



# Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Scotland's Rural College

## Technical Report

May 2019

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## About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review \(ELIR\)](#) and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.<sup>1</sup> You can also find out more about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).<sup>2</sup>

Further details about ELIR can be found in an accompanying [brief guide](#),<sup>3</sup> including an overview of the review method, information about review teams, and explanations of follow-up action.

## About this review

This is the Technical Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC). The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 27 March 2019 and Review Visit on 13-17 May 2019. The review was conducted by a team of five reviewers:

- Ms Heather Armstrong (Student Reviewer)
- Mr Steven Barnett (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Crichton Lang (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Clare Peddie (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr 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.

## About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers a threshold 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 threshold judgement can be found on page 2, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> About ELIR:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review)

<sup>2</sup> About QAA: [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland)

<sup>3</sup> Brief Guide to ELIR: [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Outcome Report: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Scotlands-Rural-College](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Scotlands-Rural-College)

## Threshold judgement about Scotland's Rural College

Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience.

This is a positive judgement, which means that SRUC meets sector expectations in securing the academic standards of the awards it offers and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience it provides, currently and into the future. This judgement confirms there can be public confidence in the awards SRUC offers and in the quality of the learning experience it provides for its students.

### 1 Contextual information about the institution, student population and the review

#### 1.1 Summary information about the institution

1 SRUC is a specialist higher education institution delivering tertiary education, research and consultancy, created in October 2012 from the merger of Barony, Elmwood and Oatridge Colleges with the Scottish Agricultural College. SRUC currently operates its main education activities from seven campuses across Scotland - Aberdeen (Craibstone Estate, Aberdeen), Riverside (Ayr), Barony (Parkgate, Dumfries), Edinburgh, Elmwood (Cupar, Fife), Oatridge (Ecclesmachan, West Lothian) and Glasgow Botanic Gardens (Glasgow).

2 The current Strategic Plan 2018-2023 sets out SRUC's ambitions and actions linked to the five key drivers of integration; innovation for impact; industry facing; international; and inspiring. The Strategic Plan launched a significant transformation programme in May 2018 which was still being implemented at the time of the current ELIR. This programme includes bringing together its current Education and Research Divisions and creating three new regional faculties: North, Central, and South and West of Scotland, with each faculty led by a Dean (paragraphs 77-79). SRUC has made the decision to locate the whole of the South and West Faculty at an expanded campus at Barony (in Dumfries) and undertake a phased withdrawal from the Riverside (Ayr) and Crichton (Dumfries) sites.

3 SRUC does not currently have its own degree awarding powers (DAP). With a focus on supporting stakeholders in agriculture, land and the rural sector, SRUC has stated its ambitions to become a rural university for Scotland and to apply for DAP within the period of the current Strategic Plan. The current validation arrangements with the University of Glasgow and University of Edinburgh, continue to cover taught degree provision, with research degrees largely validated by the University of Edinburgh (82%) and agreements with 11 other institutions for individual PhD registrations. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) accredits the majority of Higher National, National Certificate and Scottish Vocational Qualification awards. A small amount of provision is accredited by City and Guilds, the Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI) and Equestrian Qualifications GB Limited (EQL).

#### 1.2 Composition and key trends in the student population

4 In December 2018, SRUC had a total further and higher education (FE and HE) student population of 2,343 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. Of the total, there were 1,449 FTE taught HE students (approximately 62%), with 824 FTE undergraduate students registered on Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HND), 564 FTE students on undergraduate degree programmes (BA/BSc), and 61 FTE students on taught master's programmes. All postgraduate taught (and some undergraduate) provision is delivered by distance-learning, making a total distance-learning population of 146 FTE

students. Research student numbers have approximately doubled since 2011 with 85 FTE current student registrations.

5 There is a good gender balance at SRUC with a slight shift towards females - 54.8% since 2013-14. There is also a trend towards a more mature student body with a gradual increase in the percentage of students aged 21 or over, from 37% in 2013-14 to 47.2% in 2017-18. Students from the 20% most deprived postcodes (MD20) made up 12.6% of the total in 2017-18, with students from MD40 postcodes at 26.3%, both just slightly below the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Outcome Agreement target figures for the institution. Retention was 83% in 2017-18 (using the sector-wide definition as listed in SRUC's SFC Outcome Agreement). The Reflective Analysis (RA) states there is no notable variation in these statistical trends across campuses.

### **1.3 Commentary on the preparation for the ELIR including contextualisation**

6 Preparations for ELIR were led by an institutional team which included both the President and Vice-President of the SRUC Students' Association (SRUCSA).

7 Following consultation with staff and students, SRUC identified five contextualised topics as priorities for the review:

- student journey: progression and pathways
- student voice and feedback
- professional discussion of learning and teaching
- business information and reporting
- degree awarding powers.

8 From the review documentation and discussions with staff and students, the ELIR team was able to confirm that these topics reflect SRUC's current strategic priorities. The RA clearly sets out the rationale for the choice of topics and summarises a programme of engagement activities, run across SRUC - both to inform the development of the RA and to prepare staff and students for possible engagement with the ELIR team.

### **1.4 Summary of follow-up to the previous ELIR**

9 The 2014 ELIR set out eight areas for development including one priority action and the RA set out the progress SRUC had made towards meeting these. The ELIR team was able to confirm this progress noting SRUC took a number of years to finalise its mapping against the Quality Code for Higher Education 2013-18 and to complete its Education Manual. The context of ongoing discussions about the future status of SRUC was accepted by the ELIR team as a reasonable explanation for the delays in meeting those two areas of development (paragraphs 114-118).

### **1.5 Impact of engaging students in ELIR preparations**

10 SRUC has actively supported the development of its Students' Association (SRUCSA) and encouraged full participation in preparations for ELIR. SRUCSA, through their sabbatical officers, wrote the initial draft of section 2.1 of the RA on student representation and engagement, and were also consulted and provided feedback on a full draft of the RA through its Executive Committee and Campus Councils. The ELIR team considered this engagement to be full and genuine and particularly noteworthy given the small size of the SRUCSA (two full-time sabbatical officers and no full-time staff) and the challenges of delivering effective student representation over seven campuses.

## 2 Enhancing the student learning experience

### 2.1 Student representation and engagement

#### Student representation

11 Overall, SRUC has appropriate arrangements in place to support the engagement and representation of students, although some challenges that exist in securing student representatives are recognised. While a range of structures are in place to gather and respond to student feedback, all of these do not operate as effectively as they could. Further developments are intended to enhance both student representation and responding to student feedback. There is a supportive and positive working relationship between SRUC and its Students' Association (SRUCSA).

12 The SRUCSA Executive Committee is composed of nine elected officers including the President and Vice-President (full-time sabbatical positions) and seven part-time posts consisting of six Campus Officers and a Sports and Activities Officer. While these elected officers play a key role in communications between SRUC and the wider student population, both SRUC and SRUCSA recognise ongoing challenges in filling elected officer roles, particularly in relation to campus officers.

13 Students, mainly through the Student President and sabbatical officers, are represented on all SRUC committees linked to learning, teaching and the wider student experience, including the SRUC Board, and the Academic Board and its sub-committees. Sabbatical officers spoke positively about their role within SRUC and confirmed they had the opportunity to support the drafting of section 2.1 of the RA and provide feedback during the ELIR process (paragraph 10).

14 Campus-based programmes elect a class representative for each year of the programme. These class representatives are members of the programme's Student Liaison Group (SLG) which meet each term, involve the programme team and play a key role in enabling students to actively engage in the improvement of their learning experience and raise any issues directly with programme staff. Staff who met the ELIR team spoke positively about the effectiveness of these meetings. Students who met the ELIR team provided many examples of action being taken by programme teams in response to matters raised by students. The RA indicated that SRUC recognises ongoing challenges electing class representatives on courses with small student numbers and delivered in distance-learning mode. The ELIR team also heard from staff and students about challenges recruiting students to undertake the class representative role.

15 All postgraduate students have an opportunity to engage in the management of the postgraduate student experience through their representation on the Postgraduate Committee, which has two sub-groups: one dedicated to postgraduate research students and one to postgraduate taught students. A SRUCSA Officer (for example, the President or Vice-President) is included in the membership of both the Postgraduate Committee and its sub-groups. However, the ELIR team learned that postgraduate students are not currently represented within SRUCSA executive structures. The ELIR team met with a small number of postgraduate class representatives during the review, who seemed to be relatively newly appointed and were still to undergo training to support them in this role. Postgraduate students participate in SLG meetings and seemed clear they knew who to speak to should there be any issues with their studies. SRUC confirmed that it plans to enhance postgraduate representation on its Research Committee.

