




SoTL cultures in South African Higher Education and future directions: Insights from a multi-Institutional benchmarking study

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ABSTRACT

Despite global recognition of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), its endorsement in national policy, and the availability of dedicated funding, higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to engage with conceptual ambiguity and uneven patterns of SoTL development. In the Global South, this has prompted sustained reflection and sector-wide efforts to strengthen SoTL cultures. This paper reports on a qualitative, external multi-institutional benchmarking study involving SoTL coordinators from selected South African public universities who participated in a two-day reflective workshop to examine SoTL institutional cultures, support mechanisms, and programme goals. The study is framed by John Biggs' notion of the Reflexive Institution (RI) and Margaret Archer's Social Realism (SR). A basic search commenced in 2023 with a desktop review of institutional SoTL websites and targeted email enquiries. Insights from this preliminary phase informed the purposive selection of HEIs with well-established SoTL programmes, whose representatives subsequently convened to explore the SoTL cultures within their respective contexts. Findings indicate that the institutionalisation of SoTL in South African HEIs reflects significant variation shaped by differing contexts and resource conditions. These variations, the paper argues, are less signs of conceptual confusion than adaptive responses that foster reflective practice and strengthen faculty agency. However, without a coherent strategy, embedded structures, and sustained resourcing, SoTL risks remaining peripheral to disciplinary research. The paper contributes to sectoral efforts to motivate new theoretical insights and transformative practices that advance SoTL in ways that are both impactful and locally relevant.

Keywords: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Slow SoTL, SoTL benchmarking, institutional change, SoTL project funding

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is generally understood as a systematic approach, using established or validated criteria of scholarship, to investigate, improve, and share knowledge about teaching and learning in Higher Education (HE).¹ It involves identifying scholarly questions, designing

¹ Michael K Potter and Erika Kustra, "The Relationship between Scholarly Teaching and SoTL: Models, Distinctions, and Clarifications," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsoTL.2011.050123>.

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PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 9th September, 2025 | Accepted: 2nd February, 2026 | Published: 11th March, 2026.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Fernandes-Martins, Manuela, and Musara Lubombo. "SoTL cultures in South African Higher Education and future directions: Insights from a multi-Institutional benchmarking study." *Journal of Education and Learning Technology* 7, no.2 (2026): 13-36. <https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.2026722>

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investigations grounded in literature, collecting and analysing data, applying findings to understand how teaching can maximise learning, enhance practice, and disseminate results to build collective knowledge.² Crucially, SoTL transforms teaching from private practice into "community property" through systematic analysis of student learning evidence and collaborative engagement with pedagogical scholarship.³

Originating in the Global North with Ernest Boyer's reconsideration of traditional scholarship beyond discovery to include integration, application, and teaching, with 'learning' added in the late 1990s as an equally valid scholarly activity, SoTL evolved over time into a systematic, public form of inquiry that transforms teaching from knowledge transmission into reflexive practice, subject to peer review and community engagement.⁴ In the Global South, attention to SoTL has been shaped by the historical expansion, massification, and structural inequalities of HE systems as well as by postcolonial imperatives of transformation and professional development in teaching and learning.⁵ These conditions generated a sociological agenda for SoTL that foregrounds social action and decolonised scholarship.⁶ More recently, scholars have called for "a SoTL of the South," described as robust, responsive, and resilient, context-sensitive practices capable of fostering sustainable and transformative change.⁷

Within South African HE, the imperative for systematic pedagogical inquiry has intensified as the country grapples with increasingly diverse student populations and persistent challenges in access and success. SoTL is thus aligned directly with the national framework for the development of academics as university teachers, particularly supporting the imperative to "promote knowledge production and knowledge sharing on teaching and learning."⁸ This framework positions SoTL engagement as essential professional development for new and early career academics, established faculty, and teaching leaders committed to enhancing their roles as university teachers. Such engagement represents what has been characterised as "ongoing and cumulative intellectual inquiry, through systematic observations and ongoing investigations, by faculty into the nature of learning and the impact of teaching upon it."⁹ The current digital revolution in HE, initially involving blended learning, accelerated by COVID-19, and now the adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) assisted teaching and learning, has further reshaped SoTL's trajectory, introducing other possible critical areas of scholarly engagement.¹⁰

Despite its global and government recognition as well as receiving dedicated funding in South Africa, SoTL is yet to achieve the established status of disciplinary research at most institutions.¹¹ Its growth remains constrained by conceptual ambiguity, which has seen its differentiated institutionalisation across universities.¹² Recent studies indicate that at least 16 of the 26 public universities offer SoTL as part of their professional development programmes, highlighting its potential

² Cathy Bishop-Clark, Craig E Nelson, and Beth Dietz-Uhler, *Engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A Guide to the Process, and How to Develop a Project from Start to Finish* (Routledge, 2023).

³ Joelle Fanghanel et al., "Literature Review. Defining and Supporting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): A Sector-Wide Study," 2016.

⁴ Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).

⁵ Ian Scott, "Towards an Agenda for SoTL in Africa?," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsofl.2009.030103>.

⁶ Michael Samuel, "Developing a Syntax for SOTL," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South* 1, no. 1 (September 11, 2017): 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v1i1.11>.

⁷ Brenda Leibowitz, "The Significance of SOTL in the South," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–3; Samuel, "Developing a Syntax for SOTL," 19.

⁸ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), "Framework for the Development of Academics as University Teachers," Pretoria: DHET, 2018, [https://www.dhet.gov.za/Policy and Frameworks/Framework-for-the-Development-of-Academics-as-University-Teachers.pdf](https://www.dhet.gov.za/Policy%20and%20Frameworks/Framework-for-the-Development-of-Academics-as-University-Teachers.pdf).

⁹ Pat Hutchings and Lee S. Shulman, "The Scholarship of Teaching: *New Elaborations, New Developments*," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 31, no. 5 (September 1999): 10–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091389909604218>.

¹⁰ Xolisa Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities," *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, October 16, 2023, <https://issotl.com/2023/10/16/sotl-in-south-africa-emergence-evolution-possibilities/>.

¹¹ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *A National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers* (Pretoria: DHET, 2018).

¹² Huang Hoon Chng, Katarina Mårtensson, and Brenda Leibowitz, "Leading Change from Different Shores: The Challenges of Contextualizing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2020): 24–41.

as a necessary strategy for mitigating teaching and learning challenges.¹³ At the coordinating institution, which was among the first to institutionalise SoTL from 2012, they recognise the importance of professional development initiatives and activities related to SoTL.¹⁴

Calls for greater engagement and dialogue with SoTL cultures within the sector-wide academic community persist. Central to these efforts is an imperative to understand how SoTL manifests across institutions in order to clarify the conditions that enable or constrain its full institutionalisation. In South Africa, the extent to which SoTL is integrated into policies, institutional cultures, and reward systems varies considerably across universities. More than a decade after the initial review of the status of SoTL in the country, analyses of how institutions promote SoTL in their contexts remain sparse and fragmented.¹⁵

This study responds to this gap by examining how South African universities conceptualise, resource, and support SoTL initiatives with attention to variations in programme structures, faculty support mechanisms, and institutional resourcing. With most public universities now offering SoTL, understanding how these initiatives function across diverse institutional contexts is essential for strengthening teaching and learning outcomes and advancing contextually grounded, reflexive, and transformative approaches to scholarship.¹⁶

Contemporary scholarship recognises SoTL as operating across multiple interconnected dimensions that encompass three fundamental levels: Good teaching that demonstrably promotes student learning; scholarly teaching that draws systematically on research evidence to enhance instructional effectiveness; and the scholarship of teaching and learning proper, which combines critical reflection with rigorous inquiry to generate new knowledge about teaching practice. Systematic inquiry transforms individual pedagogical reflection into collective, public, and disciplinary scholarly discourse.

SoTL is articulated through defining characteristics such as inquiry focused on student learning, grounding in both scholarly literature and local institutional contexts, methodological soundness, collaborative partnerships with students, and public dissemination of findings.¹⁷ These features distinguish SoTL from informal teaching reflection by requiring rigorous investigation capable of withstanding peer scrutiny and contributing to broader pedagogical knowledge. While some universities have formalised support mechanisms that recognise SoTL outputs, dedicated funding streams, and teaching awards linked to SoTL scholarship, others exhibit more tentative or fragmented engagements. In the latter, SoTL is often marginalised, viewed primarily as a researcher-driven endeavour disconnected from broader teaching and learning development.¹⁸ Such variations, though expected in situated contexts, reflect broader systemic tensions regarding the status of teaching scholarship relative to disciplinary research.¹⁹

Inquiries to clarify the conditions that enable or constrain its full institutionalisation have been focused on descriptive questions exploring "what is" happening in learning environments, causal investigations of "what works" to enhance student outcomes, aspirational "visions of the possible" that

¹³ Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities."

¹⁴ North-West University, *Annual Report 2012* (Potchefstroom: North-West University, 2012), https://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/i-institutional-information/annual-report/AR_2012/JH20522_NWU_JVbinne_ENG_WEB_optimized_with_links_R_15_Nov.pdf.

¹⁵ T Pitso, "Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 27, no. 1 (2013): 196–208.

