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# Assessing the value of SCOTENS as a cross-border professional learning network in Ireland using the Wenger–Trayner value-creation framework

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## ABSTRACT

SCoTENS (the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South) is a unique network of teacher educators from north and south of the Irish border. Funded by government departments and membership institutions across the island, it is facing a range of potential uncertainties. This study is an attempt to map the values and impacts of a complex boundary object. A framework designed by Wenger–Trayner was adapted to create a bespoke research tool. This was deployed to collect data in semi-structured conversations (cross-border pairs of respondents) and in monologues from individual contributors. The study permitted researchers to access both the breadth (from a range of stakeholders) and depth (from immediate to transformative) of significances and to capture the unique flavours and forms of perceived values across this terrain. Sustaining this vulnerable and valuable network in an uncertain future will be usefully informed by these findings.

## KEYWORDS

Teacher Education; values; networks; SCoTENS; Wenger; Brexit; Ireland

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *The value imperative*

SCoTENS (the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South) is a unique network of teacher educators from north and south of the border which separates Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. SCoTENS was first conceived following the Belfast /Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Coolahan, 2008) and formally established in 2003. So, whilst its *raison d’être* lies in peace building, SCoTENS’ objectives are focused primarily on cross-border co-operation for the enhancement of teacher education on the island of Ireland. We believe SCoTENS is the only network of its kind in the world operating across a contested border; this is where the network’s value imperative rests. The members of SCoTENS are drawn from the full range of stakeholder institutions for

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teacher education across the island. SCoTENS organises an annual conference (including roundtables for doctoral researchers) and a cross-border student–teacher exchange. It also provides seed-funding which supports collaboration between groups of teacher educators in designing, developing and implementing small-scale, north/south research projects. The scale of achievement relating to this has been reported elsewhere (Clarke et al., 2018; Galvin, 2018).

Now in its seventeenth year, SCoTENS is facing into a situation with unpredictable consequences for its work. This paper reports on an ongoing study into the challenges facing SCoTENS in a post-Brexit world and the articulation of its value as a unique, all-island network. By focusing systematically on what SCoTENS has done to date and its activities – through the voices and insights of those involved – the paper offers an authoritative and timely reading of the organisation, its value, and its work. Values are of course intimately linked to activities and present in both *tangible* and *intangible* form (Kaplan & Norton, 2004). Through an exploration of collective and personal narratives, this paper addresses the question of what counts as value for SCoTENS and why this is important not only for the organisation but also beyond (cf O’Doherty & Hall, 2018; O’Toole, 2018). As such, this paper is intended to be useful for those who would wish to better understand the importance of cross-border professional learning and research networks within such contexts. Additionally, this study of cross-border co-operation can feed into the necessary post-Brexit debate about the future challenges of working across a border on the island of Ireland (O’Keeffe & Creamer, 2019).

Drawing on a *value-creation framework* based in social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a; B. Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017), the SCoTENS steering committee has been involved for some time now in a shared *professional learning journey* (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Our use of this framework focuses on a series of five inter-related, operational dimensions of value for professional learning, along with their strategic and enabling underpinnings. We address in particular the following foundational aspects of this value in the paper:

- **Immediate & Potential Value** which refers to the experiences that people have when they engage with SCoTENS and the knowledge, insights, new relations, and so on, that result;
- **Applied & Realised Value** which concerns what SCoTENS has been able to achieve through its work and the difference the network has made in regard to better mutual understanding among teacher educators and revised praxis around teacher education in Ireland; and
- **Transformative Value** which foregrounds particularly significant changed and sustained practices and perspectives on professional learning emerging from the activities of SCoTENS since it began its work.

## 2. Research approach and design

### 2.1 Research context and theoretical framework

A number of considerations have been fundamental in shaping the decision to undertake a deep, value-creation analysis of SCoTENS and the direction that analysis has taken. First,

a review of SCoTENS undertaken by Professor John Furlong and a team from Oxford University (Furlong et al., 2011) suggested that it was advisable to revisit our priorities and practices as an organisation at regular intervals. The occasion of our 15th annual conference provided such an opportunity. Additionally, the collapse in 2017 of the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland had a significant and unexpected consequence for the Conference funding stream; northern departments retrenched on all expenditure and, despite representations from different sectors of the teacher education community in Northern Ireland, withdrew all northern funding. It has not been reinstated. Fortunately, the southern funding remains in place and SCoTENS has been able to grow its support base among teacher education interests, counteracting to some degree this loss. Nevertheless, it was a sobering moment and emphasised the need to revisit our activities to find ways of validating and making more visible publicly the work that we do.

