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**Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education:
something to fear for or comply to?**



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Introduction

In recent Finnish higher education research a phenomenon has resurfaced which is more familiar in the field of basic schooling: the hidden curriculum. It has been implicit in the studies of student cultures and professional socialisation but, during the 1990s, in research and development related to higher education pedagogy and the various activities around the quality of teaching, the idea of hidden curriculum has gained new interest and weight (see Kumpula 1994; Sääntti 1999; Ylijoki 2000).

This presentation is based on an ongoing project at the University of Turku. This research is the first in Finland which attempts to explicitly and empirically study the hidden curriculum in higher education. The main question is: what do students actually learn in the university, and how do they learn it? In higher education, the official curriculum tends to be rather loose and partly uncoded compared to school curriculum. Thus, there is potentially lots of room for the functioning of the hidden curriculum.

The broader objectives of the project are, first, to analytically outline hidden curriculum in the context of higher education, and to draw a conceptual framework which would help to understand the problems that students encounter. The findings could also help the experts and developers of teaching and learning in higher education. The second objective is to develop a framework for a survey of the hidden curriculum through student experiences. We are also interested in finding out how well students realise the existence of the hidden curriculum and how do they cope with the official curriculum and survive through their studies - either relying on the hidden curriculum or ignoring it.

The Concept of Hidden Curriculum

In educational research, the concept of hidden curriculum has been strongly connected to pedagogy. According to the pedagogical point of view, the problem of hidden curriculum is solved when it is

reviled and integrated within the official curriculum. In this way the concept is made 'profane' and stripped away off its unpleasant connotations related to the radical and critical notions of the 1970s. What we have left, is just a taxonomy of different curricula: official, written, taught, tested, learned, null and hidden curriculum (e.g. Eisner 1994; Longstreet & Shane 1993) .

By using the same reference to the leftist ideology, it has also been claimed that the concept of hidden curriculum, is totally out of date. Some parts of this ideology may well be out of date but it is still a fact that what happens in schools and during education affects students far more than just what is written in the official curriculum (see Portelli 1993). The overt and the hidden are not mutually exclusive but form a complex mechanism of production and reproduction (Apple 1980).

As freshmen enter the university, they soon learn what is allowed and what is expected from them. Studying in higher education requires completely new ways of thought and action compared to learning in schools. Learning the social mechanisms and the tacit knowledge of the academe and to socialise into the academic cultures is a lengthy process. Students must learn to interpret various situations right, apply the appropriate set of rules and to respond with a suitable vocabulary (Gerholm 1990).

Before explicating the framework, I want to make only one additional comment. The concept of hidden curriculum does not only refer to the "hidden" values and norms, or the socialisation process as such, but the observations since Phillip W. Jackson's classic, *Life in Classrooms* (1968), that they are in odds with what is written in or implied by the official curriculum.

Dimensions of Hidden Curriculum

The conceptual framework used in our study draws on the ideas of Margolis and Romero (1998) and Bergenhenegouwen (1987). Hidden curriculum can be analysed using four analytically distinct categories. First, students must learn to learn. Learning to be a university student is - at least in Finland - miles away from the assumptions of the official curricula, which presuppose that secondary education will provide the necessary prerequisites¹. Secondly, students must learn their profession. On one hand, this involves learning the specific ways of thinking and the different practices of one's discipline. On the other hand, students must learn the thinking and practices of the

¹ Like elsewhere, also in Finland access to higher education has been gradually opened up in principle to everybody. In practice, however, the majority (90 %) of new students still have the traditional matriculation examination.

profession. This task is only partly covered by all the books and courses which are part of the official curriculum. The third task is learning to be an expert, which includes learning the thinking and practices of science, and the ways and traditions of the academe. This task is coined in the hierarchical structure of the official curriculum incorporating the idea of maturing from a novice to a journeyman and eventually to a master. The fourth dimension of hidden curriculum is the most profound. It relates to the learning of the ‘university game’. According to Pierre Bourdieu, to survive in any social field requires the willingness to play the game which, with its specific stakes, constitutes the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). As soon as one starts learning the rules one can also learn to play better, and eventually, as one proceeds in the studies and gains academic expertise, one can even start to set the rules.

