

Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Scotland's Rural College

Technical Report

March 2014

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About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

A dedicated page of the QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in Scotland and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.¹ You can also find more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.²

Further details about the enhancement-led approach can be found in an accompanying [ELIR information document](#),³ including an overview of the review method, definitions of the judgement categories, and explanations of follow-up action. It also contains information on the Scottish Funding Council's response to ELIR judgements.

About this review

This is the Technical Report of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC). The review took place as follows: Part 1 visit on 12 and 13 March 2014 and Part 2 visit on 28 April-2 May 2014. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Professor Peter Bush (Academic Reviewer)
- Pat Devlin (Academic Reviewer)
- Dr Abigail Hind (Academic Reviewer)
- Gill Troup (International Reviewer)
- Louise Cascarino (Student Reviewer)
- Peter Watson (Coordinating Reviewer)

In advance of the review visits, SRUC submitted a self-evaluative document (the Reflective Analysis) and an advance information set, comprising a range of materials about the institution's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards. In addition, SRUC submitted a case study: the Development of a Single Students' Association for SRUC.

About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers an overarching judgement on the current and likely future effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for managing academic standards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience.

The overarching judgement can be found on page 3, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

ELIR Technical Reports are intended primarily for the institution which hosted the review, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports which identify findings across several institutions.

¹ Further information about the ELIR method: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review

² Further information about QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus

³ ELIR information document: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=61

Technical Reports set out the ELIR team's view under each of the report headings. Shorter Outcome Reports are provided which set out the main findings of the ELIR for a wider audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.⁴

⁴ Outcome Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005700

Overarching judgement about Scotland's Rural College

Scotland's Rural College (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.

1 Institutional context and strategic framework

1.1 Key features of the institution's context and mission

1 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 (SFC) as a Small Specialist Institution. SRUC also receives funding from the Scottish Government Rural and Environmental Science and Analytical Services Division (RESAS) for research and consulting activity. It has close links with industry across all of its education, research and consulting activities.

2 SRUC operates its main education activities from six campuses:

- Aberdeen - at the Craibstone Estate five miles from the city centre
- Ayr - at the Riverside Campus shared with the University of the West of Scotland
- Barony - at Parkgate nine miles from Dumfries
- Edinburgh - on the science campus of the University of Edinburgh
- Elmwood - in Cupar, Fife
- Oatridge - at Ecclesmachan, West Lothian.

3 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 education farms. SRUC operates four research farms and four education farms. 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.

4 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 currently contributes to six University of Edinburgh MSc programmes. 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. SRUC has acknowledged the

complexity of having to satisfy the requirements of multiple awarding bodies, and this is a factor in SRUC's aspiration to apply for its own degree awarding powers.

5 In March 2014, SRUC announced its intention to explore a closer 'strategic alignment' with the University of Edinburgh. Understandably, given the timing, it was not clear during the ELIR visits what the nature of the enhanced collaboration would entail. The ELIR team was assured that there is a strong commitment across the SRUC leadership team to continue to establish a genuinely tertiary institution, with a distinctive mission and values.

6 As a consequence of merger, SRUC is going through a period of rapid change and reorganisation. The ELIR team recognised the complex nature of SRUC which, as a small specialist institution, has to address a wide range of issues and manage change with less access to expertise and resources than much larger institutions. The leadership team is faced with the challenge of maintaining the quality of core business while ensuring that it has the capacity to implement its change programme. The geographical spread of the institution's work across Scotland adds to the complexity of implementing and managing change.

7 In line with the ELIR method, SRUC identified areas it wished the ELIR team to focus on during the review. These were: cross-divisional integration; the institution's preparedness for making a degree awarding powers application; and the current approach to change management and the curriculum planning process.

8 The ELIR team heard evidence of the positive impact of cross-divisional working on staff and student opportunities. Cross-membership of various institutional groups, including the Academic Board and Research Board, are likely to support research-teaching linkages. There are many positive examples of cross-divisional working, learning from previous practice and consulting with staff and students in the management of significant change. In relation to degree awarding powers, the ELIR team considered that SRUC is some time away from being able to demonstrate that it can meet the criteria. Key areas for development include: the implementation and embedding of institutional strategies, policies and processes; the effective management of data including that relating to student progression and achievement; and a clear demonstration that the institution is meeting all of the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). Further details on each of these areas can be found throughout this report.

1.2 Strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching

9 At the time of the current ELIR, SRUC was undertaking considerable work to develop a strategic and coherent approach to the enhancement of learning and teaching. The ELIR team saw evidence of a systematic approach to linking institutional priorities with department processes including business and quality enhancement planning.

10 In December 2012, SRUC developed its Strategic Plan for 2013-18 and, at the time of the current ELIR, the Group Board had recently endorsed the associated implementation plan. Supporting Divisional and Knowledge Transfer and Exchange plans were in place and new Estates and International strategies were being developed in 2014.

11 Positive progress had been made in relation to the development of the SRUC education vision and strategy through a short-life working group. Four interrelated strategies were in development covering portfolio development, portfolio delivery, learner engagement and learner support. There had been some slippage from the original intended implementation date as a result of SRUC's decision to delay finalising the strategies to

ensure sufficient time for further consultation with staff and students. The ELIR team considered this was a constructive decision, to facilitate wider engagement with the strategies and to ensure the strategic approach would build on existing good practice within the various legacy colleges. Overall, the team considered it was an example of SRUC using the merger process to create a genuinely tertiary institution.

12 Flexible entry and seamless progression are identified as defining characteristics of SRUC and the institution is committed to improving the number and range of such opportunities for learners. In an effort to maximise opportunity and progression, SRUC has made the strategic decision to develop fully integrated tertiary provision, and has consequently not separated the organisational structures for further and higher education. The six academic departments in the Education Division were established in June 2013 and heads of department were appointed from across the legacy colleges. The departments are structured to have a subject focus across all further and higher education provision with the strategic intention of tertiary integration. There is an Assistant Principal for Further Education and an Assistant Principal for Higher Education who both have line management responsibility of colleagues in the curriculum departments. The Assistant Principals meet informally to coordinate activities and report formally to the Academic Board.

13 SRUC is currently undertaking a curriculum review of its taught programmes to ensure alignment with the institution's four strategies (see paragraph 11) and to inform the development of department business plans. The ELIR team saw clear evidence of constructive reflection on curriculum development, for example there was debate and deliberation around the future structure of the undergraduate curriculum and, specifically, the extent to which SRUC will continue to offer Higher National awards as part of that curriculum in all cases (see paragraphs 24 and 82). This is the form of academic debate that SRUC should ensure it is able to facilitate and encourage at all levels.

14 At the time of the current ELIR, SRUC was still principally operating under the learning and teaching policies and procedures of the legacy colleges. Exceptions to this included admissions processes, student financial hardship support and the establishment of the cross-institutional Students' Association and student representation mechanisms. A new Education Manual was under development which would align to the four SRUC strategies (see paragraphs 83, 108 and 113).

1.3 Effectiveness of the approach to implementing strategies

15 At this stage in the development of the education strategies, it is not possible for the ELIR team to reach a clear view on the effectiveness of their implementation. SRUC has a clear overarching Strategic Plan, which the academic departments are drawing on in the development of their business and quality enhancement plans. Full implementation of the four education strategies and the associated Education Manual is not planned until 2014-15. While the extent of consultation with staff is positive and to be encouraged, a challenge for SRUC is the pace at which it can take forward these developments and, in particular, the implementation of the draft education strategies to develop an institution-wide quality culture and approach. This should be addressed as a matter of priority.

