



Characterizing a Student-centered University: What do students think?

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Abstract

Higher education institutions cannot exist without students, deemed their primary asset. This is why many tertiary institutions have begun adopting a student-consumer approach to improve student satisfaction and student-centeredness. However, the concept of student-centeredness is understudied, and there remains no unified definition of what it constitutes. This study hopes to expand on the limited existing literature. To achieve this, the research sought to understand students' perceptions of whether their institution is student-centered. Sixty-two students from two private universities responded to an online questionnaire. Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Findings reveal that student-centeredness is complex, multi-dimensional, and viewed based on students' expectations and experiences. Nevertheless, a student-centered university encompasses a safe and welcoming learning environment that validates students' efforts, listens to their concerns and recommendations, caters to their holistic development, and provides the requisite resources for student success. Even though both private institutions make some efforts to be student-centered, findings suggest notable weaknesses that undermine total student-consumer satisfaction, which raises the need for operational and policy review. Improvements in communication, responsiveness, and a better balance between financial goals and student well-being are needed to improve student-centeredness. The study has implications for how technology could enhance student satisfaction outcomes.

Keywords: *Higher education, Jamaica, Student-centeredness, Student-customer satisfaction, Student success.*

A. Introduction

Students constitute a significant portion of the academic community in higher education institutions (HEIs) and the education sector. Without students, the existence of colleges and universities would be rendered unnecessary, emphasizing their fundamental role in academia. Despite this, concerns frequently arise regarding whether tertiary institutions genuinely prioritize student-centeredness. Many students have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of customer service, institutional policies, and overall interactions they experience within HEIs, leading to ongoing discussions about improving student support structures. Academic leaders have started implementing measures to enhance student-centered practices in response to these concerns. For instance, Kevin Brown, the University of Technology (UTech), Jamaica's president, proposed a RESET agenda, one of which key objectives is reinforcing student-centeredness (The Gleaner, 2024). This growing emphasis on student-centeredness reflects a broader recognition of the need for HEIs to align their services and policies to foster students' academic and career development.

The concept of student-centeredness has deep historical roots and remains a central theme in discussions about higher education. It frequently emerges in the literature concerning first-year university students who face challenges transitioning from high school to tertiary education.

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Kift (2009) underscores that learner-centeredness is the dominant paradigm within transition pedagogy, supporting students' academic and personal adjustment. However, despite its significance, Taylor (2013) points out that student-centeredness, though widely referenced, often lacks a clear and universally accepted definition. Bremner (2021) echoes this sentiment, stating that the various interpretations of the concept make it challenging to establish a standardized framework. Historical perspectives on student-centered learning can be traced back to educational philosophers such as Rousseau (1712–1778), and Pestalozzi (1746–1827), who championed that education should prioritize the learner's needs and active engagement rather than merely delivering content. This perspective has continued to shape modern discussions, leading to the development of concepts such as “student-centered learning” and the “student-centered approach,” which stress flexibility, interactivity, and student autonomy in learning.

Paris and Combs (2006) provide a nuanced understanding of student-centeredness, identifying three principal dimensions. First, they highlight a student-as-consumer standpoint, emphasizing flexible scheduling and service delivery in higher education. Second, they discuss individualized instruction facilitated by interactive technology and meaningful pedagogical resources. Lastly, they explore integrating student voice and choice into teaching while ensuring that content standards are met. These dimensions underscore that student-centeredness is not limited to one aspect of education but encompasses a holistic approach that considers instructional methods, institutional policies, and students' overall experiences. Given the increasing demand for more student-focused education models, institutions must reevaluate their approaches to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Madden, Johnson, Daley, and Fearon (2025) emphasize that HEIs are becoming more attentive to students' overall experiences and striving to enhance student satisfaction. Their study identifies academic advisement and student satisfaction as crucial pillars of student success. Key factors include effective communication, high-quality teaching, emotionally intelligent lecturers, flexible learning and payment options, efficient student support services, modern learning facilities, and opportunities for holistic development (p. 278). However, despite these emerging discussions, research on student-centeredness within the Jamaican and broader Caribbean context remains scarce. Consequently, there is a pressing need for further investigation into students' perceptions of student-centeredness in HEIs. Addressing this gap, the present study explores students' perspectives by posing a fundamental question: What are students' perceptions of student-centeredness at their institution? This inquiry aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the extent to which HEIs in Jamaica and the Caribbean genuinely prioritize student-centered practices.

