



## End of Year 1 Report for Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)

The key purposes of this report are to: -

- provide a framework for HEIs to report on their Theme activity that has taken place over the year
- help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

Please report under the headings below. The report should be about 6 to 8 sides of A4 in length.

### **Institutional team**

Identify any changes in Theme leadership, TLG and institutional team membership since details were reported in the institutional plan developed at the start of the academic year.

No changes in Theme leadership, TLG or institutional membership.

### **Evaluation of activities/outcomes**

To make evaluation processes more accessible and user friendly, we have attempted to simplify (not minimise) the evaluation reporting process into 7 key questions (see below). Prior to completing these, it would be useful to refer to the QAAS website resource: [A Guide to Basic Evaluation in HE](#) (specifically, Section 8, Summary overview on page 23, and the Evaluation Checklist – Appendix A, on pages 28-29).

Please report each activity/intervention against the following questions in the Evaluation part of the template.

N. B. You may have already realised some of your objectives and/or these might be ongoing, so please delineate each question according to whether activities or interventions have been completed already in this reporting year or are in process.

(Easiest way is to delete **either/or** options highlighted in **red** in questions below):

## Evaluation

Please complete the following 7 questions for each activity or intervention (N.B. Just cut and paste the table below as many times as necessary)

Resilient Learning Community Activity Overview
<p>SRUC's activity during this first year of the Resilient Learning Community has followed that outlined in our year one plan. This plan was 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:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Focus on building the foundations: what does Student/Staff Learning Communities mean at SRUC and how can we develop them.</li><li>Focus on addressing student loneliness and isolation.</li></ol> <p>Following an all-staff consultation, where ideas were sought around what this might look like in practice, three separate projects were agreed upon:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>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.</li><li>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.</li></ol> <p>The development of Peer Mentoring in a blended learning environment. This includes establishing a model for the implementation and ongoing evaluation of peer learning &amp; 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).</p> <p>The first two of these were merged and led by Student Research Interns, the latter has been implemented by our Student Journey Officer.</p> <p>A range of activities has occurred alongside this in the development of learning communities, such as (but not limited to),</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Programme Leaders Forum – Leaders from 7 campuses meet weekly to discuss, share and problem solve any issues. This is Co-Chaired by CELT (Centre of Enhancement for Learning and Teaching) and facilitates discussion and topics from the Academic Leadership Team / Registry / SRUCSA, and the informal/formal agenda varies from week to week.</li><li>GAPS Forum – Guidance, Academic and Pastoral Support meet 4-weekly to share good practice and discuss staff development, any pinch points, and solutions.</li><li>#Speakeasy: a 15-minute virtual space when students join/or at the end of a class and can chat about what they do in their downtime / subject / hobbies to help build community.</li><li>Virtual rooms have been created for both staff and students.</li></ul>
1. What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)

### Research on Student and Staff Learning Communities

Our Student Research Interns have conducted research into student and staff learning communities so as to better understand, and provide recommendations on, ways to further develop communities in a future blended learning and working world. The research comprised of a student survey (which saw 214 responses), a staff survey (which saw 73 responses), and staff interviews (14 staff were interviewed). The format of these surveys and interviews were developed in collaboration between staff and students so as to ensure that the research conducted would be as effective as possible and so as to remove any barriers to participation. The research report will be available in August 2021.

### Peer Mentoring

At the start of the 2020/21 academic year, we investigated potential subject areas to start peer mentoring schemes in. This was done through our staff development programme (alerting colleagues to the possibility of starting one of these projects), our staff forums and by working with staff and our Students' Association. Two subject areas (Vet Nursing and Equine Studies) began a project with the support of the Student Journey Officer. The Student Journey Officer and staff from each subject area worked in partnership to recruit and train volunteers, before working closely with student volunteers to help define their peer mentoring project (e.g., what would the focus be, how many sessions, when etc.).

There was also interest from other subject areas, but projects did not start due to lack of staff capacity and lack of interest from students in volunteering. Of the two projects that started, one is still active and one lost momentum after a few sessions.

