

Unpacking your Hidden Curriculum: A Guide for Educators



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The ‘hidden curriculum’ of higher education refers to certain unspoken ‘rules of the game’ about the norms, processes, and language of higher education that students are implicitly assumed to have but are not explicitly taught or explained (Hubbard et al, 2020; Semper and Blasco, 2018). The existence of the ‘hidden curriculum’ means that some students are not equipped to navigate the unfamiliar territory of higher education, which can have consequences for their wellbeing, sense of belonging, and success.

We created the [Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum](#) to provide students with explanations of terminology that is a common feature of higher education across the sector. This resource was designed to offer a generic overview of terms, phrases, and words used, such as ‘lecture’, ‘personal tutoring’ and ‘assessment’. However, we also appreciate that there is discipline or institution-specific terminology and practices that also constitute the hidden curriculum in universities. For example, we found particular variability in terminology and practices around small-group teaching and assessment. It is important that educators think critically about what the hidden curriculum looks like in their local context.

In this Guide for Educators, we offer some prompt questions and top tips to help get you started with unpacking the hidden curriculum in your subject area and/or across your wider institution. We have also produced a guide template for staff which will support you to capture subject-specific terminology and reflect on where and how this information is currently communicated to students. We recommend that you use these materials, alongside the existing Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum, to better understand and alleviate the potential knowledge gaps and barriers that students might encounter.

Prompt questions

- What words are used to describe small-group teaching in your institution or programme?
 - Do you use words like ‘seminar’, ‘tutorial’, ‘supervision’?
 - What are students expected to do to prepare for these?
 - How do they find out this information currently?
- What specialist or programme-specific terminology is used in your subject discipline?
- Are there norms, practices, or rituals that students are expected to participate in? How and when?
 - For example, are there assumptions about students’ study behaviours, or preparation for assessments?
- How do students know what is expected of them in assessment?
- Do you use specific terminology to describe different types of assessment?
- Is the use of terminology consistent across staff? Is there shared understanding of what terms mean?
- How and when do you tell students what this terminology means?
- Can this terminology be explicitly explained to students?
- What words do students need to know, in order to make sense of (and meaningfully engage with) their curriculum? [Make a list]

Unpacking your hidden curriculum: 3 top tips

1. Explain to staff what ‘the hidden curriculum’ refers to and acknowledge it as a part of the student experience.
2. Begin to think critically and collaboratively about how the hidden curriculum can be uncovered or explained to students.
 - What aspects of your curriculum are assumed?
 - What expectations do you have of students?
 - Are they fair expectations?
 - Do you explicitly teach the content you expect students to know?
 - Are there questions that you get asked again and again by students?
3. Engage in an ongoing dialogue with students about their experiences of the hidden curriculum in your local context. This may be achieved through staff-student partnership events and forums or less formal opportunities for staff-student discussion, such as during personal tutoring or mentoring.

Guide template

Here, we provide a guide template that we recommend staff work through to unpack the hidden curriculum. This three-step process works best if it is done collaboratively with teaching and professional support staff alongside students.

Subject-specific terminology What words and phrases do students need to know?	Identifying gaps Where in the curriculum is this explained or communicated to students?	Uncovering the hidden curriculum How could this be more explicitly communicated to students? Do students all have access to this information?
Examples:		
Students have weekly Computer-Based Learning sessions, referred to as CBLs. Students need to know this acronym to understand the course.	This is mentioned in the first introductory welcome event.	We could work on making terminology more explicit in module paperwork and lectures, for example, by reducing the use of acronyms or providing students with a jargon buster.
Students complete a critical review of a paper as part of an assessment. This is often referred to as a 'crit'. Students need to understand this when making module choices.	Assessment criteria are available on the VLE and listed in the module catalogue.	We could ensure that we use consistent language in all modules when describing assessments. We ensure that we explain what is meant by 'critical' and provide exemplar assessments.
Students are expected to give a conference style presentation.	Assessment criteria are available on the VLE, but students don't understand what is meant by a conference.	We could explain further what is meant by conference, and the behaviours that will ensure success. We could give example slides.

The aim of this exercise is to remove some of the barriers to success that students can face. This is the first step in making higher education less mysterious and helping students to navigate our systems and processes. However, the language and implicit expectations of higher education need to be critically examined. Ultimately, we should work to remove these barriers, and make our systems and processes more inclusive.

Working in partnership with students and professional services staff, we can make higher education an inclusive space where everyone belongs. And that facilitates transformation.



An [editable MS Word version](#) of this template is available on the QAA website.

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