B. Literature Review

Student-centeredness in higher education has increasingly been associated with meeting students' expectations and ensuring their overall satisfaction. This shift has led to the growing perception of students as customers or clients, fundamentally altering the traditional academic framework. However, while student-centeredness emphasizes improving student experiences, Paricio (2017) argues that student customers' concept extends beyond delivering quality services. Instead, it represents a transformation in higher education, where universities operate in a competitive market, and public reputation becomes a key institutional priority. This perspective reframes education as a valuable personal and economic investment for students, necessitating curricula explicitly designed to support professional development. Additionally, the quality assurance mechanisms in HEIs now prioritize customer satisfaction, leading to a redefinition of relationships between students and faculty members. Consequently, the evolving nature of student-centeredness necessitates a balance between fostering academic rigor and meeting the consumer-oriented demands of modern higher education.

In this context, student-customer satisfaction has become a central metric for assessing HEI performance. Many institutions now recognize satisfaction as a crucial quality measure, directly influencing rankings, enrollments, and funding (Jereb, Jerebic, & Urh, 2018; McLeay, Robinson, & Yusoff, 2017). Kanji and Tambi (1999) define satisfaction as "being better at what matters most to customers" (p. 152), emphasizing the need for institutions to adapt to changing student expectations and continuously enhance service delivery. Given that students form a range of expectations regarding their educational experiences, researchers have conceptualized student satisfaction as a multidimensional construct (Hanssen & Solvoll, 2015; Jereb et al., 2018). Elliot and Shin (2002) define student satisfaction as a short-term attitude reflecting how well an institution meets or surpasses students' expectations. Sirgy et al. (2010) categorize student satisfaction into three primary components: academic, social, and institutional facilities and services. When students perceive a positive university experience, they are more likely to become ambassadors for their institutions, encouraging prospective students to enroll (Wong & Chapman, 2023). As a result, HEIs must acknowledge that students' experiences and perceptions play a crucial role in shaping institutional reputation and long-term success.

Satisfaction in higher education, much like in consumer industries, is driven by the alignment between expectations and actual experiences. Helgesen and Nettet (2007) describe satisfaction as "a psychological state or a subjective judgment based on the client's experiences compared with their expectations" (p. 43). This definition underscores the importance of HEIs, ensuring that the quality of education, student services, and institutional support meets or exceeds students' expectations. Petruzzellis (2006) similarly argues that customer satisfaction is achieved when the perceived quality of service aligns with or surpasses the expected standards (p. 352). Consequently, higher education institutions must continuously assess and refine their strategies to remain responsive to student needs. This requires institutions to integrate regular feedback mechanisms, enhance faculty engagement with students, and develop flexible learning structures that accommodate diverse learning styles. By doing so, HEIs can foster an environment that promotes academic excellence and a positive overall student experience.

Given these dynamics, higher education administrators must recognize that students' expectations are a crucial benchmark for institutional quality. The traditional model of higher education, which primarily focuses on content delivery and academic assessment, must evolve to include a more student-centric approach that values holistic development and satisfaction. Institutions must, therefore, reorient their policies and activities to better align with student priorities, such as effective communication, accessible academic support, modernized learning environments, and career-oriented curricula. Furthermore, ensuring students feel valued and heard within their academic communities will contribute to their academic success and enhance their long-term engagement with the institution as alumni. By prioritizing student satisfaction alongside academic rigor, HEIs can create an educational experience that is both enriching and aligned with contemporary demands in the global higher education landscape.

C. Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research design to investigate tertiary students' perceptions of student-centeredness in higher education. The qualitative approach was employed as it allows for an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, which allows the researcher to obtain rich, descriptive data. The study collected data from 62 students (51F, 11M) from Northern Caribbean University (NCU) and the University of the Commonwealth Caribbean (UCC) through an online questionnaire created in Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised both open- and closed-ended questions covering academic advisement, student engagement, and satisfaction. The questionnaire link was distributed and circulated via class WhatsApp groups and learning management system (LMS) platforms over two months. Student participation was voluntary.

The respondents represented several academic cycles, including bachelor's, associate's, and master's degree programs, with the majority (85.5%) enrolled in a four-year undergraduate degree program. Their fields of study are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' academic fields of studies

Academic Discipline	Number of Students
Arts	1.6%
Behavioral and Social Sciences	30.6%
Business	41.9%
Humanities	14.5%
Information Technology	14.5%
Natural and Applied Sciences	4.8%

The study used qualitative content analysis to interpret the data. After the respondents completed the questionnaire, the researcher carefully reviewed the data and observed various patterns, informing the codes and categories. This meticulous process uncovered key insights concerning students' perceptions of student-centeredness in higher education.

D. Findings and Discussion

There is no clear consensus concerning students' perceptions of student-centeredness at their institution, as the responses are mixed. Many students believe their university prioritizes other things, such as finances or religious activities, over students' needs. However, several highlight positive aspects, including opportunities for student involvement, support services, and responsiveness from particular lecturers. The following categorizations provide further details about their responses.

1. Financial Focus Vs. Student Needs

A large portion of the negative comments suggest a perceived focus on financial gains as opposed to student well-being. This encompasses concerns about exorbitant tuition fees, inadequate financial support, and a notable lapse in responsiveness from the administration whenever students encounter difficulties.

Excerpt 1: "NCU is a money-making school. No effort is made for students, and lecturers are on a don't-care basis."

Excerpt 2: "They don't care about the students as long as they get the tuition."

Excerpt 3: "It is student-centered to an extent; they do just enough to keep students interested. University is a business. No university is 'student-centered' enough to hide that fact."

Excerpt 4: "It's more like whatever they want to do, they do. We as students just have to work with what they say."

Excerpt 5: "Student retention is lacking. I think waiting on responses and analyzing them is best."

Excerpt 6: "Students often have issues that are never resolved even when the proper channels are being followed."

Excerpt 7: "It is as if some individuals make it so [student-centered], and then there are others who do not care."

Excerpt 8: "Tuition going up every semester is off-putting on the student-centered side of things, but I suppose it is ok."

Excerpt 9: "It is not student-centered but more money-centered."

2. Communication issues

Students highlight difficulties with communication (slow response times, inefficient email systems, unresponsive faculty), which distract from a student-centered environment.

Excerpt 1: "I don't believe the institution listens to students concerns."

Excerpt 2: "They tend to respond to emails late."

Excerpt 3: "The issues with bad lecturers need to be addressed."

Excerpt 4: "Sometimes yes and sometimes no, because it is not every time you get a good response."

3. Inconsistent Experiences

Several respondents report experiencing a wide array of engagement and interactions with faculty, which are deemed negative.

Excerpt 1: "If this question was an issue specific to lecturers, then there are a few that do make the experience worthwhile, holistically; however, the school [university] needs to work more on improving a student-centered focus."

Excerpt 2: "[The university is student-centered] from some aspects because some lectures don't motivate the students to learn."

Excerpt 3: "I think the institution could benefit from being more student-centered as currently very few departments go out their way to ensure that students concerns or achievements are seen and heard. Thus leaving students feeling discouraged and overlooked."

Excerpt 4: "NCU does a good job of serving its student population, but there are some loopholes as it relates to getting timely advisement from advisors that have landed many students in difficulty before."

Excerpt 5: "I believe that the workload that is required to pass a course is a lot. Assignments are not posted in time so that we have adequate time to do them; this includes group presentations. Most lecturers post at the same time, so imagine you have 5 courses and each has group work and you only get a week or little over a week to finish and submit plus pre-record. I think more consideration is needed in this area plus more."

Excerpt 6: "Too many students fail courses/drop out without much care from lecturers and the university on a larger scale."

