

Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum

Expanded Edition



About this guide

This guide has been created to help explain some of the terminology that you may come across whilst at university. It is aimed at new students who are about to start studying at university, although much of the content will be helpful to students throughout their university journeys as well as to students at other types of higher education provider. Sometimes academics and professional services staff can forget that much of this terminology will be new to students and assume that you will automatically know what they're talking about when they refer to things like office hours, learning outcomes, modules or different kinds of assessment.

At the start of your university journey, it can be difficult to ask questions face to face about the language of higher education and what particular terms mean, the roles of different university staff, how teaching, learning and assessment work, and what your own responsibilities are as a student.

In this guide, we've tried to anticipate the questions you might have as you start to navigate university life and familiarise yourself with the different principles, structures and processes. Designed in consultation with the academic community (see Appendix), it is, effectively, a glossary which you can use to help you understand the different expressions you are likely to encounter and enable you to settle into life at your new institution.

We have organised this guide into six sections:



University life



Support services



Academic life



Teaching and learning



Assessment and feedback



Study behaviours

We recommend that you read through it before you start university but come also back to it during your first week and throughout your first semester as needed. Please note, some terms may be used in slightly different ways, depending on your course and your university, but we have tried to identify things that are common across all universities. For example, we have used 'school' and 'department' to refer to the organisational unit that delivers your teaching, but it might also be referred to as a 'college' or 'institute' in your university. We hope this document will give you information to start you off on your exciting learning journey.

This resource was commissioned by QAA Membership and produced by Dr Pam Birtill, Dr Richard Harris and Madeleine Pownall at the University of Leeds.



Section 1: University life

Personal tutor

Your personal tutor is an academic member of staff who will give you advice and guidance throughout your degree. The precise role of the personal tutor will vary across different universities, but you should expect them to help you navigate all the academic aspects of university. They may also be the person who provides you with a reference for a job when you move on from university. Please note, some universities do not have personal tutors, in which case these duties are typically allocated to other members of staff, such as course leaders, subject tutors or members of the professional services departments.



Office hours

Office hours are the time when academic staff will be available for you to see them, to discuss anything you need to. This can be in-person in their office or online as a virtual one-to-one. You can often contact academic staff outside this time via email too.



Students' Union

As an independent body, a Students' Union (also known as a Students' Association or Guild) represents the voices of their students. Students have the opportunity to elect peers to take on full-time roles as their representatives at the most senior levels within the university or college. These representative bodies consider the wider experience of students, often offering opportunities to engage in sport and social activities, develop skills and employability, and providing independent advice on the provider's policy and regulations and supporting students to navigate student life.



Clubs and Societies

Your Students' Union (or equivalent) will support student organised clubs and societies. You will have the opportunity to join these clubs and societies and they are likely to share information, for example by having a stall at a [fresher's fair](#). Societies can be social, skills or hobbies based, subject based, or involved in social action, such as supporting student wellbeing or helping in schools. If you have an idea for a society that does not yet exist, you can talk to the Students' Union and apply to form the society. Societies are usually run by committees, and becoming involved in organising a society can be rewarding, and look good on your curriculum vitae.



Who represents you?

Each course will have some students who are elected by their fellow students to represent their concerns. They are often referred to as student representatives, but this will vary across universities. Different universities and departments will have different types of student representatives. For example, you may have student representatives that act on behalf of the whole course, or you could have representatives for each year group. If you have concerns or positive feedback about your course, you can talk to your student representative who will raise this in the appropriate forum. This forum is most likely to be the Student Staff Forum (although the name will vary across universities). You also have representation beyond your department, for example the [Students' Union](#), and National Union of Students (NUS).



Who's who at university

You will encounter a lot of different roles and job titles in university life:

Freshers



A 'fresher' is a student who has just started their first year at a university. The university and the [Students' Union](#) will organise events which are designed to welcome students to their university. These are known as freshers' events and will often include a [societies](#) fair, and social occasions, such as parties and balls. Commercial organisations will also often organise events, and you should ensure that you know whether events are sanctioned by the university or not. Freshers' week is usually a week before teaching starts during the first term, when you will be expected to attend induction activities organised both by your teaching department and the university.

Postgraduate students

Postgraduate students are students who, typically, have completed an undergraduate degree and are undertaking further study. There are two types of postgraduate student - taught and research. Taught postgraduates will usually be studying for a masters' degree, while research postgraduates will usually be studying for a [PhD](#).



Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Reader/Associate Professor



Lecturers, or Senior Lecturers (sometimes called a Reader or Associate Professor), are academic staff who often teach and assess you on your course. As well as teaching, lecturers will often conduct their own research, publish [journal articles](#), apply for grant funding to support the research activity within the department, and [peer review](#) other people's research.

Demonstrator

If you are studying a science or practice-based subject, demonstrators will often help you with the practical components of the course. Demonstrators typically have a degree (or equivalent experience) in the relevant subject and can often be studying for a higher degree, such as a [PhD](#). They will assist you in using equipment and may give advice on writing assignments.



Professor



Professors are the highest rank of academic staff in a university. In the UK, around one in 10 academics is a professor. In the UK, being appointed to a professorship is part of a promotion procedure, and staff will need to meet certain criteria relating to their role. There are also named professors, who are given 'a chair' normally named after an individual who has made significant achievements or named after the funder of the professorship. These are particularly prestigious. Professors who have retired but are continuing to contribute to the work of the university have the title Professor Emeritus/a.

Senior management within the department and university

Each department or school will have a Head of School/Department who is responsible for the overall management. Also, most schools or departments will have a role such as a Director of Teaching and Learning or another title (such as Head of Teaching, Director of Student Education, Programme Director). This person is responsible for the teaching and learning provision in the school and oversees quality assurance of teaching in the school. In most universities, a school will be part of a faculty or college (a faculty is a collection of schools that share related interests). A Pro Dean is responsible for the management and strategy of the faculty.





Section 2: Support services

Universities provide a great deal of support outside the taught academic content. You should make the most of these services, as they will really help you to navigate the academic experience and also help you to get the most out of your time at university.

Support services

There are different people and services who will support you with different academic issues during your time at university. The names of these services will vary across universities:

Academic librarians can help you to find [journal articles](#), access books and search for literature. They are also responsible for archiving materials in the library and helping you to access anything you need from the [library](#) for your course. It is likely that your library will have a 'using the library' course.

IT services will provide IT support and will have plenty of 'how to' guides for students.

Disability Services can help students access study support.

The Student Counselling Service will support students who experience mental health issues while studying.

Each school will have administrators who support each course. Get to know your school administrators - they are there to help you and can help you find answers to your questions, and direct you to other sources of help and information.

Quality teams play a vital role in supporting and enhancing the student experience. They are tasked with assuring the quality of higher education delivered by your university in identifying and providing opportunities for improvement (or enhancement). From constructive engagement with course design and revalidation processes (i.e. ensuring that a course is fit for purpose), to the monitoring of examination boards and managing student concerns, the quality team helps to ensure that students receive the higher education programme they signed up for.

Disability Services

If you have a disability, which is defined under the Equality Act 2010 as a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities, your university's Disability Services will be able to provide you with support. You should make an appointment as soon as you can to speak to someone in the disability service. They will help you navigate the university's procedures, apply for funding when required, and can provide support services. They will work with you and your academic department to make sure that teaching and assessment is inclusive and accessible.



Mental health support

Student mental health is important to universities and there are a variety of support systems in place. If your mental health has a substantial long-term negative impact on your ability to do normal daily activities, you should seek support from your university's Disability Services. It is also advisable to register with a local GP near your university and/or accommodation and use them or the wider NHS for mental health treatment as required.

Other services available through the university will include the university's Student Counselling Service, peer support services, and online services. You should look at your university's webpages for contact details and referral methods.

If you are struggling with your mental health, try to keep your teaching department informed, and remember you can apply for [mitigation](#) if needed so that your academic work doesn't suffer as a result.



Academic Language Centre

The university's Academic Language Centre will provide support to students for whom English is not their first language. They will provide pre-university programmes to prepare students to study in English, administer exams to assess students' English proficiency, and provide support to students. They will also provide teaching of other languages, often including British Sign Language, for both staff and students.



Employability

Employability is about supporting you to get the job you want when you graduate. Your university's careers centre will provide you with lots of support, including help with your CV, mock interviews, practice assessment centres, and other preparation for applying and getting a job. There will also be opportunities in your degree to practice skills that are relevant to employment, such as group work and presentations. Some courses will also have modules that require placements and other types of career training. The careers centre and/or your department may organise careers events to introduce you to different types of career.