¹⁶ Pat Hutchings, "Introduction: Approaching the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," in *Opening Lines: Approaches to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, ed. Pat Hutchings, Menlo Park, CA (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2000), 1–10; Ronald A. Smith, "Formative Evaluation and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2001, no. 88 (December 4, 2001): 51–62, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.37>; Chrissie Boughey, "Institutional Difference: A Neglected Consideration in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning* 5, no. 2 (2011): 6; Mary T Huber, "Teaching Travels: Reflections on the Social Life of Classroom Inquiry and Innovation," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 3, no. 2 (2009): 2; Marion N Allen and Peggy Anne Field, "Scholarly Teaching and Scholarship of Teaching: Noting the Difference.," *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship* 2, no. 1 (2005).

¹⁷ Peter Felten, "Principles of Good Practice in SoTL," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry The ISSOTL Journal* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 121–25, <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninq.1.1.121>.

¹⁸ Pitso, "Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities."

¹⁹ Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities."

imagine transformed practice, and "new conceptual frameworks" that reshape theoretical understanding of teaching and learning.²⁰ The importance of culture is underscored in recent literature, which is a reminder that 'what works' in SoTL depends on three contextual questions: *Where?*, *When?*, and *For Whom?*²¹

As already highlighted, the study reported in this paper thus examined how SoTL manifests across institutions, focusing on how HEIs conceptualise, resource, and support SoTL initiatives. Particular attention was paid to variations in programme structures, faculty support mechanisms, and institutional resourcing. With most public universities now offering SoTL, understanding how these initiatives function across diverse institutional contexts is essential for strengthening teaching and learning outcomes and advancing contextually grounded, reflexive, and transformative approaches to scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The trajectory of South African SoTL development in South Africa reflects the nation's complex socio-political transformation agenda. It transcends initial reductionist efforts focused on improving teaching practices in ways that reduced SoTL to an inquiry "focusing on the performance of students and how that can be enhanced."²² Critics challenge reductive, neoliberal and efficiency-driven conceptualisations that position educators as technicians reflecting on how to 'fine-tune' a car rather than as critical intellectuals engaging with complex socio-educational dynamics.²³ Others extend this argument, emphasising that while student success remains important, SoTL's scope encompasses far broader concerns about educational justice and transformation.²⁴

The emergence of *Slow* scholarship responds to neoliberal academic pressures by advocating deliberative, ethically-grounded academic practice that resists efficiency-driven performativity.²⁵ Within South African contexts, slow SoTL aligns with institutional reflexivity through deliberative, collaborative, and politically conscious practices that intersect with social justice concerns, positioning teaching scholarship as inherently transformative rather than merely ameliorative.²⁶ This perspective aligns with decolonial reinterpretations of SoTL that challenge Western-centric epistemic frameworks, supporting polycentric epistemologies tailored to Global South realities and rooted in social justice and societal engagement.²⁷

Recognition of teaching methods as "social acts informed by cultural traditions" underscores the necessity of contextually situated SoTL practice.²⁸ A social realist lens highlights how institutional structures, cultural norms, and reflexive agents shape pedagogical strategies, requiring SoTL to engage authentically with local sociocultural contexts. Scholars arguing for this imperative contend that SoTL's presumed universality often reflects decontextualised Western frameworks that artificially isolate classrooms from broader sociocultural contexts.²⁹ Accordingly, while SoTL may acknowledge its cultural origins, it must incorporate local sociocultural influences to ensure pedagogical strategies respond authentically to contextual realities. Despite growing scholarship, institutional understanding and support for SoTL remain variable, compounded by tensions between adopting global frameworks

²⁰ Hutchings, "Introduction: Approaching the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning."

²¹ Nancy L Chick, Peter Felten, and Katarina Mårtensson, *The SoTL Guide:(Re) Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (Center for Engaged Learning, Elon University, 2025).

²² Daniel Bernstein, "How SoTL-Active Faculty Members Can Be Cosmopolitan Assets to an Institution," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 2013): 35–40, <https://doi.org/10.2979/teachlearninqu.1.1.35>.

²³ Peter Looker, "Contextualising Contexts—Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Cultural Difference," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South* 2, no. 1 (2018): 112–28; Brenda Leibowitz and Vivienne Bozalek, "Towards a Slow Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South," *Teaching in Higher Education* 23, no. 8 (November 17, 2018): 981–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1452730>.

²⁴ Chaka Chaka, "SoTL and the Scholarship of Decolonising Curricula in Higher Education Contexts: A Critical and Decolonial Dialogue," *Teaching in Higher Education* 26, no. 4 (2021): 67–82.

²⁵ Leibowitz and Bozalek, "Slow Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South," 993.

²⁶ Leibowitz and Bozalek, "Slow Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South," 981.

²⁷ Chaka Chaka et al., "Situating Some Aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in South African Higher Education within Southern Theories," *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education* 17, no. 2 (2022): 6–24.

²⁸ Liz Grauerholz and Eric Main, "Fallacies of SoTL: Rethinking How We Conduct Our Research," *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in and across the Disciplines* 1 (2013): 152–68.

²⁹ Looker, "Contextualising Contexts—Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Cultural Difference."

and adapting them to resource-constrained, culturally-diverse environments. Insufficient attention has been directed toward understanding how institutional contexts mediate the enactment of SoTL practices.

An integrated view of scholarship distinguishes between traditional disciplinary research aimed at advancing specific fields and participatory research that creates knowledge beneficial to both researchers and participants.³⁰ This distinction is particularly relevant for understanding SoTL within universities, where institutions function simultaneously as knowledge producers and learning communities. Nevertheless, understanding how institutions are adapting their SoTL programmes to these rapidly-evolving contexts remains fragmented, creating new imperatives for further investigation. This is not least because the goal for SoTL has been and continues to be regarded as an “inquiry into teaching and learning for the purposes of improving teaching and learning in context and contributing to what we know about teaching and learning, in support of the broader aims of higher education.”³¹ In South Africa, SoTL programmes primarily aim to improve teaching and learning processes, address systemic education challenges, and foster scholarly teaching practices.³²

The key objectives of SoTL programmes in South Africa thus include mitigating high student attrition rates,³³ encouraging academics to reflect on teaching methods,³⁴ and developing institutional approaches to pedagogical innovation and action.³⁵ These programmes seek to create awareness about scholarly teaching, with a particular emphasis on contextualising educational practices within the South African higher education landscape.³⁶

Research on SoTL in South African universities reveals varied approaches and challenges in implementation. A systematic review across seven South African universities revealed that SoTL conceptions and support varied considerably, often remaining researcher-centred rather than focused on transforming teaching and learning practices.³⁷ An analysis of institutional initiatives at a South African university illustrated that SoTL growth can be fostered through an “organic approach” when conceptualised inclusively and multidimensionally, spanning research, recognition systems, professional development, and policy frameworks.³⁸ Similarly, a study of a postgraduate diploma module demonstrated that SoTL can be advanced at the academic level by embedding learning theories and reflexivity, particularly through social constructivist approaches in postgraduate education for university academics.³⁹ Other scholarship has emphasised the importance of contextualising SoTL within Southern theories, advocating decolonial approaches that critique dominant Western epistemic practices and embrace polycentric epistemologies relevant to Global South higher education contexts.⁴⁰

Further contributions provide conceptual frameworks for institutionalising SoTL. One study proposes a framework that aligns individual, institutional, and social justice goals, operating across micro-level pedagogical practices, meso-level institutional alignment, and macro-level social justice transformation, while emphasising the need for “epistemic disobedience” in developing world contexts.⁴¹ A sector-wide investigation of global SoTL use highlights its role in reflecting on and

³⁰ Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Lesley Wood, and Ina Louw, *A Participatory Paradigm for an Engaged Scholarship in Higher Education: Action Leadership from a South African Perspective* (Brill, 2015).

³¹ Chick, Felten, and Mårtensson, *The SoTL Guide: (Re) Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.10.

³² Chaka et al., “Situating Some Aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in South African Higher Education within Southern Theories.”

³³ Jo-Anne Vorster, “SoTL: A Mechanism for Understanding and Finding Solutions to Teaching and Learning Challenges,” *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South* 4, no. 2 (September 28, 2020): 6–21, <https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v4i2.149>.

³⁴ Arthur James Swart et al., “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: ‘What the Hell’ Are We Getting Ourselves Into?,” *European Journal of Engineering Education* 42, no. 6 (2017): 653–67.

³⁵ Samuel, “Developing a Syntax for SOTL.”23.

³⁶ Chaka et al., “Situating Some Aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in South African Higher Education within Southern Theories.”

³⁷ Pitso, “Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities.”

³⁸ Renuka Vithal, “Growing a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Institutionally,” *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no.3(2018):468–83.

³⁹ Lester Brian Shawa, “Advancing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Using Learning Theories and Reflectivity,” *Ceps Journal* 10, no. 1 (2020): 191–208.

⁴⁰ Chaka et al., “Situating Some Aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in South African Higher Education within Southern Theories.”

⁴¹ Samuel, “Developing a Syntax for SOTL.”

transforming teaching and learning through research-informed approaches.⁴² Their recommendations for institutions seeking to recognise SoTL include that SoTL needs to be discussed and made explicit as a concept to generate some institutional consensus on its usefulness to enhance practices; embedding reward and recognition across academic role profiles, and recognising SoTL in relation to its context of practice while maintaining sectoral comparability. Their assessment framework is intended for adoption rather than the generation of a new definition.