## 2. Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)

### Research on Student and Staff Learning Communities

By undertaking this research, we aimed to maintain the ethos of an evidence-based approach to enhancement developed as part of the last Enhancement Theme. The intent is to base Enhancement Theme Year Two and Three activity on the recommendations arising from the research. This aligned to the consultation prior to developing our Year One plan, which highlighted that the activity for 2020/21 should focus on building the foundations for future development of learning communities in a blended learning world. The employment of Student Research Interns to undertake the work aimed to further foster a student's-as-partners approach to enhancement, a key element of SRUC's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy.

### Peer Mentoring

The Year One pre-consultation also highlighted student isolation and loneliness, which we aimed to tackle immediately. A range of interventions have been put in place, of which peer mentoring is one. Evidence from across the sector has emphasised how vital peer mentoring programmes can be for addressing loneliness and building community, in addition to supporting transitions and helping students to develop a sense of self efficacy, academic confidence and to become effectively integrated into their institution. The intent is to establish what peer mentoring model works best for SRUC's unique structure, and then grow the scheme over the coming years. Again, aligning to our students-as-partners focus, the peer mentoring schemes are designed to be student led, but supported by staff.

They are also subject-specific and bespoke, ensuring the schemes are able to adapt to and reflect the specific needs of students.

3. What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)

### Research on Student and Staff Learning Communities

Impact of the research project has been both intentional and unintentional.

Unintentionally, the student survey highlighted that there are many students who are not aware of what learning communities are, how they are developed, the benefits of being part of existing learning communities, or how they would go about encouraging or creating a small group or cohort who share the same academic goals, interests, or career aspirations. Taking part in the survey had the unintentional consequence of raising their awareness of the importance of engaging in communities.

An intentional impact has been the uncovering of student and staff understanding of, current engagement in, and thoughts about how to develop further blended learning communities. For example:

- + Students recognised the value of and willingness to engage in learning communities for connection, participation, engagement, and outcomes, but are not always clear on how to engage in learning communities.
- + The importance of developing a range of communities – social, health-related, subject, and academic – at a campus, faculty and cross-SRUC level.
- + The confusion caused by multiple communication channels used for the development of staff learning communities.
- + A desire to engage in more communities by staff, with a corresponding recognition that this was not necessarily seen as a priority in day-to-day working.

A wide range of recommendations is arising from the research, such as:

- + Increase the students' association influence and exposure among students, creating more opportunities for students to come together in community.
- + Enhance, unify, and standardise platforms for staff to engage in that are easy to access, including updates, the opportunity to share blogs and post questions, and form connections.
- + Promote existing SRUC successful student learning community examples, expanding on established structures that have been shown to be functioning.

Once the research report is finalised, we aim to use the findings and recommendations to develop future activities. By basing these on the evidence, we can focus our activities to where they will have the most impact. We will continue to hire Student Interns to support us in this endeavour, continuing to build a student's-as-partners ethos, while supporting student personal development.

### Peer Mentoring

Two projects were begun this year, each with 8 volunteers who attended training. The first group was started in Vet Nursing and was called 'Suture Self' by the Leaders. The

Leaders decided to focus on running academic sessions and ran a session on study skills. It was well-attended, with 15 students going along to the session. The Leaders also developed a logo to advertise their project. However, following on from this the project seemed to lose momentum, and when the Leaders were contacted again, they expressed that it was difficult to find time to run sessions. From here the project seems to have stopped. The Student Journey Officer will discuss this with the staff members involved in supporting the scheme to establish why this may have been the case, and whether the project will continue next year.

The second project was an Equine Community group, open to students from Equine courses. The Leaders decided that they wanted to run community-building sessions such as group chats, competitions and to provide study tips. They wanted their project to be open to all students on Equine courses. The Leaders called their project 'Mucker's Nation'. They ran a variety of sessions, including initially group chats which were not that well-attended. However, they have had much more success with their competition format. Through their Teams page they have run a variety of competitions asking students to submit photos and entries in several categories. They have run 3 in total, which have all had good engagement. The Leaders have also collaborated with marketing and comms and our Students' Association to advertise their project to the wider student body and via the staff at Forums (i.e., those with an interest in horses, but who might not be on an Equine course). The project has been very successful, and the Leaders plan to continue it next year.

