

The student-centered approach in Moroccan higher education, between standards and teaching practices.

Summary

In Moroccan higher education, students are considered beneficiaries of the learning process. This approach seeks to engage students as active participants in their own learning. This synthesis essay discusses the current state of the role of students in the educational process. It questions the underlying system, particularly the traditional vision that continues to shape pedagogical practices. Despite recent reforms, the system still appears to be centered on teachers and the transmission of knowledge through lectures. In this context, although students are considered beneficiaries of learning, skills development, and autonomy, and are encouraged to participate, obstacles remain. The article highlights the discrepancy between normative prescriptions and teaching practices, emphasizing the need to reevaluate students' roles as active participants in their own learning. The conclusion emphasizes that the transition from passive to active participation is gradual and depends on adapting institutional and pedagogical mechanisms, which the education system is attempting to achieve through reforms.

Keywords: *reform, student-centered approach, beneficiary, learning, CNPN*

Introduction

At the core of contemporary education systems is the student-centered approach (SCA), which is a fundamental pedagogical paradigm (Reigeluth & al., 2017). This paradigm is characterized by its adherence to a pragmatic vision (ESU, 2010). The prevailing environment in these systems, notably within higher education, has undergone a shift toward a greater emphasis on not only the acquisition of skills but also the cultivation of cross-disciplinary competencies, autonomy, and critical thinking. These qualities are increasingly regarded as integral components of the student profile that is shaped during their academic pursuits. It is evident that the expectations of this environment, in alignment with the implementation of the reform, are prompting education authorities and policymakers to introduce structural and functional changes, commencing with the necessity to reevaluate teaching models and pedagogical practices (UNESCO, 2021). From this perspective, a student-centered approach appears to be more appropriate for boosting change in teaching methods and practices. It is

important to acknowledge that this approach entails a redefined role for both the student and the teacher in the teaching and learning process (UNESCO, 1985; Reigeluth & al., 2017). In this sense, students are expected to commit to becoming active participants in their own learning, and teachers are expected to support them as facilitators (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005; Schweisfurth, 2013). This represents a change, not only in the design of this educational process, but above all in the practices that involve both teachers and students (ESU, 2010).

The analysis of this issue is based on:

- The conception of the student's role in the educational process,
- The theoretical and pedagogical perspectives of student-centered education (SCE);
- The place of the student in the reform of the educational system and according to pedagogical standards;

This article explores the foundations of this student-centered learning approach and the prospects for its adoption in Moroccan higher education.

1. Principles and theoretical foundations of the student-centered approach

The student-centered approach is an educational model based on a methodical design and approach, founded on fundamental principles that reflect "added value." These principles are characterized by the active participation of students in their own learning, with consideration given to their autonomy in the teaching and assessment process. In terms of implementing this process, particularly with regard to the curriculum, learning outcomes (LOs) are a determining factor in this pedagogical approach (Bremner & al., 2022).

In terms of implementing this process, particularly with regard to the curriculum, learning outcomes are a determining factor in this pedagogical approach (Bremner & al., 2022). This is because the purpose of learning is to achieve the expected results, and to assess the extent to which students have achieved them by the end of the course. By definition, learning outcomes refer to "statements of what a learner knows, understands, and is able to do after completing their training" (CEDEFOP, 2009). Moreover, while drawing on pioneering theoretical frameworks in the field of learning, represented by Piaget's constructivism (1952), Vygotsky's socioconstructivism (1978), and Rogers' humanism (1969), the learner-centered approach aims to adapt learning to the students' needs and encourages their active participation as autonomous learners. In this theoretical context of learning, and in perfect alignment with the student-centered approach, the academic world is witnessing a growing focus on "learning outcomes (Harris, & al., 2019). It is therefore important to acknowledge

the correlation between SCE and LOs in this educational paradigm, which aligns with international standards, including the Tuning program (González & Wagenaar, 2008).

The literature on ACE identifies the following dimensions as fundamental to its implementation (Lea et al., 2003; CEDEFOP, 2009; EACEA, 2015):

- The individualization of learning, including the styles and needs of each student;
- Active participation in knowledge building and learning;
- Student involvement in teaching activities and assessment;
- Valorization of learning outcomes and transferable skills.

