

Peer-Authored Guidance for the Hidden Curriculum: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of a Student-Co-Created Survival Guidebook in an English for Professional Communication Diploma

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ABSTRACT

The guidebook examined in this paper is a peer-authored resource produced by students in a diploma programme in English for professional communication at a public university in Malaysia, developed as their Final Year Project (FYP); this paper reports an exploratory mixed-methods case-study evaluation of it, integrating its qualitative and quantitative strands through a joint display. A qualitative content analysis of responses from 31 current students and recent graduates identified six recurring transition concerns, most prominently campus and residential adjustment and the acquisition of non-graded professional competencies; a joint display links each concern to the guidebook section it informed and to the post-survey item that subsequently evaluated that section. A descriptive product evaluation of 63 readers, current students, prospective (high school) students, and parents or caretakers, found high perceived utility of the finished guidebook overall (mean agreement 97.7% across 17 items), alongside two more informative internal patterns: a group difference in perceived relatability that was largest between students and high-school respondents but not strictly monotonic with distance from the lived programme experience (parents agreed more than high-school respondents on this item), and an inverted pattern on one item in which parents rated the guidebook's transferable value most highly. An exploratory comprehension-versus-confidence pattern in the results suggests that the guidebook may build understanding of institutional expectations more readily than confidence in acting on them, particularly around communication with lecturers, though the descriptive, single-institution design means this pattern is best treated as hypothesis-generating rather than confirmed. These findings speak to the pedagogical value of peer-authored resources within the hidden curriculum, an underexamined niche in the students-as-partners literature on English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes programmes; student agency among the guidebook's own authors is discussed here as a theoretical interpretation rather than as an outcome this evaluation directly measured, and such guidebooks are best understood as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, direct peer or lecturer contact.

Keywords: peer-authored resources; hidden curriculum; student agency; mixed-methods case study; higher education transition; English for Specific Purposes

INTRODUCTION

The transition into higher education is a demanding period of academic, social, and institutional adjustment. First-year undergraduates frequently report difficulty managing an unfamiliar workload, interpreting new academic expectations, and adapting to reduced structure, and this difficulty is associated with elevated stress and lower academic confidence (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Misra & McKean, 2000). In Malaysia, this pattern recurs across institutional contexts: first-year students report academic pressure, motivational strain, and adjustment difficulty as consistent features of the transition (Abdullah, Kong, & Talib, 2014; Kaur & Awang-Hashim, 2014; Siah & Tan, 2015).

Much of this difficulty traces back to what the literature calls the hidden curriculum: the unwritten expectations, norms, and behaviours a university transmits outside its formal syllabi (Cotton, Winter, & Bailey, 2013; Margolis, 2001). The concept once referred mainly to institutional culture in the abstract; more recent work reframes it as something students can learn to read, and in some accounts push back against (Kimelberg & Brass, 2026). Diploma programmes carry an extra layer of this problem, since students there have to pick up tacit professional competencies, time management, collaborative conduct, communicating with academic staff, alongside the technical syllabus content, competencies the curriculum rarely spells out even though it assumes them (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

One response to this gap is peer-authored, localised guidance: materials produced by the very students who have recently navigated the same transition, rather than by the institution itself. Peer-produced educational resources are theorised to translate abstract institutional expectations into accessible, experientially grounded language, lowering the affective barrier that formal handbooks can raise (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014; Maunder, 2018). The genre is not new: library and information science, for example, has long used peer- or practitioner-authored survival guides to reduce specific institutional anxieties (DiPrince et al., 2016), and a comparable logic underlies near-peer mentoring in professional education, where mentors close enough in experience to mentees to remain credible produce measurable gains in confidence and adjustment (Akinla, Hagan, & Atiomo, 2018).

Producing such a resource is also, for its student authors, a specific kind of learning activity. Contemporary higher-education literature increasingly treats students as partners and co-creators of curricular resources rather than only their consumers (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014), a shift theorised through the broader construct of student agency, defined as students' capacity to act purposefully and reflectively on their own learning and that of others (Klemenčič, 2023). Where this literature has been applied mainly to general undergraduate or graduate contexts, its extension into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes remains comparatively thin, despite those programmes placing explicit, assessed weight on the same competencies, communication, autonomy, and professional register, that peer-authored guidance is theorised to build (Bánhegyi & Fajt, 2025; Rubic & Devic, 2026).

This study responds to that gap using a concrete case. Senior students enrolled in a diploma programme in English for professional communication at a public university in Malaysia developed the guidebook examined in this paper, a peer-authored resource, as their Final Year Project (FYP). Fifty topics across seven sections make up the finished guidebook, covering academic adjustment, collaborative work, non-graded professional skills, and campus life, and drawing on both the student authors' own experience and input from contributing lecturers. Evaluating that guidebook is this paper's task, through two strands: a qualitative needs analysis of what students in the programme say they actually need, and a descriptive evaluation of how a diverse readership, current students, prospective students, and parents or caretakers, rates the finished resource's usefulness. Three research questions guide this evaluation:

RQ1. What transitional and academic concerns do current and recently graduated students in the programme identify as most salient during their adjustment to the programme?

