

## Life-wide Learning and a More Complete Education: Analysis of Student Views



## Background

The University of Surrey Student Experience Strategy (July 2008) sets out a vision for a 'complete education' inspired by the belief that a higher education experience should recognise that students are engaged in learning in all aspects of their lives while they are studying at Surrey. SCEPTRe is engaged in a programme of work to help elaborate what a 'more complete education' might mean to students.

To test student opinion on the idea, in May 2009 SCEPTRe invited undergraduate and post-graduate students to apply for a '*Life-Wide Learning Award*' by writing a short (up to 1000 word) statement about experiences through which they had learnt outside their academic programme or professional training experience. They were also invited to provide a short summary statement about what they understood a more complete education meant. A total of sixty accounts were submitted (35 UG and 25 PG) and the winners and two runners up were selected by a small panel of judges. All student quotations and organisation references have been anonymised. The text has been enhanced with cartoons drawn by SCEPTRe's artist in residence Patrick Saunders (prhsuk@yahoo.co.uk). Analysis was conducted by SCEPTRe staff Claire Fellows (cf00022@surrey.ac.uk). Individual stories can be viewed at <http://>

## Method of Analysis

These accounts have been analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The following questions were used to frame the analysis:

- What conceptions of a more complete education do students' have?
- What sort of experiences do students recognise as being sites for useful learning?
- What sorts of learning/benefits personal/professional development are students gaining from their wider life experiences?
- Do students connect back or integrate their development/learning in the wider world to their academic development?

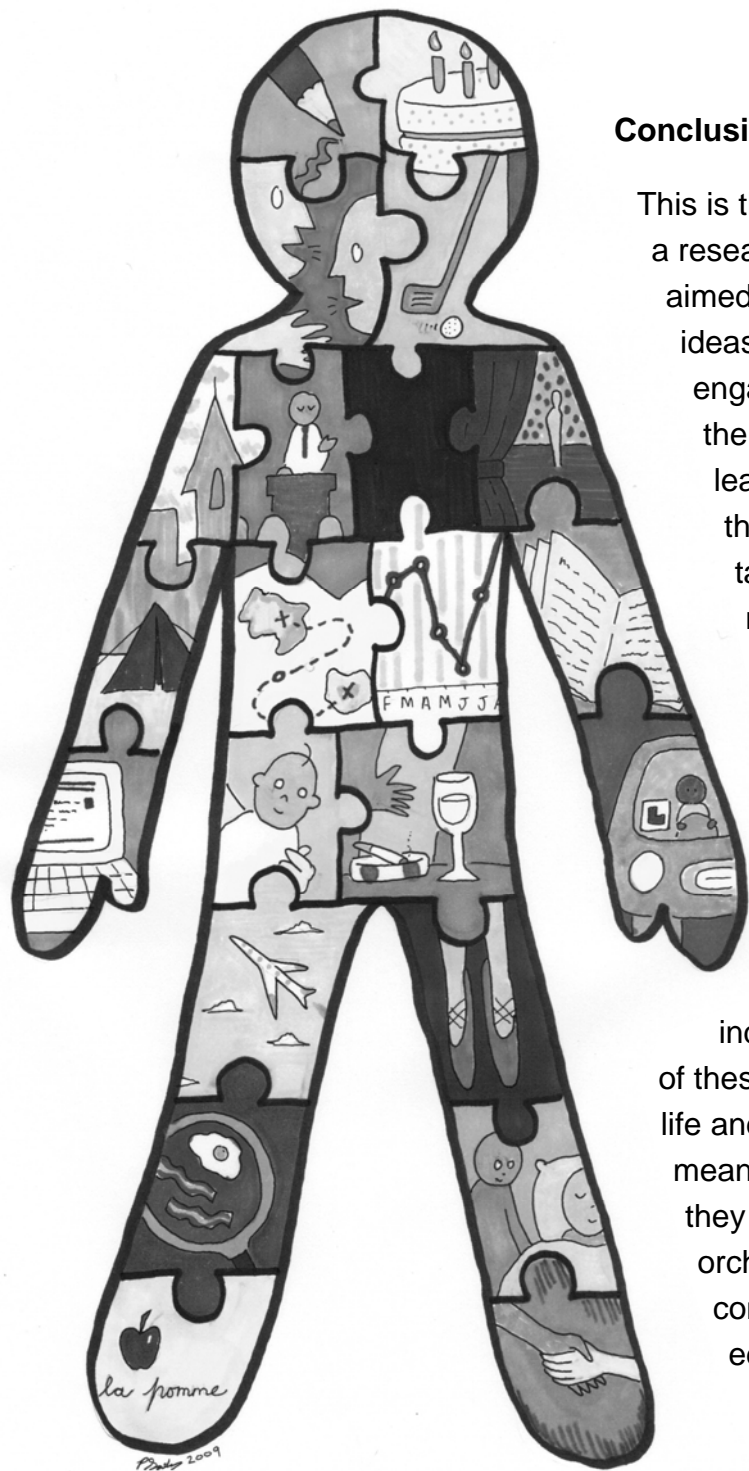
These questions were used as superordinate themes to the analysis. Specific themes were drawn out from the stories under each of these superordinate themes, using illustrative quotes. These were interpreted in relation to the student's experiences and the meanings these had for them.