Other studies explore broader SoTL implications. Some examine its potential role in developing higher education capacity in sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa but do not specifically analyse how South African universities promote SoTL.⁴³ Further work investigates theoretical underpinnings and emerging trends of SoTL inquiry in improving curricula and educational leadership, albeit without direct attention to South Africa.⁴⁴ A conceptual framework has also been proposed to guide institutional decision-making for SoTL capacity building, emphasising the importance of structured support systems for strengthening SoTL capabilities across institutions.⁴⁵ Figure 1 is our original illustration depicting key aspects that constitute a system of SoTL institutionalisation in South Africa.

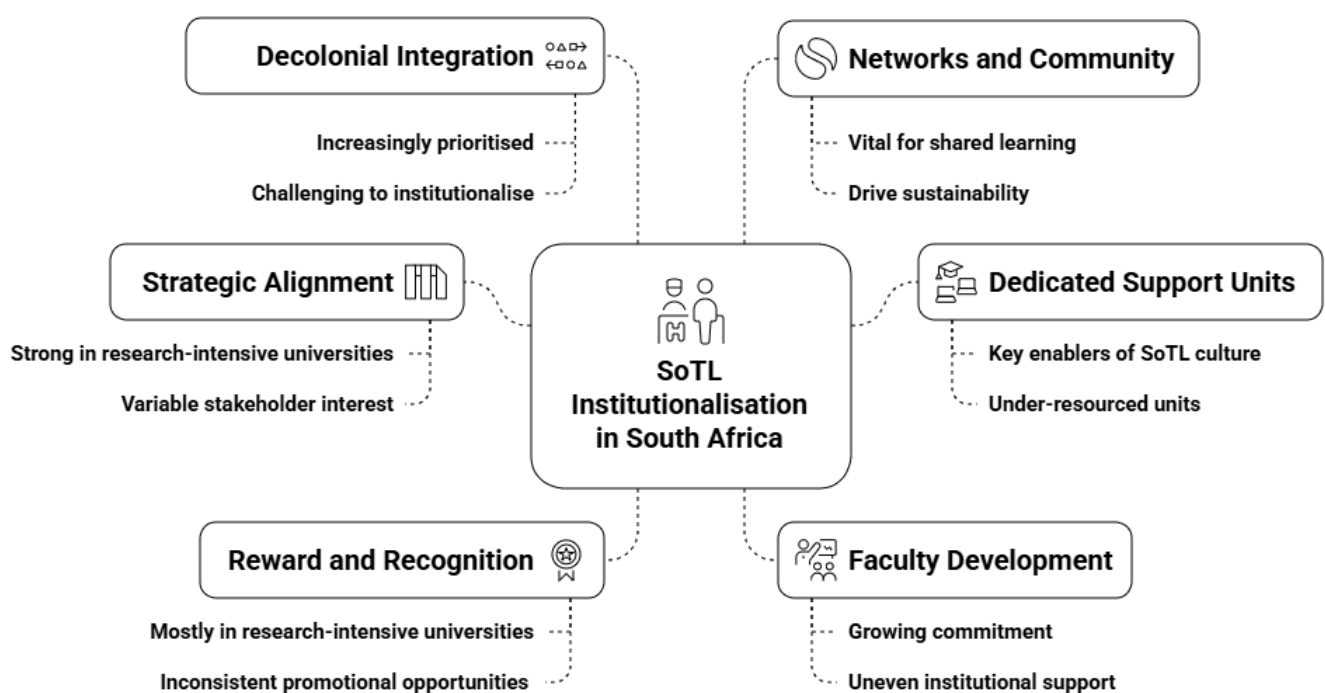


Figure 1: Institutionalisation of SoTL in HEIs (Original illustration).

The promotion of SoTL within South African universities is reinforced by national policy frameworks that emphasise the integration of teaching and research. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) identifies staff development as a key focus area, posing critical questions regarding SoTL: *How does the institution promote the scholarship of teaching? To what extent is SoTL recognised as a legitimate academic career pathway? How are expertise, resources, and institutional structures provided to support teaching staff development?*⁴⁶ Figure 1 illustrates the multifaceted ways posited by

⁴² Joëlle Fanghanel et al., “Defining and Supporting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): A Sector-Wide Study,” *Higher Education Academy*, 2016, 1–43.

⁴³ Scott, “Towards an Agenda for SoTL in Africa?”

⁴⁴ Harry Hubball et al., “Developing Institutional Leadership for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Lessons Learned with Senior Educational Leaders in Multi-National Research-Intensive University Contexts,” *International Journal of University Teaching and Faculty Development* 4, no. 4 (2013): 237.

⁴⁵ Paula Myatt et al., “Reflecting on Institutional Support for SoTL Engagement: Developing a Conceptual Framework,” *International Journal for Academic Development* 23, no. 2 (2018): 147–60.

⁴⁶ Council on Higher Education, “Resources for Improving Teaching and Learning,” Pretoria: Council on Higher Education, 2003, <https://www.saide.org.za/resources/Library/CHE - ITL.pdf>.

scholarship to embed SoTL meaningfully within South African universities around the following key areas:

Strategic Alignment and Support Structures

Institutionalising SoTL requires embedding it within university strategic plans, reward systems, and dedicated support infrastructures, such as Centres or Units for Teaching and Learning (CTLs). These units function as hubs for faculty development, offering workshops, mentoring, seed grants, and peer networks essential for nurturing capacity and disseminating SoTL practices.⁴⁷ However, CTLs often face limited funding, staff shortages, and competing institutional demands, which constrain the scale and sustainability of support programmes.⁴⁸ While the promotion of SoTL has traditionally been assigned to Academic Development Units rather than faculties, an emerging body of knowledge is beginning to document how SoTL is being cultivated within South African HE.⁴⁹

Scholars have argued that the overall intention of SoTL should never be relegated to the sidelines of scholarly practice but rather should become part of the ordinary job description of academics.⁵⁰ When explicitly linked to faculty reward and recognition mechanisms such as teaching excellence awards, innovation grants, or promotion criteria, SoTL gains legitimacy and encourages engagement.⁵¹ In some universities exhibiting nascent stages of institutionalisation, SoTL remains researcher-centred, sporadically funded, and minimally integrated into promotion structures. However, others demonstrate more established commitment by embedding SoTL in strategic plans, offering financial and reputational incentives, and supporting staff participation in SoTL conferences.⁵² Embedding SoTL in quality assurance, curricular renewal, and pedagogical innovation frameworks is considered critical in strengthening its institutional legitimacy and potential impact on teaching cultures.

Integration with Academic Development, Quality Assurance, and Reward Systems

The institutionalisation of SoTL represents a strategic response to persistent teaching and learning challenges in HE.⁵³ Evidence suggests that its development can be strengthened through its strategic integration into academic development programming, quality assurance mechanisms, and institutional support systems. The *National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers* provides an enabling ecosystem, promoting knowledge production and knowledge sharing about university teaching and learning, where research projects constitute central activities in addressing this imperative.⁵⁴ This systematic approach has become increasingly critical as universities contend with increasing numbers of non-traditional students, with quality teaching and learning recognised as essential for promoting access, participation and success.

Contemporary SoTL scholarship demonstrates conceptual maturity characterised by three stable, consensual features: Critical reflectivity expressed as content pedagogical knowledge, learning partnership arising from student-focused teaching, and peer-scrutiny through publication.⁵⁵ These characteristics foreground the enhancement of student learning through the systematic development of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, with classroom-based research serving as a privileged pathway for improvement. Yet, teaching within HE is inherently diverse, necessitating research approaches tailored to disciplinary particularities while upholding rigorous scholarly standards.

⁴⁷ Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities"; Pitso, "Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities."

⁴⁸ Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities."

⁴⁹ Zuber-Skerritt, Wood, and Louw, *A Participatory Paradigm for an Engaged Scholarship in Higher Education: Action Leadership from a South African Perspective*.

⁵⁰ Lee S. Shulman, "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A Personal Account and Reflection," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 5, no. 1 (2011): 1–7; Vorster, "SoTL: A Mechanism for Understanding and Finding Solutions to Teaching and Learning Challenges."

⁵¹ Pitso, "Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities." 205.

⁵² Pitso, "Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities." 203-206.

⁵³ Vorster, "SoTL: A Mechanism for Understanding and Finding Solutions to Teaching and Learning Challenges."

⁵⁴ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *A National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers*.

⁵⁵ P Albergaria Almeida, "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: An Overview," in *Journal of the World Universities Forum*, vol. 3, 2010, 143–54.

Strategic integration enhances both the legitimacy and impact of SoTL within teaching cultures.⁵⁶ In some South African universities, SoTL outputs are explicitly linked to promotion criteria, teaching awards, and funding streams. Research-intensive universities have pioneered this approach by establishing Teaching and Learning Innovation Grants and hosting SoTL conferences.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, many academics still do not participate in SoTL compared to traditional disciplinary research. Some scholars have defended academics who do not invest time and engage deeply with teaching scholarship, arguing that it is counterproductive to expect all academics to conduct SoTL.⁵⁸ Addressing this perception and aligning institutional reward structures with the goals of teaching excellence and transformation remain ongoing challenges. Recognition systems that genuinely value SoTL contributions across diverse disciplinary contexts are, therefore, critical for embedding and sustaining scholarly teaching practices throughout academic careers.