The SCoTENS steering committee members are educationalists from a variety of traditions and professional/practice backgrounds. It should be unsurprising then that we embraced the opportunity presented by the research as a *learning* one, and that, epistemologically and conceptually, the study we designed builds on *professional learning research* (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016) in an interpretative tradition, draws on *discourse-studies* practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krzyżanowski & Forchtner, 2016), and is informed by a *social history* approach (Evans, 2008). The defining *métier* is a *value-creation framework* (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a; B. Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017) based in social learning theory.

## 2.2 Research methodology

### 2.2.1 The Wenger-Trayner framework

In line with our theoretical stance and the decision to view the research as an opportunity for a shared, professional learning journey, we needed to identify a methodology that would both facilitate and help structure the series of conversations necessary to foreground the practices, values and hopes that characterise individual and collective participation in the activities of SCoTENS since its formation. This needed to be sophisticated enough to capture the considerable nuances involved in SCoTENS' work and the diachronic nature of SCoTENS' development but also open enough to allow participants to hold honest and critical conversations around the full range of SCoTENS' activity: student exchange; research collaboration; seed-funding of small-scale north-south projects; the annual conference with its workshops, seminars, keynotes and networking opportunities; and so on.

In Wenger's earlier work he develops the notion of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) to explain how people are constantly engaged in the pursuit of shared enterprises which bring about collective learning: 'As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn' (Wenger, 1998, p. 45). It is this collective learning that results in practices, and as he argues, these practices are 'the property of a kind of community created over time' (Wenger, 1998, p. 45). More recently, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) outline a framework where 'knowledgeability' is developed through our relations not just within any single community of practice (which leads to 'competence') but in relation to a multiplicity of practices

across a landscape, where boundaries of practice are unavoidable. Such boundaries in such complex landscapes of practice are however always ‘interesting places’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a, p. 18) offering the potential for boundary encounters, ‘brokering’ at the edge of the landscape (Kubiak et al., 2015), and boundary crossing leading to novel learning, innovation and progress not just for individuals but for communities. In this way boundaries are referred to as ‘learning assets’. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) thus describe learning as a formative journey through a social landscape of practices, crossing boundaries, experiencing interactions; an identity-shaping trajectory through a landscape which at times can be welcoming but also at times exclusionary or marginalising, producing experiences of identification but also of dis-identification. B. Wenger-Trayner et al. (2017) propose a further variation on the original value-creation framework so that it can double as a planning template. They note that although the framework was originally intended to frame retrospective assessments of learning from communities of practice, some communities had also begun to use the framework to prospectively create a vision and plan their activities, setting aspirations, considering conditions, and establishing risks and mitigation strategies.

Within both the original and newer frameworks seven *value-creation cycles* are presented where engagement in social learning can produce *immediate value* such as enjoying the company of like-minded people; *potential value* such as insights, connections, or resources; *applied value* creatively drawing on these insights, connections, or resources to change what we do; *realised value* through changes in practice that make a difference to what matters; *transformative value* through the transformation of people’s identities or the broader environment; *strategic value* through engagement with relevant stakeholders; and *enabling value* where individuals learn how to enable social learning. See [Figure 1](#).

### 2.2.2 Narratives as windows into value

Value creation needs to be approached in the context of personal and collective narratives. Narratives provide an angle on what learning is taking place (or not) and thus what value is created (or not). The Wenger–Trayners talk about narratives as accounts and as aspirations, both of which have implications for our study in relation to evidence to be assembled and examined. As accounts of what has happened and is happening in the everyday, ‘ground’ narratives concern formative events that shape the community. From such narratives we were able to identify thematic accounts around aspects such as the events that have shaped SCoTENS, the activities that members engage in/interactions and experiences that characterise these, aspirations regarding networking/participating in SCoTENS activities, and understandings of success. These kinds of accounts unpack to a considerable degree expected/hoped for value. They also suggest that tensions between personal and collective narratives and between everyday and aspirational narratives create a valuable space for learning. The power of the framework to facilitate capture of both retrospective and prospective views on value also proved particularly useful.