16 The RA indicated SRUCSA is currently reviewing both its representative structure and strategic plan to ensure it continues to represent its student population effectively and

improves SRUCSA's visibility on campus. The ELIR team encourages SRUC and SRUCSA to work together to complete this review, with particular focus given to postgraduate representation, and the outcomes actioned in a timely manner, ensuring students across all campuses, regardless of stage and mode of study, continue to be appropriately represented.

17 Training for class representatives is delivered by SRUC's Learner Engagement Officers, with one training session delivered per campus each academic year. Capacity issues mean it is not possible to rerun the training for students who are unable to attend these sessions. SRUCSA and SRUC both recognise this challenge and a project was underway to develop online training materials for class representatives via the virtual learning environment (VLE). The ELIR team encourages SRUC to ensure that all elected student representatives have access to, and complete, training to support them in their roles in a timely manner.

18 A Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) has been in place between SRUC and SRUCSA since 2014. However, both parties recognise there have been challenges associated with the visibility of the SPA to the wider student population. The ELIR team learned that SRUCSA was leading a review of the SPA.

### **Responding to student feedback**

19 A range of formal and informal mechanisms are used to gather student feedback including Student Liaison Groups (SLGs) (paragraph 14), Student Liaison Committees (SLCs), Campus Councils and Speak Week. Run by SRUCSA for the first time in 2017-18, Speak Week asked students to provide feedback on two questions about their experience at SRUC. The feedback gathered is organised into subject groupings and shared with SRUC. Departments and support services, as appropriate, have captured actions being undertaken to address this feedback within their annual monitoring reports and quality enhancement plans.

20 Campus Councils are managed by SRUCSA, providing an opportunity for all students to communicate with the SRUCSA executive. The ELIR team learned from the students they met that student engagement with Campus Councils varies across campuses, and this variability is impacting on the ability of these councils to be an effective tool in gathering feedback from the student body. Student Liaison Committees are organised by SRUC, who hold two meetings per campus during the academic year. These meetings are attended by a member of SRUC's Board, a senior education manager (normally the Senior Tutor (paragraph 27)) and are open to all elected class representatives. They provide an opportunity for class representatives to feed back to senior staff, with the ELIR team learning they tend to achieve better student attendance than Campus Councils. While the ELIR team recognised that a range of mechanisms are in place to gather student feedback, students who met the team were not always clear about the action that was being taken in response to their feedback (paragraphs 23 and 72).

### **Engagement with surveys**

21 A range of surveys are provided by SRUC as mechanisms for students to feed back directly regarding the quality of their learning and teaching experience. These include: a New Student Survey (completed shortly after induction); an End of Year Survey; the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) College Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey; the National Student Survey (NSS); the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES); and an end of module questionnaire. SRUC recognises challenges with low student response rates across all of these surveys and, in 2018-19, improving response rates in the NSS has been a priority of the Academic Leadership Team (ALT). A number of actions have been undertaken including using the Faculty Deans, other academic staff and class representatives to encourage student participation.

22 Survey results are considered by ALT and data sets are issued to individual departments and service areas, with the expectation that each department and service area will develop an action plan. The ELIR team formed the view that engagement with the action planning process appeared to be variable between departments and service areas. The RA indicated that, for most of the formal surveys undertaken, students would receive feedback on the actions taken via SRUC's 'You said, we did' campaigns. Academic staff also spoke about the use of the 'You said, we did' campaigns, indicating it was the responsibility of each head of department to decide how to respond to student feedback. The team accepts that there are benefits to be gained in communicating actions taken in response to student feedback through branded campaigns like 'You said, we did' but would caution against over reliance on one mechanism, encouraging SRUC to continue to offer a range of communication approaches for students.

23 Overall, students who met the ELIR team were clear about the formal and informal mechanisms available to them to provide feedback to SRUC about the quality of their teaching and learning experience. However, the students were less clear about how their feedback is considered within SRUC, what actions are taken and what communication processes are used to keep students informed and close the feedback loop. There would, therefore, be benefit in SRUC reviewing the current arrangements for analysing and responding to student feedback (paragraph 72).

## **2.2 Recognising and responding to equality and diversity in the student population**

24 SRUC has appropriate mechanisms in place to recognise and respond to equality and diversity. SRUC recognises the diversity of its student population, and the challenges associated with delivering provision across geographically dispersed sites and across a variety of delivery modes including full-time, part-time and distance-learning. SRUC states that it is committed to delivery of a comparable learning experience for all of its students, based on equity rather than consistency.

### **Equality and diversity**

25 Equality and diversity is a SRUC Board responsibility, operationalised through the Equality, Human Rights and Inclusion Committee (EHRIC). SRUC is a Disability Confident employer and a member of Athena SWAN.

26 All SRUC staff complete a mandatory equality and diversity compliance module as part of their induction and all students receive an equality and diversity presentation at the start of the academic session, with information also contained within student programme handbooks and a presentation on the virtual learning environment (VLE).

27 On each campus, SRUC has a team of Safeguarding Officers whose role it is to liaise with the Senior Tutor (whose role includes acting as campus Safeguarding Manager) when implementing any action with respect to the duty of care of SRUC students. As well as this safeguarding responsibility, the Senior Tutor on each campus is responsible for the management and coordination of the services and facilities necessary for the effective delivery of learning, teaching and student support at their campus. The Senior Tutor will liaise with the Learner Engagement Manager, if intervention is required, with respect to ongoing student needs. The Learner Engagement Manager leads a team of staff who support the delivery of learner, mental health and careers support for students across SRUC (see paragraph 38).

## **Students with disabilities and additional support needs**

28 SRUC has effective processes in place to support the early declaration of a disability and/or other support needs by students. SRUC's online student record system is widely and effectively used by staff to access summary student support needs information, so any adjustments required can be made to support students with their learning and assessment.

29 Students with learning disabilities and/or physical disabilities are supported through the Learner Engagement Team (paragraph 38), who plan and coordinate a suite of measures to support students, ensure these are implemented and that a record is retained for the duration of the student learner journey. SRUC's internal measures of the retention, progression and achievement rates of students with support needs and/or a declared disability, is in line with those of the total SRUC HE population.

30 Students who met the ELIR team spoke positively about the support offered to students with a disability and/or other support needs, very much valuing the individualised nature of the help they received. Staff also spoke positively about being equipped with access to appropriate information in order to provide specific support for their students. Staff went on to say they felt a real sense of job satisfaction, resulting from having access to appropriate information to allow them to provide appropriate support to individual students.

## **Distance-learning**

31 SRUC has 146 FTE students studying by distance-learning, with a significant proportion of these being part-time postgraduate taught students who mainly engage with their studies through the virtual learning environment (VLE) (paragraph 4). SRUC's taught postgraduate masters students are exclusively distance-learning students.

32 In discussion with a group of distance-learning students, the ELIR team learned that the students particularly valued the opportunity to attend a face-to-face induction event and study weekends that are held on campus for students on many of the distance-learning programmes. However, the same students also voiced concerns about the time commitment required to attend, the quality of the session content and the pace of delivery. The students stated they believed there would be merit in SRUC considering whether the content from these face-to-face sessions could be more effectively captured and made available for those students who were unable to attend (paragraph 67).

33 The ELIR team heard specifically from distance-learning postgraduate taught (PGT) students who described their experience as being inequitable to that of campus-based students. Their concerns included: a lack of engagement and support from their allocated Year Tutors; not always being clear about who their class representatives were; being disproportionately impacted by problems with access to library facilities (paragraph 65); technical difficulties with the video conferencing systems (paragraphs 66 and 67); and variability in the quality and variety of the distance-learning materials (paragraph 67). Students also described setting up their own social media networks to overcome shortcomings in communication mechanisms through the VLE.

34 Given these findings, SRUC should review the needs and experience of students studying by distance-learning to ensure they are effectively supported. This review should include consideration of SRUC's pedagogical approach for distance-learning, setting minimum expectations for online materials, student induction, IT support, library access, and the use of video conferencing.

## **Mental health and student wellbeing**

35 In 2017, SRUC launched a three-year Healthy Learning and Wellbeing Strategy, developed in partnership with SRUCSA, to support staff and students to improve productivity and learning. As part of this strategy, the Student Support Service implemented a series of measures to support students with mental health difficulties to remain engaged with their studies. All these initiatives are overseen by SRUC's Health and Safety Policy Executive Committee. Over 70 staff have been trained across SRUC in mental health first aid. SRUC works with Therapet (a scheme offered by Canine Concern Scotland Trust) and has utilised the SANE Black Dog campaign. This campaign provides a confidential out-of-hours support line for students (and staff with concerns about students). A cross-institutional project, involving colleagues from Student Support Services, Hospitality, E-learning, Marketing, the Education Office, SRUCSA and academic staff, produced a virtual learning site for students which has become dedicated to providing student wellbeing information including advice on healthy eating and combatting exam stress. SRUC also supports an annual Mental Health Awareness Week hosted by the Mental Health Foundation which is given a different focus each year.