## Contents:

A More Complete Education	3
Life-Wide Learning: What experiences does it embrace?	4
Learning and Personal / Professional Development	5
Connecting and integrating experiences into their self identity	6
Significance of experiences	7
Motivation to pro-actively engage with the world	8
Conclusion	10

There is a strong sense in student stories of life-wide learning that their engagement with wider life experiences was all about who they were and who they wanted to be. By engaging in this way they grew a little more into the person they wanted to become and perhaps, through this process learnt a bit more about who they might want to be. By seeing life as a resource for learning and personal growth as a human being and proactively choosing to engage in life in a particular way, and by achieving things through this process they grew in confidence and this affected other parts of their lives. It is clear that students, not teachers or curriculum designers are the great integrators and sense makers. It is students that connect the different parts of their lives and create the relevance and meaning that ultimately makes them the people and professionals they become.

*"There are things that we learn in formal education such as mathematics and physics but there are also things in life that we don't learn through formal education. The trials and tribulations that we go through in life provide us with a greater education. The informal education of life is the one that teaches us trust, love, compassion and understanding. Many of the important things in life we will not learn in a school but through our own experiences as an individual. A more complete education would enable us to marry life experience with our pursuit of knowledge thus providing us with the wisdom to progress to higher things".*



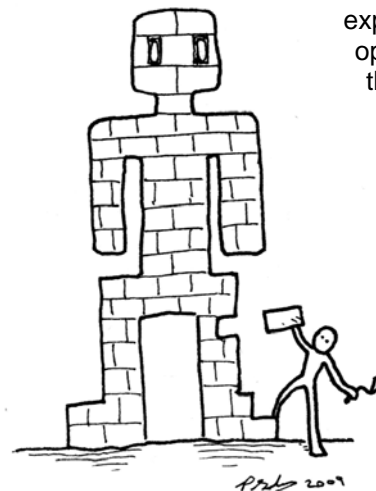
## Conclusion

This is the first stage of a research project aimed at exploring the ideas of students' engagement with the idea of life-wide learning and how they themselves take responsibility for making their own educational experience more complete. The stories clearly indicate that many of these students see life and living as the means through which they secure and orchestrate a more complete education.

## A More Complete Education

When asked to write about what they conceived as a more complete education, the students produced a variety of responses. These included not only the definition and the end result, but also the purpose, its potential and the requirements.

The majority of students indicated that their concept of a more complete education embraced a wide range of experiences within the context of the lifelong opportunities and challenges that are available to them. However, other conceptions included the integration of academic experiences with other experiences, the personal growth and the development of themselves and having some form of connection and relationship with the wider world. The chance to make use of available opportunities and to develop intellectually and emotionally seemed to be important to many students.



In terms of what a more complete education offers, students stated that it not only provides a wide range of experiences, but it also allows for the application of knowledge to other parts of their life, the chance to discover more about themselves and their aspirations, and the opportunity to develop as a whole person. The desire to value themselves as a whole person, rather than just the part that is generally valued in higher education, seems to be a recurrent theme.

Additionally, there is also the prospect of forming a connection or relationship with people who might otherwise not be encountered by limiting themselves to their higher education experience. This point was made by a number of students, illustrating the value they place on this.

