

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Thursday 21 May 2015

Report from Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) of Validation Meeting for the Master of Science, Postgraduate Diploma, Postgraduate Certificate in: Agricultural Professional Practice

Kenneth Hutton, Academic Collaborations Office, Clerk to the Liaison Committee

Report of Validation Meeting held at SRUC, Aberdeen on 1st April 2015

CONFIRMED

1 Validation panel

Dr Kyrsten Black	Assistant Principal Higher Education, SRUC [Convener]
Dr Peter Dominy	Senior Lecturer, Life Sciences, Biomolecular Science, University of Glasgow
Mr Steve Barnett	Head of Educational Development and Quality Enhancement, Harper Adams University.
Mr Martin Birse	Farm Manager, Pitgaveny Farms, Elgin.
Mr Keith Potts	Final year student on MSc Countryside Management (by distance learning) at SRUC.
Dr Lou Ralph	Programme Leader for MSc Organic Farming, SRUC
Dr Chris Smith	Academic Development Manager Higher Education, SRUC [Reporter]

2 Summary

The validation panel agreed to recommend to the SRUC Academic Board and the Academic Standards Committee of the University of Glasgow that the Master of Science / Postgraduate Diploma / Postgraduate Certificate Agricultural Professional Practice should be validated as awards of the University of Glasgow for six years from session 2015-16. The panel made a number of conditions and advisory recommendations, which are summarised in section 5.

3 Introduction

SRUC (and previously SAC) has offered taught postgraduate programmes in the rural sector¹ for a number of years using part-time, distance learning as the mode of learning. The taught postgraduate programme in Agricultural Professional Practice would be delivered using this model. Students would typically study modules with a

¹ Organic Farming, Applied Poultry Science, Countryside Management, Rural Business Management.

total SCQF credit value of 60 in each year, taking one year to complete the Postgraduate Certificate, two years for the Postgraduate Diploma and a further year for the MSc. The full MSc (180 SCQF credits) would require successful completion of a project and report with a credit value of 60 SCQF credits.

The validation panel (the panel) was provided with a validation document which gave details of the proposed programme. The timetable for the meeting and details of the academic staff in the programme development team (the team), including those who met the panel, are given in Appendices A and B.

The role of the panel was to scrutinise the proposed programme, and to report to the SRUC Academic Board and the Academic Standards Committee of the University of Glasgow on the suitability of the programme leading to the awards of Master of Science, Postgraduate Diploma and Postgraduate Certificate of the University of Glasgow.

4 Meeting with the programme development team

The panel met the key members of the team who had been responsible for developing the programme in order to discuss a range of issues identified following consideration of the validation document.

4.1 Programme rationale

The team outlined the rationale underpinning the development of the programme. They explained that the programme has been developed to meet an identified need for postgraduate-qualified people in the agricultural sector. Recent reports by Oxford Economics, the Scottish Government, and Lantra have identified that there is growth in the sector, which has resulted in an increasing demand for new recruits. Two recent strategy papers by the AgriSkills Forum and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board have identified the importance of the continuing development of professionalism in the sector in order to improve the business performance, competitiveness and sustainability of UK agriculture.

The proposed programme is therefore targeted at those interested in pursuing a career within the land-based industries in a professional capacity such as consultant, agronomist, animal nutritionist or farm manager, for which there is currently high demand for recruits. The industry needs specialists who not only have an understanding of their sector, but have the skills to interact professionally with their clients. Within the programme a core group of modules will focus on topics such as consultancy skills, management, finance and agricultural policy. In order to develop the student's own area of expertise the programme includes a number of elective modules in business, and crop or livestock production, some of which will support specific professional accreditation (see 4.3).

The panel were supportive of the rationale and the vocational need and demand for the programme which had been thoroughly justified by the team and in the validation document.

4.2 Programme aims and objectives

The panel were content that the programme was consistent with SRUC's mission, vision and long-term aims and objectives as well as SRUC Education's overall aims for its learning programmes. The specific aims of the Agricultural Professional Practice programme were considered to be appropriate, however, the panel **recommended** that the team should add the following aim, which was proposed as an objective in the validation document: *to provide a student-centred learning environment which*

stimulates participants to achieve their full intellectual potential and to develop independence of thought and an enquiring mind.

