

# Towards a Lifewide Curriculum

Norman Jackson



Norman is the Leader of the Lifewide Education Community which he founded in 2011 which supports and advocates a lifewide approach to

lifelong learning and personal development. Between 2005-11 he was Director of the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education (SCEPTre) which developed and applied the idea of lifewide learning and education at the University of Surrey through the Surrey Lifewide Learning Award. The experiences and learning gained convinced him of the value and significance of a lifewide

approach to learning and development in education. He is the commissioning editor for the Lifewide Education in Universities and Colleges e-Book and has written/edited six other books.

## The learning and development we need for a complex world



In 2006, at the start of our SCEPTre<sup>1</sup> project at the University of Surrey, I commissioned an artist to draw a picture on our wall to provide us with a vision of the educational world we were trying to create. The picture is the product of his talent and his imagination as he interpreted the conversations we had with him. It took me another 18 months to realise that in order to meet the aspirations in this vision we had to embrace the idea of a lifelong and lifewide learning. To prepare ourselves for the

complexities and uncertainties of our future life we needed to draw on the learning, development and achievements we gain from all the experiences in our lives - the lives we have lived and the lives we are living.

This epiphany led me to the idea of a lifewide curriculum (Jackson 2008, 2011) to embrace an educational design that seeks to empower and enable a learner to integrate their learning

and development from any aspect of their life and gain recognition within their higher education experience

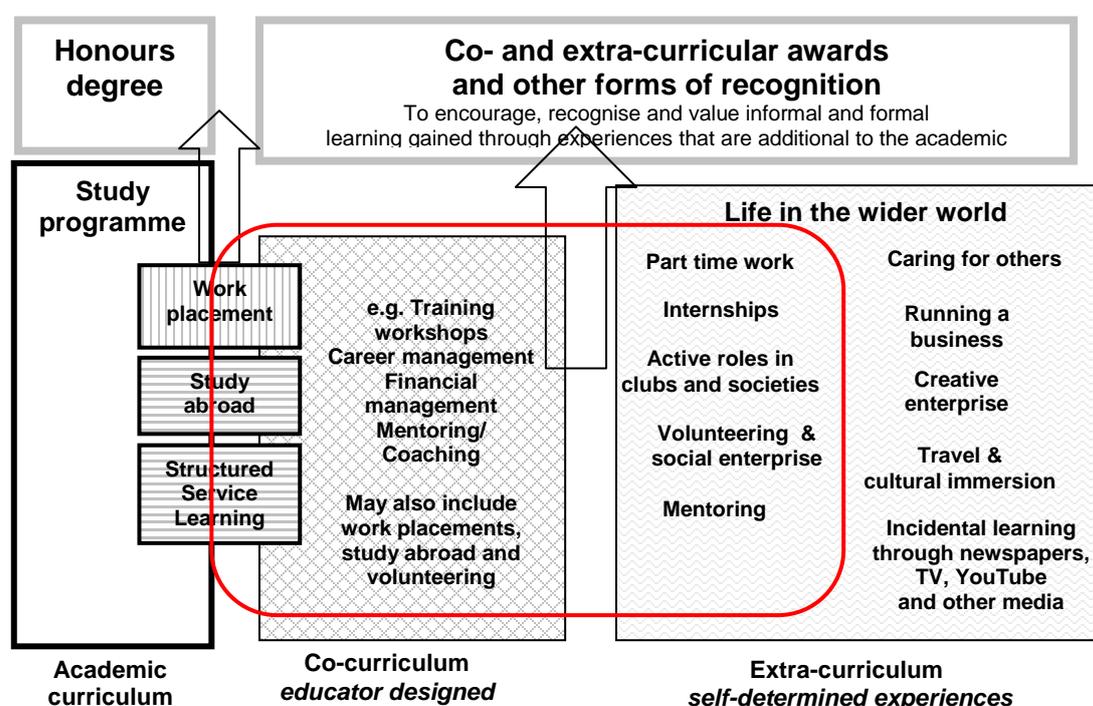
## What is a lifewide curriculum?

There are two ways of looking at a lifewide curriculum: from the perspective of an institution or through the eyes of a learner. From the institutional perspective a lifewide curriculum contains three curricular domains:

1. academic curriculum, which may by design integrate real-world work, study abroad or community-based experiences
2. co-curriculum: which includes experiences provided by the university that may or may not be credit-bearing and for which learners may or may not receive formal recognition. In some universities work placements, study abroad, mentoring and volunteering within student associations are included in the co-curriculum.
3. extra-curriculum: which includes experiences that are determined by the learners themselves and constitute all the spaces that they inhabit outside of the academic and co-curriculum.

The distinction between co- and extra-curricular has been deliberately blurred in some universities as experiences that would be considered to be extra-curricular in Figure 1 have been incorporated into the co-curriculum. But regardless of the way institutions define their curricular domains this book is primarily concerned with the co-curricular and extra-curricular domains of student experience and achievement and the ways in which student learning and development is being supported and recognised in these domains.