SoTL and Decolonial Transformation Imperatives

The institutionalisation of SoTL in South Africa is inseparable from the country's broader decolonial and transformation mandates. Universities face the dual responsibility of improving pedagogy while addressing entrenched structural and epistemic inequities inherited from colonialism and apartheid.⁵⁹ Effective SoTL institutionalisation requires policies and support structures that actively encourage decolonial pedagogies, epistemic plurality, and a critical examination of power relations within academic cultures.⁶⁰ Situating SoTL within local socio-cultural, institutional, and disciplinary contexts strengthens its relevance and impact. As argued compellingly, the more SoTL is contextually grounded, the more meaningful and effective it becomes.⁶¹

Institutions engage in sustained, institution-wide reflections and efforts to transform curricula and teaching practices through interdisciplinary Communities of Practice (CoPs). A study at the University of Stellenbosch highlights the crucial role of ongoing, difficult interdisciplinary conversations that disrupt established teaching norms and advance decolonial transformation.⁶² Despite aspirational institutional plans, actual curriculum transformation remains challenging, requiring persistent dialogue, representation of marginalised voices, and redistribution to align curricula with social justice values.

Collaborative Networks and Community Building

The formation of CoPs has emerged as a particularly effective strategy for fostering collaborative engagement with SoTL journeys.⁶³ Beyond institutional boundaries, national and regional SoTL networks serve critical functions in supporting sustainable institutionalisation by cultivating scholarly communities rooted in epistemologies of the South.

Platforms such as the *SoTL in the South* conference series and related open-access journal published by the University of Johannesburg facilitate cross-institutional dialogue, resource sharing, and policy development that enhance SoTL legitimacy and practice across diverse universities.⁶⁴ Scholars have consistently noted that SoTL integration into institutional cultures requires coordinated actions through linked social networks, effective communication, well-established networks, and

⁵⁶ Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities."

⁵⁷ Pitso, "Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities."

⁵⁸ Vorster, "SoTL: A Mechanism for Understanding and Finding Solutions to Teaching and Learning Challenges."

⁵⁹ Luqman Muraina, Yonela Toshe-Mlambo, and Siviwe Cingo, "South African Higher Education: Transformation or/and Decolonisation?," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South (SOTL) in the South* 8, no. 1 (2024): 183–205.

⁶⁰ Muraina, Toshe-Mlambo, and Cingo, "South African Higher Education: Transformation or/and Decolonisation?"

⁶¹ Looker, "Contextualising Contexts—Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Cultural Difference."

⁶² Gerda Dullaart et al., "Challenges of Transforming Curricula: Reflections by an Interdisciplinary Community of Practice.," *Transformation in Higher Education* 8 (2023): 301.

⁶³ Lize Van der Merwe, Peter Smith, and Karen Jones, "Communities of Practice in Human Movement Sciences: A Collaborative Approach to SoTL," *South African Journal of Sports Medicine* 35, no. 3 (2023): 112–28.

⁶⁴ Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities"; Brenda Leibowitz, "The Significance of SOTL in the South," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–3.

sustained senior administration support.⁶⁵ In addition to these structures, emerging work highlights the value of digital platforms as productive spaces to build SoTL networks and communities of practice across institutional boundaries.⁶⁶

To manage the effective building of these networks, scholars have also articulated principles for building and nurturing fellowship in SoTL.⁶⁷ Building on these insights, this study adopted a multi-institutional benchmarking approach to examine how South African universities conceptualise, implement, and support SoTL programmes, with attention to programme structures, faculty support mechanisms, and institutional resourcing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on the elements of Reflexive Institutions (RI) and Archerian Social Realism (SR), the study situates SoTL practice as an outcome of the dynamic interplay between structures, cultures, and reflexive agents, yielding contextually contingent rather than uniform outcomes.⁶⁸ The notion of the ‘reflective’ institution offers a critical lens for examining the quality of SoTL institutionalisation. It contends that universities must not only align SoTL with their espoused frameworks, such as professional development, teaching excellence, research-informed practice, and transformation but also embed mechanisms for reflexive evaluation and continuous renewal. Being reflective thus entails making explicit institutional commitments to SoTL, creating iterative processes for quality enhancement, and addressing structural or cultural impediments that compromise its development.

SR extends this analysis by foregrounding the dynamic interplay between structures (policies, resources, rules), cultures (values, norms, beliefs), and agency (the reflexive capacities of academics).⁶⁹ SoTL outcomes, from this perspective, are not predetermined but emerge from the negotiations of academics as they navigate and sometimes transform the conditions under which they work. The social realist approach highlights why SoTL possibly remains both ambiguous and variable across institutions – its institutionalisation is contingent on histories, mandates, and strategic priorities as well as on the capacities of staff to exercise agency.

Together, these two approaches are used to provide a framework for understanding SoTL as a reflexive and contested institutional process. This framing guided the benchmarking study by focusing attention on how organisational structures, programme goals, faculty support mechanisms, and resource allocations shape the possibilities for SoTL. It enabled an interrogation of not only how SoTL is formally enacted but also how it is lived, negotiated, and transformed by academics within differing institutional contexts.

In foregrounding SoTL as embedded in lived realities and shaped by structural pressures, the study aligns with emerging calls for SoTL that is ‘done differently’, that is, contextually grounded, inclusive, and responsive to the complex challenges of higher education in the Global South.⁷⁰

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to understand SoTL institutionalisation at different South African universities marked by diverse organisational and cultural contexts.⁷¹ This approach was particularly

⁶⁵ Andrea L. Williams et al., “The Power of Social Networks: A Model for Weaving the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning into Institutional Culture,” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal* 1, no. 2 (January 2013): 49–62, <https://doi.org/10.2979/teachlearninqu.1.2.49>.

⁶⁶ Shannon M Sipes, Samy L Minix, and Matt Barton, “Building a Social Network around SoTL through Digital Space,” 2020; Aletta M. du Plessis et al., “Recommendations for Success in Forming and Maintaining a SoTL Community of Practice,” *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 13 (2025): 1–17, <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/TLI/article/view/78506>.

⁶⁷ Anita Acai et al., “Seven Guiding Principles for Building Fellowship in SoTL,” *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 15, no. 3 (2024); Pitso, “Status of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in South African Universities”; Cupido et al., “SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities”; Leibowitz, “The Significance of SOTL in the South.”

⁶⁸ Margaret S Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge university press, 1995); Margaret Scotford Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶⁹ Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*; Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*.

⁷⁰ Chaka et al., “Situating Some Aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in South African Higher Education within Southern Theories.”

⁷¹ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

beneficial as it enabled participating institutions to showcase the diversity of configurations which illustrated the cultural orientations of SoTL programmes. This study formed part of a broader investigation into SoTL at the coordinating institution. It received ethical approval from the relevant research ethics committee in 2023.

Research Design

An external benchmarking design, used in education research, was adopted to facilitate a comparative analysis of how SoTL is institutionalised across diverse South African universities. Benchmarking has been defined as a systematic process of comparing practices with peer institutions to identify strengths, challenges, and potential areas for improvement.⁷² In HE research, benchmarking is recognised as an improvement-oriented, process-driven methodology that balances respect for institutional contexts with opportunities for comparative learning.⁷³ This external benchmarking design enabled the gathering of comprehensive insights regarding institutional SoTL programme structure and organisation, comparison, identification of good practices, and the development of recommendations to strengthen SoTL culture across institutions. Epistemologically, the study valued both experience-based and research-based forms of knowledge. Participants drew on their situated understanding of institutional practice. The reflective engagements thus became integral to the co-construction of insights into SoTL institutionalisation and the articulation of future directions in different South African contexts.

Participants and Sampling Method

South African public universities with established SoTL programmes participated in this study. The selection process began in 2023 with a comprehensive desktop review conducted across public universities to assess the presence and maturity of SoTL initiatives via institutional websites. This was augmented by targeted email enquiries to SoTL coordinators to verify programme scope and support systems. At least 16 of 26 public universities offered SoTL in professional development programmes at the time but growth remained constrained by conceptual ambiguity and differentiated institutionalisation. Eight institutions meeting criteria such as programme sustainability, existence of dedicated teaching and learning centres, and evidence of sustained SoTL activities were shortlisted. Ultimately, five SoTL coordinators available from five universities participated in a two-day benchmarking workshop held at a central location in 2024. This final sample represented a diverse range of South African HEIs, including historically advantaged and disadvantaged universities, comprehensive institutions, and research-intensive universities, thus ensuring broad representation of perspectives on SoTL institutionalisation.

