



## **Scotland's Rural College**

### **Follow-up Report to the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)**

**August 2015**

#### **Preface**

One year after publication of their ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to submit a Follow-up Report to QAA Scotland. These reports are also submitted to the Scottish Funding Council. Follow-up Reports are written in the institution's own words and require to be endorsed by the institution's Governing Body prior to publication on the QAA website. Guidance on the content and structure is provided by QAA Scotland.

Institutions are asked to focus on the action they have taken since the review and to include an indication of the effectiveness of that action. ELIR reports highlight positive practice as well as areas for development, and institutions are encouraged to comment on key areas of activity relating to good practice that they have prioritised since the ELIR.

Follow-up Reports are discussed with institutions as part of the ELIR annual discussion meetings. They also form the basis of a follow-up event which involves institutions that were reviewed around the same time coming together to explore the ways they have responded to their ELIR outcomes. This activity is intended to emphasise the enhancement-led nature of the review method.



## **SRUC (Scotland's Rural College)**

### **Follow-up to ELIR (August 2015)**

#### **1. Introduction**

SRUC participated in the third cycle of Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) between March and May 2014. At the time SRUC was less than two years old having been formed in October 2012 from the merger of four 'legacy colleges' – Barony, Elmwood, Oatridge and The Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) – to create an integrated multi-campus institution delivering tertiary education, research and consultancy to serve a range of stakeholders in agriculture, land and the rural sector. Prior to review the institution had stated a strategic aim to seek taught and research degree awarding powers and asked the review team to consider its preparedness to make such an application.

Staff and students were extremely pleased to achieve the highest of three possible outcomes - a judgement of 'effectiveness' - so soon after merger. SRUC also fully accepted that it was still on a journey in its development and hence recognised the validity of the review's recommendation that it should, as a matter of priority, ensure there is academic dialogue and critical reflection taking place systematically and regularly at programme, department and, in particular, institution level in order to meet its strategic intentions.

A separate review of further education provision was conducted around the same time by Education Scotland<sup>1</sup>. A report comparing the outcomes of the two reviews was prepared by QAA and Education Scotland for the Scottish Funding Council<sup>2</sup>.

The recognition of a number of areas of positive practice in the ELIR report was particularly valued by the College and in part provided support for its progress since merger:

- Commitment and progress towards creating a tertiary institution
- Priority given to improving student representation and engagement
- Network of student support
- Holistic approach to developing employability skills

In late 2014 the Scottish Funding Council conducted a 'two-years-on' post merger review of SRUC on behalf of the Scottish Government. The Council considered that the merger could be regarded as a success in terms of achievement against the key success criteria which included: effective leadership and governance; communications and engagement with staff, students and external stakeholders; organisational development. The Council noted, however, that 'financial and estates issues are still a

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/SRUCFullRev300514\\_tcm4-830516.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/SRUCFullRev300514_tcm4-830516.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ExternalReviewofSRUCOct%2014\\_tcm4-843263.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ExternalReviewofSRUCOct%2014_tcm4-843263.pdf)

challenge which may require financial assistance from the Council to resolve. This will be essential to realise the full benefits of the merger to students and staff’.

At the time of the ELIR in March 2014, SRUC announced its intention to explore a closer ‘strategic alignment’ with the University of Edinburgh. Detailed discussions with the University took place during 2014 and 2015. In June 2015 SRUC and the University made a joint announcement that after significant consideration, they have agreed to build on their existing strong relationship and to continue to work closely as independent institutions. Given SRUC’s unique position and industry relevance, both parties recognised the importance of SRUC retaining independent governance in order to ensure appropriate delivery of its services to stakeholders, particularly in the areas of academic activities, including its strongly impact-focused research, and its longstanding regional presence throughout Scotland. The discussions held both internally and with the University during the past year and in particular those under the auspices of the Joint Academic Working Group, have contributed appreciably to the further development of SRUC’s academic vision and are highly relevant to its future as an independent institution.

As the National Provider, SRUC was asked by the SFC to lead on the development of a National Strategy for Land-based Education and Training (up to and including SCQF Level 8). A review of eleven industry sectors was undertaken. The work involved discussions with all of Scotland’s College Principals/Senior Managers and relevant industry representatives, and has resulted in the identification of both sector-specific recommendations and common cross-sectoral priorities of strategic importance to the future of Land-based Education and Training in Scotland. The report was published in August 2015<sup>3</sup>. Its impact on SRUC’s portfolio will be further considered during 2015-16.

