



Resilient Learning Communities

Institutional Plan for: SRUC

Context

In 2019/20, SRUC released a refreshed institutional Strategy, focusing on becoming a 21st century enterprise university at the heart of our sustainable natural economy. We also developed a new Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, focusing on an inclusive approach to learning and teaching that enables our students to become leaders and change agents in their chosen profession. The strategy comprises ten principles, which will underpin learning and teaching at SRUC over the next decade. One of these principles is learning communities, that is supporting the development of effective and positive learning relationships through learning, teaching and extra-curricular practices. Another is the development of active blended learning, something that has been accelerated exponentially owing to Covid-19. Much of our focus over the next three years will be to move from responsive blended learning to a more permanent, less reactive / pandemic-led, form of blended learning - one that best suits our tertiary coverage and practical-based subjects.

The development of resilient learning communities will be key to this development – as will our first and foremost principle – working with our learners as partners. It is within this context that the Enhancement Theme work will sit.

Alongside these developments has been a wholesale restructure of our academic division, one of the outcomes of which has been the creation of a new Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. This Centre includes a new Student Journey team who have specific oversight for coordinating cross-SRUC Enhancement Theme activity. This will ensure Enhancement Theme activity aligns to SRUC strategic direction.

Institutional team

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Institutional lead	Dr Pauline Hanesworth Head of Learning and Teaching		

TLG staff representative	Alison Boyle Student Journey Lead		
TLG staff alternate representative	Dr Lisa Nowak Student Journey Officer		
TLG student representative	Amy McLuckie Co-President SRUCSA		
Additional Institutional Team Members	Jill Offer Programme Leader Applied Animal Science		
Additional Institutional Team Members	Avril Rae Northern Faculty Careers Advisor		
Additional Institutional Team Members	Class Rep 1 (TBC)		
Additional Institutional Team Members Alternative	Class Rep 2 (TBC)		

Planned activity: Year 1

Overall outcomes/activity
<p>The Covid-19 situation has created an opportunity to review, revolutionise and renovate how we go about things at SRUC. One area that has been of key focus over the past ten months has been our student learning communities, and ensuring our learners feel like they belong and are engaged. We aim to ensure this focus continues through our Enhancement Theme work over the next three years, ensuring our activities continue to build greater resilience in our learners and staff, that they enhance and work through our student and staff learning communities, and that this is achieved via a blended learning environment.</p> <p>To this end, our outcomes will be achieved by integrating former and current themes, being mindful of diversity and inclusion, and widening access, and continuing to create a community of belonging. They will focus on building, adapting and enhancing effective and resilient learning communities – at both the student and staff level – in a new blended learning and blended working world. The activities will be project based and build on each other, with year one focusing on laying the foundation.</p> <p>At an institutional level, we anticipate benefits such as increased belonging and engagement, improved resilience, enhanced learning, and reducing loneliness and</p>

isolation. We aim to deliver work that leads to a better understanding of the development and maintenance of learning communities in a blended learning/working environment, that results in improved learning and working experiences. The outputs from our projects – both practical and research based – will hopefully be of interest to other institutions across the sector.

Year 1 outcomes/activity

Our year one plan was collaboratively developed. Through discussions with the previous Enhancement Theme Institutional Group and our Programme Leaders Forum and through conversations within CELT and among institutional/student/theme leads, it was agreed that the first year of Theme activity should:

- a. Focus on building the foundations: what does Student/Staff Learning Communities mean at SRUC and how can we develop them.
- b. Focus on addressing student loneliness and isolation.

Following an all-staff consultation, where ideas were sought around what this might look like in practice, three separate projects were agreed upon:

1. Research on SRUC Student Learning Communities: what do these currently look like, what should they look like, and how might they be developed/enhanced to be fit for purpose in a blended learning world.
2. Research on Staff Learning Communities: what do these currently look like, what should they look like, and how can they be developed/enhanced to be fit for purpose in a blended working world.
3. The development of Peer Mentoring in a blended learning environment. This includes establishing a model for the implementation and ongoing evaluation of peer learning & support at SRUC and the creation of a resource pack (including training materials for staff and students, guides on online engagement and the provision of funds for student-led activities and events).

Following the successful employment of Student Research Interns in 2019/20 as part of last year's Enhancement Theme, it was agreed that these posts would again be made available for 2020/21. As such, two Student Research Interns will undertake – with guidance – projects 1 and 2. Project 3 will be led by our Student Journey Officer.