Table 1. Dimensions of Hidden Curriculum

	HIDDEN CURRICULUM		OFFICIAL CURRICULUM
	Socialisation / professionalisation	Social and cultural reproduction	
Learning to learn	Learning (to learn)	Learning to be a learner	Assumption that secondary education provides the necessary prerequisites
Learning the profession	Learning the thinking and practices of ones discipline	Learning the thinking and practices of ones profession	Curriculum content: basic field related knowledge and skills
Learning to be expert	Learning the thinking and practices of science	Learning the thinking and practices of the academe	Curriculum hierarchy: specialised knowledge and skills
Learning the game	Learning the rules	Learning to play	Curriculum as a time/space code

Data and Methods

For the empirical study, three different fields of study in the University of Turku were selected. Medical and teacher training represent two quite different professional fields. Medicine has its roots in the medieval university and carries discernible distinction. Teacher training, on the other hand, is an offspring of the modern mass higher education², and has to maintain its distinction on a daily basis. As the third field, sociology was chosen to represent the broad, academic, and non-vocational

² We refer here to the training of basic school teachers which was integrated into higher education during the 1970s.

part of higher education where, for instance, academic freedom and theoretical orientation are ways to make the distinction.

In the first phase - to assess the feasibility of the conceptual framework and the related questionnaire - a dozen pilot interviews were made. In the second phase, altogether 280 students were surveyed. The return rate was only 50 per cent which was partly due to the delayed launch of the survey in May 1999. There was no significant differences between the return rates of students in different fields. Female students replied somewhat eagerly than males.

Our questionnaire attempts to approach the hidden curriculum from different angles. It includes also questions related to student problems and to the development of teaching and learning at the University of Turku. This article concentrates on three points in the questionnaire. The first set of questions relate to the information aspect of learning to be a university student and to survive in the university. Most students know relatively little about the university or higher education as they enrol. If they have, for instance, physicians as parents, they might know what it takes to study and practice medicine. But what is, for instance, the art and the study of sociology? This is predominantly learned on the way - and usually the hard way.

The second question examined here includes a 31 item block of statements tackling the issue of "what is learned in the university". Principal component analysis was used for exploring the underlying dimensions of hidden curriculum, and simple sum variables were then constructed for the comparison of the importance of these "dimensions of learning" in the different fields.

The third set of questions are used to broaden the perspective outside the structured block of questions. The first open question asked for those things which students had encountered during their studies and which proved to be valuable but on which they had not gained any information. The second open question asked for those things which were most important in coping with the studies and surviving in the university.

Learning to Learn

Entering the university and embarking academic studies can be quite a culture shock. Compared to the old safe school environment, the academic learning scenery is rough, wide and partly

uncomprehensible. With this kind of a landscape you need a good topographic map. Students who have highly educated parents - lots of cultural capital - carry this map in their habitus. They are like "fish in the water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 127). Students from less advantageous backgrounds, on the other hand, may feel like strangers and experience academic alienation (Archer et al. 1999).

We asked, first, what kind of idea or representation students had on studying in the university in general and of their chosen degree programme in particular in the beginning of their studies. Because so many enrolling the university nowadays already have previous studies, for instance in the open university, and thus have some idea of what studying at university level involves, it is important to control for previous university experience.

In the following table, the percentage of those who did not have any clear picture of the university and their field of study is shown. We can see that the share is relatively high for those who had no prior university experience. More than a third of the students in medicine and teacher training and 46 per cent of the students in sociology had no idea of studying in the university. Interestingly, however, somewhat fewer of the medical and teacher training students had no idea of their own degree programme before enrolling. This is probably explained by the fact that one fifth of the medical students had physicians as parents (one or both) and 15 per cent of the students in teacher training came from teacher families.

Table 2. The share of the respondents who had no idea of university studies by prior university experience and field of study.

Prior studies in the university	Field of study	University in general	Own degree programme	N
No	Medicine	36	29	42
	Teacher training	37	32	38
	Sociology	46	77	13
Yes	Medicine	8	8	42
	Teacher training	30	48	38
	Sociology	8	17	13

Sociologists, on the other hand, were absolutely in the dark as regards to studying sociology. Almost four out of five had no clear picture of what it involved if they had no prior experiences in the university. One interviewed sociology student says it all:

”I had absolutely no picture of sociology nor studying in the university. (...) Half a year was one big mess, I just watched that hey, this is this and that is that. Then you began to realise, and now I have it maybe a little bit clearer what I want”

Sociologists who had more previous studies than their colleagues in medicine and teacher training had also gained the most in this respect. Students in teacher training, on the other hand, have not been able to clarify their idea of the teacher training programme through university experience, rather the other way around.