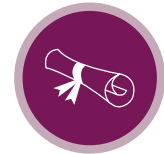




Section 3: Academic life

PhD

When studying for a PhD (or Doctor of Philosophy degree) qualification, a [postgraduate student](#) will conduct a long piece of research. It will normally take three years to complete full-time, although part-time study alternatives are available. The degree will commonly (though not exclusively) be assessed by a written thesis and an interview, called a viva. PhD students will often be involved in teaching. Ask them about their research!



Journal article

A journal article is a piece of scholarly work that academics publish in journals. This may be research, discussion papers or other forms of articles. Journal articles are used to disseminate, or share, research.



Peer review

Peer review is an important (but not the only) way of assuring the quality of [journal articles](#). When an academic submits a research paper to a journal, the editor of the journal will send the paper to other academics, who will provide feedback on the quality of the paper. The editor will decide whether the paper can be published, or whether the authors need to do more work on the paper. Peer review is usually done for free, depends on good will and takes a long time. Increasingly often, research papers will be submitted to free online archives as 'preprints', allowing research to be accessed more quickly, but without the quality checks provided by peer review.



The library

You can expect to find all the core texts that you need for your course in the library, as well as useful study spaces. But your university library has many more functions. Through your library's online system, you will be able to access [journal articles](#) that you will need during your degree. This means you should never have to use your own money to access paywalled journal articles. These online systems will be slightly different across universities but you will get introduced to them when you start university. [Librarians](#) are often involved in teaching academic skills as well.





Section 4: Teaching and learning

Module

A discrete 'chunk' or unit of learning with its own learning outcomes and, usually, its own [assessment](#). Most, but not all, courses in the UK are modularised. Where courses are modular, they can comprise different modules which may vary in size. The size of modules is described as a number of [credits](#).



Electives

Elective modules, or electives, are typically optional modules that you decide to enrol in, rather than being a core, mandatory part of your degree. Different courses and universities will have different options. You might need to make choices of optional modules within your course, or you might be able to undertake elective modules from across the university.



Credit system

University modules are organised into 'credits' at most universities. This is a system for calculating how each of your modules is weighted, that is, how much they contribute to your overall grade. On full-time courses, you usually study 120 credits in each year with an undergraduate honours degree usually composing of 360 credits in total. Each credit requires a notional 10 hours of study effort, which is divided between direct contact with teaching staff, directed learning, independent study and assessment. So a module that has 20 credits will have 200 hours of study time allocated. How those hours are allocated to different learning tasks will be dependent upon the type of course and learning outcomes for the module. You can find out more about credit in ['What is Credit? A guide for students'](#).



Lectures

A lecture is a large-group teaching session that is run by a [lecturer](#) or member of teaching staff. Lectures are typically taught in lecture theatres or halls, although online delivery became an essential alternative to in-person lectures during the global Covid pandemic. Blended delivery, whereby students can choose to attend lectures on campus or join them remotely from elsewhere, will likely continue to be offered as an alternative to in-person teaching for some time. During a lecture, you will listen to information and [make appropriate notes](#) as the lecturer is speaking to you. Lectures are often recorded by the university so you can access them after they have been delivered live.



Seminars and tutorials

Depending on your course, you will have teaching sessions that are not lectures. Small group teaching sessions may be called tutorials, supervision or seminars. This will vary by context, but you will usually be required to prepare some work in advance, and be given the opportunity to discuss course material more closely with other students and a teacher.



Practical teaching and learning

While lectures and seminars are the two most commonly known examples of teaching and learning at university level, it's important to recognise that there are many different and effective ways of teaching and learning in higher education; particularly among practice-based courses. Examples include laboratory-based demonstration and assessment in the sciences, studio work, production and performance in the creative arts, field trips and working and/or studying abroad as part of the study of modern languages.





Section 5: Assessment and feedback

Who sets and marks your assessments?

In universities, assessments are set and marked by the people who teach you. There will be an internal process of moderation, when another member of staff, usually in the same department, will read a sample of the assessments and make sure that they agree with the grades awarded. Grades will remain provisional until the external examiner, who is an academic from a different university, also views students' work and grades. The external examiner's role is to ensure that the marking process is fair and that the marking is to a consistent standard across a cohort, and broadly aligned with how the subject is assessed in other universities. The external examiner does not alter individual student grades.