16 The new SRUC governance and strategic planning processes have been developed in the context of the 2010 ELIR report on the Scottish Agriculture College (SAC), which indicated the need for closer linkages between the bottom-up culture of enhancement and SAC's strategic priorities for quality enhancement. There is initial evidence that the SRUC overall approach is likely to address this.

17 SRUC recognises that, although it has established appropriate structures for governance and strategic oversight of academic activities, the roles of the new Academic Board, the Education Board and the Research Board are still developing. SRUC intends to revisit the board roles to consider their effectiveness as part of a post-merger review. The ELIR team considered that the extent to which these deliberative structures operate effectively and become embedded would provide a useful indicator of the institution's growing maturity (see paragraph 111).

2 Enhancing the student learning experience

2.1 Composition and key trends in the student population, including typical routes into and through the institution

18 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 on one of three taught postgraduate programmes. Additionally, there were 79 postgraduate research students. Of the 1,600 students on taught higher education programmes, 250 were studying part-time distance learning programmes; this included all of the taught postgraduate student population. In the same year, SRUC had 3,122 further education students, of whom 724 were studying full-time.

19 The number of students studying at undergraduate level has increased by 23 per cent over a five year period, although part-time student numbers have declined. The SRUC Strategic Plan 2013-18 sets out an ambition to increase postgraduate research enrolments by 100 per cent and taught postgraduate enrolment by 75 per cent, building on a five-year growth of 31 per cent in research student numbers and stability in taught postgraduate enrolments. The 2013-14 Outcome Agreement with SFC indicates that SRUC intended to enrol 1,493 full-time equivalents in 2013-14, of whom 53 are either overseas or from the rest of the UK (rUK). SRUC has an ambition to increase the number of overseas and rUK students.

20 A high proportion of students starting degree-level study enter with advanced standing, with progression routes from Higher National awards offered by SRUC itself and also through agreements with further education colleges. Not all curriculum areas have internal progression routes to degree-level study and this has been identified as an area for improvement, through a national strategy for land-based education and training in Scotland. There are plans to increase the proportion of students who progress from Higher National awards to degree-level study. In the former Scottish Agricultural College (SAC), 80 per cent of Higher National Diploma award holders progressed to year three of a degree programme in 2012-13, compared with 91 per cent of those who originally enrolled on a degree programme. Of note are the high numbers of students who elect to complete their studies with a General Degree rather than progressing to Honours; this comprised 40 per cent of students in 2011-12. As part of SRUC considering its undergraduate curriculum structure, it intends to improve the proportion of students who progress from SCQF level 9 to 10.

21 Since the merger, SRUC has been working towards strengthening the use of a consistent data set across its six campuses to inform review and planning, including benchmarking against internal and sector norms. The ELIR team learned that the harmonisation of student data into a single management information system was scheduled for completion later in 2014. The team considered that the oversight of student data, notably in relation to student success, could be strengthened. While student progression data was considered at individual programme level, there was limited evidence of consideration at institutional level to inform admissions, curriculum and student support arrangements (see paragraphs 58, 115 and 128).

2.2 Supporting equality and diversity in the student population

22 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. In addition, linked to wider efforts to improve data management, there would be considerable benefit in SRUC disaggregating data for different student groups to identify any differences in progression and completion rates.

23 At the time of the current ELIR, SRUC's approach to equality and diversity, covering protected characteristics, was based on the existing arrangements in place at the legacy colleges. A cross-SRUC team has been in existence since June 2012, although, more recently, responsibility for supporting equality and diversity in the student population has been incorporated into the terms of reference for the newly-created Student Experience Committee, a sub-committee of the Academic Board.

24 Notable features of the student population include relatively high levels of disabled students (in common with other specialist land-based institutions) and the significant number of students who enter their degree programme with advanced standing, including those who enter from another campus or another college. Support arrangements for students entering with advanced standing are under consideration as part of work relating to the four education strategies (see paragraph 11). SRUC has a strategic intention to facilitate progression across the SCQF levels and this has involved giving detailed consideration to the curriculum and assessment fit between HNC and HND awards and the subsequent levels of an undergraduate degree. The ELIR team heard from staff and students that the Higher National awards, notably the approach to assessment, were not always a good preparation for degree-level work. This being the case, the team would encourage SRUC, as part of its curriculum development and delivery work, to continue seeking an appropriate solution to aid student transition and achievement, negotiating the position as appropriate with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (see paragraph 82).

25 While small class sizes mean that SRUC staff can provide personalised support to students, the ELIR team heard that there is work in progress to improve the consistency of support provided across campuses to specific student groups, particularly for those entering with a disability. SRUC also indicated that small cohort sizes can make it challenging to undertake meaningful statistical analyses of progression or achievement by student characteristics. The ELIR team noted that the annual quality enhancement plan template used in the legacy further education college campuses included a prompt to consider how student characteristics had impacted on student success. In some curriculum areas, such as sport and tourism, students are able to study awards by different modes of attendance. This is a valuable feature of curriculum delivery, but the current annual review process is not capable of distinguishing between student data for different modes of study. As it develops an institution-wide approach to annual review, SRUC should ensure that systematic consideration is given to success and retention data to enable managers to identify relative success by different student characteristics, including disability and mode of study at every level.

26 Helpful pre-entry guides provide EU and other international applicants with pre-arrival information. Specialist support is available for international students at one campus on one specific programme, and all international students are able to access the support services provided by the wider learner and learning support teams. The ELIR team considered that, if international student numbers are increased as intended, SRUC will need to ensure it has systematic arrangements for identifying additional specialist support to meet the particular needs of international students at all campuses.

27 The ELIR team met students from one of SRUC's eight part-time, distance learning programmes, the MSc in Organic Farming, which was the first of the distance learning programmes to be developed. The students confirmed that the support and curriculum delivery arrangements were extremely good. SRUC had submitted the student support arrangements as an Enhancement Theme case study in 2013, although it was not clear whether these arrangements had been translated into good practice in other programme areas. The arrangements included students being supported through the virtual learning environment (VLE) with resources and online evening meetings, up to four short campus-based study periods a year, formative and summative assessment opportunities, and access to hard-copy resources through a postal delivery service. The team considered that these arrangements were particularly helpful in supporting part-time students to succeed and would encourage their wider adoption across SRUC, especially in view of aspirations to increase numbers on distance and blended learning programmes.

28 In discussions with the ELIR team, students confirmed that small class sizes and the accessibility of staff (for example through open door practices) result in positive relationships with staff at the campus level, including those with pastoral support roles. The team would endorse the SRUC intention to keep under review the balance between campus-based, general support and institution-wide, specialist support to ensure the complex needs of those students most in need can continue to be met across all campuses (see paragraph 37).

2.3 Engaging and supporting students in their learning

29 Overall, SRUC has an effective approach to engaging and supporting students in their learning with a number of further developments planned or in progress. SRUC has developed a Learner Engagement Strategy which aims to be inclusive of all learners and covers all taught, distance learning and work-based provision offered by the College including all modes of delivery and courses offered on a commercial basis. The Strategy seeks to: proactively develop students as reflective learners which not only enhances their learning at SRUC but also beyond; improve students' employability; support the development of broader capacities and graduate attributes; and recognise and value the contribution learners can make to enhancing the quality of provision and to the broader life and work of SRUC.

