

# **From ‘Work Integrated’ to ‘Life-Wide’ Learning: Changing a University’s Conceptions of Curriculum**

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## **From 'Work Integrated to 'Life-Wide' Learning: Changing a University's Conceptions of Curriculum**

### **Abstract**

Bringing about significant change in a mature and successful Work Integrated Learning (WIL) scheme is quite a difficult thing to accomplish. The University of Surrey, which has a long established WIL scheme based on year long professional training work placements, has embarked on a programme of R&D work aimed at adapting and enhancing its WIL model for learning, by adopting a life-wide concept of learning and curriculum. The intention is to develop a new University Award through which an individual's life-wide learning enterprise can be encouraged, supported, valued and publicly recognised. This paper describes the concepts that are intended to inspire change and the initial stages of trying to turn good educational ideas into new organisational practices: practices that add value and opportunity to our undergraduate WIL professional training scheme.

## Introduction

For over 50 years the University of Surrey has been at the forefront of the Work Integrated Learning movement in the UK through a curriculum model that requires programmes in all disciplines<sup>1</sup> to provide opportunities for year long work placements that are relevant to the learner's field of study and career intentions at the end of their second year of study. The University uses the term Professional Training<sup>2</sup> to describe this type of WIL curriculum and it has proved to be successful in enabling our graduates to secure employment on completion of their degree: University of Surrey graduates are consistently at or near the top the graduate employability league tables in England.

Taken at face value it would seem that the University of Surrey has a very effective educational model so why bother doing anything more? But closer inspection indicates that, if we exclude programmes that have a statutory requirement for a curriculum that integrates practice and academic study (eg in health programmes), only 50% of our undergraduates participate in our *Professional Training* work placement scheme. Furthermore, there are growing concerns about the impact of the current economic instability on year long placement opportunities.

We are in a classic change dilemma – do we sustain a proven model that seems to work well for a significant proportion of our students, or do we change what we are doing to adapt to changes in the external environment and try to add value to the experience and development of students who currently do not benefit from professional training?

The University, through the work of its Centre for Excellence in Professional Training (SCEPTRE)<sup>3</sup>, concluded that we need to do both and proposed two complementary strategies. The first is to diversify our approaches to WIL by examining forms of WIL that we do not currently practice – forms that do not require a commitment to a year long placement. The second is to develop a much broader conception of a curriculum to embrace: one that recognises that learners gain valuable personal and professional development through life-experiences outside the current WIL curriculum. We are calling this a 'life-wide curriculum' to emphasise that the whole of a person's life is brought to bear on their unique learning project that enables them to become who they want to become.

This paper focuses on the second strategy developing initial ideas that were presented at the 2008 WACE conference in Sydney (Jackson 2008a). It outlines the concept of life-wide learning through a life-wide curriculum and the ways in which we have begun to operationalise the idea and try to influence and change the university so that the concept can become part of 'the way we do things here.' That is we bring about deep cultural change – the hardest thing to do in a university!

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of vocational health-related programmes that operate a fully integrated work-study programme

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/professionaltraining/>

<sup>3</sup> SCEPTRE is one of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning established IN England through a five year Government grant in 2005/06. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/>

## **A New Proposition**

We are attempting to add value to our existing model of a WIL curriculum by establishing a new educational proposition and trying to engage the university in testing and evaluating the proposition through a number of strategies. These strategies are at three levels: 1) political – trying to influence the senior managers and leaders of teaching and learning and professional training, 2) collegial – trying to influence the University’s teaching and learning committees that make/approve educational policy and 3) individual – trying to enthuse individuals with the ideas and involve them in adapting their practice or inventing new practice and influencing others they work with.

But change strategies that are fundamentally about persuading people to change their thinking and practices will not succeed without a strong compelling idea and this is where the life-wide learning / life-wide curriculum idea comes into play.

The idea that higher education is one component of a life-long process of learning is well established in educational policy and practice throughout the world. The idea of a life-wide learning is proposed to highlight the fact that at any point in time, for example while a learner is engaged in higher education, an individual’s life contains many parallel and interconnected journeys and experiences and that these individually and collectively contribute to the ongoing personal and potentially professional development of the person. By reframing our perception of what counts as learning and developing the means of recognizing and valuing learning that is not formally assessed within an academic programme we can help learners develop a deeper understanding of how they are learning in the different parts of their lives. Heightened awareness is likely to help learners become more effective at learning through their own experiences.