In the future we hope to build on the successes and learning from this year and grow our peer mentoring programme further. We have already had some requests to start new peer support projects, and we will advertise again.

To support the development of the project, funds were made available and a set of resources was developed for staff and students involved in the project. This includes bespoke training for both projects, with a set of accompanying slides that they are able to reference. Additional training was also created on subjects such as barriers to participation, the principles of good listening and tips for online meetings, as well as a session planning template to be used by all groups. Students and staff have also been given access to the 'Peer Support Activities' toolkit created by Edinburgh University Students' Association, which the Student Journey Officer has been given permission to use/adapt and share. A presentation on different peer learning and support models has also been produced, as well as an outline of what it might mean to be a staff contact for a peer support scheme at SRUC.

The Equine Community group (Mucker's Nation) were entered into the 2021 sparqs awards in the category of 'student-led initiative in a College'. They were shortlisted and eventually won the award, which was a fantastic achievement. The students attended the awards ceremony, and we have disseminated this across SRUC via social media and our SRUCSA/staff networks.

#### 4. How will we know? (How is the change measured)

##### Research on Student and Staff Learning Communities

The success of the research project has been seen initially in the engagement from staff and students, with 214 students and 73 staff taking part in the survey, 14 staff being interviewed, and a range of staff and students supporting the development of the project. Informal discussions and formal minutes from team meetings also indicate that learning

communities is being discussed more. Further success is in the identification of recommendations to enhance student and staff learning communities, which will be implemented in years two and three of the Theme. The findings of the research will be disseminated, with existing successful communities identified being promoted via case studies. Short bite-sized videos will be created, with step-by-step guides on how to develop and enhance practice. It is anticipated that a follow up survey in Year 3 will be undertaken to ascertain if change has occurred.

Exit interviews with the student interns, to be undertaken during the summer, will also indicate the benefits to them of undertaking the internship.

### Peer Mentoring

At present success has been measured using the following metrics:

- Number of volunteers recruited (8 for Vet Nursing Project, 8 for Equine Community)
- Number of volunteers trained (8 for Vet Nursing, 6 for Equine Community)
- Number of attendees in sessions/ events (15 for Vet Nursing, 73 for Equine Community)
- Number of projects (2 this academic year)
- Number of sessions delivered (1 for Vet Nursing, 8 for Equine Community)

The relatively low numbers reflect the fact that the scheme is at a relatively new stage. We did not want to interrupt the development of new student-led projects and peer relationships through excessive staff involvement or evaluation. However, as the projects become more robust and over the next academic year, we plan to include more elements of evaluation including focus groups, surveys, and quotes.

However, an indication of success can be found in the fact that the Mucker's Nation project was entered into the sparqs Student Engagement Awards in the 'student-led initiative in a college' category, which it won.

### 5. Who has been involved in making any judgements? (Who decides on effectiveness)

Initially, judgements are made by those involved in the projects – the Student Interns, the Academic Enhancement Lead (Student Journey) and Academic Enhancement Officer (Student Journey), and the Enhancement Theme Institutional Group. The success of both projects is also jointly evaluated by staff and students, both through consultation activities (e.g., with various forums, committees etc.) and through informal conversations with project participants. As both projects develop, we are keen for the Enhancement Theme Institutional Group to have more of a role in this, acting as a steering as well as advisory group.

### 6. Any lessons learned to apply already? (Applied ongoing learning)

### Research on Student and Staff Learning Communities

The research has indicated that there are many successful student learning communities already in existence in SRUC, such as the Blethery Bothy, a virtual hub where students within a faculty come together and share their experiences with students who are

progressing. Future work should focus on promotion of these successful communities, expanding on established structures and rolling them out across the organisation.

