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Development of the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum'

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Abstract

The 'hidden curriculum' of Higher Education refers to practices, terminology, and norms that students are implicitly assumed to understand, but are never explicitly explained. Most interventions proposed to reveal the hidden curriculum have been designed and implemented in subject-specific contexts with limited scope for wider impact. In collaboration with the Quality Assurance Agency, we designed the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum', which provides a student-friendly glossary of terms, allowing students to arrive at university with some of the hidden curriculum unpacked. In this article, we outline the conceptualisation, development, and staff evaluation of the guide, before sharing reflections on the process of creating a hidden curriculum resource.

Keywords

hidden curriculum, transitions, student experience, pedagogy, evaluation

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The 'hidden curriculum' of Higher Education (HE) refers to certain 'unspoken rules' about the norms, processes, and language of HE that students are implicitly assumed to understand but are often not explicitly taught (Semper & Blasco, 2018). This concept generally describes not just facets related to the curriculum, but also the values, knowledge, skills, or practices that are required to successfully navigate HE and to be an effective HE student, that are not overtly taught, explained or communicated to students. Indeed, Bergenhenegouwen (1987) has suggested that 'implicit education' would be a better term for the phenomenon of hidden curriculum, highlighting the discrepancies between explicit teaching and implicit understandings. One mechanism that educators may draw upon to unpack the hidden curriculum is to critically question which norms of HE are the most overlooked, assumed, or unquestioned by academic staff and institutions. Indeed, as Koutsouris et al., (2021, p. 132) explain, the hidden curriculum can refer to "unintended messages, underpinning norms, values and assumptions that are often so unquestioned that they have become invisible".

The hidden curriculum may specifically impact students who are not the 'typical', such as those from minoritised backgrounds, mature students, disabled students, care experienced students, and those who are the first in their family to access HE (Hinchcliffe, 2020).

Efforts to 'make visible' the invisible norms and values of HE may be a useful starting point in uncovering, and avoiding adding to, the hidden curriculum. While aspects of the HE experience will always be implicit, raising awareness of the hidden curriculum should encourage educators to avoid making understanding more obscure than necessary. However, interventions to reveal the hidden curriculum are often targeted at the subject-specific context; that is, they are typically done in schools or departments and there is little work which investigates interdisciplinary commonalities. For example, in medical education, Neve & Collett (2017) described small group activities with groups of students discussing the hidden curriculum, and the impact it might have on their experiences as medical students and doctors. These subject-specific interventions to help students unpack the hidden curriculum have an important role to play in developing a more accessible and inclusive learning experience. However, there is also value in developing more universal, sector-wide tools and resources to reveal the hidden curriculum. In doing so, this will ensure that students' have access to the generic hidden curriculum of university life, as opposed to the more discipline-specific localised aspects. Therefore, in collaboration with the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA, https://www.qaa.ac.uk/), we created the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum', an online resource created for the purpose of enabling students to arrive at university with some access to the sector terminology that typically forms part of the hidden curriculum. The QAA is an independent charity that monitors and advises on standards and quality in UK HE, as well as providing accreditation internationally. While the QAA is no longer the regulatory body for England, it remains so for the other nations of the UK and continues to provide advice and support for its member organisations. It was in this support and advice role, that the QAA wanted to support the development and dissemination of this guide. In this reflection, we detail the process of conceptualising, developing, and evaluating this resource, before briefly reflecting on this process.

Conceptualisation of the guide

To provide students with an introductory tool that allows them to uncover the hidden curriculum of HE, we created a short, student-friendly resource titled 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum', which can be accessed in the supplementary materials of this paper and online here (QAA, 2022). This resource was designed to provide students with a glossary of common terminology, phrases, and acronyms that are features of HE across the sector. This was specifically aimed at revealing the 'rules of the game' aspect of the hidden curriculum (Hubbard et al., 2020). Hubbard et al. (2020) highlight how language such as 'tutorial' on an induction timetable already includes manifestations of the hidden curriculum. This view of hidden curriculum is aligned with Semper and Blasco's (2018) notion that "the 'hidden curriculum' is not actually hidden, but merely constituted by all those things that are so taken for granted that they are rarely given any attention" (p. 484). To address this, we conceptualised our hidden curriculum resource as constituting a set of HE specific norms, practices, and terminology that students are assumed to understand when they join and progress through their university studies. We theorised that terminology is the most useful, simple, and overlooked place to begin unpacking the concept of hidden curriculum across the student experience.

