Outcome Agreement SRUC

(Scotland's Rural College)

Academic Year 2023/24

October 2023

Contents

SRUC Outcome Agreement

1. Introduction and Context

SRUC's vision is to be a new Tertiary Enterprise University College at the heart of the natural economy, which delivers positive social, cultural, and economic impacts for Scotland and that is attractive to learners, collaborators, and investors.

We deliver transformational education and skills right across the country through an integrated tertiary model, which is underpinned by world-class translational research, and amplified through consulting and commercial activities. We believe in the continued power of a place-based agenda in delivering for the needs of Scotland, and our identity is founded on being rooted in the communities that we serve.

A number of major strategic strands support our progress towards this vision: SRUC has made significant progress in the process for the attainment of taught degree awarding powers (TDAP); allied to this we continue to progress our ambition for a School of Veterinary Medicine based on a tertiary model which is inclusive and radical. SRUC also continues to build upon its first class reputation as a research provider and collaborator by developing plans now for Research Degree Awarding Powers (RDAP).

SRUC makes a difference
SRUC celebrated its ten year anniversary ([SRUC celebrates ten years with Holyrood showcase | SRUC](#)) in 2022 and we continue to achieve and support our communities in Scotland and beyond. SRUC has been ranked as the top young university in Scotland two years in a row ([SRUC named top young university in Scotland for a second year by Times Higher Education | SRUC](#)) and SRUC student Julie-Ann Murray was named Scotland's Apprentice of the year ([Julie-Ann named Apprentice of the Year | SRUC](#)). Building on last year's success in REF, we and ILRI were awarded £1.5M from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation to help develop a selection index for the African smallholder dairy system ([New research to tackle cattle methane emissions in Africa | SRUC](#))

SRUC remains values-led and outcome-focused
Along with the rest of the sector, SRUC has been faced with new challenges this year such as the cost-of-living crisis, the step change around generative AI, ongoing socio-political turmoil, and the escalating climate emergency.

For many years now, SRUC's strategy has reflected the reality that these kinds of grand challenges require agile, adaptable and resilient institutions that know how to collaborate, be supportive and bring about the skills and innovation that the country needs to respond effectively.

Underpinned by the SRUC values of Respect, Innovation, Support and Excellence, this Outcome Agreement for 2023/24 seeks to give assurance on the use of SFC funding and to demonstrate how we will deliver, with impact, across a range of priorities:

- Support and promote the **achievement** and **retention** of our students through a blended delivery model
- Ensure the **wellbeing** of staff and students through these challenging socio-economic times

- Deliver an education-led economic recovery for Scotland through supporting the **success** of the natural economy now and in the future through our world class teaching, research, and consultancy
- Take a **regional approach** with our campuses acting as anchor institutions to ensure that we deliver to the natural economy across Scotland.

2. Priority Area 1: Fair Access and Transitions

SRUC's widening access and participation strategy outlines our approach to encouraging students from a range of backgrounds to participate in tertiary education lifelong learning pathways. We have an inclusive approach to teaching, at all stages in the student journey identifying and addressing the needs of potential and existing students. SRUC offers vocational and academic pathways equally, with higher level apprenticeship pathways for work-based learners in addition to strong vocational content and work placement opportunities embedded in next generation qualifications. SRUC's Widening Access and Participation Strategy reflects our tertiary education profile and comprises four strands:

1. **Encouraging Access** through partnership with select recognised access programmes, engagement in national access and participation networks, outreach work with recognised partners and a focused approach to schools provision that leads to increased recruitment.

2. **Enabling Entry**, supporting access for widening access applicants through implementation of a contextual admissions policy, and through encouraging and supporting current SRUC students at SCQF Levels 4-8 to apply for next level programmes.

3. **Equipping for success** for widening access students through an approach to learning, teaching and assessment that embeds equality and diversity, the provision of expert student support on the academic, pastoral and funding level, the use of bespoke funding, and the delivery of a range of study skills support activities.

4. **Evidence Based Approach** focussing on widening access and participation activities based on what SRUC data and wider research indicates works.

Our focussed approach to schools provision is on track to achieve a significant year on year increase in enrolments in 2023-24, with the portfolio of NPA subjects expanded to include horticulture and equine in addition to modern agriculture. This offers schools across Scotland a diverse curriculum mapped to the sustainable development goals and designed to raise awareness of learning and career pathways across the sectors SRUC supports.

A vital component of supporting students to succeed is additional support at transition points. Currently we have our "Preparing to Study" at SRUC course, an online, interactive package to help students to continue developing the essential skills. Programmes also have bespoke support for students transitioning between levels such as our "Joining Applied Animal Science" self-study course, particularly targeted at those articulating from HND Animal Care to 3rd Year degree, or Rural Business Management's suite of study skills workshops, run during semester 1 of Year 3 to support the transition. HND gateway programmes such as rural animal health; regional pathfinder initiatives such as our partnership with Borders College and access courses such as our rural business summer school enable learners to progress to degree level study.

Given the current socio-economic situation, we have also reviewed the role of funding support, specifically reviewing the evidence that additional funding (not core funds) has played in supporting students. The evidence is clear that, although this funding may not support access,

it is supporting participation. We have well established student peer support projects, led by students and supported by staff. Peer supporters organise activities such as online study and progression information sessions, CPD, competitions and trips. Retaining students, particularly those who are vulnerable, is a key priority. In 2023-24 SRUC will continue to work with a range of organisations, with examples including DWP employability initiatives and armed forces training projects. Whenever possible, SRUC targets bursary provision to support all learners to achieve.

SRUC's Corporate Parenting Working Group (CPWG) oversee our support for care-experienced students. This group comprises staff from across SRUC and is co-led by two student support tutors with expertise in the area and reporting to the Student Support and Engagement Committee. CPWG covers not just care-experienced students, but refugees, travellers, homeless students, estranged students, veterans, carers and survivors of abuse. A key focus of CP action plan (SRUC Corporate Parenting Plan) is on raising awareness of the support on offer among both students and staff.

