Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Scotland's Rural College

Outcome Report

May 2019

Contents

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.[1] You can also find out more about the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).[2]

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

About this review

This is the Outcome 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).

This report sets out the threshold 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.

The threshold judgement for this report can be found on page 3, followed by commendations and recommendations.

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

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[1] About ELIR:
www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review
[2] About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland
[3] Brief Guide to ELIR: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf
[4] Technical Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Scotlands-Rural-College

About Scotland's Rural College

Scotland's Rural College (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).

The current Strategic Plan 2018-23 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. 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.

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.

SRUC does not currently have its own degree awarding powers (DAP). The current long-standing validation arrangements with the University of Glasgow and University of Edinburgh, 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).

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 that there can be public confidence in the awards SRUC offers and in the quality of the learning experience it provides for its students.

Commendations

1   Scotland's Rural College is commended for the following areas of good practice.

2   **Mental health awareness and support** - SRUC has prioritised raising awareness and provided support for student mental health linked to the development of a Health and Wellbeing Strategy which is successfully delivered through the implementation of a range of initiatives involving both staff and students.

3   **Supporting individual student journeys** - 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 geographic spread.

4   **Communicating with staff** - in a period of considerable restructuring and change, SRUC has paid particular attention to engaging staff at all stages of the process. SRUC 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 evident that staff valued the clarity this approach provided.

5   **Academic staff development** - SRUC recognises the importance of providing development opportunities for all academic staff as identified in the personal development 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.

Recommendations

6   Scotland's Rural College is asked to consider the following recommendations.

7   **Effective use of academic committee structures** - use the opportunity provided by recent changes to the academic governance and committee structure to review the balance of responsibilities and accountability between the academic committees and operational structures. In doing so, ensure there can be an informed debate on key academic matters relating to learning and teaching, and the wider student experience.

8   **Distance-learning student experience** - 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.

9　　**Preparation for teaching** - establish a clear policy which outlines institutional expectations for the training that all staff and students must complete before undertaking teaching and/or assessment responsibilities.

10　　**Responding to student views** - review 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 communicated effectively to students in a timely manner.

11　　**Feedback to students on assessed work** - 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.

12　　**Using data to enhance the student experience** - recognising the progress made in improving business information, 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.

13　　**Careers advice** - enhance the mechanisms through which professional careers advice is provided to all students.

What happens next?

14　　QAA Scotland will continue to engage with the institution through the annual discussion visits which, among other matters, consider the ways in which institutions respond to the ELIR outcomes.

15　　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. The final version of the institution's Follow-up Report is published on the QAA website. Institutions also engage in a range of enhancement and development activities including Focus On projects where institutions work collaboratively to improve policy and practice relating to topics that are frequently occurring in ELIR outcomes.

Further information

16　　A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review. The Technical Report sets out the team's findings under each heading in the ELIR 4 method.

17　　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](#).

18　　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](#).

19　　Further information about QAA Scotland and the enhancement-led approach, including the ELIR method, can be found on the [QAA website](#).

20　　For further information about the Scottish Funding Council see [www.sfc.ac.uk](#).