



## Transforming Assessment In Higher Education

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### A Case Study Series

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## *Case Study 18*

# **Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses (SLICCs): Enabling students to gain academic credit for extra- curricular activities during the summer vacation and take ownership of their learning**

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## **Background**

The Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses (SLICCs) initiative is being developed across our institution to offer an innovative educational experience that is inspiring, challenging, and transformational, accessible to all students, and importantly is not supplementary learning, but for academic credit. SLICCs offer a flexible reflective framework for experiential learning during an experience the students arrange for themselves over their summer vacation. SLICCs are based around students defining their own learning outcomes in the context of an academic theme within their own proposed experience. Students reflect throughout their defined experience whilst collecting an e-portfolio of evidence of learning (Stefani *et al.* 2007; Zubizarreta 2009), which they reflect upon and curate for assessment. The philosophy of SLICCs is that our students are being placed at the centre, undertaking independent, co-created, and co-owned student-led learning (Bovill *et al.* 2016; Healey *et al.*, 2014). This produces a deep engagement by students, and also staff, in the learning process. SLICCs enable students to better recognise and articulate their development through experiences, and boost students' learning and assessment literacy (Price *et al.* 2012). Engagement with a SLICC results in learning experiences that are better integrated with graduate attributes and employability, as articulated in the recently published University of Edinburgh 'Learning and Teaching Strategy' (2017). Taking the initiative into and beyond pilot phases has been a three-year process, requiring significant student support from

Students' Association sabbatical officers and participating students themselves who recognised the opportunities for autonomy and taking ownership of their learning, from senior academic management including an Assistant Principal and the appropriate Senate Committee, together with commitment from champions in schools and professional support services.

Students propose and design their own plan of study around a chosen and substantial learning experience during their summer vacation, and identify the main academic theme. This encompasses developing opportunities for experiential learning in the local and global community, and in the research-rich environment on campus. Students' experiences include work placements, internships, academic summer studentships, expeditions, cultural exchanges, volunteering, self-directed research, and regular summer jobs. We were very clear from the outset that SLICCs should be inclusive; highlighting our widening participation students, with 45% of participants in our pilot studies from this background (Speirs *et al.* 2017).

## **Approach**

In the SLICC framework, students define their anticipated learning based on generic learning outcomes, that address 'analysis', 'application' and 'evaluation', re-interpreting these in the context of their own defined experience undertaken during their summer vacation. These learning outcomes are aligned with our institutional graduate attributes. Students receive initial feedback from their tutor, who guides them on how to maximise their opportunities, and approves the SLICC to continue. This initial engagement of students reflecting on their anticipated learning and assessment is key to the design and success of SLICCs, supported by extensive online materials, guidance and exemplars in a 'SLICCs Resource Pack'.

Throughout their SLICC, students reflect frequently in a blog, and collect and curate evidence in an e-portfolio. This evidence can be varied and extensive, exhibiting profound breadth and depth of insight. Students are provided formative feedback on an 'Interim Reflective Report', based on their progress towards achieving their original personalised learning outcomes. This interim report forms the basis of the evidenced, summative and self-assessed 'Final Reflective Report' of their learning journey and achievements. Students are also guided in the SLICCs Resource Pack in using the assessment criteria to inform their progress, and at the time of final submission, they are asked to grade themselves, and justify their grading according to the grade descriptors and assessment rubric.

Table 1: Pilot learning outcomes developed for SLICCs at SCQF Level 8

Learning Outcome 1 – ‘Analysis’ – I am able to demonstrate how I have actively developed my understanding of the context/setting of my SLICC.
Learning Outcome 2 – ‘Application’ – I am able to draw on and apply a range of relevant skills and attributes (academic, professional and/or personal) in order to engage effectively with my SLICC, identifying where I needed to improve these and/or develop new ones
Learning Outcome 3 – ‘Evaluation’ – I am able to evaluate and critically reflect upon my approach, my learning and my development throughout my SLICC

SLICCs have been piloted over two summers with first and second year students from 17 different academic schools ranging across numerous subjects with differing pedagogic approaches. If successful, students received 10 academic credits at SCQF Level 8 (pre-honours Years 1 and 2 in the usual Scottish 4-year degree programme; equivalent to FHEQ Level 5). With the pilot studies shown to be successful, summer SLICCs have been accepted by the Senate committee to be mainstreamed for 20 academic credits (10 ECTS equivalent) with the addition of two further learning outcomes.

