education is to be truly student-centred, students should be consulted about the process of learning and teaching. Moreover, within the current higher education climate, it is imperative that institutions move from an ‘inside out’ approach, where those on the inside ‘know’ what is best, to an ‘outside in’ approach where customers’ expectations are researched and serviced. The research reported here investigated higher education students’ perceptions of and attitudes to student-centred learning. Two studies were conducted, employing the complementary methods of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The first study involved focus groups while the second involved an Internet questionnaire. Results showed that students generally held very positive views of student-centred learning. However, they were unsure as to whether current resources were adequate to support the effective implementation and maintenance of such an approach. Implications of these findings are discussed with respect to educational research and practice.

Introduction

Interest in student-centred learning has been long-standing among educators in primary, secondary and higher education. Research, policy and practice claiming to take a student-centred approach has continued to grow. However, one of the central problems with both theoretical and applied work in this area is that of definition. As Farrington (1991, p. 16) has noted, there is ‘considerable disagreement and confusion about what student centred learning actually is’. A lack of attention to and consistency in defining the approach has resulted in a plethora of synonyms (e.g. learner-centred education, flexible learning) and an inability to compare studies or teaching practices directly.

A range of potential definitions may be identified. Different researchers and practitioners highlight different dimensions of the learning and teaching process (see, for example, Brandes & Ginnis, 1986; Fay, 1988; Cannon & Newble, 2000). For our purposes, Cannon and Newble (2000, p. 16) provide a good starting point. They define student-centred learning (SCL) as:

ways of thinking and learning that emphasize student responsibility and activity in learning rather than what the teachers are doing. Essentially SCL has student responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to a strong emphasis on teacher control and coverage of academic content in much conventional, didactic teaching.
Thus, student-centred learning embodies the following tenets: reliance upon active rather than passive learning, an emphasis on deep learning and understanding, increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student, an increased sense of autonomy in the learner, an interdependence between teacher and learner (as opposed to complete learner dependence or independence; Fay, 1988), mutual respect within the learner–teacher relationship, and a reflexive approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both teacher and learner. Implicit within this approach is the principle that students should be consulted about the learning and teaching process; that is, that it is student- rather than teacher-centred (Biggs, 1999).

A student-centred approach, therefore, differs quite fundamentally from more conventional approaches to learning and teaching. Moreover, these differences are not confined to what goes on in the classroom but include issues of epistemology. Hannafin et al. (1997) characterise the latter differences as follows:

Conventional instructional approaches ... reflect a positivist epistemology: information and concepts are separated from the contexts in which they naturally occur, meaning exists independent of the perceiver, and attainment of externally defined learning outcomes provides evidence of acquisition. Student centred approaches, on the other hand, are rooted in constructivist epistemology: knowledge and context are inextricably connected, meaning is uniquely determined by individuals and is experiential in nature, and the solving of authentic problems provides evidence of understanding. (p. 94)

The different epistemological underpinnings of a student-centred approach manifest themselves in different theoretical positions and teaching methods. A second major issue in this area is the common gulf between rhetoric and reality. That is, many institutions or educators claim to be putting student-centred learning into practice, but in reality they are not (Biggs, 1999). Thus, as Farrington (1991, p. 16) has concluded, there is frequently ‘more rhetoric than reality involved in claims about student centred learning methods in Further Education’. Based on the observation of almost 300 educators (further education and adult education lecturers, nurse tutors, and school teachers) as course leader of an In-Service Certificate in Further Education, Farrington found that, while many educators believed that they were adopting a student-centred approach, the learning–teaching agenda remained firmly in the hands of the teacher.

One of the possible reasons for this gulf is that implementing a truly student-centred approach (e.g. Rogers, 1965; Brandes & Ginnis, 1986) to learning and teaching takes a considerable amount of effort (Felder & Brent, 1996). As academics labour under the pressure to publish or perish, devoting time to innovative teaching methods is unlikely to be seen as a high priority. A further disincentive is simply one of resources. Student-centred learning requires as much in the way of resourcing (if not more, initially) than other methods. Moreover, the perception and experience of many UK academics is that resources are more likely to be allocated to research than to teaching. Thus, the gap between rhetoric and reality may be a function of the current climate in higher education, rather than of truculence on the part of educators.