Data Collection Method

Data collection employed a multi-method qualitative approach, including a gallery walk and a collective reflective session. A gallery walk was preferred as it is an interactive qualitative data collection method that promotes participant engagement and collaborative meaning-making by presenting prompts or statements visually for review and commentary.⁷⁴ It facilitated comparative reflection across diverse participants and institutional contexts. Participants engaged with 12 SoTL statements adapted from program taxonomies agreed upon at the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED) Conference, held in Aarhus, Denmark, from May to June 2022, to capture dimensions such as funding models, institutional support, reward systems, community-building initiatives, and alignment with strategic frameworks. Participants reviewed and annotated these statements, sharing insights on how their institutions operationalise each aspect.⁷⁵

⁷² Ebba S I Ossiannilsson, "Benchmarking: A Method for Quality Assessment and Enhancement in Higher Education," in *Learning, Design, and Technology: An International Compendium of Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* (Springer, 2023), 2149–67.

⁷³ Anang Amiruddin Nugroho and Udik Budi Wibowo, "The Influence of School Infrastructure on Student Learning Activeness: A Research Study," in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Learning Innovation and Quality Education (ICLIQE 2019)* (Paris, France: Atlantis Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200129.076>.

⁷⁴ Jo Raphael, Shelley Hannigan, and Peta White, "A Gallery Walk: 'Drawing out' Understandings of Collaborative Self-Study in Teacher Education," *Enacting Self-Study as Methodology for Professional Inquiry*, 2016, 109.

⁷⁵ International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED), "Conference Presentation," ICED 2022, Aarhus, Denmark, May 31–June 3, 2022, <https://bit.ly/SoTLICED2022>.

Following the gallery walk, participants convened for a structured reflection using Padlet. This digital collaborative platform enhanced data richness through participant-generated content and discussion. All sessions were recorded with participants' informed consent to ensure a comprehensive and accurate record of discussions.

Data Analysis

Recordings and images were transcribed. These were analysed using deductive thematic analysis, where coding was guided by a priori themes derived from extant SoTL literature while remaining open to emergent insights. This analytic method balances theoretical sensitivity with empirical grounding, enabling the systematic identification of patterns and contextual nuances across institutions. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted, involving participant review and confirmation of data interpretations. Member checking is a widely accepted validation strategy in qualitative research that promotes credibility and reflexivity.⁷⁶

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine how South African universities conceptualise, implement, and support SoTL programmes, with attention to programme structures, faculty support mechanisms, and institutional resourcing. Understanding how SoTL manifests across institutions is important to clarify the conditions that enable or constrain its full institutionalisation. To contextualise the findings, this section first provides descriptions of the participating institutions, followed by an analysis of the organisational structures, goals and objectives of SoTL programmes, pathways for faculty engagement, support mechanisms, institutional resources, and future visions. The findings are also presented thematically to illuminate points of convergence, divergence, and emerging trends across the universities.

Participating Institutions

The coordinating institution, hereinafter referred to as *the first university*, is a multi-campus, comprehensive public university serving close to 60,000 students across three campuses in two provinces.⁷⁷ Formed in 2004 through the merger of historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions, it reflects South Africa's post-apartheid transformation agenda. SoTL was formally adopted in 2012 as a strategic driver to enhance teaching quality. The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) coordinates SoTL activities, supporting multilingual teaching, diverse student needs, and staff development. Funding is administered via the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG). Researchers submit proposals with detailed budgets and ethics approval; projects are assessed on teaching-learning praxis, identified gaps, and alignment with institutional goals, with funding contingent on availability. Action Research is encouraged, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods over 24 months, culminating in scholarly outputs disseminated via conferences, publications, and workshops.⁷⁸ Past initiatives include writing retreats, CoPs, and institutional teaching awards for grant holders.

The second institution is a university of technology serving approximately 21 000 students across two campuses. The Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT) houses curriculum development, staff development, and SoTL, with a focus on practice-based inquiry that bridges industry requirements and academic scholarship in response to South Africa's skills development needs. This institution frames SoTL as research-led professional learning, formally launched in 2014 under UCDG funding. Its mission is to improve teaching and learning, encourage reflective practice, advance

⁷⁶ Linda Birt, Suzanne Scott, Debbie Cavers, Christine Campbell, and Fiona Walter, "Member Checking: A Tool to Enhance Trustworthiness or Merely a Nod to Validation?" *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no. 13 (November 2016): 1802–1811, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>; Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice

in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2021): 328–352, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.

⁷⁷ North-West University, *Annual Report 2012*.

⁷⁸ Jessica, Pool, M. Manuela Fernandes-Martins, and Mariëtte Fourie, *A Scholarly Approach to Student Success in Higher Education*, vol. 2 (Johannesburg: AXIOM Academic Publishers, 2022).

disciplinary conversations, increase research outputs, and foster CoPs. SoTL is coordinated centrally, with faculty mentors guiding mentees through three-year mentorships. Deliverables include peer-reviewed publications, with recognition embedded in awards and conferences. Funding is allocated after review of abstracts or draft papers, reinforcing the institution's commitment to scholarly teaching. The university also hosts the International Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, with this article prepared for engagement with the theme of the 11th edition. Opportunities for student partnership in SoTL remain limited.

The third institution, a tri-campus university of technology with over 34,000 students, introduced SoTL initiatives in 2017 via the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), with the first UCDG-funded programme in 2018. The programme emphasises professional development through workplace-integrated, socially and epistemically just inquiry. Participants ('SoTL Fellows') undertake systematic investigations of disciplinary teaching practices, producing conference papers, journal articles, or book chapters. Mentorship, workshops, and retreats support project conceptualisation, ethics approval, data collection, and dissemination over one- to two-year cycles. Broader engagement is fostered through annual Learning and Teaching Imbizo and community meetings.

The fourth institution is a relatively new comprehensive university, established in 2013 and currently serving approximately 12,000 students across two campuses. It embodies both the opportunities and challenges of institutional transformation in a context historically marked by limited access to university education. SoTL at this institution is positioned at the intersection of transformation, access, and quality. It supports historically underprepared students while building staff capacity and cultivating scholarly teaching. Professional development is structured through the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education, creating reflexive practitioners. Academic Support Services embeds SoTL via disciplinary seminars, classroom evaluations, and annual teaching awards, reinforcing institutional culture and professional identity.

The fifth and last institution is a research-intensive public university, serving approximately 54,000 students across seven campuses in one province. SoTL has been promoted since the early 2010s to link evidence-based pedagogy with a strong research culture. Coordinated by the Department for Education Innovation, SoTL integrates educational research with teaching practice, fostering reflective practice, innovation, and disciplinary knowledge development. Funding supports research grants and innovative projects, with assessment criteria including ethics clearance, focus on student learning, and dissemination of outputs. Workshops, writing retreats, and a community of practice provide support, while successful scholars are recognised through institutional teaching awards.

Across the five institutions examined, SoTL is constituted in diverse ways that reflect their histories, mandates, and structural configurations. In some, it is framed primarily as a mechanism for professional development and teaching excellence; in others, it is closely tied to research productivity, postgraduate pedagogy, or industry-linked applied learning. These institutional enactments illustrate the multiple conceptual models of SoTL identified in the literature.⁷⁹ What emerges is that in the South African higher education context, SoTL functions simultaneously as a strategy for transformation, capacity building, and equity, while also serving as a research-informed practice that generates new knowledge on teaching and learning. This multiplicity underscores both the flexibility and the contested nature of SoTL as it is institutionalised across varied university types. These diverse contexts offered a kaleidoscopic view of SoTL institutionalisation across institutions, adding richness to the findings and strengthening the suggested future directions for SoTL in South African HE contexts.

Organisational Structure of SoTL Programmes

The organisational location of SoTL within South African universities reflects broader questions of legitimacy, authority, and institutional culture. Across the five cases, SoTL is positioned in centralised academic development or teaching and learning units: University 1 within a Centre for Teaching and Learning; University 2 within a Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching; University 3 within a

⁷⁹ Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*; Pat Hutchings, *Opening Lines: Approaches to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. (ERIC, 2000).

Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching; University 4 within Academic Support Services; and University 5 within a Department for Education Innovation. This centralised placement aligns with international trends, where SoTL is frequently anchored in institutional centres to provide coherence, professional expertise, and support for interdisciplinary collaboration.⁸⁰

From the perspective of a reflective institution, such centralisation can be seen as an attempt to align SoTL initiatives with institutional quality frameworks and to embed mechanisms of coordination and evaluation. Yet, SR cautions that structures are never neutral: While central units may provide enabling resources, they can also constrain agency by reinforcing perceptions of SoTL as ancillary to disciplinary research, potentially limiting its influence on promotion and tenure decisions.⁸¹ Such configurations may inadvertently privilege compliance with institutional mandates over grassroots innovation, or focus on project outputs rather than the reflective, inquiry-based aspects of SoTL.⁸²

The diversity of configurations across these universities illustrates how cultural orientations mediate structural arrangements. In some contexts, centralised units act as stewards of institutional vision, strategically embedding SoTL in professional development and quality enhancement agendas. In others, faculty-linked or decentralised structures foster ownership, cultivate locally grounded projects, and support CoPs that privilege reflective engagement and peer learning.⁸³ Here, the morphogenetic lens highlights how agents navigate and potentially transform structures. While centralisation may set parameters, SoTL practitioners exercise reflexivity in shaping the meaning and value of SoTL in practice.

Organisational structures, then, are arguably not simply administrative containers for SoTL. They actively construct the purposes, forms of participation, and knowledge practices associated with SoTL. Institutional location thus signals whether SoTL is framed primarily as professional development, as research-led inquiry, or as a hybrid that remains subject to ongoing negotiation.

