

## **A book review of Davies, M. (2022) *Study skills for international postgraduates*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: Bloomsbury Academics.**

**Silvia Colaiacomo**

University College London, UK

**Keywords:** international students; academic skills; internationalisation of the curriculum; intercultural learning.

*Study Skills for international postgraduates* by Martin Davies (second edition) aims to support postgraduate taught students across different disciplines to manage expectations and navigate the requirements of their studies in 'Western' academia, defined in the book as meaning English speaking countries of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The book seems to address mostly students at Australian universities, and it is intended to be used independently for self-study before or at the start of a course/programme.

The book is divided into eight parts, each comprising between one to six chapters and addressing different aspects of students' experience of academia. Parts 1 to 5 set the context of higher education studies by outlining expectations and possible challenges due to cultural differences, key skills such as time management, how to develop an awareness of the new academic environment – including considerations of academic integrity – and unpacking key terminology such as 'critical thinking'.

Parts 6 and 7 focus on developing writing and oral skills in relation to assessment types. They systematically cover the most common assessments generally used within social science programmes: reports, essays and reviews as well as presentations, groupwork and contributions to class discussions. In addition, section 7 offers guidance for managing communication with tutors and supervisors. Finally, part 8 addresses research degrees and how to move towards the development of a research proposal. Chapters are enriched by 'focus boxes' where key terms are unpacked and/or examples of practice are provided. These

sections are particularly extensive in parts 6 and 7, where assessment types are explained in detail.

The book is part of the broad literature on study skills designed for independent use; it addresses the readers directly and in a supportive and encouraging tone to help them navigate challenges and possible setbacks. The abundance of examples and clear explanations and tips to approach assessment and academic writing are well-planned, easy to follow and applicable to learners that have just completed an undergraduate degree as well as those who are returning to higher education after a longer break. Parts 6 and 7 are indeed the most practical and approachable of the book and possibly the most relevant and useful to readers. Examples of practice are selected from a number of disciplines, and they balance an awareness of disciplinary specific discourse with a specific focus on language. In addition, Parts 6 and 7 are not underpinned by assumptions about the readers' preparedness for postgraduate studies, and they are rich in references and additional/external resources.

The remaining parts of the book, Parts 1 to 5 and then Part 8, are far less neutral. The dominating narrative places international students in a constant deficit discourse, without considering individual variations, cultural sensitivity and previous experiences. The word 'Western' is used across the book to identify an alleged norm and standard of quality against which students need to be acculturated. International students are otherised and constructed as needing support to understand why it is important to learn English or 'commit yourself'. The initial chapter discusses the notion of 'independence' as opposed to 'passive acceptance' in Western academia, as if international students need to be considered as an indistinct block completely alien to responsibilities or cultural and interpersonal awareness, as well as academic practice. The underlying assumption that emerges through the initial parts implies that postgraduate international students need support in all aspects of their life abroad, from socialising to approaching knowledge construction. By doing so, the book ignores the richness that a diverse student population brings to the classroom and, implicitly, considers the experience of international students as relevant or meaningful in relation to learning development when compared to that of Western students. The book doesn't encourage students to build on their existing learning schema, but to reframe their approach completely

by adjusting to the new education environment. By doing so, it seems to contradict the notion of independence and the active approach to learning that it claims to embrace.

Parts 1 to 5 make recurrent use of non-neutral terms like 'foreigner', while at the same time they discuss the importance of heavily culturally loaded concepts such as 'wellbeing' and mental health by taking them for granted as universal. The book outlines an approach to education that doesn't appear to promote inclusivity or mutual understanding and dialogue; it sketches an approach where international students are solely responsible for their performance and integration. Also the theme of accessibility is completely absent: an awareness of universal design for learning (Rose, 2006) could actually prove useful for students looking for differentiating forms of self and peer support. The initial parts (1 to 5) could have benefitted from a more balanced and nuanced approach to students' diverse experiences, and could consider some of the literature on the integration of cultural perspectives in an intercultural context (Spiteri, 2017), or on internationalisation of the curriculum (Leask, 2015).

A second theme (or the lack thereof) running through the book and needing further reflection is the lack of awareness of technology and how this can support learning. In Part 2 students are encouraged to keep a glossary of new terms. This is a valuable suggestion, but it ignores the large support that students receive from apps and dedicated software and websites, which can be used constructively to support language and academic skills development. In this respect the book seems to dismiss or simply ignore the networks developed during the Covid-19 pandemic which are freely available online to both home and international students. Equally, the section on plagiarism doesn't mention broadly used software for plagiarism check that are now well-established and integrated in university systems. These are systems that students need to be aware of in the current environment of digitalised assessment, as they can also provide useful support during formative assignment tasks. In relation to academic misconduct, the book could outline the very timely and pervasive problem of contract cheating (Dawson, 2020). We are aware that international students are often targeted by companies offering proof-reading services (Slade, 2021) leading to a breach of academic conduct. To alert international students about this potential risk and its implication would be essential in a book that aims to support their preparation for postgraduate studies.

All in all, the book provides an excellent tool to support students wishing to reflect upon and improve their academic writing skills in relation to a variety of assessment types, mostly used in social sciences and humanities. It offers clear guidance, examples and easy to follow visuals and tables that unpack different formats and writing styles. There is a wealth of practical tips in relation to each form of assessment and step by step activities that students can complete at their pace to enhance their writing and communicative confidence in English for academic purposes. The main strength of the book is indeed its focus on writing for coursework and different assessment types. The other areas of the book addressing more generic skills are however underpinned by a deficit discourse that may appear less supportive for students, as it doesn't consider the diversity of students' approaches and the richness they bring to their postgraduate studies in terms of skills, competence and previous educational experience.

## **References**

Dawson, P. (2020) *Defending assessment security in a digital world*. London: Routledge.

Leask, B. (2015) *Internationalizing the curriculum*. London: Routledge.

Rose, D. H. and Meyer, A. (2006) *A practical reader in universal design for learning*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Publishing Group.

Slade, C. (2021) 'Upholding academic integrity: an institutional response to student use of contract cheating services', *The IAFOR International Conference on Education*. Honolulu, Hawaii, 6-9 January.

Spiteri, D. (2017) *Multiculturalism, higher education and intercultural communication*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

***Author details***

Silvia Colaiacono is a lecturer in the Arena Centre for Research-Based Education at UCL. Her main area of responsibility is overlooking the teacher training provision for Postgraduate Teaching Assistants. Her background is in history of art and modern foreign languages, which she taught in HE in the UK and internationally. Since 2016, she has been focusing on academic development programmes for teaching and support staff. She is particularly interested in internationalisation of the curriculum and exploring the interaction between space, pedagogy and technology in different disciplinary settings.