Student representation

30 As was evident from the case study submitted for ELIR, SRUC has made significant progress in establishing a single Students' Association (SRUCSA) to replace the very different arrangements that were in place in each of the legacy colleges. SRUC and SRUCSA have worked together, with the support of student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) and NUS (Scotland) and have taken external reference points into account in devising the student representative arrangements, for example the relevant chapter of the Quality Code. There are two full-time sabbatical officers (a President and Vice-President), supported by six campus officers who receive a bursary in recognition of their contributions. In addition, there is a part-time student officer to represent postgraduate students. Senior SRUC staff indicated a willingness to continue to keep under review the representative arrangements and the support available for SRUCSA, which is positive.

31 At the time of the current ELIR, student representation at programme level remained as it was pre-merger. Class representatives are elected by peers and this process is facilitated by year/course tutors within timetabled activities. There are two learner engagement officers one of whom has responsibility, along with the SRUCSA campus officers, for facilitating the class representative system. A variety of training and development opportunities are available to all SRUCSA executive members and class representatives through NUS and sparqs. The ELIR team learned that work would begin in spring 2014 to

develop a Student Partnership Agreement, as part of SRUCSA's business planning agenda. It was proposed that this would begin part of the annual responsibility of the Student Experience Sub-Committee.

32 In discussion with the ELIR team, student representatives highlighted a number of challenges that had been experienced in establishing SRUCSA and the wider representative structures. At times SRUCSA and SRUC staff at officer level had different priorities and this had led to tensions. Students identified a need for staff support within SRUCSA itself, rather than relying on SRUC officer support. This is something SRUC could consider as it seeks to embed the representative arrangements. It was evident from discussions with students and staff that student engagement in the committee structure and related activities is valued. Student views are actively sought and appreciated by senior colleagues.

33 Both SRUC and the ELIR team recognise the significance of implementing a multi-campus Student Association and representative system. The team considers that positive progress has been made and would encourage SRUC to keep their effectiveness under review as they embed, continuing to listen carefully to the views of the elected student representatives.

Student feedback

34 SRUC participated in the National Student Survey (NSS) for the first time in 2012-13. Due to the scope of the NSS, not all SRUC students are eligible to participate. The ELIR team learned that a working group had been established to consider the results and departments were considering these as part of the evaluation in preparing Quality Enhancement Plans. An action plan had been approved by the Education Board in September 2013 and this was made available to students via the VLE. SRUC has identified targets for future NSS participation rates and overall satisfaction levels with the aim of matching the Scottish average in both by 2015.

35 SRUC has internal arrangements for students to provide feedback on their experience, for example through the student representative structure and student liaison committees. Discussions with students during the ELIR visits suggested that the student liaison committee meetings could operate more effectively. Students reported a tendency for the same issues to be raised repeatedly, minutes not always being available and a lack of clarity around whether or how matters had been resolved. SRUC acknowledged that these views are confirmed by the NSS outcomes and were also raised during focus group discussions with students carried out as part of preparing for ELIR. The Reflective Analysis stated the SRUC view that the issue concerns the systematic harnessing of feedback, agreeing action and reporting this back to students. As one way of addressing this, SRUC indicated that it intends to introduce a 'you said, we did' approach to reporting on student liaison committees. The ELIR team would endorse this analysis and encourages SRUC to keep the matter under review.

36 In common with many institutions, the legacy colleges have benefitted from close professional relationships between staff and students, facilitating and encouraging continual informal feedback. It was evident from the ELIR team's discussions with staff and students that this continues to be the case following merger, and that student views are valued and listened to through this route.

Student support

37 Through the legacy colleges two systems operated for providing student support. The adviser of studies role operated at the former SAC and provided the interface between students and the pastoral support services. At the Barony, Elmwood and Oatridge campuses this role is known as course tutor. Regular meetings are held between students and these members of staff. As part of a personal development plan (PDP) project, a common agenda

was developed for the meetings between students and their adviser of studies to encourage discussion on exploring progression opportunities, and provide curriculum and pastoral support collectively with the aim of embedding graduate attributes including employability. At the Barony, Elmwood and Oatridge campuses, PDPs are developed and monitored jointly by the course tutor and students. At those campuses, personal learning support plans are compiled by Learning Support staff to record additional support requirements, arrange support and monitor progress. During the ELIR visits, the ELIR team learned that benefits from the two legacy systems were being combined to produce a SRUC year tutor scheme. The team considered this was a positive example of the institution drawing on good practice across the legacy colleges to the benefit of students.

38 In preparation for ELIR, students confirmed that they were very satisfied with their academic and pastoral support, indicating that the open door policy of staff provided a timely and accessible service. These positive views were echoed in meetings with students during the ELIR visits.

Video conferencing

39 SRUC has identified improvements in the use and provision of video conferencing (VC) as an area for development following student feedback including the outcomes of the NSS. SRUC is progressing this through a cross-institutional project led by a VC steering group. In addition, training workshops were provided across all six campuses in October 2013 and staff who use VC on a regular basis have the opportunity to participate in a module delivered by the University of the Highlands and Islands: Learning and Teaching with VC. The ELIR team recognised this as a positive example of SRUC responding to student feedback and sharing positive practice across the organisation.

Virtual learning environment

40 A new SRUC virtual learning environment (VLE) is under development, led by a VLE Development Group. In the meantime, each of the legacy colleges has retained its existing VLE, combined with the corresponding e-portfolio applications. Focus groups were held on each campus to solicit staff and students views. This, and other sources of feedback including online fora, was used to develop a specification based on a clear campus identity within an overall SRUC theme. The new VLE is planned to come online in June 2014, in time for academic session 2014-15.

41 In discussions during the ELIR visits, students indicated that the existing VLE was satisfactory but there was a lack of clarity and consistency on how the VLE is used by staff and students across different programmes, for example in relation to online submission of assessments, and the availability of materials. Currently no minimum expectations or guidelines for the use of the VLE in modules and programmes are in place for SRUC, despite this being raised in the 2010 ELIR report on SAC and included in the ELIR follow-up report. SRUC is encouraged to implement VLE guidelines as intended, not to constrain the creative use of the VLE, but to ensure that students are not disadvantaged, for example by differing assessment submission arrangements.

Feedback on assessment

42 SRUC identified assessment, with appropriate and timely feedback, as important in encouraging student engagement. It also expressed the intention to continue working on this area, following the NSS outcomes in addition to the outcomes of the institution's own subject review and annual programme review processes.

43 The ELIR team noted SRUC's intention that, at the beginning of each year, students should receive a programme handbook which includes detailed assessment regulations, and at the start of each module students should receive an assessment schedule detailing the nature of the assessment and its timing. The handbooks viewed by the team varied in detail

and content, and not all provided an explanation of the assessment regime. Students who met the team had varied experiences of being notified about assessment briefs and submission dates: some students explained that programme handbooks and module descriptors were helpful in this regard, while others had received submission information close to the submission date. The team also learned of a range of practices operating across campuses in relation to the submission of assessed work, including online and manual submission to various individuals, such as the course/module tutor or to a central point.

44 In discussions with the team, staff recognised the benefit of advanced assessment scheduling, and the management of it, to reduce the 'bunching' of assessment submissions wherever possible. However, a variety of views was expressed by staff on the need to announce submission dates within the module descriptors, and different applications of the moderation arrangements were also identified, although all staff acknowledged the usual requirement to return assessed work to students with feedback within four weeks. A number of students indicated that their assessments had been returned on time, while others had experienced considerable delays. All of the students reported that the feedback they received was usually very helpful and that staff were available to provide further detailed feedback as necessary.

45 As part of its planned work to improve assessment and feedback policy and practice, SRUC is encouraged to 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.

