



External Review of Scotland's Rural College

**Report comparing outcomes of QAA and
Education Scotland reviews**

September 2014

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About this report

This report brings together and compares the outcomes of reviews carried out at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) during 2013-14 by Education Scotland and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Education Scotland and QAA each conducted reviews at SRUC according to a protocol that was agreed in August 2013 between the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Education Scotland, QAA and SRUC.

Scope of the Education Scotland review

Education Scotland conducted a bespoke external review of further education provision at SRUC. It took place during the week beginning 17 March 2014. The bespoke approach took account of the role of QAA and Education Scotland in reviewing and reporting on the student experience at SRUC. The judgements expressed by Education Scotland refer only to the following themes:

- learner progress, outcomes and achievement
- learning and teaching process
- learners enhancing their own learning
- leadership for learning and teaching.

Further detail about the selection of themes and the conduct of the review can be found at: www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/about/collegereviews/index.asp

The full Education Scotland review report is available at: www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/reports/othersectors/collegereviews/SRUCScotlandsRuralCollege.asp

Scope of the QAA review

QAA conducted a full Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) of higher education provision at SRUC. The Part 1 visit took place on 12 and 13 March 2014 and the Part 2 visit was in the week beginning 28 April 2014. The ELIR took account of the role of Education Scotland in reviewing and reporting on the student experience at SRUC. The scope of ELIR includes consideration of academic standards and the student learning experience with areas of enquiry being grouped around six main topics:

- institutional context and strategic framework
- enhancing the student learning experience
- enhancement in learning and teaching
- academic standards
- self-evaluation and management of information
- collaborative activity.

Further information about the ELIR review method is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review

The full QAA review report is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005700

About Scotland's Rural College

SRUC, the legal title for the institution, was formed on 1 October 2012 from the merger of four 'legacy colleges' - Barony, Elmwood, Oatridge and The Scottish Agricultural College (SAC). SRUC indicated that the merger has created an integrated institution delivering tertiary education, research and consultancy to serve a wide range of stakeholders in agriculture, land and the rural sector.

SRUC is a designated higher education institution and is recognised by the Scottish Funding Council as a Small Specialist Institution. SRUC also receives funding from the Scottish Government Rural and Environmental Science and Analytical Services Division for research and consulting activity. It has close links with industry across all of its education, research and consulting activities.

SRUC operates its main education activities from six campuses including four education farms: Aberdeen, Ayr, Barony (nine miles from Dumfries), Edinburgh, Elmwood (in Cupar, Fife) and Oatridge (in Ecclesmachan, West Lothian). Research activity is focused primarily at the Edinburgh campus (with additional facilities at the Bush Estate, including the Roslin Institute Building shared with the University of Edinburgh), with other activity at a number of locations including the Aberdeen and Ayr (Auchincruive) campuses, and the four research farms SRUC operates. Consultancy activity is delivered through a network of 26 consultancy offices spread across Scotland and northern England and eight veterinary disease surveillance centres in Scotland.

SRUC does not have its own degree awarding powers. Most of SRUC's taught degree programmes are validated by the University of Glasgow under an accreditation agreement and, since 2010, the institution has had a similar accreditation agreement with the University of Edinburgh. SRUC has a number of postgraduate research students with the degrees being awarded by eight different universities, including Glasgow and Edinburgh. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) accredits the majority of Higher National, National Certificate and Scottish Vocational Qualification awards.

In March 2014, SRUC announced its intention to explore a closer 'strategic alignment' with the University of Edinburgh.

Student population

In 2013-14, SRUC had a total higher education student population of 1,600 students (headcount or 1,486 full-time equivalent), studying at SCQF levels 7-11, of whom 72 were taught postgraduates. Additionally, there were 79 postgraduate research students.