3. Priority Area 2: Quality Learning and Teaching

In 2023/24, we will continue to focus on embedding our Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy 2020-2025 pillars and principles, which aim to ensure students have a high-quality, safe and supportive learning experience. The primary mechanism by which this will take place is through our Curriculum Review project, based on our SEEDABLE Curriculum Framework (the operationalisation of the strategy).[1] 2023/24 will focus on supporting those programmes under review in Cycle Three (the Environment and Conservation and Forestry, Forgework and Engineering Boards of Study) through the Review process, upskilling them in the theories and practices behind SEEDABLE, and supporting them to baseline current practice against the Framework and to develop plans for future implementation. We will also focus on supporting those programmes who underwent review in 2021/22 and 2022/23 to implement their three-year action plans, interrogating the progress of Cycle One (2021/22) through the Annual Quality Dialogue process. We will continue to assess progress of the project as a whole through the Curriculum Review evaluation framework, which provides indicators of success at the short, medium and long-term level.

We will also continue to support implementation of the pillars and principles, and the accompanying SEEDABLE framework through programme design – through scheduled revalidations and new programme development – and through staff development activities. With regard to the latter, the focus this year will continue to be active and blended learning, with particular focus on digital assessment, on accessibility, inclusion and universal design, on experiential learning, and on making the most of AI capabilities in learning, teaching and assessment (in an ethical, responsible and transparent way). Following dissemination of guidance, staff development, and the creation of the AI in Education Working Group, we aim to particularly encourage the latter: making use of and experimenting with AI so as to learn the limits of what this means for our approach to education.

The ongoing implementation and development of active and blended learning will continue to be supported by our Digital Transformation programme, with a particular focus in 2023/24 on the student journey. The aim is to ensure that the journey is consistent, is a shared journey, leading to belonging and becoming. Projects in this programme will address one of three foundations: data, systems and student/staff skills. Projects around data and students skills are already in progress with the remaining expected to be developed over the Autumn. This

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[1] SEEDABLE = a competence-based approach to education that embeds sustainability, enterprise, equality and diversity enabled by active and blended learning.

will be complemented by the continuing update to our campuses, which will ensure our estate is fit for an active and blended learning approach.

To support specific areas of the strategy and SEEDABLE, we will focus project work and further activities in three different areas: student personal and professional development planning, encouraging student uptake of our Enterprise Academy Learning initiatives (in particular our Enterprising Changemaker course, our Student Enterprise Challenge, and our Sustainability Start-Up School), and refreshing our approach to student engagement and partnership in a post-pandemic world. The latter in particular aims to embed further student engagement in their education experience. This will be complemented by our refreshed Student Voice policy (to be launched by December 2023), which aims to strengthen the student feedback cycle.

We have seen the efforts of the past years to improve and ensure a high quality, safe and supportive environment yielding impact. This is seen within our National Student Survey (NSS) results, ratified by our Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES). For example, between 2020 and 2023, we have seen the gap between SRUC student satisfaction with teaching on their course and the benchmark narrowing from 10.65 percentage points (pp) to zero, and we have seen satisfaction with academic support moving from 5.63 pp below benchmark to 1.91 pp above.[2] This is matched by high scores for these areas in our SSES with the questions 'The way I'm taught helps me learn' receiving 89% agreement, 'I believe all students are treated equally and fairly by staff' receiving 82%, and 'I feel that I am part of the college community' receiving 79%. These are also reflected in our overall satisfaction scores with the NSS moving from 12.74 pp below benchmark (10.81 pp below sector average) in 2020 to 0.01 pp above benchmark (3.52 above sector average) in 2023, and the SSES score sitting at 91%.[3]

Our ambition is to continue to improve overall in the SSES and against both benchmark and sector average in the NSS. However, we are aware that with building works occurring in one of our main campuses, disruptions may negatively impact survey outputs. This would only affect the NSS. Continuous and targeted communications alongside flexible timetabling, blended teaching (taking what we have learnt through Covid), and contingency planning aims to mitigate impacts on the student experience.

While we have seen improvements in the NSS and continuing high scores in the SSES, we are aware that there are two particular areas that still require focus: organisation and management and students feeling that it is clear that their feedback on their course is acted upon. The former received 60% on the NSS, 8 pp below benchmark and 13.61 pp below sector average, with both questions performing poorly. Poor performance is not ubiquitous – some programmes performed better than both benchmark and average, and the SSES received 86% satisfaction on a similar question. The latter question received 54.93%, 3.57 pp below benchmark and 5.93 pp below sector average. This is not reflected in the other questions in the student voice theme, suggesting there is something specific about this question in particular. This is matched by the SSES for which the equivalent question was the poorest performing question. Again, though, this is not ubiquitous with one programme receiving 76% positivity in the NSS for this question.

We aim for improved performance in these areas over 2023/24 (with the caveats above regarding building works), with both local and cross-SRUC action. Programme teams will respond to, and agree actions in response to, their NSS and SSES results. Currently, this

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[2] Sector average comparisons: Teaching on My Course has moved from 8.73 pp below sector average (2020) to 0.98 pp above (2023); Academic Support has moved from 3.38 pp below sector average (2020) to 2.74 pp above (2023).

