QAA SCOTLAND

This review was conducted in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

Quality Enhancement and Standards Review

Scotland's Rural College

Review Report

April 2024

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Introduction

This is a report of a review under the [Quality Enhancement and Standards Review](#) (QESR) method conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of Phase 1 of the Scottish Quality Enhancement arrangements at Scotland's Rural College.

The review took place on 24 April 2024 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Connel Greenhorn (Student Reviewer)
- Professor Clare Peddie (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Richard Tong (Coordinating Reviewer).

QESR is Phase 1 of a two-phase approach that enables the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to fulfil its statutory obligation under Section 13 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005* to ensure that provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable higher education provided by fundable bodies for academic quality and enhancement between 2022-24. The second phase of QAA's external quality review arrangements starts in 2024-25 to coincide with the implementation of new tertiary quality arrangements.

The main purpose of this review was to:

- provide assurance about the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards to inform an enhancement-led full institutional review in Phase 2

- provide assurance about the provider's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities for students to inform an enhancement-led full review in Phase 2

- report on any features of good practice

- make recommendations for action.

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 campuses in Aberdeen, Elmwood (Fife), Oatridge (West Lothian), Edinburgh and Barony (Dumfries).

In 2023-24, SRUC had a total further and higher education (FE and HE) student population of 2,817 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. Of the total, there were 1,501 FTE taught HE students (approximately 53.3%), with 846.8 FTE undergraduate students registered on Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HND), 585.9 FTE students on undergraduate degree programmes (BA/BSc), and 45.3 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 94.6 FTE students. There are currently 51 FTE postgraduate research students registered.

Findings

From the evidence presented, the review team is confident that Scotland's Rural College is making effective progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision to enable effective arrangements to be in place for managing academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience.

Good practice

The QESR team found the following **features of good practice**.

- **Annual monitoring process and the role of annual dialogue meetings in quality enhancement**: The QESR team considered the annual monitoring process undertaken at programme and departmental level to be highly effective, robust, well-documented and consistently implemented across SRUC. The impact of the recently expanded annual dialogue meetings on quality enhancement and the student experience were evident through the identification of good practice, actions arising and areas for development (paragraph 32).

Recommendations for action

The QESR team makes the following **recommendations for action**.

- **Consistent implementation of the framework supporting professional development for teachers:** SRUC should consistently implement the framework supporting professional development for all those engaged in teaching and that support is in place and training is completed prior to teaching for postgraduate research (PGR) students who teach on a voluntary or employed basis (paragraph 17).

- **Student support for blended learning and PGR students:** SRUC should address issues concerning access to, and communication about, the support and opportunities available to distance-learning and PGR students to help ensure parity and consistency of the student experience (paragraph 26).

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Strategic approach to enhancement

1   The QESR team is confident that SRUC has in place effective arrangements to monitor, review and enhance its strategic approach to enhancement. The team considered a range of documents including the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, the Curriculum Review Overview, action plans and reports, Outcome Agreement report to SFC, and minutes from meetings of key institutional committees. In addition, the team met with staff and students.

2   SRUC has had a Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy in place since 2020. The strategy has two main pillars: Learning for Change and Learning for All. The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy was formed following a four-stage development process that included analysis of existing documentation, workshops involving students and staff, and consultation with internal and external key stakeholders followed by approval by Academic Board. The current Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy sits alongside the existing institutional strategy and the QESR team heard that plans are in place to ensure the new teaching and learning strategy is embedded within the new institutional strategy. The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy is delivered through seven workstreams, awareness raising and dissemination, policy and process, new course development, academic development, learning spaces, curriculum review and strategy review. The overall strategy lapsed in 2023; plans for the development of the new strategy are in place for 2024 and initial discussions have begun. The QESR team heard how the new strategy for learning and teaching enhancement will aim to establish greater integration between education and research - for example, by developing stronger links between the institutional expertise in agriculture and veterinary science and the curriculum.

3   The Head of Learning and Teaching is responsible for the strategic leadership of enhancement in teaching and learning, and reports to the Provost and the Deputy Principal. The Vice-Principal Skills and Lifelong Learning has a more externally driven skills-based portfolio alongside the Vice-Principal for Enterprise and Knowledge Exchange, while the Provost and Deputy Principal has oversight of the Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP) process and academic endeavour. These three leaders work closely together and, through regular dialogue and debate, oversee the integration of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy with that of research, enterprise and innovation. Through this continuous dialogue, the QESR team heard that the leadership team ensures the coherence of enhancement and the teaching and learning strategy in the institution.