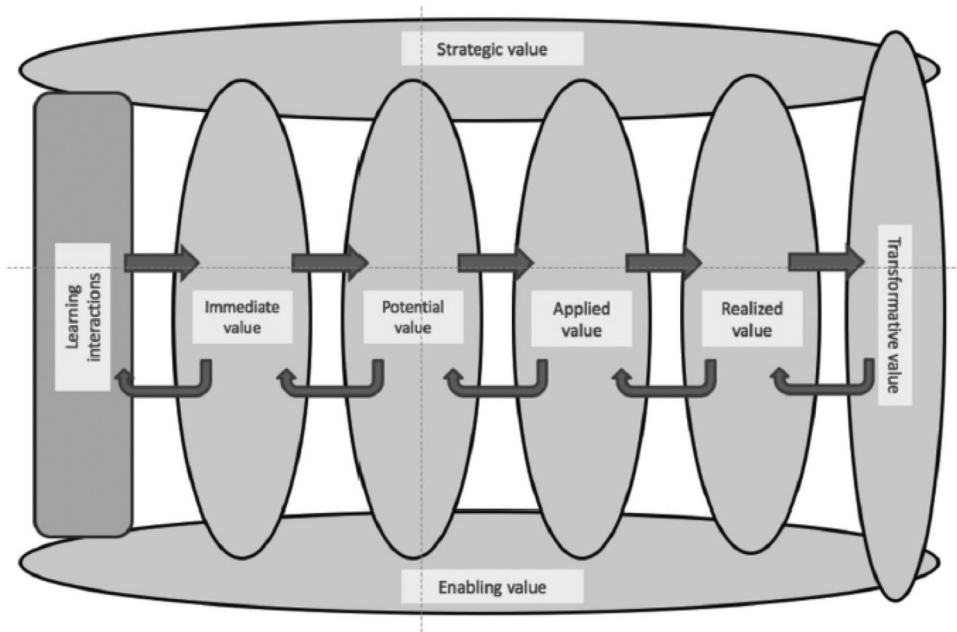


Figure 1. Value Creation Cycles framework (E. Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015).

### 2.3 Research question and methods

The overarching purpose behind the research was to capture – through personal and collective narratives – considered views on the value of their SCoTENS activities from across the widely diverse membership of the SCoTENS community and so better understand their reasons for participation. Essentially, the core question was: *What is the value of SCoTENS and its various activities to its membership?* Research participation was by open call, augmented as necessary by invitations to individuals and dyads to fill a stratified sampling frame that represented the range of SCoTENS activities since its inception.

The data collection involved seeking the views of stakeholders who were invited to record their ‘SCoTENS Stories’. Typically, stories were collected from north-south pairings, for example, from two researchers who worked together on a particular SCoTENS-funded project, or pairs from the student–teacher exchanges. To ensure comprehensive coverage of the sampling frame, personal/individual stories were also elicited in several cases. Participant category, role, and jurisdictions are shown in Table 1. These are broadly

Table 1. Participants by Respondent category, activity, and jurisdiction.

Respondent category	Number Involved	Jurisdiction
Leadership within SCoTENS: the founding members of SCoTENS	one pair	1N, 1S
SCoTENS secretariat	one individual	1N and S
Student teacher exchange participants	two pairs (4 in total)	2N, 2S
Doctoral Roundtable participants	seven individuals	2N, 5S
Participation in the SCoTENS Annual Conference	two individuals	2S
Participation in seed funded research projects	three pairs and three individuals (9)	3N, 6S
SCoTENS committee members	two pairs and one individual (5)	2N, 3S

reflective of participation in the Annual Conference from members North and South and are also indicative of the full extent of SCoTENS activity.

The *SCoTENS Stories* narratives were initialised and guided in each case by a set of prompt cards based on elements of the Wenger-Trayner framework. These developed out of work at SCoTENS 2017 when committee members along with Etienne Wenger annotated the value-creation framework with reference to the purposes and activities of SCoTENS and were designed to be self-administered. This offered considerable discursive advantages as a method. For instance, participants had the freedom to discuss the cues on the prompt cards in a free-flowing manner and at their own pace. Additionally, the momentum could be sustained through two professional colleagues motivated to discuss common experiences. Nevertheless, there were some concerns around the risk inherent in this approach. Participants could stray from a particular cue, or perhaps fail to identify which value they were discussing although it was largely clear from the context and cues. Heron and O'Brien (2019) who used an analogous 'Listening Rooms' approach also noted some issues arising from a lack of verbal prompts or probes by an interviewer to extend, develop or clarify points. These proved largely unfounded, however, and the potential advantages outweighed any such drawbacks.

Krzyżanowski and Forchtner (2016) suggest that while there is no single, correct way to analyse and present qualitative data, a discourse-studies approach can offer valuable insights into both individualised and collective *agentive action* (Richardson, 2015) and help foreground the institutional forces which support or inhibit such action. In addition, Cohen et al. (2011) point out that qualitative analysis is 'heavy on interpretation' of which there can be many versions which is both 'their glory and their headache' (p. 537).

With this in mind, the SCoTENS Stories audio files were transcribed fully, the data then coded/described, thematic patterns identified, and similarities and differences in perceptions of value-creation noted. This involved rigorously checking for accuracy, identifying and coding themes and sub-themes by reading and re-reading the data, interpreting and reporting emerging trends and issues (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Multiple readings from within the author group added an additional test of truth value to the resulting discussions and verified that the outcomes were well founded. These findings are presented and discussed below.