The panel were interested in the role of the postgraduate diploma and certificate. The team explained that it was not intended that the post-graduate certificate would be promoted as a stand-alone qualification, rather it would serve as an exit award for students unable to complete all the taught elements of the programme. The post-graduate diploma would be promoted as a stand-alone qualification for which the team considered there to be a demand. The panel were of the view that the specific objectives for the programme should be refined to allow differentiation of those relevant to both the postgraduate diploma and certificate, and made this a **recommendation**.

4.3 Accreditation by professional and statutory bodies

The validation document provided details of the potential support and accreditation of the programme, or components of the programme, by professional and statutory bodies. The panel fully supported such accreditation for a programme aimed at developing 'professional practice'. However, the panel had some concerns in relation to both the extent to which completion of the PGDip or MSc or component modules might qualify candidates to achieve such professional accreditation, and also the clarity of information in this regard being provided in the documentation and to potential students. Whilst discussions with the team gave the panel greater clarity on these issues, they did not feel that the information provided was sufficiently clear and explicit.

4.3.1 Institute of Agricultural Management (IAgrM)

Whilst the documentation made clear the support that the IAgrM would provide to promote the programme; the panel did not consider that the extent to which completion of the PGDip or MSc might contribute to the attainment of its professional grade of membership (P.Agric) was clear. Equally, there was no clarity as to whether the IAgrM would accredit the programme as such. The panel therefore **recommended** that the team should ensure that the definitive document and any derived documentation such as programme handbooks and promotional literature should clearly explain the programme's potential contribution to the attainment of P.Agric status.

4.3.2 Professional accreditation for technical elective modules

The documentation explained that completion of some of the elective modules in the programme would be tied to the attainment of professional qualifications by accrediting bodies including BASIS² and AMTRA³:

Module/s	Qualification
Animal Health and Veterinary Medicine	AMTRA Suitably Qualified Person
Sustainable Nutrient Management	BASIS Fertiliser Advisers Certification and Training Scheme (FACTS)
Arable Crop Protection Parts 1 & 2	BASIS Crop Protection
Grassland and Fodder Crop	BASIS Crop Protection Grassland and

² BASIS is an independent, UK, standards setting and auditing organisation for the pesticide, fertiliser and allied industries

³ Animal Medicines Training Regulatory Authority.

The panel had a number of concerns regarding these modules, including their applicability to non-UK students in light of the specificity of the UK-based professional qualifications, and the need to attend on-campus learning events typically lasting about one week per module. The panel therefore made it a **condition** of validation that the team resolve and clarify in final documentation the following issues:

- That the attainment of credit for the modules should not be dependant on successful attainment of the professional qualifications i.e. it should be possible to achieve the PGDip or MSc without gaining the professional qualification. Successful completion of the modules would contribute to, but may not be sufficient to fully attain, the professional qualifications.
- That the additional requirements over and above completion of the module to achieve the professional qualification, including the need for any further practical experience, should be explicit.
- The extent to which students already holding these qualifications could be accorded accreditation of prior learning for all or part of the modules;
- The tuition costs involved in a) successfully achieving the module and b) completing the professional qualification.

Further, the panel **recommended** that:

- Consideration should be given to enabling completion of these modules solely by distance learning i.e. not requiring attendance at a campus or central location.

4.4 Promotion, marketing and international promotion of the programme

The panel were concerned that the teaching and learning approach proposed was not entirely by distance learning as implied in the programme rationale. In particular, the elective modules leading to professional qualifications required multi-day attendance at a campus (see 4.3.2 for more detail). Coupled with the UK-specific nature of the professional accreditation, the panel felt that this was likely to make the programme unattractive to non-UK students and limit recruitment and the medium to long-term viability of the programme. The team explained that the market research conducted in Scotland and the rest of the UK suggested that demand for the programme would be strong in the first few years and outlined the marketing approach which would be used to promote the programme once validated, in particular but not exclusively by using SAC Consulting's data-base of client contacts. The panel were concerned that this was too short-term a view and **recommended** that the team should quickly create a five-year development plan for the programme to include the ability to study only by distance learning and hence also allow student recruitment from outwith the UK (see also 4.3.2 and 4.7.1 in this regard).