4   One valuable outcome of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy is the curriculum review process that embeds Sustainability, Enterprise, Equality and Diversity, enabled by Active and Blended (SEEDABLE) learning in the curriculum development and review process. The SEEDABLE review process is supported by guidance documentation including an introductory video, a review process guide, expectations note, a guide to the framework and guidance documentation for those engaged in the review process. The process is managed by a steering group including academic staff from three faculties, professional service staff, a member of staff from SRUCSA (SRUC's Students' Association) and external consultancy. The QESR team found evidence that SEEDABLE is now embedded within the curriculum design process, has informed curriculum review in programmes across SRUC higher education provision, and has gained recognition in other institutions. The team heard from staff that the SEEDABLE curriculum review process has been beneficial by stimulating change in the curriculum and enhancement to programmes, such as the inclusion of authentic assessment and the development of learning materials which are more accessible to students. It was also noted that there were extra benefits

derived by staff from the professional development provided as part of the process and the embedding of self-reflection in pedagogical practice.

5   However, students who met the QESR team told the team they were not aware of the SEEDABLE curriculum review process and were therefore not able to confirm the benefits to the curriculum. In addition, the QESR team learnt that, while the SEEDABLE review processes have been helpful in highlighting actions needed - for example, the need to take a proactive approach to improving the accessibility of learning materials in the Agriculture programme - some of the actions are still ongoing or not yet started. Where the SEEDABLE review process has highlighted the need for action, SRUC is encouraged to progress these recommendations and ensure they are completed.

6   Another initiative driven by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy is the plan to deliver academic development with a pedagogic focus for teaching staff through the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT), including ensuring that academic staff have the competence, confidence, capacity and capability to implement the strategy. An outcome of this development is that academic staff are now provided with the opportunity to gain teaching qualifications and professional recognition for their teaching activities and to engage in a Teaching and Learning conference or campus-based staff development roadshows. The new promotions process also now recognises contributions to teaching and learning. The QESR team heard from academic staff that their contributions to teaching and learning are supported by CELT and that, more generally, there is an institutional culture of celebration of excellence and sharing good practice across professional and academic staff. Student involvement in the recognition of teaching excellence through an awards process was also reported in one campus but not across the institution.

Student partnership

7   The QESR team is confident that SRUC has effective arrangements in place to monitor, review and enhance its approach to student partnership. The team considered the Student Partnership Agreement; Annual Report to SFC; Pilot SEAP Report; SEAP Quality Enhancement Plan; ELIR 2019 Final Update; End of Enhancement Theme Report 2020-23; Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy 2020-2025; Periodic Institution-Led Review Policy; minutes from key institutional committees; and met with staff and students.

8   The QESR team found that SRUC and SRUCSA are currently reviewing and restructuring the Student Partnership Agreement (SPA). This aims to embed partnership working at SRUC by setting out a series of key projects to be delivered on a three-year timescale. Through a series of workshops developed with the support of sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland), SRUC and SRUCSA are reviewing the structure of the SPA, how key projects within the SPA are monitored and tracked, and the SPA's broader alignment to strategic and operational objectives. A previous successful project associated with the SPA included a Student Evaluation project on centralised student feedback survey mechanisms. This project included the development of a resource base for class representatives covering training, reference materials and the minutes of Student Liaison Committees. However, the QESR team heard the renewal of the SPA was making relatively slow progress and, as such, encourages SRUC to prioritise student partnership projects and report on actions and progress through appropriate forums, such as the Student Partnership Group.

9   The QESR team found that the development of institutional policy and strategy was based on strong student partnership and representation. For example, SRUC's Mental Health Strategy and Widening Access and Participation Strategy was derived from Speak

Week - a SRUCSA-led initiative - following support and guidance from UUK Stepchange. The QESR team heard that both strategies have established a range of operational actions which prioritise retention and improve student support for those at risk of withdrawing from their programme due to challenging circumstances. This included the development of a training programme to enhance mental health resource provisions and a 'Preparing to Study' at SRUC module to help ease transition and support the development of essential skills.