Goals and Objectives of SoTL Programmes

The adoption of SoTL programmes across the five universities has been staggered, reflecting distinct institutional histories, mandates, and strategic priorities. Universities 1 and 5 introduced formal SoTL initiatives in the early 2010s, University 2 in 2014, University 3 in 2018, and University 4 is only now formalising SoTL through its revised PGDHE programme. Despite these different timelines, the stated goals of SoTL programmes converge around three key aims: advancing student learning and success, strengthening evidence-based pedagogical practices, and building faculty capacity for scholarly teaching.

In part, these goals reflect the conceptual evolution of SoTL from Boyer's broadening of scholarship, where teaching is recognised as a legitimate scholarly activity, to Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone's emphasis on the systematic, reflective, and public dimensions of teaching inquiry.⁸⁴ At the same time, they also reflect the specific contexts and cultures of the institutions, shaping how SoTL is valued and enacted. As already indicated, the more SoTL is situated within its institutional and disciplinary context, the more meaningful and impactful it becomes.⁸⁵ Applying the social realist lens, these goals can be understood as outcomes of the dynamic interaction between institutional structures, cultural norms, and faculty agency, producing contextually contingent rather than uniform practices.

Alignment with institutional missions, as seen in University 4's curriculum-integrated SoTL, demonstrates how programmes can operationalise evidence-informed practice to improve teaching quality and student outcomes. Where SoTL relies primarily on external funding, integration with

⁸⁰ Fanghanel et al., "Defining and Supporting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): A Sector-Wide Study."

⁸¹ Roger Boshier, "Why Is the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Such a Hard Sell?," *Higher Education Research & Development* 28, no. 1 (March 31, 2009): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360802444321>.

⁸² Hutchings, "Approaching the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning".

⁸³ Angela Brew, "Higher Education Research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The Pursuit of Excellence," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 5, no. 2 (2011): 3.

⁸⁴ Ernest L Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. (ERIC, 1990); Pat Hutchings, Mary Taylor Huber, and Anthony Ciccone, *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact*, vol. 21 (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

⁸⁵ Looker, "Contextualising Contexts—Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Cultural Difference."

broader teaching and learning strategies is more limited, highlighting the mediating role of institutional culture and structural support.

Variation across institutions should not be interpreted as weakness. Universities arguably adopt different entry points to SoTL depending on their maturity, strategic orientation, and available resources. In practice, the diversity of goals and objectives across these five cases illustrates these multiple conceptual levels of SoTL in operation.⁸⁶ This suggests that institutional SoTL objectives are both procedural and cultural. Their relationship is bidirectional. They shape how SoTL is valued, enacted, and sustained across different university contexts. Yet they are also shaped by context and sustained through reflective engagement and faculty agency.

Pathways for Faculty Engagement

Faculty engagement in SoTL is structured differently across the institutions. Universities 1 and 5 employ formal application processes that require ethical clearance, research proposals, and planned dissemination outputs; University 2 relies on mentoring-driven models; University 3 uses project- or group-based registration; and University 4 prioritises classroom-focused initiatives embedded in professional development programmes. These variations align with the argument that multiple, context-sensitive pathways lower barriers and accommodate varying faculty experience.

Mentorship emerges as a particularly effective mechanism for capacity-building in contexts where SoTL is still emergent. It supports capacity-building and reflective practice. However, the absence of SoTL Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), known to deepen scholarly engagement, suggests an opportunity to enhance peer learning and sustained SoTL cultures.⁸⁷ Formal systems emphasise rigour and alignment with institutional metrics, while mentoring promotes inclusivity and reflective inquiry. Highly bureaucratic entry processes risk privileging established academics with existing research capital, potentially excluding novice or marginalised faculty from participation.

From RI and SR perspectives, these pathways also illustrate how structures, culture, and faculty agency interact. Formal approaches support scholarly teaching, while collaborative models foster SoTL properly. It can be argued that differences across institutions in engagement pathways are not deficiencies. They reflect conceivably productive variations that balance quality, inclusivity, and innovation in fostering SoTL cultures.

Mechanisms of Faculty Support

Across the five institutions, faculty support mechanisms are multifaceted, combining writing retreats, workshops, mentoring programmes, webinars, and conference participation, providing sustained opportunities for reflection, inquiry, and scholarly dialogue. Universities 1 and 5 provide structured grant support, including ethics and dissemination mentoring; University 2 emphasises mentorship; University 3 uses collaborative projects; and University 4 integrates classroom-focused professional development. These mechanisms, viewed from a social realist perspective, mediate the interaction between institutional structures and faculty agency, enabling academics to navigate policies, resources, and cultural expectations.

Mentoring and peer support enhance reflective practice and capacity-building, particularly in institutions where SoTL is emergent. However, the absence of formal FLCs limits opportunities for deep, sustained scholarly engagement. Here, the notion of reflexive institutions underscores the importance of feedback loops and institutional responsiveness, where support structures must be adaptable to evolving faculty needs, disciplinary contexts, and institutional goals. Overall, support mechanisms shape both participation and the epistemic culture of SoTL, influencing whether scholarly teaching is enacted as isolated projects or integrated, reflective practice.

⁸⁶ Hutchings, "Approaching the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning".

⁸⁷ Laurie Richlin, "Scholarly Teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2001, no. 86 (2001): 57–68.

Institutional Resources

Across all cases, SoTL funding remains largely contingent on external sources, particularly UCDG cycles. While dedicated staff, centres, and coordinators manage grants, infrastructure, and programme continuity, integration into core budgets and strategic planning is often limited, leaving sustainability precarious. Reliance on external funding can create dependency cycles, privileging technicist, output-oriented approaches over the reflective, inquiry-based practices central to SoTL.⁸⁸

At University 1, funding is tied to research where students are direct beneficiaries, excluding faculty-focused initiatives such as CoPs or professional development workshops. Yet, collaborative networks and CoPs are shown to foster critical reflection, collective knowledge generation, and scholarly engagement with teaching.⁸⁹ The exclusion of projects such as the development of digital competencies or faculty workshops, despite their known alignment with emerging pedagogical needs, illustrates how resource conditions can constrain the epistemic breadth of SoTL, privileging certain kinds of inquiry over others.⁹⁰ In considering the impact of SoTL, student learning remains the anchor of inquiry.⁹¹

In contrast, University 2 links funding to outputs such as publications and conference presentations, reflecting a research-oriented conception of SoTL aligned with Boyer and Hutchings' notions of the scholarship of teaching and learning proper, where reflective practice is coupled with rigorous evidence generation and peer critique. Institutions that tie funding to tangible outputs are enacting SoTL in its research-oriented mode, supporting scholarly teaching while simultaneously reinforcing accountability structures.

Despite the dependence on external grants, variability across universities demonstrates that funding does not produce uniformity. Here, systematic, public inquiry supports scholarly teaching while reinforcing accountability structures. Other institutions expand inter-institutional networks (University 2), deploy grants strategically to embed SoTL within curricula (University 4), or professionalise SoTL pathways and career development (University 5).

These variations indicate that resources do more than enable activity: Resources shape the scope, forms, and cultural interpretation of SoTL. Funding availability and conditionality influence whether SoTL is enacted primarily as professional development, research-informed practice, or a hybrid. This reflects the complex, context-sensitive institutionalisation of SoTL. However, the heavy reliance on externally contingent funding, uneven integration into institutional strategies, and privileging of certain output-oriented projects, while evincing doing SoTL differently, also reveal structural weaknesses that may limit the sustainability, inclusivity, and epistemic breadth of SoTL, issues that must be addressed when considering future directions of SoTL.

Visions for the Future

The gallery walks yielded visual representations of "SoTL Dreams," reflecting institutional aspirations shaped by context and partnerships. At University 2 (Figure 2), SoTL was re-envisioned through a mentorship model oriented towards developing successful desired graduates, underpinned by pillars such as idea generation, experience, capabilities, and other output-driven measurable outcomes. Within this framing, SoTL is critically situated within the Global South context, ensuring that practitioners reflect on dominant epistemic practices that constrain achievement of the required graduate attributes. In this sense, SoTL becomes purposefully output-driven, seeking social responsiveness through the creation of teaching-learning environments in which desired graduate attributes must be developed.

⁸⁸ Nancy L. Chick, "'Methodologically Sound' Under the 'Big Tent': An Ongoing Conversation," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 8, no. 2 (July 30, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsofl.2014.080201>.

⁸⁹ Van der Merwe, Smith, and Jones, "Communities of Practice in Human Movement Sciences: A Collaborative Approach to SoTL"; Richlin, "Scholarly Teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching."

⁹⁰ Cupido et al., "SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities."

⁹¹ Felten, "Principles of Good Practice in SoTL."

