

# *The impact of the hidden curriculum on international students in the context of a country with a toxic triangle of diversity*

Article

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# **The impact of the hidden curriculum on international students in the context of a country with a toxic triangle of diversity**

## **Abstract**

The hidden curriculum, which refers to the ideologies that remain implicit in educational content, is often studied in the context of developed countries with a colonial past where there are efforts to redress the historical injustice of the colonial past. In this paper, we examine the impact of the hidden curriculum on international students in a country with a toxic triangle of diversity. The toxic triangle of diversity describes a context where there is extensive deregulation, voluntarism without responsabilisation of organisations, and absence of supportive organisational discourses for diversity. Most studies of the hidden curriculum have taken place in countries where there are national laws for equality, institutional responsibility to bias-proof the curriculum, and supportive discourses for diversity. Drawing on a field study with nineteen international students (nine in the field of business studies and ten in other subject fields), we demonstrate how the hidden curriculum remains unattended and how it is legitimised through macro-, meso- and micro-level interactions that students have. We show that the hidden curriculum serves to silence different forms of exclusion, loneliness and discrimination that international students experience in the context of a toxic triangle of diversity. We suggest ways forward for undoing the damage done through the hidden curriculum in toxic contexts.

**Keywords:** Hidden curriculum, Diversity, International students, Abductive research, Turkey

## **Introduction**

The heterogeneous demography of international students offers new insights into possibilities of coexistence (Jones, 2017). While the individual experiences of coexistence have become the focus of the internationalisation strategies of educational institutions, cultural and systemic biases that such institutions may hold have remained unaddressed. For this reason, when demands for multivocal, multicultural and pluralistic forms of education have been discussed, the issue of curriculum design and delivery has been explored as a site for addressing biases in educational settings (Furman, 2008; Fallin-Bennett, 2015). There has been scant attention to how the curriculum connects with international, national and institutional contexts in which education takes place. In this paper, using the concept of toxic triangle (Küskü et al., 2020) in order to frame the interface of macro, meso and micro levels of analysis, we consider curriculum as a meso level construct which is imbued with macro level structural considerations and values and enacted through micro-level interactions.

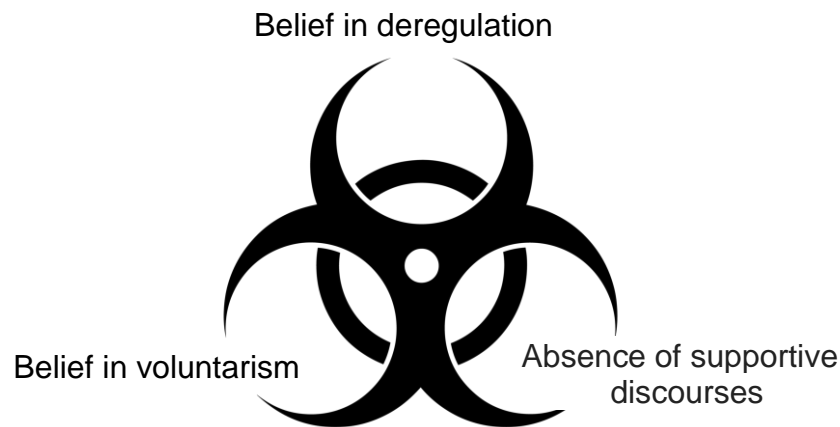
Focusing on the curriculum, we draw attention to the notion of the hidden curriculum which refers to culturally-based ideologies that operate behind explicitly designed educational content. The concept of the hidden curriculum is traditionally confined to what material should be taught to students in order to make their way satisfactorily through the school and to some extent to the society (Apple, 2018; Pratt, 2020). The traditional view of the hidden curriculum has undoubtedly “enhanced our understanding of learning by highlighting a myriad of implicit messages communicated to students in schools” (Pratt, 2020, p. 98). It has also helped policy makers and educators to eliminate pernicious educational content by which students are subtly indoctrinated in classes (Pole, 2001). The content-related mainstream of the hidden curriculum has been further

expanded to the impact of the hidden curriculum on the contexts of social relations in life, economy, gender, race, disability, and different forms of oppression (Garcia-Huidobro, 2018). Besides the English language sources above, we also benefit from the arguments of Turkish scholars inspired by Freire's (1970/2018) critical pedagogy. Avcı (2021) and Gönen (2021) ground the suppression of diversity by stating that educational circles in Turkey do not allow teachers and students to go beyond the official curriculum and internalised norms and do not provide an environment to develop critical approaches. Sarı et al. (2017) state that the curriculum, with its content and design, and the physical and social educational environment do not support the democratic participation repertoire of students. We develop the understanding of the hidden curriculum in line with Freire's critical pedagogy that gives voice to the experiences of international students in a way that captures the interplay of the curriculum with complex social settings which are shaped by different ideologies and political agendas. We, therefore, aim to offer a broadened lens of the hidden curriculum as a site of vested political, social and economic interests in a country which offers a toxic and adversarial context for diversity.

Borrowing a local concept which was developed by Turkish scholars, the toxic triangle of diversity (Küskü et al., 2020), we explore what happens to international students in a country which has an antagonistic context for diversity and which has not started addressing its issues with the hidden curriculum. We locate the toxic triangle (see Figure 1) across three distinct values in the Turkish context: First, there is a belief in deregulation where there are no supportive laws against discriminatory and biased educational content. Second, there is a belief in voluntarism that is informed by neoliberalism, which has been the driving force for internationalisation of education. Such a voluntarism abandoned regulation of educational institutions to the logic of the market

ideology without any accountability for equality, diversity, and inclusion (Zeichner, 2010; Bourassa, 2011; Nyland et. al., 2013; Zerquera and Ziskin, 2020). Third, there is a general absence of supportive discourses that reveal the hidden curriculum and seeks to redress the damage it causes. Exclusion of vulnerable groups from the dominant diversity discourse may also lead to covert exclusion in the hidden curriculum (Kim, 2020).

