



Response to Speak Week 2023/24

Academic Leadership Team

April 2024

1. Overview

The Academic Division received the Speak Week 2023/24 report in late February 2024. This report was reviewed by the Academic Leadership Team, the responses from whom have been summarised below. In this first section, we offer a written response to the report as a whole; it is recommended that this section is read with the original report in hand. In section two, we provide responses to the to the five recommendations, while in section three we provide further information on progress relating to Appendix 1 – Speak Week 21/22 update.

We thank our student body for participating in Speak Week, and SRUCSA for running the survey, and analysing and reporting on results. We recognise that the cost of living crisis continues to bring challenges to our student community and celebrate the initiative and commitment demonstrated by SRUCSA officers in collating responses on this and other key topics. We believe Speak Week is an excellent mechanism holding us to account and enabling us to make targeted improvements in our provision of academic and academic support services.

We are pleased that there are such positive responses regarding staff expertise, passion, and commitment to **learning and teaching**, and their supportive approach to providing a positive learning experience for students and developing sector relevant learning materials. We support staff to further develop and be recognised for their enhancement of learning and teaching and facilitate engagement in pedagogic scholarship and learning innovations as well as encouraging engagement in sector activities. We take an evidence-based approach to enhancement, enabling staff to reflect on learning and teaching. We curate, share and celebrate innovative and inspiring learning and teaching practices.

In 2023/24 we continue to progress well with our institution-wide **curriculum review**, modernising curricula where required and continuing to embed meta-skills delivery within programmes. This review is on top of periodic review and redevelopment cycles undertaken by our programmes every six years and additional light touch review as required. In 2023-24 the review cycle includes all programmes in the Environment and Conservation and Forestry, Forgework and Engineering Boards of Studies. In 2023-24 work-based learning is up for light touch review following on from the full institution led review undertaken in 2021.

We continue to improve **learning and teaching delivery**, building on our experience of blended delivery, recently expanding use of digital platforms to support a wider group of learners and maintaining our award winning **SEEDABLE** approach to curriculum design. Through a process of continuous improvement, we review and update digital approaches based on some of the excellent examples of good practice shared by colleagues. In 2023-24 the Principal's Teaching Innovation Fund supported two innovative projects:

1. SRUC Barony Veterinary Nursing digital stethoscopes. This specialist equipment enables hearing impaired learners to take part in practical sessions that they were previously excluded from. Access to digital stethoscopes support learners with hearing impairment to achieve their day one competencies on graduation.

2. SRUC Oatridge Forgework induction forge. This specialist equipment aligns learner experience with current industry standards, is more environmentally friendly and allows further stretch of skills development.

We received positive feedback from students on the development of new short courses including **technology focussed** provision such as drone and GIS use and spatial mapping. We have also received positive recognition in the sector for our agile and flexible approach to the design, delivery of new provision such as the peatland restoration short course and new developments such as the Introduction to carbon audit (farms).

We appreciate the positive comments regarding **learning and support** and understand the value students place on the experiential learning experiences which are key to the majority of SRUC's courses. We continue to seek feedback from students on changes to programme delivery, for example the introduction of next generation approaches to HN delivery, so that we can ensure an optimal approach to sector relevant education and skills provision. Whilst, unfortunately, some of the post-Covid FE level additional upskilling funding has now been discontinued, we are working across faculties to continue to deliver embedded FE level practical skills and access sector practical training funds (e.g. new entrants or women in agriculture/rural/forestry). We also identify HE areas where there may be opportunities to subsidise access to higher level short courses through university level upskilling funding. We appreciate the constructive feedback regarding **well-paced and organised content delivery** as well as the insights provided on areas where students would value delivery feeling less rushed and consider that there is an overload of information.

When we provided our response to the 2021-22 Speak Week report we were continuing to see challenges with elective and work placement post-Covid. We recognise the efforts of the dedicated lecturing and support staff teams in re-establishing these important activities and note that these areas have not been specifically highlighted in the 2023-24 report. We hope that this as perceived by SRUCSA a positive indicator that our students are feeling more content with the approach to electives, work placements and internships and continue to welcome student input through the usual feedback mechanisms.