RQ2. How do current students, prospective students, and parents or caretakers perceive the utility of the peer-authored guidebook across informational, experiential, and behavioural domains?

RQ3. What do these perceptions suggest about the pedagogical value of peer-authored resources within the hidden curriculum?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The hidden curriculum and academic transition

The hidden curriculum refers to the implicit norms, expectations, and behavioural codes that structure academic life without appearing in any formal syllabus (Margolis, 2001). Explicit curricula spell out learning outcomes and assessment criteria; the hidden curriculum instead governs how students are expected to deal with staff, settle disagreements in group work, and manage their own autonomy, none of it usually taught outright (Cotton,

Winter, & Bailey, 2013). Scholarship on the construct has shifted in recent years, from a mostly descriptive account of institutional culture to a more applied question: is the hidden curriculum something each student must decode alone, or a legitimate target for institutional disclosure (Kimmelberg & Brass, 2026)? This study takes the applied position. If these norms are genuinely hidden, making them explicit, through a resource written by people who have already worked them out, counts as a real institutional response rather than a workaround.

Malaysian studies of first-year transition tell a fairly consistent story across institutions: students describe academic pressure, motivational strain, and adjustment difficulty linked to workload and expectations they did not see coming (Abdullah, Kong, & Talib, 2014; Kaur & Awang-Hashim, 2014; Siah & Tan, 2015). Diploma and professional-communication programmes add a further layer to this, since students there also have to pick up professional register and workplace-adjacent conduct that general first-year support rarely touches (Knight & Yorke, 2003). The diploma programme examined in this study sits squarely in that gap. It is a language diploma with a professional orientation, so its hidden curriculum stacks the academic norms any first-year student faces on top of discipline-specific expectations, correspondence style, presentation conduct, managing a relationship with a supervisor, that are particular to this programme.

Peer mentorship and peer-authored resources

Among the responses to transition difficulty that the higher-education literature actually has solid evidence for, peer mentorship stands out. A systematic review of near-peer mentoring in professional education found measurable gains in mentee confidence, belonging, and adjustment, provided mentors stayed close enough in experience to remain credible while still knowing more than their mentees (Akinla, Hagan, & Atiomo, 2018). Relatability is usually offered as the mechanism: peers put abstract or intimidating institutional expectations into language grounded in recent, shared experience, and that lowers the affective barrier that more formal, top-down guidance tends to raise (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014; Chester, Burton, Xenos, & Elgar, 2013; Maunder, 2018).

A peer-authored text extends this same logic beyond direct interaction, reaching readers the mentor behind it will never actually meet. This is not a new genre: practitioner- or peer-authored survival guides already exist elsewhere in higher education, aimed at specific institutional anxieties, and library and information science has its own documented case of a peer-oriented guide cutting library-related anxiety among new students (DiPrince et al., 2016). What a guidebook offers that a single mentoring relationship cannot is scale and permanence: it can be revisited, passed on to parents or prospective students, and updated across cohorts in a way one-to-one mentoring cannot.

Students as partners and the co-creation of educational resources

A separate, increasingly influential strand of literature stops treating students as recipients of institutional support and starts treating them as partners in producing it. Under the students-as-partners paradigm, curricular and support materials become things students can co-create alongside academic staff, or in place of them (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). Increasingly this work leans on student agency, students acting purposefully and reflectively on their own learning and on behalf of peers, to explain theoretically why co-creation benefits the student authors themselves and not just the people who eventually read what they made (Klemenčič, 2023).

Open educational resource (OER) research offers the closest empirical analogue to the present case, because it directly studies students producing, rather than only consuming, learning materials. Evidence from OER design projects indicates that the act of production itself, not merely exposure to the finished resource, is associated with gains in the producing students' own engagement and motivation (Trust, Maloy, & Edwards, 2023; Wang, Han, & Yang, 2022). Where this literature has mostly examined discipline-general or technical OER, its extension into professional-communication and language-programme contexts is limited to a small number of studies, most outside Southeast Asia, showing that OER quality and integration matter as much in communication-focused courses as in any other discipline (Tijerina, 2025; Vihos, Chute, Johnston, Pawliuk, Buro, Velupillai, & Sampaga, 2023).