Around half of the SRUC education provision is at further education (FE) level (SCQF levels 3-6). In 2012-13, 1,048 students attended full-time FE level programmes and 2,730 students attended part-time FE level programmes. In the same year, the College's contracted level of activity from SFC for non-advanced land-based programmes was 32,953 Weighted Student Units of Measurement (WSUMs).

Overarching judgements about Scotland's Rural College

Both Education Scotland and QAA found that SRUC has **effective** arrangements for maintaining and enhancing the student learning experience. Differences in the wording of the overarching judgements relate to differences in the scope and methods of review used by Education Scotland and QAA.

The overarching judgements for the two reviews are set out as follows.

Education Scotland review

SRUC has **effective** arrangements to maintain and enhance the quality of its provision in relation to:

- learner progress, outcomes and achievement
- learning and teaching processes
- learners enhancing their own learning
- leadership for learning and teaching.

This judgement indicates that the College has in place **effective** arrangements to maintain and enhance the quality of its provision and outcomes for learners and other stakeholders in relation to these themes.

QAA review

SRUC has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience. These arrangements are likely to continue to be effective in the future. In order for SRUC to meet its strategic intentions it should, **as a matter of priority**, ensure there is academic dialogue and critical reflection taking place systematically and regularly at programme, department and, in particular, institution level.

This judgement means SRUC, overall, has arrangements for securing academic standards and for enhancing the quality of the student experience. In order to further secure these arrangements, SRUC has been asked, as a matter of priority, to increase the regularity and constructively critical nature of academic debate that should support decision-making across the institution.

Areas of positive practice

Both the Education Scotland and QAA reviews identified positive practice at SRUC. The areas identified in each report are set out here around a number of common themes. The stylistic differences in the text below reflect differences in the review methods and reporting styles.

1. Successful management of merger and creation of a genuinely tertiary institution

Education Scotland

- Education Division managers provide effective and inclusive leadership and work well together to direct and support teaching departments to provide high quality learning experiences for FE learners.
- Effective collaboration between Education Division managers, heads of teaching departments, programme leaders and managers in other divisions is providing opportunities for FE learners to benefit from multi-campus resources and wider SRUC activities, including research and consultancy.

QAA review

- **Commitment and progress towards creating a tertiary institution** - SRUC has adopted an approach to creating a tertiary institution which is characterised by consultation with staff and a genuine willingness to listen and learn from good practice in each of the former institutions. SRUC has developed four key education strategies which have the clear potential to integrate activities and educational opportunities across the institution. SRUC has restructured to bring about integration of further and higher education provision through curriculum departments. There is improved communication and cross-working between the Education, Consultancy and Research divisions, and across campuses, which are benefitting students and staff.

2. Employability skills

Education Scotland

- The Education Scotland review identified examples of excellent practice in relation to employability at the College. These related to the opportunities learners have of accessing specialist facilities across each of the six campuses, which widen the learners' experience of the land-based industry. In addition, the arrangements the College has developed are creating parity of esteem between further education and degree level provision, providing a useful catalyst for staff across different programme levels to work together and to share and adopt effective practice.
- Almost all learners make good progress from prior learning and most gain additional qualifications required for working in land-based industries.
- The College provides good opportunities for FE learners to widen and enhance their knowledge of land-based industries.
- Learners develop a wide range of employability skills as a result of learning in a realistic working environment and through their frequent involvement with employers and industry representatives.
- FE level programmes incorporate an appropriate blend of technical and employability skills with theory and core skills components.

QAA review

- **Holistic approach to developing employability skills** - students are supported to develop vocationally relevant skills and awareness of employability, drawing on staff consultancy, professional practice and research. Student employability is also promoted through the applied nature of the curricula and the provision of work experience opportunities.

3. Student support

Education Scotland

- Most teaching staff provide learners with high-quality advice and guidance on career options and opportunities for progression.
- Learners have good access to a wide range of onsite and cross-campus resources to support learning.
- Learners make good use of feedback from teaching staff and course tutors to enhance their own learning. They use personal learning plans productively to reflect on their own learning in relation to their programme and industry requirements, identify skills gaps and set further objectives and targets.