The term life-wide curriculum is used to denote the personal life course of an individual through which they learn. It is a useful educational concept if we want to promote a life-wide concept of learning. A life-wide curriculum seeks to highlight the potential for drawing learning from the diverse experiences that a learner may encounter during their higher education experience. It is an inclusive concept intended to recognise that universities are complex enterprises for learning and that many people (not just teachers) contribute to students’ learning and development. It is an opportunity enhancing and enabling concept rather than a policy for making people do things they don’t want to do. The concept is learner driven ie outside the requirements of the formal academic curriculum a learner can choose or not choose to include her experiences and learning in her unique learning profile. The intention is not to force learners to account for their everyday experiences. Rather, the value in the idea is to encourage the university to think about learning in a more holistic way and to encourage, support and value this view of learning so that learners eventually see the benefits of viewing their lives in this way.

The challenge for a university that adopts the idea of life-wide learning through a life-wide curriculum is to develop the means to support, recognise and value such learning. At the University of Surrey we are proposing to develop an Experiential Learning Award (Surrey Award) to enable learning to be recognised from those aspects of a learner’s life that are not

currently recognised through the academic award. This additional form of recognition of a learner's experiences and achievements fits well the strategic movement in the UK towards more comprehensive information outcomes from a higher education (HE Progress Files<sup>4</sup>).

**Figure 1 about here**

## **Learning Potential of a Life-Wide Curriculum**

The most powerful argument for a life-wide curriculum is that it contains more potential for learning than any other curriculum! Adopting a life-wide curriculum changes our conception of what counts as learning and where learning occurs. It shifts higher education into a more experience-based model of learning (Andreason et al 1995) i.e. the experience of the learner occupies central place in the learning process. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators. A key element of experience-based learning is that learners analyse their experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it in order to draw meaning from it in the light of prior experience.

An experience-rich curriculum that engages with the full breadth of a learner's life also provides an environment within which a more holistic conception of learning and individuals' sense of being in the world can be appreciated. We can appreciate much more (Beard et al 2007:5) 'learning through being, doing, sensing, feeling, knowing and changing'. (Beard and Wilson 2005:4) provide a powerful and comprehensive visualization of this whole learner whole world interaction through the metaphor of a 'learning combination lock'.

Learning that is grounded in experience, especially when it is a rich, meaningful and immersive experience has the potential to contribute to all forms of learning identified by Marton et al (1983: 283-284) and most importantly, support development of the most elaborate forms of learning. Experience of working and learning in different environments is also essential to developing a repertoire of 'ways of knowing' and 'being able to come to know'. Experiential knowing is part of action and it lies at the heart of the epistemology of practice. It complements but is different to explicit and tacit knowledge and can only be gained through acts of doing and being (Cook and Brown 1999).

Baxter Magolda (1992 and 2001) identified four qualitatively different *ways of knowing*. These are:

- *Absolute knowing*: knowledge exists in an absolute form, it is either right or wrong
- *Transitional knowing*: knowledge is certain in some areas and uncertain in other areas
- *Independent knowing*: knowledge is uncertain. Everyone has their own beliefs
- *Contextual knowing*: knowledge is contextual. One judges on the basis of evidence in context.

If a learner only possesses a way of knowing that is absolute, then he or she is unlikely to cope well with problem-solving in the conditions of uncertainty that characterize the real world. However, a student who possesses an independent way of knowing is likely to feel more confident, and be more effective, in such a situation. A student who has learnt in lots of different experience-based

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<sup>4</sup> Guidance for HE Progress Files <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/PDP/default.asp>

contexts will realize that knowledge, in real world problem working, is often strongly situated and contextual. A way of knowing is more than an academic cognitive skill that can be “developed” through carefully designed learning activities. It is firmly a part of who you are – your identity. In other words, changing one’s way of knowing is to change as a person.

Our line of reasoning is that if we are to claim that higher education is preparing learners for a complex world (another concept that underlies the SCEPTrE enterprise) then we and they must pay particular attention to the epistemology of practice(s) in the social, professional and working worlds that they will enter when they leave the academic environment. The epistemology of (professional) work practice (coming to know what to do through doing in a specific situation or context drawing on past experiences which includes learned theory) can only be learned through the experience of practising with other practitioners. The epistemology of practice pays particular attention to the idea of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learning for a complex world requires learners to appreciate and experience the epistemology of practice in professional situations that are relevant to chosen career pathways and more generally in other social practice settings embodied in the idea of a life-wide curriculum.

