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Student-centred Learning in Higher Education: Implications for the Jamaican Workplace

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Abstract

This paper explores the experience, impression and understanding of student centred learning by 44 business education students at a university in Jamaica. The study sought to establish whether such a learning approach enhances the competencies of students in accord with the demands made by employers for critical employee characteristics in the 21st century workplace, whilst also enhancing learning outcomes in students' current studies. The research reported here was informed through two studies, using complementary methodologies in qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The first study utilised a survey instrument, while the second employed focus groups. The findings revealed that students generally held positive views of student centred learning and that they believed it enhanced their learning experience in their current studies. However, they were not clear as to whether the approach was being utilised fully and/or effectively and whether current resources were adequate to support the effective implementation and maintenance of such an approach. Findings further revealed that many of the competencies developed through the practise of student centred learning are complimentary to not only desirable, but indeed, identified characteristics that the 21st century worker should be

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ideally equipped with, according to the International Labour Organisation (Brewer, 2013). These characteristics also being in accord with the demands of employers in Jamaica. This latter point being affirmed by a senior figure from the Jamaica Employers' Federation through a one-on-one interview. The importance of "gearing" such learning at the tertiary level to the demands of employers for well prepared and effective employees that complement and indeed enhance the workplace is recognised as a national imperative, and thus policy, as developed through educational leadership should be in accord. This research posits that the utilisation of student centred learning will not only benefit learning at the tertiary level, it will also better prepare graduates for the workplace.

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Introduction

The performance, productivity and effectiveness of the Jamaican workforce continues to be at the centre of discussions surrounding the country's historically woeful levels of economic development (USAID, Jamaica Country Assistance Strategy, 2009; Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2019). Insipid levels of economic growth in Jamaica have remained stubbornly slothful in the 57 years since independence, with gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates averaging approximately 0.5% per annum (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2016). Successive governments have continuously sought to address this as a central policy theme in their political strategising, most recently in referencing such weak growth through a vision of a "partnership for prosperity" (Jamaica Information Service, 2016)

thereby asserting the intent to enhance human capital development in the interest of improving economic growth levels.

A significant challenge for the Jamaican economy is to boost the human capital endowments of the labour force, equipping it with the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute to improved levels of employee productivity, economic growth, social development and international competitiveness. The Training and Workforce Sector Development Plan (Training, and Workforce Development Task Force, Jamaica, 2009) identifies competencies (consistent with the identified International Labour Organisation core work skills (Brewer, 2013), that the Jamaican workforce should possess so as to enhance economic growth and global competitiveness, crucially, and in tandem with Vision 2030 (Government of Jamaica/Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2009), the country's blueprint for making "Jamaica, the place of choice to live, work, raise families and do business" (p. vi). In acknowledgment of this the Government of Jamaica has prioritised funding in higher education and workforce development with the intention of driving the stock of human capital to higher levels so that this may support the drive for economic growth.

Through education, escalation of future productivity and efficiency of workers is possible by enhancing the level and thus quality of the cognitive stock of economically productive individuals (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). Better educated individuals are likely to enhance levels of productivity and creativity, which in turn, amongst other things, can stimulate technological progress. In specifically referencing developing countries, Lall and Kraemer-Mbula (2005), reflect that such countries cannot simply import and

rely upon technologies without investing in the enhancement of workforce 'capabilities' alongside, so as to enhance, adapt and improve existing technologies. These capabilities (Sen, 1999) involve acquiring new skills and knowledge that, properly utilised will propel future growth and development.

An advanced level of education supports more competitive participation in the global economy. Furthermore, higher skilled persons have better opportunities to earn higher wages, for economies to have lower unemployment rates, higher mobility and improved employment opportunities than thus pervade the developing economy. Reformulation of human capital thinking in recent times has stressed the significance of education and training as a key to participation in the "new" global economy and as has already been referenced, such measures of a country's development and performance are regularly reported upon both nationally and supranationally through indices, such as those produced by the United Nations, World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Statistical Institute for Jamaica (Statin) (The World Bank, 2017; Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2019). Foray and Lundvall (1996) state, that the overall economic performance of the OECD countries is increasingly more directly based upon their knowledge stock and their learning capabilities" (p.21).