Regarding the social background and cultural capital of students, those who have academically educated parents also have better idea of the university and their degree programme than the others (see table 3). This is the case especially amongst the students of medicine. The students in teacher training gain less from their educated parents in this respect. The number of sociology students in our data is so small (N=25) that nothing conclusive can be said about them.

Table 3. The share of the respondents who had no idea of university studies by prior university experience and parents’ education.

Prior studies in the university	Parents’ education	University in general	Own degree programme	N
No	Academic	33	25	40
	Other	41	47	51
Yes	Academic	15	25	20
	Other	22	33	27

Finding Information

Familiarising with the new territory and finding information is the first important learning task for new students as they begin their university life. While higher education has evolved from an elite institution to a mass education facility, student information systems have grown rapidly. Nowadays we have in Finland senior student tutors, specialised advisory assistants in the faculty, and every newcomer has to participate in an introductory "studying at a university" course. Unfortunately, the reality of the university life can be quite different, as pointed out by one interviewed medical student:

"The introductory university studies course - it had not much value because we had at the time our first parties. It was of not much use but our tutors are to blame."

In our study, semi-official sources of information, in which we counted tutors and other students, proved to be most important. Official sources, faculty etc., came in the second place. Unofficial sources of information, friends and family, were relatively unimportant, except for the sociology students.

From the single sources of information, the study manual which includes, for instance, the degree requirements, was reported as most important. However, the use of it did not correlate much with the other official sources. Furthermore, it seems that the written curriculum is offered in a package which is partly uncomprehensible, at least for there two interviewed teacher training students:

"But study manuals are those where you can find information, although it's sometimes difficult to understand what it all really means."

"Well like the study manuals, that is, many times you remember looking for information which you, however, cannot find..."

Learning the Game

One of the basic ideas of the hidden curriculum is that in addition to the various things studied and thought, that you might learn or not, you learn how to play the university game and to survive. But what does it take to be a successful student? Previous studies have emphasised, for instance, skills to plan and organise studies and timetables (Cantwell & Moore 1996) Verbal abilities are also emphasised because they are naturally important in the academic world where scientific discussion and argumentation are the basic practises (Archer et al. 1999).

In their research Archer et al. (ibid., 49) found out that students' ability to logical reasoning was the best predictor of academic achievement measured by grade point average. This is not surprising, as also the authors conclude. A more interesting finding was the weak connection between motivational goal orientation and self regulatory control.

Our questionnaire included an open ended question where students could state three main factors which they considered important in coping with university studies. Most of the answers expressed characteristics related to motivation, self-control and planning. Furthermore, the way some students criticised the question points to the types of achievement goals which Archer et al. (ibid., 39) call performance and mastery. It boils down to the question whether we mean by "coping" good grades and fast graduation or satisfactory learning. This is a further indication that the achievement goal types are not just psychological student types but in a great extent conscious study strategies learned through experience. One respondent describes the whole situation:

"In order to cope in the university, you need thick buttocks, so you can sit and read. One has to melt in the tube and drift along with the faculty mainstream in ones thoughts and output. You have to know how to please the professors with your assignments. There is more than just finding out things in the best and most useful way for you. Ps. I hope that things weren't like this, but as I have them as such experienced, so there they are."

What else, besides being self-sufficient and, when necessary, sit tight in your desk, do students learn in the university? To study this, students got 31 statements to answer using a Likert scale from

1 (learn little) to 5 (learn a lot). In order to look for the possible dimensions of hidden curriculum within the battery of questions, principle component analysis was performed.

Initial solution produced eleven components. After some elaboration, three poorly correlated items were dropped from the analysis. The final model includes seven quite clearly interpretable components accounting for 56 per cent of the total variance.

I will skip the technical details (see appendix) and proceed to the following figure which shows the seven dimensions and the means of the sum variables³. We can see that professorial power, self control and scientific study orientation are things that are relatively well learned in the university. Those who have learned to survive by using tactical or school-like orientation are smaller groups. Students have also learned less than average that social relations are important or that there is male dominance in the university. However, in these respects sociologists clearly differ from the others.