Provided the definitional and pragmatic concerns surrounding student-centred learning could be overcome, is there really evidence to suggest that a student-centred approach is more effective than conventional approaches? Overall, the answer to this question appears to be in the affirmative. For example, a recent longitudinal study conducted by Lonka and Ahola (1995) within the Department of Psychology at the University of Helsinki compared ‘traditional’ and ‘activating’ instruction. The six-year project found that activating
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instruction differed significantly from traditional instruction. Student evaluations, using questionnaires, archive data and evaluation forms, revealed that the development of study skills and understanding were associated with 'activating' courses more than with those that were 'traditional' in approach. Moreover, although those students who participated in 'activating' courses studied more slowly during the first three years, they were more successful than students in 'traditional' courses in the long run. Thus, the number of 'activating' courses taken was related to academic success in the final examination and thesis writing.

Hall and Saunders (1997) explored the use of a more student-centred approach within a first-year information technology course. They too adopted teaching methods that aimed to foster more active learning, often regarded as the cornerstone of student-centred approaches (Cannon & Newble, 2000). Thus, student presentations, quizzes and continuous assessment were used rather than the more conventional lecture and final examination. Although the transition to this approach was not without problems (such as increased workload for staff and a shortage of resources), the course was seen to increase student participation, motivation and grades. Some 94% of the students taking the course attested that they would recommend it, rather than a conventional course, to others. Similar findings are reported by Prendergast (1994), who implemented student-centred learning with third-year business studies students.

It would seem, therefore, that a student-centred approach has the potential to improve educational outcomes for students in higher education. Overall, it is claimed that a student-centred approach has the potential to enhance 'motivation to learn, retention of knowledge, depth of understanding, and appreciation of the subject being taught' (Felder & Brent, 1996, p. 43). In addition, it appears that students generally prefer student-centred learning, although a few studies have found some students to be highly resistant to the implementation of such an approach and/or disappointed with the learning experience (e.g. Peeke, 1993; Felder & Brent, 1996). This may be due to a mismatch between what students expect of higher education and what they experience in student-centred learning. More research is needed to ascertain quite what factors contribute to the successful implementation of student-centred approaches to learning and teaching.

Perhaps one of the most important drivers for attempting to implement student-centred approaches in higher education is the changing nature of the student population. Approximately a decade ago, the increasing proportion of access students comprising the intake into higher education institutions had a significant effect upon the pedagogy within those institutions (Howells et al., 1991). Today, the policies and practices of widening participation have led to an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous student body, which has again challenged the way in which things are done within the sector. Increases in the number of mature students, international students and students with disabilities signal changes in the needs of students and, therefore, a need for change in the way that the university responds to those students. By shifting the emphasis from the teacher to the student, the diversity of student need can be appreciated and accommodated (Biggs, 1999). However, in order to appreciate what the academic and non-academic needs of students are, one has to ask them.

Despite changes in higher education that have resulted in students increasingly being seen and seeing themselves as primary customers (Hill, 1995; Thorne & Cuthbert, 1996) and, rightly or wrongly, lecturers being regarded as service providers, the sector continues to be dominated by what Sander et al. (2000) term an 'inside out' approach. The assumption is that those on 'the inside' know what is best in terms of what the needs of students are and what students should expect of their lecturers. However, as Sander et al. point out, successful service industries think 'outside in', researching the needs and expectations of their target
market and responding accordingly. In recent years, the needs of graduates have changed. They now need to have the flexibility to adapt to different jobs within their working life, and the ability to apply their learning to a wide range of situations. Consequently, in order to meet the changing needs of students, higher education institutions may need to learn from service industries.

Researching student expectations, attitudes and perceptions is, therefore, important for at least two reasons. First, the process of learning and teaching should take account of student needs and expectations. As noted, it needs to be fundamentally student-centred rather than teacher-centred. Engaging the student in the learning and teaching process is simply good educational practice. Second, the move from an ‘inside out’ to an ‘outside in’ approach should have an indirect impact on admission and retention statistics. Students will be both attracted to and more inclined to stay with a course that meets their learning needs. It is for these reasons that this study sought to examine higher education students’ attitudes toward and perceptions of student-centred learning within an institution which is highly committed to learning and teaching in general, and to the concept of student-centred learning in particular.