36 Students talked very positively about the range of mental health and disability support measures implemented across SRUC, confirming they were very well-supported. Staff who met the ELIR team indicated they felt confident that they knew how to access support for students when needed and that this provision was well-coordinated should a student move to a different SRUC campus.

37 Overall, SRUC is commended for prioritising awareness-raising and its provision of student mental health support, linked to the development of its Healthy Learning and Wellbeing Strategy which is successfully delivered through the implementation of a range of initiatives involving both staff and students.

### **2.3 Supporting students at each stage of the learner journey**

38 The ELIR team found the support for students at each stage of their learner journey was individually relevant and personalised. Students who met the ELIR team confirmed they were well-supported and the help available is effectively delivered, predominantly by academic staff. This front-line support is aided by the Learner Engagement Team which effectively coordinates the provision of more specialist campus-based support for students as needed. The Learner Engagement Team, while not having a physical presence on each campus, work as a mobile cross-institution team providing support to students as required (paragraph 27). The work of this team is considered by SRUC's Learning and Teaching Committee, and Student Support and Engagement Committee.

#### **Induction**

39 Upon acceptance to SRUC, students receive a comprehensive welcome pack with all the relevant joining information they need. The welcome and induction support provided for students was originally designed by the Student Experience Manager but is now managed and implemented on each campus by Senior Tutors. An induction checklist, available in the SRUC Education Manual (paragraph 106), is designed to be used by staff to ensure students receive a comparable induction experience regardless of their study mode or campus of delivery. Feedback gathered by SRUC through their student induction survey indicates almost all cohorts of students are satisfied with their induction experience. Overall, students who met the ELIR team also supported this position and staff spoke confidently that induction is coordinated and comprehensive. A small number of students spoke about being unexpectedly delayed, for personal reasons, in joining their programme at the start of the

semester and, as a result, believed they may have missed key induction information. The team would therefore encourage SRUC to consider how late arrivals may be better supported.

40 Distance-learning students, for whom induction is managed by the programme coordinator and the Group Manager for Information and Digital Services, reported a more variable experience. Students expressed disappointment with induction linked to being unable to attend the face-to-face induction event and study weekends (paragraph 32).

### **Academic advice and support**

41 Students are supported in their studies by a team of academic tutors and support staff. Academic and pastoral support is personal, individualised and provided by the academic teaching staff and Year Tutors. More specialised support is delivered, where required, by mobile Academic Support Tutors who are coordinated by the Learner Engagement Team (paragraph 38). On each campus, the management of student support provision is overseen by the Senior Tutor. Senior Tutors can request the deployment of Academic Support Tutors to a campus to address specific needs of individual students. The ELIR team heard that campus-based students found academic staff to be very accessible and easy to meet on an informal drop-in basis. Campus-based students feel highly supported by the academic staff, speak confidently about the more specialised support mechanisms available and, where relevant, were very positive about the role of Academic Support Tutors.

### **Student transitions**

42 The structure and nature of SRUC's tertiary provision facilitates the effective transition of students between both programmes and campuses. The ELIR team heard from both students and staff, about a number of examples of students moving from Higher National (HN) provision through to graduating with honours' degrees, where students often had to successfully negotiate a move to a new campus in a different part of Scotland. SRUC's approach supports the delivery of a personalised flexible journey which can be readily adapted to suit the specific needs of individual students and plays a key role in supporting them through these transitions. Students have the opportunity to take breaks from their studies and to convert from full-time to part-time study if required. Students receive personalised support from Year Tutors and other academic staff with these programme transition decisions. The team heard this support can make a significant difference to the degree outcomes for students. The team met students who talked very positively about the flexibility and support mechanisms offered by SRUC which had enabled them to progress further in their studies than was their original aspiration. The team learned that students were well-informed in advance of making any change in their student journey, for example, when a programme change would also involve moving to a new campus in a different geographical area.

43 The ELIR team learned of two specific examples of support provided for transitioning students. Firstly, the Going Further Bursaries where students can apply for financial support to articulate from HN into degree programmes, which is of particular value when a student may be required to change campus in order to complete the next stage in their learning journey (paragraph 42). Secondly, a longitudinal programme of induction which runs over the first six weeks of the semester in year three of the degree programmes, providing effective and targeted induction for all students making the transition from FE to HE.

44 SRUC is commended for the individualised support and flexibility of delivery which provides students with an environment where they are able to achieve success beyond their initial intended study outcomes.

### **Timeliness of feedback on assessments**

45 SRUC acknowledged variability across its programmes and campuses with regard to the timeliness of returning assessments and providing feedback to students on their assessed work. This was confirmed by students who met the ELIR team, who indicated that overall, the quality of assessment feedback was good, but they had experienced delays, often significantly beyond the published timescales. Students believed the delays resulted from the use of double-marking practices, including those which appeared to be more rigorous than those set out in the SRUC Education Manual. The team also heard some students had experienced the bunching of assessment deadlines, particularly towards the end of modules, which the students believed had negatively impacted on their performance.

46 The ELIR team learned that the recently appointed Faculty Deans, with the support of the Student Experience Manager, now (2019) have a key role in implementing a range of measures to improve feedback timescales but, at the time of the current ELIR, it was too early for SRUC to have collated information to measure improvements. The team, therefore, encourages SRUC to consider how best to further disseminate the intentions set out in its policy advice on assessment moderation. Senior managers also informed the team that multiple strands of activity were being implemented to address the concerns raised. These included analyses of student surveys to identify where feedback is not working well, closer communication with the students, internal monitoring activities on feedback delay and SRUC-wide checks on meeting release dates for examination results. In view of the student experiences described to the ELIR team during the current review, the team recommends that SRUC concludes the work it currently has underway, to ensure there is greater consistency in the timeliness of assessment feedback provided to students, in accordance with SRUC policy.

### **Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship**

47 SRUC's Academic Strategy (December 2017) outlines its commitment to ensuring teaching, research and consultancy activities are innovative and entrepreneurial. This Strategy goes on to state an ambition to ensure all programmes are closely aligned with industry need, ensuring high levels of graduate employability.

48 Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship skills are truly embedded within the culture of SRUC. Students are prepared for their chosen career through vocationally-orientated degree programmes and other awards. Liaison with industry is well-established and a fundamental part of the learning and teaching experience of students, who benefit from close industry links - for example, through guest lectures, industry visits and scholarship opportunities, and from the research and consultancy activities both within SRUC and with a number of partner organisations.

49 At a curriculum development level, SRUC and academic staff actively engage with industry partners to ensure the curriculum delivers graduates that are appropriately trained for their careers. Within the new organisational structures, the Faculty Deans have a role which includes a responsibility to engage with industry partners over research, teaching and consultancy provision.

### **Careers**

50 Careers support for students in SRUC is predominantly delivered by academic teaching staff and Year Tutors who perform a significant role in facilitating the transition of students to employment through direct network contacts with industry and introducing students to possible employers. SRUC's staff role descriptors contain an expectation that Year Tutors advise and discuss career aspirations with students in their final year of study. SRUC holds an annual careers event, which rotates around the campuses and routinely

attracts over 40 participants from industry. During this event, a presentation is given on possible career pathways for students potentially interested in undertaking a research degree. While SRUC organises transport from all campuses to support student attendance at this careers event, the ELIR team understood student attendance can be disappointing and variable between campuses depending on the event location.

51 The ELIR team learned there is limited access to more generic careers support for students who may wish to explore and access information about alternative careers not directly aligned to their degree programme or progression on to further study. SRUC is aware of this concern, which had been raised as part of a recent Institution-led Review (ILR) of Student Support Services and has also been raised directly by students. It is recommended that SRUC enhances the mechanisms through which professional careers advice is provided to all students. The team recognises that SRUC faces challenges, with standard sector benchmarking metrics often not fully applied to their provision, and therefore encourage the institution to find other ways of reporting on employability metrics and benchmarking its performance to the sector (paragraph 123).

### **Graduate attributes**

52 SRUC identify five graduate attributes that students will develop during their studies: academically competent; critical thinkers; desire for learning and personal development and employability. Graduate attributes are developed across the curriculum with staff proposing new modules required to identify graduate attributes specifically within the module descriptor template. Students who met the ELIR team were aware of their graduate attributes but indicated they would like more support to identify alternative career opportunities, beyond their immediate subject discipline which would utilise their generic graduate attributes (paragraph 51).

## **2.4 Postgraduate taught and research student experience**

### **Support for all postgraduate students**

53 SRUC has an appropriate approach to managing the postgraduate taught (PGT) student experience which is consistent with sector expectations. Overall, postgraduate students who met the ELIR team spoke positively about the support they received from academic staff during their studies. While postgraduate research (PGR) students consider themselves to be embedded within the SRUC research community, there would be benefit to SRUC in ensuring it has clearer institutional oversight of its PGR student data.