According to the Training and Workforce Development Sector Plan: Vision 2030 Jamaica (2009), Jamaica has yet to attain optimisation in its competitiveness based upon its workforce profiles. The task force indicates features of the ideal Jamaican worker, one who should possess basic educational foundation skills such as

mathematics and English language, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and high level interpersonal skills. In targeting outcomes for the education system, a priority is, to underpin a learning environment that is safe, non-violent, drug free, inclusive and respectful. Through the development of such skills, education is supporting the aforementioned policy, which clearly advances the need for Jamaica to focus on the training and development of traditional academic and technical skills, in addition to skills that enable an individual to possess attributes such as initiative, problem solving skills, communication, and team spirit (Jamaica Gleaner, 2014). These, not only are beneficial and indeed critical in an economic context, but also in Jamaica's drive to deliver a more just and socially inclusive society that promotes opportunities across its own divide. As such, employees possessing these aforementioned skills are likely to deliver increased productivity, thereby benefiting the Jamaican society (Government of Jamaica/Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2009).

Deficiencies in the level and quality of employability skills, as sought in the 21st century worker are regularly commented upon, both in the media and in academia (Jamaica Gleaner, 2017; Jamaica Observer, 2017), and this is not limited to the Jamaican context. Hargis (2011), noted that students in the state of Kentucky, United States, lacked proficiency in 21st century soft skills (employability skills). Proficiency levels were inconsistent with those soft skills employers required. In investigating common soft skills that employers sought in the state, Hargis (2011) found that many students lacked these skills. Pondering such discrepancies between

what employers require and what educational institutions provide is the subject of regular academic discourse (Abraham & Karns, 2009).

In a review of the impact of competency-based training upon the acquisition of appropriate employability skills globally, including for Jamaica, Boahin and Hofman (2013) found that employers sought "creativity, ICT skills, communication, problem solving, organisational skills, proactivity, teamwork, and adaptability" (p. 394). Thereby reinforcing the need for Jamaica, through the Training and Workforce Development Sector Plan: Vision 2030 Jamaica (2009), to continue to advance policies (and practice) toward enhancing workforce employability skills. This being imperative for the delivery and enhancement of competitive advantage. In lamenting such deficiencies, a Jamaica Employers' Federation leader (Jamaica Gleaner, 2009), pointed to this not only being an employability issue, but one that has wider consequences as these deficiencies become embedded, thereby becoming social issues.

The forgoing paragraphs clearly point to the need for a significant response from education institutions to address such identified deficiencies in critical employability skills. The importance of education and knowledge as key drivers, so as to advance the development of human capital for economic development is now widely recognised, demanding and gaining eminence through governmental policy (Government of Jamaica/Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2009) and thus the emphasis placed upon the relationship between elevating educational attainment and the ensuing competencies of the workforce must be responded to. In such a vein, Abraham and Karns (2009), in conducting a survey of what businesses consider as successful attributes of successful managers,

pointed to the need for educational leaders to ensure that curricula are aligned with business desires. A variety of teaching and learning strategies may be advanced to support such a response, one such approach being student centred learning. Such approaches have increased in this century and are practiced across the Jamaican education sector, alongside which, both in Jamaica and worldwide, the development and growth of vocationally based, competency based approaches to learning has also developed (UNESCO, 2012). In Jamaica, this advancement has been driven through the incorporation of competency based education in the secondary sector (Ministry of Education, 2014; Jamaica Information Service, 2014), building upon the approach as lead in the tertiary sector. This approach supports substantively the use of student centred learning to more effectively advance such learning strategies, as learners pursue vocational qualifications, such as the Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ).

Student Centred Learning

Student centred learning has for many years held significant interest amongst educators across all sectors of education, with research into policy and practice surrounding the use of student centred approaches continuing to evolve. However, an initial issue when pondering this approach in teaching and learning is that of definition. What really does student centred learning encompass? As Greener (2015), Tangney (2013), Paris and Combs, (2006), amongst others acknowledge, there exists disagreement and divergence in what student centred learning actually is. This inability to define exactly what is meant by student centred learning has thus led to

variations to the central thinking in studying this learning approach, with a number of adaptations, pseudonyms and derivatives now present and thus this paper utilises term variations within the theme to reflect this (e.g. active learning, learner centred, problem based learning). Whilst at times this hinders comparisons, it does point to a central tendency, that is, to adjust teaching activities in ways that can enhance student learning (Brown Wright, 2011; Gleason et al., 2011; Reddan, McNally, & Chipperfield, 2016). In furthering one's understanding of the approach, researchers and practitioners highlight differing dimensions within the learning and teaching processes. Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) extensively explore definitions and features of what student centred learning embraces and how students in tertiary education perceive the approach, particularly as contrasted with traditional teaching methods. Significantly, it is in investigating the benefits of a student centred approach that the clear link to critical employability skills is harnessed. Features that are regularly expounded upon in relation to student centred learning include active and creative learning activities (Lumpkin & Achen, 2015), continuous facilitator/learner dialogue and feedback with balanced learning responsibilities, formative assessment, respect, equity, recognised and agreed outcomes, empowerment and accountability in learning. Russell, Comello, and Lee Wright (2007), point to student centred learning strategies shifting the focus of activity from the teacher to the learner; this approach being particularly relevant to tertiary and professional education, as it nurtures motivation and an incentive to learn. Rather than instructing, facilitators guide students, allowing learners to actively participate in deciding what to learn, how they learn and

how they evaluate what is learnt (Weimer, 2002); meaning that learners have more responsibility and ownership of their learning.

