

A book review of Davies, M. (2022) Study skills for international postgraduates. 2nd edn. London: Bloomsbury Academics.

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Summary of the book's purpose, its main ideas and primary audience

Davies effectively distils many years' pedagogic experience with international postgraduate students, within a Western, English-speaking higher education culture, usefully brought up to date by addressing some of the challenges of increasingly prevalent online delivery, informed by the recent Covid-19 related actions forced on HE Institutions. The book therefore delivers wisdom, both historic and forward-looking, making it ideal as a reference tool to take the newly arrived international postgrad, for whom it is primarily intended, from the early days of settling in and making friends, through their academic programme, closing with suggestions about doctoral research. Offering the book to all incoming international students as part of a 'welcome pack' would be an excellent idea.

Uniqueness

The book uniquely addresses not just the academic side of postgraduate activities but addresses the cultural and social elements vital to making international study inherently valuable. Additionally, with increasing numbers of international students seeking entry to Western-style, English-speaking HE providers, and these providers actively promoting their 'product' in other cultures, this book is timely.

How the book 'works'

The title accurately reflects the book's intended audience by focusing on master's level study within Western-style, English-speaking HE systems for students whose prior academic experience lies outside that tradition. That said, there is much content which

could be taken as excellent advice for all postgrads, although the generality of postgrads is not its intended audience.

Structurally, the book is conveniently sectioned broadly by timeline, opening with advice regarding the nature of postgraduate education, cultural challenges and adaptations such as how to create a supportive network, and basic survival skills such as information management and reading. The importance of avoiding plagiarism is heavily emphasised, illustrated with numerous examples to make the issue and its solution clear. The nature of research within the Western tradition is addressed together with the requirement to develop, apply and express critical thinking skills. As essays and dissertations form key postgraduate metrics, their creation and refinement are well covered. The importance of multiple aspects of the spoken word is stressed and described in multiple areas – giving tutorials and presentations and even talking frankly to one's supervisor. For postgraduate students who wish to take their studies further the book finishes with advice regarding preparation for doctoral studies.

The lively text is enhanced by highlighted chapter summaries, key points, important notes and short blocks of text which are themselves clearly structured. Schematics are used to illustrate structural or organisational aspects of various elements of postgraduate work. Checklists are used both within the book and at its end to help the reader self-check progress.

An extensive bibliography supports the author's credibility and provides readers with useful further reading, both of an academic and more popular nature. A number of other 'skills' books are referenced and built upon. A clear Index rounds-off the book.

Shortcomings

Two shortcomings are evident in Davies' distillation. Groupwork or working collaboratively with others on projects, which is ubiquitous within the sciences, and seems increasingly so in arts, humanities and social sciences as universities respond to organisations' needs to hire 'work ready' employees, is only addressed to some extent. Guidance in the sensitive and subtle area of working with others would benefit those from other cultural backgrounds. The book does not provide specific advice regarding cultural and procedural differences for the international postgrad studying an experimental discipline.

How the book supports the international student

The eponymous title is supported by sage advice regarding the challenge of settling into different cultural, psychological and academic milieux. Readers are encouraged to join clubs, become active in student life and to develop social networks outside their own linguistic or cultural heritage as a way of settling into their host culture. Usefully, the book addresses the inevitable highs and lows – the U-curve – of the experience of international study, from early euphoria to mid-term blues through to the excitement of finishing and graduation – not forgetting the ‘reverse culture shock’ of returning home and missing the friends, ambiance and fun of having studied abroad.

The core messages of the nature of study within Western HE systems are clearly addressed: the need to question and challenge, the importance of critically appraising the subject matter literature, of writing lucidly and succinctly, of speaking up both in support of a viewpoint but also in debating constructively and the acceptance of being wrong or making mistakes from which effective lessons can be drawn.

Relevance to Learning Development as a secondary readership

Behind this book lies the premise, based on many years’ experience, that international postgraduates will encounter challenges by virtue of their entry into a foreign social and academic culture; the book then addresses these challenges. It therefore follows that the academics who might be teaching these same international postgraduates would benefit from reading the book, firstly to enhance their knowledge of the challenges faced by their students and secondly to identify approaches which they could incorporate into their future pedagogical approach. Indeed, with international students’ relevance and their importance to many HE Institutions it would make good sense for this book to become required reading for both newly appointed academics, through their PG Certificates in Higher Education or Academic Professional Apprenticeships, so that they could develop their pedagogy from its inception with the international student in mind. Similarly, experienced academics might use the book as part of their Continuing Professional Development.

Comparison to similar books

Books similarly published for the postgraduate students, such as Grix (2010) and Bell (2010) take their readers through the postgraduate research process, both in terms of its components and its timelines. Whilst Davies addresses both, he additionally and usefully orientates the international student to differences between their 'home' education approaches and the Western, English-speaking higher education culture with which they will have to come to terms. In addressing the postgraduate, Davies goes well beyond Cottrell's (2013) best-selling, and excellent, Study Skills Handbook which, whilst aimed squarely at entrants into higher education is still useful to postgraduates as a refresher in study skills' fundamentals.

References

Bell, J. (2010) *Doing your research project: a guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social science*. 5th edn. (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University).

Cottrell, S. (2013) *The study skills handbook*. 4th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Grix, J. (2010) *The foundations of research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Author details

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