An important theme in students' conceptions of a more complete education was the need for the right state of mind to make the most of available opportunities, the ability to integrate other knowledge with the current activity and having a supportive network around you. Individual students also indicated other prerequisites, which included being aware of current world issues, being physically fit and being able to speak at least one other language.

In actively engaging in a more complete education, a student wrote that it would *"enable us to marry life experience with our pursuit of knowledge, thus providing us with the wisdom to progress to higher things"*. Therefore a student can expect to not only become a well developed person, who is prepared for their future experiences and endeavours, but also realise their own potential. However, there is also another

aspect to this which is illustrated by another student: “at the end of the journey you have a home decorated with beautiful stories”. This emphasises the pivotal role of experience in creating the memories that they value.

“A more complete education to me means that I learn and develop not only to get a degree but also as a person. I think that education doesn't just have to be about a subject that we pick, but I believe that it is about learning how to think, and to develop our ideas and communicate them with those around us. Education is all about learning, and new experiences help us to do this”.



...At the end of the journey you have a home decorated with beautiful stories...

### Life-wide Learning : what experiences does it embrace?

Students identified a wide range of experiences that they felt had provided opportunities for valuable learning outside their academic programme. These in turn had in some way contributed to their personal development. Examples include attending workshops, seminars and courses that focus on certain skills and abilities. For instance, one student discussed their participation in a number of dance classes, whilst another mentioned attending public lectures. Self directed activities, such as teaching yourself a skill or learning one from a peer, were also recognised.

Less formally structured and organised activities like being a member of a society's committee, learning a new language and taking part in some charity work were also recognised. Travelling was also specified as a cultural experience, whether to Peru on an expedition, or to New York for a holiday.



Other activities included exercising and playing sports. One student in particular wrote about their training schedule which was preparing them for their participation in the London 2012 Olympics, while another talked about learning and achieving at the top level of Australian football.

Some students also recognised that every day life also provided experiences that were valued for their learning potential. These included the experiences of looking after themselves or another person, or moving abroad.

motive of the students. “It is about maximizing one's potential, ultimately enabling the desired lifestyle and leading to personal satisfaction”. This particular student felt that in order to prepare for their future career, they needed to constantly challenge themselves and thus improve their abilities. Other students discussed their desire to be better at specific skills or academic, physical or mental activities and thus actively sought out the experiences that would enable them to improve.

The motivation for participating in particular activities, such as learning a language or playing a sport, was identified as the passion the students already had for it, their desire for self improvement within that activity or the enjoyment they believed they would get from doing it. However, further incentives came from the challenge that it would involve and the sense of achievement they would feel if or when they were successful.

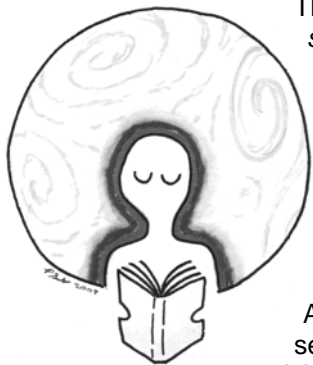
One individual discussed the sense of triumph they felt after all their training they were able to win a swimming competition: this hard won achievement, gave them the drive they needed to persevere with the sport.

Although financial constraints played a substantial part in the reasoning for getting a part-time job, other motives included the enjoyment of doing the work itself and the opportunity to interact with other people. Thus although the student may have begun the job with one purpose in mind, they continued to engage with it because of the other rewarding aspects which emerged through the work.



The motivations behind volunteering varied between students but included the sense of achievement the student knew they would feel after taking part and their desire to give something back to the community. One such student stated that “I have never felt more valued as a volunteer. Knowing that you are part of a world-wide movement all aiming to help young people is very humbling and motivating”. In this respect it seems that, as is this case with part-time work, although the student may begin because of one motive, they continue because of a variety of different ones.

“I have also been a member of the Guildford city swimming club for almost three years and I have competed in the south east region masters competitions. As I am now older than 25, I am classed in the master's category and within that category I have won one gold and one bronze medal. The sense of achievement that you get by winning in a competition is amazing. It boosts your self-esteem and teaches you that after all the hard work there is an enjoyable victory”.