Salter, Pang and Sharma (2009), guided faculty in redesigning courses giving students and facilitators new roles in which students would be more actively engaged and not just be lectured to by facilitators. Increased reliance and emphasis was placed upon active rather than passive learning. Student centred approaches in content delivery allow students the opportunity to manage their learning as they are required to take responsibility for their learning through being actively involved in the learning process rather than simply passively receiving information through a lecture (Slunt & Giancarlo, 2004). Weimer (2002) emphasised deeper learning and understanding, whereby the teacher changes from the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side" viewing students not as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge but as explorers being guided along their intellectual and developmental journey. Weimer (2002) further points to increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student, supported by an increased sense of autonomy. This increased interdependence between facilitator and learner is emphasised by Tärnvik (2007), when contrasting whether the learner participates completely dependently or independently. Inherent within the approach is the belief that students should be consulted about the learning and teaching process, that for effective learning to be facilitated it is desirable to move toward a model in which students are actively engaged in the learning process, that it is student, rather than facilitator (teacher) centred.

Research by Schaefer and Zygmont (2003), suggests that an instructor centred environment promotes "dependent learning" (p.

238), as opposed to the independent learning that Tärnvik (2007) identified. Kemm and Dantas (2007) found that the use of information technology, including e-learning in a tertiary level programme accommodated many learning styles and enhanced student interest and engagement, resulting in better performance on written reports and examinations. In exemplifying the benefit of using information technologies in the classroom, Lu, Ma, Turner and Huang (2007) in an assessment of the impact of using wireless internet in student centred learning interactions, acknowledged favourable impacts upon pedagogical, technological, and cultural learning.

The student centred approach, therefore, differs quite profoundly from more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Furthermore, differences in relation to what occurs in the learning environment are not the only differences. In determining the approach to learning, philosophically, student centred learning differs as it identifies as a constructivist epistemology, as opposed to traditional learning, which is commonly epistemologically positivist. The learning environment, context and the knowledge sought are intrinsically linked, participants in the learning determine its outcome and it is more experiential in its conduct, with the solving of authentic problems providing evidence of understanding, whilst promoting a connection between the classroom and "real world" problems (Gleason et al., 2011; Van Amburgh, Devlin, Kirwin, & Qualters, 2007).

Of note is the variance between what is stated as undertaken and what actually happens in learning interactions. Institutions or educators will cite the claim that they practice student centred

learning, whether it be for quality reasons, accreditation or personal advancement etc., when quite the contrary is the reality (Biggs, 1999). Further, Moore (2009), demonstrated that differences existed between facilitators in interpretation and application of problem based learning, in part due to facilitators' personal pedagogical beliefs and values; pointing thus to the need for consistency in facilitation through agreement, thereby reducing the void between rhetoric and reality in this approach.

Ultimately, the key direct beneficiaries of this approach are crucial. How learners understand, perceive, experience and benefit from student centred learning will decide its future as a pedagogical approach to learning. Its likely positive growth is signalled through much of the literature reviewed. With increasing access for students into higher education (Jamaica Information Service, 2018), academic institutions have and will continue to require adjustments to pedagogical approaches as such institutions look to offer learning that leads students to graduation and onwards to workplace and career success. Equipping graduates with identified critical employability skills (Brewer, 2013) will become all the more so, an imperative, as the workplace continues to increase its demand for ever more knowledgeable and work ready graduates into their organisations. Hence, as Jamaica continues to chart its development path in the global economy of the 21st century, further widening participation in higher education in the Jamaican context is necessary so as to meet country aspirations as identified through Vision 2030 (Government of Jamaica/Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2009). Consequently, an imperative for educational leadership will be to advance successful pedagogical approaches to support this vision for

tertiary academic institutions, as they seek to provide successful, relevant and beneficial learning outcomes in programme delivery.