[3] Though the 2023 NSS scores for this question exclude England.

process does not involve students, but we will be encouraging programme teams to work with their class representatives in an exploration of the data to finalise action plans. Planned responses to student feedback will be scrutinised within the Annual Quality Dialogues (on the panel of which sits a sabbatical officer) which take place in October and November, ensuring there are robust plans in place to address poor performance in these two particular areas, and identifying support requirements. Cross-SRUC action will be agreed through Committee and Team discussion taking place between now and November. Prior to this a particular focus on student voice and engagement has already been agreed through two projects. First, our Students' Association aim in 2023/24 to focus on their recruitment, training and ongoing support of class representatives in order to improve the effectiveness of this system. Second, SRUC and SRUCSA will work with sparqs to refresh our approach to student partnership and engagement. This will begin with sparqs' facilitating a Student Engagement Analysis Workshop, and result in a refreshed / renewed Student Partnership Agreement with agreed KPIs.

Overall, we look forward to working with our students, Students' Association and colleagues to continue to improve and ensure a high-quality, safe and supportive learning experience at SRUC across 2023/24.

4. Priority Area 3: Coherent Learning Provision

SRUC's provision is internationally relevant, with educational materials mapped to the UN sustainable development goals. Through our pan-Scotland network of campuses and rural business consultancy, we are engaged with regional skills requirements. Our skills and lifelong learning team gather sector information and identify gaps in skills provision to agree regional and national priorities. We plan to build on the success of the peatland restoration project management upskilling course launched in 2022-23 with the development of other higher level CPD such as arboriculture, forestry, veterinary, animal welfare and technology short courses. For example, regional work-based learning officers recently identified a gap in CPD provision for higher level arboriculture skills. New bespoke upskilling CPD is currently undergoing approval ready for delivery from 2023-24 to support the sector with sustainable forestry skills requirements. For our agriculture courses we gather information through our network of rural business consultants. An example is our new 'technical' apprenticeship for agriculture where consultants and sector businesses were involved in the planning stages and the qualification will link to the future skills workstream of the Strength in Places project. Our rural animal health HND gateway programme is a good example of how SRUC continues to support access to degree learning pathways and sector careers, with industry participating in course development and delivery to ensure that we address sector skills shortages, for example in food safety, rural practice and aquaculture.

We work in partnership with providers across Scotland to support fair access to our learning pathways. For example, we deliver specialist practical blocks of college learning for apprentices from Shetland College, and we work in partnership with school across Scotland to deliver our suite of accredited senior phase school qualifications. We also collaborate on CPD development and delivery with a range of organisations such as Countryside Learning Scotland and Keep Scotland Beautiful. In 2023-24 we are working with Ayrshire College who will host one of SRUC's Strength in Places 'Maker Spaces', encouraging innovation and working together to ensure delivery of complementary regional upskilling provision. We will continue our SFC supported pathfinder project with Borders College, through the appointment of a joint business development post and delivery of accredited and industry relevant upskilling courses, building on the success of the joint prospectus in 2022-23. Through the regional pathfinder SRUC has led delivery of a summer business school short course and supported

articulation to HND level agriculture study for regional students as part of the pathfinder project and we expect to build on this success in 2023-24.

SRUC takes a student focussed approach to development of skills and lifelong learning provision, with SRUCSA representatives working closely with senior leadership teams, for example through the work-based learning thematic review steering group leading on the development and delivery of the apprenticeship offer at SRUC, to ensure parity for vocational learners and industry relevant qualifications. SRUC partners to deliver industry relevant education with examples including landbased engineering provision where we continue to deliver specialist programmes for international companies such as Agco. In 2023-24 new industry partners include international poultry, aquaculture and forestry sector businesses as well as government agencies such as Forest and Land Scotland. More generally we continue to engage with partners and stakeholders to take a coordinated and strategic approach to tackling skills within and in support of the rural economy, including National Farmers Union Scotland, Skills for Farming, Skills Development Scotland, Lantra Scotland, Food and Drink Federation Scotland, Scottish Machinery Rings Association, Borders College, and the other land-based college providers across Scotland.

5. Priority Area 4: Work-based Learning and Skills

SRUC is fully committed to Work-based learning (apprenticeships) as part of its curriculum offering and this has been highlighted by the appointment in AY 2021/22 of the Vice-Principal Skills and Life-Long Learning in a newly created post to lead on this area at an Executive Leadership level. In 2022 a standalone work-based learning strategy was developed for the first time, with one of the strategic priorities being to steadily grow the number of Apprentices across all frameworks and levels and to broaden offering to higher SCQF levels, Technical & Graduate Apprenticeships. Currently SRUC offers a Modern Apprenticeship pathway in 67% of its Programme Areas (Figure 1) or 72% when including the Level 8 Technical Apprenticeship. Working with support and demand from industry another two potential pathways could be offered if SDS Contract and the additional of new occupational groups allow.

SRUC met its SDS contract for 2022/23 achieving the highest number of Modern Apprenticeship 'New starts' since SRUC was formed (Figure 2). Growth across Modern Apprenticeships is expected to continue in 2023/24 (with an increase of 11% expected) and the curriculum is being expanded to include the development of a new MA Food and Drink Operations at SCQF level 5 focussing on Production and Processing Skills. We have also developed, and are now recruiting to, a new higher level 'technical' apprenticeship to address sector skills gaps in agriculture, conservation and forestry. The first cohort of this SCQF Level 8 Technical Apprenticeship in Rural Land Use and Management will be the Agriculture Pathway but the pathways in Forestry and Environment be developed next.

We continue to support the delivery of the Land-based Pre-Apprenticeship pilot programme in partnership with Borders College and the Scottish Machinery Ring Association (SMRA). In the autumn of 2023 this will be expanded to offer The Land-based Pre-apprenticeship in Forestry with the ultimate aim of helping prepare young people for employment in the forest sector. This new development has involved collaboration with Ring-link and with Dr Helen McKay OBE, Chief Forester for Scotland. The Land-based Pre-Apprenticeship programme is founded on strong industry engagement and provides progression to modern apprenticeships.
SRUC is also raising the level of its skills provision, presenting land based as an innovative high tech, rewarding sector for young people, influencers, career changers and career progressors. SRUC's provision expands across SCQF levels 4-11 to create a skilled Scottish workforce through upskilling and reskilling, particularly in relation to the transition to net zero,

integrated land management, climate, biodiversity, and sustainable food production. Higher level courses have included Petland Restoration and Spatial Mapping: From App to GIS Map.

