Navigating the Unseen Path: Unveiling the Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education

Helen Whitehead

University of Salford

Corresponding author: h.c.whitehead1@salford.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the hidden curriculum, often described as the "untaught" aspect of the educational journey, which comprises explicit knowledge, norms, and behaviours essential for success. It becomes most apparent when students begin their university experience, as a smooth transition to university life significantly influences academic achievement and continuity. Before students engage with subject-specific learning, there is a transitional phase where students adapt to new environments, social circles, unfamiliar processes, and institution specific terminology. Given these adjustments, it is not surprising that some first-year students feel overwhelmed.

To address this issue, an online resource has been developed, focusing on the hidden curriculum. The resource aims to guide students, covering crucial areas such as teaching and learning, assessments, marking, and available support services. First-year undergraduate students, subject heads and EDI leads within SEE were consulted in the resource development process. To ensure the accessibility of the online resource, marketing supported the development, to ensure its distribution before the 2024/25 academic year commences.

The objective was to enhance the student experience and foster a sense of belonging, for example, for mature students, those from working-class backgrounds, minority ethnic students, and first-generation students. Longer-term outcomes will include determining if the resource has supported academic achievement and

retention. The resource is initially available to undergraduate students within SEE but will subsequently be distributed to all schools across the university.

Key Words: Hidden curriculum, inclusive design, transition, rules of the game, underrepresented students

Introduction and Objectives

The hidden curriculum was coined by Philip Jackson in 1968 and is defined as the 'untaught' component of the education experience and encapsulates the knowledge, norms and behaviours that are required for success (Margolis, 2001; Cotton et al., 2013; Hubbard et al., 2020; Alsubaie, 2015; Rossouw & Frick, 2022; Heim et al., 2024). The hidden curriculum can be divided into two sections, the first being 'Sense of Belonging' and the second being 'Rules of the Game'. 'Belonging' focuses on the implicit messages students receive about whether they fit into the university environment and whether people like them can succeed. This can include belonging to the institution, friendship groups and the broader community of their discipline (Hubbard et al., 2020). The "Rules of the Game" focuses on the institutional processes and terminology of the taught curriculum and the expectations of the university (Hubbard et al., 2020).

Students are more likely to experience the hidden curriculum when they first arrive at university where the transition to university can signify a major life change, with students often having difficulty visualising and predicting the experience (Briggs et al., 2012; Drury, 2023). The transition to university is a crucial period and the success of this is likely to impact the student's future achievements (Leese, 2010). Educators are not always aware of the hidden curriculum because they are well versed in the rules of the game so these barriers may go unnoticed (Heim et al., 2024).

The transition to higher education (HE) represents a significant shift in academic pursuits, and early exposure to the hidden curriculum can prove advantageous for both students and the institutions they attend. It would be inaccurate for educators and institutions to assume that students will adopt the conventions of university study without first ensuring that they have been taught these conventions in previous

studies. For instance, referencing is a fundamental aspect of HE, yet many students will encounter it for the first time when they begin the HE journey. This is likely to be the case for academic writing, independent study, and note-taking as well (Heim et al., 2024).

Underrepresented students within HE are students consistently underrepresented in terms of enrolment, participation and success compared to the overall student population. Examples of underrepresented student groups include minority ethnic students, first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities (Mishra, 2020). As previously stated, the transition to HE can signify a significant life change. It has been reported that this is likely to be experienced with greater intensity by students from non-traditional backgrounds, including mature students, working-class backgrounds, minority ethnic students, and first-generation students (Hubbard et al., 2020). Mishra (2020) states for example that first-generation students are unable to benefit from the knowledge and experience of parents or guardians who have attended university, which places them at a disadvantage compared to other students.