These principles are operationalized through the implementation of active teaching methodologies, such as skills-based approaches and flipped classrooms, as well as the integration of formative assessment techniques that prioritize skill development over knowledge retention (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Admittedly, the student-centred approach represents a radical change from traditional teaching practices. Teachers must demonstrate specific skills and strategies to implement it effectively (ESU, 2010). According to Weimer (2002) in his seminal work, this involves completely overhauling the teaching approach in favor of a learning-centred pedagogy. In a systematic review, Bremner & al. (2022) emphasizes the crucial role of the conditions for implementing this approach and the degree to which teachers embrace it. This is because the approach involves not only a change in habits, but also a paradigm shift, shifting the teacher's role from that of a transmitter of knowledge to that of a facilitator, guide and companion in the educational process (Weimer, 2002; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005; Schweisfurth, 2013). Through this approach, teachers support and guide students in building their knowledge and developing their skills by providing them with resources and personalized support. Teachers also encourage students' autonomy and responsibility for their own learning while acting as moderators in the educational activities they programme.

The learning process undertaken in the modern higher education system is considered more appropriate with SCE. This approach to learning corresponds to the changing educational needs of students and society in the modern world (Bergan & al., 2010; UNESCO, 2021). This pedagogical approach allows the teaching process to focus on the needs, interests, pace, learning styles, and active engagement of students (ESU & EI, 2010; Klemenčič & al., 2020). Studies by O'Neill et al. (2005), Bergan et al. (2010), Schweisfurth (2013), Neumann, J. W. (2013), Klemenčič et al. (2020), Bremner et al. (2022), and Sakata et

al. (2022) confirm the merits of the student-centered approach, particularly in that it enables a substantial improvement in educational objectives and learning outcomes. Prince (2004) underscores that the implementation of student-centered teaching methodologies is conducive to enhancing exam performance and mitigating failure, contingent upon the incorporation of active learning into educational activities. In a review of the literature on SCE in various fields of education, Freeman & al. (2014) analyzed several studies that agree on its suitability for teaching. These studies found that SCE increases student performance on assessments with a high success rate. Schweisfurth (2011, 2013) has noted that, in the international context, SCE is associated with learning environments that strengthen the student's place in the education system, their agency, and their civic skills, taking into account local specificities and respecting sociocultural aspects for successful adoption. Along the same lines of analysis, Sakata & al. (2022) report on the benefits of this approach in education systems similar to Morocco's. In this context, SCE is considered a more suitable educational option for fostering autonomy, critical thinking, and social responsibility. UNESCO (2021) has advocated an overhaul of educational methodologies, emphasizing active teaching methods and the establishment of a novel social contract for education. This social contract is predicated on a student-centered approach, which can be regarded as a foundational element of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 on quality education.

2. Representation of students in the Moroccan education system

Since the reform initiated during the 2003-2004 academic year, Morocco's higher education system has undergone a major overhaul, gradually aligning itself with international standards, notably the Bologna Process (Kouhlani & al., 2021). The goal of this reform was to put students back at the center of the educational process and modernize and professionalize their courses. However, the actual implementation of this new system gives rise to a salient question: Are students active participants in their education, or are they merely beneficiaries of a teacher-centered system?

2.1. The student in the context of the reform

The reform of Moroccan higher education, which marked a significant turning point in this regard, is part of a new dynamic of educational policies and strategies whose implementation is based on a standardized pedagogical organization. This reform, in its fundamental configuration and its renewed version, aims not only to restructure the training cycles (Bachelor's-Master's-Doctorate, L-M-D) but also to establish an overhaul of teaching

methods and practices, while striving to place the student at the center of the educational process (Weimer, 2002; Kelo & al., 2024).

However, despite these ambitions, the reality observed in higher education institutions, particularly open access institutions, shows that students are still largely considered to be limited beneficiaries of action, despite international standards (UNESCO-CEPES, 1985; Tuning, 2003, CEDEFOP, 2009) and the recommendations of the CSEFRS (2018, 2025), which designate them as actors and educational partners. This incongruity between the normative framework and actual practices gives rise to a fundamental question: do students in Moroccan higher education truly act as autonomous agents or passive beneficiaries?