Peer-authored resources in ESP and EAP contexts

The specific niche this study occupies, peer-authored resources within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes, remains comparatively underexamined. ESP and EAP research has instead concentrated on learner autonomy as an individual, classroom-embedded competency: portfolio-based instruction, collaborative digital storytelling, and structured peer feedback protocols have each been shown to build autonomy and confidence within a single course (Bánhegyi & Fajt, 2025; Jitpaisarnwattana, 2025; Kostopoulou & O'Dwyer, 2021; Mckinley, Zhu, & Thomas, 2025). Recent work has also begun to model student agency directly within ESP settings, linking it to motivation and foreign language anxiety rather than treating it as an assumed by-product of instruction (Rubic & Devic, 2026).

What is largely absent from this literature is the specific combination this study examines: students in an ESP or professional-communication diploma acting as authors, rather than participants, of a resource intended for a readership beyond their own classroom. The present study addresses that gap directly, treating the guidebook as a case of peer-authored, professional-communication-specific OER, evaluated for its perceived pedagogical utility to readers and, implicitly, as an enactment of the professional communication competencies (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Knight & Yorke, 2003) that the diploma programme is designed to produce.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The design is a pragmatic, mixed-methods case study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2018): the guidebook is treated as a single bounded case, examined through two complementary strands of evidence. One is a qualitative needs analysis of what students and recent graduates of the programme say they needed during the programme's transition period; the other is a quantitative, descriptive evaluation of how a diverse readership perceives the finished guidebook's usefulness. These two strands do not represent sequential phases run on the same respondents, and neither strand statistically validates the other. Rather than leaving the two strands to sit alongside each other unconnected, this paper integrates them through a joint display (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013): Section 4.6 presents a table (Table 3) linking each needs-analysis category identified in Section 4.1 to the guidebook section(s) it informed and to the corresponding post-survey item(s) that subsequently evaluated that section, making the point of integration between the qualitative and quantitative strands explicit.

Context and ethical considerations

The guidebook was produced as students' Final Year Project (FYP), and the evaluation reported in this paper was conducted as a course-based pedagogical assessment rather than as a funded or externally reviewed research study. Accordingly, no formal institutional ethics board review was sought for this evaluation. Both survey instruments were administered through Google Forms, with participation voluntary and responses collected anonymously; no identifying information was requested from respondents, and no incentive was offered. Contributors named within the guidebook itself, whether student authors of individual topics or lecturers who contributed content, are described in this paper only in generalised terms (for example, 'a student author' or 'a contributing lecturer'), with the exception of this paper's own co-authors, who are identified in the authorship line above.

Participants

Pre-survey respondents (N = 31) were students and graduates of the programme reflecting on their own experience of it: 28 (90.3%) identified as current students in the programme, drawn predominantly from Semester 5 (n = 23) with smaller numbers from Semesters 2 to 4, and 3 (9.7%) identified as alumni of the programme who had already completed it. This sample does not include lecturer or staff respondents. The guidebook's original development process is documented as having also drawn on informal interviews with lecturers (Section 3.5), but that input was not captured in a form suitable for the structured thematic analysis reported in Section 4; the qualitative findings below therefore reflect student and alumni perspectives only, a point returned to in the Limitations section.

Post-survey respondents (N = 63) were a more heterogeneous readership recruited to evaluate the finished guidebook: 36 (57.1%) identified as current diploma or degree students, 19 (30.2%) as high school students, treated here as a proxy for prospective applicants to the programme, and 8 (12.7%) as parents or caretakers.

Instrumentation

The pre-survey instrument used five open-ended prompts covering academic, social, and campus-life domains (what respondents wished they had known before joining; academic advice; social advice; campus-life advice; and general advice for incoming students), together with two rapport-building prompts (a memorable moment; a one-line 'movie title' for the programme experience) that were not analysed for thematic content.

The post-survey instrument used a binary agree or disagree response scale across 17 items: two items for each of the guidebook's seven sections, one assessing comprehension of the section's content and one assessing a behavioural or affective outcome such as confidence or intended action, plus three overall items assessing general utility, coping support, and willingness to recommend the guidebook. The binary format is a limitation of the original instrument design rather than a choice made for this paper: it does not support the kind of magnitude-of-agreement analysis a Likert-type scale would allow, and its ceiling effects, evident in the results reported below, are addressed directly in the Limitations section.

Procedure

The guidebook's development is documented in the project's extended abstract and is summarised here for context. Development proceeded over a 12-week period: an ideation phase (Weeks 1 to 2) in which several project concepts were discussed before the guidebook format was agreed; a preliminary needs-analysis phase (Weeks 3 to 4) using a Google Form survey supported by informal interviews with current students, alumni, and lecturers, which generated an initial pool of 87 candidate topics later consolidated to 50; a writing phase (Weeks 5 to 12) in which content was drafted primarily by the student authors, with contributions from one staff member and several lecturers on selected topics; concurrent proofreading and editing (Weeks 8 to 12); and design and layout development (Weeks 9 to 12) in collaboration with a graphic designer.