The memories created are also significant; “when you start to look back after you have reached a certain point in life, all that you cherish is the lifelong memories of the environment in which you have grown up”.

Several students discussed experiences they had had which meant a lot to them because of the way they could reminisce over them. Thus sometimes simply having the experience is as important as being able to develop as a person through it.

A further point of significance came from the selflessness of the students’ acts. Several discussed activities such as voluntarily working with homeless people or children, raising money for charity and working on community projects abroad. Through being able to give something back to the community, these experiences had instilled the individuals with a sense of self-worth. One student indicated how they had not previously realised how much they were able to change someone else’s life by their actions. For them, the realisation of their potential to help other people was what had made the experience so significant.

*“By that point I’ve had 59 flights, a few hours on the simulator, attended a few lectures on the ground, I had been trained on how to get myself out of every conceivable emergency and had read half a dozen books on the theory of flight. We land; he gets off the plane and tells me “are you confident with your flying?” I hesitantly nod and says that I’m ready to fly solo now. It’s my 60<sup>th</sup> flight and I am terrified but happy. After the take off, I circle some hot air balloons that were slowly drifting to the north. The fact that I was alone on the glider made the experience unforgettable”.*

### Motivation to pro-actively engage with the world

A number of different sources of motivation were given by the students as to what had encouraged their active engagement with the world beyond their academic programme. The influence of students’ families was motivating in a multitude of respects. One mentioned how he had been the first member of his family to attend university and thus his self-esteem was increased by the fact his family were proud of him. Another student described how he was looking after his brother to allow him to study as well. His ability to give his brother an education was a source of pride and inspired him to undertake an active life at university.

The desire to meet other people also featured heavily as a motivating factor. Whether the intention was to make friends or purely to interact with a range of different people, this stimulated the students’ enthusiasm for their activities. Self improvement was another motive of the students. Self improvement was another

*“Being an international student is quite an experience by itself. Studying at a university in a different country has contributed to shaping my multicultural personality and ability to adapt with ease to new environments and take on new challenges”.*

### Learning and Personal / Professional Development

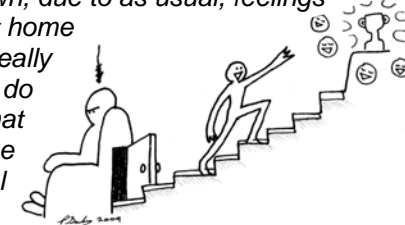
Through doing their activities, students identified that they had learnt a variety of academic and non-academic skills. These were cultivated through attending workshops, undertaking placement or work experience and assisting other students in a mentoring capacity, as well as through carrying out specific skill-based activities and fulfilling a position of responsibility. These skills were considered useful in improving personal performance in those specific areas as well as for integrating into other aspects of life.



One such area referred to social skills. One student in particular discussed their positive experiences of participating in some workshops run on building self esteem, while others mentioned how their attendance at a variety of social events had enabled them to interact with a mix of people they had not had much contact with previously.

On reflecting on a trip to New York, one individual stated that “I learnt more about myself and the English way of life as I compared these new features and norms with those I was raised around, confirming I am really English at heart, and even though I may consider a global career one day, to live somewhere else is more than the pretty brochure, it’s a new way of life, a culture on its own”. Thus even having a cultural experience was seen to reflect into the individual’s sense of personal growth.

On the whole, although students mentioned the skill and personal development they underwent through their various activities, they placed a considerable emphasis on the things that they were able to learn about themselves. After having worked as a special constable within the police, one student expressed such a position: “At the end of my first year at university, I was pretty down, due to as usual, feelings and emotions and all that stuff. so I was sitting at home feeling sorry for myself when I decided that I really needed to sort myself out, and push myself to do something, and that lead me to do something that I never expected, but has completely changed the person I am, the way I think, and the way I feel about myself”. Thus their experiences were

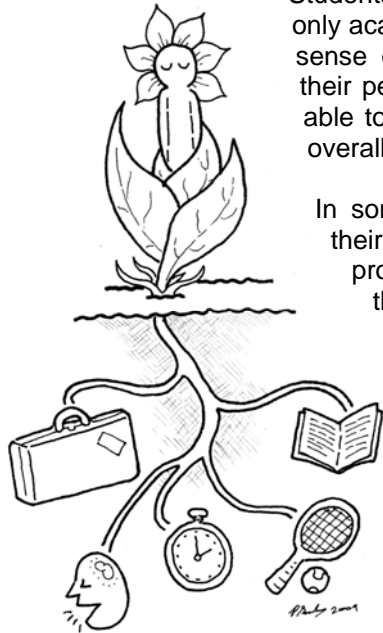


multifunctional in that they allowed the students to develop themselves and their specific abilities, as well as providing a sense of self discovery.