### Outcomes

SLICCs develop students’ learning and assessment literacy, employability and ownership of their own learning. The framework strongly values the learning opportunities that come from dealing with challenges or even mistakes, which are often penalised by existing modes of assessment. If the student clearly articulates and evidences how they have taken advantage of the learning opportunity and learned from the experience, indicating a change in their future approaches, challenges and mistakes can be strongly and positively recognised in the SLICC assessment. These benefits are propelling the SLICCs initiative forward, with the framework being run both centrally and locally across the institution.

At the outset, it was clear that for the SLICCs approach to support the institutional strategy to develop graduate attributes, they must be resource efficient, scalable, interdisciplinary and flexible. A scoping exercise across the institution revealed some excellent reflective practices, although these tended to be small scale and embedded in disciplines. As an illustration of the scalability of SLICCs, all Year 2 medical students undertake a highly flexible group SLICC (220+ students in 30+ groups), on self-proposed

projects in any area of interest, many using interdisciplinary tutors including art, design, education, engineering, geosciences, humanities and music.

The true breadth of interest in SLICCs from a wide range of staff and disciplines is starting to surface. The SLICCs initiative is now being adapted, adopted and applied creatively across the institution to a wide range of experiential projects, tasks and opportunities, within and across disciplinary boundaries. The SLICCs learning framework can support students from foundation, through undergraduate to Masters. They may be designed through developing a portfolio of learning around a series of smaller course events arising in labs, workshops or tutorials. Alternatively, the learning experience may be a project that produces a substantial output (e.g. Honours or MSc projects), or take a reflective, portfolio-based overview of a programme or its application. SLICCs are being embedded in online distance learning MSc programmes, allowing students to reflect on their disciplinary learning in the programme, or to co-create a learning experience to apply their academic development into their professional practice.

The SLICCs framework can work with individual students or groups, even students in different years of the programmes, or undergraduates and postgraduates working together, and in single- or inter-disciplinary ways across programmes and academic structures. Two additional learning outcomes have been developed subsequent to the initial piloting – ‘skills’ and ‘mindset’ – further aligning SLICCs with the institution’s graduate attributes.

In the **‘SLICCs Resource Pack’** [<http://edin.ac/sliccs-resource-pack>], a full set of resources have been developed to support students’ reflective practice, experiential learning, and assessment literacy, including exemplars. Further support is provided for SLICC tutors to enable them to understand the ethos of SLICCs, and to navigate the resources to support their tutees effectively. For school and programme leads, stratified learning outcomes and assessment rubrics according to stage of study, and course development support, including generic Boards of Studies documents are shared as part of the ‘SLICCs Academic Community’. These increase the efficiency and ease of uptake and embedding by interested colleagues across the institution. We offer these as open educational resources, and look forward to collaborating with colleagues on this.

The successful transition from concept, through piloting to mainstreaming, embedding and roll-out has required a number of key factors. There was already significant interest across the institution in developing a credit-bearing experiential learning framework, by both students and staff, with multiple highly-regarded, often long-standing, but usually relatively small and bespoke course and programme initiatives. There was also a recognised strategic need for further development of experiential teaching and learning

at our institution with its major research focus, research-led teaching and increasing community engagement. Nevertheless, success also needed significant support at a range of levels, including from students, senior management and champions in schools, to counter the inevitable challenges in initiating and embedding new developments. This development and implementation will be explored in more detail in a full manuscript, currently in preparation. The challenge now lies in maintaining the momentum gathered from this pilot work to embed the SLICC learning framework in students' experiences across the institution.

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