Method

The study employed a two-tier design, combining qualitative methods (focus groups) in an exploratory phase with quantitative methods (web-based questionnaire) in a more focused investigative phase. The complementary use of qualitative and quantitative methods has long been recognised (cf. Punch, 1998; Neuman, 2000).

Phase One

Forty-eight full-time psychology students participated in eight focus groups aimed at exploring issues of learning and teaching within the higher education environment in general, and the notion of student-centred learning in particular. Each focus group comprised six students. Of the eight focus groups held, two involved postgraduate students and six involved undergraduate students. The undergraduate focus groups included two from each of the three stages of the degree programme. For each stage, one group involved ‘traditional’ students (i.e. those 21 and under, and single), while the other group involved mature students (i.e. those over 21, and often co-habiting or with dependants). The rationale behind this sampling technique was to achieve a range of student perceptions and experiences across all levels of study, and to attempt to reflect the diversity of the student body following the policy and practice of widening participation.

Students were recruited to participate through large notices posted on university notice boards. Headed ‘It pays to talk’, notices advertised that students would be paid £5.00 per hour to participate in a discussion about student-centred learning. A sign-up sheet was provided for a range of date and time options.

The focus groups were held in a meeting room within the Department of Psychology. Light refreshments were served at the start of the group in order to facilitate a relaxed environment. A moderator guided the discussion through a series of topics related to learning and teaching within higher education. All groups lasted approximately an hour and were audiotaped with the permission of the group members. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Tapes were transcribed verbatim, using the light Jeffersonian method (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).
Phase Two

Thematic content analysis of the transcribed focus group material informed the development of a predominantly structured web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire focused specifically upon student-centred learning. A series of questions was designed to collect the participants’ demographic details and their perceptions and experience of the definition(s), purpose and effects of student-centred learning.

The short-form of the Approaches to Studying Inventory (Gibbs, 1990, based upon Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983), henceforth ASI, was used to assess participants’ general approach to learning. The ASI (short-form) consists of 18 items. Each item comprises a statement and a five-point scale on which respondents indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with that statement. The 18 items load on three subscales or orientations; namely, an achieving orientation, a reproducing orientation and a meaning orientation. The achieving orientation indicates ‘competitiveness, well organised study methods and hope for success’ (Gibbs, 1990) while the reproducing and meaning orientations reflect a surface or deep approach to learning respectively. This three-factor structure has been shown to be reasonably robust in studies by Richardson (1992) and Newstead (1992).

Reliability statistics for the ASI (short-form) demonstrate that the scale is moderately reliable, with mean alpha coefficients ranging between 0.47 and 0.67 (Richardson, 1992; Newstead, 1992). The validity of the full ASI scale has been assessed through its correlation with students’ perceptions of the learning culture of their institution, academic performance and the development of learning approaches over time. Results tend to be somewhat mixed, with some studies finding significant correlations and others failing to do so. With respect to the short-form, Newstead (1992) found indirect validation of the inventory through the correlation of the achieving and meaning subscales with academic performance, concluding that the ASI (short-form) is ‘a potentially useful instrument’ (p. 307).

The final questionnaire was active on the World Wide Web for six months and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Each of the five sections of the questionnaire (demographics, definitions, purpose and effects of student-centred learning and the ASI) was sent as a separate page in order to maximise data retrieval. Participants were warned that hackers could view the information they provided, while they were completing the study, if their own computer was not protected by a firewall. Protecting the student-centred learning website with a secure socket layer ensured the confidentiality of the data while in transit.

Participants were offered the opportunity to receive the results of their ASI should they wish to provide their e-mail address. Seventy-seven per cent of participants provided this information and were sent a one-page report that thanked them for their interest in the research, explained their scores on the three subscales and cautioned about taking such test results too seriously. The findings of each of the two phases of the study are reported separately and then compared in the discussion.

Qualitative Data

Transcripts were analysed using constant comparison analysis (Willig, 2001). The data were independently coded into categories by two researchers. The categories were then compared. On the whole, a high level of agreement was attained between the researchers with respect to the identification, definition and instantiation of categories. Where any small points of disagreement arose, the researchers re-examined their analyses and talked through their interpretation until agreement was reached.
The majority of focus group participants (approximately 60%) had not previously heard of student-centred learning, while those that had were unsure as to what the term meant. This finding is somewhat surprising since the research was conducted at a university which has had student-centred learning at the heart of its Learning and Teaching Strategy since 1999. Moreover, this strategy has a fairly prominent place on the university website.