Raelin (2007) identifies the building blocks of an epistemology of practice as:

- *Extensive use of tacit knowledge* – the tacit processes that practitioners use as they work through the problems and challenges of daily practice. Such knowledge is deeply rooted in action and involvement in a specific context in a specific time. But while people may be knowledgeable about what they do and can do it, they may not be able to explain how they know what to do.
- *Critical reflection* – the thinking capacity to make sense of their own practice and experiences and mindful habit of doing it. Or the ability to think about how their actions resulted in a particular outcome. This ability results in the creation of a personal ‘real time’ learning environment through which beliefs, assumptions and mental models as well as actions, can be tested and evaluated.
- *Mastery* – people develop their expertise not only by repeated practice in a single domain but by acquiring skills in multiple contexts. Mastery is developed through an appropriate apprenticeship in which novice practitioners are exposed to embodied practice, apply and develop their own practice, are encouraged and given feedback on their performance and gradually take on more and more responsibility. Developing mastery is coupled to the development of tacit knowledge and knowing, and the ability to evaluate and learn from own experiences through critical reflection.

Michael Eraut’s more pragmatic visualisation of an epistemology of professional practice (Eraut 2007, 2008), complements Railin. He notes that the basic epistemology of practice involves the professional actions of:

- *Assessing situations* (sometimes briefly, sometimes involving a long process of *investigation and enquiry*) and continuing to monitor the situation;
- *Deciding what, if any, action to take*, both immediately and over a longer period (either on one’s own or as a leader or member of a team);
- *Pursuing an agreed course of action*, performing professional actions - modifying, consulting, evaluating and reassessing as and when necessary;

- *Metacognitive monitoring of oneself*, people needing attention and the general progress of the case, problem, project or situation; and sometimes also learning through reflection on the experience.

His empirical observations of how people learn in workplace settings, either as explicit learning activity or a by-product of work, provides the basis for new and useful tools to help learners in work situations to observe themselves and others, and think about what they are doing and the effects of what they are doing more wisely.

This basic epistemology used by professionals to evaluate a situation – decide how to respond – do something and change what we do when we see and understand its effect – is also the basic epistemology we use in other areas of our lives and it seems reasonable to infer that we can develop and practice this epistemology through life experiences outside a professional work context (a learner's life-wide curriculum). For example, a student engaged in part-time work or a community volunteering project will be using the same basic epistemology to deal with a difficult customer or team mate as a seasoned professional working on a complicated problem with a client. We can test this by questioning a learner about the process they went through when deciding and implementing a course of action. Developing deeper awareness and understanding of this epistemology of practice can be designed into reflective processes embedded within a life-wide learning / life-wide curriculum scheme.

At the heart of the life-wide learning / life-wide curriculum idea is the deep moral purpose of fostering learners' will or the spirit to be and become (Barnett 2004, 2009). An individual's life-wide enterprise contains far more opportunity for them to exercise their will than that part of their life that is only associated with an academic programme. But will alone is not enough alongside this intentionality the learner must have the agency (the forethought, capacity, skill, behaviours and metacognitive powers) to engage in ways that will enable her to act, influence events, achieve her goals and learn through the experience. She must be, or learn to be, an agentic learner (Bandura 2001). The work of Stephen Billett (Billett 2009 ) points the way to how we encourage the development of agentic professionals. We argue that a life-wide learning enterprise contains far more opportunity and potential for the development of human agency than a formal education programme and this connects both the moral and educational arguments for implementing the idea of a life-wide curriculum in university education.

### **Changing a University's Conceptions of Curriculum**

But it is one thing to have an educational idea that has the potential to change a University and quite another to actually change thinking and practice of the people who are the University. In the second part of this paper I explain how we have begun to introduce and implement the idea in my University. Figure 2 shows a plan of actions intended to help the University move from a position 1 year ago when the life-wide learning / life-wide curriculum idea did not exist to an imagined (idealised) situation in three years time.