2.4 Approaches to promoting the development of graduate attributes, including employability

46 SRUC has an effective approach to the development of employability skills and opportunities.

47 Employability is one of SRUC's five graduate attributes which were developed as an outcome of the former SAC's engagement with the Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century. Since the formation of SRUC, these graduate attributes have been cascaded to staff and students across all campuses with the intention of raising awareness and seeking feedback on their relevance to the new, merged organisation. The Reflective Analysis indicated that, based on staff and student focus groups during ELIR preparation, there is a general acceptance that the graduate attributes are fit-for-purpose across SRUC. SRUC has also identified the need to continue embedding the graduate attributes in the curriculum, for example explicitly referencing them in module descriptors and in the standard agenda for student meetings with their adviser of studies. In discussions during ELIR, students demonstrated limited awareness of the graduate attribute terminology but, once the underlying principles were explained, were able to identify examples of having engaged in activities and experiences that indicated the attributes were, in fact, forming part of the student experience. There would be benefit in SRUC developing with its students a common language for understanding and promoting the concept of graduate attributes.

48 The former SAC had an Employability Strategy which, the Reflective Analysis stated, is in the process of being revised as part of the development of the SRUC education strategies, policies and procedures. SRUC is continuing the SAC practice of holding an annual careers convention for students. The convention is evaluated carefully and, although the formal student feedback was mostly positive, a number of areas for development have been highlighted for future events, demonstrating responsiveness on the part of the institution.

49 SRUC does not have a central careers guidance service and acknowledged that current provision in this area varies across the different campuses. There would be benefit in SRUC continuing to explore options for providing generic careers support to students and keeping this under review to ensure the effectiveness of arrangements for students on all campuses.

50 SRUC emphasised its strong and specific vocational links, with significant employer engagement in the curriculum and wider activity including the work of the Consulting Division. Programme teams have close links with industry throughout the development of the curriculum and in delivery, for example through the involvement of guest lecturers who are based in industry. Staff are encouraged to maintain their industry knowledge and skills in a variety of ways including through the Return to Industry programme which is part of the staff development fund. Current practice (from the former SAC) is for a member of the programme team to take responsibility for industry liaison and providing career advice to students. In the new curriculum structure it is proposed to establish Curriculum Advisory Panels for each department with representation from industry and the further and higher education sectors. In addition, the procedures for annual programme review, institution-led subject review and revalidation provide systematic checks on professional relevance. It was evident from discussions during the ELIR that students are very aware of these industry and employer links, including through research and consultancy undertaken by staff who teach them.

2.5 Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience

51 Overall, SRUC has effective arrangements for enhancing the student learning experience.

52 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 the former SAC and further education colleges is being combined to develop a year tutors' arrangement, which is a positive example of SRUC drawing on experience across the legacy colleges. 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. The ELIR team also affirms SRUC's plans to keep the learner support arrangements under review, drawing on the expertise and practices in each of the six campuses.

53 Students are supported to develop vocationally relevant skills and understanding of their employability, drawing on staff consultancy, professional practice and research, applied curricula and the provision of work experience opportunities. This holistic approach to the development of employability skills is a positive feature of the SRUC arrangements.

54 SRUC has made positive progress in prioritising student representation and engagement, 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, including through the Student Experience Sub-Committee of Academic Board.

55 The ELIR team supports the SRUC plans to improve the transition arrangements, including student support, for students progressing from Higher National awards to year three of degree programmes. In doing so, SRUC should establish its own approach to curriculum design to the benefit of its students and stakeholders.

56 As part of its planned work to improve assessment and feedback policy and practice, SRUC is encouraged to 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.

57 SRUC is planning for more consistent and extended use of the VLE to support student learning once a single VLE platform has been introduced for 2014-15. SRUC is encouraged to give increased attention to the ways in which the delivery of programmes offered over multiple sites can be harmonised, linked to the implementation of its Portfolio Delivery Strategy. In particular, the blended learning arrangements in place to support students on the MSc in Organic Farming could be considered for wider adoption across the institution.

58 While small class sizes mean that staff are generally aware of, and responsive to, the needs of individual students, SRUC should strengthen its institutional oversight of key student data, ensuring the data being collected is valid and reliable, following work to integrate the legacy data management systems. SRUC should also ensure it can make comparisons between and within programmes to disaggregate data relating to students studying on different modes and with different characteristics to identify any differences in, for example, progression and completion rates (see paragraphs 115 and 128).

3 Enhancement in learning and teaching

3.1 Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice

59 SRUC has a variety of approaches for identifying and sharing good practice, many of which are positive and some are more embedded than others.

60 In 2011, the former SAC produced a staff development plan on the identification and dissemination of good practice which had been developed in response to the 2010 ELIR. SRUC now needs to consider how it will incorporate the plan into its new strategic approach to education and the related staff development activity (see paragraph 71)

61 SRUC has reintroduced the annual Learning and Teaching Conference, which is positive. There is also evidence of good practice being identified in the institution-led subject reviews and from external examiner reports. Annual Programme Review is used at programme level by SRUC and the 2012-13 template highlights good practice. SRUC is encouraged to ensure that its approach to Annual Programme Review continues to incorporate and follow up on the identification of good practice at institution as well as programme level.

62 The ELIR team was assured that the newly-established informal monthly meetings of department heads and the two Assistant Principals would result in opportunities for identifying and sharing good practice. The creation of quality enhancement coordinator posts in the departments is also likely to enable a systemic approach to identifying and sharing practice across the six departments both informally and through their membership of the Academic Development Committee where there is an opportunity to use the Quality Enhancement Plan template to identify areas of good practice and positive impact of quality

enhancement for institution-wide consideration.

63 The ELIR team learned of a number of other approaches including: the dissemination of departmental newsletters; sharing practice between professional support staff and academic staff through the training delivered to Senior Tutors by learner support colleagues; cross-SRUC seminars which are made available to staff and students on the VLE; and Staff Information Notes which are produced regularly by the Academic Development Manager (Further Education).

64 In addition, it is likely that the Postgraduate Committee and its sub-groups will provide the opportunity to share good practice in relation to postgraduate research student matters, for example through student members of the committee. These arrangements were still embedding at the time of the current ELIR.

3.2 Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity

65 SRUC is engaging with the national Enhancement Themes and has structures and projects identified to facilitate this. SRUC acknowledges that it has found engaging with the Themes more challenging since the merger.

66 In line with sector practice, an institutional team has been established to coordinate, and promote staff and student engagement with, the Enhancement Theme activities. This team is chaired by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Manager for higher education, who also represents SRUC on the national Theme Steering Committee. The team includes staff and student representation from all three SRUC divisions. In the former SAC, Divisional Management Team and Education Management Group meetings regularly considered progress with Theme activities. Meeting minutes are archived on the SRUC intranet site for wider dissemination. In future, the Themes will be considered by the SRUC Academic Board.

67 SRUC has identified four priority areas: graduate attributes; assessment and feedback; support for transition or progression; and increasing engagement with quality enhancement and associated Enhancement Theme activity across the six campuses. Funding in 2013-14 has been directed at four pedagogic research projects linked to the Enhancement Themes, which is positive, but the ELIR team considered it was too early to evaluate the potential impact of this work.

68 SRUC has acknowledged that engaging large numbers of staff and students with the Themes has been more challenging since the merger. A need for greater engagement by teaching staff with the Themes has also been identified in the most recent institution-led subject review. The ELIR team would support moves to promote greater engagement. The team noted the limited awareness of Themes-related initiatives among the groups of students it met. The team would support SRUC's plan to disseminate its own Theme case studies through cross-SRUC staff development days.