10   Through sub-projects designed to address the student voice and help close the feedback loop, 'MyVoice,' a 24/7 feedback system has been developed. This aims to help students give feedback to SRUC on strengths and aspects of the student experience that they value as well as make suggestions and share ideas for enhancements. The system directs individual submissions to the appropriate service. The QESR team heard positive views of MyVoice, with examples outlining how the system was clear and easy to use and which were met with timely response rates. SRUC has an advisory group which can be used, when required, to address any issues coming from 'MyVoice' feedback where further advice is required.

11   The QESR team identified good engagement with students across the series of Institution-Led Reviews (ILRs), particularly involvement with teams developing the self-evaluation and document-writing groups. In discussion with students, it was clear that students involved in ILR found the process to be valuable, providing pragmatic solutions and recommendations to put student feedback at the centre of improving programme structure and teaching provisions.

Action taken since ELIR 4

12   The QESR team is confident SRUC has effective arrangements to monitor and review actions taken in response to its Enhancement-led Review (ELIR 4). The team considered the ELIR 4 Follow-up report, and minutes from key institutional committees and met with staff and students. The institution has followed up on the key recommendations from the ELIR 4 report and these can be tracked through to the final update given to Academic Board in 2023. The report to the May 2023 Academic Board acknowledges that, while there has been progress on all the recommendations made in ELIR 4, there are areas that require further attention. The QESR team considers that four recommendations have been completed and three require further work.

13   The first recommendation in ELIR 4 concerned the effective use of the academic committee structures. The new academic committee structures ran for the first time in 2019-20 with the intention of judging effectiveness and appropriateness of remit, and membership a year later. In 2020, the role and remit of three of the sub committees (Programme Approvals and Academic Standards Committee, Student Support and Engagement Committee and the Learning and Teaching Committee) was reviewed in line with the new structures for Registry, the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT), Doctoral College and the faculty offices In addition, there was a review of the effectiveness of the Academic Board in 2022-23. The QESR team agreed that the institution has now addressed this recommendation.

14   The ELIR 4 team recommended that SRUC review the needs and experience of students studying by distance-learning to ensure they are effectively supported. The QESR team found evidence of work across the institution to ensure that students studying by distance learning are effectively supported. For example, as part of the SEEDABLE initiative, minimum expectations have been set for online materials through a minimum standard for courses delivered through the virtual learning environment (VLE) ,and there are plans to conduct a review of compliance in 2023-24. The QESR team found that SRUC has also

amended the mitigating circumstances policy to better accommodate distance-learning students and the students met by the team reported positively on sympathetic arrangements to meet the needs of part-time and distance-learning students. There has been significant investment in the digital infrastructure and investment in staff development to assist colleagues to adapt to the different modes of teaching and learning, although there has been some delay in the implementation of improvements to technology in classrooms to help distance-learning students to engage.

15   However, the QESR team heard from the students that there was inconsistency in the experiences of distance-learning students including, in some cases, significant shortfalls in the ability of students to access staff for advice and support. SRUC has identified that negative feedback from students is often owing to the suitability of the mode of delivery for the topic or task in hand. The students who met the team also reported a lack of parity of student experience when accessing the same module by distance learning or in person. The review team concluded that there was further work needed by the institution in partnership with students to understand these inconsistencies and to ensure parity of experience for students accessing modules through different modes of learning (see also paragraph 26).

16   SRUC was advised in the last ELIR to establish a clear policy which outlines institutional expectations for all staff and students before undertaking teaching and/or assessment responsibilities. The QESR team found a clear framework of expectations has now been established for the professional development that all staff and students should complete before undertaking teaching or assessment responsibilities. In addition, a tracking system to monitor engagement with the training across the institution, including all the campuses, is in place. The QESR team heard that staff are clear about their responsibilities with respect to the acquisition of training and that tracking of accumulated qualifications is thorough.

17   In meeting with students, the QESR team heard that support for teaching and the training available were variable depending on the campus and supervisory support. The team heard how postgraduate research (PGR) students could avoid recording teaching hours, bypassing the need for training, and how PGR students had taught lectures without any dedicated training other than support from their supervisor. The team also heard from senior staff that improvements were needed to improve the consistency of application of the framework across the institution. The QESR team **recommends** that SRUC should consistently implement the framework supporting professional development for all those engaged in teaching, and that support is in place and training is completed prior to teaching for PGRs who teach on a voluntary or employed basis.