SRUC continues to engage with partners and stakeholders to take a coordinated and strategic approach to tackling skills within and in support of the rural economy, including National Farmers Union Scotland, Skills for Farming, Skills Development Scotland, Lantra Scotland, Food and Drink Federation Scotland, Scottish Machinery Rings Association, Borders College, and the other land-based college providers across Scotland. Stakeholder engagement occurs at different levels within SRUC – from the strategic engagement with national initiatives such as the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland ISG, Skills for Farming Group and the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan, to the course and subject specific engagement that has continued with long-standing employer links. SRUC also engages with employer representative groups such as National Farmers Union Scotland (NFUS), Scottish Machinery Rings Association (SMRA) and organisations such as the Institute of Agriculture Management. SRUC' is well placed to understand and respond to the current and prospective skills needs of individuals at both a National and Regional level. SRUC staff participate in advising Scottish Government at a National Level or in supporting the development of the skills action plan to support delivery of the refreshed North East Scotland Regional Economic Strategy.

SRUC, through its consultancy arm, SAC consulting, provides direct feedback from practitioners across a range of areas including farm businesses, environmental and food chain employers and this is augmented by direct employer engagement through, for example, the roll out of the Flexible Workforce Development Fund and engagement with businesses as employers of MA candidates.

Figure 1: SRUC Programmes which offer a Modern Apprenticeship Pathway

SRUC Programme Areas	Offer Modern Apprenticeship
Agriculture	✓
Animal Care	✗
Animal Nursing/ Animal Health	✓
Animal Science	✗
Poultry Production	✓
Bioscience	✗
Countryside & Environement	✓
Equine/ Horse Care	✓
Food & Drink	✓
Forestry/ Trees & Timber	✓
Forgework	✗
Gamekeeping/ Game & Wildlife	✓
Greenkeeping/ Golf Course M'ment	✓
Horticulture/ Landscape/ Garden Design	✓
Land-Based Engineering	✓
Professional Golf	✗
Rural Business Management	✗✓**
Vet Nursing/ Vet Assistant	✓

** Rural Business Management isn't available as an MA but is in the TA Rural Land Use & Management

Figure 2: Number of New Starts per SDS Contract Year

SDS Contract Year	Number of New Starts
2014/15	154
2015/16	148
2016/17	130
2017/18	190
2018/19	179
2019/20	182
2020/21	159
2021/22	199
2022/23	243
2023/24	269*
2024/25	309**

*Expected to achieve this Contract Year
**Predicted increase if SDS Contract & Funding allows

6. Priority Area 5: Net Zero and Environmental Sustainability Response

SRUC participated for the first time in the 2023 THE Impact Rankings. SRUC was in the top 25 per cent of global universities (out of 1625 HEIs) for activities supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on Zero Hunger, Climate Action, and Life on Land. We were ranked in the top 100 universities worldwide for Zero Hunger and was among the top 200 institutions for Climate Action.

We are also delighted to be named as a double finalist in the Green Gown Awards, in the categories of 2030 Climate Action (for our Climate Change Action Plan -SRUC Climate Change Action Plan) and Tomorrow's Employees (for the project SEEDABLE: Graduates that will Create a Sustainable Future).

SRUC has published our Climate Change Action Plan 2020–25 Over the period of this plan, SRUC has set a target to reduce total carbon emissions by 20%, as measured from the 2019/20 revised baseline year. This will result in an overall emission reduction by 2025 of 62.4% from the 2014/15 baseline. This will be achieved through initiatives including emissions reduction strategies which are outlined in the plan and a strategic rationalisation of the SRUC estate. This sets a realistic and positive pathway to ensure SRUC meets and exceeds the Scottish Government's milestone target to reduce emissions by 75% by 2030.

Non Farms Emissions tCO2e
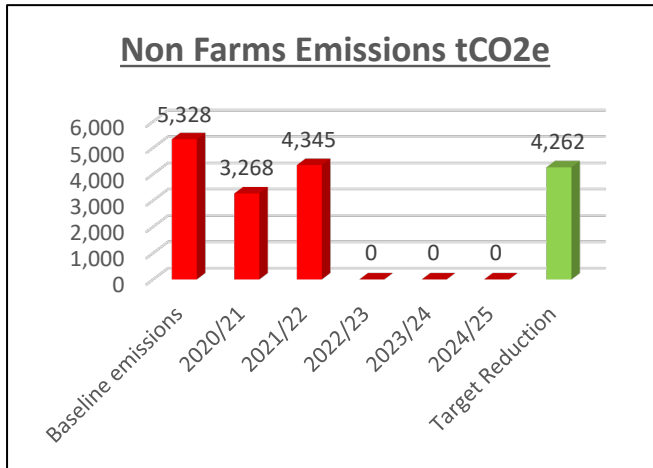
2021/22 Emissions Summary

Non-Farms emissions were 4,345 tonnes which is an increase from 2020/21 (which was lower because of the effects of the pandemic) but still represents a 18.4% reduction from baseline. As we return to sites after the pandemic site usage will rebalance and will return to normal usage patterns. It is suggested that the actions within the CCAP are helping to reduce our carbon footprint and early indications are that the overall reduction of 20% is on target.

Owing to the very different nature of greenhouse gas emissions from SRUC Farms, we have developed a separate net zero plan with high-level metrics feeding into the overall SRUC strategy We have completed an audit of all farms and are monitoring emissions against that baseline. In 21/22 farms emissions were 18,376 tCOe, which is a 9.4% reduction from baseline. This was balanced by 8,049 tonnes for soil carbon and forestry sequestration.