Full ethical approval for the research was granted by a university college in Northern Ireland covering voluntary informed consent, the right to privacy, the right to withdraw without giving a reason, confidentiality in the processing of the data, and anonymity as far as possible in the report or any other modes of dissemination. This accords with both the British Educational Research Association guidelines (British Educational Research Association, 2018) and Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) practices and protocols, and of course with the ethical stance of SCoTENS itself.

### 3. Findings

Findings from the research are presented and discussed under headings drawn from the Wenger-Trayner value-creation framework: immediate & potential; applied & realised; and transformative. This allows for some meaningful exploration of the many views and voices captured by the research.

### 3.1 Immediate and potential value

Value cycles/activities can produce Immediate & Potential Value for an organisation or network when they provide experiences in which people can engage in order to generate knowledge, insights, new relations, and so on.

We see both a strong understanding of the need for this and a number of interesting examples of such engagements noted in the conversations between participants in SCoTENS activity, particularly among the founding members (FM) and secretariat (Sec) when they talk about the early days of the organisation. For instance, considerable value was seen to rest in getting the Education Departments in both jurisdictions to engage with, and fund, the initial SCoTENS programme. It meant unprecedented levels of direct contact across the border *with people beginning to look at the south for partnerships* (FMn), as well as more openness in conversations about the nature of teacher education across the island. The success involved in gaining this funding was seen as having both individual and institutional value: with initial teacher education (ITE) programme leaders and institutional managers working together in the SCoTENS Committee, and younger colleagues meeting at conferences and in student–teacher exchanges, thereby fostering professional development and cross-border insights:

... the immediate value was the impact of [bringing together] so many perspectives; people co-operating, people working hard, people engaging in research, people tossing out new ideas, that was the [resulting] environment. (FM<sub>s</sub>)

Similarly, the incorporation of SCoTENS as a cross-border network centred around the pragmatics of financial support for teacher education represented from a secretariat perspective *a very good example of cross-border co-operation and networking ... very much within our objective and our mission* (Sec).

From the outset, there was evident commitment to share expertise to benefit north-south teacher education, and a *very collegial atmosphere* (Sec) that produced valuable outputs and outcomes. The more tangible of these would include the inaugural SCoTENS Conference, the first ventures into seed-funding and cross-border student–teacher exchanges. The latter was seen by the student–teacher respondents (ST) as offering huge potential to *experience very different classroom settings that supported professional development differently* and they valued particularly how their *confidence increased as they worked in a cross-border team, encountering different curricula, and [using] new teaching skills acquired during the practicum* (ST<sub>n,s</sub>). Additionally, the potential for conference proceedings as well as annual research and activity reports, all disseminated through the SCoTENS website, also represented a potential and very tangible archive of valuable educational resources.

The possibilities resulting from the annual conference and the introduction of the SCoTENS seed-funding scheme for small-scale, north-south research projects were among the activities most highly regarded by respondents. For the two conference participants (CP), meeting colleagues in a cross-national setting, networking and sharing views and experiences took centre stage. The SCoTENS conference was described by one respondent as *a bridge to professional development* (CP<sub>n</sub>). It was also valued for providing an impetus to conduct cross-national educational research, with immediate and longer-term benefits such as engaging in professional dialogue, learning from more seasoned



practitioners, finding common interests, and instigating subsequent funding applications. As one seed-funded respondent (SFR) noted:

For me as a fledgling researcher ... this was my first external funding application, my first funded project working with anybody. The fact that it was cross-border was a bonus ... the value of that, even in terms of my career has been enormous ... (SFRn)

This was echoed by their southern partner:

[Our] project ... evolved organically. ... The opportunity that we had to work closely on material that interested us both ... has been a real lynchpin of this project ... to bring together two perspectives which complement each other and, I think, our very strong pedagogical package. (SFRs)

It should not be too surprising then to note that the value of SCoTENS as an incipient community of practice was regarded as possibly the programme's most important feature for many of the respondents. One captures it particularly well when they noted that because of SCoTENS there was now ... *an added value in recognising that there's a community of teacher educators out there* (SFRn).

For SCoTENS committee members (SC), all of the above were of course seen as important. However, it was notable that considerable value was also invested by committee respondents in *agentic collaboration* as a form of highly challenging professional development. This included: being involved in an organisation contributing to the peace process; learning from, and working with, a much wider community within teacher education than previously; and having a *unique platform* (SCs) for broader thinking about values and practices, thereby contributing to a greater all-island vision. Clearly, the levels of connectedness that SCoTENS afforded were seen as of high value. As one committee member put it:

SCoTENS is non-competitive ... [it is] something that is inclusive, is inviting, and ... when you have small institutions ... it allows for breadth of vision, even across the island ... that's really valuable. (SCs)