The pre-survey instrument analysed in Section 4.1 of this paper was collected during this preliminary needs-analysis phase (22 to 28 October 2025). The post-survey instrument analysed in Sections 4.2 to 4.4 was administered separately, after the guidebook's completion (10 to 15 January 2026), to evaluate the finished resource among readers.

Data analysis

Pre-survey responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis: responses across the five substantive prompts were read in full and coded by a single coder using a primarily inductive process, then grouped into recurring concern categories, with each respondent counted once per category regardless of how many prompts touched on it (the absence of independent second coding is noted as a limitation in Section 6). This paper describes the results as concern categories rather than themes, and characterises the analytic approach as qualitative content analysis rather than thematic analysis, because the coding aim was to identify and count discrete, relatively concrete recurring concerns rather than to develop the more interpretive, latent patterns of meaning that thematic analysis typically seeks (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Table 1 summarises the six categories together with their operational definitions, frequencies, and an illustrative quotation for each. Post-survey responses were analysed descriptively, as the percentage of agree responses per item, disaggregated by respondent group (student, high school, parent) and reported alongside the pooled sample percentage. Given the binary scale and the descriptive aims of this evaluation, no inferential significance testing was performed; group differences are reported and interpreted as descriptive patterns rather than as statistically tested effects, consistent with the calibrated, associational claims this design can support.

RESULTS

Pre-survey needs analysis

Coding the 31 pre-survey responses using qualitative content analysis (Section 3.6) produced six recurring concern categories, presented below in order of frequency and summarised in Table 1 together with each category's operational definition and an illustrative quotation. A seventh observation cuts across several of these rather than standing as its own category, an undercurrent of psycho-social strain (burnout, homesickness, anxiety about presenting or being judged), and is noted at the end of this subsection.

The most frequently raised category, by a clear margin, was campus and residential adjustment (20 of 31 respondents): getting oriented to unfamiliar facilities, tolerating whoever ends up as a roommate, staying safe at night, and finding one's way around a large, unevenly serviced campus. Respondents expressed this concern directly. "You can't choose your roommate(s), so respect & tolerate each other because you're going to see them the whole semester... Please don't go out alone especially at nights even if it's on campus, it's dangerous," one wrote. Dormitory conditions in particular drew forthright commentary: "Dorms. They SUCK. PREPARE YOURSELF."

Close behind, at 18 of 31, came non-graded competencies, skills the formal syllabus never actually grades: time management, professional conduct, confidence speaking or presenting. A recurring note here was reassurance rather than warning. "communication doesn't mean you have to be an extrovert," as one respondent put it, while another reframed the whole idea of personal growth away from comparison with classmates: "you're not in competition with anyone else in Academic or Co curriculum; you're in competition with yourself."

A recurring surprise, raised by 17 of 31 respondents, was programme-identity mismatch: many had simply not understood what the programme actually involved before enrolling. "How this course is so much more than just English," one wrote. "We learn things like communication skills, translation, editing, and even how to present and work in teams... The course really opened my eyes to how broad the study of language actually is." Another respondent summed up the same gap between expectation and reality more tersely, listing what they wished they had known as: "We learn BBM like I thought English only."

Group work generated its own category, peer collaboration friction (14 of 31), covering both how hard it can be and the practical strategies respondents wished someone had told them earlier. "Group works are hell on earth," one wrote bluntly, under things they wished they had known. Other respondents focused on practical strategies rather than the difficulty itself: "Choose your groupmates wisely to avoid a free rider."

Twelve of 31 respondents raised what might be called assessment shock, surprise at how much the programme leans on continuous assignments and presentations instead of final exams. "I didn't know there wouldn't be any final exams and that most of the assessments are through assignments and presentations instead," one wrote. A second respondent made sure the absence of exams was not mistaken for a lighter workload: "just because you don't have finals, doesn't mean you are as free as a bird. there are plenty of assignments that are enough to keep you from seeing the daylight again."

The smallest of the six categories, lecturer relationships (11 of 31), was about communication and rapport with academic staff. One respondent tied this directly to a concrete, later payoff: "always respect your lecturers and try to connect or talk with them about assignments or coursework. building a good relationship with your lecturers will make it easier for you to know who to approach or choose as your supervisor for your fyp."

One thing did not fit neatly into any single category: an undercurrent of psycho-social strain, burnout, homesickness, anxiety about presenting, being judged, or falling behind, that kept surfacing inside responses coded primarily under other categories. It is treated descriptively here rather than as a seventh category, and picked up again in the Discussion.