In light of the above, at the time of finalising this report, SRUC is in the process of reviewing and consolidating its future strategic plans. It recognises that stronger collaboration across all three SRUC divisions (Education, Consulting and Research) is vital to improving SRUC’s future sustainability, effectiveness, market appeal and student experience. Therefore in order to strengthen and develop further its academic strategy SRUC has considered fully merging the Education and Research Divisions, whilst recognising the importance of FE, HE and research to its future and ensuring that we can deliver these functions appropriately. The proposal was endorsed by the SRUC Board in December 2015 and consequently an Academic Strategic Review and Restructure Working Group has been established to consider and take forward the plans, jointly chaired by Dr Kyrsten Black, Assistant Principal, and Professor Nick Sparks, Animal And Veterinary Sciences Research Group Manager, and including representatives from each division; research, education, consulting and professional services. At the same time SRUC is considering the contribution that having its own degree awarding powers might make to its future strategy and development; initially this is being considered by a working group, lead by the outgoing Dean of Postgraduate Studies on behalf of the Executive Management Team, which was established in July 2015 and will report in March 2016.

This report details action that SRUC has taken to address the outcomes contained in the ELIR reports since their publication in August 2014.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/ReportsandPublications/national\\_land\\_based\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/ReportsandPublications/national_land_based_strategy.pdf)

## 2. Report preparation

This report has been developed on behalf of SRUC's Academic Board. On receipt of the ELIR reports members of the ELIR working group, which had been formed in 2013 to oversee SRUC's preparations for the ELIR process, drafted an action plan to address the areas for development and in so doing considered the wider content of the ELIR Technical Report.

Following feedback from the Executive Management Team, the action plan was subsequently approved by the Academic Board and shared with the SRUC Board in December 2014. Progress against the action plan has been, and will continue to be monitored by the Academic Board which includes student representation. The SRUC Board approved the initial Follow-up Report at its meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2015 and will endorse the final version at its meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

## 3. Action to address identified areas for development

The ELIR Outcome Report identified eight areas for development which SRUC was asked to consider. The action plan identified a lead person responsible for developing and implementing the action plan for each area for development and for reporting on progress. This will continue to be reviewed by the Academic Board. The following sections provide an overview of progress to date:

### 3.1 Institutional oversight and academic leadership – Priority Action

*Establish regular and systematic arrangements to ensure there is **institutional oversight** of the conduct and outcomes of key quality processes.*

*Ensure there is strong **academic leadership**, particularly at the institutional level, and that academic dialogue and debate take place at all levels.*

A Governance Review was conducted in the autumn of 2014 on behalf of the SRUC Group Board. As a result the SRUC Board was restructured to better represent academic issues and the Education and Research Boards (sub-boards of the Group Board) which had been put in place at merger to provide oversight on research and education activity during immediate post-merger transition were stood down with effect from November 2014. A number of the responsibilities and powers of the Education Board were hence remitted to the Academic Board. The role, remit and membership of the Academic Board was therefore revised and approved by the Executive Management Team in January 2015. From September 2015 the Academic Board, is being chaired by the Acting Principal and Chief Executive and is now clearly responsible for the core academic governance of SRUC including planning, co-ordination, development and supervision of its academic work (including both research and taught postgraduate activity). The membership has been extended to include further representation from Research, Consulting and Professional Services Divisions. Its remit includes that it should ensure that critical reflection is taking place at programme, departmental and institutional level. The Academic Board meets at least three times each academic year. The remit and membership of the sub-committees of the Academic Board are currently being reviewed to ensure they are appropriate for the future strategic direction of SRUC; the Academic Board receives and considers progress reports with recommended actions from this review to be presented to the Academic Board in July 2016.

The senior executive academic and business leadership requirements of SRUC are discharged as follows; the SRUC Executive Management Team is:

- Janet Swadling, Acting Chief Executive/Principal
- Professor Geoff Simm, Vice Principal Research
- David James, Assistant Principal and acting Head of Education Division
- Mike Wijnberg, Managing Director SAC Consulting
- Alasdair Cox, Interim Head of Professional Services

Key senior academic roles are fulfilled by the Vice Principal Research – for research and PGR provision. For taught programmes and following the retirement of Professor David McKenzie, Vice Principal Education, in July 2015, Dr Kyrsten Black, then Assistant Principal Higher Education and David James, then Assistant Principal Further Education assumed joint responsibility for the Education Division of SRUC reporting directly to the Acting Chief Executive.

In early October 2015 Mr Pat Machray, now Chairman of the SRUC Board, announced that SRUC had begun the process to recruit a Principal and Chief Executive.