The objective of the project was to develop a hidden curriculum resource for incoming undergraduate students within the Science, Engineering and Environment (SEE) school at the University of Salford. The creation of this resource enables the provision of essential information to students before they arrive at the university, thus facilitating their comprehension of key terminology and the services the university offers.
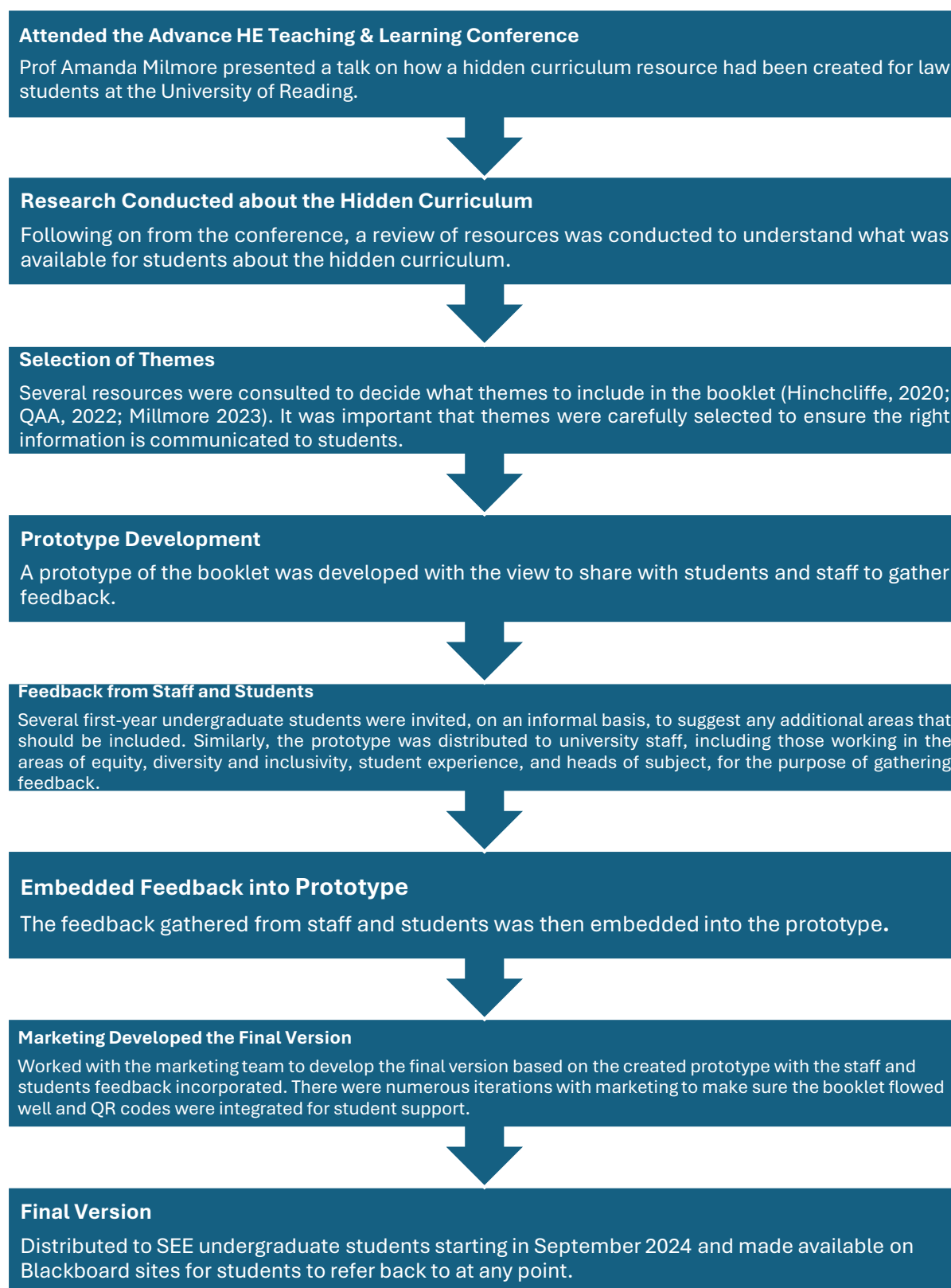
Methods

The concept of creating a hidden curriculum resource was developed following the presentation given by Professor Amanda Millmore at the Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference in 2022 (Millmore, 2023). During the talk, Prof Millmore outlined how a resource had been created for law students at the University of Reading. Following on from the conference and after a review of resources available at the University of Salford, it was clear that a resource would be beneficial for students within SEE that would be designed to enhance awareness, promote inclusivity, and support the holistic development of students by addressing the

unspoken lessons, values, and perspectives encountered in HE. Figure 1 outlines the step-by-step process involved in creating the hidden curriculum booklet.

In developing the booklet, several resources were consulted, including Hinchcliffe (2020), Birtill et al., (2022) and Millmore (2023). The main themes were identified and used to structure the content of the hidden curriculum resource, created with the specific intention of supporting students at the University of Salford. The themes selected were: Studying at the University of Salford; Teaching and Learning; Assessments and Marking; and Who to Ask for Help.

After identifying the primary themes, first-year undergraduate students were informally invited to suggest additional areas for inclusion. This took place during a Geography and Environmental Management Level 4 Academic Tutorial lecture delivered by the author. The booklet prototype was circulated among the students for them to read and provide informal feedback on its usefulness and any missing elements. These students were selected because they had just begun their university journey.