As part of the reforms undertaken since the implementation of the L-M-D system, the Bologna process model has been adopted as a reference in educational policy and to establish the changes necessary for a new pedagogical dynamic (Kouhlani & al., 2021; 2023). Therefore, although the promotion of a student-centered approach is an objective in this model, the reforms seek to initiate it indirectly through mechanisms that value the student's personal work in the curriculum. This pedagogical approach, characterized by its systematic structure, has been integrated into the education system (L-M-D) through the educational framework delineated in the Cahier des Normes Pédagogiques Nationales (CNPN)¹ (National Educational Standards Handbook). This document serves as a reference manual, delineating the organizational framework and educational functions of these cycles.

2.2. Aspects inherent to the status and role of the student

In the context of pedagogical practices, there has been a historical tendency to prioritize the role of the instructor, often referred to as "the teacher," while the student is regarded as the recipient of the educational outcomes. The prevailing logic of teacher-centered teaching in education systems has been well-documented (Weimer, 2002). In the preceding century, higher education policies did not contemplate the possibility of active involvement or constructive participation by students in the learning process. Prior to the implementation of the L-M-D educational system in 2004, a specific focus was placed on students within the objectives dedicated to teaching, training, learning, and qualification. This focus has been updated, leading to the formalization of a vision for students in the education system, particularly with the reforms and actions that have followed to date, namely the Bachelor's degree project (2018) and the ESRI Pact (2022)². Moreover, policies dedicated to this area of higher education set out recommendations that support this vision, namely the texts of Law

01.00 (Dahir, 2000) and 51.17 (Dahir, 2019). Concurrently, in its evaluation studies on higher education policy and reforms (2018, 2020, 2025), the CSEFRS underscores the significance of prioritizing students' centrality in the teaching and learning processes within the educational system. The objective of these studies is to encourage a shift in the role of students from passive beneficiaries to active participants in the educational process (see Table 1). In the context of quality assurance in higher education, the ANEAQ³ standards place students at the core of the academic process. However, in practice, particularly in the context of program evaluations, a discrepancy emerges between the recommendations made by the CNPN and their subsequent implementation.

This necessitates a reconceptualization of the role of students as stakeholders, encompassing their involvement not only in teaching activities but also in all phases of the educational process, from program design and goal setting to the achievement of expected results, in this case, learning outcomes.

Table n°1: Students' perception of themselves as beneficiaries and actors in the educational process

Dimension	Student	
	Beneficiary	Actor
Role in learning	Passive Receiver	Active, collaborative participant
Teaching methods	Transmissive (Lectures)	Project-based work and portfolio
Motivation	Extrinsic, grade-oriented	Intrinsic, interest-focused
Interaction with the teacher	Limited, unidirectional	Interactive, tutoring, mentoring
Evaluation	Undergone: Summative	Participatory: Formative
Learning Outcomes	Absence of the objective	Objective to be achieved

It should be noted that it is not the beneficiary status of the student that is being questioned, but rather the vision, in terms of design and practices, under which they are admitted. The distinction between Beneficiary and Actor, as established in this table, provides illustrative information on salient aspects at the local level in relation to international standards.

In the present context, the student's circumstances are examined from the vantage point of their pertinence and ramifications for the higher education learning process and as an

objective of an educational strategy. It is important to acknowledge that, within this context, the cultivation of students' personal competencies has been prioritized within the domain of soft skills, which were identified as the primary challenges of the system (MENFPESRS, 2019). These interdisciplinary soft skills courses were incorporated as essential components into the program in 2021, initially designated as Power Skills in 2023, and subsequently transitioned to cross-disciplinary modules in 2025. The cultivation of these soft skills aims to equip students with the capacity to adapt and seamlessly integrate into diverse environments, including academic, social, and professional settings (Kouhlani & al., 2021). This approach, selected by education policymakers, aligns with the tenets of the student-centered paradigm. Neumann's study (2013) corroborates this, highlighting how this approach fosters students' personal growth by enhancing autonomy, self-regulation, and the capacity to learn continuously. The CSEFRS (2025) defends this aspect in its latest report, highlighting the importance of formally adopting a student-centered approach. The report points out that policies and reforms do not devote sufficient attention to implementation rules, resulting in students remaining in a receptive and passive role. This approach is more appropriate for implementing various teaching methods, such as interactive teaching, active learning, cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and flipped classrooms. It promotes interaction between students and teachers, as well as between peers. It also constantly works towards constructive alignment between teaching objectives and educational activities and assessments.