18   In the findings of the last ELIR, SRUC was asked to review the current arrangements for analysing and responding to student views to ensure that there is greater institutional oversight of responses with coordinated action being taken. The QESR team learnt there is a process in place where the outcomes from three student surveys - the National Student Survey (NSS), the Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES) and the SRUC-wide survey (SWS) - are visible on dashboards and are considered together by the Academic Board and at the Annual Quality Dialogues. In the minutes of the Academic Board, there is recognition that work is still needed to ensure that students feel that their voice is heard and that responses to actions are fed back. Two new posts have been created which have the Student Voice within their remit: Academic Enhancement Lead (Student Journey) and Academic Enhancement Officer (Student Journey). These posts have oversight of how SRUC responds to student views on an institutional level. This team undertook a mapping of student voice activities during 2020-21. The mapping exercise demonstrated that there are inconsistencies in the student liaison group structure and a

need to improve the class representative system. The review team heard that students had variable experiences of how the student voice is heard and actioned. The QESR team was reassured to see that the need for SRUC to continue to develop approaches and mechanisms by which the student voice is heard - by working with students to strengthen the student partnership - is recognised in the pilot SEAP document.

19   The ELIR 4 teams recommended that SRUC conclude the work that was underway at that time on ensuring there was greater consistency in the timeliness of assessment feedback provided to students, in accordance with SRUC policy. In the ELIR update to Academic Board of May 2023, several developments, including a Feedback App, are described to improve the quality and timeliness of feedback to students on assessed work. The QESR team heard that the student experience of the timeliness and quality of feedback was very mixed between different campuses. In addition, the team heard that the implementation of the Feedback App had not been a success due to the poor quality of data informing the outputs from the app and that the app was not now in regular use. However, the NSS results indicate that the response to questions on Assessment and Feedback has steadily improved over the last three years. The QESR team considers that SRUC has improved with respect to timeliness and quality of feedback but that there is more work to do to ensure consistency and parity of experience in different areas of the campus.

20   The ELIR 4 review also highlighted the need to improve access to management data across all aspects of the institution to support enhancements to the student experience. Changes that have been implemented while addressing this recommendation include enhancements to business management data, financial data and operational data, to include automation of student fee information and multiple applicant data. There have also been improvements to the data warehouse to provide better student demographics, progression and outcomes data, and committees and academic staff now have access to this data to help inform developments to the student experience. Recognising that improvements to data to enhance the student experience will need to remain ongoing, the review team took the view that this recommendation had been met.

21   The final recommendation from ELIR 4 was to enhance the mechanisms through which professional careers advice is provided to all students. The QESR team welcomed the steps taken to ensure that students studying at all campuses have access to careers advisers through the provision of VLE resources and an appointment booking system. The review team heard reports from some students of positive engagements with the Careers Service and use of the VLE resources. However, the review team also heard that there is still work to do to ensure that distance-learning and PGR students are supported in their career development (see also paragraph 26).

Sector-wide enhancement topic

22   The QESR team is confident that SRUC has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital/blended offering. The team considered the Tertiary Enhancement Topic and Enhancement Activity Plan 2023-24; Curriculum Review Action Plans; Annual Quality Dialogue Outcomes; minutes from key institutional committees; and met with staff and students.

23   SRUC's statement on digital and blended learning sets out the approach to digital and blended learning, teaching and assessment. This includes teaching locations that cover a wide variety of differing locations and a mix of technologies, as well as a range of learning strategies. As part of its Curriculum Review, SRUC has identified a strategic approach to digital/blended learning which it intends to use to inform a range of work and projects. For

example, the QESR team learnt in meetings with staff that the Personal Development Planning Tool is informed by the SEEDABLE competencies (see paragraph 4) to provide an online, virtual opportunity for students to identify, improve and develop upon key skills and experience captured in the student experience. The team encourages SRUC to develop this resource further in collaboration with the student body to help reach and engage a broader range of student groups and learners on different modes of study to overcome any obstacles that may be a barrier to accessibility and use.

24   SRUC has recognised the importance of providing guidance and support to students on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in learning, teaching and assessments. This has led to the development of a range of resources that support students in exploring the potential of GenAI while also ensuring they understand the ethical implications, including challenges related to academic integrity. From discussions with students, the QESR team was confident that students knew where to access the resources and were aware of the risks related to academic misconduct if artificial intelligence tools were used inappropriately.