QAA review

- **Network of student support** - there is a network of easily accessible and highly supportive campus-based and central learner and learning support services, as well as campus level senior tutors. At the programme level, good practice from two former arrangements, advisers of study/course tutors, is being combined to develop a year tutors arrangement, which is another positive example of SRUC drawing on experience across the legacy institutions. This support network provides students with advice on curriculum content, personal tutoring and personal development planning. Students are positive about their experience, highlighting the accessibility and responsiveness of the academic staff.

4. Learning and teaching

Education Scotland

- Teaching staff plan lessons well, establish constructive and supportive relationships with learners, and provide helpful and timely feedback to learners.
- Arrangements for FE teaching staff to engage in classroom observation are providing a helpful and useful facility for teaching staff to reflect on learning and teaching approaches and engage in professional dialogue to discuss and enhance their practice.

QAA review

- Learning and teaching was not identified as an explicit, separate area of positive practice in the QAA outcome report but the earlier comments around the development of the four key education strategies (see 'creation of the tertiary institution' above) indicate the generally positive findings in this area of activity.

5. Student engagement

Education Scotland

- Learners contribute to personalising their own learning through selecting units and topics for projects and core-skills activities. They regularly use a range of approaches to peer review their individual and group performance and draw productively on this process to further develop their technical and employability skills.

QAA review

- **Priority given to improving student representation and engagement -** SRUC has made positive progress in this area including developing a learner engagement strategy and identifying staff and structures to support its implementation. Priority has been given to the establishment of the student association and relationships at the most senior levels are positive, with evidence of student views being well received in the institution-level committees. A number of these developments are in the early stages and SRUC is encouraged to retain an active oversight of their effectiveness as they embed, listening carefully to the views of the student representatives.

Areas for development

Both the Education Scotland and QAA reviews identified areas for development. The areas for development identified in each report are set out here around a number of common themes. The stylistic differences in the text below reflect differences in the review methods and reporting styles.

6. Staff induction, mentoring and support

Education Scotland

- In a few theory classes teaching staff do not always take opportunities to engage learners in reflecting on their own learning.
- Some new college managers are not yet sufficiently familiar with the approaches and standards expected of FE level provision to support future developments fully.

QAA review

- **Induction and mentoring -** progress plans to implement an institution-wide approach to staff induction and to mentoring.

7. Progression and retention

Education Scotland

- Progression and retention was identified in the Education Scotland review as **both** an area of positive practice and an area for development. The positive practice related to withdrawal rates and successful completion rates on almost all FE programme areas being better than national sector performance levels. The area of development was that, in a few teaching departments successful completion rates on a few programmes are below the national sector performance level.

QAA review

- Partly relating to progression and retention, the QAA review identified the following area of development which would aid the transition of students from Higher National to degree provision, and potentially could also aid transition between FE and HE: **Pedagogical development and assessment practice** - progress work to harmonise programmes delivered over multiple sites and to establish a SRUC approach to curriculum design.
- As part of a wider development point about management of information, the ELIR report identified that SRUC needs to ensure it can make comparisons between programmes and within programmes, and to disaggregate data relating to students studying on different modes, for example to identify any differences in progression and completion rates.

8. Equality and diversity

Education Scotland

- The range of FE level programmes provides very good opportunities and preparation for progression to further study and employment. However, in most classes teaching staff do not take opportunities to promote equality and diversity.

QAA review

- Equality and diversity was not identified explicitly in the ELIR Outcome report but the Technical report (paragraph 22) identified the following: SRUC has a number of informal arrangements in place for supporting equality and diversity. There would be benefit in ensuring that informal arrangements, for example, relating to small class sizes, are linked systematically to the formal monitoring and review arrangements.