Development of the guide

To start the process of designing the hidden curriculum resource, we began by crowd-sourcing ideas from the academic and scholarly community. We created an online Padlet board, which is a digital interactive 'graffiti board' that can be accessed by anyone online, that contained the prompt question 'What do students need to know before joining university?'. We focused on the transitions to university stage of the student experience, as we theorised that this is a time of heightened hidden curriculum and a period where the majority of new terminology is introduced to students. This Padlet board was shared across Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) online communities, including Twitter (using #AcademicChatter, see Pownall, 2021) and SoTL mailing lists, and within the teaching community of our institution. The Padlet received 38 anonymous responses and respondents were generous in the detail of insights they provided, covering topics such as academic acclimatation and student wellbeing considerations.

These responses, along with both our own experiences and evidence from the pedagogical literature, were used to create an initial list of words and phrases that we deemed useful for students to understand in order to unpack the hidden curriculum. Additionally, we considered the recommendation of Hubbard et al. (2020) that we should make the language of HE more accessible. At this stage, we felt it was important to allow space for our own insights. We reflected upon the many hours of conversations we have shared with students over the years of our teaching experiences. This helped us to identify the terms and phrases that students often struggle with understanding. To provide some context, the team designing and developing the resource consisted of one early-career lecturer, one associate professor, and one Deputy Director of Student Education, all of whom work in a School of Psychology at a research-intensive Russell Group University in the UK. Between us, we have over 35 years of teaching experience in universities, although we come to the project with different insights and perspectives.

As part of this early drafting stage, we collectively shared our reflections on helping students navigate the transition to university (including both students we teach and our own family members entering university) and drafted a list of ideas for the first iteration

of the resource. This was then shared with several 'traditional' students who were preparing to start university, and the QAA for early feedback. From this, these initial ideas were then refined, developed, and organised into five distinct categories, each representing a unique aspect of the student experience: University life, Academic life, Teaching and learning, Assessment and feedback, and Good study behaviours (see Table 1 for an exhaustive account of the section contents). Within each of these sections, we developed clear, accessible, and student-friendly definitions for key terms, phrases, and acronyms that students may encounter during the transition to university. We then each collaboratively refined and edited all entries. While our initial focus was on the language of universities, it was necessary to contextualise some of these by explaining the ways that universities function in places, thus the final guide both explained the practices and the language of HE.

Table 1. Contents of the first edition of the Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum

Section	Contents
University life	Personal Tutor
	Office hours
	Students' Union
	Who represents you?
	Who's who at university?
	Postgraduate students
	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Associate Professor
	Professor
	Senior Management
	Support services
Academic life	PhD
	Journal article
	Peer review
	The library
Teaching and learning	Module
	Electives
	Credit system
	Lectures
	Seminars
Assessment and feedback	Who sets and marks your assessments?
	Feedback
	How will my work be graded?
	Grade boundaries
	How are essays marked?
	Mitigation
	Formative assessment
	Summative assessment
	Learning outcomes
	Marking rubric
	Plagiarism
Good study behaviours	What does it mean to study independently?
	Email etiquette
	Note taking
	Reading

> Reflection
> Critical thinking
> Academic writing
> What to do if you don't understand something
> Learning isn't always comfortable

Staff evaluation

Our first edition of the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum' resource largely reflected our own insights and lived experiences, with limited input from other relevant stakeholders. Therefore, we conducted an evaluation of the guide using staff feedback. Ethical approval for this evaluation was granted by the University of Leeds, School of Psychology Ethics Committee (Reference: PSYC-343). This evaluation process was repeated with academic staff based in England (n=32) using a similar analytical approach that was informed broadly by conventions of qualitative content analysis, interested in descriptive contents of text. Our definition of 'staff' was intentionally broad to be as inclusive as possible. Of the staff respondents, nine identified as early career members of academic staff, 13 mid-career, eight late-career, and two did not disclose their career stage. Staff respondents were well distributed across different academic subjects (e.g., mathematics, biological sciences, law, and languages) and included staff from a wide range of areas of HE. Five staff respondents had previously seen the resource before completing the evaluation. Staff feedback was also overwhelmingly positive, echoing the student feedback. For example, one respondent said the resource was "a really readable summary of various things students should know about University life" and another reported that:

> [The resource is] incredibly useful and I directed my first year students to it; it helps them find and easy overview of terms they might not be familiar with, and spells out things they might not feel comfortable asking but are essential parts of the university system.