54 The Dean of Postgraduate Studies is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Postgraduate Strategy, developing the identity of the Graduate School, developing new taught postgraduate provision and managing external relationships with research awarding institutions. Since November 2017, the roles of Dean and Manager of Postgraduate Studies have been combined, with SRUC intending to review the roles as part of the wider organisational restructure. The RA confirmed that SRUC intends to revise its Postgraduate Strategy to align with the Strategic Plan 2018-2023 (paragraph 2). The administration of the Graduate School is coordinated through the Postgraduate Office, which is managed by the Dean and Manager of Postgraduate Studies. The School includes both taught and research-based postgraduates. The Postgraduate Office is also responsible for all aspects of academic postgraduate management including student recruitment, registration and induction, supervisor approvals, and the Postgraduate Committee and its sub-committees.

## Postgraduate research students

55 Postgraduate research degrees at SRUC are validated by 12 different institutions, with PhD students jointly registered with SRUC and one of these 12 awarding institutions (paragraph 3). At the time of the current ELIR, the majority of PhD students were registered with the University of Edinburgh. PGR students who met the ELIR team considered themselves to be SRUC students, while recognising their status as students of the awarding institution to which they were registered, to complete their PhD studies.

56 Improving induction arrangements for PGR students has been an area of focus for SRUC, following feedback which indicated students often found the complexities of PhD studentships challenging to understand. New students receive an induction from their awarding institution, as well as inductions to their SRUC research group and the Postgraduate Office, and complete online SRUC induction modules. The main SRUC student induction takes place in October each year, supporting the majority of new research students, with additional sessions possible for students starting later in the academic year. Postgraduate students confirmed they had participated in induction activities from both their awarding institution and SRUC, and that these had been valuable.

57 PGR students are provided with their main research skills support by their awarding institution and are able to access the full range of training available within that institution. This skills development is supplemented by opportunities within SRUC, such as the PGR skills day and the annual postgraduate research conference. The Postgraduate Office fulfils a key role in effectively coordinating the skills training offered and monitoring student progress with their studies. The Office also provides support to students and supervisory teams in cases where supervisors have been changed.

58 Supervision agreements are in place between each of the awarding institutions and SRUC and specify the balance of supervision between each party. All SRUC PGR students have a primary supervisor from their awarding institution and are managed by a supervision team comprising staff from both the awarding institution and SRUC. All PhD students have an adviser who is external to the supervisory team, is named at the outset of the PhD and can be used to resolve academic or pastoral issues for the students and matters that may be pertinent to potential concerns between the student and their supervision team.

59 All SRUC supervisors are required to undertake mandatory formal supervisor training with one of the partner institutions at least once every five years. The Postgraduate Office maintains a record of the training undertaken and issues reminders to supervisors who need to update. New supervisors must complete this training before they can undertake supervisory duties.

60 The awarding institution currently takes primary responsibility for the management of PhD progress and completion, and for ensuring PGR students receive the support and supervision they require. The ELIR team learned that SRUC does not currently hold comprehensive progression and completion data for its PhD students, with this information being held by the awarding institution. As a result, monitoring of the effectiveness of supervision, for example, by discipline or department, is not possible. There would be considerable value in SRUC working with its awarding institutions to ensure it has access to management data on PGR students (paragraph 123).

61 Postgraduate research (PGR) students who met the ELIR team were fully cognisant with, and spoke confidently about, the arrangements in place for their supervision and training, and were content with the support provided by the Postgraduate Office. PGR students also spoke positively about being well-supported by SRUC to travel and work outside the UK, to attend national and international conferences and other workshops. They confirmed it was possible to ask for specialist training outside SRUC, with such requests

normally being supported; that they benefitted from the strong links SRUC has with industry; and they routinely had the opportunity to present their work alongside research staff at internal seminar programmes. In summary, PGR students felt very much valued members of the research community.

### **Postgraduate research students who teach**

62 Postgraduate research students (PGR) studying at SRUC have the opportunity to teach at the University of Glasgow and University of Edinburgh, as well as on SRUC programmes. The ELIR team understood that all SRUC students who undertake teaching at those universities must complete training as set out in each of the universities' regulations. However, based on the information SRUC provided for the current ELIR, the team concluded that, at present, SRUC does not keep a record of students actually completing this training.

63 The ELIR team also learned that SRUC currently has no institution-wide policy on the training requirements for PGR students who teach on SRUC programmes and modules. SRUC documents indicate that currently it is the responsibility of individual module leaders to ensure PGRs are briefed on a number of matters to support them in the delivery of a teaching session or with the marking of student work before students undertake teaching duties. The team concluded that the current procedure does not explicitly state the training requirements each PGR student must undertake before embarking on teaching and learning activities and no record is kept to confirm training has indeed taken place. SRUC should, therefore, establish a clear policy that outlines the minimum training to be completed by PGR students before undertaking teaching and/or assessment responsibilities.

## **2.5 Learning environment**

### **Learning spaces**

64 SRUC has appropriate arrangements in place to systematically review and enhance the learning environment offered to its students. SRUC recognises, given the nature of its provision, the need to offer practical working environments and remains committed to making ongoing investment in technology, learning spaces and staff development to ensure the student experience continues to keep pace with innovations in technology and advances in pedagogical practice. With teaching delivered across multiple campuses and through distance-learning, SRUC has recently invested in a collaborative learning space at its Barony campus which provides staff with the opportunity to develop their skills in the use of these new technologies to support learning, teaching and assessment. Academic teams endeavour to use real working environments where possible to enhance the student experience and students benefit from opportunities to learn in working farms, restaurants, laboratories, engineering workshops, campus gardens, livery and equestrian resources and animal care units.

65 The ELIR team heard from staff that, since the 2014 ELIR, SRUC had undertaken work to standardise library service opening hours, fines and lending periods across the institution and had integrated its e-journals and e-books into one system. All new students received information on the library service and its use during induction, information is available about referencing and the use of e-journals and students can request bespoke support sessions if required. Staff did report that some library locations are only supported by one staff member which, on occasion, presented challenges opening the library for students. Despite these developments, a number of the students who met the team suggested their experiences of the library service were variable and often disappointing. In particular, concerns were raised about the support available to them to ensure they had the necessary skills to make effective use of the service and gaining remote access. This was viewed as being especially problematic for students studying at a distance (paragraph 33).

Postgraduate research students (PGR) also commented negatively on access to library provision both within SRUC and when accessing library provision within awarding institutions. Distance-learning students, who might be located geographically distant from any SRUC campus, believed there would be benefit in SRUC exploring whether it would be possible to partner with libraries at institutions who might be close to their home address, in order to support access to these institutions' services. The ELIR team therefore encourages SRUC to review and, where necessary, enhance the support and information available to students on how to use the library services offered and undertake work to increase student awareness of these support resources.

### **Technology-enhanced learning**

66 Given the nature of SRUC's academic provision, video conferencing (VC) is used to facilitate cross-site teaching. The ELIR team learned that eight, out of a total of 275 year three and four modules, are fully delivered by VC. While few modules rely entirely on VC for delivery, the team also learned many modules have at least one instance during their delivery where VC will be used. Students reported that using VC can often be a problematic experience, with technical difficulties resulting in delayed or cancelled classes. Students also spoke of feeling academically disadvantaged in teaching and learning situations where they were remote users using a video conferencing link to join teaching sessions where other students in the cohort were physically present with the member of staff.

67 Distance-learning programmes at SRUC are delivered through the VLE, with the majority of these being postgraduate taught (paragraphs 4 and 31). In terms of support and development for staff delivering these programmes, SRUC employs a number of e-learning managers (four staff in three campus locations), offers some basic guidance for staff in the Education Manual (paragraph 106) and additional guidance in the virtual learning environment (VLE) regarding how to set up a module. Staff can also make use of the collaborative learning space at the Barony campus (paragraph 69). Despite this staff support, students who met the ELIR team expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of some of the VLE materials. SRUC recognised that, while they promote good practice in the use of the VLE, the experience of students remains variable and is committed to ensuring academic staff have the opportunity to enhance their online teaching and learning practice. The team therefore encourages SRUC to consider its current arrangements for coordinating and quality assuring the provision of e-learning in order to create an environment for sharing good practice and to identify and support improvement to the student learning and teaching experience.

## **2.6 Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience**

68 SRUC has an effective approach to supporting students at each stage of their learner journey which is individually relevant and personalised. Students are particularly well-supported in their studies by academic staff and tutors who are accessible, while also having access to specialist support from the Learner Engagement Team when required.

69 Overall, SRUC is commended for prioritising awareness raising and its provision of student mental health support, linked to the development of its Healthy Learning and Wellbeing Strategy, which is successfully delivered through the implementation of a range of initiatives involving both staff and students.