These changes have also helped to clarify the respective roles of the Education Division Management Team and the Academic Board for key quality processes. For example, the latter has received and scrutinised validation, revalidation and institution-led periodic subject review reports during the last academic year, where previously this had been the responsibility of the Education Division Management Team.

An interim procedure for the annual monitoring of quality at programme, department and institution level is in place and the review of the 2014-15 academic year will proceed on time through the new committee structure. The full revision of annual monitoring procedures will be completed in time for the start of the 2016-17 academic year, having been suspended pending the outcome of the strategic alignment discussions which might have seen University of Edinburgh policies and procedures adopted for HE provision.

At the time of ELIR in 2014 the Academic Board and its sub-committees were only months old. They have met regularly during 2014-15 and their operation is still developing and evolving. This also applies to the role of the six teaching departments, led by the Heads of Department and, particularly as it applies to the management of quality at programme and department level, assisted by their Department Quality Enhancement Co-ordinators.

### **3.2 Management of information**

*Ensure the data being collected is valid and reliable, following work to integrate legacy data management systems. SRUC needs to ensure it can make comparisons between programmes and within programmes, and to disaggregate data relating to students studying on different modes, for example to identify any differences in progression and completion rates. In addition, SRUC needs to use the information set for comparison against national norms and to inform decision-making, policy and practice at institutional, department and programme levels.*

Priority during 2014-15 has been placed on refining the data management system and particularly with respect to the collection of suitable completion data for HE programmes. This is complicated by the current SRUC regime of co-delivery of HN and Degree programmes at SCQF levels 7 and 8 and the availability of 'annual' exit awards. Oversight of student data in relation to student success is being strengthened. Joint work between Academic Development and Education Business Support teams has taken place during 2014-15 to identify reporting requirements. It has been recognised that changes to results reporting are necessary in order to allow

satisfactory analysis at programme level and above. Changes are being put in place effective from the 2015-16 academic year which should result in more comprehensive analysis to contribute to annual monitoring. Work is also ongoing to identify benchmarks suitable to SRUC's co-delivery of HN and degree programmes. The work is being led and monitored by the Education Divisional Management Team which in autumn 2015 initiated a working group to review the management of education data in SRUC, including its use in quality management and enhancement – led by the Head of Information Systems and including the Assistant Principal HE.

### **3.3 Mapping to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education**

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

It was always intended following the formation of SRUC that this work would be embedded within and closely linked to the development of quality assurance processes (see 3.4 below) such that as policies and processes were reviewed, revised and/or developed there would be consultation with and cross-referencing to the Quality Code. As a result of the postponed completion of the Education Manual, due to the anticipation of strategic alignment and the consequent adoption on University of Edinburgh academic policy and practice, it is now recognised that the mapping to the Quality Code in order to evidence that SRUC is meeting its expectations needs to be progressed as an urgent priority to be completed before the end of the 2015-16 academic year. The work will be overseen by the Assistant Principal HE on behalf of the Academic Board.

### **3.4 Specification of quality assurance processes**

*Prioritise the specification of its quality processes and the completion of the Education Manual ... by December 2014 as intended to avoid a lack of clarity and possible confusion by staff around their involvement with the quality assurance processes.*

The creation of the SRUC Education Manual - which began in 2014 - has been challenging and it was not completed by the end of 2014 which was the timescale requested by the ELIR team. Particular challenges to completing the Manual include the span of FE and HE, the range of validating bodies and the need for compliance with their particular requirements, the anticipation of a possible move to University of Edinburgh processes for HE. SRUC attaches a high importance to completion of this work and is prioritising section completion using a risk assessment approach; it is currently planned that much of the work will be completed in time for implementation for the 2016-17 academic year. Progress, led by the Academic Development Manager, HE, continues to be reported to, and monitored by the Academic Board.

Whilst the SRUC Education Manual is in development, local legacy college QA procedures continue to be used. For degree programmes, the relevant sections of the former SAC Education Manual are in use in relation to: new programme development, annual programme review (monitoring), institution-led [periodic] subject review, assessment policies and procedures (including the external examiners' system). The Education Development Manager HE is responsible for the continued implementation of these procedures, providing advice as required to programme leaders and necessary operational liaison with the validating universities.

New procedures are introduced at an appropriate time following committee approval. For example, from academic year 2014-15 SRUC has operated as a single-centre with respect to SQA awards including Higher Nationals which are delivered across all six campuses. This required the development of new procedures for internal and external verification of delivery and assessment. Procedures were developed by the Academic Development Team and put in place at the start of the 2014-15 academic year and in light of experience have now been reviewed by the Academic Development Committee and revised prior to 2015-16. New SRUC policies and procedures for academic misconduct, academic appeals and student discipline were introduced at the start of the 2015-16 academic year.