Despite being unfamiliar with the term, students came up with various ideas about what such an approach might embody. All students thought that student-centred learning could have positive implications for their learning experience. However, some students (approximately 20%) drew a distinction between what they hoped the term meant and what they thought it probably did mean. This distinction hinged on scepticism in relation to such initiatives for a couple of students. For example, one student said:

I just had the impression that it was a political slogan almost. (Male, year 3, traditional)

For other students who drew this distinction, it hinged on ‘the reality of higher education today’ (female, year 3, mature). These students acknowledged the increasing pressures upon universities, such as large student numbers, high demand for research output and a tightening of resources. They asserted that, in reality, what they hoped student-centred learning might be was probably an impossibility in the current climate. The following quotations are exemplary:

What I expect it is is because I recognise that universities are having to behave more like a business and having staff teaching small groups of six people just isn’t a financial possibility. (Female, year 3, traditional)

Well, if every student is coming at something from a different angle and e-mailing the lecturer about it and stuff, they’ll probably never get their research done. (Female, year 1, mature)

In discussing what they hoped student-centred learning would be, the majority of focus groups came up with the idea of a learning/teaching continuum, with student-centred learning and teaching at one end and teacher-centred learning and teaching at the other. Most of the students felt that neither end of the continuum was ideal. The teacher-centred end would be overly prescriptive, while the student-centred end would be overly open, causing the student feelings of anxiety and insecurity. In addition to the idea of a continuum, students raised what could be conceived of as various ‘elements’ of a student-centred learning approach. Indeed, given these students’ purported lack of familiarity with the notion, they came up with an astonishing range of such elements, perhaps reflecting their reflexivity in terms of what works or does not work in their own learning experience. A couple of students asserted that the concept of student-centred learning involves ‘a fundamental paradigm shift’ and is not ‘just about students going out and learning on their own’ (female, year 1, mature).

Despite their formulation of a teaching/learning continuum, noted above, students usually identified what we have termed ‘elements’ of the learning and teaching process through reference to a simple dichotomy of student-centred versus teacher-centred. Table I shows the different elements identified and reveals that students perceived what they believed student-centred learning to be as a generally positive approach.

No differences were found between students at different stages of their degree or between undergraduate and postgraduate students with respect to the identification of elements of student-centred learning. However, mature students were a little more articulate in framing their ideas. Traditional students, therefore, raised the same issues as mature
### Table I. Students’ perceptions of student-centred versus more conventional methods of teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of learning/teaching</th>
<th>Student-centred approach</th>
<th>Conventional approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student body</td>
<td>Caters to heterogeneous student population and individual student needs</td>
<td>Caters to homogeneous student population and lowest common denominator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of learning</td>
<td>Active—lectures more interactive, group work, getting the student to think, be creative, facilitates retention</td>
<td>Passive—lectured at, little group work, student replicates what they have been told, lost from memory once regurgitated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of teaching</td>
<td>Interactive—lectures more interactive, group work, flexibility in terms of choice of modules</td>
<td>Transmission—lectured at, little group work, little or no flexibility in terms of choice of modules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Continuous, qualitative, teacher and student give each other feedback</td>
<td>Limited, quantitative, teacher gives student feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Formative and summative, coursework and examination</td>
<td>Mostly summative, reliance upon end of module examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning outcomes</td>
<td>Having a say in the learning outcomes, acquiring knowledge and skills, especially skills relevant and applicable to the real world</td>
<td>Having little or no say in the learning outcomes, acquiring knowledge and some skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student–teacher relationship</td>
<td>Respect for students, treated as adults, prior knowledge/experience acknowledged, co-constructing knowledge, sometimes teacher learns from student</td>
<td>Paternalistic attitude, teacher as expert, student ignorant regarding process and content of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Students more responsible for and in control of their own learning, become more independent, personal accountability, an empowering process</td>
<td>Staff responsible for making the student learn, remains dependent on teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td>More effective</td>
<td>Less effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>More motivating due to formulation of personal learning objectives and cycle of constructive feedback</td>
<td>Less motivating due to working to someone else's agenda and little or no feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>More interesting as some flexibility to pursue own learning</td>
<td>Less interesting as what is to be learned is dictated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Boosted through process of continuous feedback and positive relations with staff</td>
<td>Less confident as little feedback and unsure whether learning right material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Exciting in respect of content and process</td>
<td>Certain elements of course may be exciting if teacher is inspiring, other elements will be dull</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students but did not put them across quite as clearly, possibly due to their different life and learning experiences. While many quotations could have been cited in order to illustrate the way in which the students described the differences in approach outlined above, the following encapsulate most succinctly their views.