Figure 1: Toxic triangle of diversity in the hidden curriculum



We frame the hidden curriculum as a multilevel construct that embodies the interface between educational content and its individual level reception, the political agendas of the authorities and institutions that design and deliver it, and their taken-for-granted approaches to inequalities based on age, gender, sexual identity, nationality, ethnicity, social class, and other forms (Warren et al., 2019; Kamasak et al., 2020a). In the particular case of international students, the hidden curriculum, which silently valorises and focuses on dominant ideologies, could negate the positive treatment of diversity for international students (Apple and Apple, 2018). The hidden curriculum may serve to pathologise and delegitimise certain ethnic identities through the use of a supposedly

academic vernacular discourse. Thus, international students can be stigmatised with racial identities which are implicitly espoused in the curriculum (Ballakrishnen and Silver, 2019). The hidden curriculum also entrenches discrimination against women, people of colour, minority sexual orientation groups, and other marginalised groups. The hidden curriculum, therefore, cuts across international, national, institutional and individual values, and serves as a multilevel construct through which emergent demands for social justice are often silenced, in preference for perpetuating the sociocultural and ideological hegemony of the status quo.

Educational systems and processes that are underpinned by the neoliberal ideology often come with the claim of objectivity such as performance evaluation criteria and student evaluation methods. This naive assumption of objectivity regarding the curriculum suppresses democratisation, and entrenches biases in the hidden curriculum (Humphreys, 2017). Indeed, focusing on the formalisation of diversity through public budget constraints and accountability mechanisms based on financial outcomes, instead of creating a multicultural environment, has caused a decline in standards (Zeichner, 2010). While connecting diversity to the demands of the market has enabled international students to be accepted, it has also paved the way for them to be regarded as customers (Kamasak and Özbilgin, 2021).

In this paper, we examine the consequences of the hidden curriculum for international students in a country where there is a toxic triangle of diversity. In doing so, we demonstrate the utility of exploring the diversity implications of the hidden curriculum, expanding its traditional focus on decolonisation with multiple categories of diversity. Further, we study a national context where there is a toxic context for diversity, and show how the hidden curriculum affects the experiences

of international students in adverse ways. Our analysis shows that market conditions and demands for internationalisation are important yet inadequate for addressing the equality and inclusion needs of international students, when there is a toxic context for diversity. Below we provide a literature review on the hidden curriculum at the macro, meso and micro levels. The methods section explains the design of the field study and the data collection process, and analyses methods. We offer findings related to three issues, including the decolonisation of the hidden curriculum, normative order in the hidden curriculum, and coping with the hidden curriculum. We discuss our conclusions and theoretical implications, and provide some suggestions.

### **Hidden Curriculum: a review**

In this section, we first define the hidden curriculum and examine its manifestations in the neoliberal national context. The second part of the literature review focuses on a country with a toxic triangle of diversity, presenting how the hidden curriculum manifests in such a context.

### **Hidden Curriculum in the Neoliberal Context**

The hidden curriculum is a phenomenon where several learning outcomes in relation to political ideologies, ethics, sustainability, equality, and diversity might occur in biased, stereotyped, stigmatised, idealistic and superficial ways (Chapell, 2009; Bayne and Dopico, 2020). The negative impacts of the hidden curriculum on society are generally mentioned from the educational point of view; however, the impact of the hidden curriculum is far beyond the reproduction of biases and the creation of preconceived notions in educational settings (de Hopman et al., 2014). All social relations in a society can be shaped by hidden curricula in which idealised group values,



gendered norms, ideologies, objectives and agenda are embedded (Nudelman, 2020). Studies which examined textbooks found that while certain countries or cultures were represented overly positive and favourable, others were associated with negative and unfavourable impressions such as poverty, scarcity or corruption (Chapell, 2009). Similar examples regarding the roles of women in society, and idealised top managers in terms of educational backgrounds, race, gender and sexuality were prevalent in teaching materials (Kamasak et al., 2020a).

In a broader sense, even some missionary schools, which were established in the ages of imperialism and colonialism to impose the cultural sovereignty of the colonial powers, might be the macro elements of the hidden curriculum (Kamasak and Özbilgin, 2021). Therefore, formation of schools (Eisner, 1980), teachers' narratives and their preferred methods (Brookfield, 2017), developed or available materials (Giroux and Penna, 1979), and even physical spaces and spatiality (Hemmings, 1999) are considered to be the components of the hidden curriculum.

The emergence of the hidden curriculum is rooted in the colonial period which traces back to the 15th and 16th centuries (Giroux and Purple, 1983). The dominant culture of the coloniser did not only demarcate the race, gender, language and ethnicity of the other, but also totally reshaped the norms, codes and values of social life; the hidden curriculum has, thus, a long and strong historical tie with the process of colonisation (Fanon, 1967). Coupled with this strong tie, the hidden curriculum has become more dominant in terms of establishing and maintaining social relationships of students in more implicitly and covertly dictated forms over years.

The cultural traditions, political ideologies and elements of other socio-economic contexts of the macro level shape the meso, or organisations, that regulate the lives or social practices of individuals by defining legal regulations, social differences, codes, and social stratification (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). The macro, with the norms generated using this type of conductivity, defines and includes ideal individuals for itself, while producing structures and relationships which cause individuals, who do not fit into its definition, to be labelled as “abnormal” or “criminal”. When considering diversity as an integral part of the entire society, organisations are likely to develop inclusive approaches rather than considering individuals having different identities as fragmented and excluding them. Especially in countries where neoliberal ideology is adopted, the state has left its own obligations to market mechanisms through deregulations. In this way, the conductivity of the macro has also been concealed by the withdrawal of the state through transferring its responsibilities to organisations and individuals (Küskü et al., 2020). The coercive and normative power of laws, culture, traditions and social movements is decisive in the definition and acceptance of diversity (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2021). From this perspective, in countries where there are no legal measures against discrimination or where a strict and exclusionary normative order does not exist, the toxicity of the neoliberal ideology on diversity will be strengthened (Klarsfeld et al., 2012).