Purpose of the Study

This paper explores students' experience of student centred learning, and its significance to education and the workplace. The study examined to what extent students understand the concepts of student centred learning and their experience of this learning approach in their studies. Students also give their impression of whether student centred learning enhances their quality of learning in their programme of study. Finally, in exploring the features that make up student centred learning, the study sought to establish whether such a learning approach enhances the competencies of students in accord with the demands made by employers for critical employability skills in the 21st century workplace.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of student understanding of student centred learning and its benefits?
2. Does student centred learning assist in enhancing the quality of learning outcomes in a business education course in a tertiary institution in Jamaica?
3. Does student centred learning enhance the knowledge and skills development of students in line with the attributes sought by the Jamaican workplace? *(this includes critical thinking, initiative, creativity, collaboration, communication, media and*

technology literacy, flexibility, leadership, productivity and social skills)

Methodology

The study was conducted using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods provides a better understanding of the research problem and questions than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012). This integration, widely practised in research, likely delivers a more robust and corroborative outcome. A three-stage data collection approach was employed to gather data for the study. In the first phase, data were collected using a survey instrument, see appendix 1. The purpose of the survey was to gather data about the student centred learning experiences of the participants in the study. The participants are student teachers from the Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies, at the University of Technology, Jamaica. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

The survey was administered with two separate groups of students, totalling 44 full-time business education students completing their bachelor's degree in education. As student teachers, the participants were exposed to student centred learning approaches through their teacher education training. Therefore, in completing the survey, as they were aware of the concepts and issues being investigated, this knowledge, complemented and enhanced the richness of the research dialogue.

In the second phase, focus group sessions were held to gather data about the students' understanding of student centred learning and their experience of this approach, see appendix 2. Two separate focus group sessions were held, consisting of 11 participants in one group and 20 in another; thus, a total of 31 students participated in the focus group exercise. The participants in these focus groups were also selected using purposeful sampling.

In the final stage of the data collection process, an interview was conducted with the Chief Executive Officer of the Jamaica Employers' Federation (JEF) to gather information in reference to critical employability/soft skills that employers in Jamaica are seeking when graduates enter the workplace and as to whether these were present or not. The interview was a one-on-one interview, in which the researcher asked questions and recorded the responses (Creswell, 2012). The interviewee was selected based upon her experience and knowledge of the required skills being sought by Jamaican employers, as members of the federation.

The approach and design of this study purposively sampled each of the key population sets from which data were sought. These were student teachers with knowledge and experience of student centred learning and workplace representation that intimately understood, and had knowledge of what critical workplace skills Jamaican employers are seeking so as to enhance productivity and performance.

Data Analysis

The data were collated and entered into Google forms, then imported into Microsoft Excel for additional analysis. Descriptive

statistics were used to analyse the data and presented the participants' responses to the survey and focus group items, in order to address the research questions. Descriptive statistics describes and summarises the data (Fallon, 2016); this includes outlining the frequency, percentages, and measures of central tendency in this study. Microsoft Excel was used to organise the data and create the charts necessary to depict the results. This tool was adequate to aid in analysing the results as it allowed the researchers to sort information, analyse patterns and also perform calculations.

The data collected were processed and the responses that have common themes were identified and grouped together under the different research questions that guided the study. Inferences were drawn from the data collected and interpretation of the data presented was used to establish the actual perceptions of the participants.

The questionnaire responses were analysed using the steps for analysing qualitative data as outlined by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). These steps entail reading over the transcribed data, analysing participants' responses, arranging the information in categories and sub-categories, identify patterns and connections between categories and themes, then finally interpretation of the data by attaching meaning and significance to the analysis (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Details of the data collection for each research question and the data analysis can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1.

Research questions, method of data collection and analysis

Research Question	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis
1. What is the level of student understanding of student centred learning and its benefits?	• Focus group (questions 3 – 5)	Descriptive Analysis
2. Does student centred learning assist in enhancing the quality of learning outcomes in a business education course in a tertiary institution in Jamaica?	• Survey (item 6 – 13)	Descriptive Analysis
3. Does student centred learning enhance the knowledge and skills development of students in line with the attributes sought by the Jamaican workplace? *(this includes critical thinking, initiative, creativity, collaboration, communication, media and technology literacy, flexibility, leadership, productivity and social skills)*	• Focus group, (questions 6a - 6d and question 7) • Interview	Descriptive Analysis One-on-one interview

Results

The survey was structured in a manner which enabled the researchers to gather information about the students' experience of student centred learning and their understanding of the features of student centred learning. A total of 44 participants responded to the questions posed, of which 75% were female and 25% male. Majority

of the respondents originate from rural areas of Jamaica (58%), with the remaining 42% from urban areas. All participants surveyed were completing a bachelor's degree in education.

The purpose of the survey was to understand the students' experience of student centred learning in their studies. Therefore, the data were collected and presented in a manner which reflects the features of student centred learning approach. These features include students' learning experience, feedback, assessment, teacher/student interactions, responsibility and accountability, motivation, and teaching and learning processes (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003). Data collected from the second phase of the study were integrated through these features.