3.3 Engaging and supporting staff

69 SRUC is currently preparing its strategic approach to staff development as part of the wider development of its education strategies. A range of activities to engage and develop staff are in place, and SRUC has recognised the need to introduce an institution-wide approach to staff induction.

70 SRUC recognises that, post-merger, it is still working to support more effective prioritisation of staff development on a cross-college basis, building on strategic documents

from the legacy colleges, notably SAC. This means that the specific expectations of, and support for, staff currently vary across the campuses.

71 The Education Division's Strategic Plan for 2013-14 includes the aim of linking staff development to changing business, market and staff needs. Departmental business plans have translated this into fairly broad-based activities. The ELIR team heard that departmental quality enhancement plans, when completed, will set out the annual priorities for staff development, based on annual programme reviews and staff performance management reviews. While there had been slippage in the production of these plans, due to the organisational changes associated with the merger, the prioritisation of specific staff development activities was evident in the one plan available at the time of the current ELIR. The template also provides a mechanism by which progress with all action points, including those related to staff development, is reviewed in the following year's plan.

72 The ELIR team learned that key strategic responsibility for the professional development of staff sits with a newly-appointed postholder in the HR team. SRUC confirmed that the operational management of professional development for staff involved in learning and teaching sits with the Academic Development team and in particular the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Managers (Further Education and Higher Education).

73 The ELIR team heard of a range of activities in place at each of the campuses, including: externally-accredited programmes for new teaching and training staff; pedagogic research projects; performance development reviews; a pilot mentoring scheme for new staff; and peer observation and review. Discipline-related development is encouraged in a number of ways including through participation in cross-division knowledge transfer and exchange activities and project work within the Rural Policy Centre. Staff are encouraged to apply for external and SRUC trust funds to support overseas staff development opportunities, and the SRUC Return to Industry programme, which encourages staff to update their industry knowledge and skills, is supported through the staff development fund.

74 SRUC intends to devote three days annually to cross-college staff development, including the annual Learning and Teaching Conference. The ELIR team considered that these cross-SRUC events have the potential to make a significant contribution to the arrangements for sharing good practice, including outcomes and materials associated with SRUC's engagement with the Enhancement Theme activity.

75 The ELIR team was provided with some examples of how staff development activities have impacted on the student experience, and there is likely to be benefit in SRUC considering how it will routinely evaluate the impact of the different development opportunities, to ensure that the full value of the investment is realised.

76 SRUC identified its induction arrangements as requiring more immediate attention to ensure appropriate support is in place for staff across all campuses. Based on discussions with staff and students, the ELIR team would encourage SRUC to progress with its plans in order to ensure that new staff who teach and assess students are familiar with the key institutional policies and curriculum design. The team learned of a mentoring scheme (which had been piloted in the Research Division), which is to be introduced more widely. In particular, the mentoring scheme is likely to be of value to established staff who take on new roles as a result of organisational change, as well as those who are new to the organisation.

3.4 Effectiveness of the approach to promoting good practice in learning and teaching

77 SRUC acknowledges that it does not currently have a strategic approach for promoting good practice in learning and teaching, but this is being addressed as part of the development of the four education strategies (see paragraph 11). A range of approaches and activities are in place, many of which are effective. The introduction of three days each year devoted to cross-institutional staff development for all staff is a positive initiative and provides an opportunity to strengthen the sharing of good practice in learning and teaching.

78 There are high levels of industry engagement and many examples of sharing academic development across education, research and consulting activities. This promotes ongoing updating and sharing of positive and current practice.

79 SRUC is encouraged to progress plans to implement an institution-wide approach to staff induction and to mentoring.

4 Academic standards

4.1 Approach to setting, maintaining and reviewing academic standards

Taught programmes

80 The universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow have overall responsibility for securing and maintaining the academic standards of each degree programme delivered in their name by SRUC. For undergraduate and taught postgraduate degrees, the responsibilities of SRUC and the relevant awarding institution are clearly described in detailed Memoranda of Agreement that were originally agreed with the former SAC. Overall responsibility for the academic standards of HNC and HND awards lies with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

81 The memoranda with the two universities stipulate that the overall quality arrangements for SRUC programmes should reflect those of the awarding body in relation to programme validation, re-validation, assessment, external examining and programme monitoring. SRUC is required to present a report on its programmes to the annual meeting of the Joint Accreditation Committee (Edinburgh) or the Joint Liaison Committee (Glasgow) as appropriate, with the reports and commentary included within the annual quality and standards reports received by the relevant university Senate. The two universities have devolved considerable authority to SRUC on the initial setting and monitoring of academic standards. The universities exercise their awarding body responsibilities primarily through the programme validation process, the approval and reporting arrangements of external examiners, and the assessment moderation arrangements. These, in turn, are underpinned by the SRUC academic regulatory framework, which is formally recognised by the universities. SRUC's overall approach is defined in the SRUC Education Manual which it inherited from the former SAC and which is currently undergoing review with the intention of introducing a new pan-SRUC Education Manual in 2014-15.

82 On the advice of SQA, SRUC has continued to operate four separate centres for Higher National awards (arising from the four legacy colleges). At the time of the current ELIR, SRUC was engaged in discussions with SQA to agree the arrangements for the operation of a single centre with effect from August 2014. There had been some progress in the Animal and Equine Department in harmonising the delivery of Higher National programmes that are offered over multiple sites. The ELIR team considered that SRUC should progress with the harmonisation and possible rationalisation of its Higher National delivery across all of its campuses, irrespective of the precise position in terms of operating

as a single SQA centre.

83 The ELIR team noted the consultative approach adopted by SRUC to the development of its four key education strategies (see paragraph 11). The Academic Board had expressed the view that these four strategies were likely to contribute significantly to the development of the revised Education Manual which, consequently, would be unavailable for some time. However, the team learned that these strategies would have variable impact on the content of the Manual whose development had been hindered largely by resource constraints. SRUC should prioritise the specification of its quality processes and the completion of the Education Manual which sets these out. Specifically, 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 processes (see paragraph 113).

Design, validation and institution-led subject review of programmes

84 The current Education Manual details the procedures adopted by SRUC in the approval and validation of new programmes. These procedures are in line with sector expectations and include involvement of the relevant awarding university at each stage.

85 The Institutional-led Subject Review (ILSR) process, which is also detailed in the current Education Manual, incorporates the revalidation of programmes within the subject group and takes place normally on a six-year cycle. The recently-established curriculum departments have been constructed partly to ensure that the complete departmental provision will undergo ILSR at the same time. The ELIR team noted that a new six-year cycle had been agreed by the awarding universities, involving one ILSR being conducted per year, with two reviews (Applied Sciences and Technology, and Environment and Countryside) taking place in 2014 to establish the cycle.

86 Reports and responses to validation and review activities seen by the ELIR team confirmed the commitment to include appropriate external specialists, including representation by the awarding universities, the thoroughness of panels' consideration of the self-evaluation documents, the rigour of their engagement with programme teams and the timely and comprehensive responses from programme teams. The team noted that approved validation reports are currently reported to the Divisional Management Team before submission to the relevant university Senate sub-committee. In future, SRUC intended to present these to its own Academic Board in advance of submitting them to the awarding university. The team would endorse that plan, and would also encourage SRUC to apply the same arrangement to the consideration of ILSR reports.