Much of our research is focused on understanding greenhouse gas emissions in the natural economy. We have further developed the activities of our Global Climate Emergency challenge centre, which aims to find new systems-level solutions to tackle the worsening climate crisis. Collaborating with partners, we identify and implement interventions and ensure the adaptation to, and mitigation of, climate change impacts. Our UKRI Strength in Places Digital Dairy Value-Chain project is on track and aims to decarbonise the dairy industry in Scotland and beyond. In 2023 we will pick up a range of next steps, including future workforce and schools' engagement. Agrecalc a carbon footprint tool that enables farm enterprises to identify and measure emissions, benchmark key performance indicators, identify mitigation strategies and monitor improvements, has gone from strength to strength. We deliver Farming for a Better Climate, working with farmers and land managers to provide practical ideas to improve farm efficiency and reduce the farm carbon footprint. Through our research and outreach activities SRUC helps deliver net-zero emissions from food production while increasing the level of both efficiency and farm productivity.

Through our Sustainability, Enterprise, Equality and Diversity through Active and Blended Learning (SEEDABLE) curriculum review process we are embedding sustainability and climate change in all aspects of or curriculum. Our activity reaches over all of SRUC with colleagues from SAC Consulting (part of SRUC) leading the way in Carbon Literacy qualifications for rural industries in Scotland, having gained certifications from the Carbon Literacy Project (CLP).

7. Priority Area 6: High Quality Research and Innovation

SRUC is committed to fostering research that enacts tangible changes in the real world. By forging strong collaborations with industry, societal and policy partners, our dedicated team of academic staff and students work collectively to execute our foundational strategy of catalysing meaningful solutions to pressing global challenges. Our prominence in the Agriculture, Food, and Veterinary Sciences sectors was recently validated by REF2021, which reaffirmed SRUC as the leading institution for research in these fields. Additionally, our track record for research performance has been steadily climbing both nationally and internationally,

as illustrated by key metrics (please refer to the accompanying infographic). This reflects our unwavering commitment to excellence and innovation in research.

Rooted regionally
- Top ten UK Young University
- Cutting-edge research facilities and farms

Knowledge nexus
- 1st in UK on research power in agriculture, vet & food science (REF2021)
- Top 20 in UK for industry engagement & collaboration (THE 2023)

Pioneering places
- Developing place-based facilities in digital, dairy chains, food & drink chains and vet services & science

Research rise
- 40% increase in competitive awarded research income in 2022/23
- Grant success rate (by value) more than doubled

Growing globally
- Top 25% in World Universities Rankings
- Top 10% globally in citation index (THE 2023)
- 77% of our research papers with international co-authors

Industry impact
- SRUC research has generated £1.1 billion, improved profitability and reduced costs
- Top 25% globally in contributing to Sustainable Development Goals (THE Impact 2023)

Find out more at www.sruc.ac.uk/research

REG and RPG allocations play a crucial role in bolstering our institution's research capacity. The funding supports key research initiatives, including high-impact projects, interdisciplinary studies, and early-career research fellowships (see below and accompanying Case Studies).

7.1 Research Capability and Strategy (Research Excellence Grant)
The Research Excellence Grant at SRUC serves a pivotal role, being utilised to strategically propel our challenge-focussed research and support our place-based research agenda across Scotland. At SRUC, our primary aim with research activities is to catalyse transformative change, with a commitment to challenge-led research. As part of our initiatives, we are:

- Continuing to support the development of our three consolidated Challenge Centres: Climate Emergency, Thriving Natural Capital, and Food Security.
- Progressing with the Challenge Focussed Research Fellows and have chalked out plans to run a second cohort in academic year 2023/24.
- Actively supporting PhD studentships to further academic excellence.
- Allocating pump priming for the development of new research capacity.
- Underpinning the research and innovation endeavours of our major place-based projects working with local partners, government and enterprise agencies.

For academic year 23/24, this includes several projects: the Vertical Farm installation in Edinburgh; the Rural and Veterinary Innovation Centre in Inverness; the Digital Dairy Chain and Dairy Nexus in Dumfries; and SeedPod in Aberdeen.

With a pronounced emphasis on Challenge-Driven Research Centres, our objective is to foster collaboration with a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, from policymakers and industry leaders to academics and civil society. These centres, in essence, act as nexus points for knowledge exchange and stakeholder engagement, shaping both academic discussions and tangible, real-world policies. For example, the Thriving Natural Capital Centre at SRUC serves as a pioneering hub for research and innovation in the sustainable management of Scotland's invaluable natural resources. Working in close partnership with industry leaders like Diageo

and key organisations such as Scotland's Alliance for Rainforests, we aim to create and develop ecosystem markets that are both economically viable and environmentally sustainable. By building up such partnerships the centre aims to create ecosystem markets that strike a balance between economic viability and environmental sustainability, to collaboratively strive towards net-zero targets, and to staunchly combat the decline in biodiversity. Such partnerships are indispensable, allowing us to amalgamate resources and expertise. In doing so, we address multifaceted challenges through a multi-disciplinary lens, ensuring that natural capital remains central in both public and private sector dialogues, leading to benefits that resonate both in the present and future.

7.2 Training the Next Generation of Research Informed Leaders (Research Postgraduate Grant)

Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG) plays an instrumental role in the postgraduate research capacity and strategy of SRUC. Firstly, it enables us to enhance the academic experience of our postgraduate students by offering them access to superior training and research opportunities. Secondly, it directly feeds into our institutional strategy of fostering a robust research culture that drives innovation, deepens knowledge, and facilitates collaborative endeavours. For the academic year 2023-24, we have a comprehensive plan for the utilisation and distribution of RPG funding, aligned with the overarching objectives of our institution:

Training Programme Development: A substantial portion of the RPG funding will be channelled towards developing a training programme tailored to support our new PhD Programme (see REG Case Study). This will ensure that our doctoral candidates have the requisite skills and knowledge to excel in their research pursuits.