The final stage of the data collection process confirmed the increasing emphasis by employers for the identified critical employability skills (Brewer, 2013) to be more prevalent amongst the Jamaican workforce so as to enhance its effectiveness. This is expounded upon in discussion.

Students Learning Experience. Respondents overwhelmingly (83%) recognised their learning experience as diverse, creative, practical and interactive. This being consistent with recognised features of student centred learning, whilst also supporting the tenets of other researches (Cannon & Newbie, 2000; Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003; Chamorro-Premuzic, Furnham & Lewis, 2007), which assert that student centred learning emphasises interaction and activity in learning. Significantly, focus groups pointedly indicated an enhanced learning experience with the integrated use of smartphones into learning activities. The remaining 17% of the respondents stated that their experience was however, didactic,

regurgitative and repetitive; features more commonly associated with traditional, conventional teaching approaches.

Feedback. Feedback and guidance are very important elements of student centred learning (McCabe & O'Connor, 2014; Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). The participants were asked about the frequency of feedback received from lecturers. The results indicated that 51% received feedback periodically, 47% received feedback continuously, 21% received summatively, and only 7% received no feedback at all. However, in a student centred learning approach, feedback should be from both students and teachers as opposed to conventional methods where feedback is limited and is only delivered by the teacher (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003).

Assessment. When asked about assessment, the participants outlined that they received formative and summative assessment - 98% responded that they received formative assessment and 71% received summative assessment. The respondents therefore received a combination of both formative and summative assessment, which supports the tenets of student centred learning (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003), that assessment should be both formative and summative within a student centred learning environment. Other researchers (Brown et al. 1997; Light & Cox, 2001) found that more formative assessment and feedback to students related to their learning would enhance student learning. They believe that formative assessment can help the students by highlighting their learning gaps and content knowledge that is in need of development. An emphasis on formative assessment, with less summative assessment supports and encourages a more student centred approach (O'Neill, Moore & McMullin), as opposed to conventional

teaching methodologies that emphasise summative assessment (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). The participants also stated that they regularly had an input into the assessment activities as sought by the facilitator. In conventional approaches, assessment emphasises the giving of marks and grades, while the giving of advice and learning function is less emphasised; also competition amongst students is highlighted, more so than personal improvement and competency (Black, 1999). This should not be the approach at the tertiary level, since students are being prepared to enter the workplace with the ability to take advice, learn from others and develop vital interpersonal skills.

Teacher/student Interaction. In a student centred learning environment the teacher/student interaction is respectful, their prior knowledge and experience are acknowledged, and learners are recognised as adults; versus the conventional approach where the teacher is paternalistic, the teacher is viewed as an expert, and the students are ignorant of the process and learning content (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). In investigating the student/teacher relationships, the results revealed that 88% of the participants thought their interactions were respectful, 57% stated that they were treated as adults and 67% stated that their prior knowledge and experience were acknowledged. A small number, 7% identified the facilitator as paternalistic, seeing themselves as the 'fountain of knowledge'.

Motivation. Respondents were motivated by their facilitators encouraging their own development of personal objectives. This encouraged respondents (43%) too wn their goals and strive toward these. Significantly, 83% of respondents recognised that their

facilitator enabled personal flexibility in learning interactions. Their learning experience was flexible, not rigid, which contributed to the development of deep learning skills (McCabe & O'Connor, 2014). Similarly, 52% of respondents indicated that they received inspired content and process in their learning. Facilitators also ensured that both content and process were stimulating. This motivated learners and contributed to their course success. Student participation, motivation and grades increased when student centred approaches were adopted (Lumpkin & Achen, 2015).

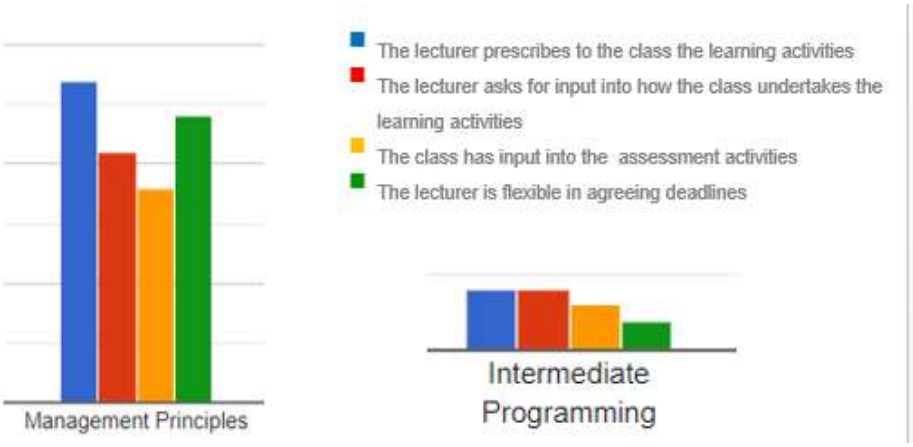
Responsibility and Accountability. Based on the results of the study, 77% of the students felt that they were empowered to own and plot their own learning pathway, with 55% feeling empowered and accountable for their learning. Prior research noted that student centred learning promotes increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student (Weimer, 2002). Likewise, in student centred learning there is a shift in responsibility from lecturer to students (Attard, DiLorio, Geven & Santa, 2010; Geven & Santa, 2010; McCabe et al, 2014; Maclellan 2008). Our results reflected similarly, with respondents advancing that they felt responsible and in control of their own learning. Learners have full responsibility for their learning when student centred approaches are adopted, the opportunity to become more independent as learners and more accountable for their learning, by being actively involved in the learning process rather than passively receiving information from a lecture advances learning outcomes (Slunt & Giancarlo, 2004).