**Figure 2 about here**

Anyone who has tried to bring about significant change in educational practices in a university knows how difficult it is to stimulate change when the people who must implement change have near total autonomy over their practice and are quite happy with the way things are. Bringing about change on any significant scale is difficult, messy and full of contest, conflict, avoidance and non-engagement. In introducing the idea we have stressed that this is not a threat to the existing approach that has proved to be successful. Rather, our life-wide learning / curriculum idea is intended to add value to this approach for students who participate in professional training and to extend opportunity for the recognition of experiential learning to those students who do not participate in our professional training scheme. Putting student interests and voices at the heart of the project rather than educational ideas which many colleagues only see as fuzzy nonsense, is an important part of building a compelling case and our intention is to create a lot of videos featuring students talking about their life-wide learning enterprise.

In planning a significant change process in a university there is so much that cannot be predicted – a plan can at best only provide a sense of what the planner imagines has to be done at any stage in the project. It must also contain the space for emergent opportunity or unanticipated events of consequences of actions. In a dynamic change environment it is much easier to fill in the details of a plan after it has been completed! It is also sometimes wiser to wait until something happens in order to know how to respond and capitalise on a new situation. Our plan (often improvised) for introducing, developing and implementing the idea of life-wide learning / life-wide curriculum contains within it three main strands of activity.

### **Conceptual Development of the Idea**

The starting point is an inspiring idea – life-wide learning / life-wide curriculum, a belief that the idea is a moral idea that is worth pursuing and a belief that the idea has relevance to the University of Surrey and that it could be operationalised.

A working paper outlining the idea was created in April 2008 and tested first with family and colleagues. It was discussed with the Vice-Chancellor (who fortunately considered it to be a good idea) and with SCEPTRÉ's Executive and Steering Committees. It was refined and connected to our Student Experience Strategy and also presented as a concept at the WACE Conference in Sydney in September 2008. The idea was also incorporated into the central theme of the University's learning and teaching conference Learning to be professional through a life wide curriculum<sup>5</sup> (April 2009). The conference was used to test the proposition and to draw scholars and practitioners into the process of evaluation and elaboration. In April I attended a national conference on emedding enterprise in the curriculum and was surprised to discover presenters from other universities using the frameworks and concepts to explain what they were doing – a simple demonstration of the speed with which ideas permeate and are adapted by practitioners in a networked world! A book proposal is being prepared to facilitate the next stage of conceptual development and the elaboration and demonstration of the idea in a scholarly medium.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://learnigtobeprofessional@pbwiki.com>



## **Political Development of the Idea**

Educational/curriculum developers have to seize opportunities to connect and embed their ideas into institutional policies if they want to systemically influence practice. In the first half of 2008, the university was consulting on its first Student Experience Strategy which was being formed around what the university considered was its brand distinctiveness – ‘a more complete education’. The life-wide learning idea helped the people who were creating policy to explain their concept more fully and an alliance of ideas and interests was formed. The working paper was duly adapted to show how the two ideas were intertwined.

Fearing that these fledgling ideas could be trivialised and marginalised if they were debated in the institution’s committees the first step was to secure Vice-Chancellor support. His explicit statement of support, incorporated into the working paper proved to be invaluable. *‘Surrey enjoys an unrivalled position with its professional training year and employment record for our graduates which many years ago grew out of a clear understanding of how to relate higher education to the needs of employers and employees. SCEPTrE’s ideas for introducing the concept of a ‘life-wide’ curriculum to address learning in a complex world, could prove equally valuable in helping our graduates succeed in the future and I encourage you to support this initiative’*. This endorsement of the life-wide curriculum idea conveyed the message that there was top management support for the idea and that it fitted with the leader’s strategic vision for the university.

Realising that the ideas stood little chance of implementation unless they were embedded in the University’s two strategic policies for learning and teaching and the student experience we began to engage the new Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Development in discussions as soon as he took up his post (September 2008). The strategic value of the ideas were emphasised by connecting the concept of a life-wide learning / life-wide curriculum to the concept of a ‘complete education’ which was the central idea in the Student Experience Strategy.

In November 2008 we took the opportunity provided by the annual review of our Fellowship policy to embed our developing vision of a higher education in our policy.

