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REVIEW

## Beyond skills: reframing academic literacies and the cultivation of graduate identity

Dennis, C., & Abbott, S. (2025). *Excelling at university: Academic literacies and the development of graduate identity*. Routledge. ISBN 9781032108896

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Chris Dennis and Stuart Abbott's *Excelling at University* offers a timely and comprehensive guide for navigating critical questions for staff and students in higher education (HE). Moving beyond surface-level study tips, Dennis and Abbott inspire us to reflect on the shifting focus from the 'how' of our work to the 'why' of our academic practices and praxis.

In an era infused with intense technological change influencing the practice of HE and the conditions in which staff and students navigate the purpose of HE beyond skills, this book makes a clear, present, and intentional contribution to this central debate. From the outset, the authors pose deceptively simple questions: what does it mean to excel? How does one envision and exceed one's own expectations of HE? What are the connection(s) between participating in HE, students' engagement with their course, and post-university life? They offer a framework that foregrounds identity, critical engagement, and an understanding of the deeper purposes that underpin the personal, social, and material nature of academic practices. Their central argument is that university success emerges not from mastering isolated skills but from participating in the social, epistemological, and disciplinary practices that constitute much of our defined academic life. The book's 14 chapters span key dimensions of learning—from mindset and motivation to assessment literacy, self-regulation,

critical thinking, academic integrity, collaboration, and work-based learning—offering an integrated perspective on what it means to become a graduate.

A central strength of the book's approach lies in its explicit adoption of an academic literacies perspective, a stance that has shaped writing and learning research for nearly three decades. Lea and Street (1998, 2006) reconceptualised student writing not as a neutral skill but as a socially situated practice embedded in disciplinary norms, power relations, and identity formation. Dennis and Abbott draw on this tradition, positioning student success as participation in academic communities rather than the accumulation of atomised competencies. Their emphasis on understanding the why of academic expectations—for example, why tutors value argumentation, why referencing matters for epistemic integrity, and why different genres demand different ways of knowing—helps make tacit academic norms explicit to students.

This conceptual grounding distinguishes the text from what some scholars have classified as traditional and conventional study skills guides, often critiqued as overly generic, essentialist, reductive, and frequently counterproductive (Wingate, 2006, 2012). By contrast, *Excelling at University* resists a deficit framing that assumes student shortcomings must be remedied through so-called 'bolt-on' or 'add-on' workshops. While these opportunities may be suitable in some cases, they often presume a clear 'gap' and 'solution' to developing students' sense of being and learning. This sense influences how students integrate a range of skills and knowledge to move from novice learners in their respective fields and disciplines to advancing their understanding, deepening their learning, and embedding knowledge in daily life. Dennis and Abbott invite HE teachers (in all their forms) and learners to see themselves as embedded and emerging members of disciplinary and professional communities.

The authors' identity-driven approach also resonates with Hinchliffe and Jolly's (2011) influential model of graduate identity, extending the argument that employability comprises four interrelated strands: value, intellect, social engagement, and performance. This contingent and contextual approach requires a will to learn. It provokes educators and students alike to immerse a sense of self and interdependent learning in their disciplines. Here, staff and students are situated and invited to actively participate in their personal and professional communities of practice.



Although pitched as a student-facing guide rather than a research monograph, the book's recommendations align closely with established empirical work. Chapter 4 on self-regulated learning (SRL), for instance, reflects clear parallels with Zimmerman's (2002) influential model that conceptualises SRL as a cyclical, dialogical set of processes involving forethought, performance, and self-reflection. The strategies advanced by the authors—goal setting, monitoring progress, strategic planning, reflective evaluation, and reflexive practice—correspond directly with these components, and their practical advice reflects the consensus articulated in related scholarly work on SRL models (Panadero, 2017).

Similarly, Chapters 5 and 6 on assessment and feedback draw from the substantial shift in feedback research over the past decade. Rather than presenting feedback as information transmitted from teachers and tutors to students, the authors adopt a dialogic framing consistent with Carless and Boud's model of feedback literacy, which highlights four capacities: appreciating feedback, making judgements, managing affect, and taking action (Carless & Boud, 2018). Their encouragement of peer feedback, exemplar analysis, and iterative drafting mirrors good-practice recommendations in the literature on dialogic feedback processes (see, for example, Campbell & Duke, 2023; Carless, 2015a). Furthermore, by anchoring their work in Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback model—framed by the questions, 'Where am I going?', 'How am I going?', and 'Where to next?'—the authors provide a rigorous conceptual basis for their practical advice. In an era of tech-infused, seemingly endless sharp changes in policies and practice, these questions are not luxuries and 'nice to do', but rather critical to situated teaching, learning, being, and becoming through HE.

In discussing writing for assessment, the authors again demonstrate awareness of academic literacies scholarship. They highlight genre variation, tacit expectations, and disciplinary epistemology—concerns widely documented by Lea and Street (1998, 2006) and reinforced by Wingate's (2006) argument that writing development should be embedded within disciplinary contexts rather than isolated in remedial provision. Here, connections and interconnections, emerging from key questions students and staff create, sustain, and reflect on through their practices, remain a central element of being a student and becoming a graduate.

Dennis and Abbott situate their work within a scholarly landscape that has moved decisively away from generic skills training toward a contextualised, identity-focused understanding of academic practice. Their approach converges with several major research trajectories. First,



following Lea and Street (1998, 2006), the book recognises academic writing and learning as culturally and epistemologically shaped practices. This lens foregrounds identity and helps explain why students struggle to transfer 'skills' across modules. Second, Wingate's (2006, 2012) work demonstrates the limitations of bolt-on study skills and the need for discipline-integrated writing development. Dennis and Abbott echo this by contextualising writing within disciplinary purposes and genres. Third, the book's feedback framing converges with the dialogic movement, emphasising student uptake, peer learning, and exemplars rather than post-hoc commentary (Carless, 2015b; Carless & Boud, 2018). Finally, by foregrounding identity formation, the authors integrate academic literacies with contemporary employability theory, particularly Hinchliffe and Jolly's (2011) four-strand model of graduate identity.

For Learning Development (LD) practitioners, *Excelling at University* is equally theoretically robust and practically applicable. Its alignment with academic literacies makes it an excellent bridge between LD pedagogy and student-facing guidance. The emphasis on exemplars, peer review, and iterative feedback offers LD practitioners concrete approaches to integrate into workshops and curriculum partnerships, supporting students in developing judgement and evaluative expertise (Carless, 2015a; Carless & Boud, 2018). The treatment of self-regulation and self-reflection provides a research-aligned framework for helping students plan, monitor, and reflect, an area often underdeveloped in traditional study skills materials (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). Finally, the identity-oriented approach provides language and structure to support LD's mission of fostering student agency and disciplinary belonging (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Overall, *Excelling at University* is a thoughtful and highly accessible guide that moves beyond procedural advice to illuminate and connect to, and with, the deeper purposes of academic practices. By drawing on academic literacies, self-regulated learning, and contemporary feedback scholarship, Dennis and Abbott provide students—and the practitioners who support them—with a framework for understanding not only what to do at university, but why it matters and who they are becoming in the process. The book represents a valuable contribution to the literature on student learning and a strong addition to LD toolkits.

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