Excerpt 7: "Students need to be more involved in some decisions which affect us directly. I'm of the belief that if a student is studying online, they should not be compelled to purchase any book and only to realize that the semester ends and the book is unused."

Excerpt 8: "Students' needs are met and there are a number of programs in place to assist students, but sometimes those who are responsible seem to forget the reason why they are doing what they are doing. Some sort of means-end displacement."

Excerpt 9: "The policies are designed to suit lecturers. For example, mandatory attendance policy where students must be present for every class or they will fail; or the tardiness policy after five minutes in the class session a student is considered late, while a teacher is considered late after 30 minutes. At all times lecturers are given preference and more leeway, which makes the tertiary experience more of a secondary experience. There are many other examples; however, I must highlight this last one, as the assumed definition of "student centered" according to lecturers seems to be giving students the opportunity to teach the entire class a topic on the syllabus that they have no idea of, and then grade then for their knowledge. This act is more like students doing their jobs rather than the student-centered value one may think the practice does."

Despite the negative perceptions and experiences shared, respondents also provided a wide range of positive elements that contribute to student-centeredness, some of which are the opposite of what is mentioned above. These include a positive learning environment that affirms

and validates students, listens to their concerns, seeks after their holistic development, and provides the necessary resources for student success.

Excerpt 1: "They provide a friendly environment for student to learn and tools and opportunities to develop skills."

Excerpt 2: "I would describe it as being student-centered. It cares about the students and recognizes the achievements of the students as well as granting students opportunities (job vacancies, summer work, etc.)"

Excerpt 3: "Well, the UCC focuses on the needs interests and abilities of individual students. It encourages students to take an active role in their learning, emphasizing self-motivation, and giving them ownership over their education."

Excerpt 4: "They prioritize the needs and well-being of their students, ensuring that we have the necessary support, resources, and opportunities to thrive academically and personally. From academic advisement to various student services, they strive to create an environment that puts students at the center of everything they do."

Excerpt 5: "Yes, I am a part-time student who works and I feel like the institution takes the fact that I work a 9-5 and go to school seriously, based on the lecturers and how they present, as well as how the system is structured to accommodate part-time working individuals."

Excerpt 6: "You can tell that with the communication systems and events held, the university aims to create a community of students."

Excerpt 7: "NCU is a Christian institution, which lifestyle propels us as student to pursue commitment and growth in a personal relationship with Jesus. It caters for us as student not just academically but spiritually as well."

Excerpt 8: "They pay attention to the students' queries and recommendations."

Excerpt 9: "Most events and /or meetings that are held are centered around the students and how to improve our experience."

Excerpt 10: "They do their best to communicate through all the mediums, ways to assist us. Even just recently, they started tutor sessions for students lagging behind in certain courses. The lecturers do communicate with us outside class times and that is truly helpful because we students do struggle with balancing schools and work and motherhood (some). So at times, we may have been in class, but the information maybe wasn't clear; they have no problem explaining so we better understand. Some of the lecturers are so lenient. They give support – enough time to complete our assignments. The school introduces growth opportunities for us every now and then (the marketing research project, among others) and scholarships so students are exposed to opportunities for growth. They introduce fun and interesting ways we can engage whether online or in-person on campus..."

The findings suggest mixed views from students with regard to their opinions of student-centeredness in higher education, which reinforces the idea that there is no fixed definition (Bremner, 2021) and that the notion is based on personal expectations and experiences. The findings also show a correlation between student-centeredness and student satisfaction (Madden et al., 2025). Several students complain about high tuition fees, which oppose student-centeredness, and see university as a "business" – making it a transactional experience (Tomlinson, 2016). One student said, "They don't care about the students as long as they get the tuition." Students may feel voiceless if they have no say in the decision-making of tuition hikes. One student said, "It's more like whatever they want to do, they do. We as students have to work with what they say." However, tuition is generally high across HEI institutions in Jamaica (Williams, 2018), and as a developing economy, many students will find it challenging to cover their fees without student loans or a payment plan. As both NCU and UCC are private institutions with little or no subvention from the government, it can be assumed that they have higher operational costs, and a large portion of their expenses is covered through student tuition fees.