With the neoliberal ideology, the states were able to delegate their responsibilities using the market mechanism and transform organisations into competitive and profit-oriented structures (Özbilgin and Slutskaya, 2017). While remaining local is seen as a failure for them, organisations, with the international connections they are supposed to provide, have also turned into a means of exercising power for states. Global drivers have been built into the macro that impacts the practices of internationalised organisations through the marketisation and encouragement of governments

(Özbilgin et al., 2016). The contact of organisations with different identities increases with internationalisation; in the meantime, it has also been observed that they can influence societies by discourses and policies that support diversity. However, in societies where legislations are inadequate and conservatism is dominant, diversity has led to the development of biases both in theory and practice.

***The context: hidden curriculum at the clasp of the toxic triangle of diversity***

The Turkish education system bears the traces of the country's complex and multilayered historical tensions, and antagonistic treatment of diversity, and therefore offers an interesting site which would help examine the impact of the hidden curriculum on international students in a toxic context. The toxic triangle of diversity in Turkey is our local concept through which we examine the educational setting in the country. The toxic triangle of diversity in Turkey manifests historically through three different values: deregulation of diversity concerns in education in the last two decades, belief in the supremacy of the education market and its voluntary regulation based on market logics, and an adversarial discourse that delegitimises demands for human rights and civil liberties.

**A brief historical account of the Turkish education system could explain how the toxic triangle context has emerged.** Reforms in the field of education, which were central to the modernisation project of Turkey (Ege and Hagemann, 2012), date back to the late Ottoman era. Education in the Ottoman Empire was based on a multi-faith paradigm, where each faith group (i.e., Muslims, Christians, and Jews) organised their own education, and was predominantly inspired by theology and science, primarily for boys (Göçek, 1993). Wealthier and aristocratic people were able to send

their children to France for education in the declining years of the Ottoman Empire. There were reforms to modernise education, through special privileges afforded to Western countries, such as France, Britain, the USA, and Italy, to set up high schools in Western languages (Somel, 2001), which is hardly discussed in Turkish educational circles as part of Western colonisation. The internationalisation of an elite education and the emergence of foreign schools in the Ottoman Empire are often identified as a turning point of modernisation rather than the colonisation of the Ottoman Empire by Western countries.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, multilayered reforms took place in order to foster a unified Turkish national identity and to promote a secular curriculum which challenged the multi-faith and multiethnic ethos of the Ottoman era. However, the nationalisation efforts merged with religiously inspired approaches to education in Turkey in the 1950s. The conservative populist rhetoric of the right-wing Democratic Party, which came to power after the transition of Turkey to a multiparty system, re-strengthened the place of Islam in the curriculum (Güven, 2005). Liberal economic policies were introduced by the liberal-conservative PM, Turgut Özal, who came to power in 1983 after the coup d'état in 1980. Since the 1980s, in tandem with the liberalisation of Turkey, religious-nationalist discourses were also supported in the curriculum. Progressive voices, such as feminist and human rights movements in the country, were further silenced in this period (Arat, 2001).

The 2000s was marked with the neoconservative and Islamist policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which is still in power. Through the privatisation, marketisation, and hyper-deregulatory neoliberal policies of the AKP government, human rights and equality

demands have become even more fragile in Turkey (Kaygusuz, 2018). The “Ottoman-Islamic cultural heritage, [which] is an essential component in the AKP’s vision of national culture” Erdem (2017, p. 711), has led to a “neo-ottoman management of diversity” (p. 711) in Turkey, and this ideology has extensively affected the education system of the country as well as life courses of people. The Turkish government’s neo-Ottomanist efforts to have influence across the former Ottoman territories has also engendered a drive to reinvigorate Turkey’s ‘colonial’ ambitions by recruiting students from these regions, remarkably from Arabic-speaking countries and the Balkans. The educational diversity ecosystem in Turkey has exacerbated under the administration of the AKP (Erdem, 2017; Özbilgin and Yalkin, 2019). The number of schools where religious principles have been interwoven with curricula has increased substantially, which is, indeed, much more than the demand of the society. While there were 1149 religion-based high schools in 2016 across the country, the number reached 1651 in 2020 with a 50 percent increase (Ministry of Education Statistics, 2021). The elements that support the toxic triangle of diversity are not confined to a compelling one-size-fits-all type of schooling. International institutional reports (Freedom House, 2018; OHCHR, 2018) show that nearly seventy thousand high school and university students are under arrest and cannot continue their education, and freedom of opinion and expression of teachers and students in Turkish academia is suppressed. In many higher education institutions, in particular the state ones, many student clubs that embrace diversity and inclusion (i.e., LGBT+ student associations and women’s studies groups) are banned, and funding of research activities, such as equality, diversity, and inclusion, in social sciences are withdrawn (HRW, 2021). Unfavourable experiences and suffering of different groups of people who are marginalised by the rise of religious-nationalist discourses in education have increased (Kamasak et al., 2020b). Marketisation, which started in the field of education in the 1990s (Kamasak et al.,

2021), has accelerated in the 2000s, as in all other sectors (Kurul, 2012), and reached its peak in the 2020s when the toxic triangle of diversity now manifests in an untamed form across all aspects of education in Turkey. Also, in this period, internationalisation in education has come to the fore with the emergence of a stronger foreign policy agenda (Güder and Mercan, 2012).

Turkey has started a national drive in its development plans to increase the number of international students coming to Turkey (TCKB, 2013; TCCSBB, 2019). The number of international students in Turkey has increased by 350 percent in the last five years (Kasap, 2019). While a homogenising ethno-religiosity discourse is now adopted widely in the university curriculum (Sen, 2020a), the meteoric growth in the number of international students warrants an exploration of what happens to international students in a higher education context which remains toxic for ethnic diversity. While international students are drawn to Turkey due to its national and also implicitly neo-ottoman drive for the internationalisation and commercialisation of higher education, monolithic policies, ignoring the multicultural nature of the country with deficient legal regulations for equality and insufficient inclusion culture, provide an interesting context of a toxic triangle of diversity. This study, in this context, examines the experiences of international students in this toxic context of diversity.