70 SRUC has established effective mechanisms for identifying and supporting students' individual needs, enabling them to be successful in their student journey. In many cases, this allows students to achieve outcomes beyond their initial aspirations. This

personalised approach to supporting students works well within the context of SRUC's multiple campuses and geographical spread.

71 There would be benefit in reviewing the current arrangements for analysing and responding to student views to ensure there is greater institutional oversight of responses with coordinated action being taken. This would enable SRUC to ensure changes are effectively communicated to students in a timely manner.

72 SRUC are asked to conclude the work currently underway to ensure there is greater consistency in the timeliness of assessment feedback provided to students, in accordance with SRUC policy.

73 There would be benefit in reviewing the needs and experience of students studying by distance-learning to ensure they are effectively supported. This review should include consideration of SRUC's pedagogical approach for distance-learning, setting of minimum expectations for online materials, student induction, IT support, library access, and the use of video conferencing.

74 SRUC are asked to enhance the mechanisms through which professional careers advice is provided to all students.

75 SRUC should establish a clear policy that outlines the training to be completed by PGR students before undertaking teaching and/or assessment responsibilities.

### **3 Strategy and practice for enhancing learning and teaching**

#### **3.1 Strategic approach to enhancement**

76 SRUC's strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching is emerging with notable leadership from key individuals and operational groups. An ongoing challenge for SRUC is to consider the balance of responsibilities and accountability between academic committees and operational structures to support informed debate and ensure clear leadership of its strategic approach on key academic matters related to the student experience. SRUC stated that its approach to the enhancement of learning and teaching is underpinned by four strategies: Portfolio Development, Portfolio Delivery, Learner Engagement and Learner Support. The Education Manual (EM) underpins the implementation of these four strategies (paragraph 106). At the time of preparing the Reflective Analysis (RA), SRUC stated that these four strategies were being reviewed and updated in line with the Quality Code for Higher Education 2013-18 (Quality Code), SRUC structural developments (paragraph 2) and sectoral changes.

#### **Strategy and the management of change**

77 SRUC's strategic vision for its academic activities is also set out in the Academic Strategy 2017, with some priority actions, for example, developing a strategic approach to addressing NSS outcomes, set out in the Academic Business Plan 2018-21. The SRUC academic governance and committee structure plays a key role in implementing strategy and the ELIR team learned during the visit that this structure had recently been revised to reflect the establishment of the new faculty structures (paragraph 2). The key committees and groups responsible for academic standards and the quality of the student experience are the: Academic Board; Learning and Teaching Committee; Research Committee; Programme Approvals and Academic Standards Committee; and Student Support and Engagement Committee.

78 During the review, the ELIR team explored with senior colleagues, staff and students, SRUC's plans to deliver its Strategic Plan 2018-2023, the transformation

programme and plans to ensure the quality and academic standards of its provision remain secure. Staff and students who met the team confirmed they were being kept fully aware of changes and that there had been consultation and other opportunities to engage with strategic planning. Staff were appreciative of monthly briefings and consultations led by senior staff on all campuses and it was evident that they valued the clarity of this approach. The ELIR team's view is that during a period of considerable strategic change SRUC has paid particular attention to the need to engage staff at all stages of the process.

79 As well as establishing new faculty and department structures as part of its current restructuring programme, the ELIR team heard from senior staff that SRUC was in the process of establishing a new Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Office to support the recently-appointed Head of Learning and Teaching. SRUC had also recently established and appointed to the post of Registrar, as part of its plans to establish a Registry. During the review visit, the team heard more about the role of the new Faculty Deans in managing change and driving strategic enhancements across the institution. The RA confirmed the Deans were working on developing a new regional structure for the faculties and departments. The team also heard that SRUC was working on proposals to develop departmental committee structures to support the maintenance of academic standards and to provide regular opportunities for academic and research staff to debate key matters linked to enhancing the student experience. These developments are part of SRUC's plans to reinforce and coordinate the strategic management of enhancement across the institution. The Deans direct onsite presence in, and engagement with, the campuses was positively commented on by staff. While recognising these developments were at an early stage, the team considered that these changes were positive.

80 From consideration of the minutes of the key committees and operational groups, the ELIR team formed the view that significant strategic leadership for academic enhancement emanates from individual senior staff or from operational groups such as the Quality Assurance/Quality Enhancement Group (QA/QE Group), the Research Division Management Team and the Academic Leadership Team. By contrast, key committees such as Academic Board and the Learning and Teaching Committee appeared to assume the role of being in receipt of operational reports, with less emphasis placed on engaging in strategic academic dialogue or providing strategic leadership for enhancement. The ELIR team therefore recommends that SRUC uses the opportunity provided by recent changes to the governance and committee structure (paragraph 77) to review the balance of responsibilities and accountability between academic committees and operational structures. In doing so, SRUC should ensure there can be informed debate within its committee structure on key academic matters relating to learning and teaching and the wider student experience.

### **Embedding an enhancement culture**

81 In line with sector expectations, SRUC operates a programme of Institutional-led Reviews (ILRs) across its academic provision which, while linked to revalidation and focusing on quality assurance matters, also includes elements of enhancement, including a clear requirement for identifying good practice and action planning (paragraphs 103 and 104). In response to a recommendation in the 2014 ELIR, SRUC has also, as part of its annual monitoring processes, introduced the use of academic dialogue meetings with each department's management team to discuss annual departmental monitoring reports (paragraph 105). The ELIR team considered that both the ILR and annual monitoring processes provide SRUC with useful opportunities to both embed existing institutional enhancement themes and to identify new enhancement priorities with direct links to appropriate action plans.

82 SRUC shared with the ELIR team that, with the relatively recent publication of its Education Manual (in 2018), its current focus was on ensuring these policies and procedures

were appropriately embedded across the institution, and therefore a monitoring process was in place to ensure SRUC has evidence linked to the completion of and compliance with key quality processes. The team recognised that, within the policies and procedures contained within the Education Manual, SRUC have all the components required to support its goal of truly embedding an enhancement culture across the institution (paragraph 106).

### **3.2 Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity**

83 SRUC is engaging appropriately with the national Enhancement Themes and has developed structures and projects to facilitate this. In line with sector practice, an institutional team has been established to coordinate SRUC's Theme-related activities and promote staff and student engagement across the institution. The institutional team is led by a senior member of staff and includes staff and student representation from across SRUC campuses, as well as staff with specific responsibilities for learner engagement, learner support and business intelligence. The institutional team reports to the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Academic Leadership Team (ALT) and, via the QA/QE Group, to departments, practitioners and students.

84 SRUC has taken an approach to the current Enhancement Theme (Evidence for Enhancement: Supporting the Student Experience) that builds on work undertaken in the previous Theme (Student Transitions). Institutional activities continue to build on the integration of further and higher education across SRUC and also support the delivery of key areas of strategic development linked to the educational portfolio (paragraph 3). The RA stated that, during the current Enhancement Theme, SRUC aims to foster an ethos that demonstrates the importance of considering evidence for enhancement across the whole student experience by ensuring necessary evidence is available in a timely manner and is used to reflect on and identify good practice. A number of projects are outlined to deliver this within the SRUC's Enhancement Theme plans, including strengthening the annual monitoring and Institution-led Review processes through the use of learning analytics and investigating the current delivery of modern apprenticeships to inform development of technical/graduate apprenticeships. In addition, SRUC provides annual funding to support a small number of pedagogic projects linked to Themes activities, with the outputs from these shared widely through a number of internal fora, including institution-wide seminars, staff workshops and SRUC's annual Learning and Teaching Conference.

85 There are implicit links between SRUC's Enhancement Themes work and other key institutional developments, specifically the further development of monitoring and review processes, a SRUC-wide business intelligence (BI) project, and the development of a digital strategy. The BI project, which is being led by the Head of Information Systems, will support SRUC to review and revise its business and data reporting to reflect the new faculty structure. This project will also provide the opportunity to enhance the functionality and quality of the reports produced by SRUC's systems. The RA acknowledged that this work is at an early stage. SRUC's expectation is that the output of these projects will further support the use of data in monitoring reports and annual dialogue meetings (paragraph 105). The ELIR team would encourage SRUC to maintain its focus on these projects and their wider linkages, and to further consider how they can evaluate the overall impact on enhancing the student learning experience.