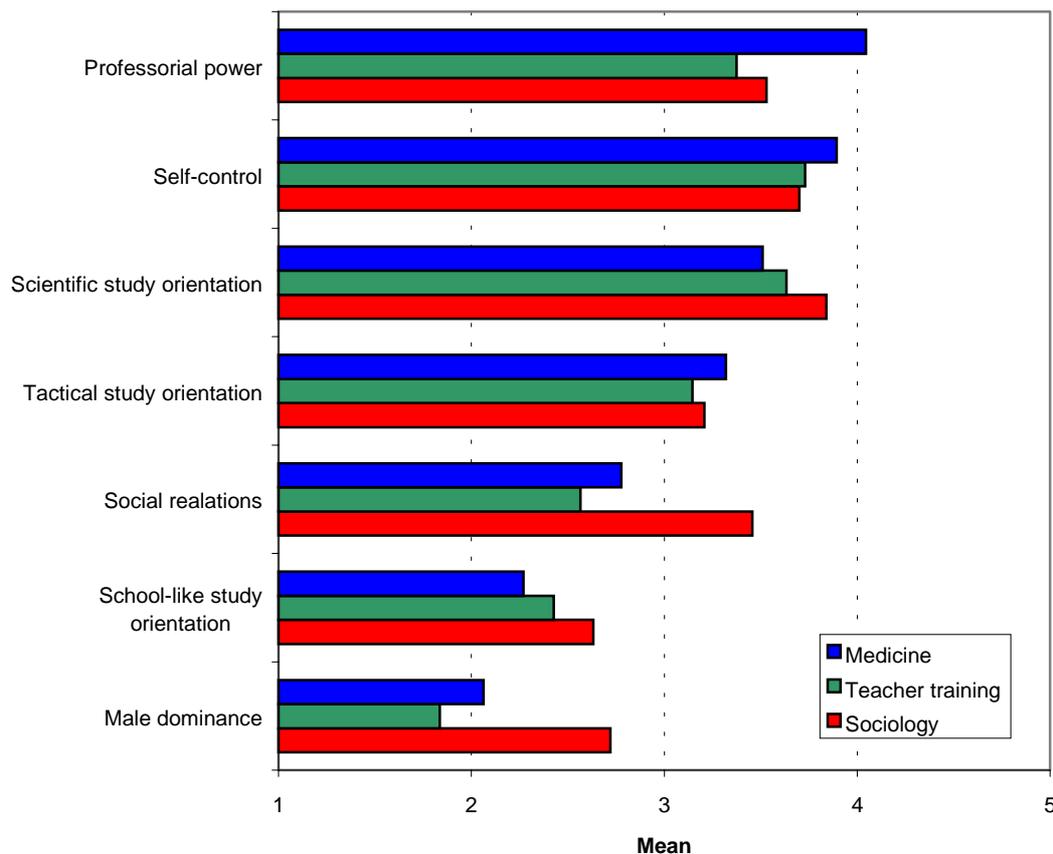


Fig. 1. Dimension of What is Learned in the University. Means by Field of Study

³ The scales were adjusted by dividing the sum with the number of items.

Students of sociology seem to learn that there is a male dominance in the university better than students of medicine or teacher training. There are also some obvious reasons for this. In their curriculum students of sociology are encouraged to critical thinking and they learn already in their freshmen year the basics of social inequalities and gender divisions. According to the interviews, critical attitude and questioning were important features of professional sociologist.

Sociologists had also learned somewhat better than the others that scientific study orientation is a good strategy. Sociology is a theoretical subject in a different sense than medicine which has a firm theoretical base in its curriculum but which is also highly professional in nature compared to sociology. For sociology students identification to the broad 'theoreticness' is an escape from the vague professional future outside the university career (cf. Ylijoki 2000). One interviewed future sociologist described the situation:

"...in the university, we concentrate on theories which are useless in the labour market. Everybody cannot become researchers, although university prepares only for research."