It is anticipated that the research (projects 1 & 2) will enable us to better understand learning communities at SRUC – particularly in a blended learning format – and identify areas for enhancement, so enabling us to focus second- and third-year Theme activities accordingly (and so maintaining the ethos of evidence-based enhancement developed via the previous Enhancement Theme). As well as identifying good practice and pinch points / gaps, it is anticipated that the publication of this research will mean its findings can be of use to the wider sector.

It is anticipated that the Peer Mentoring work (project 3) will address the issues of building resilient learning communities and loneliness by providing high-quality, sustainable and accessible peer learning and support communities at subject and campus level in a blended learning environment. By developing digital peer support communities, we anticipate a range of benefits including relationship building (particularly between year groups), greater support around transitions and enhanced support around challenging

content, study skills and assessment. The additional layer of support that peer-led activity can provide has clear links to resilience, attainment, retention, success and a richer student experience.

The informal peer support projects also aim at building resilience by promoting learner autonomy, providing opportunities for students to connect with one another in a structured and supported way, providing a place for students to ask questions they may not yet be comfortable asking staff, and ensuring that peer leaders are equipped with the training and knowledge they need to signpost effectively and design high quality, relevant and purposeful peer support sessions. The allocated funding will be used to design and produce resources, and to permit peer support groups to run their own events, sessions and social events. The resource pack output will be made available to the wider sector.

Dissemination of work

Internally, we will engage with staff and students via existing forums including the Heads of Department Forum, Programme Leaders Forum, and Guidance, Academic and Pastoral Support Forum. We will publish updates and reports and seek engagement via our institutional blog and an institutional Theme webpage, and incorporate learning/outputs in our annual staff development programme. We will also rely on the range of staff and students within the Institutional Theme Group to engage with their stakeholders on the Theme work. This has been effective to date with buy in from both staff and students.

Externally, we will encourage sharing of project updates and outputs via sector forums (both those Theme related and more wider learning and teaching/student engagement forums) and networks and will encourage/support dissemination of outputs via relevant sector-wide conferences and events.

Collaborative cluster work

SRUC aim to be involved in two collaborative clusters:

1. We are a partner in the Mental Health collaborative cluster, with our Head of Learning and Teaching (Institutional Lead) being our main contact link.
2. We anticipate engaging in the Student-Led collaborative cluster, with our SRUCSA Co-President (TLG Student Representative) being our main contact link.

Precise roles in these clusters are still being determined.

Supporting staff and student engagement

Staff and student engagement will be encouraged and supported through various routes. The Enhancement Theme funding will be used to employ the Student Research Interns (projects 1 & 2), to support delivery of the Peer Mentoring work (project 3), and to support engagement in wider Theme activity (e.g., development of training, engaging in Theme events etc.). We will make use of existing forums, networks and meetings for project delivery (e.g., co-opting a Programme Leader Forum or Class Rep meeting to undertake research activities). We have written into the Student Journey team remit the leading and supporting of Enhancement Theme activity. Finally, the fact that Learning Communities is one of our Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy principles means that we will be able to embed Enhancement Theme work within wider Strategy activity.

Evaluation

The Institutional Theme Group meets regularly throughout the year and has ultimate oversight of Theme activity progress. Individual projects will also be supported by regular project-based meetings.

Anticipated impacts and their measurements include:

- i. Increased awareness of learning communities among staff and students, evidenced through informal discussions and formal minutes from team meetings, and engagement with research updates/outputs (e.g., blog reads, resource views etc.).
- ii. Identified activities to enhance student and staff learning communities, with progression of selected activities in years two and three of the Theme.
- iii. Benefits of undertaking the Research Internship (e.g., increased confidence in research, increased partnership working etc.), identified via exit interviews with the interns post-project completion.
- iv. A short report will be produced on the activities of each peer support group active in AY 2020/21, in addition to an overall report. This will include feedback from attendees, peer leaders and staff members involved with the projects identifying the impacts of the work.

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Financial Annex Year 1

An indication of the allocation of Theme funding is as follows:

- Support projects identified in the year one plan of work:
 - **Project one:** student-led research on Student Learning Communities (£1,750).
 - **Project two:** student-led research on Staff Learning Communities (£1,750).
 - **Project three:** peer mentoring/support in a blended learning environment (£1,500).
- Support staff and student attendance at Enhancement Theme meetings, events and conferences to help disseminate SRUC Theme activity, engage in sector-wide collaborations and learn from others' Theme work (£1,000).

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