4.5 Admissions policy

4.5.1 Entry requirements

As a programme aimed at developing 'professional practice' the panel were interested to explore the amount of professional experience in agriculture which would be required on entry, and during study, to successfully complete the programme. It was noted that work-based learning was required for completion of some modules (e.g. *Professional Leadership and Management* and *Business Planning and Decision Making*) which might be difficult if students were not already in relevant employment. The team explained that whilst it would be preferable for students to be in relevant

employment during their studies this was not essential since for example temporary (most likely voluntary) work-placements could be facilitated by the programme team or the student could be provided with appropriate 'case-study' information to enable completion of the module. Whilst the panel accepted that this approach would be appropriate, it was concerned that the expectations regarding experience were not sufficiently explicit in the documentation and **recommended** that the narrative regarding entry requirements should be expanded to suggest the desirability of a quantified level of previous and/or ongoing relevant professional employment in the agriculture sector.

4.5.2 Administration of admissions

Given the necessarily subjective nature of evaluating a potential student's ability to benefit from and complete the programme based on their academic, work and professional experience (see 4.5.1), the panel **recommended** that the final selection of students during the admissions process should be managed by the programme team, and might include interview by telephone or on-line means prior to decisions being made.

4.6 Programme structure

The panel explored the structure of the programme with the team and were satisfied that the core modules proposed (three in Year 1 and two in Year 2) were relevant and that their learning outcomes were consistent with the specific objectives of the programme. Core modules represented 75 of the total of 120 credits required to complete the PgDip and the taught component of the MSc programme.

The panel were, however, concerned that the programme structure in relation to elective modules was unnecessarily prescriptive in that it implied that electives were ring-fenced for study in either the first or the second year only. It was felt that this approach limited student choice, in part because it might limit the number of students selecting an elective in any one year and hence the viability of that elective running (particularly if the student cohort was small). The panel therefore **recommended** that the elective modules should be placed in a single pool and should not be year specific. It might be that some electives could therefore only run biennially.

Whilst the panel agreed with the option to include a so called 'free choice elective' within the programme (utilising appropriate modules from other SRUC taught MSc programmes), they felt that the title might be misleading, particularly given that the learning requirements of some such modules might be constraining (e.g. in terms of the timing of assessment or of study weekend attendance). The panel therefore **recommended** that further detail should be provided to students in relation to the timing and accessibility of alternative electives.

4.7 Learning and teaching approaches

4.7.1 Study weekends

The team had followed the approach adopted by other SRUC taught postgraduate distance learning programmes of holding regular (2-3 times per year) study weekends as an important part of the learning programme. For this programme, the team proposed at least four study weekends over the 2 year period of the PG Dip and an additional 2 study weekends for the MSc. Experience on existing programmes – supported by feedback from students - is that the study weekends are invaluable in developing and maintaining student engagement with their studies, in helping to develop a strong learning community, and hence minimising student withdrawals. The panel were supportive of this approach for UK-based students, however, advised the

team of the need to consider an alternative approach when further developing the programme in the medium to long term – particularly, but not only, for students from outwith the UK (see also 4.4). Further, the panel **recommended** that the team should clarify whether attendance at study weekends was mandatory, or if not, what alternative learning approaches could be taken, and include further details of the nature and content of study weekends in the validation documentation and hence in derived promotional literature and programme handbooks (including sample programmes).

4.7.2 On-line tutorials and discussion threads

The panel explored with the team their plans for holding participative group discussions with the students using on-line facilities such as GoToMeeting (e.g. for tutorials) and Moodle (for discussion threads). Members of the teaching team had first-hand experience of using these facilities from teaching on other SRUC distance learning programmes. The panel were content that the team had effective plans which would encourage and facilitate student engagement on a regular basis. The panel encouraged the team to ensure that such activity was timetabled well advance, at the start of delivery of the module, in order to maximise participation. The team noted that on-line tutorials could be recorded and then reviewed by students at a later date.

4.7.3 Development of critical thinking

It was noted that the development of critical evaluation and analysis was a key attribute of postgraduate study and was indeed embedded in the learning outcomes of most modules in the programme. The panel asked how the team intended to facilitate the development of critical thinking. The team provided good examples of learning approaches which would be employed within individual modules; however, the panel **recommended** that the team should put in place a clearer scheme for the development of critical thinking through the three years of the programme rather than leaving this to individual module leaders.