Clearly more than the students of medicine or teacher training, sociology students had also learned the importance of social relations. One possible explanation why teachers score so low on this dimension might be its strong tactical element: you associate with faculty in order to find out useful tips concerning reading and exams. The fact that students of teacher training also have the lowest means in professorial power and male dominance relates to their cultural homogeneity. One interviewee explained the situation like this:

"But it's not exactly competing, but more or less like comparing. Could it be that we all become teachers, that we are already attached to school-like thinking."

Students of medicine differ most from the others as what comes to the learning that professors rule in the university. One interviewed medical student described the situation in the department:

"As a general principle, there is this certain kind of conservatism. Things are done as they have been always done... (...) It's really difficult to change the teaching It's always the same way. I guess that it's a common principle [in the department] that things have gone well like this before so they are run the same way now."

An other student added:

”Teaching is a sacred subject, you can not interfere or criticise. That it becomes - that I don’t know for sure, but if you criticise you are on the black list, and your studying gets tough.”

In order to study more closely the effect of gender on male dominance in the university I will return to the original items. As we can see from the following table, female students agree clearly more often than males with the claims that there is male dominance in the university and that women must score higher in order to succeed in the academic world.

Table 4. Learning the gendered structures of the university by the sex of student (%)

Learning item		Learned (4-5)	Not learned (1-3)	N
Male dominance in the university	Males	2.9	97.1	35
	Females	19.0	81.0	105
Women must score better to succeed	Males	8.6	91.4	35
	Females	30.5	69.7	105

As the table shows, the number of males in our survey is relatively small. On the other, the number of students of sociology is also small (25). This makes the analysis within the different fields not very reliable. However, the basic situation is similar in all the three groups. And as already concluded above, female sociologists are the most critical and students in teacher training the least critical as what comes to the learning of the gendered practises of the university.

According to prior research and theoretical insights, especially those of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1988), the social background - and the various forms of capital (cultural, social and economic) inherent in it - of the students is also related, in addition to access and academic achievement, to the applied strategies of survival and the functioning of the hidden curriculum. For instance, in a situation where students wealthy with cultural capital navigating easily in the academic field can concentrate in the playing of the academic language game, and possibly in this way raise their value in the eyes of the professors, students from disadvantaged social backgrounds are more likely to resort to

intense studying and gathering good marks. High cultural capital as such is naturally not the only prerequisite for success in the academic field. An other study conducted amongst the law students at the University of Turku suggests that a son of a judge 'destined'⁴ to the faculty of law can experience lack of motivation and weak socialisation (Mäkinen 1999).

In our data, however, we did not find anything very conclusive about the effects of students cultural capital - when measured by parents education - on the dimensions of learning. The analysis suggests that students with moderate or low cultural capital learn more than those whose parents have both an academic degree what I have called theoretical study orientation. Or the other way around: Those with well educated parents are more critical towards an assertion that you can learn, for instance scientific and critical thinking and argumentation in the university. They have "a sense of the game" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 120).

On the other hand, it seems that students with cultural capital learn tactical study orientation. This applies especially to those in the fields of medicine and sociology. One interviewed medical student explained the strategy:

"And then we have this system that all lectures are copied and we get previous exams with the right answers too. Of course I'll look through them."

Finally, what comes to the dimension of male dominance, it seems that especially an academic mother affects her children's way of interpreting inequalities. Those with academically trained mothers have been the best learners that there exists a male dominance in the university.

Learning the Hard Way

One problem of this type of pre-designed questions reported above is that they direct the answers towards dimensions existing perhaps only in the researchers head. That is why the students had the opportunity to list already in a previous question things which had proved important but which they had learned on the way because nobody had told them and they had not thought asking them. This is part of the tacit knowledge of the academe which is stored in the daily departmental life and used

⁴ This idea originates from Martin Trow (1972, 68-69) who describes the evolution of mass higher education from former privilege to right and nowadays even an obligation. The other side of obligation is what Trow calls "involuntary attendance"

to order its routines. On the other hand, it is generated by the students themselves as they participate in the activities of the department and encounter real situations (Gerholm 1990).

The tacit nature of this kind of knowledge is illustrated by the fact that we got 58 blank forms, which is 41 per cent of all respondents. In addition, 10 replied that they could not think anything, and the same amount said clearly that they had not encountered such things. Thus, we could speculate that at least half of the blank answers reflect some kind of tacit knowledge. Obviously for the same reason, the answers we got are relatively simple but as such very comprehensible.