25   The QESR team learnt that SRUC provides an opportunity for students to gain access to an IT skills assessment during the enrolment process, which is designed to address digital inaccessibility and provide an equitable approach to supporting students' digital needs required to enable student success. However, when the QESR team met with students, awareness and, therefore, uptake of the IT skills assessment were clearly mixed, particularly among distance-learning students. Students also commented that the needs analysis that complemented the assessment tool was too basic and of limited value.

26   When meeting with students, the QESR team heard a range of experiences that indicated issues relating to the parity and consistency of the support to distance-learning students. These included student perceptions about the lack of practical experiences available for distance-learning students, the lack of access to an IT skills assessment, the need to extend communication from professional service teams in the form of career and professional development opportunities, and the opportunity to input into feedback forums. These issues also extended in parts to postgraduate research students - for example, in relation to engagement with career support and professional opportunities. The QESR team **recommends** that SRUC should address issues concerning access to, and communication about, the support and opportunities available to distance-learning and PGR students to help ensure parity and consistency of the student experience.

Academic standards and quality processes

Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards

27   The QESR team is confident that SRUC has effective arrangements for managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards. The QESR team considered SRUC's Annual Report to the Scottish Funding Council 2022-23; Institution-Led Review Action Plan Progress reports; the Outcomes of Annual Quality Dialogue meetings; student feedback; minutes from institutional committees; and met with staff and students.

28   The QESR team found that SRUC's arrangements for managing quality and setting standards meet the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and align with the guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Policies relating to curriculum development and approval are aligned to the Quality Code, take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

29   In 2022-23, the Final Awards Board, a sub-committee of Academic Board, was introduced to provide further assurance of the standards of the final awards by considering the end-of-year outcomes of all taught HE provision. The Final Awards Board is chaired by the Deputy Principal and Provost, and the QESR team reviewed minutes of the Board where external examiners confirmed that SRUC takes a consistent approach to quality assurance of awards.

30   The Academic Board is the governing and executive body responsible for overseeing the quality and standards of all taught awards and credit-bearing provision through monitoring and maintaining academic regulations and a coherent framework of internal quality assurance and enhancement procedures. From the minutes available, it was evident that the Board has appropriate oversight, and operates in accordance with its remit. This includes consideration of reports on Institution-Led Review (ILR), school-level reports on accreditation and approvals, annual monitoring and external examiner activity. The Learning and Teaching Committee is a key sub-committee of the Academic Board and has two sub-committees - the Student Support and Engagement Committee and Programme Approvals & Academic Standards Committee. Staff confirmed that they engaged in assuring the quality and standards of the awards through these committees. Academic Board also oversees research degrees and receives reports from the Doctoral College Committee, which is a sub-committee of the Research Committee. The QESR team reviewed committee minutes and considered that processes are robust and allow identification of any issues with plans for effective enhancement.

31   The ILR process operates reviews for all modes of learning as well student support services provision on a six-year schedule. Academic subjects with a similar focus are grouped together and students are included on the ILR panels, both in the preparations of the self-evaluations and in the review event. Membership of the ILR panel includes external oversight by an academic member of staff from the validating university and two external subject experts. Evidence of effective student representation and involvement in the process was provided in the Institution-Led Review Reports considered by the QESR team and the student meeting.

32   The reports and associated action plans addressing any recommendations coming from internal review are monitored by the Programme Approvals and Academic Standards Committee, and a progress report is submitted by the Board of Studies team. One of the key aspects of the annual monitoring processes is the Annual Dialogue meetings held with each department's management team. In 2022-23, the Annual Quality Dialogue process was revised by extending the meetings to three hours to accommodate extended discussion about the Board of Studies portfolio and the membership of the panel was expanded to include all Heads of Department along with a second member of the executive team. These meetings support a two-way dialogue about key priorities from each departmental annual report and identify examples of good practice. The QESR team considered the annual monitoring process undertaken at programme and departmental level to be highly effective, robust, well-documented and consistently implemented across SRUC. The impact of the recently expanded annual dialogue meetings on quality enhancement and the student experience were evident through the identification of good practice, actions arising and areas for development, and is considered as a feature of **good practice**.

33   Based on the evidence available, the QESR team is confident that SRUC is managing its arrangements for assessment and feedback effectively. External examiners are required to submit an annual report 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. SRUC ensures central oversight

of external examiner reports through scrutiny by the Programme Approvals and Academic Standards Committee in the form of an External Examiners Synthesis Report which summarises the areas for development and provides responses to the external examiners' comments. All external examiners identified areas of good practice about the SRUC's management of assessment and academic standards, with four themes emerging from the reports: the range and type of assessments, the support provided to students, the quality of the marking and feedback, and the ease of access to evidence through the VLE.

