Universities Innovation Fund: Proposed Approach by SRUC to deliver the UIF priorities during 2016-17

Introduction:
Knowledge exchange is the core, uniting competence required to help achieve the SRUC Mission – “committed to excellence and impact in the advancement, communication and translation of knowledge throughout the rural sector”. Our commitment to KE is embedded in our Strategic Plan 2013-18 (http://www.sruc.ac.uk/downloads/download/708/sruc_strategic_plan_2013-2018).

SRUC has an established framework for KE delivery (funded from a number of sources including Scottish Government, SFC and industry). For SFC funding this is documented in the current Outcome Agreement. This paper outlines for 2016/17 how SRUC proposes to put further emphasis on activities that support the national priorities identified by Universities Scotland in its “5-point action plan” the Innovation Scotland Action plan. SRUC aims to address and develop these national priorities as part of UIF funding, within the context of its particular mission and focus, and where appropriate undertake activities collaboratively with other Scottish universities.

Priority Actions

1. Promote entrepreneurial opportunities to students during their studies.
2. Increase developmental opportunities for and uptake of entrepreneurial training and education, and develop institutions’ practitioner led entrepreneurial training.

At SRUC courses are vocational, focused on supplying skills needs for the rural industries. They are applied in nature and feature units/modules that train and help prepare students to run a business e.g. Accounting; Enterprise Management; Finance; Business Management and modules in entrepreneurial studies. Many of our graduating students will have careers within a rural enterprise. Beyond formal training we aim to promote an innovation culture in our students. We equip students with the skills and attitudes to be open to new ideas, to think of novel solutions, to adopt new technology i.e. be entrepreneurial. To do this effectively requires a number of different approaches bringing together a range of expertise and resources across the college. To make an initial step change in further promoting entrepreneurial activity in our courses we propose in 2016/17 to focus on a number of specific activities:

a) Use our specialist farm resources to promote innovation and entrepreneurship. We have a number of research farms that can be used to demonstrate state of the art activities and facilities e.g. measurement of greenhouse gas emissions from farmed animals; “smart” monitoring equipment for optimising production; precision agriculture. We do not use these facilities sufficiently at present for the benefit of our students and for training opportunities with industry participants. In addition we are key partners in three Innovate UK Agritech centres on Livestock (CIEL); data and metrics (Agrimetrics Ltd) and Smart Agriculture (Agri EPI Ltd). It is our intention to use these activities and centres to promote an entrepreneurial and innovation culture to a range of our students and trainees in 2016/17. This will involve a greater collaborative approach internally across the divisions of SRUC (i.e. consultants and researchers delivering to students), and will also be in collaboration with Edinburgh University (Roslin Institute) in relation to CIEL as well as Scottish industry partners in our wider AgriTech Centre ventures.

b) To better utilise relevant internal as well as external speakers from Scottish Universities and other organisations (e.g. Scotland Food and Drink) as well as invitees from our well developed industry links to specifically promote aspects of
innovation and entrepreneurialism as part of the formal delivery of our undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses.

c) To further develop an established programme of seminars open to all staff and students at SRUC and wider afield. We would intend to utilise the opportunity to diversify these with key external speakers on relevant aspects of innovation (i.e. application of new technology and outputs from our R&D programme) and entrepreneurship within the land based industries.

d) To build greater linkages with other Universities to learn from them and continue to participate in training offered by such groupings as Vitae and the Converge Challenge.

3. Encourage mobility of staff between business and universities

At SRUC staff specialise in research, consultancy or education activities with many operating across more than one area. Researchers working with consultancy colleagues, ensures that links and networks with the rural industries are very close. Many research projects are collaborative with industry or indeed deliver directly to industry. However, within this already productive framework, we would intend to further encourage mobility between staff and business during 2016/17. In particular, we would wish to encourage development of networks with industry (SRUC are already members of local business groups), especially for our younger staff. In our experience it is from such activities that added benefits accrue, not only for future collaborative research, but also from the development of trust (see 5 below), that facilitate and enable the effective uptake of innovation and innovative new approaches.