However, staff respondents also used the feedback boxes to provide more nuanced and constructive feedback on the resource too. For example, some staff acknowledged how terminology differs across contexts and areas of the university, which means that the words that we outline in the resource may not be applicable to every context. This is an important caveat to the guide:

> "[…] there are so many terms that get used (often interchangeably) for classes. Sometimes they're 'modules', sometimes they're 'courses'. Classes themselves can be referred to as lectures collectively, even if students never sit in a lecture hall. And what's the difference between a workshop and a seminar? The same is true for assessments: often they get called 'exams' even when they're not. More information like this would be useful.

This speaks to the differences in terminologies across contexts and institutions, which presents a challenge for creating a truly generic, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional guide. This also highlights the inconsistency in terminology across, and sometimes even within institutions, which itself can be a source of confusion for both students and teachers in HE. Therefore, it is important that efforts to help students navigate the hidden curriculum of HE are suitably attentive to these variations, so as not to further confuse students and introduce unnecessary complexity, and where possible institutional definitions of such terms should be adopted, and consistency checked. Beyond this, some respondents also felt that there were wider issues in the transition to HE and hidden

curriculum that could be more explicitly addressed in the resource. For example, one respondent noted that the guide could do more to set appropriate expectations about 'university life' beyond academic skills: "I think this guide is a really good idea, but it should address this almost inevitable feeling of alienation (and how to deal with it)". This was echoed throughout the staff respondents and prompted us to consider the focus of the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum'. Again, this largely reflected the need for efforts to improve students' sense of belonging and transitions to be attentive to their surroundings and personal spaces (Ahn & Davis, 2019), rather than focusing too tightly on the academic aspects of university life alone. This also reflects the wide variability in experiences and prompted us to (re)consider what the 'default' or 'ideal' student looks like in university. For example:

> It's important to include a section advising students to seek support for the challenges that a university education creates for neurodiverse students.

However, other respondents did not perceive any gaps within the resource's contents: "it answers questions students will have or wouldn't have thought of yet. Particularly students who are underrepresented". Finally, staff respondents also provided us with a list of words or phrases that they felt were not covered by the first edition of the 'Student Guide to the hidden curriculum', which are displayed in Figure 1. Importantly, staff often provided unique recommendations for words or phrases that other respondents did not, which again demonstrates the variability and breadth of terminology used in different contexts within HE. These responses highlight some of the rapid changes to HE in recent years shown through, for example, references to virtual learning and wellbeing. Therefore, the guide should also be updated regularly to reflect newer challenges to the hidden curriculum that will arise in the coming years.
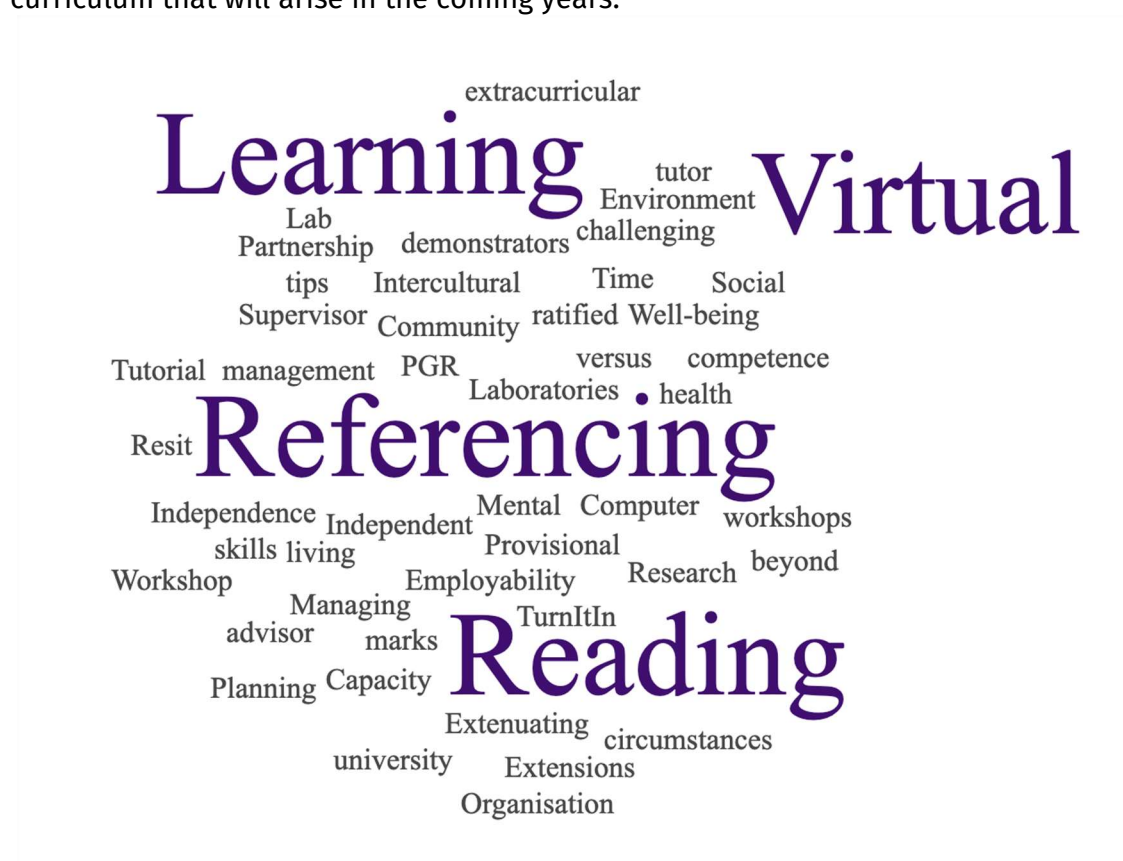