*‘The University of Surrey Student Experience Strategy sets out a vision of a more complete education. We are inspired by a vision of a higher education experience that recognises that students are engaged in learning across the whole of their lives throughout their time at Surrey. It is this ‘whole life’ learning that enables students to develop their unique identity, their subject and professional knowledge and skills and the agency that will enable them to achieve their full potential and be successful throughout their lives.’*

### **Our vision of ‘whole life’ learning**

- Embraces the ideas of ‘life-long learning’, ‘life-wide-learning’ and ‘personal wellbeing’ and encompasses formal and informal learning in the classroom, on work placement, in paid or unpaid work, in extra-curricular settings and other aspects of life.
- It connects and embeds academic and professional development within the disciplinary curriculum whilst encouraging and enabling students to make use of the wide range of developmental opportunities offered by the university and the wider world.

- It sees the professional training experience and the opportunity it provides to work in an appropriate professional environment as a key component of learner development.
- It encourages students to actively participate in all the opportunities for learning that life has to offer and seeks to recognize and value the learning gained through experience in a life-wide curriculum’.

Two significant events (Fellowship Festival November 2008 and a Learning to be Professional through a Life-Wide Curriculum conference April 2009) provided opportunities for the Deputy Vice-Chancellor to make public speeches that set out this emerging vision for learning at Surrey within which life-wide learning was fundamentally a part.

‘We are inspired by a vision of a higher education experience that recognises that students are engaged in learning in all aspects of their lives throughout their time at Surrey.....it is this ‘whole of life’ learning that enables students to develop through a combination of academic study, professional placement, co-curricular opportunity and learning through life, their unique identity and spirit to be who they want to be and help them realise their full potential as a human being.’

The third strategy within this strand of activity was to propose to the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy Group, with DVC support, that the University develops an Award to recognise and value learning gained outside the academic curriculum and positioning it in terms of supporting the delivery of the Student Experience Strategy Action Plan. In March 2009 the proposal for an 18 month feasibility study was accepted by the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy Group. Once this had been given SCEPTRe reallocated its staff resources to appointment a Surrey Award / Life-Wide Learning Developer (April 2009) to provide additional capacity to support the R&D enterprise. Involvement of the Careers Service and Students’ Guild in the recruitment process enabled them to gain some ownership for this important developmental process.

### **Practical Development of the Idea**

Turning ideas into real, effective, sustainable and valued practices is the ultimate goal. It involves a combination of development – new infrastructures, capacities, practices, procedures, research – finding out what others do, and evaluation – to understand how well these practices encourage and support learning and the resources that will be necessary to support the scheme. The feasibility study will involve:

- Mapping opportunities for life-wide learning on campus that already exists and persuading those responsible for such opportunities to participate in the scheme
- Creating new building blocks (like a work experience certificate) to encourage and facilitate learning through and from particular contexts.
- Finding out what other universities are doing, how they encourage, support and recognise life-wide learning. Finding out how they introduced a comparable award.
- Creating the technical and supporting infrastructures necessary to support a Surrey Award
- Creating the procedures and systems for an award.
- Developing an appreciation of the costs and benefits of such an award.

## **Looking Back**

‘Where there is a will there is a way’ so the age old saying goes, and developing an institutional will to change and become something different is what lies at the heart of any change process that affects the whole organization. The challenge for any broker of change is to help the university move from the familiar, the tried and the tested, in to an unfamiliar and uncertain practice world. The role is often one of containing and alleviating anxiety as well as harnessing the energies, ideas and creativity of the people who want to make change happen.

‘If you want to change an organization you have to change the conversations’ (Seele ). Looking back over the last year it is clear that much of our effort has been expended in trying to change the conversations. The main emphasis has been on trying to develop an institutional will to broaden conceptions of learning by: 1) creating compelling stories for why we need to change and how we might change 2) persuading key people (leaders) of the potential value for the change, encouraging them to envisage and talk about a new sort of vision 3) trying to add scholarly substance to the story of change by engaging other scholars in the process of explanation 4) gaining collegial buy-in for development work 5) building resources and capacities to support the development work 6) initiating development work on the building blocks for implementation.