4. Set out breadth and depth of professional development available to University Enterprise and Innovation officers; identify any gaps

As a small specialist institution the degree of specialisation implied in the title “enterprise and innovation officers” does not exist, as many staff have multifunctional roles that go beyond our job titles but encompass the remit of promoting and developing innovation and enterprise. To strengthen our commitment in this area we do and will continue to fully engage with US RKEC to develop a national approach to support the development of University Enterprise and Innovation Officers. In particular for us the priority will be to learn lessons that can be transferred to existing staff in SRUC. This will help SRUC clearly elucidate what would be appropriate professional staff development for relevant staff in this area. From this we would through collaboration with other universities, facilitate training for key staff and also tailor an institutional approach with a particular emphasis on the needs of the wider rural industries in Scotland. These would be the two key goals for this priority for 2016/17.

5. Enhance skills for effective collaboration within the academic and SME business base.

This is important for SRUC as our key client/business base comprises thousands of micro/small enterprises in the rural sector. We have good knowledge of, and client relationships with many of these. One of our key objectives is to facilitate innovation and uptake of new applicable research outputs to these industries through a focused programme of KE. In order to maximise impact it is important to have sufficient staff who are identified as “trusted brokers” - these are people who are well regarded by Industry and researchers and well known in the rural industries. It takes time to build up such trust in our target industries, and many of the current “trusted brokers” will retire within 10 years. It would be our intention in 2016-17 to identify staff from within SRUC who could contribute to this essential role and develop into the “trusted brokers” of the future (existing staff who already have this status can act as trainers and transfer appropriate essential skills, acting as mentors where appropriate). In addition we intend, through
active participation in US RKEC and US RCDG, to consult with other HEIs on best practice in this area. Examples of such conversations and how these have influenced our tailored approaches to our target industries will be used as evidence of our commitment to this priority.

6. Examine partners current strategies/initiatives, and the government actions, to ascertain how to best support the transition from transactional to strategic relationships between universities and business/industry sectors.

This activity strikes us as something that requires to be undertaken collaboratively between all Universities to identify strengths where current good strategic relationships and practice exist that can be used as case studies to facilitate further development in this area. In particular it would be important to identify where such future potential strategic relationships can be developed. SRUC would be more than willing to share its experiences of developing strategic relationships with its target industries and also contribute to where benefit would be gained in developing future such relationships. It would also be willing to devote time and staff, perhaps through a sub-group activity of RCDG, to produce a report during 2016/17 to map effective ways forward for this priority.

7. Implement enhanced template contract arrangements for SMEs in all Scottish Universities

SRUC is an active member of the contract group of RCDG, that has made good progress in this area and we would fully support and participate in the implementation of the agreed contract template, especially making this template visible to all and as readily accessible as possible. We are more than willing, guided by RCDG, to help facilitate this dissemination process. Given our focus at SRUC on generating industry client business we have much experience of operating with SMEs utilising appropriate terms and conditions for contracts, collaboration agreements, licence and non disclosure agreements etc. We are therefore willing through US RKEC and RCDG to positively share our experience in this area and hence contribute to the development and agreement of a range of template legal documents that facilitate the development of more productive relationships with industry and other key collaborators, hence helping further develop this collaborative approach on during 2016/17.

8. Implement “post-project referral protocol” in all individual HEIs and Innovation Centres.

SRUC will actively contribute to, and help facilitate, the full implementation of such a protocol (particularly through its membership of RKEC and RCDG, and with interaction as appropriate with Interface) so that clients can efficiently be directed to the appropriate expertise in our universities/institutions/enterprise network. SRUC has extensive experience in handling such client interactions through its consultancy activities and applied research contracts and would contribute such experience to the development of such a protocol. In the context of the “innovation support ecosystem” this would be of particular relevance after completing work funded through the innovation voucher scheme or knowledge transfer partnerships (KTPs) ensuring that clients ongoing needs have been satisfied.

9. Development of a framework for monitoring and evaluation of the success of the UIF approach

SRUC acting collaboratively through its membership with RKEC and RCDG would be pro-active in helping to develop such a framework. SRUC has particular expertise in developing similar approaches for the systematic evaluation of its KE activities which we are more than happy to share.