### **3.3 Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice**

86 The RA stated that SRUC believes being a tertiary institution, which incorporates a range of expertise from its research and consultancy activity across a broad range of subject disciplines, is a distinct strength in identifying and sharing good practice. The ELIR team noted a range of practice in place to support this view. SRUC has an effective and systematic approach for identifying and sharing good practice using a range of mechanisms,

both formal and informal, as well as drawing on external networks and agencies to support enhancement. Internal mechanisms for sharing good practice include: the annual Learning and Teaching Conference where staff can present on enhancement projects and innovations in teaching or student support; student feedback in surveys and module evaluations; Teacher Liaison Group and Programme Management Team meetings; and an electronic publication, the E-SIN, which allows staff to present high-level information about activities they have been undertaking and signposts staff to sources of further information. The ELIR team considered that the attendance levels reported by SRUC at its annual Learning and Teaching Conference were particularly impressive, with 148 colleagues attending in 2017 and 161 in 2018 (at the time of the current ELIR, SRUC's total academic staff with significant learning and teaching responsibilities was 193 head count). For a distributed institution the team believes these figures demonstrate significant commitment and effort on the part of SRUC and its staff.

87 The weekly pan-SRUC seminar series covers both research and teaching topics and is open to both staff and students. Outputs from both the Enhancement Theme-related projects and smaller pedagogic projects are also reported through these seminars (paragraph 84). SRUC acknowledges that, although these seminars are recorded, and any associated presentations placed on SRUC's web-based collaborative platform, staff engagement has been poor mainly because the timing of the seminars often overlaps with the teaching commitments of staff. SRUC is therefore encouraged to consider how the future delivery of the seminars can be developed to support greater staff engagement.

88 Academic Dialogue meetings, while considering the outcomes from annual monitoring processes at programme and departmental level, specifically ask colleagues to report on and highlight areas of potential good practice and develop Quality Enhancement Plans following these meetings. The ELIR team viewed these meetings as being an effective mechanism for identifying and exploring examples of good practice (paragraph 105). The six Department Quality Enhancement Coordinators (DQECs) also play an important role in promoting enhancement opportunities to colleagues and there was an expectation articulated by senior staff who met the ELIR team that the new faculty structures would also bring additional strategic focus to activities at cross-departmental level. In addition, industry engagement was cited by staff as an important element in enhancing their learning and teaching practice.

### **3.4 Engaging, developing and supporting staff**

89 SRUC has effective arrangements in place for engaging and supporting staff in the development of their learning, teaching and scholarly practices, offering a range of formal and informal staff development opportunities. The RA stated that the engagement and support of staff across learning and teaching is a key focus for SRUC and is driven by a Staff Development Policy and associated procedures. The Staff Development Policy has been developed to ensure qualifications that impact the safe and successful delivery of teaching, for example, Lantra (the Sector Skills Council for Land-based and Environmental Industries) certificates of competency are a priority.

90 The 2014 ELIR, encouraged SRUC to progress its plans to implement an institution-wide approach to staff induction and mentoring. The current ELIR team considered that positive progress had been made with the introduction and implementation of these processes. The RA noted an expectation that all staff should have a recognised teaching qualification and there are a number of routes available to staff for gaining a qualification appropriate to their SCQF level of delivery. Staff concentrating primarily on HE delivery are required to undertake a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education by distance-learning with either the University of the Highlands and Islands or the Robert Gordon University. Staff confirmed that this policy was being implemented and maintained.

91 SRUC is also implementing a Professional Discussion of Learning and Teaching procedure which asks staff to select one of three mechanisms (Developmental Classroom Observation, Peer Support of Teaching and Learning Walks) to support the peer review of their learning and teaching practice. Staff who had engaged with this procedure were positive about the experience and the benefits to their professional development. SRUC recognised initial challenges in engaging HE-focused staff in particular to engage with this procedure. The ELIR team would encourage SRUC to continue with its plans for full implementation of the Professional Discussion of Learning and Teaching procedure across all teaching staff.

92 In meetings with the ELIR team, staff confirmed that discussions around their professional development needs and aspirations took place with their line managers as part of SRUC's annual Performance Management process. SRUC offers a range of internal continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for staff related to quality matters and business and student support. Membership of Landex (Land Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence is a subscriber organisation for UK land-based FE and HE providers) and other external agencies also provides staff with access to a range of CPD opportunities relevant to the land-based sector. Throughout the review visit, the team was able to discuss a range of specific enhancement activities that staff were actively involved with, and in many cases leading, often in relation to the curriculum or student support areas for which they were responsible. The team was also informed about a number of instances of staff presenting at sectoral events, and in one case participating in curriculum-related ERASMUS exchange activity.

93 The majority of staff the ELIR team met exhibited an enthusiasm and appetite for engaging in enhancement work. Staff spoke about being encouraged and supported by SRUC to engage in enhancement-related activity and believed the institution was committed to their professional development. While time for these activities is included in their personal development plans, many colleagues indicated that competing workload demands impacted on their ability to fit development and enhancement activity around other work. These concerns by staff were recognised in the RA which indicated that discussions on time-remission, including study leave, should take place at Performance Management Review meetings and link to a centrally-managed staff development budget. During the review visit, the newly-appointed Head of Learning and Teaching indicated that work was planned to explore supporting staff development needs, including student support areas, with the Heads of Department and DQECs. The team would encourage SRUC to explore and maximise the opportunities presented by the establishment of its new faculty and departmental structures, and the evolving departmental Quality Enhancement Planning process (paragraph 105), to build further opportunities for staff to engage in enhancement activities.

94 SRUC believe the faculty and departmental restructuring currently underway will allow it to bring further strategic alignment to the use of resource to support staff professional development in line with its overall Strategic Plan. As part of this, and in relation to the institution's strategic ambition to strengthen research-teaching and consultancy-teaching links, the ELIR team learned that SRUC plans to involve staff who would have traditionally had roles linked to the delivery of research and consultancy directly in the delivery of learning, teaching and assessment. In order to support this, SRUC should establish a clear policy which outlines the minimum training to be completed by all staff new to teaching or returning after a gap, before undertaking teaching and/or assessment responsibilities (paragraphs 2, 63 and 98).

### **3.5 Effectiveness of the approach to implementing institutional strategies and enhancing learning and teaching**

95 SRUC has an effective approach to enhancing teaching and learning and the wider student experience managed through its Academic Strategy and supporting strategies. SRUC is engaging appropriately with the national Enhancement Themes and had developed structures and projects to support this, which also help deliver key aspects of its Academic Strategy.

96 At the time of the ELIR, SRUC was implementing a transformation programme involving significant restructuring and organisational change. SRUC has paid particular attention to engaging staff at all stages of the process and has been particularly successful in employing an extensive range of communication measures including monthly briefings and consultations led by senior staff on all campuses. It was evidence that staff valued the clarity that this approach provided.

97 SRUC is asked to use the opportunity provided by recent changes to the governance and committee structure to review the balance of responsibilities and accountability between academic committees and operational structures. In doing so, this will ensure there can be informed debate on key academic matters relating to learning and teaching and the wider student experience.

98 It is evident that SRUC recognises the importance of providing development opportunities for all academic staff as identified in the Performance Management Process. In addition, SRUC actively supports academic staff to engage with a range of external and internal development opportunities including the well-attended annual learning and teaching conference and other formal study, pedagogic research and conference opportunities. SRUC has expressed the intention to involve staff who would have traditionally had roles linked to the delivery of research and consultancy directly in the delivery of learning, teaching and assessment. In view of this, SRUC should establish a clear policy which outlines the training to be completed by all staff new to teaching before undertaking teaching and/or assessment responsibilities.

## **4 Academic standards and quality processes**

### **4.1 Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and academic standards**

#### **Taught programmes**

99 SRUC does not currently have its own degree awarding powers. The University of Edinburgh and University of Glasgow have ultimate 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 defined in detailed Memoranda of Agreement (MoA), originally signed with the former Scottish Agriculture College (paragraph 2). The MoAs stipulate that the overall quality arrangements for SRUC programmes should reflect those of the awarding body in relation to programme validation, assessment, external examining and programme monitoring. The two awarding institutions have devolved considerable authority to SRUC for the monitoring and management of academic standards. For SRUC's HNC and HND provision, the overall responsibility for the academic standards of these awards lies with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

## Programme design and validation

100 Procedures used for programme design and validation are comprehensively set out in the SRUC Education Manual (EM). Validation processes are centred upon stakeholder consultation, including students, employers, professional bodies, and external academics, helping to ensure appropriate content, academic level and quality of learning opportunities. These processes are further informed by market intelligence information and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements and/or occupational standards as necessary. Following each validation event, the outcomes are reported to SRUC's Learning and Teaching Committee, via the Programme Approval and Review Committee, before submission to the awarding institution for approval.

101 Programmes are typically validated on a six-yearly cycle, with the revalidation process based upon a similar level of stakeholder engagement as the initial validation. SRUC considers its relationships with the awarding institutions allow it to have a high-degree of autonomy in terms of curriculum development, secured by:

- full documentation relating to programme specification, module descriptors, learning outcomes and assessment criteria being in place for each degree
- the composition of validating panels
- external examiner arrangements, with externals engaged, inducted and supported by SRUC, but approved by and reporting in parallel to the awarding institution
- SRUC's degree procedures reflecting University of Glasgow regulations as published within their Academic Calendar (including the code of assessment), these are applied to all of SRUC's degree provision regardless of the awarding institution.