As noted above (3.1) an interim hybrid procedure for the annual monitoring of quality for both FE and HE at programme, department and institution level is in place to review the 2014-15 academic year. The effectiveness of this procedure will be evaluated on completion to inform the drafting and finalisation of revised procedures for the Education Manual.

An SQA-led Systems Development exercise took place towards the end of 2014-15 in preparation for the full implementation from August 2015 of revised SQA Quality Criteria; the recommendations arising from this exercise will be incorporated into future development and revisions of SRUC's QA processes.

### **3.5 Assessment**

*As part of its planned work to improve assessment and feedback policy and practice, ensure there is greater consistency in the content and layout of programme handbooks and module descriptors, particularly with regard to the information provided on the nature and submission dates of assessments, and to ensure that all staff are familiar with and fully apply SRUC assessment practices.*

Following feedback from validation and revalidation panels during 2014, the format of degree module descriptors was revised to provide further detail on assessment, its linkage with learning outcomes, and the development of graduate attributes. The revised format was piloted with programmes undergoing revalidation during 2014-15 and the format and guidance is currently being finalised in light of experience and feedback. SRUC's assessment policy was developed during 2014-15 and approved by Academic Board in June; work will continue in 2015-16 to develop further procedures and guidance on assessment and feedback which will draw also on our participation in QAA's Focus on Assessment and Feedback Project. Dissemination and development activity with teaching staff led by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Managers, is taking place as for example during the second annual SRUC Learning and Teaching Conference held at the end of August 2015. Work is planned for 2015-16 to ensure greater consistency in the content of programme handbooks to be in place for the 2016-17 academic year.

### **3.6 Pedagogical development and assessment practice**

*Progress work to harmonise programmes delivered over multiple sites and to establish an SRUC approach to curriculum design.*

The further development of curriculum design and assessment practices particularly at SCQF level 7 and 8 to better facilitate transition to higher levels of undergraduate degrees has been on the agenda since before SRUC's formation in 2012. Further development in this regard was to be integrated in the development of 'four-year' degrees – i.e. not built on a foundation of SQA Higher National awards at SCQF levels 7 and 8. This work was put on hold whilst strategic alignment discussions with

University of Edinburgh took place during 2014 and 2015, and is now being reconsidered at a strategic level by the Degree Awarding Powers Working Group (see section 1).

Meanwhile, work has been ongoing to standardise the approach to programme delivery and assessment across campuses. During 2014-15 SRUC operated as a single SQA centre for HN (and FE) delivery (see 3.4 above), and considerable progress has already been made in standardisation of assessment and delivery; this work will also be ongoing during 2015-16 led by Heads of Department.

Initial work, led by the Assistant Principals HE and FE with Heads of Department, was conducted in late 2014 to scope the future shape of SRUC's portfolio of taught programmes at FE and HE level. This work is considering articulation and progression pathways through the portfolio, modes of delivery and assessment, and rationalisation where appropriate of multi-campus delivery. It will now also consider outcomes from the National Strategy for Land-based Education and Training and continues at an operational level led by the Assistant Principal FE working with Heads of Teaching Departments, whilst strategically it is being taken forward as part of the recently initiated Academic Strategic Review (see section 1).

### **3.7 Formal agreements and strategy for collaborative activity**

*Ensure current **formal written agreements** are in place for all collaborative activity in order that students, SRUC and partner organisations are clear about the nature of the agreement and the expectations associated with it.*

The move to establish written agreements for the management of PGRs registered with the University of Edinburgh will formalise what has been a long established working arrangement. The aim would be to agree an appropriate Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the College of Science and Engineering of the University of Edinburgh covering the general principles by which PGRs can be located and supervised within SRUC. This MoU will indicate that all such PGR students will have an individual Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) which will detail the roles and responsibilities of the individual academic supervising partners. Once agreement over the MoU has been reached with the College of Science and Engineering, the aim will be to use it to establish similar MoU arrangements with other Colleges in the University of Edinburgh and with other partner Universities. The Manager of the SRUC Postgraduate Office will be responsible for leading the establishment of all MoUs and will oversee the development of MoAs based around a common agreed format. Once any MoU covering PGR management and supervision has been agreed, it will be reviewed by the Academic Board (and appropriate sub committee) and on agreement, signed off by the Principal/CEO. Discussions have taken place with the University of Edinburgh regarding the need for clear agreements with respect to PGR studentships in future, these discussions can now be finalised following the outcome of the strategic alignment discussions.