Annual Programme Review

87 Annual Programme Review (APR) is a self-evaluative process focusing on the maintenance of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. It is initiated by the Programme Management Team with opportunity for the whole programme team to contribute. The purposes of APR are aligned with the awarding universities' codes of practice for annual monitoring and include: to help make judgements about the academic standard of the programme; to provide evidence to support changes in the curriculum and other aspects of the learning and teaching process; and to demonstrate adherence with quality processes and evidence of quality enhancement.

88 A revised APR template was introduced for 2011-12 to focus the reports on the identification of outcomes, actions, enhancements and examples of good practice. SRUC has taken subsequent action to ensure APRs are more reflective and submitted earlier in the academic year. The ELIR team noted that the APRs from 2011 onwards were comprehensive and included sections on: employment; admissions; progression and achievement; feedback from students, staff, external examiners and verifiers, employers and

industrial interests; the external environment; progress with the previous year's action plan; identification of good practice; a self-critical appraisal; and an action plan for the forthcoming year. However, the team considered that the supporting data on admissions, progression and achievement should be improved (see paragraphs 58, 115 and 128).

89 The ELIR team learned that APRs were submitted to the SRUC Academic Development Manager (Higher Education) who prepared a composite report for the relevant awarding university. While this report was considered by the Education Management group and the Divisional Management Team in the former SAC, there was no apparent mechanism within SRUC whereby the APRs were considered collegially by the wider academic community beyond the individual programme team and, consequently, no opportunity for colleagues from other departments to take a collective view on the continuing appropriateness of the academic standards and/or the enhancement of the programmes, or to receive and disseminate good practice. SRUC would benefit from giving much broader consideration to its APR outcomes and the themes arising from that process.

90 The ELIR team learned of a particular taught postgraduate programme about which a number of issues had been raised by students and subsequently investigated by the head of department. Because an APR had not been completed for the programme, SRUC as an institution was not aware of the matters raised, how they had been addressed or what implications they might have had for academic standards and/or quality. It is possible that, in future, the departmental quality enhancement coordinators, in producing their quality enhancement plans, would be in a position to monitor a department's approach to meeting the SRUC APR requirements. The team also recognised that this was likely to have been a one-off and that, overall, the APR process was being engaged with constructively by staff.

91 In discussions with the ELIR team, staff identified the APR process as self-critical indicating that they particularly welcomed the focus on good practice. The team would encourage SRUC to consider the added value of providing programme teams with departmental and institution-wide overviews of the APR reports. In addition, SRUC should as a matter of priority provide Academic Board with an overview of the matters arising from the APR process and should also seek ways of engaging the Board in an academic debate on the institutional themes arising from the APR process (see paragraph 109).

External examining

92 The ELIR team formed the view that SRUC makes scrupulous use of external examiner reports at programme level, and should progress its intention for them to be scrutinised by the Academic Development Committee which, in turn, would provide a summary overview report to the Academic Board.

93 SRUC nominates external examiners for approval by the relevant awarding university which specifies their roles and responsibilities. SRUC provides its own External Examiner Handbook which clearly explains their remit within the College; this guidance may be supplemented with additional advice from programme leaders. External examiners communicate with programme teams through the year and at the annual board of examiners, and submit a report to both the Principal of the awarding university and to SRUC. Programme leaders are responsible for responding formally to the external examiner and additionally to show, through the APR process, how any issues have been addressed.

94 The external examiner reports considered by the ELIR team used the University of Glasgow report proforma. Responses from the Programme Leaders were comprehensive, addressing the points made in the reports.

95 The external examiner reports are currently scrutinised by the SRUC Academic Development Manager (Higher Education) and through the overview reports submitted to the

awarding universities. Currently, there is no mechanism within SRUC for all of the external examiner reports to be considered, although the ELIR team noted that SRUC intends for the Academic Development Committee to consider these in future with the Academic Development Manager (Higher Education) providing an overview report for consideration by the Academic Board.

96 Students who met the ELIR team had no knowledge of external examiner reports or the role of the examiners. SRUC should consider how it will meet the Indicator in *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code relating to making external examiner reports available to students.

Annual reports to awarding institutions

97 Both awarding universities receive an annual report from SRUC together with a summary of the comments of the relevant external examiner reports. These annual reports are considered by the relevant sub-committee of the university senates. The reports seen by the ELIR team met the specific requirements of the relevant university and, therefore, were different in layout but were comprehensive, offering overview reports of developments at SRUC, reports on academic standards, the student experience, successes and areas for improvement together with a range of detailed annexes in matters such as student data, validation schedule, new staff and reports on academic appeals and complaints. The minutes of the awarding universities' committees demonstrated a detailed and careful consideration of the reports. There would be considerable benefit in SRUC considering these annual reports, for example at its Academic Board, prior to their submission to the relevant university. This would provide a further opportunity for SRUC to develop collegial ownership of the programmes, and share in the consideration of both good practice and areas for development that are reflected in the reports (see paragraph 109).

Research degree programmes

98 There are currently 79 registered PhD students, of whom 61 (77 per cent) are registered with the University of Edinburgh, and eight (10 per cent) with the University of Glasgow. A further six universities account for the remaining 10 (13 per cent) students. SRUC has formal Memoranda of Agreement with the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, but not the remaining six universities. The Glasgow Memorandum refers to research students but not to the responsibilities of the University and SRUC in relation to postgraduate research programmes. The Edinburgh Memorandum makes no reference to postgraduate research activities but, since 2013, the University has had a requirement for a memorandum to be in place for each research student if supervision is carried out by SRUC. As a consequence of that requirement, there is a detailed Postgraduate Memorandum of Understanding between SRUC and the University's School of Mathematics which lays out the relative roles of the two organisations regarding the quality assurance of research degrees.

99 SRUC indicated that the relationship with the University of Edinburgh had been of many decades' standing and that both parties were familiar with their respective roles. Nonetheless, SRUC should ensure that formal Memoranda of Agreement are in place for each awarding university. These formal agreements should clearly state the relative roles of SRUC and the awarding university in respect of the management of, and quality assurance arrangements for, the research degree programmes, and the support for the postgraduate research students.

100 SRUC has prepared a detailed Postgraduate Research Handbook for students and staff. This makes clear that students and staff are required to follow the regulations and requirements of the awarding institution. The supervisory team will include at least one representative of the awarding institution who will offer guidance on that institution's requirements and may be the principal supervisor. The Handbook clearly spells out the

responsibilities of postgraduate research students, the individual roles of supervisory team members, arrangements for progression, submission and examination, complaints, appeals and academic misconduct. Students who met the ELIR team associated themselves closely with SRUC, were aware of the broad roles of SRUC and the awarding institution, and had at least four supervisors, one of whom was from the awarding institution. However, it did not appear that SRUC had considered the extent to which the Handbook reflected all the Indicators in *Chapter B11: Research degrees* of the Quality Code. SRUC should progress this as part of mapping its policy and practice against the Quality Code.

101 While SRUC provides some limited training in research methods, the awarding institution has the lead responsibility for research training. SRUC has negotiated the provision of research training by the University of Edinburgh for those students registered with universities that are geographically more distant. The ELIR team learned that, currently, postgraduate research students were involved in teaching, demonstrating or marking on SRUC programmes to a limited extent on the Edinburgh campus. Those students who were involved with these activities within the awarding university received some training there. As it develops its own research culture, there would be considerable benefit in SRUC considering extending its responsibilities for the provision of research training and offering opportunities for postgraduate research students to contribute to teaching, subject to the provision of appropriate training.