For me it would be ... giving us the tools to be able to go out and find out for ourselves. I find the thought of that really quite interesting and motivating rather than learning things, you know, script by script. (Female, year 1, mature)

I just think it gets people more motivated and more into the subject, and you get positive feedback, and you feel better about yourself, and then you do more work. It's like a vicious cycle once you get into it. (Male, postgraduate, mature)

I don't think the system is geared up for that at all because I feel factory farmed. I am an educational bulimic. They make me binge and purge all of this knowledge without any time to absorb or digest it, and I think to be truly student centred you have to make a space for the individual in that and the way the system currently works there isn't the space for us as individual people. (Female, year 3, mature)

I'd hope that SCL would be a recognition and awareness that that's the way that universities are going to shift towards and that the university will accommodate in terms of timetabling, so that students can fit in outside work commitments and have increased library opening hours and increased computing facilities and an increased flexibility from the university as a whole. (Male, year 3, traditional)

The final theme identified in the focus group discussions concerned factors that students feel inhibit or facilitate their learning. With respect to the former, students identified a 'horrible weekly timetable', a lack of personal motivation, and anxiety as to what was expected from them (particularly in terms of coursework and examinations) as the main factors inhibiting their learning. Other factors included being left to themselves without much guidance from a lecturer, unapproachable lecturers, a lack of flexibility or choice in module selection, a lack of flexibility in relation to other external commitments such as dependants and part-time work, limited resources (such as books, access to computing facilities), and the pressure from friends to go 'pubbing and clubbing' rather than to stay in and work.

Principal factors that were seen to facilitate learning included dynamic or inspirational lecturers whose 'enthusiasm spills over' (male, postgraduate, mature) and peer support (such as formal or informal tutor groups). As one student said:

Talking to fellow students makes it easier because people say that if you can explain it to someone else, then you’re going to learn it better. (Male, year 1, traditional)

Other issues that were seen to facilitate learning were good resources, enough time available to put into learning and helpful support staff.

In summary, despite students’ claims not to have heard of or to be familiar with the concept of student-centred learning, they provided a very rich description of what they thought it might be and how it differed from more traditional approaches. On the whole, the students were excited by the idea of such an approach as formulated above. However, many voiced concerns about how student-centred higher education should become. The main concern was that students might be told to ‘just go away and find out without sufficient guidance, or before we have the necessary skills under our belt’ (female, year 2, traditional). A secondary concern was that individual students would require different levels of guidance,
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putting a strain on academic staff. In particular, a couple of students felt that such an approach, if not implemented carefully and with adequate resourcing, may serve to further advantage very able students over those who were less academically able or had disabilities.

Quantitative Findings

Demographics

A total of 197 individuals responded to the questionnaire, of which 104 completed all questions. The majority of respondents were female (83.2%), aged between 17 and 20 (70.4%), British (86.7%) and resident in the UK (90.3%). Most respondents were studying psychology (93.6%), at undergraduate level (91.8%), with reported number of hours’ study per week ranging from 0 to 50 (modal = 10 hours). The majority of respondents had no dependents (82.7%) and were not employed in any full or part-time capacity (70.1%)

Definitions

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of items pertaining to various aspects of student-centred learning (e.g. it involves continuous student assessment). These items were grouped in relation to the underlying concepts encompassed by the definitions: flexibility, individuality, responsibility, continuous feedback/assessment, and preparation for the real world. A number of items also reflected a cynical attitude; in other words, that student-centred learning was not fundamentally about providing an improved learning experience for students but was driven by some other agenda (e.g. a political slogan that means nothing). Table II indicates the percentage of respondents demonstrating some agreement with definitions that encompass these concepts.