It must be acknowledged that this phenomenon is not pervasive within the higher education sector; it is characteristic of open-access institutions (CSEFRS, 2018), while regulated-access institutions (CSEFRS, 2020) implement principles of this approach, focusing on active learning, autonomy, and professional development.

3. Educational organization in light of CNPN standards

The signs of change brought about by higher education reform are evident in the pedagogical organization that represents its practical framework. Thus, this reform is being systematically implemented through changes to the CNPN. A review of the 2014 to 2025 versions indicates a substantial transformation in the conceptualization of the student's role. While the 2014 CNPN, in line with earlier versions, placed students in the position of beneficiaries, in an undefined sense, the prevailing trend in practice makes them passive, being generally receptive. The most recent version of the program, released in 2025,

advocates for the centralization of students within the framework of program design and pedagogy, recognizing them as active participants in their own learning processes. This novel representation, drawing inspiration from the Bologna process, interrogates the capacity of the Moroccan university system to translate prescribed principles into effective practices.

In summary, the regulatory framework delineated by the CNPN stipulates the principles for program design, pedagogical methods, and evaluation. Programs are structured into learning modules and organized into semesters according to the duration of the teaching cycle (ETF, 2020, 10-11). To ensure their readiness for implementation, these programs undergo an accreditation procedure administered by the ANEAQ⁴.

The ongoing revision of the CNPN, initiated in 2023 and projected to extend through 2025, represents more than just a change in the education system; it is part of a global movement to adopt an approach involving the active participation of students in higher education. Previous versions had almost no indicators of effective student engagement, emphasizing the transmission of knowledge and suggesting a directive role for teachers. In contrast, the 2025 version emphasizes the principles of autonomy, participation, personal work, and skills development, marking a change in the representation of students in the educational process. These changes were introduced gradually in the 2021 and 2023 versions. Furthermore, this evolution occurred following the CSEFRS's consistent recommendations to align with international standards. The table below shows the criteria used to identify the role of students in the educational system described by the CNPN in its various versions.

Table n°2: The role of students in the CNPN versions: (2014–2025)

Specific criteria	CNP versions			
	2014	2021	2023	2025
Student design	Passive learner, knowledge receiver	Emerging actor, beginning of autonomy	Independent and responsible learner	Committed partner, reflective and critical actor
Student place	Inactive beneficiary	Participating beneficiary	Active beneficiary	Responsible beneficiary
Student autonomy	Limited, dependence on the teacher	In development, semi-autonomous learning	High degree of autonomy expected, self-assessment	Assertive independence, self-directed learning
Educational approach	Teacher-centered	Interactive, participatory	Competency-based	Active, reflective
Type of Participation	Weak, lecture-style teaching	Encouraged but not systematic	Systematic, via practical activities,	Integrated collaborative and reflective learning
Customization of courses	Fixed paths, limited options	Flexible options, guided courses	Flexible, customized courses	Customized courses,
Cross-disciplinary skills option	Little to no mention	Soft Skills	Power Skills	Cross-disciplinary skills
Evaluation methods	Summative assessment	Mixed: formative + summative	Mixed = (Validation + Credit)	Formative (validation + credit)
Accountability and self-assessment	Not planned	Incentive	Encouraged	Integrated and systematic
Pedagogical support	Limited institutional	Support initiatives	Structured individualized follow-up	Personalized, enhanced support
Career guidance and integration	Weak indication	Gradual integration	Follow-up on professional integration	Guidance and pro-active support

In the configuration of CNPN versions, the role of the student becomes increasingly significant in terms of the educational organization of the curriculum. This development signifies a paradigm shift, placing the student at the center of the educational process by promoting responsible involvement and participation in the learning journey. Consequently, the notion of the student, in accordance with the learner-centered approach, is gradually being incorporated into the reference framework, particularly in recent iterations.