10. Development of the structures and mechanisms to give more ambitious and effective connection of universities to social and cultural beneficiaries.
This priority is important for us as society is a key audience for us. We have a commitment to a co-ordinated approach to engagement with schools at various levels through sharing expertise and curriculum development, and facilitation of innovative approaches to teachers and pupils (for example we have recently given a series of interactive talks on the role of maths in the agricultural and primary food industries). To ensure interaction with rural industry we work closely with the Royal Highland Education Trust (RHET). We place emphasis on promoting more sustainable and resilient rural communities and have produced a number of related policy documents for government e.g. “Retreat from the Hills” based on such work. To achieve further progression we would contribute working in collaboration with universities (e.g. via RKEC and RCDG) to further develop structures and mechanisms that more effectively engage wider society. We have less expertise to bring to bear on cultural beneficiaries, although we do benefit from Leverhulme funding for an artist in residence, as well as previous activities with Edinburgh College of Art (the “Animals in Art” competition) and Glasgow University for a Farming and Poetry event. This suggests that more could be done to expand these initiatives and make them more effective and ambitious, therefore SRUC would welcome taking part in any co-ordinated initiatives with HEI’s to effect such a step change in this activity.

11. Development of the structures and mechanisms to give more effective support for Scottish businesses to trade on a European and global stage

SRUC has well developed networks of industry clients and actively interacts with industry groupings such as Scotland Food and Drink (SFD). For example recently we have been involved with SFD and Aberdeen University in promoting our innovative primary and secondary food producing capability as part of an initiative to attract interest from industry and potential partners in a bid for Knowledge Innovation Community funding (recently announced by the EU) on food. We are keen to further promote collaborative approaches with industry to help and facilitate Scottish primary and secondary food producing businesses be more effective on a UK, European and global scale. For example with QMU, we have been working on a collaboration in response to the developing SFD Industry Innovation Response to look at alignment of resources focused on collaborative academic capacity building. This might take the form of joint post-docs focused on key industry challenges and would help link blue skies and market ready research or support inter-sector innovation. We are more than happy to undertake further collaborative approaches with universities and industry, across various sectors as required, to develop effective co-ordinating mechanisms to foster dialogue and constructive positive outcomes. Where appropriate we would actively engage with US RKEC and RCDG to promote a cross sector approach. In particular within Scotland we would support new and flexible (i.e. models that recognise the differences between sectors) interventions to encourage traction in high growth areas such as Food and Drink, where R&D spend has been relatively low, but growth projections are high.

12. Fundamentally re-thinking the innovation support ecosystem of Scotland

SRUC is a willing active participant (with key groupings e.g. US RKEC; RCDG, Interface, SFD) to develop a revision to the “innovation support ecosystem”. Such an approach would ensure that all sectors of industry are included, bringing in players that perhaps rightly or wrongly feel more peripheral to current co-ordination activities. A fully inclusive co-ordinated cross sectoral approach may be ambitious but necessary for the future. In so doing it would be important to fully elucidate the ambition and scope of such a revision, explaining activities and terms used clearly as they develop, and making sure that all key end users are involved i.e. universities, industry, government and where appropriate the public. Initial thinking may occur through RCDG or RKEC during 2016/17, to which SRUC will actively participate and are happy to lead any particular relevant part of any such initiative.
Platform Grant
As noted above SRUC uses the SFC grant, guided by its objectives, to undertake a comprehensive programme of KE focused on rural industry promoting uptake of innovative outputs from our R&D. As noted above we have a major commitment to the public audience, through school based KE and our participation in science festivals and key agricultural events such as the Royal Highland Show. SRUC would use the Platform Grant to partly support the administrative and managerial costs of producing an enhanced programme of KE. This includes a contribution to specialist activities such as communications, publications, web development and marketing services. It would also provide a contribution to senior staff time to actively participate, leading where appropriate, in cross university groupings such as RKEC and RCDG, together with interaction with Interface, Scotland Food and Drink, Innovation Centres, Scottish and Highlands and Islands Enterprise and other organisations. In addition specific KE co-ordinators have been identified within the institution to ensure a cross institution approach across its Education, Consulting and Research divisions. We also allocate resources to train staff in KE approaches as well as the systematic evaluation of KE to facilitate continuous improvement and to maximise impact.

In total the current SRUC cost of such necessary support (including initiatives to the public and for cultural engagement) is £625K, a significant proportion of which is provided by SFC KTG. Current cost to support communications/marketing and senior staff is £450K. In future, assuming a platform grant of £250K, SRUC would be able to support such service activities for KE to around the same levels as now.