The results clearly indicated agreement with definitions of SCL that encompass notions of flexibility, individuality, increased feedback/assessment, responsibility, and preparation for the real world. These findings were confirmed through a binomial test indicating significantly higher responses in the agree categories (test proportion 0.5; p < 0.05). However, agreement with definitions reflecting cynicism was not asymmetrically demonstrated, with around 40% of respondents agreeing with some cynical definitions (test proportion 0.5; p > 0.05).

Purpose

In a similar approach respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a number of statements reflecting the purpose of student-centred learning. These items

| TABLE II. Percentage of respondents in agreement with definitions of student-centred learning |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| % agree with                                 |                                      |
| Flexibility                                  | 94.4                                 |
| Individuality                                | 91.4                                 |
| Increased feedback/assessment                | 93.9                                 |
| Responsibility                               | 91.9                                 |
| Prepares student for real world              | 64.0                                 |
| Cynicism                                     | 40.1                                 |
were grouped in relation to the underlying concepts encompassed by the purpose expressed: individuality, skills development, increased depth of learning, increased motivation, and increased efficiency of learning. Again, a cynical outlook on the purpose of student-centred learning was included using statements such as ‘SCL benefits staff rather than students’. Table III indicates the percentage of respondents demonstrating some agreement with statements that encompass these concepts.

The results clearly indicated agreement with all statements of the purpose of student-centred learning. These findings were confirmed through a binomial test indicating significantly higher responses in the agree categories (test proportion 0.5; \( p < 0.05 \)). Here, the number of respondents in agreement with cynical statements is low, with significantly greater numbers of respondents in disagreement (test proportion 0.5; \( p < 0.05 \)).

**Gender Differences**

When comparing the above analyses (definitions and purpose) using only male respondents’ data, and then only female respondents’ data, female respondents were found to mirror the findings reported above. However, male respondents did not demonstrate the significantly greater agreement for the definitions encompassing preparation for the real world found in the group as a whole, and demonstrated significantly greater agreement with cynical statements of the purpose of student-centred learning (\( p < 0.05 \)).

**Age Differences**

Analyses were repeated for the two age groups of ‘21 and under’ and ‘Over 21’. The older group respondents did not demonstrate the significantly greater agreement for the definitions encompassing preparation for the real world found in the group as a whole, and demonstrated significantly greater agreement with cynical statements of the purpose of student-centred learning (\( p < 0.05 \)).

**Effects of Student-centred Learning**

Respondents were asked to complete six questions designed to assess opinions regarding the effectiveness of student-centred learning in increasing or decreasing students’ abilities. For each statement, respondents were asked to rate their answer on a six-point Likert scale. The resulting scores were then converted into a scale ranging from a possible 0 to 36, with 36 indicating that the respondent perceived greatly increased effectiveness from student-centred

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**Table III. Percentage of respondents in agreement with purposes of student-centred learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% agree with</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs/skills</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of learning</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency of learning</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynical</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The respondents in this sample scored a median score of 16, with scores ranging from 5 to 25. There was a slight, non-significant, negative skew.

ASI

A total of 135 respondents completed all the questions that comprise the sub-scales underlying the ASI. The mean scores on these three sub-scales of achieving orientation (mean = 9.2; SD = 3.3), reproducing orientation (mean = 10.4; SD = 3.5), and meaning orientation (mean = 7.2; SD = 3.6) were well below preliminary norms for the short-form based on national studies (Gibbs, 1990). However, these norms were derived from performance on the items when they were part of the full scale and, therefore, should be viewed with caution.

Discussion

This research sought to investigate student perceptions of student-centred learning with a view to establishing 'consumer' hopes and expectations in respect of higher education in the UK. Two studies, using complementary approaches of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, were conducted. The findings need to be viewed with some caution as the majority of participants volunteered to take part and were undergraduate psychology students.

The studies revealed that, on the whole, students held a positive view of student-centred learning. Although within the focus group study most students reported being unfamiliar with the concept, they spoke at length about what they hoped it might mean. In doing so, students described a continuum of learning and teaching and central elements of the learning and teaching process. Support for the definitions of student-centred learning generated in the focus groups, as well as student comments regarding the purpose and effectiveness of such an approach, was then tested more widely in the Internet study. Here too, a student-centred approach was seen to have positive implications for learning. However, as with the focus group study, a proportion of students were cynical about student-centred learning initiatives, believing them to be driven by a political agenda (such as the pressures associated with staff research) rather than by a genuine commitment to improving learning and teaching. Students who were cynical were more likely to be male and older.