*SRUC collaborates with a wide range of partners for a variety of purposes and intends to increase the number of its collaborations. There is evidence of these collaborative arrangements adding value for the students and staff. There would be considerable benefit in establishing a strategic SRUC approach to collaboration in all of its forms and clarifying where in the institutional structure oversight of collaborative arrangements sits. This should include oversight of arrangements relating to awards at all levels.*

The establishment of a strategic SRUC approach to collaboration will be considered as the institution undertakes the review and consolidation of its future strategic plans, led

by the Academic Strategic Review and Restructure Working Group (see section 1). The revised Academic Board remit (see section 3.1) now includes the provision of guidance and advice to the Executive Management Team on the development of collaborative links and partnerships with other education and training providers. Revision of the Academic Board has focussed on the need to review wider academic governance, including an effective strategic approach to all formal collaborative arrangements. As the remit of sub-committees supporting the Academic Board are developed and established, it is intended that a specific Academic Board sub-committee should be in place to review all collaborative arrangements and their ongoing management.

### **3.8 Induction and mentoring**

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

An Education Staff Development Policy has been developed and approved by the Academic Board in November 2014. The development of associated procedures including those for professional discussion of learning and teaching, induction for education staff, staff mentoring, scholarly activity and the enhancement of learning and teaching through identification and dissemination of good practice, is ongoing led by the Academic Development Team. Meanwhile, the SRUC mentoring scheme, first piloted within Research Division and rolled out to Education Division in 2013, has been further promoted during 2014-15 though further work is needed to facilitate the recruitment of mentors. Partly as a result of feedback from the SRUC Staff Survey (March 2014), a work shadowing policy is being developed led by Human Resources which will usefully supplement the mentoring scheme.

## **4. Update on areas of positive practice**

### **4.1. Commitment and progress towards creating a tertiary institution**

Embedding of the tertiary curriculum departments, first established in summer 2013, has been taking place during 2014-15. Three staff development days held termly during the year greatly facilitated cross-campus communication within departments and these will be continued in future. The revised remit and membership of the Academic Board (see 3.1) has increased the capacity for cross-divisional working which has also been evidenced through continued development of the Knowledge Transfer and Exchange programme.

Recognising the need to align term/semester dates across SRUC, a short life working group has developed a proposal for a common academic year for 2016/17 onwards. A significant driver for this is to provide greater parity of student experience, and amongst the proposals are included a common week for student induction at all campuses and the introduction of an autumn reading week for higher education delivery.

### **4.2. Priority given to improving student representation and engagement**

A Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) was signed in late 2014 by SRUC and the Student Association. The SPA has been jointly developed by staff and students from all six SRUC campuses with support and guidance from *sparqs*. The ability of students to work with their institution, individually and collectively, to improve their experience is important to the aims of both SRUC and SRUCSA. The SPA will guide engagement and this relationship, and act as a tool to help SRUC and SRUCSA reflect on and improve the effectiveness of their interactions. In this first year of the agreement three joint working projects have been identified: Communication; Careers; Learning &

Student Community. These projects have arisen from internal and external evaluation and consultation processes, including outcomes of external quality review, NSS and issues arising at the Student Experience Committee.

#### **4.3. Network of student support**

Building on the good practice at the Barony, Elmwood and Oatridge campuses, additional Learner Support posts have been created, particularly at the ex-SAC campuses, to strengthen the activities coordinated through the Senior Tutors and the Year Tutor network.

#### **4.4. Holistic approach to developing employability skills**

SRUC Students' Association (SRUCSA) has recently undertaken a project on career guidance and employability – identified as an action area within the SPA. Building on this, further work with SRUCSA is planned to promote greater understanding of graduate attributes and support the development of these attributes to enhance employability.

The National Strategy for Land-based Education and Training (see section 1) makes a number of recommendations which aim to enhance future employability including the establishment of National Industry Liaison Groups to support a more coherent national approach to employer engagement within the land-based industry sectors, and to ensure that all HNC programmes incorporate a period of appropriate work placement, to improve practical and employability skills.

### **5. Future plans**

Work is still very much ongoing with respect to all the above areas for development and the action plan will continue to be monitored through the Academic Board by both the EMT and Group Board. Following the conclusion of the strategic alignment discussions with the University of Edinburgh, it is recognised that some elements of the plan and timescales are likely to be modified as SRUC's future strategic plans, including those for degree awarding powers (DAP), become clearer. SRUC recognises that in order for it to be able to meet the criteria for DAP particular key areas for development, as detailed in the Technical Report (para. 8), remain: the implementation and embedding of institutional strategies, policies and processes; the effective management of data including that relating to student progression and achievement; and a clear demonstration that the institution is meeting all of the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

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