We take the large number of comments on **quality of assessment planning, assessment load and feedback** seriously and recognise the need to step up our monitoring and performance in this area. Assessment and feedback schedules are required to be disseminated at the beginning of every module/unit and, across SRUC, staff will continue to work together to ensure this is happening in all areas of learning and teaching. Assessment and feedback are categories within our **curriculum review 2021-2024**, and we identify within this work that we will incorporate opportunities for students to act as partners in authentic assessment and feedback, including student choice in assessment practices. In addition, through curriculum review, we will further develop students' assessment literacy; preparing, engaging and supporting them throughout the assessment process, ensuring expectations are understood by all and facilitating their self-efficacy. We will continue to facilitate internal and external collaborations for the further development of learning and teaching. Where we perceive external agencies are placing onerous assessment demands

we will continue to work withing SQA guidelines to integrate across units and combine learning outcomes within units to reduce assessment load.

We recognise that there is always room for improvement and comments on consistency and standardisation of **timetabling and communication** are valuable in supporting our work in these areas. Where possible we seek to avoid 'in year' adjustments to practical assessment schedules and aim to be effective in our communication approach when these changes are necessary. However, we recognise that some subject areas such as forestry and engineering currently face challenges with recruiting staff due to sector shortages and there may unfortunately be times when the only option is to reschedule to ensure appropriately skilled staff are available. Timetable changes came up as the most significant issue in student meetings during the taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) scrutiny process. We believe a move to centralising of timetables, subject to undertaking relevant equality impact assessments, could be helpful and we are aware of wider sector project work by University of the West of Scotland (UWS) in this area which might help us to optimise timetabling arrangements. However, SRUC's timetabling challenges are complicated by our dispersed geography and the impact of travel arrangements to rural campuses where transport infrastructure can increase complexity.

On **facilities**, we appreciate the positive feedback on developments with specialist facilities for forestry, animal care and agriculture which aim to enhance the learning experience. We note one negative comment on **livestock practical** and would like to emphasise that recent practical work has seen impactful results, for example, students competing in livestock judging against European peers at the Paris livestock show and a SRUC student achieving third place in the final. In North faculty, investment in teaching facilities is now promoting delivery of skills and knowledge to support the agricultural industry across the region and we recently received feedback from an external partner that SRUC's livestock practical training facilities are the best they have worked with.

We note the positive comments on **library space** and appreciate the feedback on opening hours. We will seek information from the sector on opening hours, particularly at evenings and weekends and consider whether there are innovative ways to improve access to library facilities. In considering access to physical library spaces there are security, health and safety and supervision matters which campus and estates colleagues need to consider in the provision of services. SRUC campus and estates team and academic leadership team will build this Speak Week feedback into our thinking as we undertake pan-SRUC activities in relation to libraries provision in 2024-25.

SRUC, with our vision to be Scotland's Enterprise University at the heart of our sustainable natural economy, particularly values student community input on **sustainability**. Sustainability is embedded in our mission, and in all areas of our education, research and consultancy. Examples of work undertaken on sustainability include:

- **Climate Impact Teams**

During 2022 Campus & Estates Team attended SRUC's main campuses to promote and deliver "Climate Impact Teams" (CIT). During the 2 weeks of "in person" promotional events over one hundred learners gave their details and expressed an interest of a new award system specifically designed to create and raise environmental awareness and contribute towards CCAP actions. However, there was limited interest from learners actually wishing to sign up for an award. With sustainability a key part of SRUC's SEEDABLE approach to curriculum design, we believe there may be value in revisiting the climate impact engagement with SRUCSA to understand whether there is interest in additional climate impact activities in 2024-25.

- **Waste Management Recycling**

During 2023-24 CES Team attended all main campus to ensure canteen recycling waste facilities were operational and address any areas where canteens did not have evidence of adequate canteen recycling facilities.

A site audit of SRUC's Waste Management Contractor was also performed to ensure SRUC Waste Management operations were "Zero to Landfill". SRUC's general waste is recycled into energy through our Waste Management Contractor recycling facility sites.

Campus and estates have also recently implemented campus building waste recycling stations. At SRUC Craibstone office bins were removed to eliminate over 6,000 single use plastic bin bags. Consistency of delivery of waste recycling is regularly checked by campus and estates teams with only three additional campus waste recycling stations to implement within Barony Campus in preparation for academic year 2024-25.

- **Environmental Awareness**

SRUC delivers messaging on environmental communications and campaigns through a range of official media channels and welcomes feedback from students on topics of interest. Examples of recent activities include a daily communication campaign during "Scotland's Climate Week" and on campus active travel events at Craibstone and Oatridge Campuses. There was also a recent environmental communication campaign regarding "World Water Day" and "Food Waste Action Week".

Finally, with regards to climate and sustainability, during 2023 the campus and estates team compiled SRUC's first "Annual Climate Change Action Plan Report", intended to benchmark progression report on the progress and delivery of SRUC's environmental actions. It is published within CES SharePoint page and awaiting approval for external publication.