102 The ELIR team noted that, while SRUC monitored the progress of its individual postgraduate research students and was aware of the extent to which they met the progression requirements of the awarding institution, it experienced some difficulties in obtaining details of the outcomes of final assessment in a timely manner. SRUC had yet to develop arrangements for monitoring in detail the progression and achievements of its postgraduate research cohort across the various subject groupings because students' individual annual reports are submitted to the awarding institution. The SRUC Postgraduate Degrees Committee undertakes an annual review of research provision for each of the four research groupings which includes consideration of the research environment; the selection, admission and induction of students and their supervision, progression and review; and the development of research and other skills. Demonstrating detailed oversight of research degree programmes and the student experience would be critical for a successful research degree awarding powers application (see paragraph 8).

4.2 Management of assessment

103 While SRUC has clearly articulated principles, regulations and procedures relating to its assessment arrangements, the ELIR team found variable understanding of these among staff and differing student perceptions of their operation.

104 The current Education Manual requires assessment to be considered during the programme approval process and linked directly to the approved learning outcomes. The Manual also requires clear criteria for the volume, distribution, marking and grading of assessments. The validation, ILSR and APR reports considered by the ELIR team articulated and reflected on programme assessment arrangements (see paragraph 88).

105 The SQA Higher National assessment principles govern the assessment arrangements in the first two years of undergraduate awards offered at SRUC. In relation to the third and fourth years of study, SRUC has largely adopted the University of Glasgow Code of Assessment. The Glasgow Code explains clearly the marking scheme and grade-related criteria. It was evident from discussions during ELIR that, on the whole, students understood these. However, in discussions with staff and, particularly, students there were a number of issues raised around the scheduling of assessments and some inconsistency in the arrangements for providing feedback on assessed work

(see paragraphs 43-45). SRUC should, therefore, ensure that all staff are familiar with, and fully apply, SRUC assessment practices.

4.3 Use of external reference points in managing academic standards

106 On the whole, SRUC is making effective use of a range of external reference points, although its mapping and formal adoption of the Quality Code requires further attention (see paragraphs 120-122).

107 There is evidence in the validation and ILSR self-evaluation documents and subsequent reports, and through their endorsement by the awarding universities, that SRUC makes effective use of the SCQF and takes account of the appropriate subject benchmark statements. These reports also provide evidence that engagement with academic peers and representatives from the relevant industrial/professional bodies is adding value to the processes. Programme teams are responsible in the first instance for setting the curriculum at the appropriate academic standard. Advice is available from the Academic Development Manager and from SQA as appropriate. In discussions with the ELIR team, staff demonstrated an understanding of the SCQF levels and the relevant subject benchmark statements.

4.4 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards

108 SRUC's arrangements for securing academic standards, and their operation, for both taught and research programmes are broadly effective. On the whole they reflect sector expectations in their use of the SCQF and subject benchmark statements. SRUC should complete, by December 2014, the specification and operation of its quality processes through the production of the revised Education Manual, and should combine this work with the full mapping of its processes against all chapters of the Quality Code.

109 As a matter of priority, SRUC should ensure it has an inclusive institution-wide critical overview of the academic standards of its programmes through the scrutiny of and reflection on the outcomes of validation, institution-led subject review, annual programme review and external examiner reports. This could be achieved by developing the role of the Academic Board and its associated committees.

5 Self-evaluation and management of information

5.1 Key features of the institution's approach

110 Overall, SRUC is developing an effective approach to self-evaluation and the management of information. The institution is still in its infancy and significant change was ongoing at the time of the ELIR. Consequently, while procedures were in place for the evaluation, monitoring and review of programmes, SRUC was still in the process of establishing its approach to self-evaluation and the management of information.

111 New academic governance arrangements were implemented following the merger in October 2012. The Education Board and Research Board were established in October 2012 as sub-boards of the Group Board, with responsibility for the governance of education. A newly-formed Academic Board held its first meeting in December 2013. Students are represented on these boards. SRUC expressed confidence that appropriate governance arrangements are in place but acknowledged that work remained to be done in embedding the new governance structure and ensuring that the roles of the Boards are developed appropriately in the medium-term.

112 Rather than separate further education and higher education provision into different sub-divisions, SRUC chose to develop fully-integrated tertiary provision, with a view to maximising the opportunities for articulation and progression. Hence, six curriculum departments, in place since June 2013, deliver across both further education and higher education and across campuses. Here, too, SRUC recognised that more work is required in the short to medium-term to embed the structure and to develop a new tertiary multi-campus model of delivery.

113 The education policies and procedures in place at the time of the current ELIR were those of SRUC's four legacy colleges. This was considered to be the least risky approach to ensuring the maintenance of quality and standards in the short term given the challenges anticipated in the restructuring process following the merger. In seeking to establish new policies and procedures, SRUC determined that there was a need first to translate its overarching strategic aims into clearly articulated education strategies which would provide a bridge between the institutional strategic aims and objectives and Education Division policy, procedure and operational arrangements. Four interrelated education strategies (covering portfolio development, portfolio delivery, learner engagement, and learner support) were in the process of development. SRUC intimated that work prior to the commencement of academic session 2014-15 would involve engagement with staff and students which would, in turn, lead to revision and/or development of all associated policies and procedures. As indicated elsewhere in this report (see paragraph 83), SRUC should prioritise specification of its quality processes and finalise production of the Education Manual.

114 During 2013-14, the outcomes from Annual Programme Review (and from Quality Improvement Plans relating to further education provision) were used to compile Departmental Quality Enhancement Plans. It is the intention that key actions from these plans will be embedded within Department Business Plans. Designed around the notion that the locus for quality resides in the curriculum departments, the scheme is to be implemented during 2014-15 and is intended to facilitate connections between different operational levels: between committees through cross-membership and reporting links; between quality assurance processes; and between senior and middle managers through providing a vertical and horizontal link. The scheme has the potential to strengthen SRUC's evaluative processes, most particularly at the institutional level. The newly-created quality enhancement coordinator posts are integral to the scheme and sit on the Academic Development Committee, which reports to the Academic Board. As SRUC recognised, this provides an opportunity to establish evaluative practices which are likely to provide institutional oversight of its key quality processes. The ELIR team considered that this should be progressed as a matter of priority.

115 At the time of the current ELIR, SRUC was still in the process of establishing its approach to the management of information. The main locus of analysis of student progression and retention data in the former SAC was in Annual Programme Reviews. This differed from a more rigorous use of data in the Barony, Elmwood and Oatridge campuses. SRUC acknowledged that integration of its legacy systems was ongoing and intimated that a key aim is to refine the generation of data directly from the institution's education management information system. SRUC is encouraged to progress its intention to compile institutional summary data which can be used to set benchmarks against which programme and campus data can be compared (see paragraphs 21, 58 and 128).

5.2 Commentary on the advance information set

116 SRUC provided an advance information set as well as a considerable volume of additional information immediately prior to the Part 2 visit. The information provided allowed the ELIR team to develop a good understanding of the arrangements that were in place, and which were being put in place, for quality assurance and enhancement.

117 SRUC indicated that its new Education Manual and a complete mapping of policy and practice against the Quality Code would be concluded by the end of 2014.

5.3 Use of external reference points in self-evaluation

118 SRUC's approach to using external reference points in self-evaluation has many positive and effective features. The key area for development relates to the use of the Quality Code.

119 SRUC uses a range of external reference points including: subject benchmark statements; the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; industry contacts and employers; feedback from external examiners; validating university reports; external activities of staff; feedback from staff participating in external conferences, workshops and networks; and the national Enhancement Themes. SRUC stated that these reference points provide context and benchmarks for comparison, allowing the institution both to align itself with the sector and to have confidence in its own autonomy. In addition, SRUC has significant links with industries and professional bodies through each of its Education, Research and Consultancy divisions. Teaching staff engage significantly with their subject associations, professional organisations and the national Enhancement Themes.