One of the main issues that arose out of the research was students’ concern about their educators achieving a balance between an approach that was too teacher-driven on the one hand and overly student-centred on the other. Students perceived conventional didactic models of teaching to be less motivating and less effective than more student-centred approaches. However, they expressed anxiety about an approach that lacked structure, guidance and support in the name of being student-centred. These findings are in line with studies which have found that student-centred approaches may improve student motivation and academic success (e.g. Prendergast, 1994; Lonka & Ahola, 1995), as well as those which have documented resistance to such initiatives (e.g. Peeke, 1993; Geelan, 1999). Indeed, as Allan (1999) found, in a small case study involving teaching students information systems project management, ‘putting students at the centre of interactive learning is more effective than passive teaching’. However, he also reported that students were resistant to methods that deviated from the lecture paradigm, possibly as this was what students expected of higher education.

As students in this research pointed out, a failure to focus upon what the student does may potentially lead to a division within the class, between those who are able to rise to the
challenge of a more ‘student-centred approach’ and those who are not. Perhaps the most thoughtful example of just such an experience is that of Geelan (1999), whose attempts to adopt a student-centred approach left some students deeply threatened and somewhat disillusioned. Geelan concludes, ‘a teacher’s withdrawal from an intensive, controlling classroom must be negotiated with students in ways which avoid the creation of an “empty centre”’ (p. 1, emphasis added). Students in this study were prepared to accept greater responsibility for their own learning, possibly influenced by their subject interests. However, this did not mean that they were prepared to be abandoned. Indeed, they emphasised the need for bi-directional feedback and guidance as essential elements of what student-centred learning should be. In other words, in order to be truly student-centred, the students must be involved in the development of the learning process rather than at the receiving end of the teacher’s approach; be it teacher- or student-centred.

A central facet of student involvement in the learning process is their perception of that process and their anticipation of what it might produce. The presage–product–process model of student learning (Biggs, 1999) highlights the central role of students’ perceptions of the learning and teaching context, understood to be an interaction between previous experiences of learning and teaching and the learning and teaching context itself. Prosser and Trigwell (1999) note that students approach their studies in relation to their perceptions of that context, and that approach is related to the quality of the student’s learning outcome. The judgement of the quality of that outcome incorporates its utility at that point in the student’s life plan. Thus, if students perceive that the learning and teaching context demands a surface approach to learning in order to achieve success, then it is a surface approach that they will adopt (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983).

Indeed, it is possible that the very low scores achieved on the ASI by the Internet sample in this research were a function of the nature of the task, rather than a valid indicator of some underlying approach to learning. Kember and Wong (2000) have drawn attention to the fact that many standard questionnaires are based upon implicit models of didactic teaching and that these may have an effect upon student responses on those questionnaires. The ASI provides scores that are supposed to relate to the student’s approach to learning, but it does not include questions about the student’s learning and teaching context. Students had just completed a set of questions on student-centred learning. In this context, they may have been comparing their view of what student-centred learning should be and should produce, in terms of deep learning and motivation, with their perceptions of their most recent experiences: that is, for the majority, their first year at university and their final years at school. In the UK, the latter has often been criticised for its surface approach to learning.

The importance of understanding student perceptions of student-centred learning goes beyond the need to understand consumer desires and attitudes in order to be successful in the marketplace. It is one of the central elements in the development of appropriate and effective learning environments. The students in this study had very clear and coherent expectations of what student-centred learning should be and what it should do. Of course, some expectations that students have may not be met within the educational context, due to pedagogical or resource limitations (Sander et al., 2000). Thus, although students may be excited by what they perceive to be the potential of a student-centred approach to learning, they may be disappointed in the reality. Having raised expectations, failure to satisfy them without just cause could lead to disillusion and rejection of the learning process. Hence, the development of any particular learning experience needs to take student expectations into account and use them as a yardstick with which to judge proposed developments. This is not say that the student’s view is the only one worth taking into account, but that it is a valid part of the negotiation between teacher and learner. Such negotiation about the learning
experience is crucial to maximising success in terms of learning outcomes for all students, and not just the highly committed and exceptionally skilled minority.

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