The common concerns for all students were related to some of the basic features of studying in the university. Some of them may be peculiar only to the Finnish higher education system. All students, especially sociologists and teachers, mentioned discovering valuable information concerning minor subjects, how and what to choose, and how to conduct the courses in relation to ones major. More information would have been useful also on language studies and tests. Those students who had previous university studies, for instance in the open university, stumbled onto questions like credit transfer and how to file them in the course register. In the Finnish system this is important because completed but unfiled courses may cause problems with the study loan officers.

About half of the students referred aspects of information indicating that university handbooks and study manuals are difficult and unclear causing abashment and confusion. They did not give a clear idea of the whole of the university studies, or how to arrange studies in an efficient way. Most of the concepts relating to the university system and studying which students encountered were unfamiliar and faculty did not bother to explain them. One interviewed student in teacher training described the situation:

"At the time [in the beginning of studies] I was quite confused. I knew nothing, all the places were strange and new concepts kept coming in an awful speed. I didn't understand anything. For other students they seemed to be self-evident. (...) It took me long time before I dared to ask what they meant."

The questions on how to organise studies, what to include in the degree, and how to fulfil all the official requirements are related to the "mysteries" of graduation. The main "spook" haunting students during their first years of study seems to be the master's thesis (pro gradu). What it is and how to do it - this is one of the guarded secrets of academic life.

Especially students in the medical faculty mentioned things with reference to the lack of guidance and tutoring. New students just "floated" among the others learning "hands on" and by the hard way. The most important things they encountered related to the advanced studies and to the clinical stage. Medical students were eager to learn, for instance, how the junior house offices were divided and filled. Some students were preoccupied with the "research madness" of the faculty. They felt that they were pressured towards starting their doctoral thesis already in an early stage of studying.

Students in the faculty of education were surprised that the teacher training programme was so school-like. What they felt was important, but on what there was no information, included teachers responsibilities, obligations, and rights in school. This was also a frightening future for some students:

"So, as you have now hard time taking responsibility for your doings and study, then you have to take responsibility for yourself and those children. And the work load ... that, hey, I won't do anything today, then you can't do in school. You can't say to pupils that I'm not able to do anything."

Here the hidden curriculum functions like a constant test of ones aptitude to be a good teacher.

Concluding Remarks

Howard S. Becker et al. (1961) describe in their classic work, *Boys in White*, the professional socialisation of medical students and how the initial perspective of the freshmen turned from an effort to "learn it all" to a strategy of survival: "what the faculty wants us to know". This process involves the transformation of the idealism concerning to the medical profession into a critical and even cynical approach. This was exactly the outcome of our study, and it represents the division between the ideal university, which exists only symbolically, and the day-to-day university.

The ideals of the civilised (humboldtian) university and true learning crumbles fast during the first years of study. The day-to-day university is characterised by hurry, stress, routines and scattered courses. The official curriculum is so stuffed with pieces of knowledge that you soon realise that

you just can not learn it all. What you actually learn, instead, is how to find out what the faculty wants you to learn and how to convince them in an exam that you have learned it.

Some students were surprised how easy it all was. It was enough to glance through text books and to find out the right exam pointers in order to attain good grades and succeed in the university. Actually, the entrance examination had been so far the toughest test. On the other hand, students realised that personal qualities and effort determine how much one can gain from studies. Among the most important lessons was that self-control, perseverance, time management, the ability to tolerate stress and hurry are crucial in the day-to-day university. It is not entirely trivial to conclude, if we take into an account the ways in which these lessons are taught, that they are important skills also in the working life.

Some students, on the other hand, were convinced that interest, willingness to learn new things, the ability to grasp the essential and critical thinking were the most important competencies in university studies. This amounts to what I have termed scientific study orientation. The following figure tries to capture this duality of the university structure (cf. Kumpula 1994).

