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Defining and supporting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): A sector-wide study

Executive summary

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1. Context of the study of SOTL

This project was carried out in the context of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) 'Staff Transitions' stream of work, with a view to investigating the extent to which activities undertaken under the banner of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) might inform a sector-wide reflection on ways of identifying and recognising excellence in teaching. SoTL is a model that is used in the higher education (HE) sector (particularly in North America, Australasia, UK, South Africa and some European and south-east Asian countries) to reflect on, and transform, teaching and learning practices. It focuses on teaching and learning strategies underpinning the curriculum, and promotes research-informed teaching. Increasingly, it also seeks to involve students by providing opportunities to learn in research-mode and to develop undergraduate research. SoTL is a research-led form of professional development, and has the potential to inform policy and practice at institutional level, for example, in career development and in the promotion and recognition of teaching excellence. In today's increasingly diverse higher education environment, with access to state subsidy now being available to private providers and non-HE institutions, it is important to provide tools flexible enough to address institutional and disciplinary diversity, changing career pathways, and varied promotion frameworks in universities.

2. Main aims of the study

In order to arrive at an understanding of how SoTL is understood across the sector, and to make recommendations for its use in promotion and recognition, the study aimed to:

- > investigate the way SoTL is defined and supported in the UK HE sector;
- > identify the key challenges in developing and supporting SoTL for promotion and recognition;
- > provide resources that enable articulation to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) (and their function across the different levels of academic/professional careers);
- > provide examples as a resource for institutions;
- > identify strategies to engage students in SoTL and the main challenges this presents;
- > make recommendations to inform the next iteration of the UKPSF and the sector in the context of the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

3. Methodology

The study relied on four sources of data (see 3.1) to generate knowledge about the way SoTL is understood and used in the sector, and to extrapolate a framework to support institutions in using SoTL to recognise teaching excellence; the HEA in enhancing the UKPSF; and national and international policy related to teaching excellence.

3.1. Data sources

The four data sources used in this study were:

- > an update of recent developments in the field of SoTL through a review of significant publications (reports, websites, and scholarly articles);
- > a survey of SoTL practices in 62 UK-based higher education providers (HEPs);
- > a series of follow-up interviews with eight heads of academic development from universities from across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland;

- > three interviews with institutional student engagement (SE) leaders representing three of the four UK nations (Wales, Northern Ireland and England);
- > six student focus groups involving 36 students (course representatives, ambassadors, society organisers and student mentors) from six HEIs across all four UK nations.

4. Main findings

4.1. Review of recent SoTL literature

Over the past 25 years, the concept of SoTL has moved from a primary focus on individual practice to enhance student learning (Boyer 1990) to developing a range of sophisticated themes, which have included:

- > the importance of peer-review and building communities of practice in SoTL inquiry (Huber and Hutchings 2005);
- > a focus on how SoTL works within different disciplines (Kreber 2009; Shulman 2005), and has the capacity to work across disciplines (McKinney 2012).

More recently, the emphasis has shifted to the promotion of research-informed teaching, undergraduate research, and student engagement (SE) in disciplinary or SoTL research (Healey *et al.* 2014a). Increasingly, SoTL is understood as an institutional tool for strategically developing excellence, and linking to career planning, promotion and recognition (Hutchings *et al.* 2011; Chalmers 2011). Very recent developments are also seeking to address the great diversity of institutions engaged in higher education teaching across the sector (Williams *et al.* 2013; Chalmers 2011; Healey *et al.* 2014b).

This analysis of the trends has enabled us to establish a theoretical framework for examining SoTL that involves the three different levels of the HE system, namely:

- > the *micro* level at the centre of the HE system, where academics are engaged with their students and investigating their own practice; and the department where the disciplinary community of academics operates;
- > the *meso* level, the institution and the impact of its strategic direction; its policies on staff development and promotion;
- > the *macro* level of the HE system, the national and international frameworks (regulations, incentives, and various steering policies) and communities that impact and interact. At this level, we also recognise the need to take account of sectorial and disciplinary diversity.