Table 1. Pre-survey concern categories: operational definitions, frequencies, and illustrative quotations (N = 31)

Category	Definition	n (%) of 31	Illustrative quotation
Campus and residential adjustment	Orientation to campus facilities, residential/roommate adjustment, and personal safety	20 (64.5%)	<i>"You can't choose your roommate(s), so respect & tolerate each other because you're going to see them the whole semester... Please don't go out alone especially at nights even if it's on campus, it's dangerous."</i>
Non-graded competencies	Ungraded professional skills the formal syllabus does not assess directly (time management, professional conduct, presentation/speaking confidence)	18 (58.1%)	<i>"you're not in competition with anyone else in Academic or Co curriculum; you're in competition with yourself."</i>
Programme-identity mismatch	Uncertainty or surprise about what the programme actually covers before enrolling	17 (54.8%)	<i>"We learn BBM like I thought English only."</i>
Peer collaboration friction	Difficulty of, and strategies for, group-based coursework	14 (45.2%)	<i>"Choose your groupmates wisely to avoid a free rider."</i>
Assessment shock	Surprise at the programme's reliance on continuous assignments and presentations rather than final exams	12 (38.7%)	<i>"I didn't know there wouldn't be any final exams and that most of the assessments are through assignments and presentations instead."</i>
Lecturer relationships	Communication and rapport with academic staff	11 (35.5%)	<i>"always respect your lecturers and try to connect or talk with them about assignments or coursework."</i>

Note. Frequencies are the number and percentage of the 31 pre-survey respondents whose response was coded under each category; a cross-cutting undercurrent of psycho-social strain (burnout, homesickness, presentation anxiety) recurred within several categories rather than forming a discrete seventh category and is not tabulated separately (Section 4.1).

Post-survey: aggregate results

Agreement across all 63 post-survey respondents and all 17 items was uniformly high: 97.7% on average, and never lower than 93.7% for any single item (Table 2). That ceiling-level pattern holds across nearly every section of the guidebook, and given the binary response scale and a respondent sample that selected itself, it is read cautiously here, and again in the Discussion and Limitations sections.

Table 2. Percentage of respondents agreeing, by item and respondent group (N = 63)

Sec.	Item	Stu %	HS %	Par %	All %
S1	Understand what the programme is about	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
S1	Clearer on expectations	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
S2	Understand adjustment challenges	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

S2	Experiences shared were relatable	100.0	84.2	87.5	93.7
S3	Useful workload/stress strategies	100.0	94.7	87.5	96.8
S3	Confident balancing academic/personal life	97.2	100.0	87.5	96.8
S4	Understand group work challenges	100.0	94.7	100.0	98.4
S4	Advice helps handle group projects	97.2	100.0	100.0	98.4
S5	Recognise non-graded skills	100.0	94.7	100.0	98.4
S5	Skills useful beyond the programme and school	94.4	94.7	100.0	95.2
S6	Campus life is part of learning	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
S6	Encouraged involvement in activities	97.2	100.0	100.0	98.4
S7	Understand lecturers' expectations	97.2	94.7	100.0	96.8
S7	Confident communicating with lecturers	91.7	94.7	100.0	93.7
Ov.	Understand what to expect from the programme	97.2	94.7	100.0	96.8
Ov.	Helped cope with/prepare for challenges	100.0	94.7	100.0	98.4
Ov.	Would recommend to future students	100.0	94.7	100.0	98.4

Note. Stu = current diploma/degree students (n = 36), HS = high school students (n = 19), Par = parents/caretakers (n = 8), All = pooled sample (N = 63); values are the percentage within each group who selected 'Agree'.

Subgroup analysis: group differences in perceived relatability

The largest gap between respondent groups on any single item occurred on the Section 2 item asking whether the experiences shared in the guidebook were relatable: 100.0% of students agreed, compared with 84.2% of high school respondents and 87.5% of parents, a gap of 15.8 percentage points between students and the lowest-agreeing group. Students agreed most, consistent with their closer proximity to the lived experience of the programme, but the pattern beneath that headline gap is not a strict gradient: high school respondents, who are closer than parents to the programme in age and student status, in fact agreed less than parents did on this item (84.2% versus 87.5%). This group difference in perceived relatability, largest for students and smallest for high school respondents rather than declining smoothly with distance from the lived programme experience, recurred in smaller form elsewhere in the instrument (Section 3's workload and stress items, for example, also showed students agreeing at or near ceiling while high school and parent agreement was comparatively, if still high, lower) but was clearest, and least monotonic, on this specific item, which asks directly about relatability rather than about comprehension or usefulness. Given the small parent subgroup (n = 8; Section 6), this non-monotonic pattern is reported descriptively rather than treated as a stable effect.

Comprehension versus confidence

A second pattern emerged when comparing the comprehension item and the behavioural or affective item within each section. Comprehension items (for example, understanding what the programme involves, understanding adjustment challenges, understanding group work challenges) were at or near ceiling across all three respondent groups. Confidence or behavioural items showed more variation. The clearest instance was the Section 7 item on confidence communicating with lecturers, which was the lowest-scoring item among students specifically

(91.7%), notably lower than the paired comprehension item in the same section, understanding lecturers' expectations (97.2% among students). Readers appear to understand what is being asked of them somewhat more readily than they feel equipped to act on it, at least with respect to lecturer communication specifically.