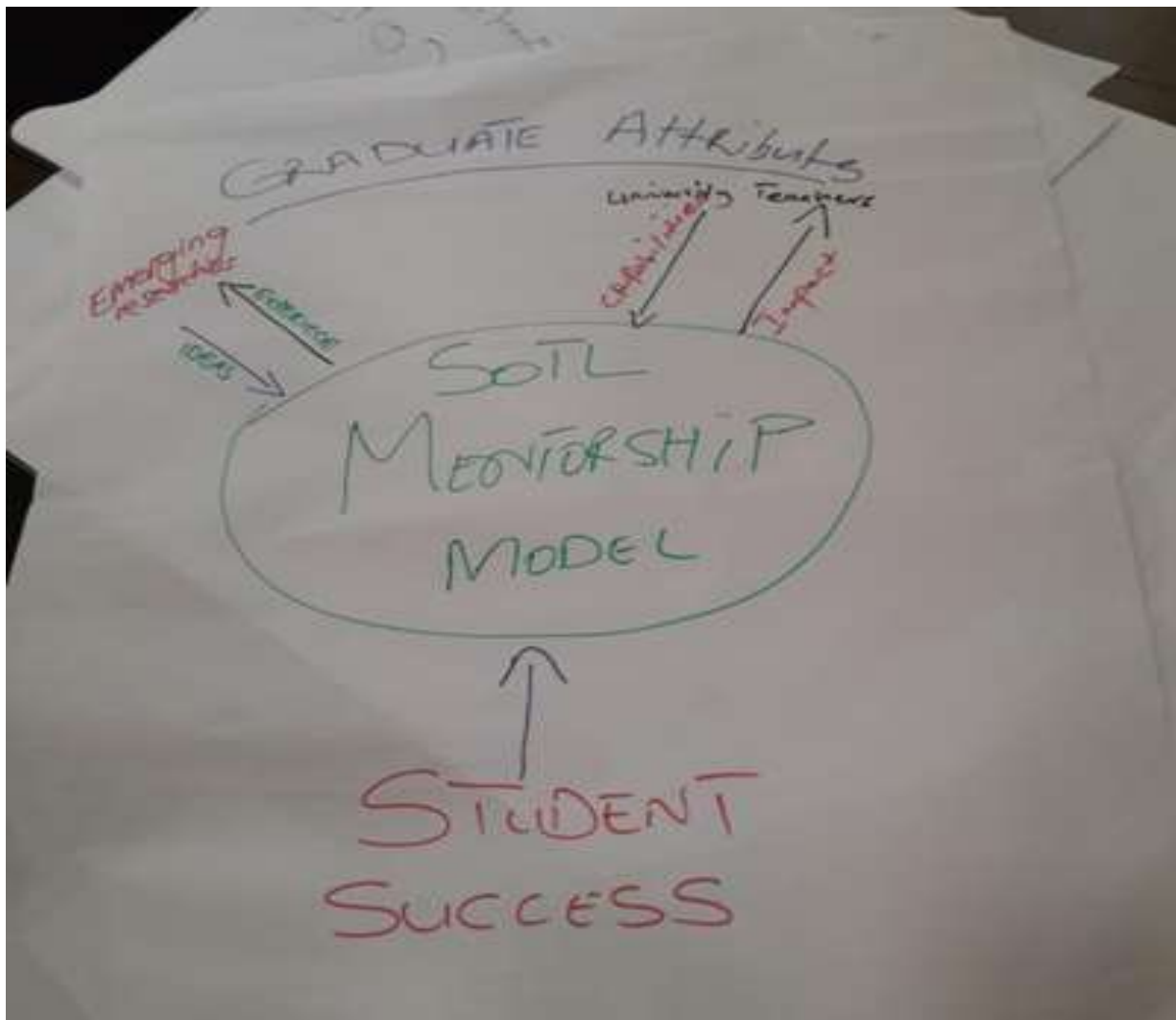


Figure 2. Output-driven orientation (Image by Author 1).

While this orientation reflects Wenger’s concept of CoPs, it also exposes a persistent instrumentalist and outcome-focused orientation where SoTL is valued primarily as a means to ensure graduate outcomes, rather than as a broader scholarly endeavour that interrogates pedagogy, power, and epistemic diversity.⁹² Without deliberate attention to inquiry, reflexivity, and the professional development of academics, such visions risk narrowing SoTL to a technicist project, thereby undermining its potential to transform institutional cultures of teaching and learning. By contrast, University 3’s vision (Figure 3) foregrounds relational depth and scholarly community-building.

In the vision produced with University 3 (Figure 3), SoTL was re-conceptualised through the lens of Slow SoTL, foregrounding students as partners, the pivotal role of SoTL champions, and the importance of collaborative processes, structured mentorship, and institutional incentives.

⁹² Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932>.



Figure 3. Process-focused orientation (Image by Author 1).

This approach embodies a process-focused orientation, aligned with principles of slow scholarship that emphasise deliberative, ethical, relational, and contextually grounded inquiry.⁹³ Here, SoTL’s value lies not only in measurable outputs but also in the reflective and communal practices through which knowledge and pedagogical cultures are reshaped.

While this vision offers a valuable counterweight to the output-driven vision discussed earlier, it also raises practical tensions. Slow, relational work requires sustained institutional commitment and resources, which may be difficult to secure in environments governed by performative metrics and short-term funding cycles.

In the vision emerging from University 4 (Figure 4), SoTL is re-framed around four objectives that reflect responsiveness to contemporary digital pedagogical trends and the turn towards evidence-based practice.⁹⁴ While the focus risks reinforcing a strong outcome-driven logic where technology and analytics dominate at the expense of deeper inquiry into teaching - learning relationships, its strength lies in its attentiveness to student voice and partnership, a more process-oriented engagement where SoTL is positioned as both a mechanism for personalising learning and a relational practice that cultivates deeper faculty-student partnerships.

⁹³ Leibowitz and Bozalek, “Towards a Slow Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South”; Catherine Bovill, Joy Jarvis, and Karen Mpamhanga, *Co-Creating Learning and Teaching: Towards Relational Pedagogy in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2025); J. Pool et al., “The Potential of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research towards Transformative Pedagogies in Higher Education: An Approach to Ethical Mindedness,” in *A Scholarly Approach to Student Success in Higher Education. Vol. 2: Transformative Pedagogies*, ed. J. Pool, M. M. Fernandes-Martins, and M. Fourie (2022), 32–63, <https://doi.org/10.62869/001c.120948>.

⁹⁴ Cupido et al., “SoTL in South Africa: Emergence, Evolution, Possibilities.”

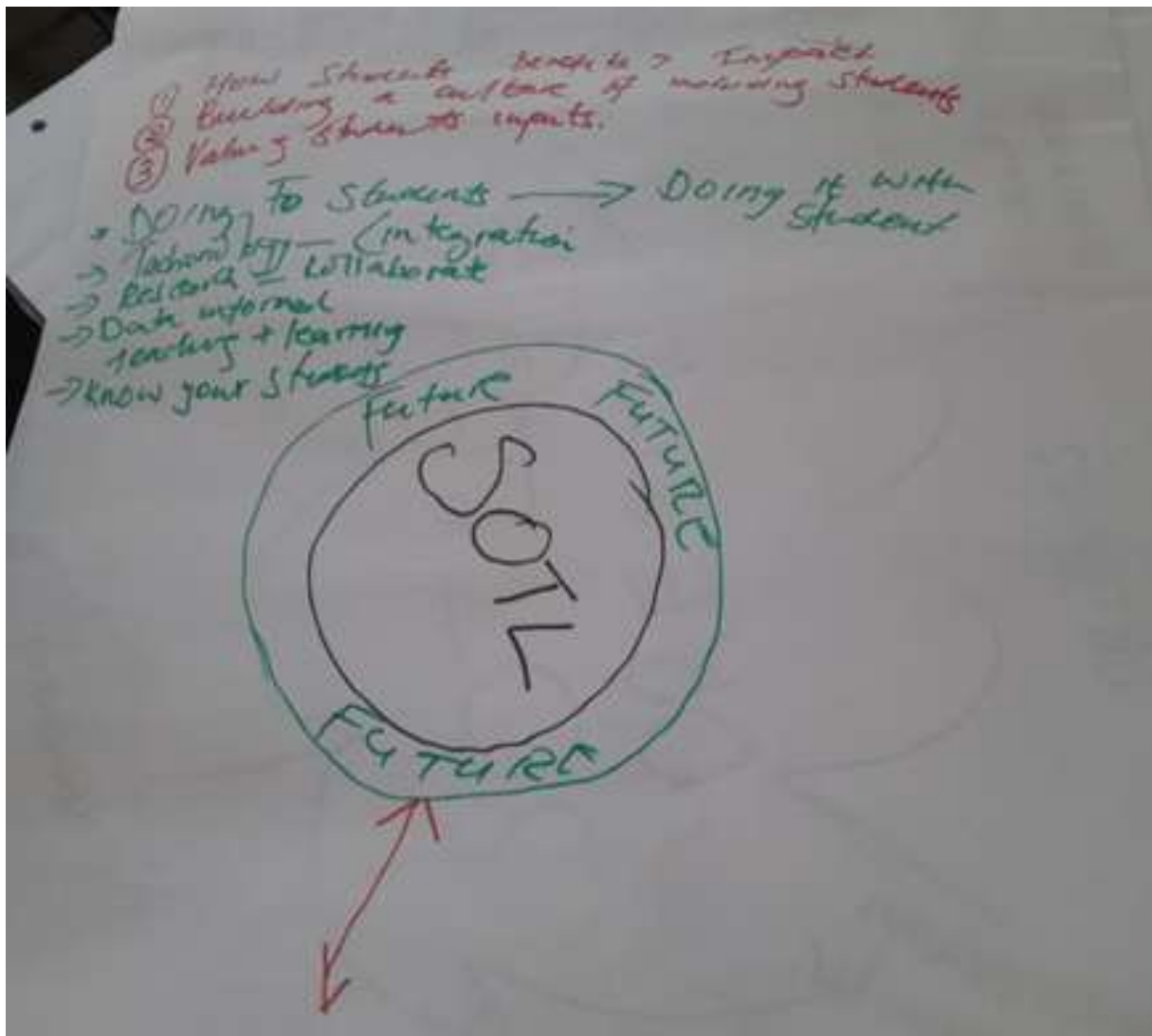


Figure 4. Student-centred orientation (Image by Author 1).

