Response to Speak Week 2020/21

Academic Division

March 2021

1. Overview

The Academic Division received the Speak Week 2020/21 report at the end of February 2021. This report was reviewed by the Academic Leadership Team and Academic Board, the responses from whom have been summarised below. In this section, we offer a written response to the report as a whole; it is recommended this section is read with the original report in hand. In section two, we provide responses to the seven recommendations, while in section three we update on the recommendations from Covid-19 Speak Week, undertaken in May 2020.

We thank our student body for taking part in Speak Week, and SRUCSA for running the survey, and analysing and reporting on results. We believe Speak Week to be an invaluable mechanism that holds us to account, enabling us to make targeted improvements in our academic provision

We are pleased that the majority of responses regarding **learning and teaching content** were positive. We undertake a constructive alignment approach to teaching – meaning content is designed to meet the learning outcomes of the programme – which helps us to ensure that our learning content is relevant to current discussion and practice in industry. This is supported by developments to give explicit recognition to scholarship, professional practice or research within SRUC, which will give academic staff the opportunity and encouragement to develop progressive content. However, there is always room for improvement, and the comments within the report will help us ensure that content is being updated accordingly. For example, we agree that we could embed sustainability and environmental impact more thoroughly in the curriculum.

In 2021/22, we are embarking on an institution-wide curriculum review. This will allow us to modernise curricula where required across SRUC. This review is on top of the cyclical review and redevelopment cycle undertaken by our programmes every six years: for example, in 2021/22 our Horticulture and Landscape subjects, Golf, Greenkeeping and Hospitality programmes, and our Veterinary and Animal Science provision are all undergoing review which will enable teams to identify areas for development. The learner voice is at the heart of these activities.

We are continuing to improve **learning and teaching delivery**, particularly in light of the increased use of digital platforms and digital learning owing to Covid-19. Some of this was very new to some of our teaching staff, who have had to move with speed to adapt to new technology and news ways of working. However, we believe that many colleagues have adapted well with some excellent examples of good practice.

Our new programme design criteria are focused in this area, and the curriculum review mentioned above will ensure all programmes are reviewed in this light, i.e. focusing on delivery as well as content. Key to this is the continued programme of staff training and development highlighted in section two, in addition to the peer support offered via our forums. We also encourage all teaching staff to undertake our peer observation process, which supports them to identify their own good practice and areas for enhancement.

We appreciate the comments regarding **programme organisation** and will act on them. It has been a difficult and challenging year for both learners and colleagues, but a key aim for all programme teams is that students have as much clarity as possible. It is evident that more support for our postgraduate taught students and staff is required, and a new MSc Group, which met for the first time this month, has been set up. The group is in place to raise and solve issues particular to SRUC's MSc delivery, and to share good practice and support each other. With regard to the particular example of Agricultural Professional Practice, we can confirm that a new Programme Leader is now in place.

We are also working hard to enhance our **practical activities** to provide high value learning opportunities and will continue to strive to improve in this area. While the disruption to practical delivery in relation to Covid-19 restrictions has been felt across the sector, it has been particularly challenging for SRUC, which relies heavily on such teaching. We are currently prioritising essential practical work as restrictions start to lift, and we ran intensive practical and fieldwork sessions in the Autumn term as conditions allowed. Looking to the future, we aim not just to maintain appropriate practical training and experience, but plan to focus as much "on-campus" time as possible on providing high quality practical opportunities within high quality practical facilities.

We take comments on **assessment and feedback** seriously, and are working to both monitor and improve our performance in this area. Assessment and feedback schedules are required to be disseminated at the beginning of every module / unit, but it is clear that monitoring of this is required to ensure it is taking place. Many of the problems with assessment and feedback are owing to over-assessment within modules / units. While this will be a focus of the curriculum review exercise – ensuring we deliver assessment sustainably as well as robustly – it must be acknowledged that some of our more onerous assessment demands are placed upon us by external agencies: we need to be cleverer in how we work within these demands.