Areas of differentiation between reviews

In the vast majority of areas, the Education Scotland and QAA reviews have generated equivalent outcomes. In only one area, Feedback to students on assessed work, the outcomes were differentiated between FE and HE provision.

Feedback to students on assessed work

This was identified as part of an area of positive practice in the Education Scotland review and an area of development in the QAA review. The reasons for this relate to the structure and organisation of the FE curriculum, which was the focus of the Education Scotland review. Some of the difficulties identified in the QAA review (which focused on HE) related to staff not always adhering to the institutional turnaround timescales. As the ELIR Technical report indicates, most students found the feedback they received to be useful, suggesting the issue was with timing rather than the quality of the feedback.

Education Scotland

- Teaching staff plan lessons well, establish constructive and supportive relationships with learners and provide helpful and timely feedback to learners.

QAA review

- In the QAA review, feedback to students on assessment was identified as part of a development point relating to assessment policy and practice more generally: as part of its planned work to improve assessment and feedback policy and practice, ensure there is greater consistency in the content and layout of programme handbooks and module descriptors, particularly with regard to the information provided on the nature and submission dates of assessments, and to ensure that all staff are familiar with and fully apply SRUC assessment practices.

Additional areas for development identified by QAA

The QAA review resulted in a greater number of areas for development, in large part due to the broader scope of the review. As outlined on page 1 of this report, Education Scotland conducted a bespoke review at SRUC focusing on particular themes only. The additional areas for development highlighted in the QAA review were:

- **Institutional oversight and academic leadership** - as a matter of priority, establish regular and systematic arrangements to ensure there is institutional oversight of the conduct and outcomes of key quality processes, such as annual programme monitoring, external examiner reports and student feedback. This should ensure that processes are carried out as intended, avoiding over-reliance on individuals, and that the outcomes of the processes are evaluated critically within programme, departmental and institutional level committees, drawing on the contributions of a wide range of academic staff and managers. Related to this, SRUC should ensure there is strong academic leadership, particularly at the institutional level, and that academic dialogue and debate take place at all levels.
- **Management of information** - ensure the data being collected is valid and reliable, following work to integrate legacy data management systems. SRUC needs to ensure it can make comparisons between programmes and within programmes, and to disaggregate data relating to students studying on different modes, for example, to identify any differences in progression and completion rates.

In addition, SRUC needs to use the information set for comparison against national norms and to inform decision-making, policy and practice at institutional, department and programme levels.

- **Mapping to the UK Quality Code** - complete the detailed mapping of policy and practice to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, and progress with an action plan to address those areas in which SRUC is not fully in alignment. This mapping should be overseen by an institution-level academic committee and used to inform and support developments across SRUC, including the design and implementation of quality arrangements.
- **Specification of quality assurance processes** - prioritise the specification of its quality processes and the completion of the Education Manual which sets these out. SRUC should complete the Education Manual by December 2014 as intended to avoid a lack of clarity and possible confusion by staff around their involvement with the quality assurance processes.
- **Pedagogical development and assessment practice** - progress work to harmonise programmes delivered over multiple sites and to establish a SRUC approach to curriculum design.
- **Formal agreements and strategy for collaborative activity** - ensure current formal written agreements are in place for all collaborative activity in order that students, SRUC and partner organisations are clear about the nature of the agreement and the expectations associated with it. SRUC collaborates with a wide range of partners for a variety of purposes and intends to increase the number of its collaborations. There is evidence of these collaborative arrangements adding value for the students and staff. There would be considerable benefit in establishing a strategic SRUC approach to collaboration in all of its forms and clarifying where in the institutional structure oversight of collaborative arrangements sits. This should include oversight of arrangements relating to awards at all levels.

What happens next?

Education Scotland and QAA Scotland have detailed arrangements for following up the outcomes of reviews. These are set out in the respective reports on SRUC available at:

Education Scotland report:

www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/reports/othersectors/collegereviews/SRUCScotlandsRuralCollege.asp

QAA report:

www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005700

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