102 For University of Edinburgh awards, SRUC is required to present a report on its programmes to the annual meeting of the University/SRUC Joint Accreditation Committee and for University of Glasgow awards, the University/SRUC Joint Liaison Committee. These reports and a commentary are included within the annual quality and standards reports received by the relevant University Senate. Thus, the awarding institutions exercise their awarding body responsibilities primarily through the programme validation process, the approval and reporting arrangements of external examiners, and also assessment moderation arrangements.

## Institution-led Review

103 SRUC's Institution-led Review (ILR) process, is normally aligned with the revalidation of programmes; it is a peer process and has been designed to confirm both the academic standards and the quality of the provision. In accordance with SFC guidance, SRUC includes student representation in its ILR process. The ELIR team noted that by including students and external representation, all key stakeholders are appropriately engaged and represented. The ILR requires the production of a Self-Evaluation Document (SED), the drafting of which is managed by a Departmental Quality Enhancement Co-ordinator (DQEC) (paragraph 107) who ensures that staff and students have the opportunity to provide feedback and comments in the pre-submission draft. The RA stated that each ILR includes all HE programmes within a single department and notes that, from 2016-17, this also included FE delivery. SRUC had undertaken a separate ILR for the Postgraduate Research Provision (2018-19).

104 The ELIR team considered the ILR process to be robust and the outcome reports generated from each ILR indicate the process is effective. The outcomes from each ILR are reported to SRUC's Learning and Teaching Committee, with this information also shared with the awarding institutions - Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and QAA Scotland (QAAS).

## Annual monitoring

105 The ELIR team considered the annual monitoring process undertaken at programme and departmental-level to be effective, robust, well-documented and implemented across SRUC. Annual Programme Monitoring is led by each Programme Management Team and provides an evidence-based evaluation report of the academic standards and quality of the learning experience for a programme, along with a Quality Enhancement Plan. Each DQEC uses the completed reports to inform the Departmental Quality Enhancement Report, which supports the creation of a Departmental Quality Enhancement Plan. The Departmental Quality Enhancement Reports and Plans are submitted to the Academic Development Team and also received by SRUC's Learning and Teaching Committee to ensure that actions intended to enhance provision and plans to disseminate good practice are appropriate. One of the key parts of the annual monitoring processes is the Annual Dialogue meetings held with each department's management team. These meetings support a two-way dialogue about key priorities from each departmental annual report and identify examples of good practice (paragraph 88). Ultimately, this monitoring process underpins and informs the development of the annual Institutional Evaluative Report and Enhancement Plan for submission to key external stakeholders including SFC, QAA and Education Scotland.

## Education Manual

106 SRUC had recently completed the development of its Education Manual (EM), which comprehensively sets out its regulatory and operational frameworks for academic provision and is available to staff and students. The EM is supplemented by a series of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for use by staff. The formal launch of the EM in 2017-18 was supported by a series of workshops across SRUC campuses, the creation of a Quality Calendar, and the establishment of a designated email address to support staff with specific queries related to the EM and supporting documents. Given the relatively recent adoption of the EM, SRUC confirmed that a process was currently in place to actively monitor the extent to which key procedures were being followed across the different SRUC campuses (paragraph 82). The ELIR team learned that SRUC plans to review the EM to support the development of the new faculty and departmental structures associated with its transformation programme and allow mapping against the Quality Code. The team would encourage SRUC to proceed with these plans.

107 Six Departmental Quality Enhancement Coordinators (DQECs) also provide support to staff who may be unfamiliar with the quality policy and procedures in the EM. The ELIR team learned the DQECs make significant efforts to schedule regular meetings (either face-to-face or via video conferencing) where they come together to discuss and consider cross-institutional quality assurance and enhancement matters. The DQECs who the team met, spoke confidently about the extent to which the quality assurance aspect of their role strengthened the quality enhancement activities of SRUC (paragraph 80).

108 The ELIR team explored the role of the QA/QE Group with SRUC and learned that this Group sits outside SRUC's formal committee structures. As a working group, it is tasked with developing policies and procedures to enhance quality assurance and quality enhancement. Overall, the team considered that, even with its somewhat informal status, the QA/QE Group is functioning effectively and contributes to supporting quality enhancement activities across SRUC.

## Assessment

109 SRUC's assessment policy, implemented in 2015, applies to all students irrespective of mode of delivery. The RA indicated that the implementation of policies and procedures relating to assessment has been a focus for SRUC in order to achieve a more consistent approach across programmes and campuses. Since the 2014 ELIR, SRUC has also taken steps to better define how graduate attributes align with module assessment through a revised module descriptor template, although some older module descriptors reviewed by the ELIR team still lacked this level of detail. The team would encourage SRUC to continue to use the opportunities provided by programme revalidation to update all of its module descriptors to ensure they meet its expectations in terms of defining graduate attributes.

110 All assessment is subject to internal moderation prior to issuing to students, with external moderation also used for module provision at SCQF Levels 9, 10 and 11. The ELIR team understood that all assessed student work is subject to second-marking and external verification by either the SQA for HN provision or an external examiner for undergraduate and postgraduate modules. SRUC operates a two-tier Board of Examiners system, with tier 1 boards considering module results and tier 2 boards considering the progression and achievement of students. Overall, the team considered that SRUC's procedures for assuring the quality of assessments were appropriate and operating effectively (paragraphs 45 and 46).

### 4.2 Use of external reference points in quality processes

111 SRUC makes good use of a range of external reference points to set and maintain its academic standards including the Scottish Curriculum and Quality Framework (SCQF), Education Scotland's 'How Good is our College' quality framework, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), and the requirements of relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). SRUC also works within the requirements of the MoAs of its awarding institutions in delivering its HE provision (paragraph 99). For postgraduate research (PGR) students, SRUC works closely with the awarding institutions to confirm that academic standards remain appropriate (paragraph 55-63).

112 As a specialist land-based provider, SRUC also places value on the annual peer review process undertaken by Landex (Land Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence) (paragraph 92). The ELIR team noted that SRUC uses this review process primarily to obtain 'critical friend' feedback on identified priorities and planned activities, including its preparations for ELIR.

113 SRUC also places great value on the feedback from its external examiners in ensuring the maintenance of its academic standards, with their roles and responsibilities clearly defined within the Education Manual. External examiners for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes are nominated by SRUC and approved by the awarding institution. External examiners are required to submit an annual report to both SRUC and the awarding institution which reflects upon the academic standards and quality of the learning experience. SRUC maintains an oversight of the external examiners' feedback through its Learning and Teaching Committee, allowing it to monitor good practice and identify any cross-institutional issues that require attention. External examiner feedback is also summarised in the overview reports submitted to the awarding institutions and discussed during the joint annual meetings (paragraph 102).

### 4.3 Commentary on action taken since ELIR 3

114 The 2014 ELIR identified eight areas for development and the current ELIR team agreed with SRUC that good progress had been made in the majority of areas. With regard to enhancing institutional oversight and academic leadership, SRUC has reviewed its academic governance arrangements, while also ensuring that the new committee structure is in line with the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016.

115 SRUC was asked to prioritise the specification of quality assurance processes and the completion of its Education Manual (EM). It is regrettable that there was such a lengthy delay in addressing this outcome; nonetheless, the current ELIR team considered the EM produced was comprehensive, with a clear plan to support its dissemination and further support being provided to staff across SRUC's campuses by the DQECs (paragraphs 88 and 107). SRUC's revised governance arrangements (paragraphs 77, 80, 97 and 114), the completed EM (paragraph 106) and the establishment of Academic Dialogue meetings (paragraphs 105) have allowed it to address the priority action from the 2014 ELIR effectively. The action asked SRUC to ensure academic dialogue and critical reflection was taking place systematically and regularly at programme, department and institutional-level.

116 The current ELIR team considered that SRUC has improved consistency with its assessment documentation, revised its module documentation and developed guidance for staff. The team noted that SRUC was continuing with its work to ensure that staff adhered to the assessment and feedback expectations as defined within the EM (paragraphs 109 and 110). The implementation of the EM, a broadening of the Institution-led Review (ILR) process to consider student services and the postgraduate research (PGR) student experience, and new procedures for managing staff induction and staff development, have all supported SRUC to progress work to harmonise programme delivery over multiple campuses and establish its approach to curriculum design.

117 SRUC has ensured that formal agreements are in place for all postgraduate research students (paragraphs 3 and 55) and for its current collaborative taught provision with the Royal Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh; the Botanical Gardens, Glasgow; and the Organic Research Centre (paragraph 3 and 128).