Another affordance relating to the Immediate & Potential value for SCoTENS committee member respondents concerned the simple reality of getting to know, understand and appreciate the often uniquely Irish practices and value bases of teacher education from a wider perspective. Learning about similarities and differences in educational practice at institutional level and, in one case, developing relationships at policy-making level, opened up opportunities for conversations around praxis and policies not otherwise possible. As one committee member noted: *Knowing a second jurisdiction ... wouldn't have happened without SCoTENS. It does change your way of thinking, and it bodes change.* (SCn). Considerable mention was also given to how being part of SCoTENS engendered trust, generated *reputational inspiration* (SCn) and – tellingly – fostered a *deep ideological commitment* [to value-based teacher education] (SCs) that helped in identifying and addressing sometimes hidden agendas related to teacher education reform, while entirely distanced from politics:

There's a [new] collegiality there that politics doesn't enter into ... a level of trust because the agenda is shared. It is visible. It is out there. ... people are deeply committed to working together across the nations ... to acknowledge that we're trying to do the same thing. (SCs)

### 3.2 *Applied and realised value*

The Wenger–Trayners’ subtle distinction between Applied & Realised Value propositions is an interesting one. *Applied value* results when learning from an organisation or a community’s activities finds its way into speculative changes in practice and values – essentially, when the community learns from its own outputs, using emerging ideas and new methods, and risks change based on that learning. *Realised value* emerges when those differences and changes start to take root and become part of the procedural, everyday knowledge of the organisation at an individual and collective level. In this way, the community or organisation moves towards some broader good, very much in the manner of a *professional learning journey* (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016). Applied and realised value are, therefore, interconnected and even coupled aspects of that learning, with one often melding into the other. We observed several striking examples of this in the commentary by participants across the range of SCoTENS activities, but particularly in conversations between the various SCoTENS Committee members, and among SCoTENS seed-funding recipients.

Aspirations towards extending teacher education communities and networks, expanding cross-border connections, and building research partnerships were all mentioned by SCoTENS Committee respondents. All these can be seen as measures of success from a value-creation perspective and represent considerable change on previous positions. For instance, one noted:

I can have conversations with people who I have now a sustained relationship with. It’s beyond oneself ... there are people in my University for instance, who have connections now with people in the north who wouldn’t have them without SCoTENS. (SCs)

A second focused more on the experience of SCoTENS as a catalyst for growth as a researcher:

[SCoTENS] quite fundamentally [influenced] me in a number of regards ... it’s made me a better researcher ... it’s introduced me to these other voices, and other research perspectives ... (SCs).

In short, among SCoTENS Committee respondents there was a clear and consistent sense of what one jurisdiction could learn from the other to improve the student–teacher experience, resulting from a growing awareness of teacher education both north and south. In addition, it was noted by several that participating in the breadth of SCoTENS activities allowed members to learn about policy-making which, in turn, affected education values and practice – *far, far beyond teacher education ... right across the education spectrum* (SCs).

Exploring the possibility of *doing things differently* is seen as an important indicator of applied value, as are increasing levels of technical skill and growing confidence in that skill. It was interesting then to note the near unanimity among SCoTENS seed-fund participants around participating in SCoTENS activities as a conditioning influence on the quality of their research practice. For example, most noted that their design and planning had improved, as had reflective practice and communication skills – all significant elements in improving as research practitioners. They reported now being more confident about conducting collaborative research with a cross-border colleague. Not only did SCoTENS provide (albeit limited) financial resources to support collaborations that would previously not have been conceivable, it also serviced intangibles such as

allowing recipients to apply more confidently for external funding, providing practice spaces to learn about the research process, and developing better techniques to disseminate findings and outcomes more widely. One respondent noted a wholly unexpected outcome, in that, engaging in SCoTENS-funded, small-scale projects allowed them and their project colleagues to change fundamentally how they taught research practice to their own students: *They're learning the protocols, the parameters, the methodologies and project management that we'd have done with those SCoTENS projects (SFRs).*

Among seed-fund recipients, SCoTENS created opportunities for realised value mainly by supporting sustained development and fostering among novice and newer researchers enduring confidence in themselves, which flowed into every aspect of their academic life; principally as a gradual shift in their teaching, research and general academic reference frames. Working with colleagues in different educational environments also constantly encouraged SCoTENS seed-fund recipients to query their own assumptions – *take a fresh look at things (SFRs)*. Additional realised value also resulted when – through SCoTENS activities such as the conference and doctoral roundtables – more experienced researchers and even conference keynote speakers proved willing to mentor less experienced colleagues by guiding and coaching for strategic planning and dissemination. In the words of one respondent, providing invaluable and enduring insights on ... *thinking about publications, thinking about conferences ... (SFRn)*, two of the staple concerns in most young researchers' academic life.