The main findings from the literature review were:

Definition and practice of SoTL:

- > There is a lack of clarity as to the status of SoTL in relation to the field of education, higher education and pedagogic research; and a perception that SoTL work lacks 'rigour';
- > SoTL is a tool that is gaining traction internationally to develop and recognise teaching competence/excellence; the prevalence of research excellence in higher education, however, hinders its potential uses as a framework to recognise teaching excellence;
- > the proliferation of definitions and varied conceptions of what SoTL is may hinder its progress as a vehicle to enhance and promote teaching, which points to the need for establishing a 'definitional framework' that allows for institutional adaptability in order to account for sector and disciplinary diversity, rather than providing a new definition.

New forms of SoTL:

- > The literature signals a move away from the initial focus on individuals' practices to a more strategic institutional and national policy foci to harness SoTL and develop competence and excellence frameworks;
- > SoTL activity is becoming collaborative (including large projects);

- social media is more frequently being used for dissemination.

Embedding SoTL strategically for recognition:

- The literature points to the need to ensure that initiatives at the three levels of the system are aligned so that SoTL is more tightly coupled to development, excellence and promotion frameworks;
- the case of SoTL career paths across the tertiary sector has been under-examined. Some literature suggests linking to 'knowledge exchange' type of activities (developing mode 2 research competence);
- disciplines and disciplinary units play a crucial role in building capacity in SoTL. It is difficult for SoTL to gain legitimacy in discipline environments, because discipline communities are the guardians of conventions, and the adjudicators of what counts as knowledge. This might account for the slow progress, and the accusation of 'lack of rigour' (often attributed to educational research).

Benefits for students:

- Students can engage in SoTL and in discipline-based research with their tutors; there are important considerations to take into account to ensure this is a working relationship;
- SoTL has the potential to develop global attributes among students.

4.2. Findings from interviews with Heads of Educational Development

The main findings were:

- there is a lack of clarity as to what SoTL entails and how it is recognised – with a sense that public discourse about it does not always match reward and recognition processes;
- some common characteristics have been identified: SoTL reflects a range of public, scholarly and reflective practices scrutinised by peers that aim to promote the enhancement of teaching and learning and in particular the learning experiences of students;
- the processes involved in building scholarship within different disciplines highlights issues of disciplinary politics, culture and variation in the applicability of promotion criteria;
- institutional approaches varied between those with a strategic approach linking SoTL to UKPSF, to those engaged in a more *ad hoc* use of SoTL;
- HEPs tend to recognise SoTL in the form of publications, and within these, they tend to value discipline-based research (often linked to institutional interpretations of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) demands) at the expense of pedagogic research.

These findings are illustrated in the main report by a series of case studies.

4.3. Survey of UK Heads of Educational Development

An online survey was developed targeting educational/staff development and HR departments to explore how and where SoTL is defined institutionally and how it operates within existing frameworks for promotion. The survey yielded findings based on responses related to institution types, resources available to support SoTL, and qualitative responses to questions on the role of SoTL in institutions.

The main findings from the survey were:

- the term SoTL is not recognised in the sector as endowed with a clear meaning and distinctive set of characteristics; there exist many definitions that revolve around professional development, teaching excellence, and the engagement of students;
- most institutions, regardless of their mission group, associate SoTL with publications and 'REF-able' profiles;
- there are 'fault lines' between local, institutional and national understandings of SoTL, which translate into a varied criteria for assessment; and a tendency to employ assessment criteria that are associated with research (especially research that is disseminated in peer-reviewed journals);
- engagement with the UKPSF is the most frequently cited activity to support SoTL, with teaching and learning seminars and peer-observation of teaching following closely behind;

- HEA Fellowship through UKPSF is the most frequently cited example of evidence used to support promotion, closely followed by publications and curriculum innovation;
- student engagement is mainly understood as students providing feedback on teaching, while student partnership is understood as students being engaged in research activities with academics;
- the responsibility for supporting SoTL is shared between senior managers (typically a Pro Vice-Chancellor Teaching and Learning or similar), educational developers, and a few other specific positions.

4.4. Findings from student engagement interviews and focus groups

The main findings were:

- the concept of student involvement and partnership in SoTL is especially challenging for students, depending on social and cultural background and capital;
- the definition of SoTL is also problematic for students, particularly as 'scholarship' is often associated with bursaries;
- despite an institutional 'push' towards student engagement, it still remains the enthusiasts and those who are comfortable with partnership that take this work on;
- a need was identified for institutional help to facilitate inclusive staff-student partnerships, going to the locus of the potential partnership in the discipline, rather than at simply at institutional level.

