Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Scotland's Rural College

Outcome Report

March 2014

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About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

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

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

About this review

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

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

This report sets out the overarching judgement formed by the ELIR team 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

It is possible for the overarching judgement to be expressed in three levels which indicate that the institution's arrangements are: effective; have limited effectiveness; or are not effective. More detail on these categories is provided in the ELIR information document.

The overarching judgement for this report can be found on page 3, followed by the areas of positive practice and the areas for development.

A more detailed Technical Report is also available for this review.[4] The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

About Scotland's Rural College

SRUC, the legal title for the institution, was formed on 1 October 2012 from the merger of four 'legacy colleges' - Barony, Elmwood, Oatridge and The Scottish Agricultural College (SAC). SRUC indicated that the merger has created an integrated institution delivering tertiary education, research and consultancy to serve a wide range of stakeholders in agriculture, land and the rural sector. SRUC is a designated higher education institution and is recognised by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) as a Small Specialist Institution. SRUC also receives funding from the Scottish Government Rural and Environmental Science and Analytical Services Division (RESAS) for research and consulting activity. It has close links with industry across all of its education, research and consulting activities.

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

In 2013-14, SRUC had a total higher education student population of 1,600 students (headcount or 1,486 full-time equivalent), studying at SCQF levels 7-11, of whom 72 were taught postgraduates. Additionally, there were 79 postgraduate research students. In the same year, SRUC had 3,122 further education students, of whom 724 were studying full-time. This ELIR considered the higher education provision. A separate review of further education provision was conducted around the same time by Education Scotland. A report comparing the outcomes of the two reviews is being prepared for the Scottish Funding Council.

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

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

Overarching judgement about Scotland's Rural College

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

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

Areas of positive practice

1   The ELIR has identified a number of areas of positive practice and these are summarised below.

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

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

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

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

Areas for development

6   SRUC is asked to consider the areas summarised below.

7   **Institutional oversight and academic leadership** - as a matter of priority, establish regular and systematic arrangements to ensure there is institutional oversight of the conduct and outcomes of key quality processes, such as annual programme monitoring, external examiner reports and student feedback. This should ensure that processes are carried out as intended, avoiding over-reliance on individuals, and that the outcomes of the processes are evaluated critically within programme, departmental and institutional level committees, drawing on the contributions of a wide range of academic staff and managers. Related to this, SRUC should ensure there is strong academic leadership, particularly at the institutional level, and that academic dialogue and debate take place at all levels.

8   **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.

9   **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.

10   **Specification of quality assurance processes** - prioritise the specification of its quality processes and the completion of the Education Manual which sets these out. SRUC should complete the Education Manual by December 2014 as intended to avoid a lack of clarity and possible confusion by staff around their involvement with the quality assurance processes.

11   **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.

12   **Pedagogical development and assessment practice** - progress work to harmonise programmes delivered over multiple sites and to establish a SRUC approach to curriculum design.

13   **Formal agreements and strategy for collaborative activity** - ensure current formal written agreements are in place for all collaborative activity in order that students, SRUC and partner organisations are clear about the nature of the agreement and the expectations associated with it. SRUC collaborates with a wide range of partners for a variety of purposes and intends to increase the number of its collaborations. There is evidence of these collaborative arrangements adding value for the students and staff. There would be considerable benefit in establishing a strategic SRUC approach to collaboration in all of its forms and clarifying where in the institutional structure oversight of

collaborative arrangements sits. This should include oversight of arrangements relating to awards at all levels.

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

What happens next?

16   QAA Scotland will continue to engage with SRUC through the annual discussion visits which, among other matters, consider the ways in which the institution is responding to the ELIR outcomes.

17   One year after publication of the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to provide a Follow-up Report to indicate how they are responding to the outcomes of ELIR. Institutions also engage in a follow-up event with colleagues from other institutions to explore the ways in which the ELIR outcomes are being implemented. The final version of the institution's Follow-up Report is published on the QAA website.

Further information

18   A more detailed Technical Report is also available for this review. The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

19   This review and its findings relate to the institution as a whole and do not provide information about individual programmes of study or subjects. For further information about those, contact the institution or visit its website.

20   University sector institutions in Scotland also engage in systematic Enhancement Theme activity. Further information about that work, which has a sector-wide and institutional focus, can be found on the Enhancement Themes website.

21   Further information about QAA Scotland and the enhancement-led approach, including the ELIR method, can be found on the QAA website.

22   For further information about the Scottish Funding Council see www.sfc.ac.uk