On sustainability and transport costs, where possible, and when Covid restrictions allow, we encourage use of **sustainable transport** options such as active transport, public transport, or car sharing.

Results from SRUC's most recent **travel survey** indicate that there are barriers to use of bicycle as a means of travel to and from SRUC Barony with over 70% of student respondents indicating they would not consider active travel at all. Particular barriers identified were the lack of a segregated cycle route along the A701 main transport route and no suitable low traffic route as an alternative. SRUC is in discussions with SWESTRANS regarding this, but at present there are no regional infrastructure plans to implement a cycle lane on the A701 or an alternative low traffic route. This means that, for SRUC Barony specifically, it is not clear how the provision of electric bikes would bring a benefit given the regional transport infrastructure challenges. However, there may be other SRUC sites where there are fewer barriers to bicycle use and we would value receiving any demand information SRUCSA holds on active transport.

On **electric vehicles**, SRUC's campus and estates team conducted an EV Strategy exercise by awarding a contract to "Urban Foresight" to compile SRUC's main campus EV Strategy Report. Subsequent to this report a business case for implementation of EV charging points has been developed. Progress with next steps will be dependent on finance and resource availability.

On the challenges of balancing finances, we encourage students who are experiencing **financial difficulties** to speak to a member of faculty staff to find out about types of **support** available.

It is incredibly important to us to recognise the excellent **support** our staff provide to students, and we value the ongoing positive feedback within the report. SRUC staff are committed to our RISE values (respect, innovate, support and excel) and it is fantastic to hear from students when these values are being actively demonstrated.

We particularly value the constructive and specific comments around the value **extra-curricular activities** and congratulate SRUCSA on the huge amount of work they have put into the development and support of clubs and societies. We recognise that this is not easy to achieve in a geographically dispersed institution.

2. Response to recommendations

Speak Week identified five recommendations for SRUC. Initial responses can be found below.

1. Work to take the student cost of living seriously by addressing the food price increase at all campuses and to provide alternative facilities.

SRUCSA said: The food prices at SRUC are too high for students living on either a loan or those that don't receive one at all. This is a hugely important issue which has been mentioned year on year. The most recent contract renegotiation with Baxter Storey resulted in the removal of the subsidy for students and a 20% increase in prices at all campuses. SRUCSA were not involved in these discussions which have directly affected students. One of the biggest requests SRUCSA have received this academic year is for provision of microwaves and kettle for student use due to the unaffordability of food on campus. There has also been disregard for the communication of changes happening. We would recommend the subsidy is reinstated, free breakfast is provided again, a discount for SRUC students is introduced, and/or microwave facilities are provided at all campuses.

SRUC response: SRUC welcomes feedback from students on cost of living and food prices. Food on campus is heavily subsidised and prices did not increase for four years prior to the pandemic. Recent price increases were below inflationary rates for food and beverages. However, it is recognised that cost of living remains a challenge for SRUCSA members and aim to provide lower cost canteen options such as soup and roll. SRUC supports the provision of microwaves where requested by SRUCSA and would welcome additional feedback on provision and location of microwaves.

2. Work to turn unused areas on campuses into student social or activity spaces and acknowledge the importance of extra-curricular activities to students.

SRUCSA said: SRUC is currently seeking TDAP which would then move into getting university status. Social and extracurricular activities are a key part of the student experience, and if SRUC are looking to take this seriously then this should be a key focus. The hiring of an Active Campus Coordinator and a budget for this department will be crucial to provide these spaces for students.

SRUC response: Phasing is required, with an active campus co-ordinator coming first and bringing recommendations which would then be subject to sourcing funding. SRUC would value seeing a blend of recommendations from SRUCSA including some which can leverage existing facilities/outdoor space as well as requests for funding. SRUC campus and estates team welcome feedback from students regarding social and extra-curricular initiatives, particularly where encouraging use of existing facilities is concerned.

3. Work to ensure lecturers and support staff work together to improve networking and contact with relevant industries.

SRUCSA said: Students are seeking more opportunities to create contacts within their class time, either through guest speakers or networking days. There is a clear link missing between careers support and teaching staff where students feel they are not given enough

exposure to different organisations or businesses they may want to pursue careers with. We would recommend that this becomes clearly signposted by lecturing staff and communication with careers staff is improved for students.