These findings are illustrated in the main report by a series of case studies.

4.5. Coda to summary of findings

As a coda to this summary, it is worth noting what was not found in this study. The following were clearly missing:

- a strong consensus on SoTL;
- the sense of a link between professionalism and SoTL;
- clarity about what SoTL is and how it can enhance practice and student learning;
- a link between SoTL and quality;
- an appreciation of the challenge posed by discipline specificities (espoused or real);
- a difference between the different types of institutions in relation to SoTL.

4.6. Framework for auditing and building capacity in SoTL activities

Analysis of evidence collected from the literature review, the survey, and the interviews has enabled the team to conceptualise the definition of SoTL within a framework that draws attention to the three levels of the system described in 4.1, and takes account of the characteristics established by the study as being inherent in SoTL.

Those characteristics are:

SoTL is about practice development, curriculum enhancement and student learning

It is:

- an opportunity for experimentation and spearheading innovation;
- an investigation of, and reflection on, practice that leads to enhanced student outcomes, grounded in methodologically sound inquiry;
- seen as a vehicle to convey values and beliefs to develop student attributes (e.g. reflexivity, integrity, transparency, evidence-based practice).

Dissemination and impact

SoTL:

- seeks review and critique;
- produces community-based and shared knowledge (commons-sharing);

- belongs in and works with a collaborative community (collaborative inquiry and writing);
- demonstrates impact on policy and practice (an emerging characteristic).

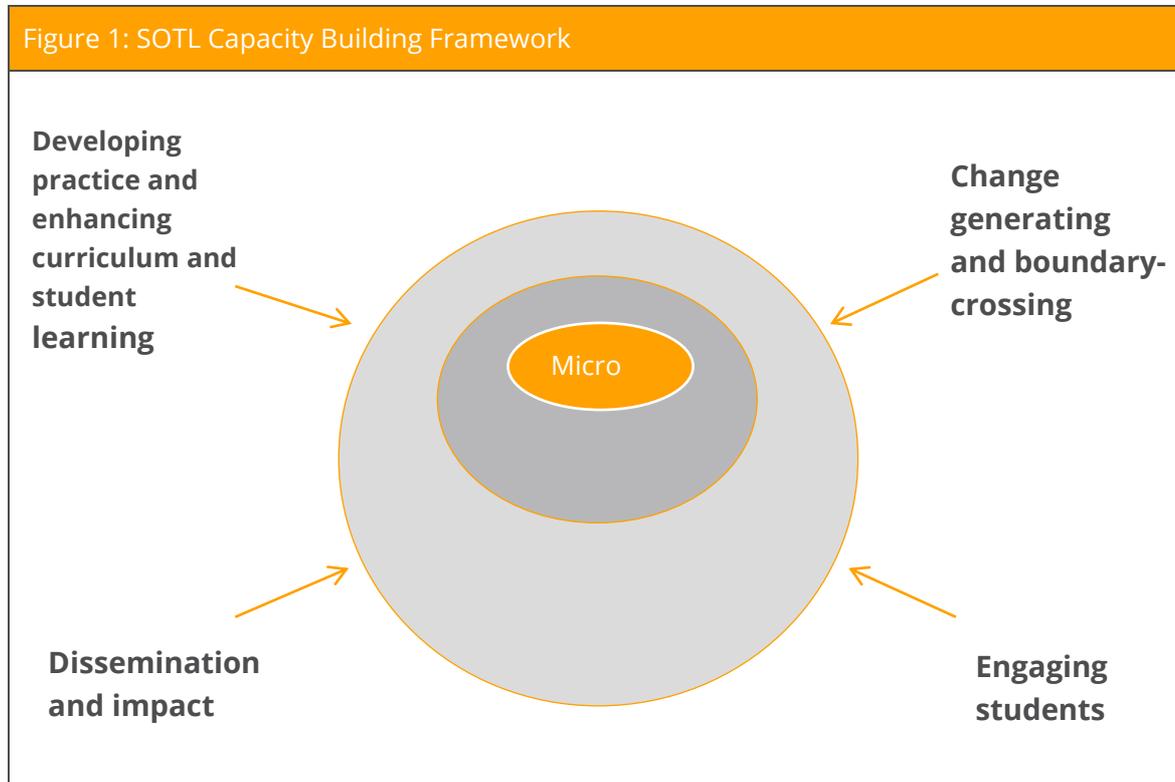
SoTL is associated with change and boundary-crossing