## **Methods**

We adopted an abductive research approach in the present study (Locke, 2017; Özbilgin and Erbil, 2019), which starts with the identification of a pattern in the data collected and allows the researchers to move between the data and the literature in order to make sense of this pattern. In the case of this manuscript, we identified that the participants discussed their experiences, which points to multilevel influences on the hidden curriculum. As a minority construct, we defined a

pattern in which we could observe the hidden curriculum and its role in the exclusion, loneliness and discrimination of international students, enabling us to interpret the macro, meso and micro level interactions. We obtained the data through in-depth interviews with nineteen international students studying in Turkey. We ensured privacy and anonymity by excluding information that could disclose the identity of the participants from the data set and assigning a pseudonym for each one. As committed to the participants, we provided maximum security for the data, information and other materials that could uncover their identities. We reached the participants through contacts in universities, which allowed us to contact international students with invites. Nine of the participants are from the business field, and eleven are from other fields.

The ages of the participants range from 18 to 28. Thirteen of them study in Istanbul, whereas the rest study in Ankara (the other demographic details are included in Table 1). The complexity inherent in understanding the norms that process behind the hidden curriculum, being able to track its relationality, and being able to monitor its effects on the exclusion, loneliness and discrimination experiences of the international students (Jones, 2017) encouraged the authors to carry out in-depth interviews that could provide extra knowledge and insight. The hidden curriculum appeared as an emic theme based on interviews.

**Table 1. Participants' demographic information**

<i>Participant pseudonym</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Country of birth</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Field of study</i>	<i>Arrival in Turkey</i>	<i>City of residence</i>
Aida	Kyrgyz	Kyrgyzstan	22	Female	Business	2016	Ankara
Amal	Lebanese	Lebanon	21	Male	Civil Engineering	2015	Istanbul
Amare	South African	South Africa	24	Male	Computer Engineering	2014	Istanbul
Carim	Syrian	Syria	25	Male	Business	2018	Ankara
Falah	Yemeni	Yemen	20	Male	Business	2017	Istanbul
Hanan	Iranian	Emirati	26	Female	Psychology Counseling and Guidance	2016	Istanbul
Karima	Iraqi	Iraq	24	Female	English Language Teaching	2017	Istanbul
Leila	Azerbaijani	Azerbaijan	23	Female	Psychology Counseling and Guidance	2015	Istanbul
Lill	German	Germany	26	Female	Business	2016	Ankara
Mukisa	Ugandan	Uganda	25	Male	Business	2017	Ankara
Olga	Ukrainian	Ukraine	23	Female	English Language Teaching	2013	Istanbul
Omar	Jordanian	Jordan	25	Male	Civil Engineering	2017	Istanbul
Othman	Arabic	Saudi Arabia	18	Male	Architecture	2018	Istanbul
Saif	Palestinian	Palestine	20	Male	Business	2018	Istanbul
Talia	Sudanese	Sudan	26	Female	Business	2016	Ankara
Tareq	Libyan	Libya	21	Male	Communication Design	2014	Istanbul
Teymour	Iranian	Iran	21	Male	Business	2018	Istanbul
Xalwo	Somalian	Somali	28	Female	Business	2018	Ankara
Yosef	Jordanian	Jordan	26	Male	Architecture	2017	Istanbul



We conducted semi-structured interviews to make it easier for the participants to handle the subject, to associate it with their experiences, and to embrace the interview (Rabionet, 2011; Kamasak et al., 2017). The qualitative interview form consisting of 62 items prepared for the interviews was used for the students studying in both business and other fields. The form had four main parts: First, the reasons that motivated students to come to Turkey and their cultural readiness for this experience before arriving; second, the challenges that they faced in studying in Turkey and the strategies that they developed to cope with these challenges; third, their experiences of education, educational settings and the curriculum in Turkey in their lives; and fourth, their experiences with other national institutions of significance and the wider society. The interviews were carried out face to face, and a tape recorder was used with the permission of the participants.

We explored the experiences of the international students inside and outside of the university, in their field of study, and in their social relations. The data collected through semi-structured interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. To analyse the interview data thematically, we coded the data following the implicit meanings (Boyatzis, 1998). Hence, we adopted the latent approach in coding. Rather than coding according to predetermined themes, latent coding allowed us to move forward from data to themes, and from themes to analysis, by identifying patterns and assumptions underlying the participants' expressions (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). The coding process proceeded with separate coding readings by the authors. Next, we compared the transcripts that each of us encoded. Finally, we analysed the statements that we marked with the same codes or agreed with during the comparison process.

In the analysis, we adopted a relational perspective which provided a framework to study on organisational phenomena by combining macro, meso and micro levels (Özbilgin and Vassilopoulou, 2018). Through this perspective, we were able to reveal individual (micro), organisational (meso) and national (macro) contexts that affected the hidden curriculum and the intermediary role of the hidden curriculum in the interaction between the contexts.

There are some limitations of our study. One of those is that, even though there were students from around 180 countries in Turkey, the study included 19 students. Yet, we tried to ensure conceptual saturation (Brod et al., 2009) and stopped the fieldwork once we had sufficient data on the phenomenon we were investigating. The second limitation is that we had students only from Ankara and Istanbul, the two cities with the highest student population. We could not collect data from other cities as the researchers were not able to travel. Third, the Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult for us to perform face-to-face interviews to some extent; so, nine of the interviews were conducted online.

## **Findings**

There are three emergent themes in our study. The toxic triangle of diversity serves as a context from which these three themes emerge in relation to the hidden curriculum for international students. First, the hidden curriculum emerges as a colonial ambition. It is apparent that the internationalisation of the Turkish higher education provision has been happening alongside neo-Ottomanist ‘colonial’ ambitions. The demography of the students matches the Ottoman diaspora closely. Such ambitions could only exist in a highly deregulated context, which pushes out demands for the decolonisation of the curriculum and the social and political life in Turkey.