Research Costs: Recognising the dynamic and ever-changing nature of research, we are set aside funds for additional research costs for students to bid into. This provision is aimed at ensuring that researchers have access to the latest equipment, resources, and methodologies that might arise during their projects.

PGR Grants for Local and SRUC-wide Activities: By allocating funds for small PGR grants, we aim to empower our students to design and implement local and SRUC-wide postgraduate research activities. This could range from seminars, workshops, and conferences to collaborative projects that foster a sense of community and enhance inter-disciplinary learning.

Team Building and Additional Training: Beyond the academic realm, it's crucial for our postgraduate researchers to develop soft skills, build networks, and function effectively in team environments. To this end, a segment of the RPG funding will be dedicated to activities (including the annual PGR conference) and training modules focused on team building, leadership, communication, and other essential competencies.

A main focus of the PGR activities in SRUC will be on our new PhD programme, not just in advanced academic training but in its broader aim to foster interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaborations. We believe that the complex challenges of today require solutions that can only emerge from collaborative efforts that cross traditional boundaries. Our programme is designed to engage with industry leaders, policy makers, and broader community stakeholders. This means that our students not only gain rigorous academic training but also obtain a multi-dimensional, real-world perspective on how research impacts industry, policy, and society at large. The aim is to produce research-informed leaders who can straddle the worlds of academic rigour and practical application, understanding not just the 'what' but also the 'why' and 'how' of transforming research into actionable insights.

7.3 Enabling an Excellent Research Environment and Positive Cultures

SRUC is deeply committed to fostering a positive, respectful, and dynamic research environment that nurtures excellence and innovation across the board. SRUC places a high priority on research integrity and ethical conduct across all its institutional activities, ranging

from teaching and research to consulting and knowledge exchange. The institution's Ethics Committee, which reports directly to the Academic Board, oversees these critical areas.

Annual Statement on Research Integrity ([Website link](#))

To broaden our commitment to research integrity, SRUC has developed a dedicated online resource that offers vital information on the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, including training materials, misconduct reporting mechanisms, and our in-house ethical activities. In the upcoming academic year 2023/24, we plan to extend our research integrity training compliance to a broader staff base. This will include not only research-active staff and postgraduates but also research technicians, consultants, agriculture and veterinary practitioners, and those involved in knowledge exchange and innovation activities within SRUC.

SRUC Good Research Practice Manual

To bolster this commitment, SRUC has recently launched the Good Research Practice Manual which will be rolled out as part of our researcher training timetable in 2023/24. Developed in close collaboration with the SRUC research community, this manual serves as a comprehensive guide for all research-related activities at SRUC. It provides practical advice, points to relevant internal policies and procedures, and connects to both internal and external resources on good research practice.

Open Research in SRUC

Open Research is a pivotal focus of the SRUC Good Research Practice Manual. The Manual incorporates these principles in alignment with the increasing emphasis from funding councils and research organisations on research that is transparent, accessible, and accountable to a global audience. To bolster the integration of Open Research principles into everyday practice, SRUC provides various training and resources and during the academic year we aim to introduce sessions on research culture to help embed new learning from the sector in everyday research practice at SRUC. Throughout the academic year, follow-on information sessions and training programmes are scheduled to supplement our recently revised practice and policies. Additionally, a dedicated intranet site, backed by an Open Access mailbox, is available to all staff and students, offering all necessary resources and training materials on open research. By weaving Open Research into our Good Research Practice Manual and providing ongoing education and support, SRUC aims to maximise the public benefit derived from research, enhancing both its transparency and accessibility.

7.4 Career and Development Support for Researchers

As we move into the 2023/24 academic year, SRUC is committed to expanding its range of development activities aimed at nurturing both early-career and established researchers. A key new initiative is the Early Career Researcher Taster Session, which will run in parallel with our new PhD programme (REG Case Study 2). These sessions will offer a mix of virtual and face-to-face engagements designed to foster a research community within SRUC, both locally and organisation wide. For the coming year, we've pinpointed immersive training sessions that focus on vital skills such as crafting your research persona and tools for supporting inclusive innovation. With funding from UIF, we aim to develop a credit-bearing micro-credential programme focusing on both qualitative and quantitative research skills. This initiative targets not just newcomers to the research field but also those looking to refresh their skills and those engaged in practical and commercial settings. The aim is to facilitate co-creation and delivery of research with industry, policymakers and other non-academic communities.

SRUC continues to prioritise career support for researchers in line with best practice, including alignment with the Researcher Development Concordat and HREiR. The Vitae Research Development Framework is an integral part of our approach, enabling tailored development programmes for research-active staff and postgraduate researchers. We continue to build upon our previous activities by hosting a variety of researcher skills events throughout the

academic year. These include sessions focusing on grant development, postgraduate research supervision and important facets like research integrity and openness. Our comprehensive approach ensures that SRUC remains at the forefront of research development, and that our staff and students are well-equipped to excel in both academic and broader professional settings.

By undertaking these initiatives, SRUC aims to robustly support the career development of researchers and to solidify its adherence to the principles of research integrity, thereby continuing to create a conducive and ethical environment for research excellence.

8. Priority Area 7: University Innovation Fund

SRUC will use UIF funding in 2023/24 for activities which support a green recovery and a just transition to net zero carbon, and we will apply the UIF uplift to the long-term development of SRUC's entrepreneurial campuses strategy. Our UIF plans for this year will support a well-being economy by continuing to co-develop initiatives with equality, inclusion and diversity at their core, and to convert and commercialise innovations which tackle biodiversity and climate targets.