Use of external reference points in quality processes

34   The QESR team is confident that SRUC has effective mechanisms in place to monitor and review its approach to the use of external reference points in quality processes. The team reviewed evidence, including the mapping of the quality processes against the Quality Code, minutes from key institutional committees and met with staff and students.

35   SRUC has mapped its quality processes to the Quality Code. The QESR team considered the mapping to be a detailed and thorough engagement with the Quality Code where the institution has identified areas representing ongoing challenges and areas for development, and with clear articulation of actions from previous mapping exercises to demonstrate where improvements have been made in the quality processes.

36   Through the mapping process, strategic goals have been identified to improve student recruitment, retention, achievement and progression with respect to widening access and the need to ensure student mental health and wellbeing going forward. In addition, the mapping to the Quality Code has assisted in identifying opportunities to strengthen practice as SRUC now offers its own research degrees, validated by the University of Edinburgh. These arising actions demonstrate an effective process of self-evaluation and provides reassurance that SRUC can identify areas for further development following engagement with the Quality Code evaluation process.

37   Where relevant, SRUC engages in the accreditation of its programmes with the appropriate body - for example, the BSc (Hons) Veterinary Nursing was recently reaccredited with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in April 2023. With the agreement of the University of Glasgow, this process also included revalidation of the programme and SRUC is reminded of the importance of clearly evidencing that programmes meet the SCQF and relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements in validations and revalidations where appropriate.

38   SRUC has a thorough process for review, approval and (re)validation of programmes which is overseen by the Programme Approvals and Academic Standards Committee, (PAASC, which receives reports of Institution-Led Reviews, programme suspensions and proposals. Institution-led reviews have a requirement for two external academics, or one academic and one industry specialist, on the review team. The PAASC also has oversight of outcomes of Boards of Study where the external examiner reports are considered, and an action plan is developed for that area of study. The PAASC committee also receives a synthesis of the reports from the external examiners and through this report identifies institutional areas for improvement. Finally, the PAASC reports to the Academic Board on which members of validating institutions sit. The QESR team was satisfied that the improved governance structure, in conjunction with a comprehensive approach to policy and process, provides SRUC with an effective mechanism of oversight of the use of external reference points in the quality process.

Use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making

39   The QESR team is confident that SRUC has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to the use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making. The QESR team consulted a range of documentation, including the Annual Outcome Agreement Self-Evaluative Report; Curriculum Review Action Plans; Retention and Progression Data; Complaints and Appeals Data; ILR Action Plans; SRUC-Wide Report on NSS, SSES, SWS; and minutes from key institutional committees. The QESR team also met with staff and students.

40   The QESR team noted that SRUC has undertaken significant work to develop and introduce data dashboards. These are designed to increase the availability of live data that can support the development of service-level key performance indicators and help staff to become more data-led in local decision-making and enhancement activity. The Digital Strategy Group has been developed to discuss the integration of data workstreams following the changes made post-ELIR 4 (see paragraph 20). This includes discussions with academic staff about accessing data packages for independent and ad-hoc needs, rather than solely for institutional annual programme reporting purposes or only within the ILR process.

41   From evidence presented, the QESR team noted that SRUC has worked closely in partnership with SRUCSA on a Student Evaluation project intended to improve the quality and quantity of feedback provided through centralised survey mechanisms. The emphasis of this project was a review of how feedback in the Student Satisfaction and Experience Survey (SSES), National Student Survey (NSS) and the SRUC-Wide Survey (SWS) is discussed and embedded in recommendations which are then followed up by Academic Quality and Development. In meetings, the QESR team heard that more work is required in capturing PGR student data and working with awarding institutions to harmonise records and nuances of PGR inputs. SRUC also intends to implement the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) to capture more in-depth analysis and responses from the PGR student experience.

42   At institutional level, SRUC's academic governance structure gives committees such as the Student Support and Engagement Committee (SSEC), Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) and Academic Board constitutional responsibility for reviewing student evaluations and centralised survey forums. This responsibility includes oversight of the metrics and themes associated with student complaints and disciplinary cases. In discussion with academic staff, it was clear to the QESR team that there is effective use of complaints, academic misconduct and appeals data sets, enabling the identification of themes, behaviours and relationships experienced across policy and practice.