Feedback

Feedback is provided on your work by academic staff who mark it. Feedback is usually provided in the form of a mark or grade, and written comments. It is important to remember that feedback is intended to be objective and constructive, supporting you to achieve your ambitions as a student. It should help you to improve your work for future assignments.

You don't have to use your feedback immediately. When you receive feedback, think honestly about how you approached the work, what worked well and what you might like to do differently next time. Remember to revisit your feedback before you start a new piece of work. Write an action plan that records what you will do differently next time.

Feedback should help you to improve, but you need to engage with it honestly. If you don't understand your feedback or you need help to know what you need to do differently, contact the academic who marked the work and ask to discuss it, and for help in improving your results next time. This would be the sort of thing you might use the academic's [office hours](#) for.



How will my work be graded?

University marking scales vary. Many universities use categorical marking schemes - where your work will be assigned a number. This is simply a way of being able to combine your attainment across modules. So if you get 58, that doesn't mean you have got four things wrong compared to a 62. Instead, these numbers relate to different standards/criteria. In other words, work that is graded a 62 is a different standard to that of a 58. These numbers relate to different award classifications (see [grade boundaries](#)). Some universities use alphanumeric marking or schemes using numbers up to 20 or 21. Your tutors will be able to explain the marking scheme in use including how it relates to your final degree classification.



Grade boundaries classification

In the UK, undergraduate degrees are classified - when you complete your whole award, you don't just get a grade (for example, 65), you also get given a classification. The best classification is a First - this is usually for work that is exceptionally good, and has a grade of over 70. The next classification is a 2.1 (two-one). This is the top half of a second class degree, and usually applies to work that has a grade of 60-70. The next classification is a 2.2 (two-two).

This is the lower half of a second class degree. The final classification is a third-class degree, for work with a grade between 40-50. Work that has a mark below 40 is a fail.

Every university has a slightly different algorithm (or calculation) for combining work across years and modules to produce the final degree classification, but generally speaking the contribution of each individual piece of work to the final classification will be quite small. At most universities, work completed in your first year doesn't directly contribute to your final classification. [Find out more](#) about degree classifications.



How are written assessments marked?

Assignments are marked according to a marking rubric. This is a document that lists the skills and [learning outcomes](#), and specifies what you should do in order to reach the necessary standards. Work is usually marked holistically - so it isn't about how many times you include (for example) a description of a study, but about the quality of that description, and how effectively you use material to support your argument.



Mitigation

Mitigation is the process by which a university helps students who have had difficulties during an assessment. For example, if a student needs an extension to the original deadline because they are ill, this is mitigation. Students need to apply for mitigation, and provide evidence to support their case.



Formative assessment

Formative assessment is an assessment that doesn't count towards your grades, but supports your learning, for example by giving you an opportunity to practice and receive feedback on work, which should improve your ability to complete [summative assessments](#).



Summative assessment

Summative assessment is assessment that counts towards your grade.



Learning outcomes

When academics design a module, they will decide what they want you to learn, know or be able to do as a result of studying the module. This will be described by the learning outcomes. In order to check that you have achieved the learning outcomes, you will be assessed, and your assessment should directly relate to the learning outcomes of the module.



Referencing

Referencing is an important part of academic writing practice. It is the way by which you let the reader of your work know where your ideas have come from and/or the authors who have influenced your thinking. The precise details of referencing vary across subjects and across universities. You should make sure that you are using the correct format for your work. Checking the required format for your referencing is a useful skill.



TurnItIn

TurnItIn is software which is used by most universities to check for [plagiarism](#) in submitted work. It checks your work against published books, websites, and other people's work (both within your university and at other universities). It produces a 'similarity score', which shows how similar your work is to other writing. When the marker reads your written assessment, they will examine the report from TurnItIn, and if there are large parts of the work that are the same as other work, you may be investigated for plagiarism. You should check with your own university about their policies for checking work, as these will vary.



Marking rubric

A rubric describes what you need to do to achieve different marks on an assessment. There will usually be different aspects of the rubric, relating to different programme or module outcomes. You should be given the rubric in advance of completing an assessment - it helps communicate the expectations around the assessment. You may receive feedback that is based around the rubric which will describe how well you are achieving the [learning outcomes](#). The rubric may be provided separately or it might be included in a course handbook or similar document.