Second, the hidden curriculum serves to entrench the normative order in Turkey with its emphasis on neoconservatism with a religious-nationalist stricture. Consequently, the equality and human rights of international students are not safeguarded effectively. This aspect of the hidden curriculum is enshrined in the supremacy of the educational market voluntarism as the second leg of the toxic triangle, which is trusted to deliver social justice and which conversely entrenches religiously and nationalistically inspired conservatism in the education system. Third, the hidden curriculum manifests itself as a silent aggressor and remains largely unquestioned. As the concept of the toxic triangle of diversity suggests, there is lack of supportive discourses and high levels of antagonism against diversity in Turkey, which even prevents the participants to truly question the rules of the game, in the absence of alternative discourses. We, therefore, shed light on why the hidden curriculum was not critically investigated in a broader context.

#### *Hidden curriculum as a colonial ambition*

The fact that the meso-organisational level operates partly with the agendas adopted at the macro-national level may lead to the transformation of curriculum into a macro-political tool in the field of education. In the neoliberal era, internationalisation attempts and countries' foreign policies are traceable via their curricula (Bourassa, 2011). The cultural, historical and geographical proximity of countries serves the internationalisation of their higher education (Kondakci, 2011). The efforts of internationalisation involve the broadening of the labour pool with academics and students drawn from different countries. Most of the time, the internationalisation of higher education happens with a country's current ties that remain from its colonial past (Razack, 2002). Indeed, the following quotation from Falah, one of the participants of our research, crystallises the colonial relationship which informed the way he chose Turkey as a destination for higher education.

Turkey's connections with Islam and the Ottoman 'colonial' history served as a significant reason for the choice of destination:

“People [in my country] think that our country is like Turkey. A Muslim country. We also have an old relationship with Turkey from the Ottoman Empire. That's why we love Turkey maybe more than some other Arabic countries. [...] I think there are many similar things here between Turkey and my home country... Many Arabs live in Istanbul. So, you feel comfortable and you don't feel different.” (Falah, a male business student from Yemen)

Falah also thought that there was no racism in Turkey and that he did not experience any maltreatment due to his national identity; however, Falah was also aware that there were other complications due to the Syrian refugee 'crisis':

“But of course the situation of Syrians [in Turkey] is different. There are other problems in this regard. I don't want to talk about them.” (Falah, a male business student from Yemen)

Today, Turkey is the country which is home to the most refugees (nearly 4 million refugees) in the world. Turkey faced a refugee 'influx' due to the civil war in Syria in 2011 (UNHCR, 2019). Lack of effective policy and inadequacies in terms of integrating refugees make it difficult for refugees to live and work in Turkey. Furthermore, lack of adequate integration has opened the door to their collective stigmatisation. Even though Turkey is a multicultural society, it has a mono-cultural and centralised education system and curriculum that silences ethnic, linguistic and religious differences (Çelik et al., 2017; Baysu and Agirdag, 2019). While the policy pursued at the macro-national level entrenches the hidden curriculum as a monologism, it pervades a hegemonic control over individuals. Instead of presenting students with a repertoire of life choices, the hidden curriculum reinforces the social norms which are tacitly condoned. The following quote reflects the otherised status of Carim from Syria due to the hidden curriculum both in his original country and Turkey as an international student:

“I felt different every time I saw myself (not stranger) here, because the country I was raised in, I always felt that I was a stranger. I accepted this as a normal part of life, both here and there.”  
(Carim, a male business student from Syria)

The international students viewed themselves as part of Turkey’s multicultural ethos. The hidden curriculum implicitly informed them of the social norms and their ultimate place in Turkish society. As the educational content is not built in a way which is sensitive to gender, race, and social class, the hidden curriculum reflects the toxic context of diversity (Freire, 1976; Thomas, 2019). The hidden curriculum could have toxic outcomes with its design, delivery and implementation to different socio-demographic groups (Thielsch, 2020). As a country which attempts to internationalise and industrialise education with neoliberal approaches, Turkey may push the students to make corrosive choices between their identities and the neoconservative assumptions of the hidden curriculum (Sen, 2020b). Amare explains how the hidden curriculum in Turkey comes with the assumption that international students should know about Turkish history and culture:

“You know the lecture might have some local students who might have learned some things in high school. When they come to university, most of them are prepared. Most of the international students did not learn those things in high school. During history, they talk about the history of the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman Empire. Most international students don’t know what happened in Turkish history.” (Amare, a male computer engineering student from South Africa)

The relational framework helps us explore the role of the curriculum in terms of its interaction between the levels. The interplay between the levels reveals the mediating role of the curriculum. The curriculum in Turkey is shaped by the neoconservative, neocolonial, and religious-nationalist ideology of the macro-national level. This ideological drive shapes the relationship that the students (the micro-individual level) establish with the hidden curriculum. Amare (above) reveals the influence of the macro-level on the curriculum, whereas Olga (below) views the imposition of

Turkish culture in the hidden curriculum as a problem and suggests an alternative for multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in the curriculum and society:

“There may be cultural courses for international students. I’m not sure if there is some explanation about what they expect from us. But actually I believe that we should not integrate in Turkish culture. They need to move Turkish people to international culture. Because most Turkish people do not understand foreign people.” (Olga, a female English language teaching student from Ukraine)

Our participants also explained that, despite its conservative and ‘colonial’ ambitions, Turkey still offered a better alternative than their home countries which had even stronger forms of religious-nationalist conservatism. Hanan explains her struggle with the stigmatisation that she experiences as an international student. She also notes that Turkey still provides her more freedom than Iran:

“Many people think Iranians are religious fanatics that hate peace with other countries and hate their government. If you give an Iranian person some freedom, they will be the happiest people on the planet” (Hanan, a female psychology counselling and guidance student from Emirati).