It has also indicated that there is strong evidence of informal learning communities on social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Yammer, Tik Tok etc.) that appear to work well and can be widened or be replicated to promote inclusion and belonging.

With regard to staff communities, it is clear that – out with forums – these mostly operate informally, and that lessons can be taken from the purposeful development of student communities in the development of formal communities to support the learning of our staff.

It is clear that one size does not fit all, and a blended approach should be adopted. Also – particularly though not only with staff – it is clear that mechanisms for the development of peer-to-peer interaction across functions and departments is required to support community at the organisation-wide level.

### Peer Mentoring

The main lessons learned include the type of projects that might be effective. For instance, although only two projects have run this year, it is notable that the more academic project was the one that fizzled out. Whilst this did not seem to be because the sessions were not useful to the students (attendance at the one session that was run was high), it may indicate that more academic sessions are more effort for the Leaders to prepare, and so may cause additional workload. It may also indicate that Leaders are more motivated to run community-building sessions.

Another thing to note is the vital role of subject staff in helping to set up, develop and support the project. Engaged staff contacts have been invaluable in keeping the projects running and helping to maintain the communication channel with both the Leaders and those who attend the sessions.

The need to develop the reward and recognition structures for volunteers has become apparent, and this is something that will be investigated as the project continues.

### 7. Any things you need to stop doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)

The main thing it is clear that needs to stop happening is the re-invention of the wheel. Both projects have shown that we need to dig deeper into the successful structures, communities, and peer mentoring projects that already exist and replicate / enhance where possible rather than starting again.

### **Dissemination of work**

Which mechanisms have been most effective in disseminating outcomes and resources internally, and to the sector? Please provide examples.

If there are materials and resources you can share with the sector, please provide details below.

Updates and promotion of the projects took place via staff meetings, blogs / updates, the Enhancement Institutional Theme Group, and the Programme Leaders and GAPS Forums. It was also shared via SRUCSA/ Comms/Staff Intranet.

### **Collaboration outwith your institution**

How have you collaborated with other institutions? This could be informally by growing networks or contacts, or more formally for example, through collaborative clusters or sector work. If you have been collaborating with others, briefly explain what this has involved and what have been the benefits and challenges.

SRUC staff attend a range of external support networks (e.g., TLG, CDN, Universities Scotland, sparqs networks), where projects are discussed, ideas shared and often opportunities arise for collaboration. SRUC are currently liaising with Borders College and others from the sector around a project we implemented supporting mental wellbeing and how through that project increased our reach and engagement with students.

We are also part a collaborative cluster on student mental wellbeing within our BAME and LGBTQ+ learner communities and the sector project on higher education: more than a degree. For the former, we have supported attendance at webinars, collation of resources and recommendations of webinar speakers. For the latter, one of our Students' Association Co-Presidents is an active member of the project steering group.

Our programme leaders have also taken part in the Programme Leadership: Strengthening Resilience, Supporting Learning Communities collaborative cluster activities, with one PL noting that their action learning set have agreed to continue on a monthly basis post-collaborative cluster activity to focus on scholarship and publications. They note, "*it turned out to be a really good opportunity to exchange best practice with some tangible outcomes*". Another attendee brought back into SRUC some great ideas for future practice.

### **Supporting staff and student engagement**

How have staff and students been supported to engage in Theme activities? Please provide examples.

Both staff and students have engaged extremely well, and this is evident in the response rates mentioned earlier. Although the recommendations are still being finalised both the Peer Support report and recommendations will be included/cited in the September Year 2 planning. Both Student Interns are an integral part of CELT and fully supported by the Student Journey and wider CELT Teams. The Programme Leader / GAPS Forum and SRUCSA ensured they had access to a variety of communication mechanisms which



helped support their involvement at every stage and widened access to and engagement with all off their activities.

### **Processes**

What are you learning from the processes, approaches and structures you are using to support this Theme?

How will this report be used/distributed within your institution?

We are learning that collaboration is key, and that through these opportunities and projects / short life working groups themselves, new and existing learning communities can be created and enhanced.

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<b>Date:</b>	<b>28.06.2021</b>
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