

**Diagnostic, self-guided, interactive pocket mentor: A rare blend of generic and applied academic skills development exercises.**

**A book review of: Hopkins, D. and Reid, T., (2024) *The Academic Skills Handbook: Your guide to success in writing, thinking and communicating at university*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Sage: London.**

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**Keywords:** academic skills development, transition into university, higher education, student-centred learning

Moving from college, or even another country and trying to manage settling into university life is exciting but also, can be daunting. There's so much to consider from making new friends, catering for yourself, living in a new environment, managing money, adapting to larger lecture and seminar class format, trying to understand new terminology used in a university setting, as well as living up to the expectations to learn read, adjust, do well and get a great job... that it can feel overwhelming for students as they enter university. The second edition of 'Academic Skills Handbook: Your guide to success in writing, thinking and communicating at university' has carefully considered each of these important adjustments, providing chapter-by-chapter guidance which university students at all levels can read alongside any course of study, by encouraging engagement in interactive learning tasks, checking progress and understanding, at the reader's own pace. Part of the 'Student Success' series from Sage, this updated edition helps guide students through each transitional phase of university life, providing diagnostic exercises to boost self-confidence, academic performance, inter-personal communication, wellbeing and employability prospects.

Written and contributed to by experienced and caring university lecturers Diana Hopkins and Tom Reid, the authors have chosen an informal tone, with concise coverage of key aspects of settling into university life and preparing to do well in academic study. There is a stimulating blend of text with imagery and visuals, combined with online interactive skills development tasks, which is a novel feature of this text, taking it to the realms of being a learning device, rather than simply a book. The tone of voice is conversational; reassuringly informal and accessible, like a pocket academic mentor. For readers, being able to annotate with your own notes, set yourself aims and chart your progress is a distinctive and valuable learning aid that transcends normal textbook reading. The amount of reading is relatively light as the emphasis is on completing related tasks, which should make the learning feel achievable within a short amount of time. New contributions to this edition encompass university 'culture', blog writing, online and blended learning, as well as sensitive coverage of the role of artificial intelligence in learning at higher education, increasing the shelf-life of this text.

The book is organised into 8 Parts and 20 chapters, logically and progressively encompassing skills of reading, listening, writing, critical evaluation, note taking, presenting, referencing, intercultural communication, working in groups, managing time and behaviours in and out of class, adapting to blended learning and creating effective content, each equally applicable to any subject readers may be studying. It's rare to find a book that covers each generic core skill briefly yet thoroughly, whilst also including subject applied coverage.

At the end of the text are annotated examples which reinforce the learning from the core chapters, with helpful indication of where readers can find the relevant chapter advice. In addition to the book, there are a range of online tools (Writing sample library, Diagnostic tool kit, Answers to guided tasks) for readers to deepen their learning and develop their skills, covering assessments from each level of a programme, from

first year undergraduate to final semester postgraduate. The sample written pieces cover a broad range of styles and formats such as a lab report, placement report, reflective essay, blog, essay, dissertation and posters, and are helpfully listed by applied subject, so any student on any programme should find something of value for their studies. Within the samples, readers are provided tips and guidance, highlighting the best aspects and areas for improvement, emulating the experience students would expect when reflecting on feedback on their work (Bohlmann, 2022).

What may be popular with readers are the multiple opportunities for stop-and-do learning tasks featured in the design of this book. As a companion skills text, this book offers readers unique ways to critically reflect on their current skill level; set themselves objectives; test and self-evaluate each new skill area interactively, using the diagnostic skills sliders, scoring guides, editable templates, grids and examples. New joiners could certainly find the reading and exercises advantageous during the summer before starting, and they would be likely to keep this text with them throughout their studies, referring to its advice repeatedly at different stages of their programme. Students coming to study in a different country or language, will also find the sections on intercultural communication (Zhang and Fisher, 2022) and confidence building of value. Reflecting that today's learners have already experienced online and blended learning approaches prior to starting university, this text helpfully explains how VLEs, flipped approaches (Ng and Lam, 2022) and even AI can be harnessed to improve the contemporary university learning experience. For instructors and academic skills service teams, the learning tasks in this text could be incorporated easily into small class sessions and workshops, or offered to whole cohorts as self-directed learning activities.

Of particular merit compared with other comparable skills texts, are the clearly sign-posted editable grids, tables, flow-charts and instructional models, with hyperlinks interspersed between the guidance, which promotes interactive learning using an e-reader / digital textbook medium. This should encourage greater engagement with the content, whilst also reducing the printed footprint of skills development advice.

Whilst some adopters (ie instructors, learning developers or academic skills support teams) may feel the content could benefit from explicitly referring to and citing meta-cognitive development (Sheridan, 2020), social constructivism (Vespone, 2023), scaffolding (Veine et al., 2020), or threshold learning concepts (Calduch and Rattray, 2022) for example, the author's chosen writing style is laser focused on how students would use it, rather than how academics would validate its underpinning. For some instructors or learning developers, that may feel at odds with guidance written by their own institution, whereas for others this may be considered relevant for ensuring student-centred learning. In an era of education where students (and staff) may be increasingly reliant upon artificial intelligence to reduce time on task, this text is an important learning companion for refocusing on the development of critical reading, thinking and writing skills, to improve the quality of work produced by humans for university assessment and future workplace environments.

## References

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