*“With the help from the university, I got an opportunity to learn French which was conducted once a week for beginners. This opportunity brought me closer to my desire of visiting France. It not only helped me learn a different language but also the thought process that goes behind it. It made me realize that the basic traits of all human beings be it any nationality remains the same. It’s just that they express it in a different manner. The beauty of any language is the ability to express and I learnt another form of expression by way of French”.*

### Connecting and integrating experiences into their self identity

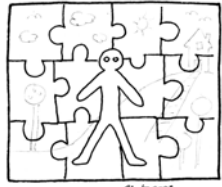
Students were able to integrate their experiences in not only academic and career related respects, but also to their sense of development and self-worth. This incorporated their perceptions of their own abilities, the way they were able to define themselves as individuals, as well as their overall confidence and self-efficacy.



In some cases, knowledge and skills acquired outside their programme of study proved useful in the application of their studies and their work experience, as well as in helping them to realise their career aspirations. *“Through this experience I began to think about letting my degree take me in a more entrepreneurial direction within food & beverages. Unless I had tried this, I never would have considered that even possible. I had opened a door of potential”.* Thus, for this student, through being able to apply the skills they had learnt to their experience of working in a restaurant, they had discovered that this is what they would like to do as a career.

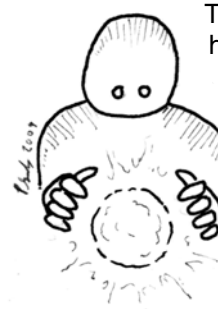
This theme resonated with a number of students who wrote about how they had been able to become more confident in themselves and in their own abilities through their experiences, and in this respect they were able to realise their own self potential. This in turn allowed them to modify the way they were able to define themselves. For instance, one student stated that engaging in volunteer work allows them to identify themselves as *“a proactive and caring person willing to work with others to improve their opportunities”*. To them, although it was important to undertake such work in the first place, it is also necessary to do so frequently in order to maintain both their sense of identity and their self-worth.

More generally, being aware of their own abilities helped the students appreciate that they were part of a bigger picture. This concept was illustrated by a number of students who had engaged in a range of community based activities and as a result had discovered the vast influence they were able to have on other people’s lives.



*“My experiences as a HCA have enabled me to see ‘the other side of the coin’ in terms of priorities in nursing and the workloads of other colleagues. I will be able to apply this experience to my future development as a staff nurse and it will only enhance my future practice”.*

### Significance of Experiences



The students gave a wide range of reasons for why their experiences had been so significant to them. These included the sense of achievement they had got, the extra knowledge they had gained and, whether it be through academia or employment, the ability to apply this knowledge. The changes that the individual had undergone also featured highly, in respect to not only the development they had undergone in their skill base, but also in their personality and self efficacy. One student in particular highlighted how they valued the experience of being a Samaritan because it had enabled them to understand and empathise with the emotions of people who are experiencing some form of distress. This has made them more tolerant of other people and their feelings, which in turn has reflected into they way they interact with people within both their personal and professional life. Thus the student had undergone changes within themselves that had enabled this new form of social practice.

Other reasons for experiential significance included the interactions the students had had with other people. One stated that they had made *“friends who I do not know what I would do without, as they make my student life a valuable social experience, and not just about the academic material”*. However, although the students placed a high value on the friendships that had formed from these engagements, they also valued the interactions they had had with those who were like minded people or from a range of diverse backgrounds. This was illustrated by one student who felt that through interacting with a variety of international students they were all able to overcome the stereotypes they may have had about each other, which could lead to an improvement in international relationships globally.

It’s good to talk...  
  
 ...and to keep talking...