Transferability: the external-stakeholder finding

One item inverted the group difference in perceived relatability described in Section 4.3. On the Section 5 item asking whether the non-graded skills discussed in the guidebook are useful beyond the programme and school, parents agreed at a higher rate (100.0%) than students themselves (94.4%) or high school respondents (94.7%). Where students were most confident that the guidebook's content was relatable to their own experience, it was parents, the readership furthest from that lived experience by age and role, who were most convinced of the guidebook's transferable, longer-term value. This finding, like the non-monotonic pattern noted in Section 4.3, is treated as descriptive and exploratory rather than as a settled effect, and is returned to in the Discussion.

Integrating the two strands: a joint display

Table 3 brings the two strands of this evaluation together in a single joint display (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013), linking each pre-survey concern category (Section 4.1; Table 1) to the guidebook section it is judged to have informed and to the post-survey item(s) that subsequently evaluated that section (Section 4.2; Table 2). Read this way, the two strands are not merely juxtaposed: each row traces a single concern from its qualitative source, through the specific guidebook content it motivated, to readers' quantitative evaluation of that same content.

Table 3. Joint display linking pre-survey needs-analysis categories to guidebook sections and post-survey evaluation items

Needs-analysis category (n/31)	Guidebook section(s) informed	Post-survey item(s)	All % agreement
Campus and residential adjustment (20/31)	S2 Adjustment and safety; S6 Campus life and involvement	Understand adjustment challenges; Experiences shared were relatable; Campus life is part of learning; Encouraged involvement in activities	100.0; 93.7; 100.0; 98.4
Non-graded competencies (18/31)	S5 Non-graded professional skills	Recognise non-graded skills; Skills useful beyond the programme and school	98.4; 95.2
Programme-identity mismatch (17/31)	S1 What the programme involves	Understand what the programme is about; Clearer on expectations	100.0; 100.0
Peer collaboration friction (14/31)	S4 Group work	Understand group work challenges; Advice helps handle group projects	98.4; 98.4
Assessment shock (12/31)	S3 Workload and stress management	Useful workload/stress strategies; Confident balancing academic/personal life	96.8; 96.8
Lecturer relationships (11/31)	S7 Communicating with lecturers	Understand lecturers' expectations; Confident communicating with lecturers	96.8; 93.7

Note. Guidebook section codes follow Table 2's Sec. column (S1–S7); post-survey agreement percentages are the pooled (All %) figures reported in Table 2. Section assignments reflect the authors' post hoc reading of which guidebook section(s) most directly address each needs-analysis category, reconstructed from the manuscript's existing material rather than from a separate mapping exercise conducted at the time of guidebook development.

This display makes visible what Section 3.1 describes only abstractly: each of the six qualitative concerns identified in Section 4.1 corresponds to a guidebook section that was subsequently evaluated at high, though not undifferentiated, agreement in Section 4.2, providing the point of integration between the two strands that a convergent case-study design otherwise leaves implicit.

DISCUSSION

Principal findings and the research questions

Read together, the two strands of evidence in this study offer a coherent, if modest, answer to the three research questions. In response to RQ1, students and recent graduates of the programme converge on six recurring transition concerns, most prominently practical adjustment to campus and residential life and the acquisition of non-graded professional competencies, alongside a narrower but still recurring confusion about what the programme's content actually involves. In response to RQ2, readers across all three groups evaluated in this study, current students, prospective (high school) readers, and parents or caretakers, report high perceived utility of the guidebook, though the pattern of agreement differs meaningfully by group and by item type rather than being uniform, as Sections 4.3 to 4.5 show. In response to RQ3, the pattern of results speaks to the pedagogical value of peer-authored resources within the hidden curriculum: the guidebook appears to translate tacit, unwritten institutional expectations into a form a broad readership finds accessible, and the joint display in Section 4.6 shows this translation tracing back directly to the concerns the student authors themselves identified as most salient. This study did not directly measure the student authors' own sense of agency, purpose, or reflective engagement while producing the guidebook, so the students-as-partners and student-agency literature (Klemenčič, 2023) is used here as a theoretical lens for interpreting what a peer-authored resource of this kind can plausibly offer its authors, rather than as a claim this evaluation itself demonstrates.

Peer authorship as a response to the hidden curriculum

The needs-analysis findings in Section 4.1 align closely with the hidden-curriculum framing set out in Section 2.1. The two most frequent categories, campus and residential adjustment and non-graded competencies, are, by definition, the kind of tacit, unwritten expectations the hidden-curriculum literature describes: neither is formally assessed, yet both recur as sources of difficulty (Cotton, Winter, & Bailey, 2013; Margolis, 2001). That the guidebook's own seven-section structure maps onto these categories directly, as the joint display in Table 3 shows, is expected rather than independent confirmatory evidence: the guidebook was built from this same needs analysis, so the alignment between the two demonstrates internal consistency in the guidebook's development process rather than external validation of the categories themselves. What Section 4.2's post-survey evaluation adds, and what the needs analysis alone cannot, is independent evidence that a broad readership, not only the student authors who identified the original concerns, finds the resulting sections useful.