## **Looking Forward**

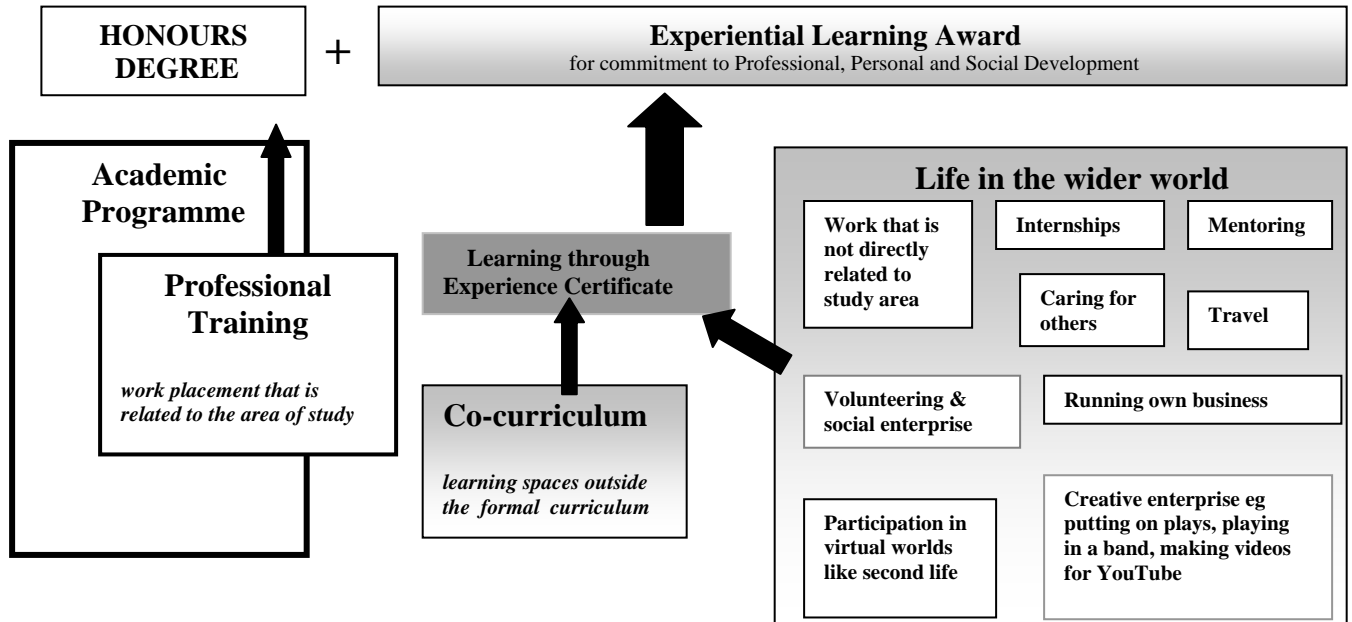
We have discovered that development and implementation (change strategy) has to progress simultaneously in three dimensions – conceptual, practical and political. At the conceptual level we are trying to draw good educational thinkers and scholars into the process: in addition to building our wikis to enable people to contribute to the development of ideas and practices we will begin to produce a book. At the practical level the next 12 months will be crucial in developing the practice to support and recognize life-wide learning and demonstrate that the support we can give can be resourced and sustained at a reasonable level of student engagement (perhaps involvement in the Award of 10% of all students in the first instance). At the practical level we also have to develop the rules and procedures for the Award and we will looking closely at how other Universities have structured their Awards. On the political front during the next phase of development we will need to involve students in building the case for an Award – without their continued support for and involvement in the Award there is little point in investing in the infrastructure or the development of ideas. We also need to involve employers in the process – the involvement of our Careers Service will be very important in this respect. There is much to do and time is running out for SCEPTRe as external funding runs out. The challenge for the University is to sustain the enterprise and accommodate SCEPTRe’s capacities within more permanent organization structures. But what happens to us is not as important as what happens to the ideas and practices that have invented through the project.

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**Figure 1 Scope of the Life-Wide Curriculum / Experiential Learning Award concept being developed at the University of Surrey<sup>6</sup>.**



<sup>6</sup> See <http://norman.jackson.pbwiki.com/Life-wide+curriculum> for updated elaborations of a Life-Wide Curriculum

**Figure 2 A planning aid to show how we will be trying to turn an idea into concrete practice and ultimately affect the culture – how we do things here. The three strands of activity – scholarly, political and practical development of the core ideas are shown by heavy grey lines.**

**A** Building Blocks A – Extending Learning through Experience Certificate, B – New Enterprise Academy C – New Learning through Residential Tutoring Certificate D – New Life-wide Learning website E – New Learning through Part-Time Work Certificate

Abbreviations: VC/DVC – Vice-Chancellor & Deputy VC, LTSG – Learning and Teaching Strategy Group