Figure 1. Word cloud showing words and phrases not covered by the resource that staff deemed important to include.

Reflections and conclusion

We created the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum' to help students uncover the hidden curriculum of HE. While there are many different facets to the hidden curriculum, including social capital, student agency, social skills, and academic literacies, in our guide we focused predominantly on the issue of the 'language' of HE. We theorised that this is an important aspect of student transitions, sense of belonging, and wellbeing that is often overlooked, but relatively simple to overcome. Indeed, if students do not have access to the language of HE, how can they be expected to actively engage? Therefore, this guide should be thought of as a useful starting point, by removing one of the barriers to successful transition to university and student sense of belonging. As such, this guide offers a relatively simple, light-touch way to enable students to navigate the initial unchartered territories of university However, we also appreciate that this represents only one example of the hidden curriculum in university, and more targeted efforts should be made, particularly in order to address the unique needs of marginalised groups of students. Overall, from our evaluation of both staff and students, we were generally pleased with the positive appraisal and the number of helpful and constructive comments. This evaluation highlighted some important amendments to make, in order to further clarify some terminology, improve the accessibility of some terms, and embed a wider appreciation of the whole student experience, beyond academic life. The second edition of the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum' is now in production, which reflects these suggestions from staff and students, with the addition of a section on student support. The guide emphasises its function as explaining the language of HE, particularly in relation to processes and structures. It is important to note that in the design of the second edition, we were cautious about 'mission creep', wanting to keep the focus of the guide while addressing the feedback we received. The second edition of the guide benefits from the student voice, particularly more marginalised students, which was lacking in the first edition.

In conceptualising, constructing, and evaluating this guide, as educators, this offered us a useful opportunity for reflection. Most notably, we were confronted how much of the language that we as academics use in HE is unknown to students. Our evaluation also demonstrated the need for efforts to dismantle the hidden curriculum to be appropriately tailored for diverse areas, subject disciplines, and contexts. In other words, while there is an overriding hidden curriculum that all students may experience, there are also subject-specific or local contributors to the hidden curriculum that should also be unpacked with students. We constructed this guide as three educators based in the same department within a UK research-intensive university. Therefore, while each of us have different perspectives on the hidden curriculum (particularly owing to our variability in career stages), we share a set of norms and assumptions about our context-specific terminology. Therefore, it was useful to discover from the staff evaluation how inconsistent and variable the use of terminology is across the HE sector. This has implications for practice, as it demonstrates how efforts to standardise experiences across the sector should be appropriately flexible to allow for subject- and context-specific variations.

Finally, we have attempted to make the second edition of the 'Student guide to the hidden curriculum' as inclusive and accessible as possible, however, in doing so, we also recognise the need for highly context-specific iterations of this resource. For example, as educators in psychology, there is a niche terminology that students should know that may

constitute the 'hidden curriculum of psychology'. This will likely be true for many, if not every, subject area. Therefore, while this guide is a useful starting point, we encourage educators to consider how to translate this generic version to more contextualised, subject-specific, institution-appropriate versions, in order to more thoroughly dismantle the hidden curriculum in their local contexts.

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