4.7.4 Teaching team

The panel noted that the proposed programme management team and the module leaders were all members of the SRUC Education Division and were interested to know the extent to which staff from SRUC Research and SAC Consulting would be involved in the delivery of the programme particularly given that one of the aims of the programme was *'To facilitate knowledge transfer from SRUC's research and SAC's consultancy activities'*. The team explained that staff from outwith the Education Division had been involved in the development of the programme and would be involved in its delivery, as 'guest lecturers' for some of the core modules, at study weekends and in the delivery of several of the elective modules (e.g. Arable Crop Protection, Animal Feed Technology). In addition it was planned that guest lecturers from industry would be involved in delivery. The panel recognised the wide range of professional expertise that the programme could draw upon and urged the team to use this information in the promotion and marketing of the programme to prospective students.

4.8 Assessment

The panel were broadly satisfied that the assessment methods employed were appropriate to the learning objectives and additionally the development of industry-relevant professional skills and attributes. However, there was a concern that around two thirds of the modules involved assessment based on oral presentations. The panel fully agreed with the team that the development and assessment of communication by presentation was important for the programme, but the panel thought that this might be

practically difficult to manage given the predominantly distance learning nature of the delivery. Discussion with the team identified a number of suitable alternative forms of assessment which might be employed. The panel therefore **recommended** that consideration should be given to reducing the reliance on assessment by oral presentations whilst ensuring that the relevant attributes were systematically developed and assessed for all students within the programme perhaps by concentrating this within the core modules.

4.9 Student voice

The team outlined the measures that would be taken to ensure that feedback and comment from students was used to enhance programme delivery, including the use of student liaison groups (SLG) – normally held at each study weekend – and module evaluation questionnaires. SLGs would involve student representatives and members of the programme management team – though for other distance learning programmes with relatively small cohorts all students had been able to attend meetings. The panel encouraged and **recommended** that the provision of opportunities for anonymous student feedback e.g. using questionnaires, should be mandatory.

4.10 Timetables and costs

The panel were concerned that the validation document did not contain sufficiently clear information for potential students regarding the full costs of study and the timetable of events - including those for study weekends and on-campus learning weeks for some elective modules (see 4.3.2). Given the significant commitment of time and money that students had to make in order to successfully undertake such study, the panel **recommended** that this information should be available to students well in advance (at the time of making an application), and be clear and explicit. For example, in addition to the basic tuition fees it would be necessary for students to fund travel and accommodation costs for study weekends and elective study, and for some to pay additional costs to complete professional qualifications.

4.11 Modules and descriptors

The panel scrutinised all modules and discussed each with the team to clarify their understanding. The panel were largely satisfied with the content of the modules and the format of the module descriptors. There were a number of issues identified by the panel which they considered should be attended to prior to validation of the programme and hence they made it a **condition** of validation that the module descriptors should be refined. This work should include:

- Clarification within descriptors as to whether there are other modules which might be prerequisites or co-requisites for successful completion (e.g. to clarify the relationship between the modules *Arable Crop Protection Parts 1 & 2*).
- clear assignment of learning outcomes to assessments for all modules to avoid the risk of over assessment, or double assessment of learning outcomes.
- Modifications to the titles of two modules to better reflect the content:
 - *Project Management for Agricultural Professionals* to become *Project Management and Analysis for Agricultural Professionals*;
 - *Sustainable Nutrient Management* to become *Nutrient Management*.
- For the *MSc Project* include, as an annex to the descriptor, a timetable which should reflect the relative obligations of both the student and supervisor to maintain and monitor progress.

- Refine reading lists to ensure that they include the most up to date editions of books and adequate inclusion of contemporary sources from refereed journals and review articles.

5 Conclusions, Conditions and Recommendations

5.1 The validation panel agreed to recommend to the SRUC Academic Board and the Academic Standards Committee of the University of Glasgow that the Master of Science / Postgraduate Diploma / Postgraduate Certificate in Agricultural Professional Practice should be validated as awards of the University of Glasgow for six years from session 2015-16. The validation panel set a number of conditions and made a number of recommendations which are noted below in paragraphs 5.3 and 5.4 (further details and context for these can be found in the earlier sections referenced in square brackets).

5.2 The panel recognised that the proposed programme had significant strengths, in particular:

- Features of the curriculum which distinguished it from similar programmes in the UK;
- Existing staff expertise in the Education, Research and Consulting Divisions of SRUC which would contribute to the delivery of the programme;
- Providing the opportunity for those in work to study part-time at a distance.

5.3 However, the panel had concerns about some aspects of the proposal and set the following **conditions**:

- a) In relation to the attainment of technical professional qualifications (e.g. BASIS and AMTRA) to resolve and clarify in final documentation the different learning, assessment and cost requirements to complete i) the postgraduate modules contributing to the PGDip and MSc, and ii) the professional qualifications [4.3.2]
- b) All module descriptors should be refined to give greater consistency in their content and detail [4.11].