Turkey was not only more liberal in comparison to other countries ruled with Islamic rule, but also an attractive destination because it was culturally and politically closer to some students’ home countries due to its ‘colonial’ and cultural ties. Leila explains how this was important in her choice of country for education:

"Because my family [from Azerbaijan] did not allow me to study in a remote location. I could have chosen Ukraine and Turkey. I found Turkey more attractive with its policies” (Leila, a female psychology counselling and guidance student from Azerbaijan).

Colonialism can simply be defined as the conquest and domination of lands, raw materials and goods in another nation or territory through the act of settlement. Despite the fact that colonialism is usually associated with the expansion of European colonial powers into other parts of the world, including Asia, Africa and the American continent, from the sixteenth century onwards, it has recurrently been part of human history. The Roman Empire, the Aztec Empire or the Mongols can

be given as examples of colonial practices before the sixteenth century, which was structurally different from modern European colonialism. What makes modern European colonialism distinct from those other examples of colonialism is actually related to the argument that the earlier forms of colonialism were pre-capitalist, while the modern version of colonialism was established in tandem with capitalism in the West (Loomba 1998). In other words, modern colonialism was able to systematically ensure appropriation and exploitation of both raw materials and human sources and produce profit(s) for the 'mother country' through the use of powerful agencies. Considering these arguments, the Ottoman Empire cannot be classified as a colonial power *in a modern sense* because a) it did not run through the process of rapid industrialisation and therefore was not integrated into capitalist production relations, b) it was not motivated by a cultural and ideological rationale aiming to exert its civilisational superiority, and c) it was possible to relatively enjoy certain rights, freedoms and privileges as long as those under its subordination paid tax and sent tribute. This should not mean that the Ottoman Empire could not culturally and/or politically dominate people and territories it controlled; on the contrary, it was able to indirectly exert its hegemony through its sociocultural policies which, considering the dialectics of time and space, had a potential to be progressive and consequently were supported even by those from different cultures and backgrounds. The ruling government, for that reason, has attempted to make use of the cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire especially in its former territories and to revive those ties with them, which has resulted in the internationalisation of higher education. Many higher education institutions have turned this political drive into market opportunities. Turkey now has a vibrant international student population. Yet, as we showed here, the higher education curriculum is not adapted to the demands of internationalisation. International students experience the hidden curriculum as a culturally exclusionary and silencing device which marks their place in Turkey as

outsiders and others. While the ‘colonial’ ambitions of Turkey have been instrumental in attracting students, the hidden curriculum exposes international students to the toxic context of diversity that Turkey suffers from. In particular, Turkish national and cultural history, which is elusive for international students, remains taken for granted in the hidden curriculum. Lack of cosmopolitan and multicultural curriculum serves to entrench the feelings of exclusion that international students experience.

### *Normative order in the hidden curriculum*

The hidden curriculum in Turkey entrenches the normative order in gender, ethnic, and class relations. The hidden curriculum also leaves the responsibility for integration to international students. While the mobility of individuals is encouraged and institutions are responsabilised for this mobility (Davies and Bansel, 2007), there is little preparation in Turkey to bias-proof the curriculum. In a country with a toxic context of diversity, international students are expected to fit in, and when they invariably fail to do so, they are marked as outsiders in the normative order. Saif and Mukisa explained why it was difficult to fit in. Yet, Mukisa explains how supportive individuals could make a difference. There is little recognition of the kind of social exclusion and racism that international students may face in Turkey. Subsequently, the personal experiences of international students, as in the case of Saif and Mukia, rarely draw enough attention to the need for proofing the hidden curriculum for biases:

“I don’t feel I’m accepted fully in the society because a lot of people look at me and they say words like ‘yabancı [foreigner in Turkish]’ especially when I’m in transportation. They talk about and laugh at me, and I hate the word ‘yabancı’ and people look at me often. [...] I don’t feel like I’m fully accepted in this country.” (Saif, a male business student from Palestine)

“One day I was working as a part-time waiter in a restaurant and a customer racially abused me because I am black, and he refused to give his orders to me. But thanks to my manager and my colleagues who stood up for me, the guy was kicked out of the restaurant.” (Mukisa, a male business student from Uganda)



Universities do not often cater for diverse social needs of international students. Instead, they often view them as guests who need to adapt to the educational and cultural context (Nada and Araújo, 2019). Normative order in the hidden curriculum may expose international students to intersectional forms of discrimination. Aida reveals how she feels like an “outsider” because of her physical appearance and gender in Turkey:

“Well, maybe because I look like an Asian, it can differ from others. [...] I can see some people look at me differently. But I totally understand them. [...] And I usually see men in jobs. For example, in restaurants, in sewing factories, etc. This also seems strange to me. Sometimes I attribute [what makes me feel an outsider] to my being a woman.” (Aida, a female business studies student from Kyrgyzstan)

As sites in which power is exercised, spaces are functional in reproducing the normative order (Foucault, 1982). Educational spaces could also reproduce the norms veiled in the hidden curriculum (Allen, 1999). The place where the hidden curriculum is designed and delivered provides an interesting setting for understanding the implicit values and meanings in the curriculum (Hemmings, 1999). Lill examines the relationship of the hidden curriculum with the place; lack of social spaces shapes her engagement with the university in gendered and ethnicised ways:

“In general, we cannot come together with my classmates except to study on projects. Also I have friends with whom I go out for a drink. We cannot interact much within the school. I think our common spaces are limited. Events do not happen much either. When there is activity, it seems like boys are the majority. Or I see boys organise football and basketball games. There are no such activities among girls. I think there are few parties and venues that everyone attends. It makes me feel like my social adaptation as a woman is affected by this.” (Lill, a female business student from Germany)

Some participants explained that the normative order in the country and being the outsider had also positive consequences. For example, Olga explained how she received more attention because she was an international student and how that made her popular. One word of caution in this case is that certain nationalities such as European looking students are often favoured over and above

Middle Eastern and African looking ones. So, the normative order would not be evenly felt by international students:

“My teacher told me it is written on my face that I'm an international student. She said everybody knows even if you are not telling it. [...] When I'm going to the lessons, everyone says here is an international student. I always sit at the back of the class for not getting attention. But in the first hour I get everybody's attention. All the time I get attention from everybody. Because I'm a foreigner. Everybody is interested in me personally being human culture.” (Olga, a female English language teaching student from Ukraine)

The normative order in Turkey is not questioned in the educational context and content. Students commented that their outsider status had complex and multifaceted consequences for their studies and life in Turkey. The normative order is reproduced in the hidden curriculum and can often challenge international students who may suffer from intersectional inequalities. Yet, we also explained how some international students, who fitted into the normative order in the country, could benefit from the hidden curriculum and enjoy inclusion.