In summary, SCoTENS works to be a professional learning nexus that fosters the testing-out and sharing of ideas and new understandings in teacher education. It does this through supporting criticality and a speculative approach to teacher education practice and values, while encouraging its members to risk change based on learning. The true value of this emerges when those SCoTENS sponsored differences and changes start to take root and become part of the procedural, everyday teacher-educator knowledge at an individual and collective level. This encapsulates the kind of culture that has evolved through SCoTENS – one permitting a learning journey to be traced from conversations, to collaborative actions and joint research, all leading to unmistakable changes in both pedagogical and research activity.

### **3.3 Transformative value**

Strong teacher education is widely acknowledged as a transformative, broadly reflective venture. It is interesting, therefore, to note the number of references made by the research participants to this aspect of value provided by SCoTENS experiences – particularly among seed-fund recipients and student teachers who had taken part in north-south exchanges. Transformational is of course sometimes too readily applied to changes in practice and understanding. References to 'transformational' activity are widely used in relation to descriptions of teacher learning but not always problematised or well theorised. This has merit but misses an opportunity to address deeper questions of identity development and professional growth (see for instance, Glanz, 2016). One of the strengths of the Wenger-Trayner framework is that it addresses this absence in some depth. In our deployment of their value framework, we drew heavily on ideas of the transformative as *raising practice and understandings to new levels in sustainable ways*, and

on the connections that surface when experimentation in practice is explored in relation to the assumptions it challenges and the new perspectives on identity it generates.

The challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions about ‘the other’ and the embracing of opportunities to do things a little differently featured in several of the conversations among the SCoTENS seed-fund recipients (SFRs). They saw the funding, though small in real terms, not only as a previously unavailable impetus to conduct cross-border educational research with immediate and longer-term benefits (such as engaging in professional dialogue, learning from each other, finding common interests, and instigating subsequent funding applications) but also as facilitating strongly transformative experiences in itself because of the nature of the research topics and the openness of SCoTENS to a rich variety of activities.

SCoTENS-funded research was seen by a number of respondents as a catalyst for a related shift in their teaching, research interest, and professional understandings. Working with colleagues in different educational environments was described as invaluable in the way it challenged these respondents to query their existing assumptions – ... [to] *take a fresh look at things (SFRs)* and so ... *make some [deep] changes happen (SFRn)*. As mentioned earlier in the paper, SCoTENS seed-funding opened up opportunity to work with sometimes more experienced colleagues, and often in first externally funded contexts (SFRs/SFRn). Working with these previously unknown colleagues was recognised as having considerable professional value; ... *Geographically close is sometimes culturally different, but it's amazing what can be done (SFRs)*. And, indeed, the resulting SCoTENS catalogue of published research is more than ample testimony to this: to date, well over 100 such small-scale projects have been funded. Information about these projects including downloadable reports and related papers from those that are now complete can be found on the SCoTENS website.<sup>2</sup>

Two of the conditions Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015c) note for possibly transformative learning relate to the opportunity for ‘blue-sky’ type thinking and the more mundane possibility of exploratory funding following this. To a degree, SCoTENS seed-funding does so. It was interesting to note this struck a chord among respondents with one in particular speaking of the funding filling a gap – *a real lacuna in CPD in [teacher educator development] (SFRs)*, and another noting how it made possible, for the first time *thinking about publications, thinking about conferences (SFRn)*. Indeed, in these and various other ways the SCoTENS seed-funding initiative was seen by each of the nine seed-funded research participants as an invaluable bridge to professional development – offering variously personal and professional development opportunities very much in line with the aspirations of SCoTENS as an organisation and its founding principles. Within the context of the research for the present paper, both founding members spoke of their hopes for the value of the research projects and their potential transformative contribution to SCoTENS’ teacher educators’ professional identity; namely, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation of teacher education traditions across the island of Ireland through imaginative and defining research opportunities for professional growth, future careers, and reputations.

Acquiring a teacher’s professional identity is best understood as a dynamic process – one that is not only influenced by individual personality and capacities, such as the ability to adapt to changing policy and social contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Schepens et al., 2009) but also by externalities such as community endorsed aspirations like mutual respect, pride in shared values and quality of practice, and the conditions that support and foster

these. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) place opportunities for highly developmental *exploratory work* and deliberate engagement with *boundary items* that enable *cross-boundary learning experiences* at the heart of the ‘knowledgeability’ that represents a transformative adaptation of different perspectives and meanings (Wenger, 1998).