4. Towards a new student profile

The implementation of the contemporary L-M-D system was predicated on the necessity to modernize higher education, with a novel vision of the stakeholders in the educational process. Consequently, the roles of the student and the teacher are being redefined in a manner that transforms their pedagogical interventions in this process. Students play an active role in the pedagogical process through various mechanisms, including the credit system (ECTS), formative assessment, and learning outcomes. These mechanisms place emphasis on students' personal and regular work (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia & al., 2018).

Moreover, as these mechanisms are recognized as effective pedagogical tools, they present a range of opportunities for the implementation of pathways designed to promote flexibility and eliminate barriers between learning paths (Kouhlani & al., 2023). However, this vision of higher education is partially being adapted to local realities, driven by recent versions of the CNPN for 2023 and 2025. This is particularly evident in the standards that directly or indirectly influence the design and development of programs. The CNPN often carries out the practical representation of higher education reform because it is the main reference framework for educational organization, reflecting how institutions and processes involving teachers and students function.

The efficacy of this transition, in relation to the role of the student, is contingent upon the capacity of institutions to implement measures that genuinely promote autonomy, participation, and recognition of knowledge acquisition. This option appears necessary to bring about change in students, given their previous learning experiences as pupils in earlier stages of education. The objective of this option is to establish a shared responsibility framework among the student, the instructor, and the institution in the pursuit of skills development and the student's personal growth, aligning with a certified professional profile. The student-centered approach has the capacity to deliver high-quality, effective teaching, provided there is a commitment formally recognized by the system and its stakeholders. Because, in the absence of widespread acceptance, there is a risk that the findings of experts (OECD, 2019) will be repeated, namely that 21st-century students will continue to be taught by teachers using 20th-century teaching practices in 19th-century institutions.

Faced with the challenges of achieving a renewal that is consistent with these educational options, such as the student-centred approach, policymakers are called upon to review current regulations on educational organisation and practice, with the aim of

establishing mechanisms for implementation and practical application for teachers, such as training and the provision of reference materials and digital work tools. Institutional reorganisation of the teaching profession based on visibility consistent with the requirements of modern education would facilitate a renewal of the roles of stakeholders, teachers, students and institutions.

Certainly, the new law (59.24/2025) currently being adopted appears promising for driving the innovations and transformations required by this educational perspective.

Conclusion

The presence of students in higher education settings is indicative of a noteworthy developmental dynamic, particularly in light of the reforms that have been implemented. This phenomenon is especially evident in the context of educational organization, as delineated by the reference framework established by the CNPN. However, despite the absence of explicit mention in educational policies or frameworks, with the exception of CSEFRS reports recommending it as an appropriate and promising option, progress has been made through the key principles that designate it as a relevant pedagogical strategy. The formalization of this process appears to be a necessary component for achieving a transition in the role of the student. This transition is characterized by an explicit statement of the student's status as beneficiaries, given the implementation of a particular pedagogical approach that qualifies them as partners in the educational process. Moreover, the student-centered approach is potentially applicable through the gradual integration of its foundations and principles into a formal vision of teaching, particularly through explicit standards and teacher training to adjust their practices. In summary, the prevailing pedagogical and educational framework appears to be conducive to the successful integration of these elements, as the conditions for its implementation are favorable for its appropriate adoption. The student-centered approach entails more than just empowering students to take ownership of their learning; it also involves broader systemic improvements to higher education, paving the way for flexible learning pathways that align with international standards.

Note:

¹ <https://www.enssup.gov.ma/en/publications/cahiers-des-normes-pedagogiques-nationales>

² The Bachelors and the Esri Pact (2022) are two reform projects initiated by the Ministry of Higher Education. the first in 2018, which was applied to the Bachelor's degree cycle but suspended and replaced by a more general reform in 2021, called the National Plan to Accelerate the Transformation of the Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation Ecosystem (ESRI Pact).

³ National Agency for Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Scientific Research.
<https://www.aneaq.ma/>

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