5.4 In addition the panel made the following advisory recommendations:

- a) add the following specific aim which the team had proposed as an objective: *'to provide a student-centred learning environment which stimulates participants to achieve their full intellectual potential and to develop independence of thought and an enquiring mind'* and refine the specific objectives for the programme to allow differentiation of those relevant to the postgraduate diploma and to the postgraduate certificate [4.2]
- b) ensure that the definitive document and any derived documentation such as programme handbooks and promotional literature should clearly explain the programme's potential contribution to the attainment of Institute of Agricultural Management P.Agric status [4.3.1].
- c) enable completion of the elective modules which may contribute to professional qualifications (e.g. from BASIS or AMTRA), by distance learning i.e. not requiring attendance at a campus or central location [4.3.2].
- d) create a five-year development plan for the programme to include the ability to study only by distance learning and hence also allow student recruitment from outwith the UK [4.4].

- e) expand the narrative regarding entry requirements to suggest the desirability of a quantified level of previous and/or ongoing relevant professional employment in the agriculture sector [4.5.1].
- f) the final selection of students during the admissions process should be managed by the programme team [4.5.2].
- g) elective modules should be placed in a single pool and should not be year-specific [4.6].
- h) further detail should be provided to students in relation to the timing and accessibility of alternative ('free choice') electives [4.6].
- i) clarify whether attendance at study weekends was mandatory, or if not, what alternative learning approaches could be taken, and include further details of the nature and content of study weekends in the validation documentation and hence in derived promotional literature and programme handbooks (including sample programmes) 4.7.1]
- j) put in place a clearer scheme for the development of critical thinking through the three years of the programme [4.7.3].
- k) reduce the reliance on assessment by oral presentations but ensure that the relevant attributes are systematically developed and assessed for all students within the programme perhaps by concentrating this within the core modules [4.8].
- l) the provision of opportunities for anonymous student feedback e.g. using questionnaires, should be mandatory for all modules [4.9].
- m) make available to students clear and explicit information well in advance (including at the time of making an application) about the timing and costs associated with all learning activities including study weekends and elective modules delivered on campus [4.10].

Appendix A

Validation of Master of Science, Postgraduate Diploma, Postgraduate Certificate in Agricultural Professional Practice.

Timetable of Validation Meeting held at SRUC, Aberdeen on 1st April 2015:

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|--------------|---|
| 10.00 | Arrival
<i>Introductions and coffee/tea</i> |
| 10.15 | Private meeting of the validation panel
<i>To discuss the proposal and identify the major issues</i> |
| 11.45 | Meeting with programme development team
<i>To discuss the proposals, rationale, educational aims, learning objectives, content, teaching and learning approaches, assessment issues, etc.</i> |
| 12.45 | Lunch |
| 13.30 | Meeting with programme development team (cont.) |
| 14.45 | Private meeting of Panel |
| 15.30 | Meeting with programme development team
<i>To report back to the programme development team</i> |

Appendix B

Validation of Master of Science, Postgraduate Diploma, Postgraduate Certificate in Agricultural Professional Practice

Members of the Programme Development Team who met the validation panel:

Mrs Caroline Daniel	Programme Leader in Agriculture and Lecturer in Business Management, Agriculture and Business Management Department, SRUC, Aberdeen
Dr Jim Thomson	Lecturer in Crops and Department Quality Enhancement Coordinator, Agriculture and Business Management Department, SRUC, Aberdeen
Dr Alex Hilton	Lecturer in Crops, Agriculture and Business Management Department, SRUC, Aberdeen
Mr Phil Wrigglesworth	Lecturer in Livestock, Agriculture and Business Management Department, SRUC, Aberdeen

Also in the Programme Development Team but not meeting the panel:

Mr Chris Stockwell	Head of Agriculture and Business Management Department, SRUC, based in Aberdeen
Mr Richard Huxtable	Head of Farms Group, Research Division, SRUC.
Mr Alister Laing	Principal Consultant and Regional Manager, SAC Consulting Solutions, Elgin
Dr Nick Prince	Lecturer in Agriculture, Agriculture and Business Management Department, SRUC, Aberdeen
Dr Anna Sinclair	Lecturer in Livestock Production, Agriculture and Business Management Department, SRUC, Aberdeen