There are a number of strong indications from the findings that the student teachers involved in SCoTENS-sponsored cross-border teaching practice exchanges both experienced and valued such opportunities. The depth of any learning experience can best be gauged by the resulting commentary and action propositions on the part of the learner. Positive responses from participants included the changes in professional confidence they experienced due to mixing with and learning about and from those in another education system and from different pedagogical and cultural backgrounds (such as *Educate Together* schools - multid denominational schools in the south of Ireland). For instance, one student teacher observed that it was a revelation to be able to: *Go out and do something different, take a risk and if it doesn't work, you will still be fine at the end of it, rather than doing the same lesson or the same type of lesson every day* [STs]. Another participant observed:

I think everybody [on the exchange] has had a brilliant experience, and has benefitted greatly from everything to do with it ... Definitely, you should be given the experience to go out of your boundaries to somewhere else where you're not used to the curriculum, not used to the schooling system ... it's something that you'll take with you throughout your career and your practice. (STn)

These and similar responses indicate a marked shift in understanding among the student teachers that came from being able to observe and experience different teaching methodologies. Respondents from both jurisdictions felt the exchange to be of defining value as it had the effect of generating greater confidence, self-belief, and openness to making provision for a range of different pupils.

This confidence translated into exploring new methods and approaches that participants felt otherwise they would most probably not have done. One spoke about how:

In our thinking and practice as student teachers, we've learned a completely different and new, exciting system ... working so much with the people around you and helping [them] – trusting that they'll do their part if you do yours. It ... was a team effort the whole way. (STs)

Another student teacher noted that the exchange opened up new and beneficial perspectives on how teaching and learning can be organised in classrooms and across school settings:

... having the opportunity to go down south and see how they teach ... their day-to-day structure is completely different from what I was used to which was brilliant, because I got to adapt to that, and I got to teach in different ways. (STn)

It was, however, commentary from the exchange students in regard to a new awareness of and willingness to confront the same taken-for-granted assumptions about ‘the other’ and the embracing of opportunities to do things a little differently – points also made by SCoTENS seed-funded respondents – that registered most strongly with the researchers. The re-assessing of some fundamental assumptions – and opening up new and beneficial professional perspectives was particularly interesting. One student teacher noted: ... *it is so needed, because whether you're in, say, all-Catholic or all-Protestant primary schools, that*

*is not reality. Once you leave school that's not what you're going to be working in, and for people who have just come through an all-Catholic education, it's a complete shock. To be immersed in [social diversity] from such a young age is such a good experience (STn).*

Additionally, there was a valuable maturity notable in some of the observations regarding new understandings of the broader aspects of professionalism in teacher identity. For instance, another student spoke about the need for SCoTENS to continue the exchange programme, because: *No matter what happens, teacher education both north and south kind of needs to move together. We are one really, we are all teachers, we are teaching the children of tomorrow (STs).* Another student teacher – having noted the potential damage Brexit was already doing to professional mobility – observed that it would be a shame if opportunities to work and study in the south were lost. On their exchange they were pleasantly surprised to find: *There were teachers [in the southern placement schools] who had studied in Belfast ... it was still nice to see people from up here [in the north] getting that chance. I'd love to do that maybe if I ever got the chance to go down [south] (STn).* Similarly, one southern exchange student noted that it was: *... an incredible experience to go from something that you're so comfortable with in your own environment [RoI] ... to somewhere where it's completely different. It shows that there [are] great relations there, that we can go and make new experiences (STs).*

To a degree what we observed among the responses from SCoTENS seed-funded and student–teacher exchange participants in the value-creation study embodies the types of conditions and opportunities that give rise to agentic actions that are arguably critical to transformative learning. In enabling the emergence of such transactional opportunities for developing professional identity, SCoTENS offers an important and unmatched value proposition on the island of Ireland.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

### 4.1 Discussion

The Wenger–Trayner Value Creation Framework with its focus on differentiated value creation was selected in order to examine how SCoTENS, as a unique, boundary-crossing, professional learning network, might be better understood for its work to date and into the next decade. The key question addressed was: *What is the value of SCoTENS and its various activities to its membership?* Members researched on this included the secretariat, committee members, founding members, student teachers on exchange, doctoral students, seed-funded research participants, and conference delegates. The study was in the context of their personal and collective narratives, with attention to what counts as ‘value’ to whom and why.

The data gathered from educationalists both North and South who had engaged with aspects of the SCoTENS project, indicated interesting and encouraging value-gain and benefit. In sum, research participants attributed significant professional development to their engagement with SCoTENS and aligned the extent of this development with the level of interaction SCoTENS facilitated with other professionals from across the North/South divide.

Key themes emerged from the various Value Cycles that embodied collaborative and supportive ideals. These included:

- Mentoring and the idea of the extended hand from the Immediate Value cycle;
- Exposure to difference and the leading hand from the Potential Value cycle;
- Stimulating critical thinking and/or support in the Applied Value cycle; and,
- Empowerment to move beyond our 'comfort zones' in the Transformative Value cycle.