Figure 1 Lifewide curriculum map adapted from Jackson (2011:116). The red line encloses spaces that some universities define as the co-curriculum.



## A flipped approach

Lifewide education holds the potential to be transformative (Barnett 2011) that potential is held in the second perspective of a lifewide curriculum which flips the process of educational design, learning and developing on its head.

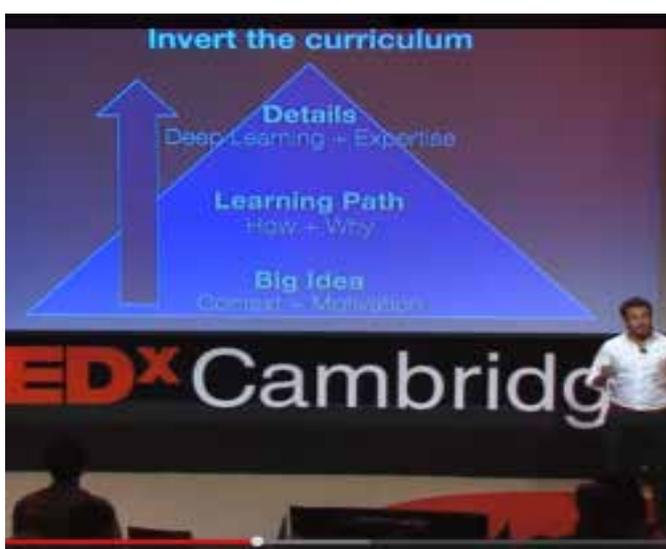
When designing educational experiences curriculum designers [teachers] usually begin with *their* purposes and the outcomes *they* want to promote, and then *they* think about the content, and process, and create and organise resources to support learning. *They* decide what counts as learning, and finally *they* evaluate the standards and quality of learning, as demonstrated through one or more assessment methods and tools that *they* have designed, guided by criteria *they* create to assist them in making judgements. This is the way teachers generally do things in higher education.

[But] what if we were to begin with the learner and his life, and see the learner as the designer of an integrated, meaningful life experience? An experience that incorporates formal education as one component of a much richer set of experiences that embrace all the forms of learning and achievement that are necessary to sustain a meaningful life.

(Jackson 2011:115).

Lifewide education embraces the idea that the learner creates their own unique personal curriculum blending and integrating their formal educational experiences with all their other private and social experiences, motivated by all their purposes, needs, interests and desires. Because of the variety and unscripted nature of this curriculum they learn to juggle and cope with the uncertainty and complexity of life and this is what prepares them for the rest of their life.

[Ariel Diaz talking at TEDxCambridge](#) 2013 tells the story of how, as a 10 year old boy, he became fascinated by Formula One racing cars and it inspired him to study engineering. As



an undergraduate studying Engineering at Dartmouth College he found himself leading a team to build a race car and immersed in equations that enabled him to understand the dynamics of the vehicle. He spent night after night getting deep into these formulas but it was exciting and the purpose of this deep involvement was realised in the making and the creation of the race car. He argues that he would never have wanted to learn and master the equations if he had been made to memorise them without appreciating their purpose and significance and then goes on to draw

the analogy with education. In his view 'we are forcing students to memorize seemingly irrelevant and mundane and boring details before allowing them to see the beauty and excitement intrinsic in every subject that they're about to study'.

In his view teachers need to begin with the big inspiring ideas that give the context and purpose for studying something... then take students along a pathway which allows them to discover things for themselves before immersing them in the detail that reveals the inner workings of the subject.

The wisdom in this story is that this is the way we learn in life outside the abstracted world of formal education. We find things we are interested in or need to know about and then work out how to gain the knowledge and skill to satisfy our interests. In other words our interests, passions and needs provide us with the purpose that makes us want to learn more and create a pathway (or ecology) to learn, develop and achieve. We begin with the problem, challenge, opportunity or the vision, we work out some ways of finding out more before we get into the detail of problem working, solution finding and achieving.

Ariel Diaz's solution to making the academic curriculum more relevant, exciting and meaningful is to design and implement it in the way we live our lives by flipping it. 'We need to start with the big ideas because when you start with big ideas you give students a great context and relevance for the subject they're about to study and also create inspiration and motivation. Then when you have this context and motivation you're able to create a natural and not forced learning pathway because that excitement that motivation leads to questions - how and why and then by answering those questions you get to organically build a deep [and personally significant] knowledge and a deep expertise.' Imagine the possibilities of a flipped curriculum that was founded on purposes, relevance and meaning that really inspired individuals.

### **Why are we moving towards a lifewide curriculum?**

While the idea of a lifewide curriculum was developed and applied at the University of Surrey it is relevant to any university or college curriculum. Over the last five years we have witnessed the implicit take-up of the idea as more and more universities have introduced schemes to encourage, support and recognise student development gained through experiences that are in the co- or extra-curricular domains.

The emergence of this interest in and concern for students' development in a more complete sense is fundamentally about making higher education *more relevant* to the present and future lives of learners and a recognition that there is much more to learning and personal development than studying a subject. With such a rapid growth in these award schemes there is likely to be a multiplicity of reasons some of which are outlined below.