With regard to **Covid-19**, we recognise that this has been a disruptive experience for all. We have taken an approach that made the safety and wellbeing of our colleagues and learners the most important priority, which resulted in us adopting a significantly different set of policies from other FE and HE providers (e.g. releasing students from residential contracts, giving programme teams the flexibility to propose methods of delivery that suited them etc.) while maintaining close and centralised control of all academic activities. Reflecting on what has worked well, and what has not, will be important as we move to a different form of blended learning post-pandemic. However, having worked with a range of approaches during Covid, we have accumulated a range of relevant experience from which we can build.

One area of this has been **online learning**. We appreciate that online learning has not been ubiquitously welcomed, but welcome the recognition that owing to Covid-19 developments we were limited in our ability to deliver elsewhere if we were to support as many students as possible to complete. We also acknowledge that for some students, the online provision has resulted in an improved and more flexible learning experience than previously. Students are not homogenous in their needs / approaches and so the provision of a range of approaches is something on which we need to build. However, given the constraints of this year, we are extremely proud of the manner in which our colleagues and learners have risen to the challenges.

We are particularly pleased to see use of Moodle has improved this year; though acknowledge that it is an area that can always be enhanced. Our Moodle Standards project aims to ensure a baseline of consistency in Moodle use going forward. With regard to our other **facilities**, we have introduced both new and improved Animal Care units in the North Faculty, with plans in place to have more reptiles and fish in these, and are working to improve the use of outdoor space around the Ferguson Building. The Central Faculty has some excellent facilities (farms, animal care, and vet nursing facilities, as well as the equestrian centre and stables), in comparison with other providers, not to mention world-leading research facilities. However, we acknowledge that there is sometimes insufficient capacity and during the closed period we have invested in laboratory refurbishments in Edinburgh to improve the opportunities for project work and practical teaching. In the South and West Faculty we have continued to improve our classroom and non-classroom space, with a particular focus on supporting interactive learning and social connection.

Our facilities are just one aspect of learning resources. The main learning resource for SRUC is our **teaching staff**. We constantly strive to upskill staff to maintain momentum, but acknowledge that this has been perhaps the most challenging period that any of our staff have encountered. As such,

we not only appreciate the positive comments students made with regard to staff but are delighted that their efforts are recognised and appreciated.

We also appreciate the positive sentiments about our **support staff** and will continue to seek to improve in this area. We are pleased to see our student support staff growing with posts being filled (e.g. our Careers Advisors) and with our support staff focusing on areas of specialism (e.g. pastoral, educational, financial) so as to ensure our learners receive the right support from the right expert. However, we acknowledge that work is needed on signposting students more clearly to the support on offer.

Overall, we recognise that while there are many areas to celebrate in SRUC, there is work that can be done to continue to enhance the **student experience**, such as in the areas of communication and mental health and wellbeing. We have a very real commitment to providing an excellent student experience, which has required a great deal of innovation and determination this year. This will continue, both in the ways outlined above, and in the more specific actions detailed in the next section.

2. Response to Recommendations

Speak Week identified seven recommendations for SRUC. Our responses can be found below.

1. **Commit to a review of our support for students who live with mental illness. This is in addition to supporting the mental wellbeing of all students.**

The Speak Week report indicated that this might be achieved by working with SRUCSA and the student body on a Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) project on the topic of students living with mental illness and mental health conditions and reviewing the Student Mental Health Agreement (SMHA) with SRUCSA to ensure there is specific inclusion of mental illness and mental health conditions, and high level monitoring of the agreement.

We agree entirely with this recommendation. To be effective, the addressing of mental health and wellbeing must be a cross-institutional activity. As such, we suggest a cross-institutional working group, working in partnership with SRUCSA, be set up to co-design an effective and robust strategy and implementation plan. It may be that this becomes a SPA project and feeds into the SMHA. It may also be that this group uses the Student Minds Mental Health Charter as a framework for strategy development.