SRUC response: Through the HN next generation project, all students enrolled on an HN next gen qualification will engage in a work placement. SRUC receives support from industry with development of qualifications to ensure relevance of course content. SRUC lecturers also engage guest speakers, including researchers who provide input to undergraduate and postgraduate courses. An example is the delivery of researcher guest lectures on ecology to wildlife and conservation, environmental management and countryside management students. SRUC also offers an annual internship programme with our SAC Consulting team which agriculture students can apply for. There are also long-running placements such as the Norvite animal nutrition scholarship which, for over ten years, exists to encourage students to think about a career in animal science or the animal feed industry: [SRUC on LinkedIn: Norvite Animal Nutrition Company Ltd scholarship](#).

SRUC provides campus specific careers advice to help with career, employability or continuing education queries: [SRUC Careers Services | Campus-specific careers advice](#)

SRUC also promotes undergraduate research experience placements via the relevant head of department.

In summary, for this recommendation on industry engagement, SRUC believes there is, in the first instance, room to work with SRUCSA to widen communications on the many current networking and industry contact opportunities and careers service provision.

4. Work to provide clarity for students on their assessment schedules in conjunction with lecture times, either before or at the beginning of their course.

SRUCSA said: Students have said that the timetables for assessments and lectures are confusing and change at short notice. Lecture times clash with their assessment schedules, which provides unnecessary stress during term time.

SRUC response: Timetabling and assessment clarity is a priority area for SRUC. We believe a move to centralising of timetables, subject to undertaking relevant equality impact assessments, could be helpful and are aware of wider sector project work by University of the West of Scotland (UWS) in this area which might help us to optimise timetabling arrangements. However, SRUC's timetabling challenges are complicated by our dispersed geography and the impact of travel arrangements to rural campuses where transport infrastructure can increase complexity.

5. Work to build an understanding around blended learning to manage expectations of students enrolling on SRUC courses.

SRUCSA said: There isn't a clear understanding by students of the definition of blended learning, and how teaching is delivered on courses. This should be laid out before students sign up to a course, which would allow them to organise travel, caring responsibilities, and work commitments before coming to SRUC. There should be a clear timetable on how much time will be spent on campus, in addition to the lectures that will be delivered virtually. This should be made available within the course information, both on the website and through communications to new and returning students. Individuals will then be able to make decisions based on whether they can manage any financial strain that would result from travelling and committing to the on-campus time. There should also be clear links to funding channels on the basis of this.

SRUC response: There is a definition of blended learning in the Induction and Student Guide. SRUC could extend it if needed, using the recent publication on definitions approved by Scottish Government. SRUC recognises that it could be better represented and communicated on the SRUC website. This recommendation links strongly to the timetabling recommendation – please see SRUC response to recommendation 4.

3. Update on progress of recommendations from 2020-21 Speak Week report

- **Website:** SRUC has continued to work with staff teams to ensure relevant course information appears on the SRUC website for prospective students to explore. We are currently undertaking a project relating to the short course area of the website.
- **Internships:** SRUC continues to provide summer internship opportunities with our SAC consulting colleagues which can support progression into careers in the sector.
- **Skills boost:** In academic year 2022-23, where additional upskilling and young person's guarantee funding was available, SRUC continued to provide opportunities across all faculties to provide a 'skills boost' towards the end of the academic year and will report back in due course. In 2023-24 this funding was reduced with the loss of the young person's guarantee fund, and from 2024-25 the upskilling fund is also being withdrawn. SRUC has signposted students towards other short course funding such as new entrants and women in agriculture funding from Scottish Government.
- **Curriculum review:** SRUC continues curriculum review work to embed entrepreneurial and emotional skills development opportunities into delivery of learning and teaching. In 2023-24 the review cycle includes all programmes in the Environment and Conservation and Forestry, Forgework and Engineering Boards of Studies. In 2023-24 work-based learning is up for light touch review following on from the full institution led review undertaken in 2021.
- **On social and leisure opportunities:** SRUC is committed to, as far as is practicable, providing opportunities across all campuses for the student community. We provide an update in this report and we know that SRUCSA are familiar with the ongoing challenges of delivering across all campuses.
- **Practical and experiential learning:** We completely agree about the critical importance of practical and experiential learning for the majority of SRUC courses. We also recognise that

some courses are appropriate for blended or distance learning delivery which can widen participation. Since the previous Speak Week response, practical delivery has returned to all campuses post-Covid and we have re-established normal campus occupation levels.

- **Baxter Storey and catering model:** SRUC recognises that catering and cost of living continue to come through as priority themes in Speak Week and have included an update in this 2023-24 Speak Week report.
- **Staff development:** SRUC is committed to developing our staff and providing relevant CPD opportunities, including staff development through the SEEDABLE curriculum design project. We continue to monitor and act on student feedback with regards to academic support.