Notwithstanding, it is evident from the responses that HEIs ought to balance student experience so that they do not feel they are paying expensively for a service they do not enjoy.

Another shortcoming of HEIs as it relates to student-centeredness is ineffective communication. Many students lamented the unresponsive nature of many faculty members and the delay with which their queries are addressed. This could cause students to believe that their institutions do not “listen to students’ concerns.” This supports Karimi’s (2008) study, which indicated that students felt ignored whenever their honest complaints were not addressed. Madden et al. (2025) also note that inefficient communication significantly contributed to student dissatisfaction, which requires urgent attention. If universities perceive students as customers, they should improve their customer service skills and other support services to facilitate students’ queries (Arnold, 2018). Madden et al. (2025ab) suggest that HEIs and lecturers could leverage technology, including artificial intelligence, to find solutions to improve student communication.

Furthermore, students highlighted inconsistent experiences at different levels of the higher education system that they believe are not aligned with student-centeredness and student-friendliness. Some students found that various units at their academic institutions support student-centeredness, but others were not at the same standard. For instance, some lecturers “make the experience worthwhile,” but the university managers need to enhance student-centeredness. Similarly, some academic and administrative departments outperform others in catering to students’ needs. Insufficient student advisement, work overload, high failure rate for some courses, unused materials, and anti-student policies are among the significant issues cited. Once again, this shows that student-centeredness is perceived from personal expectations. Nevertheless, students’ concerns call for HEIs to be more uniform in their approach when interacting with students. This can be achieved through knowledge enhancement, training, and workshops, which include themes such as emotional intelligence. HEIs also need student retention policies and mechanisms to support student success throughout their academic tenure.

Despite the numerous negative concerns highlighted, some respondents acknowledged positive experiences contributing to student-centeredness and student satisfaction. Among these are a positive learning environment with the requisite equipment to guarantee student success, support services that provide job and scholarship opportunities, promotion of active and autonomous student learning, flexibility and accommodation of part-time students, occasions to develop and maintain spiritual wellness, valuing students’ inquiries and suggestions, implementing academic support and scaffolding for struggling students, and being dynamic in teaching modality and delivery. Consequently, a student-centered university caters to students’ academic development and social, professional, and spiritual growth. Kaput (2018) advocates for an education system design that considers students’ interests, learning styles, cultural identities, life experiences, and personal challenges.

Satisfaction remains a multi-faceted construct, which means different things to different people. Still, HEIs must review their policies and practices to ensure they serve the student community as best as possible. As Kanji and Tambi (1999) indicated, satisfaction requires improving one’s approach and services in a manner that matters to one’s customers. The nature of HEIs requires this to be continuous, especially with new generations of students entering university yearly.

The study presents some limitations. Firstly, the sample size was small; therefore, it does not allow for generalizations of the findings. Secondly, the findings and analysis did not separate the institutions investigated; consequently, there is a lack of clear understanding concerning specific strengths and deficiencies relative to each institution. Lastly, another shortcoming is that only one question was analyzed from the data collected, which did not provide for robust triangulation. Future studies could examine students’ perceptions of student-centeredness across

various departments and colleges at their institutions. Additionally, it would be helpful to interrogate academic leaders' vision of student-centeredness and how it aligns with students' outlook.

E. Conclusion

Though understudied in higher education, the notion of student-centeredness is challenging to characterize, as it is perceived through the lens of students' expectations and experiences. However, it is connected with student satisfaction. Student-centeredness in higher education encompasses a positive and safe learning environment that affirms and validates students, listens to their concerns, seeks after their holistic development, and provides the necessary resources for student success. Although the findings suggest that both NCU and UCC make some efforts to be student-centered, notable deficiencies undermine overall student-consumer satisfaction, requiring a review of policy and operations. Improvements in communication, responsiveness, and a better balance between financial goals and student well-being are needed to foster a more genuinely student-centered environment. With many HEIs now viewing students as customers who can influence their reputation and viability, it is incumbent on them to establish the requisite frameworks and policies to improve students' overall experience. Technology should also be part of the cutting-edge solutions to achieve and maintain a student-centered university.

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