The current UIF outcomes have set the framework for UIF projects at SRUC for 2023/24 and we will continue to engage in the Universities Scotland's Research and Commercialisation Directors Group (RCDG) to develop our collaborative activities and transition to a Knowledge Exchange and Innovation fund in subsequent years.

In agreement with RCDG, SRUC contributes to each of the UIF outcomes from a natural economy / primary food / land-based sector perspective. Projects and activities funded through our UIF Platform Grant will continue to be match funded by SRUC. In addition, we will maintain and develop our collaborations with other HEIs and, where appropriate, partner with stakeholders such as Scottish Enterprise Agencies, levy boards, companies and others to add value to activities.

8.1 UIF Uplift 2023/24
SRUC will apply the 2023/24 UIF uplift in two key areas of entrepreneurial campus activity. Firstly, we will pool resources with other HEIs to drive forward place-based collaborations that will accelerate innovations in the blue green economy. Secondly, we will use the uplift to drive collaborative, strategic efforts that build our enterprise culture through boosted cross-institution activity and a drive to widen equality, diversity and inclusion within the natural economy sector, working with employers to support positive actions.
We have aligned these plans to the SFC Outcomes and to the key strategic drivers in the Scottish Government's Innovation Strategy and to its Entrepreneurial Campus Strategy.

8.2 Place-based collaborations
In collaboration with relevant HEIs and EAs, we will deliver a series of activities that support innovation and enterprise in the blue economy. We will initiate pump priming collaborative research into marine systems and develop a programme of rural enterprise activities which will include community, policy, businesses and students, so that we can catalyse new business ideas and convert innovations into practice. To ensure a pipeline of talent in this emerging field, we will co-develop innovative education programmes that cover new course developments, U-16 engagement and CPD for industry, particularly with regard to climate change and blue economy. Milestones include the delivery of industry showcase events and applications for UKRI grant funding.
The **Digital Dairy Chain** was highlighted in the National Innovation Strategy as a prime example of an Innovation Cluster. It aims to deliver transformational research and skills that

will change the face of dairying by helping to establish new products and value chains, cut waste and reduce environmental impact. The uplift will help shape economic, skills and training strategies and will strengthen close working relationships in the supply chain and all the tranches of services that SRUC deliver. By acting local we will be able to think global and will fund events that establish future collaborative partnerships. This will catalyse business growth and deliver an uplift in economic prosperity and resilience, further establishing SW Scotland as a leader in advanced, sustainable and high-value dairy processing. Our KPIs include increased collaborative activity in the sector, increased investment in industry-focused R&D, and a growth in the exploitation of digital technologies and advanced manufacturing processes.

The **Rural and Veterinary Innovation Centre (RAVIC)**, SRUC's new facility in Inverness, opens for business this November. Delivering on SRUC's mission as an Enterprise University at the heart of Scotland's natural economy, RAVIC will support the creation of innovative, sustainable new technologies, products, services, and businesses with global economic impact, in collaboration with relevant HEIs and research institutes, HIE and Scottish Innovation Centres. The initiative will work at the interface of agriculture, aquaculture, animal and human health, creating opportunities for collaborative entrepreneurship spanning research, education, and commercial interests. These include delivering high profile showcase events throughout Scotland, developing impactful knowledge exchange dissemination materials, and establishing entrepreneurship training and support in collaboration with regional partners including Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). Milestones include development of innovation case studies, student bursaries to engage at industry showcase events, initiation of pump-priming funding and grant applications, and the development of CPD training opportunities.

8.3 Building and diversifying our enterprise culture

We will also apply the uplift to the long-term strategic development of SRUC as an Entrepreneurial Campus, ensuring we lead the way in sustainable entrepreneurship. We will build our enterprise culture in two key strands of activity. Firstly, by working with students, staff, researchers, SMEs and the enterprise support ecosystem we will increase awareness of developmental opportunities in enterprise, and inspire and support our students to be the sustainable entrepreneurs of the future and ensure that our people are 'educated, engaged and entrepreneurial' (SRUC Strategy 2023).

The second strand of activity will implement a program of activities aimed at broadening equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), with outreach to our client base to help address this in a sector specific manner. The Official National Statistics 2021 show that 97.2% of the agriculture, forestry and fisheries industries are white, with limited race diversity which significantly impacts our abilities to achieve a wellbeing and resilient rural and natural economy. We will fund student internships to focus on promoting an inclusive environment, increase awareness, and develop toolkits and training on issues such as bystander intervention and the use of diversity-appropriate language. Through this, we aim to support positive actions and create a more diverse and inclusive enterprise culture.

8.4 2023/24 Plan for UIF supported activity in SRUC

Complementing the UIF uplift activities, SRUC's 2023/24 plan for UIF supported activities contributes to each of the UIF outcomes. Projects are grouped under the main outcome to which they contribute in the text below, but most contribute to multiple outcomes. To ensure access to funding for staff and students we develop annual UIF plans through open calls to staff and students.

8.5 Outcome one: Demand stimulation

To increase the demand and quality of engagement from businesses and the public sector for our services, we will work with our academics to review our innovation landscape for strong impact case studies and begin to work up the narratives and evidence paths. From this we will

derive a portfolio of the prioritised impact summaries to drive KE topics, awards/prizes and feed into SRUC's Innovation Hub activities.

Aligning to our plans for place-based initiatives, we will run a programme of enhanced knowledge transfer and networking. Activities include conferences, nationwide roadshows and KE content which will support industry networking, innovation opportunities, and collaboration between SRUC, business and academia. The aim is to reach new audiences and promote new opportunities for academic, teaching and commercial growth, including increased collaborations, partnerships, joint funding applications, CPD activities and business tenancies that will help SRUC support Scotland's green economic recovery and transition towards a net zero society.