This case is also a reminder that disclosure is not the only available institutional response to a hidden curriculum. Treating tacit expectations as something a peer-authored guidebook should make explicit implicitly accepts those expectations as fixed and asks students to adapt to them; it says less about whether some of those norms, particularly around group-work conduct or the balance between graded and non-graded demands, might instead be worth an institution questioning or changing. The guidebook evaluated here is best read as one workable, disclosure-based response to an otherwise tacit set of expectations, alongside rather than instead of institutional efforts to examine whether those expectations are the right ones to begin with.

Epistemological clarity versus behavioural confidence

The comprehension-versus-confidence pattern reported in Section 4.4 is exploratory, drawn from a comparison between two items in a single binary-scale survey, but it is suggestive of a specific limit on what a text-based peer-authored resource can achieve on its own. Readers, and students specifically, consistently understood what a section was telling them (comprehension items were at or near ceiling throughout), while the confidence or behavioural item paired with it showed comparatively more variation, most visibly on the item asking about confidence communicating with lecturers (91.7% among students, against 97.2% on the paired comprehension item). Read cautiously, this small gap is consistent with the broader literature on epistemological development,

which treats students' understanding of a domain as developing through a separate, often slower process than their confidence in acting within it (Richardson, 2013). Where mechanisms that combine explicit information with sustained relational contact, structured peer mentoring, for example, have been shown to build belonging and confidence together rather than knowledge alone (Bleasby, Coffey, Sweeney, & Thompson, 2025), a guidebook is, by its nature, an information-transfer mechanism rather than a relational one. Taken as a hypothesis-generating observation rather than a demonstrated effect, this pattern suggests the guidebook may be better understood as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, direct peer or lecturer contact, particularly for the specific competency of initiating communication with academic staff.

Relatability and distance: the value of an outside view

Sections 4.3 and 4.5 together describe an unexpected divergence, both read here as exploratory group differences rather than established effects. On relatability specifically, students agreed most and high school respondents least, with parents in between rather than the decline being strictly ordered by distance from the lived programme experience (Section 4.3). On transferable value specifically, a different pattern appeared: parents, arguably the readership furthest from the guidebook's specific content, were the most convinced that its non-graded skills matter beyond the programme and school. One plausible reading is that relatability and transferability are distinct judgements rather than two expressions of the same underlying attitude: relatability depends on recognising one's own specific experience in the text, a judgement naturally easiest for current students, while a transferability judgement is a more general claim about lifelong applicability that may be easier to make precisely because it is not anchored to the specifics of one's own recent experience. A more cautious reading is possible too: parent agreement on this item might just reflect a general endorsement of soft-skill and employability framing, independent of anything specific to this guidebook, and the present design, with only eight parent respondents, has no way to rule that out. Whichever reading is closer to the truth, the finding works in the guidebook's favour, read as a descriptive, exploratory signal rather than a confirmed effect. Its stated development aim, per the project's extended abstract, included reaching prospective students and their families as well as current students, and on this evidence it appears to reach readers well outside its primary authorship and readership group.

Interpreting near-ceiling agreement with appropriate caution

The uniformly high agreement reported in Section 4.2, a mean of 97.7% with no item below 93.7%, should not be read as uncomplicated evidence of the guidebook's effectiveness. A binary agree or disagree scale, a self-selected and likely sympathetic respondent pool, and the possibility that respondents were reluctant to criticise a resource visibly produced by their own peers or lecturers, can each independently push aggregate agreement upward regardless of the guidebook's actual content. What this ceiling pattern cannot easily explain, however, is the differential structure found within the data: a pure ceiling or social-desirability effect would tend to flatten differences between items and groups, not produce a consistent 15.8 percentage-point gap concentrated on a single relatability item, or a comprehension-confidence split that recurs specifically around lecturer communication. Accordingly, this paper treats the relative patterns identified in Sections 4.3 and 4.4, rather than the absolute levels of agreement in Section 4.2, as the more informative evidentiary yield of the post-survey, and returns to the absolute levels themselves, and what they do and do not license, in the Limitations section.