The resource was then shared with university staff, including those in equity, diversity, and inclusivity, student experience, and heads of subject, to gather further feedback. The university's marketing team played a crucial role in developing the hidden curriculum booklet. Multiple iterations of the booklet were created, incorporating feedback from both students and staff. Ensuring the booklet's flow and including QR codes for easy access to support services were key considerations.

Attended the Advance HE Teaching & Learning Conference

Prof Amanda Milmore presented a talk on how a hidden curriculum resource had been created for law students at the University of Reading.

Research Conducted about the Hidden Curriculum

Following on from the conference, a review of resources was conducted to understand what was available for students about the hidden curriculum.

Selection of Themes

Several resources were consulted to decide what themes to include in the booklet (Hinchcliffe, 2020; QAA, 2022; Millmore 2023). It was important that themes were carefully selected to ensure the right information is communicated to students.

Prototype Development

A prototype of the booklet was developed with the view to share with students and staff to gather feedback.

Feedback from Staff and Students

Several first-year undergraduate students were invited, on an informal basis, to suggest any additional areas that should be included. Similarly, the prototype was distributed to university staff, including those working in the areas of equity, diversity and inclusivity, student experience, and heads of subject, for the purpose of gathering feedback.

Embedded Feedback into Prototype

The feedback gathered from staff and students was then embedded into the prototype.

Marketing Developed the Final Version

Worked with the marketing team to develop the final version based on the created prototype with the staff and students feedback incorporated. There were numerous iterations with marketing to make sure the booklet flowed well and QR codes were integrated for student support.

Final Version

Distributed to SEE undergraduate students starting in September 2024 and made available on Blackboard sites for students to refer back to at any point.

Figure 1: Steps undertaken to create the hidden curriculum booklet.

Results and Discussion

The hidden curriculum booklet created for undergraduate students within SEE at the University of Salford was divided into themes. These themes are: Studying at the University of Salford, Teaching and Learning, Assessment and Marking and Who to Ask for Help. These themes were chosen because they cover the different aspects of university life that every student will experience on their journey.

Studying at the University of Salford

The first section of the booklet concentrated on the subject of studying at the university, with a specific emphasis on the institutional language utilised to describe the general terminology employed throughout the university. Specific areas of focus within this section include the introduction of students to the specifics of their chosen programme of study and the identification of the particular school to which the programme belongs. For example, a student might be enrolled on Zoology, a programme that sits within the SEE. Furthermore, this section provides an overview of the terminology associated with the structure of the academic year, including an explanation of trimesters and a figure indicating the timeframes allocated to each one (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The academic year with different trimesters is indicated.

Another important element that students must understand is the array of websites utilised at the university. For example, Blackboard is the virtual learning environment (VLE) used at the University of Salford by all students. This platform houses all of their course modules, including lecture materials, assessments, and reading lists.

Students are unlikely to have used Blackboard before starting university, therefore it was important to communicate what it is and why it is important to them.

Teaching and Learning – Understanding how it works

One of the fundamental aspects of pursuing a degree at the university level is the process of teaching and learning. Students will have the opportunity to engage with a diverse range of learning environments, including lectures, seminars, and tutorials. Students will likely be unfamiliar with the various forms of learning they will encounter. As an example, a student may see that a tutorial has been scheduled but lacks an understanding of its purpose. This unfamiliar terminology creates an obstacle for students before they even start their studies. It was therefore important that the booklet highlighted the various learning environments and provided a short description.

Universities expect students to engage in independent study and invest time in for example reading and writing assessments (Butson et al., 2020). Therefore, independent study is another aspect that was covered in the booklet as it was important to highlight that students are expected to engage with their degree outside of timetabled teaching sessions.

Assessments and Marking

For each module a student undertakes there will be an assessment(s) that is designed to test their knowledge and understanding therefore students need to understand the terminology associated with assessments. As assessments are a critical component of any degree, a section of the booklet was created to specifically focus on this and how assessments are marked. Within this section, there is an explanation for students to understand the difference for example between formative and summative assessments (Figure 3).
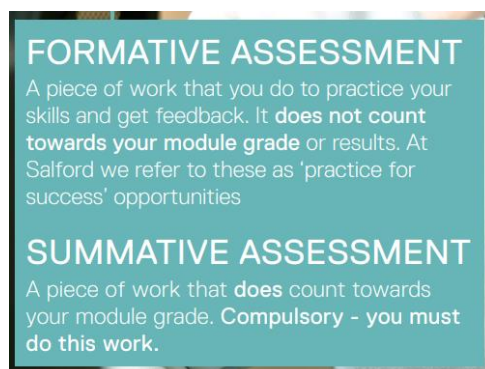
Figure 3. Clearly defined differences: formative and summative assessment.