2. **Share best practice in teaching widely both within teams and across the College.**

As part of Programme Management Team and Board of Studies meetings, learning and teaching – and the sharing of best practice – is a fixed agenda item. This is also a key part of the Annual Quality Dialogues. Over 2020/21, we have also shared best practice – particularly in digital learning – via case studies in our GBOM (Getting the Best out of Moodle) weekly newsletter and Moodle site, and through our informal forums such as the Programme Leader forum, GAPS (Guidance, Academic and Pastoral Support) forum, and Digital Champions network. However, we acknowledge that we may need to make this more visible.

To support this further, in Spring 2021, the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching are meeting with Programme Teams for dedicated learning and teaching focused conversations. These are extracting good practice as well as identifying areas for enhancement.

3. **Continue to provide support and training that is accessible to all staff to help raise the standard of delivery across SRUC. This includes both access to training materials and protected time, allowing staff to engage fully.**

In August-September 2020, we ran a five-week intensive staff development programme; throughout 2020/21, we have worked with programme teams in bespoke staff development on areas such as online learning, assessment and feedback, module development, personal tutoring and supervising projects. Training materials are available on the staff development Moodle sites, including the New to Teaching site, the Teaching Staff Development site, the Getting the Best out of Moodle site and the soon to be released Student Support Development and Getting the Best out of Mahara sites.

The CELT/Programme Team Meetings, as well as forums and networks, are helping to identify further areas for staff development, which will be incorporated into another core Summer Development programme in 2021 and bespoke team support throughout 2021/22.

Alongside this, we continue to fund staff to undertake qualifications in learning and teaching, and are supporting staff to gain recognition for this via achievement of fellowship of Advance HE.

4. **Investigate the experiences of learners on 100% online courses during the pandemic.**

In light of low response rates to much student voice work, it is suggested that some of this experience can be triangulated from relevant Student Liaison Group minutes, Student Panel minutes, End-of-Module Questionnaires and other existing mechanisms. Prior to the pandemic, we undertook a review of our distance learning programmes, including the learner experience of these. The outputs of this will provide us with an opportunity for comparison.

Should this need to be supplemented, it is suggested that we work with SRUCSA to determine the best mechanisms for, and questions within, ascertaining this experience in as representative a manner as possible.

5. **Improve the learner voice in curriculum design and review. This includes engaging with students throughout the year to gain feedback on content and discuss ideas or proposed changes with them. This can be achieved through structured discussions at Student Liaison Groups (SLGs), informal in-class discussions, and through student representation on Boards of Studies.**

With regard to formal processes, we reviewed our curriculum design process in 2019/20, with the introduction of new mechanisms in September 2020. This new process centres the learner voice much more strongly. We have also introduced in 2020/21 a structured support process for those undergoing Institution-Led Review, which again centres the learner voice more strongly.

In Autumn 2020, we undertook a student voice mapping project, the recommendations from which were ratified at the January 2021 Student Support and Engagement Committee. A project plan has been developed with the project team meeting for the first time this month to begin action. One of the sub-strands of this project is focused on Student Liaison Groups.

6. **Review the use of the term 'blended learning' over the rest of the academic year.**

The introduction of blended learning was an ambition of SRUC prior to the pandemic. The response to Covid-19 meant that this was accelerated. The majority of programmes did deliver to such a model in the Autumn term of 2020; however, the operational restrictions meant that there was only a little non-online material in the blend, with a few programmes delivering fully online (either owing to lack of practical activity or with the ambition to bring students to campus in the Winter term). The latter's plans were unfortunately made impossible owing to the January-March lockdown. With a small return to campus in the Spring term we can return to a blended learning approach for many programmes; for those not able to do so, it will be made clear to students that this will be an online rather than blended learning approach.

7. **Provide an update to SRUCSA on the actions taken from Speak Week Covid-19 Edition recommendations (summarised in Appendix 1).**

This has been provided in the section below. We will incorporate updates on previous recommendations in our annual Speak Week response, and ask SRUCSA to do the same for their actions, in their annual Speak Week report.