120 The ELIR team was provided with an update on SRUC's mapping against the Quality Code immediately before the Part 2 visit. The mapping primarily referred to documentation from the former SAC, which was the only legacy college to which the Quality Code previously referred. Senior staff explained that the ongoing review and updating of SRUC strategies, policies and procedures would include benchmarking against the Quality Code. In discussions with the team, relatively few staff appeared familiar with the Quality Code, although the appointment of departmental quality enhancement coordinators could provide SRUC with an opportunity both to map policy and practice against the Quality Code and to disseminate key elements of the Quality Code to teaching staff.

121 The ELIR team noted that the Expectations of the Code were generally met, although SRUC identified the need to remap Chapter B3 against the emerging Portfolio Delivery Strategy and acknowledged that a number of Indicators relating to the Chapter on External Examining had not yet been implemented fully. Additionally, the team noted that SRUC had not fully mapped its practices as a provider working with others against Chapter B10 of the Code, particularly Indicators 1 (the need for a collaborative strategy), 7 (to have formal legal agreements in place before the commencement of the programme) and 10 (a formal record of all arrangements subject to a formal agreement) (see paragraph 135).

122 SRUC should complete the detailed mapping of its policy and practice to the Quality Code, and progress with an action plan to address those areas where it is not fully in alignment. This mapping should be overseen by an institution-level academic committee and should be used to inform and support developments across SRUC, including the design and implementation of quality arrangements.

5.4 Management of public information

123 Effective arrangements are in place to ensure the accuracy of the information provided in respect of SRUC's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The head of each curriculum department approves the programme information contained in the prospectus prior to its publication in hard copy and on the website.

124 A Marketing and Student Recruitment Team manages the day-to-day promotion of SRUC's education provision through printed, online and social media. The Marketing and Student Recruitment Manager, together with the heads of department and other divisional managers, developed the 2015 prospectuses which replaced the previous four college-specific prospectuses. A suite of subject-based leaflets was developed. It is intended that programme leaflets will be developed and will be available in print and on the SRUC website. SRUC indicated that considerable work had gone into developing the website, including significant investment in a programme finder facility.

125 Since the 2010 SAC ELIR, social media has been used as a promotional tool and SRUC has developed campus Facebook pages and has an education Twitter account. These also are managed by the Marketing and Student Recruitment Team to ensure accuracy and consistency of content.

5.5 Effectiveness of the approach to self-evaluation and management of information

126 SRUC acknowledged that the merger had presented many challenges in respect of self-evaluation and the management of information, and that much work remained to be done in developing its education strategies, policies and procedures. The good practice adopted from the legacy colleges together with the various initiatives undertaken since the merger in October 2012 provide evidence that SRUC can be reflective in its approach. The findings of this ELIR indicate that SRUC should develop this further through the practices it is implementing across its new institution-level structures and processes.

127 SRUC indicated that it expected there will be refinement of staff roles and the remits of committees and boards as the sections of the Education Manual are reviewed, developed and approved. In refining roles and remits, SRUC should 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, including annual programme monitoring, external examiner reports and student feedback. This should help make sure that the institutional processes are carried out as intended, that over-reliance on individuals is avoided, and that the outcomes of its processes are evaluated critically within programme, department and institution-level committees, drawing on a wide range of academic staff and managers. In honing roles and remits, SRUC should also ensure that there is strong academic leadership, particularly at the institutional level, and that academic dialogue and debate takes place at all levels. Such strengthening of its arrangements would assist SRUC if it progressed with its ambition to award its own degrees, most particularly in respect of being able to evidence that it is a well found, cohesive and self-critical academic community that is able to demonstrate firm guardianship of its academic standards.

128 Integration of the legacy college systems was ongoing at the time of the current ELIR. A key aim is to refine the generation of data arising from the institutional management information system. SRUC is encouraged to ensure that the data being collected is valid and reliable, and facilitates comparisons both between programmes and, through disaggregation, within programmes. In so doing, SRUC will be aided in its intention to compile institutional summary data which can be used to set benchmarks against which programme and campus data can be compared, and which should be used to inform decision-making, policy and practice.

6 Collaborative activity

6.1 Key features of the institution's strategic approach

129 SRUC does not currently have an overall strategy for, or institutional oversight of, the development of education collaborative activities, although departments, through their business development plans, are encouraged to offer suggestions for UK subject-based collaborations and/or recruitment-based international collaborations. The ELIR team learned that the Contracts Office in the Research Division offered advice on drawing up various levels of collaborative memoranda. The team saw a number of examples of these including an 'in principle enabling' Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Malawi. This paves the way for the development of specific detailed Memoranda of Agreement for a variety of areas such as e-learning delivery, research and development projects, and student and staff exchange programmes. The team also learned of the existence of a Memorandum with an institution in China relating to the delivery of golf management programmes, and understood there were likely to be additional relationships developing with other institutions in that country.

130 SRUC's legacy colleges had a number of articulation agreements in place with colleges across Scotland which related to possible specific admission procedures for appropriately qualified students to join, for example, year three of a degree programme following completion of a relevant HND. SRUC indicated that it was in the process of renegotiating these agreements with the newly formed regional colleges.

131 SRUC identified one specific education collaborative activity, its partnership with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE). This currently involves the joint delivery of HND and BSc programmes in Horticulture with Plantsmanship, with the degree being awarded by the University of Glasgow. The relationship was established in 1995 and was governed by a Memorandum of Agreement, signed in June 2008 for a period of five years. It was reviewed as part of the Annual Meeting between SRUC and RBGE in January 2014. Consequently, an updated Memorandum has been agreed for the period from April 2014 to March 2019. SRUC acknowledged the 10-month delay between the end of the old and the start of the new Memorandum. The ELIR team noted that there had been a delay with the previous Memorandum which had been identified in the 2010 SAC ELIR report and that the former college had been asked to take steps to prevent any similar occurrence, in order to secure the quality of the student learning experience. The current ELIR team considered that SRUC had not taken these steps and further observed that the report of the annual meeting between SRUC and RBGE provided limited evidence of genuine reflection or evaluation of the partnership.

6.2 Securing academic standards of collaborative provision

132 SRUC's quality assurance arrangements for the programme taught jointly with RBGE follow those established for the approval, monitoring and review of other SRUC programmes that lead to the awards of the University of Glasgow. Management of the programme is the responsibility of the SRUC Programme Leader for the Edinburgh-based Horticulture programmes, with both SRUC and RBGE being represented on the programme management team. SRUC nominates the external examiner for approval by the University, and receives and actions the reports as it would for its other programmes.

6.3 Enhancing the student learning experience on collaborative programmes

133 Students benefit from both the specialist horticulture facilities at the Botanic Garden and the SRUC-based laboratories and other specialist facilities to support honours projects. Additionally, RBGE staff have the opportunity to access SRUC staff development. The 2011 subject review of Horticulture included this joint programme, demonstrating it was subject to the same processes as other SRUC-managed programmes.

6.4 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative activity

134 The ELIR team found the arrangements for the management of the collaborative programme with RBGE to be effective, subject to SRUC having in place robust arrangements to ensure the seamless formal continuation of the collaborative agreement on the expiry of the current Memorandum.

135 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 institutional 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. In doing so, SRUC should ensure that it is developing policies and practices that are in line with *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code (see paragraphs 121 and 122).

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