### *Hidden curriculum as a **silent aggressor***

Students may cope well with the hidden curriculum if they learn how its implicit assumptions operate. International students, who lack the insider knowledge on the hidden curriculum, may suffer from exclusion and loneliness if the hidden curriculum is hostile to their particular socio-demographic identity. Some universities attempt at facilitating students' cultural interactions in terms of getting to know 'the others' (Patron, 2014). Xalwo recounts her feeling of loneliness, in the context of a country where there is no preparation for cross-cultural exchange and solidarity among students:

“Most of my lessons are based on individual performance. For example, there are projects that I have to prepare individually or topics that I need to research. So that's why my opportunity to get together with my classmates is decreasing. I would like to spend more time with my classmates. Because I think that communicating with them would help me solve the problems I encountered while I was

living here. I could ask [them] something. I usually look for answers to [problems I have encountered] over the internet or Facebook groups.” (Xalwo, a female business student from Somalia)

The co-cultural theory, which explains the relationship between disadvantaged groups and dominant groups in a society, presents three categories of interaction (Orbe, 1996; 1997): First, the disadvantaged group may be assimilated into the dominant group (assimilation). Second, the norms governing the dominant group may be changed in order to ensure the accommodation of the other (accommodation). Third, both disadvantaged and dominant groups keep their distance (separation). Lack of coordinated efforts in the Turkish context to bring students together often leads to a separation. Teymour tells the story of trying his best to overcome his loneliness with much individual effort and of failing eventually and resigning to the fact that his immediate cultural reference group was the only option for friendship:

“I couldn’t make a lot of friends while I was studying alone, which caused a lot of mental problems for me. Everyone deserves someone to be with. [...] but I had changed myself a lot by trying to learn the language, and trying to communicate, to force myself into their society and to force myself to show how friendly I was. They kind of accepted me [...] Most of my friends are still Arabic because I choose my friends so I would say this kind of people have the same mentality. I will just be ignorant for now and forever.” (Teymour, a male business student from Iran)

As education has become more internationalised and its commercialisation has accelerated, international students are more likely to face serious financial difficulties, leading to problems such as anxiety, stress, and poor academic performance (Nyland et al., 2013). In addition to universities, other institutions are expected to be accessible and inclusive to international students so that they can maintain their wellbeing by satisfying vital requirements such as housing, health, and transportation. However, most international students report that they are often alone in their struggles to fit in without much support from their organisations. Some students, such as Talia, explain how their trust in Turkish organisations is coloured by their cultural experiences at home:

“I trust Turkish organisations. Except religious [ones]. I don't prefer to be with them. [...] Though religiosity is more intense in my own country, I have no trust in them [religious organisations]. When I got here, it was shocking to see people kissing on the street. But it was somewhat surprising that religious ties are used in different ways for political purposes.” (Talia, a female business student from Sudan)

It is evident from most of the interviews that the students experienced the hidden curriculum as a silent aggressor, suffering from isolation, misunderstanding, stigmatisation and loneliness. The culmination of these negative experiences was due to the limited role that higher education institutions played in the acculturation of the students to the Turkish context. Karima explains how the efforts of the university does not go beyond organising an international day, which also remains a merely voluntary initiative:

“Some people don't like to meet new people or have relationships with other people. Some don't like an ethnicity or a country so they don't like to have a relationship with people from there. So, the school can do nothing. And at the school actually there is an international day where people can identify their culture but yet it depends on the students to join.” (Karima, a female English language teaching student from Iraq)

As Mergen and Ozbilgin (2021) point out, one way to step out of a toxic context would be to have an experience of a cognitive dissonance about the negative consequences of that toxic environment. Some participants identified how the university could take on greater responsibility for proofing the hidden curriculum for biases. The participants noted the complex interplay between the academic and social lives of the students and how these two interacted and affected each other. Two students explained how organising the educational space, academic labour and student services could better help the accommodation of international students:

“I think the international office needs to have knowledge of everything that every new student will be facing when they get to Turkey because most of them live in dormitories. So that dormitories need to be well informed as well, about how to get a transportation card. If not, students get distressed.” (Othman, a male architecture student from Saudi Arabia)

“It's a good idea to have some rooms or places for students. They can do their projects or their studies. They can study together there and help each other. Also having more student's activities where students can meet each other and get to know each other more, communicating with each other could

be good. Also having non-Turkish professors or having some international professors is a good idea too because all of the professors are Turkish there and they feel closer to local students.” (Teymour, a male business student from Iran)

Lack of preparedness of Turkish higher educational establishments for the internationalisation of their student body is part and parcel of the hidden curriculum and of the assumption that the status quo is sufficient for international students. The hidden curriculum, as our study shows, is neither sufficient nor beneficial for international students. In fact, the overall lack of the accommodation of the different needs and demands of international students creates negative emotional, social and economic outcomes for international students. The hidden curriculum is identified as a silent aggressor in this study. The hidden curriculum with its assumptions of the legitimacy and fitness of the current educational content for international students in fact does disservice to international students, causing them to undergo considerable suffering and disadvantage.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we analysed how the hidden curriculum affected the experiences of international students in the context of a toxic triangle. Our study revealed that the colonial ambitions in the hidden curriculum, the normative order in the hidden curriculum, and the hidden curriculum as a silent aggressor are the three dimensions of the toxic triangle of the hidden curriculum in the Turkish context (see Figure 2). Overall, the results show that it is not possible to consider the hidden curriculum as an educational content issue alone. Indeed, as Spivak (2008) explains in her notion of Asian-ness, the normative order in a country, and the silences in its discourses and practices emerge as factors that constitute the experiences of individuals who are construed as outsiders. In the case of international students, their international-ness shaped their encounters with the hidden curriculum. International students in relation to the hidden curriculum are treated as mere observers from the margins, rather than ‘innovators from margins’ (Samdanis and Ozbilgin,

2020). Alluding to Spivak (1988) again, we show that the subaltern (international students in this case) lack voice and agency in contesting the hidden curriculum.