More particularly, the research suggests that the prioritisation of two overarching values remains highly pertinent to the Community as we move forward. One is the *enabling value: agentic action* in evidence among members through their involvement with SCoTENS which on the basis of the evidence here is in good health. The other is the *strategic value: continuity and change*. Our greatest challenge here lies now in engaging with government stakeholders to convince them of the value of SCoTENS as a "boundary object" where the boundary/border is more significant and potentially divisive than ever, post-Brexit. An especially troubling issue is the continuing struggle with the Department of Education and Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland to have Northern funding restored.

On a more positive note, it is clear that those who engaged with the research process have benefited professionally from their participation in SCoTENS and attributed this to the North/South dimension as evidenced by the theme of leadership together which was prevalent throughout the findings. This is the case across all participant groups. The student teachers felt challenged and supported in adjusting to different curricula and teaching cultures. The doctoral students appreciated the opportunity to 'go public' with their work in a different jurisdiction although it might be noted this initiative had only been in place for two years when the study reported here began.

Teacher educators within the SCoTENS community appear to have benefited tremendously from its opportunities with particular worth attributed to research funding alliances and networking. Of note in this respect is that SCoTENS would appear to support two agendas – the personal and collective. On the one hand, academics found a forum for competitively generated income (albeit small-scale), networking, research activity, and publication – a theme increasingly relevant for higher education staff on both sides of the Irish border in terms of professional and academic respect and promotional prospects. However, this personal benefit completely aligned with the collective – in that only projects that promoted mutual understanding across both jurisdictions were funded. Hence, the corpus of work now available on the SCoTENS website and published variously in respected professional and academic journals bearing on this broad principle linked to teacher education.

Reflecting on the research process, the authors acknowledge the usefulness of the Wenger-Trayner value-creation framework for drawing out indications of value-gain among the participants, and so allowing a gauging of professional learning benefits on a range of levels. We believe the approach also brought to the surface the complexity of the professional landscape we are working within on this island, with its multiplicity of "mini-cultures" and its various communities of practice. The study revealed a variety of SCoTENS inspired "boundary encounters" which are diverse and undoubtedly "interesting places" and it demonstrated the usefulness of narrative as a tool for exploring experiences and perspectives. In short, this study in value-creation allowed us to identify and better understand the value of involvement in SCoTENS activity to a variety of participants including student teachers, seed-funding recipients, committee members, and conference delegates.

It showed something of the challenges and limitations of our adopted approach too. It is noteworthy that there were no examples in the data of dis-identification, tension, or

conflict. Whether this is partially attributable to our approach is not possible to determine although it is a point we bear in mind for possible future work.

## 4.2 Conclusion

This paper has reported on an ongoing study into the challenges facing SCoTENS in a post-Brexit world and the articulation of its value as a unique, all-island professional learning network. By focusing systematically on what SCoTENS has done to date and its activities – through the voices and insights of those involved – the paper offers an authoritative and timely reading of the organisation, its value, and its work.

Readers outside Ireland could be forgiven for thinking that the account offered in this paper is somewhat unremarkable. After all, on the face of it, is it not the positive account one might expect when peers and professional colleagues come together to work on projects pertaining to their professional lives, common interests, and settings? We suggest, however, that it is in fact quite remarkable, significant and inspiring. Prior to SCoTENS, there has not been a tradition of formal academic and professional engagement across teacher education on this island. While there were undoubtedly examples of sharing and co-operation among academics, a case in point being the cross-jurisdictions ESAI with its well-regarded academic journal and annual conference, there was no state/official support mechanism that enabled the two parts of the island to engage around teacher education, and there was no official mechanism for bringing teachers, teacher educators and student teachers into dialogue together. Indeed, it is far more likely that colleagues, north and south, have typically had more involvement with their counterparts in England, Scotland or Wales or elsewhere, than with their peers across the two parts of Ireland itself. Thus, the comparative lived experiences, educational practices and policies of those in our nearest jurisdiction remained mostly hidden until the late 1990s.

SCoTENS has helped the teacher education community on the island of Ireland to move on from the political turmoil and violence which led to the loss of over 3000 lives in the years leading up to the relative peace which developed following the signing of the Belfast /Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The opening-up of conversation among ‘the geographically close’ if ‘culturally different’ is generating awareness of both difference and commonality, but, most importantly, fostering trust, familiarity, and mutual understanding. The different Wenger-Trayner values captured in the words of the participants in our research point to the breaking down of boundaries and borders at a time when fears of a return to old borders, walls and barriers threaten the ease with which new cross-border networks such as SCoTENS can now, finally, flourish.

## Notes

1. Prof Etienne Wenger-Trayner was keynote speaker and a participant in the SCoTENS conference in 2016. He has since advised the SCoTENS Committee on framing understandings of our work through a value-creation framework which led to this present paper.
2. See <http://scotens.org/category/research/7-other-projects/>



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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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