8.6 Outcome two (simplification/commercialisation):

We will improve business access to the knowledge and expertise in SRUC and HEI collaborative partners by continued operationalisation of industry, HEI and civic partnerships in place-based initiatives such as the SeedPod in Aberdeenshire. Innovations include new food crops; new food products; feed additives to reduce methane emissions in cattle and an expansion of aerial and geospatial services, and we will collaborate with key industry events like Scot Sheep and Arable Scotland. We will work with businesses to convert innovations in the measurement and evidencing of natural capital, into products and services which attract investment. Activities include business facing events, supporting the strategic development of business groups & networks, and curating and sharing KE materials, supported with active social media campaigns.

8.7 Outcome three (simplification/greater innovation):

The transition to net-zero and improved sustainability targets in agriculture create opportunities and challenges and we continue to prioritise within our UIF plan for 2023/24 activities which accelerate SRUC innovations relating to novel, efficient and sustainable production systems out to our business networks, including the ~14,000 SMEs we interact with. SRUC will use UIF funds to make strategic use of our sectoral knowledge and promote greater innovation in the natural economy.

Financially, taking land out of production for carbon or biodiversity benefits can be particularly challenging and we will draw together research from across SRUC exploring the ecosystem services and formulating clear guidelines on how to implement findings at the farm and wider landscape scale to promote multifunctionality. We will work with industry partners to stimulate positive change in production systems, for example innovations in integrated crop management, and in sheep or beef nutrition on modern farms. We will provide CPD opportunities for veterinary professionals, industry representatives, stock people and for students.

8.8 Outcome four (entrepreneurialism):

Our UIF plans for 2023 /24 will support the development of our SRUC Entrepreneurial Campus, able to lead the way in sustainable entrepreneurship (through capacity building, enhancing student enterprise learning opportunities and cross campus/external KE and wider HEI/Industry collaboration). We will fund entrepreneurs in residence, mentoring and student competitions. The Innovation Hub, as part of the SRUC entrepreneurial ecosystem, aims to convert and commercialise innovation and attract new collaboration partners. We will run a 6th round of our successful 'Orchard' programme which supports staff and students to increase the business readiness of concepts and to provide training and networking opportunities. Finally, this round of the Orchard will formalise the promotion of the wider enterprise ecosystem from which SRUC can connect nationally and internationally with similar innovation hub networks.

Other examples include a weekend 'school' delivered in partnership with Queen Margaret and Abertay Universities (THRIVE 2024), supporting the next generation of Scotland's food & drink

and rural entrepreneurs. We will celebrate successes through initiatives such as the AgriScot Diversified Farm of the Year Award 2024 and Converge.

8.9 Outcome five (international):

We will fund activity through our Rural Policy Centre to gather intelligence on the current and future policy priorities of many countries globally, using evidence from Scotland as a 'test bed' for just transition. We will undertake an in-depth review of the current relevant policy landscape in Scotland, the wider UK and internationally (in particular in the EU [including Ireland], the Arctic and Nordic regions, Japan, Canada, Australia and New Zealand); this review will focus on the wellbeing economy (both blue and green), just transition, and rural and island development, and it will guide our KE activities and ensure their relevance beyond Scotland. We will use it to strengthen existing and explore new collaborations and enhance our ability to win future external research and KE funding focused on this theme.

We will engage in key international networking and conference opportunities, for example the Aquaculture, Agritech and Animal Health (A3) conference which brings together business, researchers, investors, entrepreneurs and the public sector from Scotland, UK and overseas in this rapidly growing sector. We will fund bursaries to enable student engagement, collaborate with other HEIs and, in partnership with HIE, lead on the development, organisation and delivery of the 2024 conference.

8.10 Outcome six (inclusive growth and social impact):

Our online courses support inclusive growth by providing equal access to professional development opportunities for all, irrespective of geographical limitations. We will support horizontal innovation of digital, data and Artificial Intelligence by developing a series of postgraduate-level CPD courses that aim to enhance research skills, data handling and analysis. Built on the model of micro-credentials, feeding into a more formalised postgraduate-level award, this online resource will be designed to foster an environment that supports knowledge sharing and continual learning.

Economic, social and environmental changes are required to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies in socially just, inclusive and sustainable ways. We will use UIF to support our Rural Policy Centre to achieve these changes through collaboration between policy-makers and politicians, society, businesses and science (the quadruple helix), in order to develop innovative solutions. Policies/interventions designed with urban areas in mind may be detrimental to rural and island areas so we will focus our knowledge exchange on delivering evidence-based intelligence on rural/island communities to inform policies oriented towards a just transition and an inclusive, sustainable and wellbeing focused natural economy.

8.11 Outcome seven (equality and diversity):

Activity planned here aims to help to reduce barriers for enrolment and employment for ethnic minorities and to drive gender equality within agricultural and rural industries. Crucially, we will engage with employers to identify barriers to employment of graduates within the sector for ethnic minorities and underrepresented genders. We will collaborate with comparable HEI/colleges to identify existing innovation and best practice to enhance, encourage and support diversity within courses on land-based subject areas. Using focused research with students, community groups and industry employers this innovative project will make evidence-based recommendations to enhance our own actions to improve relevant enrolment KPIs on courses. Internal KE with staff, and external KE with industry, will raise awareness and influence improved practices.

9. Further Information

Further information is available from Dr Kyrsten Black, SRUC Registrar;
Kyrsten.black@sruc.ac.uk

Outcome Agreement between Scotland's Rural College and the Scottish Funding Council for AY 2023-24

On behalf of Scotland's Rural College

Signed:

Print name: Professor Wayne Powell

Position: Principal and Vice-Chancellor

Date: 2nd November 2023

Signed:

Print name: Linda Hanna

Position: Chair

Date: 14th November 2023

On behalf of the Scottish Funding Council:

Signed:

Print name: Karen Watt

Position: Chief Executive

Date: 15 January 2024