

Review of the book ‘*University and You: Strengthen your skills and develop your potential*’ by Catriona Wilson and Rebecca Wilson.

Reviewed by Xiuxiu Bao, *The University of Edinburgh*, x.bao-6@sms.ed.ac.uk

The increasing diversity of students in contemporary higher education (HE) highlights a notable attainment gap between students from different backgrounds and challenges in transitioning from school to higher education (Hensby & Adewumi, 2024; Parker et al., 2017). Catriona and Rebecca’s latest book, *University and You: Strengthen your skill and develop your potential*, offers an important perspective to support diverse students in achieving success during HE: Which skills could be personally pivotal for one student and how individuals can develop them.

The authors examine a skill set in which study techniques and non-academic skills are equally essential for student success at and beyond university. In this sense, they print a broad, yet enlightening picture of what each skill means for being a successful *student* and *person*. The inclusivity of student skills contributes to the scholarly discussion on what HE should address *for* students, rather *to* students. Additionally, this handbook takes a personalisation stance to acknowledge and facilitate the uniqueness of student needs in HE. It includes both general practical advice and self-reflection strategies to evoke students’ self-understanding, motivations to act, and sustainable self-development.

The pragmatic and reflective nature of this book may stem from authors’ strong interest and over ten years of practical and research experiences in supporting student skill development in HE. Catriona and Rebecca both lead or co-lead institutional departments responsible for supporting students at the University of St Andrews. Their combined perspectives as former students, front-line student support experts, and departmental leaders enhance the trustworthiness and feasibility of the techniques articulated in this book.

Given its primary focus on student skill development, the book is primarily targeted at undergraduate students. It serves as a handbook for those needing guidance to effectively navigate substantial changes in HE and the dynamic world. Moreover, this book may also appeal to readers interested in student HE experiences and keen on

helping diverse students thrive at university and beyond, including professors, teachers, scholars, and professional staff (e.g., student support officers). These readers could benefit from gaining relevant frameworks to scaffold the development of specific skills for students at and beyond university.

This book is neatly structured into three parts comprising twelve chapters to address authors' goal of 'prepar[ing] for being a successful student and perform[ing] to your full potential' (p3). The three parts, in some way, echo Driscoll's (1994) reflection model: what, so what, and now what. Specifically, it begins with 'what' – describing situations in which students can learn, and then moves towards 'so what' – articulating key information extracted from 'what', which leads to authors' predetermined five categories of skills covering 20 specific skills. Lastly, they emphasise 'now what' – spotlighting the need of envision the future and take necessary actions.

In the opening part, Catriona and Rebecca facilitate student readers to self-reflect on their skills, considering their current situation, future aspirations, and the importance of preparing for the transition between the present and future. This reflection aims to enhance students' understanding of themselves, serving as the foundation of developing specific skills according to the authors. To reflect on their current situation, student readers are invited to engage in activities that help them identify strengths, areas for improvement, and existing skills. Further self-reflection is encouraged by guiding student readers to explore their experiences in navigating through three distinct zones: the comfortable zone, the challenging zone, and the dangerous zone. To effectively navigate these zones in practice, students are encouraged to focus on three key elements for development, including flexibility, resilience and transferable skills.

Catriona and Rebecca then shift their focus to what a student's role means in today's university. Through a brief discussion on the learning process, the authors illustrate students' active role in influencing their learning. In other words, student engagement in learning can positively impact their learning experience and attainment. The authors then delve into the five categories of important skills for students (20 skills in total), including self-leadership, research mindset, diversity, connectivity, and being an agentic and social actor. Each skill category is analysed comprehensively, forming one chapter. Specifically, in chapter 6 to 10, the authors present the general definition and

meaning of each skill category respectively, followed by a guided process for student readers to understand, analyse, apply and reflect on a specific skill. Notably, they introduce multiple frameworks and resources to assist readers' reflections effectively, such as Gibbs' reflective cycle (p121), resilience as a water tank concept (p127), and the inverted pyramid (p214). Overall, the book provides a comprehensive, tailored scaffold for students to plan their success at university, unlocking potential for every student who is willing to make efforts to develop themselves.

The final part explored by Catriona and Rebecca is the interrelationship between one skill and 1) other skills and 2) associated activities. They claim that no skill can only be developed through one particular activities, and vice versa. Hence, they encourage student readers to use the skill-activity map (p264) to plan and track skill development. They highlight the use of such a map to prepare for success in job interviews at university and beyond, underscoring evidence for attainments. Further, the authors call for 'first steps' from students, highlighting the easiness and immediacy of actions.

Catriona and Rebecca excel in creating a supportive, encouraging and compassionate tone for all types of student readers, including those who may lack self-confidence, use English as a second language, or face inevitable barriers to engage in skill development. As a pragmatic handbook, the authors adopt a dialogic writing style (Garmon, 2001) and guide student readers in reflecting on how to develop their skills. They include practitioners' and students' insights to provide lived experiences. Not surprisingly, the book involves little historical and scholarly discussions on why a particular skill is important for *diverse* students. This is particularly notable given that the book establishes the diverse and dynamic nature of the world as its foundation in the introduction parts and further reinforces this perspective with the introduction of the skill wheel in chapter 5. Their analysis of diverse student attributes in chapter 8 *You and Diverse Universities*, however, is particularly compelling, highlighting how specific student attributes intersect with others.

One key strength of *University and You* is revealing some hidden rules of student success in HE. The authors provide practical guidance for students to find where to start and improve their skill development. As Catriona and Rebecca state, 'this book asked you questions, invited you to complete activities, and gave you tools to try things in maybe a slightly different way to what you had done before' (p281). This embodied

process of reading the book not only fosters a conversation between readers and authors, but also helps enhance students' understanding of themselves, university, and the world. It is important to point out that the small interactive activities are effective and efficient due to its easiness to engage and low time cost.

One of the book's strengths, however, is also its weakness. Catriona and Rebecca's insights into student skill development are strongly oriented towards the contexts of British higher education and the relevant student support systems therein. Although some skills, such as self-leadership, may be universally important for students studying in any country, other skills including diversity, connectivity, and agency may face different situations compared to the British HE system, particularly regarding students' capacity of seeking help and resources to develop these skills (Johnson et al., 2022).

Catriona and Rebecca's *University and You: Strengthen your skill and develop your potential* does a commendable job of chartering the strategies for students to improve skills and cultivate multiple literacies within predominantly British educational systems. However, the book could have benefited from considering non-British features across different HE systems, especially in today's internationalisation of higher education, where British HE systems actively interact with those of other countries.

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