118 With respect to the final two recommendations from the 2014 ELIR, the current ELIR team agreed that SRUC demonstrated useful progress. In relation to the management of information, including the development of more accurate and timely data, a Business Intelligence Group has been established and further work is planned to enhance accessibility of data for staff to support enhancement activities (paragraph 85). Finally, in relation to the mapping of the Quality Code, the team noted that this work was not completed until 2018. After exploring this issue with SRUC colleagues, the team learned that this was linked to the delays associated with the production of the Education Manual (paragraph 106).

### 4.4 Approach to using data to inform decision-making and evaluation

119 The 2014 ELIR asked SRUC to improve its data quality in order to support enhanced decision-making within the institution. SRUC acknowledged that progress in developing the reporting and use of data had been slower than they would have wished, partly due to discussions over an extended time period on its future status (paragraph 3). However, the RA clearly demonstrated that work has progressed in this area through the creation of a Business Intelligence Group to improve the provision of data, including Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

120 SRUC's annual monitoring arrangements use a range of KPIs to support the programme evaluation process. However, the ELIR team's view is that, typically, the data used is at a relatively high level with particular focus on student recruitment and progression

figures. Consequently, the team considered that the potential exists for the current programme evaluation to mask issues that would be identified if a greater level of granularity existed within the available dataset. For example, programme teams tend to report student achievement and retention data at the individual programme level, but with little or no reference to student characteristics such as gender or age and without comparison to either overall SRUC performance indicators or other programme areas. The team believed there would be benefit to SRUC in extending its use of performance benchmarks, in order to enhance the evaluative nature of the annual monitoring process. The team also noted that the extent of formal student feedback included with the annual monitoring process was often limited, with SRUC's internal End of Year survey typically attracting a very modest student response rate (around 10%) (paragraphs 21). SRUC is currently working to improve student response rates to the range of surveys it employs, and the team would encourage SRUC to continue with its plans in this area so this data can play a more meaningful part in the programme evaluation processes (paragraph 123).

121 The ELIR team learned that SRUC is actively seeking to improve the results and feedback obtained from the National Student Survey (NSS) (paragraph 21). While accepting that consideration of the NSS results had recently become a priority of the Academic Leadership Team (paragraphs 21 and 22), the team noted that there was limited evidence of the NSS results being evaluated or strategies for responding to the results being actively considered by the institutional committees, such as the Academic Board and Student Support and Engagement Committee (SSEC). The team considered there would be benefit to SRUC reflecting on how its NSS data could be used more effectively outside the individual departments to determine an appropriate cross-institutional strategy for progressing themes and any concerns that emerge. Linked to this, SRUC could consider reviewing the timing of the SSEC meetings so they align more closely with the release of NSS results.

122 The data available to SRUC in relation to its postgraduate research (PGR) students is relatively limited, with no mechanisms in place to ensure SRUC receives comprehensive and automatic data updates from its awarding institutions (paragraph 60). The ELIR team would encourage SRUC to explore the opportunities for greater data sharing with the awarding institutions, given this would enable enhanced monitoring to take place (paragraph 126).

123 SRUC acknowledged that further work remains to be carried out to improve its data sets and is committed to improving the accessibility and timeliness of data for key committees, departments and programme teams. Recognising the progress made in improving business information, SRUC is asked to continue to enhance the range of data sets produced, analysed and reported on, ensuring this evidence informs monitoring and decision-making on all aspects of academic quality including enhancing the student experience. The ELIR team would encourage SRUC to maintain a focus on the equivalence of student and staff experience across its campuses and programmes, and its ability to monitor progress towards defined performance targets across its distributed operation. While recognising that its activities span FE and HE, SRUC should ensure it benchmarks its performance against other higher education institutions wherever appropriate.

#### **4.5 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards**

124 SRUC has appropriate arrangements in place for securing academic standards, making appropriate use of key external reference points, and meeting the requirements of its current awarding partners. The University of Edinburgh and University of Glasgow have ultimate responsibility for securing and maintaining the academic standards of each degree programme delivered in their name by SRUC. The Education Manual comprehensively sets out SRUC's regulatory and operational frameworks for academic provision. Annual monitoring is effective, robust and well-documented.

#### **4.6 Effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the effective use of data to inform decision-making**

125 SRUC has made useful progress since the 2014 ELIR in developing its ability to improve the quality and accessibility of its data. However, limitations remain around the accessibility and quality of some data sets used to support SRUC's evaluative activities. With regard to NSS data, as well as working on improving student response rates, SRUC is encouraged to consider how this data could be used more effectively outside the individual departments to determine an appropriate cross-institutional strategy for progressing themes and concerns that emerge.

126 Recognising the progress made in improving business information, SRUC are asked to continue to enhance the range of data sets produced, analysed and reported on, ensuring this evidence informs monitoring and decision-making on all aspects of academic quality including enhancing the student experience. There would be considerable value in SRUC working with its awarding institutions to ensure the institution has access to management data, particularly that related to its postgraduate research students.

## **5 Collaborative provision**

### **5.1 Key features of the institution's strategic approach**

127 The RA outlined the ongoing importance of collaborations and partnerships to all levels of SRUC's current and future activities. This commitment is further emphasised in the Academic Strategy 2017 and the Academic Business Plan 2018-21. A number of illustrative examples were described in the RA which underlines the extent and diversity of these collaborations and partnerships, how they support and work across research, further and higher education interests and how they directly and indirectly enhance the student experience. While these relationships are all positive, they were not a central focus of the ELIR, representing mainly a range of research, schools' engagement or placement partnerships.

128 SRUC has three collaborative partnerships which relate to its higher education provision. These are with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh (RBGE); the Botanic Gardens, Glasgow (BGG); and the Organic Research Centre, Newbury (ORC). In the case of the Botanic Gardens, Glasgow the awards are taught by SRUC staff, who use the Botanic Garden facilities to support the delivery and therefore, this collaborative partnership was not a focus for the review.

129 SRUC's key collaborative activity is with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh (RBGE). This 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 a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) is in place, which has been updated for the period April 2014 to March 2019. The 2014 ELIR noted a delay in renewing the previous MoA (which ran to June 2013). The 2014 ELIR report also indicated that the reports of the annual meetings taking place between SRUC and RBGE in this period provided limited evidence of genuine reflection or evaluation of the partnership. The current team noted improvements in the effectiveness of the meetings between SRUC and RBGE, with the meeting reports indicating feedback was reflected on and action taken to improve the student experience.

130 The RA confirmed SRUC remains committed to its collaboration with RBGE. The MoA requires RBGE staff to deliver and assess modules in accordance with the policies and procedures of SRUC and the University of Glasgow. Management of the programme is the responsibility of the SRUC programme leader. RBGE provides specialist facilities and staff

expertise, with their staff delivering approximately half of the programme. The RA stated that this specialist input is of particular value to students in the later stages of the programme and in supporting them with their honours' projects.

131 At the time of the current ELIR, negotiations had commenced with RBGE to extend the current MoA, due to end in March 2019. During the visit, SRUC shared a renewed MoA, appropriate to the purposes of the collaboration, which had been signed by both organisations to extend the collaboration to March 2024. The team was able to confirm this revised agreement clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of both RBGE and SRUC.

132 The RA stated that an annual dialogue takes place between SRUC and RBGE to review the performance of the programmes, the partnership agreement and funding, and ensure that the RBGE delivers their responsibilities in accordance with SRUC (and therefore University of Glasgow) policies and procedures. These annual programme meetings inform the overarching programme and departmental annual monitoring reports for horticulture. Based on a sample of annual reports, the ELIR team considered it was clear that the provision delivered at RBGE was being appropriately reviewed by the programme team and appropriate actions were being taken in response to any issues identified. During the ELIR, SRUC confirmed that, following recent changes in personnel in both organisations, the relevant faculty and departmental leads are working closely with RBGE to ensure a close and ongoing working partnership is maintained.

133 Although a requirement for professional development of RBGE staff is not captured in the new MoA, SRUC confirmed three members of staff at RBGE were now being supported to complete the PDA in Teaching Practice in Scotland's Colleges.

134 The ELIR team also noted SRUC's ongoing relationship with the Organic Research Centre (ORC), which provides specialist input to the MSc Organic Farming programme, delivered by distance-learning. Again, the responsibilities of SRUC and the Organic Research Centre are captured within a formal MoA, set up along similar lines to the arrangements with RBGE. Input from ORC is captured within annual programme monitoring and a member of ORC staff is an associate member of the programme team. The ELIR team met a small group of students studying on this programme, who indicated that they valued the unique and specialist nature of the award, and the benefit of being able to study at a distance.

## **5.2 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative provision**

135 SRUC has an effective approach to managing its collaborative activity.

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