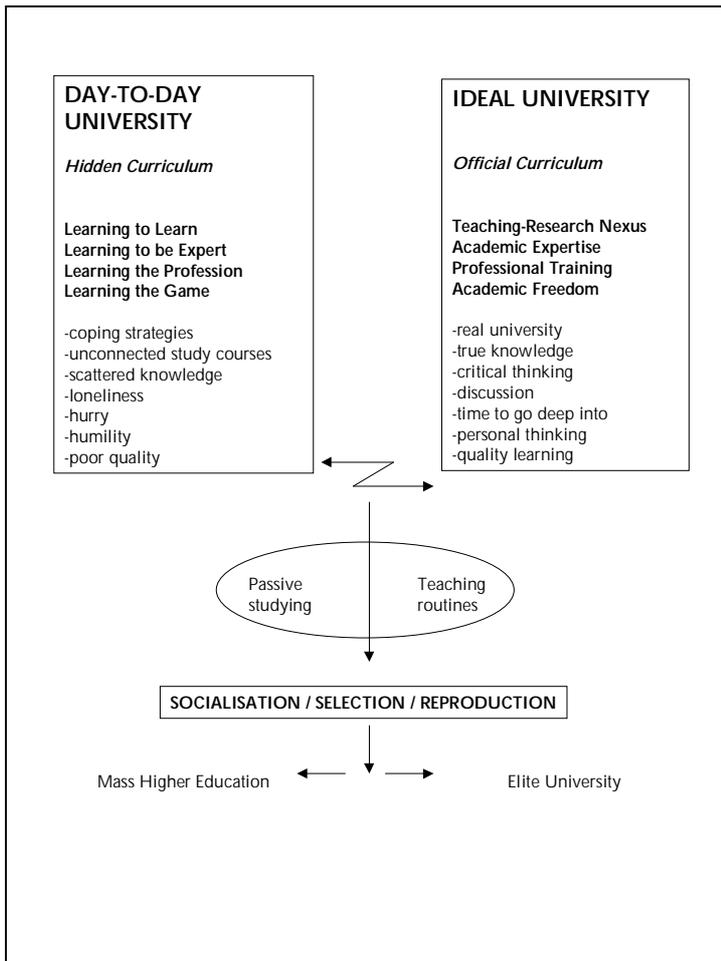


Fig 2. The Duality of University Structures

The problem of the mass university is not just on the shoulders of students but affects teachers as well. Passive studying and routine teaching is one consequence of massification; the university has become school-like. However, the elite university still functions inside mass higher education. Those who play well can freely pursue true knowledge and exercise critical thinking. For the others, the hidden curriculum serves what Burton Clark (1960) calls the ‘cooling out’ function.

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Appendix 1

Question: What have you learned in the university?

ITEM	FACTORS							Communality
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1. To express your thoughts		.740						.657
2. How to pass exams with minimal effort					.601			.483
3. To think and argue scientifically		.684				.391		.688
4. To tolerate stress and hurry	.454						-.364	.417
5. To become aware of things in a new way	.392	.502						.438
6. To comply with authority				.365		.375		.508
7. That professional skills are learned on the job		.316	.487					.442
8. To master scientific language						.650		.500
9. Critical thinking		.786						.722
10. That social background affects study performance				.505			.360	.490
12. To chose the right reading							.641	.554
13. To hide your inner thoughts			.611					.586
14. Time management	.812							.669
15. That formal degree, not knowledge and skills, is important in finding employment			.719					.572
16. To self-control your studying	.753							.663
17. That women must score higher than men in order to succeed in the academic world				.832				.710
18. To speak convincingly without real knowledge on the subject			.459		.568			.575
19. To keep up good social relations with the faculty							.710	.549
20. Looking for tips and exam pointers					.573			.498
21. That life long learning is important because knowledge becomes obsolete fast	.473		-.320			.448		.588
23. That university studies are nothing more than collecting scores and points			.722					.571
24. Perseverance	.672							.492
25. To regard professors as experts not to argue against						.667		.587
26. That academic expertise is far from being a real expert					.653			.494
28. That university studies require special intelligence					-.555			.449
29. To hunt for good scores				.368			.375	.476
30. That in the university is a male dominance prevails				.848				.738
31. That academic degree is useless in work practices			.404			-.432		.483
Variance explained	14	10	8	7	6	6	5	56

Excluded items:

- 11. That theoretical knowledge matters in practical work tasks
- 22. That you can manage in the university by applying school reading and writing
- 27. Scattered knowledge

Factors:

- 1. Self control
- 2. Scientific study orientation
- 3. School-like study orientation
- 4. Male dominance
- 5. Tactical study orientation
- 6. Professorial power
- 7. Social relations

Note: only those items with bold loadings were used for the sum variables

