

Save Elmwood Briefing Paper

Save Elmwood is part of a group of individuals and organisations in the local community campaigning around SRUC's Elmwood Campus in Cupar, representing community concerns about its closure and sale and advocating for its retention as a facility for further education for the community.

The college has delivered education to the community since 1953, once employing more than 380 staff and supporting around 5,300 learners in a range of settings across Fife – **75% of the students came from Fife**. Given the rural context of this area, localised provision was and still is essential. Our area suffers from exceptionally high rates of family/child poverty (double the national and Fife averages) and a high cost of living.

However, following the merger of all 4 colleges – Barony, Elmwood, Oatridge and the Scottish Agricultural College – to form SRUC in 2012, there was a growing concern within the local community that the **SRUC was not a good steward of the community assets** it received in the regionalisation reforms. The perception was of managed decline, lack of local leadership and missed opportunities to make the most of Elmwood's strategic position both economically and reputationally. By 2016, Auchincruive Campus in Ayr was being sold off along with Elmwood's farm and buildings, and at the same time the Rural Affairs Committee was corresponding with the SRUC about its own concerns.

SRUC's focus continued to narrow significantly, moving away from the original objectives of its founding Further Education (FE) colleges to prioritise learning in agriculture, land and the rural sector. FE Courses were cut in favour of Higher Education (HE) courses. We believe this was because SRUC speculated that this would generate greater income and higher institutional status. With the focus turning to two sites in Edinburgh and Aberdeen, **the future was a new Vet School**. This immediately raised questions over need as the established Glasgow and Edinburgh Vet Schools were not at capacity. In this headlong rush to achieve university status, we believe the SRUC accepted PhD students onto courses at their Edinburgh campus 3 years ago when they had **no power to award final degrees** until October 2024 – potentially catastrophic for the students. Similarly, vet students are currently in place **without SRUC having accreditation from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons**, nor having procured the "distributed model of clinical training involving a country-wide network of partner practices" as referred to in its 2024 Financial Report.

By April 2025, the SRUC had closed the main building and accommodation at Elmwood campus and most courses, staff and students were gone. Students from the closed Animal Care Unit (ACU) are **now being taken by bus across Scotland to other sites** and those who have been unable to do this for family or other reasons, have had to give up their course. It is our understanding that many of Elmwood's assets have been stripped and sent to the new Craibstone veterinary facility in Aberdeen. By June 2025, the SRUC Board had approved building two "capital works" (small animal and ruminant facilities) in the same meeting as they **approve in principle a banking facility** and just two months after closing Elmwood's ACU – which had received investment of £350,000 in 2019; and despite June 2024 minutes quoting that capital spend had been paused by the CEO.

During a Participation Request to SRUC by Elie & Earlsferry Community Council in 2024 (cut short by SRUC), it was noted that a Board Member claimed that the money obtained from the sale of the golf course, the sale of the agricultural land and the sale of the site at Cupar to a Housing Developer will be used to rescue the SRUC from its debt which had risen from £6m to £8m. SRUC's last reported finances up to 31 March 2024 show a **deficit of £10.8million**, the deficit having doubled during 2024. SRUC is currently in the middle of a three-year Financial Recovery Plan. A FOI request confirmed SRUC use a centralised treasury

– we see Elmwood’s sale as a **loss to our community to the benefit of communities elsewhere and to SRUC’s financial recovery**.

Our group has approached Scottish Government, Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Education Committee, OSCR, Audit Scotland and politicians with our concerns:

- a Good Governance Institute report of SRUC in 2023 questioned a “tendency for independent members of the board to adopt executive perspectives”;
- SRUC’s 2024 Financial Report “identified the risk of management override of controls”;
- a 97% EIS staff vote of no confidence in SRUC management in May 2025;
- MSP Willie Rennie asked SRUC (SC007312) to publish governance records in June 2025 – this has been slow and little, with FOI requests now being appealed;
- SRUC’s Financial Recovery Board includes no non-executive members;
- attempts to contact the SRUC Interim Chair confirmed the only contact is by an email monitored by the executive office = no route of contact independent of management.

But responses were unanimous: universities are autonomous organisations with responsibility for their own decisions and finances. By June 2025, SRUC Board Meeting Minutes quote the **“Chair’s goals and Principal’s goals were difficult to reconcile”** – the Chair then stepped down at the start of August 2025. Dundee University had similar issues.

We have not yet found where any accountability might lie. The SFC appoint an **Accountable Officer** – for SRUC this is the Principal/CEO, who we believe has no finance background; his reported salary in 2024 was £264,000 (more than head of Police Scotland). In response to our concern about the closure of the main campus at Elmwood, the SFC CEO responded:

SRUC had advised the Scottish Funding Council that while most students in Animal Care courses find employment, much of this is in lower-paid, part-time roles, and progression into professional posts, such as veterinary nursing, is low. These outcomes are part of the context SRUC considers when making decisions about curriculum and estates planning.

In our opinion, this is a **biased and incorrect view of FE provision**.

James Withers proposed in his report to the government in 2023 that colleges and FE courses should be given equal status with universities and HE courses:

There needs to be a shared acknowledgement that different pathways are simply different: not better, not worse, just different. In other words, and to be blunt, I want to consign to the dustbin the outdated view that studying at university is somehow a “better” kind of success.

National policy should recognise that skills are not an alternative to education, but an essential product of learning and training, and give equal value to the various settings and pathways in and through which skills development can occur.

We therefore call on the Scottish Government and the SFC to address these matters and ensure continued provision of both FE and HE land-based courses across Scotland. There is also a need for **much clearer oversight of the activities and governance** of universities and colleges and the longer-term implications of their strategic decisions. Based on SRUC past pledges to keep the sites accessible and offer a good geographical spread, the SFC has the power to **place conditions on further SRUC funding**, based on provision of courses and quality of provision at all sites. Sufficient funding should be made available to convert Elmwood Campus into a community and educational hub with reinstatement of the ACU and associated FE courses.

Much of SRUC’s income is from public funds; its accounting year changed in 2024, leaving a likely two-year gap in reporting by 2026. In the 2024 Financial Statement the CEO and Chair signed off the “on-going process for identifying, evaluating and managing the SRUC’s

significant risks” However, just a few weeks later in March 2025, Board Meeting minutes state a “need for the CEO and Executive to encourage and monitor compliance and **ensure internal control systems are working effectively**”. The banking facility is approved in principle in June 2025. We are of the opinion that the similarities to Dundee University’s fate are there in plain sight, we therefore question:

- is there sufficient independent oversight of SRUC’s executive leadership decisions?
- does SRUC’s Board scrutinise decisions thoroughly enough and is it given enough opportunity to do so?
- will SRUC’s focus on HE, its Vet School and the main school sites in Edinburgh (courtesy of Edinburgh University) and Aberdeen (juggling a bypass and housing development), with pressure from the domicile student cap and negligible international students, improve its financial reality?

What happens if SRUC, in its tunnel vision for the Vet School, does not recover financially?