3. Update on Covid-19 Speak Week Actions

There were six recommendations to SRUC following the Covid-19 version of Speak Week (undertaken May 2020). These were:

1. COVID-19 will have a continued impact over the next academic year and a **revised version of "Help not Hinder" should be implemented**. This will assist any students who are faced with a disadvantage due to circumstances out with their control (sickness, uncertainty around childcare or work, mental wellbeing etc.).
2. **Improving communications and monitoring for gaps** is essential.
3. Ensuring **regular 'check-ins'** with students will be an important part of the blended learning mode of study, preferably weekly. Students who are in a more vulnerable situation should be prioritised for 'live' calls.
4. Provide **consistency in use of online platforms** across all programmes.
5. A process must be put in place to quickly **identify students who require digital assistance** (e.g. laptops, dongle) during induction/matriculation.
6. Once students return to campuses, continuing the **recording of in-person lectures** will improve accessibility for students.

Our actions with progress can be found in table 1.

Table 1: Progress against actions following Covid-19 Speak Week

Recommendation	Action (July 2020)	Progress (March 2021)
1. Help not Hinder	We commit to look at the policy to explore how and if it can be revised to be fit for purpose in 2020/21. This would be an additional policy in operation only during the pandemic. The usual extenuating circumstances policy should continue to be the main reference point in non-pandemic related circumstances.	The HnH policy cannot be implemented as in 2020/21 owing to its reliance on non-pandemic data. We have implemented a range of measures this year to combat the impact of Covid including changing learning, teaching and assessment practices, updating the mitigating circumstances policy to include shielding and unexpected caring requirements, and adapting progression rules. Further potential mitigations are being explored in collaboration with SRUCSA. Our focus is on balancing evidence, proportionality, compassion and objectivity.
2. Communications	The Academic Division are working with our Marketing and Communications team to develop a protocol for and clear guidance about communication. Early in the pandemic a weekly email went out to students. Further updates have been going out from senior management to students.	Communication has been increased since January 2020 due to further lockdown measures, with a re-introduction of the weekly email. Regular check ins with faculty leadership teams enable follow up on student cases. In situations where Covid-19 cases have been reported, the relevant information has been passed to the relevant Co-President.
3. Check-Ins	Our Faculty Teams are working on a Contact and Non-Engagement code of	We have adapted attendance monitoring to encompass engagement rather than only attendance. This means that teaching

Recommendation	Action (July 2020)	Progress (March 2021)
	practice. It was clear that some teams did this really well, and this code will ensure a SRUC-wide approach to this.	colleagues can see who is joining live sessions, and who is accessing materials outwith these. Non-attendance / engagement is followed up appropriately to ensure students are okay.
4. Online Platforms	A Use of Teaching Platforms guide is being produced which will highlight which platforms are best used for which activities, aiming for consistency in use.	In addition to the Use of Teaching Platforms guide, Kaltura has now been chosen as the main platform for teaching activities. BigBlueButton, which was introduced as an emergency platform while a more detailed procurement exercise took place, will no longer be used from June. Programme teams still using BBB have been offered bespoke staff development to move to Kaltura.
5. Digital Assistance	A form in which students identify hardware / connectivity needs has been successfully piloted with our Apprentices and will be sent out to all students as part of the enrolment / induction process. We have invested in laptops for loan purposes to help plug gaps.	The form was rolled out in induction and enrolment, with identified student needs met. Lapsafes were also launched on campus in November 2020. We continue to receive requests for laptops / dongles on a weekly basis, and respond accordingly, sending out either laptops and/or dongles as required.
6. Lecture Recording	Two classroom capture companies are being reviewed: Panopto and Kaltura. Once reviewed, we will invest in classroom recording software to enable recording of in-person classes once everyone returns to campus.	Recording of virtual classrooms is more common, through use of Kaltura. The virtual learning guidance notes that: "By default, virtual classes should be recorded. Exceptions might include for legal / ethical / privacy reasons and/or because the teaching approaches are not suitable for recording, such as those with a high degree of interactivity. In these instances, it might be more appropriate to pause the parts of the virtual class not to be recorded." A working group is in place to equip on-campus classrooms with recording facilities (again using Kaltura), and to develop appropriate policies and development activities, to enable this to continue once back on campus.