- The nature of the traditional single honours course in UK higher education leaves little scope for broader educational considerations especially in research-intensive universities. Student development awards offer a way of embracing forms of development that are not catered for through the academic curriculum.
- The drive for efficiency has progressively reduced contact time: in some courses students spend significantly more time doing things other than studying and student development awards provide the means of recognising learning gained outside the academic programme.
- The spiralling costs of higher education to students means that many have to undertake paid work in order to support themselves through university and there is a ready-made

context for demonstrating students' employability skills by recognising that work is a highly relevant and valued context for learning.

- The need for universities to show they are providing value for the tuition fee means that those universities that are offering opportunities for development and recognition outside as well as inside the academic curriculum can claim they are providing more value for the tuition fee and thus gain a competitive advantage.
- Employability has to be an important outcome of a university education, so demonstrating a commitment to helping students' demonstrate their employability skills is an important indicator of institutional success.
- The significant support being given by employers and graduate recruiters, as evidenced through sponsorship and direct involvement in institutional schemes, further reinforces the institutional, student and parental beliefs that efforts to encourage and recognise all aspects of student development are a worthwhile.
- The introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) is encouraging/forcing universities and colleges to pay more attention to the ways in which they are supporting and recognising student development beyond the academic curriculum.
- As well as all these factors we should also recognise that there is a genuine desire to broaden and deepen the concept of what a higher education means and to embrace much richer representations of learning that truly embraces the real world beyond the classroom and makes higher education more relevant to students.

### **Strength in diversity**

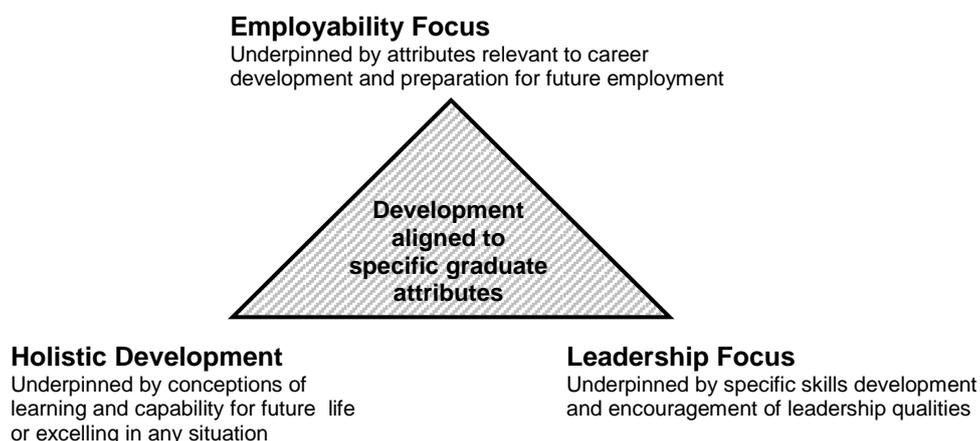
There are no right or wrong answers as to how student development and achievement can be encouraged, supported and recognised through all their life experiences and the Lifewide Learning and Education in Universities and Colleges e-book shows there is considerable diversity in the approaches used. There is great strength in such diversity in so far as schemes can be tailor made to align with institutional needs and strategic goals. But such diversity also makes it more challenging to share understandings and practices between institutional schemes, because different schemes are trying to support and achieve different things. One of the purposes of the e-book is to enable the people who are involved in these schemes to share their contexts and purposes as well as their practices.

The principles and mechanisms for recognising lifewide learning, personal development and achievement have been available for over 20 years through the process of accrediting prior and experiential learning (APEL) through the award of specific credit for learning that can be counted towards a named award. General or non-specific credit can also be used to recognise learning from the whole of a learner's life experiences both in the past and in the present. Like specific credit it can be used as currency through the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System towards an award. The proviso is that the credit is accepted by those responsible for making judgements about what credit may be accepted on a particular award and this is usually done on a case by case basis in universities (Costly 2014).

The last decade has witnessed the rapid growth of new award frameworks that provide additional mechanisms for recognising student development and achievement through experiences that are beyond their academic curriculum. A decade ago there were only a handful of awards by 2013 this has jumped to nearly 80 awards (see article by Harriet Barnes) operating in the UK. These schemes focus on current rather than past experiential and taught learning. The scope of a university's lifewide curriculum they embrace may include almost any experience a learner may be involved in while they are studying in higher education or it may be limited to specific types of experiences on or off campus.

Institutional schemes to support and recognise students' lifewide development appear to be framed in one of three main orientations (Figure 2) according to whether the approach emphasises: 1) whole-person development 2) development for employability or 3) leadership qualities. Schemes are usually underpinned by statements of attributes - qualities, skills, capabilities, values and dispositions that are deemed to be appropriate and relevant which act as prompts for reflection, evidence gathering and the evaluation of achievement and fulfilment of requirements.

**Figure 2** Different foci and approaches that awards are based around



1 Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education  
<http://www.sceptre.org.uk/>