Teaching and Learning. The study investigated the level of student centred learning integration into the delivery of fifteen different courses. The factors considered were: whether the lecturer

prescribes the learning activities, if student input was sought into how learning activities were undertaken, the student input into the assessment activities, and the lecturers flexibility in agreeing deadlines. The results indicated that different subjects appear to lend themselves to varying levels of student centred learning. For example, Figure 1 illustrates that although both of the courses reflected the use of student centred learning approaches, it would appear that one reflects a significantly higher level of such an approach. Is this because some courses lend themselves to such an approach more so than others?

Figure 1.

Student Centred Learning in Teaching and Learning



Discussion

All respondents had knowledge of student centred learning; this was expected as the respondents were all pursuing a degree in education. However, it is notable that the researchers, when discussing the features of student centred learning through the first two stages of the data collection process, found that these respondents were well versed in the key features of student centred learning and could extensively evaluate their own learning experience through the "lens" of student centred learning in the 15 courses reviewed. The level of insight was significant enough to cause such comment by both researchers.

Respondents perceived traditional didactic models of teaching to be less inspiring, less motivating and less effective than student centred approaches to learning. This is in line with studies which have found that student centred approaches may improve student motivation and academic success, whilst literature reviewed (Brown-Wright, 2011) supports the notion that many teachers strive to utilise student centred learning approaches in the classroom. However, respondents *en masse* expressed concern that too much of a lack of structure (on the part of how the facilitator manages the class) may negatively impact appropriate, robust and quality assured assessment practices. Such a concern was expressed primarily due to the emphasis upon course success in summative examination assessment.

With significant interest, our study found that the use of information technology (particularly through smartphones) assisted in enriching learning experience. This is consistent with findings by

Kemm and Dantas (2007) and Lu et al, (2007) who found that the use of information technology in tertiary level programmes not only accommodated many learning styles and enhanced student interest and engagement, but contributed to improved performance in desirable course outcomes in, amongst other things, written reports and examinations.

Findings further revealed that many of the competencies developed through practising student centred learning approaches are complimentary to desirable and indeed identified characteristics that the 21st century worker should be ideally equipped with (Brewer, 2013). Significantly, respondents themselves recognise the benefits of learning through this approach as it is viewed as both positive for their current learning experience, whilst also being beneficial in the workplace, either currently or for the future. The third component of the data collection exercise was an interview with a senior representative from the leadership of the Jamaica Employers' Federation who pointed towards its membership, over a number of years, increasingly expressing the need to develop critical employability skills (including inter-personal and communication soft skills) amongst graduates entering the workforce (Jamaica Gleaner, 2009; 2014). Further, noting that the development of these critical employability skills, as identified both locally and through the International Labour Organisation (Brewer, 2013) are indeed integral to the desired features of the workforce and its entrants, as sought by its membership. The federation interestingly points to these deficiencies affording opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop interventions so as to address such skills gaps; thereby, assisting young people to become more employable as they seek to overcome

their lack of experience in the workplace (Hewitt, Owens & Stewart, 2018). The Jamaica Employers' Federation is the employers representative body in the tripartite relationship between employers, workers (trade unions) and the government. As such, it is the local representative for the interests of employers at the International Labour Organisation. Further, it is the only trade union in Jamaica representing the views of employers in the workplace and thus its voice is significant.