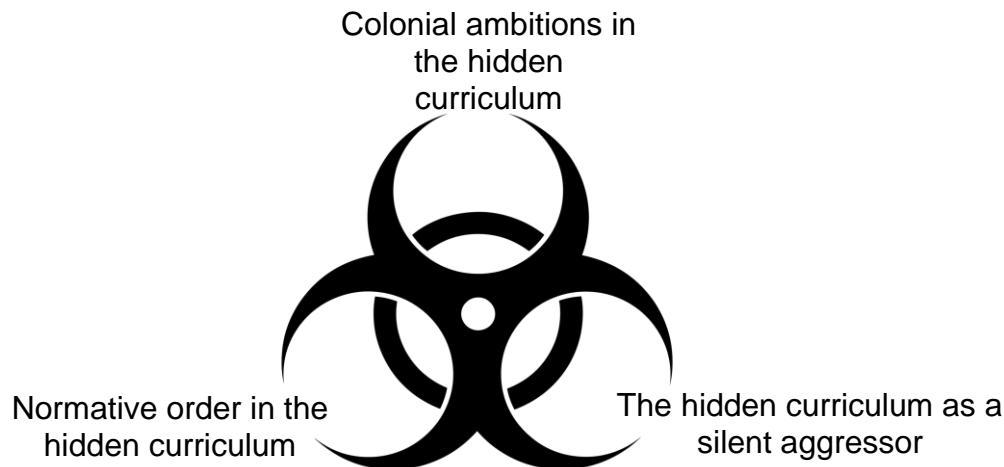


Figure 2: Toxic triangle of the hidden curriculum in Turkey

A thorough explanation of how the hidden curriculum emerges is complex and context-specific. Although our findings might offer some insights regarding the issue, possible impacts of other factors, such as the political climate and macro educational policies of the country, should not be ignored. Several studies (i.e., Bedenliler et al., 2018; Aydinli and Mathews, 2020) report that educational policies, such as internationalisation of education, recruitment in higher education, and content creation and nature of content in curricula, were highly influenced by politics, particularly in developing countries, and that Turkey is no exception. However, mentioning the power and impact of politics on curriculum design and leaving everything to policy makers can, to some extent, be oversimplified in offering to deal with the hidden curriculum problem. Moreover, the investigation of this kind of macro treatment on curriculum is far more than the scope of this paper. Thus, adopting a more micro level perspective, where educational material writers, publishers and educational institutions take significant roles, might be more beneficial to tackle the hidden

curriculum. There is one particular complexity in terms of the precarious position of the ethnic identities of international students in Turkey. It is not legal to officially ask a local student's ethnic identity since the constitution of the Republic of Turkey contains articles which emphasise that those who are a citizen of the Turkish Republic have equal rights irrespective of their race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and so on. This is also the case regarding the national curriculum. However, international students are not covered by the constitution or the curriculum, and their identity is paradoxically exposed when they apply to higher education institutions, which creates a dilemma and ambivalence. The accounts of our participants clearly show that they experience high levels of otherness and exposure to ethnic differences due to their visibility as ethnic others.

In line with this perspective, a stronger awareness among content producers (i.e., writers and well-known bloggers) about the new sociological reality of education, which requires more diversity, should be created. Particularly, publishing companies and global publishers can play important roles on this proposition through conducting several activities. Given the influential role of curricula to shape learner attitudes towards social life and relations with others, integration of material, which covers more universal codes and norms that support a more welcoming environment for people from any social and national background, can be an effective pedagogical practice of diversity. The efforts of curriculum development should also consider the exclusion of teaching content that pumps the discourse where racism, sexism, and extreme nationalism and religiosity occur (Cheng et al., 2018). Namely, rather than an ethnocentric approach, a more global and culture-inclusive teaching and a cosmopolitan ideology should be adopted in the teaching context.

Apart from the development of a curriculum which can be very effective in terms of increasing the awareness of host country students about the global reality of education, educational institutions,

particularly universities, may open some stand-alone courses which may help new international students become more familiarised to local culture. Universities should also adopt a teacher recruitment policy that supports inclusion and diversity. Although international students are generally exposed to relations with their colleagues, they also interact with teachers. The inclusive recruitment policies of universities may increase the chance of international students to find a suitable advisor who can help them in their tough times, and help teachers develop a more global mindset. Loneliness was particularly mentioned as a negative experience that international students encountered. Loneliness which emerges in emotional and social forms (Weiss, 1975; Yavuz et al., 2019) might lead international students to depression or similar kinds of negative psychological problems. In this situation, the roles of academic advisors or mentors to help international students for establishing a positive socio-emotional environment (Bordia et al., 2019) can be quite instrumental. Social practices provided by mentors can also help international students cope with the stress they might face in a country they are unfamiliar with.

Finally, the extreme and greedy financial concerns of universities, which may lead to the commercialisation of education, push them to focus on a few countries with a market penetration strategy, which can be against the logic of a global and multicultural education approach. Attraction of students from different countries should not only address the overemphasised financial concerns of universities, but also serve the idea of the creation of an educational setting where diverse cultural communities and contexts could be found.

Our suggestions may not completely cure the pathologies resulting from hidden curricula; however, practices that support diversity and inclusion in educational settings can provide a pleasant healing among international students.



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