Plagiarism

This is where a student uses other people's work and presents it as their own. Universities often use software to detect plagiarism, where your work is compared to other students' work and with pages on the internet. Plagiarism is a serious offence that can result in students being expelled from university.



Academic misconduct

Academic misconduct is a growing problem in higher education. It takes a wide variety of forms including the use of essay and degree mills, plagiarism, collusion between students, and forged or altered qualification certificates. You can find out more about what academic integrity is, what the consequences of academic misconduct can be, and the different kinds of support available to you in this [explainer video](#).





Section 6: Good study behaviours

What does it mean to study independently?

In-class learning, such as time spent in [seminars](#) or [lectures](#), is only part of the learning that you will do at university. You will also have to undertake lots of independent study. The type of independent work that you will need to do will differ during the semester but might involve [note taking](#), [reading](#), completing coursework or preparing for exams. It might help to think of studying as a bit like a full-time job in that you should spend about 40 hours a week completing work. You can ask your [personal tutor](#) for guidance about how best to spend your independent study time.



Note taking

In [lectures](#), you should take summary notes. You cannot write down everything the lecturer says, and nor should you. The purpose of a lecture is to introduce you to a topic. Following a lecture, you should write a summary of your understanding, highlighting key concepts and information, and noting things you don't understand. You should then complete set [reading](#), noticing and improving your understanding. Notes will not always be useful as revision - sometimes just the act of writing itself is useful for helping you to sort out your thinking. Make sure that everything you write is in your own words - never copy from another source even in your own notes. This is to create good habits and avoid plagiarism.



Reading

Your lecturers will expect you to read between lectures. How much and what type of reading will depend upon your subject. Some reading will be for general background and some you will be required to study in more detail. When you start reading, try and think about why you are reading that piece, as that will determine what you are looking for, and therefore what sort of notes you will need to make. Sometimes reading will help you to develop your own writing style, sometimes you will be looking for specific details. Avoid mindlessly reading material simply because you have been told to.



Reflection

Reflection is the act of thoughtfully revisiting things to 'make sense' of them. You may, for example, be asked to write a reflective commentary on how you have approached an essay. This would involve describing your process, but then considering what worked well and whether this process could be improved, and how.



Critical thinking

Questioning is one of the most important skills to acquire on your university journey, in order to demonstrate critical thinking. Critical thinking involves appreciating what sources are telling you, and how they support or undermine the story or argument you are making within a piece of work. Critical thinking is not pointing out what is wrong with something. It's also not a disconnected set of observations about something. To be critical is to be able to appreciate strengths as well as weaknesses, and to see how a source fits into the bigger story. This is a difficult skill to acquire and will take some practice.



Academic writing

It is hard learning to write well and we all (lecturers included) go through the write, rewrite, edit, proofread, submit process. Even successful professors have journal articles rejected in [peer review](#). Academic writing is formal and usually subject specific. You can improve your writing by doing lots of reading, and considering within the reading not just the content but also the structure of the paragraph, the way that authors make points and construct their work. But remember that not all published work is necessarily good.



What to do if you don't understand something

Ask! No question is a stupid question. Ask a peer, tutor, librarian, Google. Far from being a sign of weakness or incompetence, asking for help is usually the sign of a good student. It means you can recognise your own weaknesses, identify who to approach for help, and are engaged enough to want to work at improving your skills without prompting.



Learning isn't always comfortable

Overall, your degree will be a fun and inspiring learning experience. But sometimes learning will feel difficult and you are not necessarily going to enjoy every aspect of your degree. That's okay and is a completely normal part of the learning process. Learning has a complex relationship with emotion. Sometimes the parts of your course which you find most difficult can also be the most rewarding and you will feel very proud to have succeeded. Learning is a skill that you can practice and get better at. It's also a skill for life, which can help you in your future career and wider activities.



Appendix

The Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum was first published by QAA in October 2021, after which the authors conducted an evaluation of the resource with undergraduate students (N = 109) and academic staff (N = 32). In response to student and staff feedback, the guide has been refined and updated to offer this Expanded Edition in 2022.

This resource is part of QAA's **Supporting Successful Student Transitions** project, which offers positive approaches and practical solutions to help support a range of transitions. QAA Members can access further resources from this project including toolkits, short papers, presentations and case studies on our [Membership Resources Site](#).

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