In deliberations over the research and the literature reviewed so as to inform our own discussions, it became apparent that the research globally in student centred learning reaches into many facets of the teaching and learning experience; whilst it also penetrates and impacts policies toward and behaviour of stakeholders, whether institutions, individuals or government. The facilitator, for example, is often referred to in this paper. However, the impact of student centred learning approaches upon their workload and/or personal and professional practice, which is likely considerable is not considered. While this paper is not designed to study this relationship, as a result of our findings, it is pertinent to comment. Student centred learning transforms teacher orientation, changing the focus of the tasks teachers must do. Salter et al (2009) reviewed how through giving facilitators and students new roles, course redesign may, for example, better support students through ensuring that students would be more actively engaged and not just be lectured. In planning classroom activities, focus was upon identifying tasks students needed to do in order to learn the material, rather than upon the tasks teachers needed to do in order to prepare a learning session. This fundamentally changes planning in classroom preparation

activities for facilitators, particularly so for those accustomed to teaching through more traditional approaches. This has implications for facilitators as they professionally develop, making the change from "sage on the stage" to being the "guide on the side" (Weimer, 2002). This may not be an easy transition! However, such development is crucial if improvements in developing the quality and consistency of student centred learning approaches are to evolve. It is the facilitator that ensures that the skills, attitude and knowledge are developed by learners so as to better equip them with critical employability skills, as sought by the workplace; thus, expanding the utilisation of student centred learning approaches amongst facilitators is imperative.

Our research also garnered information pertaining to a study by George, Craven, Williams-Myers and Bonnick (2003). Conducted at the University of Technology, Jamaica, it indicated that student centred learning, which was poorly utilised by facilitators at that time, could be advanced through an Action Research Programme approach, aligned to staff development. Adoption of this approach was slow amongst the then lecturers, due in part to a lack of incentive to do so. In making our contribution in this arena, through our study and findings at the same university some 15 years later, it seems apparent that the present academic staff cadre, certainly in the Business and Computer Studies programme of the Bachelors of Education, at least, act quite to the contrary in their classroom practice; our study substantiating the current, more prevalent use of student centred learning approaches. Further, such evidence of the incorporation of student centred learning approaches may reasonably infer that generally the university may have significantly enhanced

its own overall ability to better supply the Jamaican workplace with suitably trained graduates. A key component of the recently reformulated university's vision is: "We are the #1 University in the Caribbean for work-ready leaders…" (University of Technology, Jamaica, 2018), a clear signal to stakeholders that it recognises this role; and thus reinforcing Abraham and Karns' (2009) musings that preparing students for employment is the mission of schools.

Conclusions

Today's society, impacted significantly by globalisation worldwide, requires lifelong learners who are flexible problem solvers and who can select, organise and use information appropriately in new situations (Pinto & Sales, 2008). In Jamaica, as well as worldwide, as the 21st century progresses, mounting concerns have been raised with regard to the quality and competency of graduates entering the workforce. Employers seek workers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will optimise performance and are "work ready"; as such, employers seek a set of critical employability skills (Brewer, 2013). These include, critical thinking, problem solving, adaptability, high level interpersonal skills and teamwork, amongst others - just such a set of attributes that are recognised as outcomes from the practice of student centred learning.

This study sought to identify whether practicing student centred learning in a tertiary education programme is likely to not only enhance learning outcomes in current studies, but also whether this practice would contribute to enhancing the capabilities and critical employability skills for graduates entering the Jamaican workforce. The results certainly point to such a conclusion. Clear

links and commonalities are apparent between not only the theoretical background that underpins the practice of student centred learning, but also the experience of our respondents, who clearly identified their own learning experience with developing competencies in problem solving, team working, interpersonal skills, responsibility and ethical reasoning, amongst others. Additionally, they were indeed cognisant of not just the impact of student centred learning upon their current learning, but pointed toward their own future workplace experience and their ability to contribute positively, due to their possession of critical employability attributes. This latter point being validated as crucial for employers when recruiting for the Jamaican workplace.

With these points, amongst others identified in this paper, we assert that our research advances the view that student centred learning approaches, as practised in tertiary institutions, can make a positive contribution to developing competencies in identified critical employability skills that will develop and benefit graduates upon entry into the workforce. Students tend to respond positively to this approach, they are motivated, particularly through using information technology to support learning activities. If more students experience student centred learning (which by implication means more lecturers must utilise student centred learning approaches!), this will directly impact and improve learning outcomes in higher education. We therefore posit that extending the practice of student centred learning across subject disciplines will likely, not only enhance student learning, but will better prepare graduates for the workplace as they will be better equipped with critical employability skills, thereby

addressing the weaknesses that many employers recognise as presently lacking amongst graduates.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Research Survey

Is Learning Really Student Centred? The Experience of Business Education Students at a University in Jamaica.

As a student undertaking the Bachelor's Degree in Education you are being asked to assist and contribute to the compilation of data so as to inform the researchers and supplement the validity of their findings.

The research is to focus upon current cohorts and is intended to assist us in evaluating your learning experience so that we may enhance research findings in relation to how student centred your learning experience is so that we may make recommendations so as to enhance the learning experience of students in Jamaica.