Limitations

Several design constraints bound what this study can claim. The pre- and post-survey samples were separate, unlinked respondent pools rather than the same individuals surveyed before and after guidebook exposure, and there was no comparison group of readers who had not encountered the guidebook; the associations reported throughout this paper are therefore descriptive patterns rather than tested or causal effects. The post-survey's binary agree or disagree scale (Sections 3.4, 5.5) captures presence rather than strength of agreement and is a plausible contributor to the near-ceiling results in Section 4.2, and the smallest subgroup, parents or caretakers ($n = 8$), is small enough that a single response shifts its reported percentage by 12.5 points; parent-group figures in Table 2 and Sections 4.3 to 4.5 should be read as indicative rather than precise.

Both samples were self-selected and drawn from a single institution and diploma programme, which limits how far these findings generalise, and respondents may have been reluctant to criticise a resource produced by their

own peers or lecturers, a social-desirability pressure this descriptive design cannot detect or correct for. The six pre-survey categories (Section 4.1) reflect a single coder's content analysis without an independent second coder, and, as already flagged in Section 3.3, capture student and alumni perspectives only: the lecturer input that shaped the guidebook's original development was never captured as analysable data, so it is absent from Section 4.1 and from the RQ1 findings built on it. Relatedly, this study evaluates the guidebook's reception among its readers; it does not directly assess the student authors' own experience of producing it, so any claims about student agency or reflective engagement among the authors themselves (Section 5.1) are offered as theoretical interpretation rather than as measured outcomes of this evaluation.

Finally, this evaluation was conducted as a course-based pedagogical assessment rather than an externally reviewed research study, with no formal institutional ethics board review sought (Section 3.2). This is an appropriate and disclosed feature of a FYP-embedded evaluation, but it is a consideration for any future replication seeking a stronger evidentiary basis. Because course-generated data of this kind are here being repurposed for scholarly publication, the authors have separately sought retrospective confirmation from their institution that formal ethics review was not required for this evaluation, consistent with the institution's and this journal's requirements for publishing course-embedded educational data; researchers considering similar work are encouraged to check equivalent requirements with their own institution and target journal before submission rather than relying solely on a study's original educational purpose.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a mixed-methods case-study evaluation of the guidebook examined here, a peer-authored resource produced by students in a professional-communication diploma programme. A qualitative content analysis identified six recurring transition concerns among students and recent graduates of the programme, most prominently practical adjustment to campus life and the acquisition of non-graded professional competencies, both squarely within what the hidden-curriculum literature describes as tacit, unassessed institutional knowledge. A descriptive product evaluation then found that a diverse readership of current students, prospective (high school) readers, and parents or caretakers reported high perceived utility of the finished guidebook, with two informative internal patterns beneath that high aggregate agreement: a group difference in perceived relatability, largest for students and not strictly declining with distance from the lived programme experience, and, on one specific item, an inverted pattern in which parents saw the guidebook's transferable value most clearly.

These findings speak to a niche that Section 2.4 identified as comparatively underexamined within the students-as-partners literature (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014): peer-authored artefacts produced within an ESP or professional-communication diploma for a readership beyond the authors' own classroom. The case suggests that a student-produced guidebook can function as a hidden-curriculum disclosure mechanism for its readers, translating tacit institutional expectations into an accessible, needs-analysis-informed form. Whether producing such a guidebook is also, for its student authors, the kind of purposeful, agentic learning activity the student-agency construct describes (Klemenčič, 2023) is a plausible theoretical interpretation this study did not directly test, since no data were collected from the student authors about their own experience of the co-creation process; this remains an open, and directly answerable, question for future evaluation (see below). What this evaluation does show, through the comprehension-versus-confidence pattern in Section 4.4, is that a text-based resource of this kind may be better positioned as a complement to direct peer or lecturer contact than as a replacement for it, particularly where the underlying need is confidence rather than information.

For this programme and similar diploma or professional-communication programmes, this suggests a practical model: a peer-produced, needs-analysis-informed guidebook, developed with light lecturer input and periodically refreshed, paired where possible with structured opportunities for direct peer or lecturer contact on the specific competencies, such as initiating professional communication with academic staff, that this evaluation found hardest to build through text alone. Future evaluation of this or comparable guidebooks would benefit from a linked pre-post design administered to the same respondents, a graded rather than binary response scale, larger and more balanced subgroup samples, particularly among parents and prospective students, and qualitative follow-up interviews to test the two readings offered in Section 5.4 for the parent-transferability finding. Directly evaluating the student-agency interpretation raised in Section 5.1 and Section 7 would require a further strand

of data collection, such as reflective journals, interviews, or focus groups with the guidebook's own student authors about their experience of the co-creation process, which lay outside the scope of the present evaluation but would meaningfully extend it. A multi-institution replication would also help establish whether the patterns identified here are specific to this guidebook and programme or hold more generally across peer-authored resources in similar contexts.

Declaration Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

Declaration On The Use Of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used generative artificial intelligence tools to support language editing and structural refinement. All content generated with the assistance of these tools was reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and intellectual content of the final manuscript. The empirical data, the analytical decisions, the interpretation of findings, and the theoretical framing are the authors' own.

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