Who to Ask for Help

It is essential for students to be aware of where they can seek support. The hidden curriculum booklet outlines two types of support: academic support, which focuses on assistance related to assessments (such as office hours), and non-academic support services, which address other needs and require specialised staff (e.g., Disability Inclusion Service) (Figure 4). Support services within the university contribute to the quality of the student's experience (Ciobanu, 2013), therefore it was important to signpost students to the support available.

Figure 4. Support services for students with QR codes for easy access.

Future Direction & Impact

The hidden curriculum booklet created for undergraduate students within SEE at the University of Salford is a starting point for supporting students transitioning to university. Since the booklet was only released to students in September 2024, it has not yet been possible to measure its impact. Moving forward, a hidden curriculum booklet will be developed for all four schools within the university. This approach acknowledges the different terminology students will encounter depending on their school of study, with notable interest already expressed by the School of Arts, Media, and Creative Technologies. Additionally, a postgraduate version of the booklet will be created in the future. Given that a significant number of our postgraduate students are international, there may be barriers related to terminology.

While the future direction for the hidden curriculum has been outlined, several challenges remain. For instance, determining who will be responsible for updating the booklet and how frequently it should be updated are key considerations. To maximise the booklet's reach and effectively measure its impact, a strategic distribution plan will need to be developed.

Conclusion

The transition to higher education is a critical period, particularly for underrepresented students, who may face additional challenges. The development of a hidden curriculum resource for incoming undergraduate students at the University of Salford's SEE school aimed to bridge this gap, providing information and support to facilitate a smoother transition and enhance overall student outcomes. Despite its importance, there is still limited research on this subject, highlighting the need for further exploration and understanding.
Future plans include developing similar booklets for all four schools within the university and recognising the unique terminology each school uses. The School of Arts, Media, and Creative Technologies has already shown interest. Additionally, a postgraduate version will be created to address potential terminology barriers faced by international students.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure Statement

All the materials included within this article represent the author's work. Any citations or work that is paraphrased is included within the reference list. This article has not been previously published, nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere. The authors have no conflict of interest to declare in relation to this article.

References

Alsubaie, M. A. (2015) 'Hidden Curriculum as One of Current Issue of Curriculum', *Journal of Education and Practice,* 6(33), pp. 113–124.

Birtill, P., Harris, R., and Pownall, M. (2022) *Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum.* Available at: https://www.membershipresources.qaa.ac.uk/teaching-learning-and-assessment/flexible-pathways-and-student-transitions/supporting-successful-student-transitions# (Accessed: 21 October 2024).

Briggs, A. R. J. (2012). 'Building bridges: understanding student transition to university', *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(1), pp. 3–21. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2011.614468

Butson, R., John, S., and Suazo, A. (2020) 'The Behaviour of Learning: Exploring Independent Study Practices of Undergraduate Heath Science Students', *Medical Science Educator*, 30(2), pp. 917–925. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-020-00974-5

Ciobanu, A. (2013) 'The Role of Student Services in the Improving of Student Experience in Higher Education', *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 92, pp. 169–173. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.654

Cotton, D., Winter, J., and Bailey, I. (2013) 'Researching the hidden curriculum: intentional and unintended messages', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 37(2), pp. 192–203. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2012.733684.

Drury, N. (2023) 'Improving transition to higher education by developing students' academic self-concept', *Education in Practice,* 4(1), pp. 4–15.

Heim, J., *et. al.* (2024). 'A flexible model for exposing and mitigating the hidden curriculum in the transition to higher education', *Open Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,* 3(2), pp. 30–55.

Hinchcliffe, T. (2020) *The Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education*. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/hidden-curriculum-higher-education (Accessed: 21 October 2024).

Hubbard, K., *et. al.* (2020) 'Addressing the hidden curriculum during transition to HE: the importance of empathy', in Hinchcliffe, T. (ed.), *The Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education*. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/hidden-curriculum-higher-education (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Leese, M. (2010) 'Bridging the gap: supporting student transitions into higher education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34(2), pp. 239–251. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/03098771003695494

Margolis, E. (2001) *The hidden curriculum in higher education*. New York: Routledge.

Millmore, A. (2023) 'Shining Lights in Dark Corners – Exploring the Hidden Curriculum in Law: supporting transitions and building a sense of belonging', *Advance HE Teaching & Learning Conference, Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference*, Keele, UK, 5 July. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/conferences/teaching-learning-2023#Programmes (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Mishra, S. (2020) 'Social networks, social capital, social support and academic success in higher education: A systematic review with a special focus on

'underrepresented' students', *Educational Research Review*, 29, 100307. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100307

Rossouw, N., and Frick, L. (2023). 'A conceptual framework for uncovering the hidden curriculum in private higher education', *Cogent Education*, 10(1). doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2191409