SoTL is seen as an institutional or departmental change vehicle; and a tool for enhancement that can be applied across disciplines and contexts, such as:

- professional development;
- institutionalisation with a focus on context specificity;
- work that is both disciplinary and interdisciplinary;
- work that spans contexts (and can be applied across the tertiary sector);
- SoTL enables the development of industry-related skills ('Mode 2 SoTL' see section 2.5 of the full Literature Review).

SoTL requires the engagement of students

- Students are engaged in their own learning, and as partners and co-researchers (to promote undergraduate research);
- the use of language needs to be clear and meaningful to engage students.



This framework provides a set of four characteristics that need to be present for a practice to qualify as SoTL; and a set of three levels at which these characteristics can operate. Institutions can use this to audit and assess their own SoTL capacity, and with reference to national policy drivers. They can refer to the 'Audit and Capacity Building tool' derived from this framework.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the team’s analysis of the evidence collected for this study, including the literature review.

5.1. Recommendations for institutions seeking to recognise SoTL

1. SoTL needs to be discussed and made explicit as a concept to generate some institutional consensus on its usefulness to enhance practices;
2. the reward and recognition of SoTL activities should be embedded across all role profiles and be proven to count in the process;
3. the criteria for assessing SoTL should be clear to counterbalance the view that there is no transparency in relation to 'making teaching count';
4. the criteria should be based on recognising robust SoTL methodologies and evidence of impact to counterbalance the view that teaching scholarship is less rigorous than research scholarship;
5. in order to ensure fairness, institutions should support the development of tools and models to demonstrate impact of SoTL in contexts that are diverse. Multiple sources of evidence might be required, drawing on a range of examples, to attempt to evaluate and evidence cost-effectiveness, impacts and outcomes;
6. in defining SoTL criteria, institutions should consider the potential of SoTL activities to inform 'institutional research' and the strategic enhancement of teaching and learning across the institution;
7. promotion panels should be trained and a set of guidelines produced to enable members to identify and reward SoTL excellence;
8. institutions may wish to adopt the SoTL Capacity Building Framework and audit tool resulting from this study to help them develop capacity, and audit the adequacy of their training and development policies;
9. in order to develop student engagement, institutions should provide sustained undergraduate research opportunities and clear statements and guidance in relation to the ethical issues inherent in staff-student partnerships, and strong mentorship schemes.

5.2. Policy recommendations at national level

1. In order to address the differences between institutions, and increasing sector diversity, SoTL should be recognised in relation to its context of practice without losing track of the need for sectorial comparability. To this effect, the framework for assessing SoTL, derived from this study, might be adopted, rather than generating a new definition;
2. in order to bring teaching and research excellence closer together to maximise institutional efficacy, SoTL should be recognised in the REF across all units of assessment (UoAs), rather than as a separate Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) exercise. It follows that institutions should include reference to SoTL in all their academic appointments;
3. SoTL might be measured in the TEF using a set of indicators that represent all levels of the system (micro, meso, macro) and include international teaching-related collaboration as an important dimension of excellence;
4. UKPSF (as respondents in this study have often associated it with SoTL) should articulate better the characteristics of SoTL (using the framework generated as a result of this study);
5. in the revised UKPSF a D0 level should be introduced to recognise the role of students engaging in SoTL;
6. national policies should incentivise and encourage HEPs to allow more time for continuing professional development (CPD) in workload models; and support institutional investments in conveying the importance of SoTL and making time provisions for SoTL-oriented scholarly efforts.

5.3. Recommendations to academics engaged in SoTL

1. In order to gain legitimacy beyond the context of disciplinary research outputs, engage in trans-disciplinary and industry-related SoTL work;
2. engage students as partners in SoTL projects.

6. Contributors

This study involved the following partners:

| | |
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