While the vision's future significance will depend on whether it sustains these relational dimensions or reduces SoTL to a tool for performance measurement, it is also bolstered by a demonstrable responsiveness to contemporary digital pedagogical trends and evidence-based practice.⁹⁵ This orientation is emphasised in the University 5 (Figure 5) vision, which situates SoTL within a globalised landscape, emphasising internationalisation, the expansion of digital pedagogies, and, as already discussed earlier, the emergent role of artificial intelligence as a stakeholder in the SoTL ecosystem. This reflects the increasing importance of technologically-mediated scholarship and global scholarly networks in shaping higher education teaching practices.

⁹⁵ Olaf Zawacki-Richter et al., "Systematic Review of Research on Artificial Intelligence Applications in Higher Education – Where Are the Educators?," *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 16, no. 1 (December 28, 2019): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0171-0>.

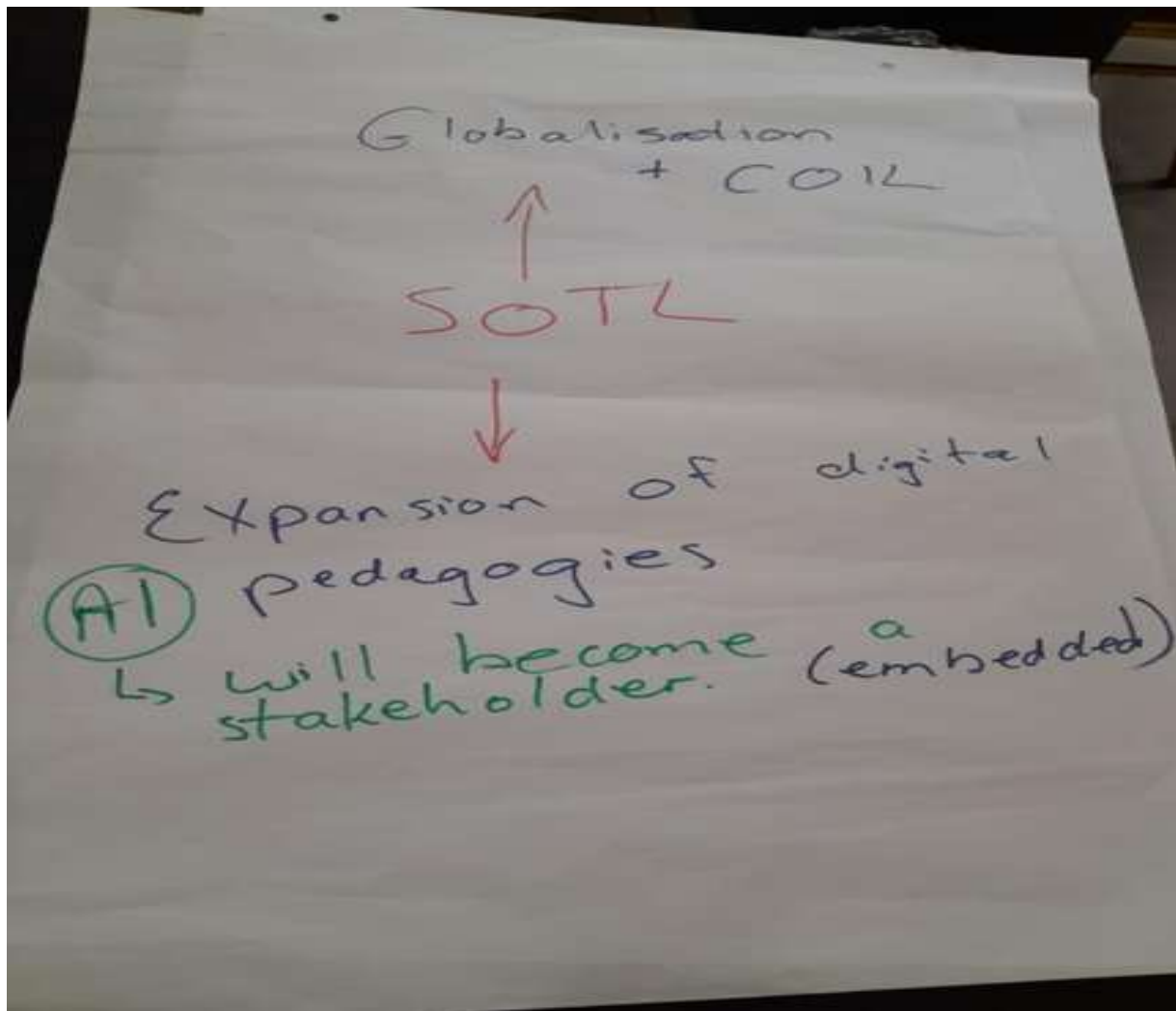


Figure 5: Digital pedagogies and evidence-based orientation (Image by Author 1).

In summary, the reflections and SoTL visions for the future reveal convergent and divergent pathways for the development of SoTL. Divergent goals were evident in processes and in structures owing to the different institutional cultures and are not seen as a risk to the development of SoTL. Divergent goals include: Formal applications – for example, in ethical clearance, research proposals, and planned dissemination; mentoring models – which included three-year mentorships with collaborative support; project registration – group-based or individual project approaches; and embedded development – classroom-focused professional development integration.

While there were notable divergencies, institutions continue to converge on goals underpinned by the national imperatives to advance student learning and success, strengthen evidence-based pedagogy, build faculty capacity for scholarly teaching, and address goals adapted to institutional missions and contexts.

Together, these visions illustrate a shared commitment across institutions to student-centred, collaborative, and forward-looking approaches, while simultaneously respecting local contexts and institutional distinctiveness. Rather than signalling uniformity, these differences highlight the generative potential of plural SoTL cultures, where contextually embedded innovation strengthens both pedagogical practice and scholarly inquiry.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Felten, "Principles of Good Practice in SoTL"; Hutchings, *Opening Lines: Approaches to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*; Chaka et al., "Situating Some Aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in South African Higher Education within Southern Theories."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening SoTL institutionalisation requires integrated strategies. Centralised units should anchor programmes for coherence and resource support, complemented by faculty-level coordinators or disciplinary CoP to promote local ownership. Clearly articulated goals aligned with institutional missions and local teaching cultures can embed evidence-based SoTL practice while advancing transformative student outcomes. Flexible, inclusive pathways such as mentorship and collaborative projects enable reflective inquiry and foster the scholarship of teaching and learning properly. Embedding resources in core budgets, rather than relying solely on cyclical external grants, is critical for sustainability and a robust SoTL culture.

CONCLUSION

South African universities conceptualise and institutionalise SoTL in diverse, contextually-grounded ways that reflect institutional histories, missions, and structural capacities. While some institutions foreground mentorship and internal capacity-building, others emphasise technology integration, internationalisation, or slow, deliberative scholarship. It can be argued that this variation must not be construed as a conceptual confusion or weakness but as an adaptive response balancing structure, culture, and agency. Across cases, SoTL is supported by strategic alignment, dedicated staff, and professionalised units, yet faculty engagement, institutional embedding, and sustainability remain variable, illustrating the interplay of structure, culture, and agency central to SR and RI lenses.

Future-oriented visions highlight both potential and risk. Universities 1, 2 and 4 frame SoTL through mentorship-oriented, student-success models, which may prioritise outputs over reflective inquiry. University 3 exemplifies Slow SoTL, emphasising student partnership, collaborative engagement, and reflective practice. This demonstrates how cultural and structural enablers foster faculty agency and scholarly teaching. University 5 envisions technology and data-informed practice. However, without supporting faculty structures and reflective mechanisms, such aspirations risk remaining unrealised. Collectively, these insights point to the need for hybrid organisational models, flexible engagement pathways, and reflective, faculty-led communities to translate ambitions into sustainable practice.

Overall, the South African case illustrates that SoTL's strength lies in its contextually grounded diversity. Institutions can innovate and adapt, nurturing faculty agency, reflective practice, and knowledge generation while simultaneously responding to national imperatives of transformation, social justice, and student success. For policy and practice, this underscores the need for institutional strategies that combine structural support, resource stability, and flexible, reflective engagement pathways. Embedding SoTL as a core dimension of academic work, not merely a peripheral, grant-dependent activity, can ensure its sustainability, enhance teaching quality, and foster a scholarly culture that is responsive to both local and national educational priorities.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was supported by a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) grant from the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG), awarded in November 2023 [1DB0063].

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