The few short questions asked are focused upon your experience in relation to the courses you are currently undertaking and your learning experience in these.

The researchers are not asking for any personal data, other than for you to supply your gender, your home region and confirm that you are a student on the above Degree Programme.

We hope that you will assist us so that we may better inform both current and future educators (including yourselves) as to how to better deliver learning programmes so that we may continue to enhance the quality of our Jamaican education process.

Our thanks in advance, Stephen Wallder & Nardia Brown

Lecturers & PhD Candidates

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1. I am Male: ( ) Female: ( ) *Please indicate your gender with a tick (√)*

2. Indicate your home region.
   - Urban ( )
   - Rural ( ) *Please tick as appropriate*

3. I am a student undertaking the Degree in Education. ( ) *Please confirm with a tick*

4. Upon entry to the aforementioned degree programme did you hold passes in the following CXC (or equivalent) qualifications.

   Please tick as appropriate

   - English ( )
   - Mathematics ( ) *If you ticked both please go to question 6*

5. If you <u>did not</u> hold either or both of these subjects when starting the programme did you gain the qualification(s) whilst undertaking your degree?

   Yes ( ) No ( ) *Please tick as appropriate*

6. Thinking generally, is your learning experience one that you recognise as:

   - diverse, creative, practical and interactive ( ) or one that is
   - didactic, regurgitative and individual ( ) *Please tick as appropriate*

7. Do you receive feedback from your lecturers/facilitators
   - continuously ( )
   - periodically ( )
   - summatively ( )
   - not at all ( ) *Please tick all that apply*

8. How are you assessed?

   - through coursework, formatively ( )
   - summatively through a final (sit down) examination ( )

   Please tick all that apply

9. Learning outcomes, are these discussed with you?

- with feedback and input sought from you ( )
- told the knowledge you will gain with little emphasis upon developing skills ( )

Please tick all that apply

10. Your learning experience and relationship with your lecturer/facilitator.

- is it respectful? ( )
- is prior knowledge/experience acknowledged? ( )
- Are you recognised as an adult? ( )

- is the facilitator paternalistic and sees self as the "fountain of knowledge?" ( )
  Please tick all that apply

11. Does your facilitator motivate, excite, inspire confidence and interest in you through:
    - Assisting you in formulating personal learning objectives ( )
    - Enabling personal flexibility in your learning experience ( )
    - Inspirational content and process in learning ( )

12. Who holds responsibility for your learning?
    - you are encouraged to own and plot your own pathway ( )
    - you are empowered and accountable ( )
      Please tick all that apply

13. Below is a list of courses that you may have undertaken as part of your Programme of Study. Please indicate with a tick the statement that applies to each course you have undertaken.

Course title:	**Assessment for each course:**			
	The lecturer prescribes to the class the learning activities	**Lecturer asks for input into how the class undertakes learning activities**	**The class has input into the assessment activities**	**The lecturer is flexible in agreeing deadlines**
Caribbean Economic Growth & Development				
Company Law				
Computing Essentials for Educators				
Cost & Management Accounting				
Electronic Accounting				
Financial Accounting 1				
Financial Accounting 2				
Intermediate Programming				
Introduction to				

Macroeconomics				
Introduction to Marketing				
Introduction to Microeconomics				
Legal Environment of Business				
Management Principles				
Production & Operations Management				
Programming Essentials				

We really appreciate your input, thank you.

Note: Upon completion of this research it will be available for review, please indicate whether you would like a copy sent to you. ( ) *please tick if yes?.*

Appendix 2.

Focus Group Research Survey

Is Learning Really Student Centred? The Experience of Business Education Students at a University in Jamaica.

Focus Group Date and Location…… Administered by ……

1. Number of Males: ( ) Number of Females: ( )

2. Home region.

   - Urban ( )
   - Rural ( )

3. Are you aware of the term – Student Centred Learning? Yes ( ) No ( )

4. What does the term Student Centred Learning mean to you?
   ……
   ……
   ……

5. In considering what you now understand Student Centred Learning to be, how does it differ from "traditional" learning and teaching modes?
   ……
   ……
   ……

6. a. In considering your experience of student centred learning, what would you identify as the prime benefits, skills and competencies that have been developed and/or enhanced for you?
   ……
   ……
   ……

b. How does student-centred learning facilitate independent learning and foster lifelong learning?

……
……
……

c. To what extent does student-centred learning contribute to your critical thinking and real-world problem solving skills?

……
……
……

d. Would you support the view that technology literacy plays a vital role in utilising student-centred learning approaches? Explain.

……
……
……

7. Thinking of your experience in the workplace, please identify key attributes and competencies that are required of you?

……
……
……

Other comments:……