

Making it at Uni: Navigate your way through the first year of your degree

A review of Bartholomew, S. and Withers, J. (2018) *Making it at Uni: Navigate your way through the first year of your degree*. Independently published.

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Overview

Bartholomew and Withers's book is an accessible and easy to digest guide to university life for prospective undergraduates and students in the first year of their degree. It is organised into two sections: the first half offers advice about what to expect at university and how to successfully integrate, covering topics such as making friends, budgeting, cooking and managing time. The second half focuses on the broad but essential skills needed to succeed academically: reading, writing and referencing.

The two authors have a wealth of experience working in Higher Education so the advice offered is drawn directly from their interactions with students. Indeed, a strength of the book is the inclusion of the student perspective through direct quotes or anecdotal accounts. With the ever changing nature of university life, particularly the burden of student debt and the rise in mental health awareness, there is a need to keep university handbooks updated and relevant to the current student experience (Dandridge, 2016; Centre for Global Higher Education, 2018). There are plenty of general guides to help students adapt to university, Palgrave's *The Study Skills Handbook* (2013) being one of the most popular. Bartholomew and Withers's book contributes to this genre by providing a personalised and friendly tone that aims to anticipate the students' questions and

concerns. Although the study skills section does not cover new ground, there are several activities aimed at the student that learning developers/skills advisors may find useful for workshops and one-to-ones.

Structure and Content

The first chapter addresses some common questions raised by students when contemplating university. For example: 'Am I doing the right thing?' and 'Am I up to this?' (p. 11). This section also acknowledges the diversity of the student population and ensures that the experience of the mature or distant learner is also taken into account. Although the book largely assumes that the student reader will understand cultural norms, there is plenty of general advice that should be accessible to international students too. The informal tone of the book is established here with the authors encouraging the reader to interact with the book by writing in it, dipping into relevant sections, and taking part in the activities. This strategy of informality attempts to emulate a study skills workshop, where the individual reading experience is transformed into a university-style learning environment.

The next chapter uses the comments of existing students ('I was surprised at how big the classes were' (p. 17)) to manage expectations and demystify the experience. The differences between college/sixth form education and university are foregrounded, focusing on the importance of independent learning, modes of learning, and assessment. According to Margaret Weaver (2013), such an understanding of these differences is vital for successful transition. The book also provides an easy to use appendix, which defines common academic terms, in the hope that this will further demystify the language of academia.

The book then moves on to explore the social life of a university student. The authors provide helpful tips on how to cultivate successful friendships; students are encouraged to make the most of every opportunity to network. Although I would not categorise the relationship between lecturer and student as social, the section on defining lecturers' roles is useful and will help students to navigate what can often be tricky and unfamiliar relationships.

Chapter four is a rather lengthy one and explores the different ways students can look after themselves at university. It covers healthy eating, food shopping, cleanliness and exercise. There has been a sector-wide recognition that students' mental health should be better supported by universities with more robust mechanisms put in place (Dandridge, 2018). Aronin and Smith note that university work is one of the biggest triggers for causing stress and other mental health problems in young people (2016). Thus the book's section on wellbeing and mindfulness could perhaps have been extended to offer support in this area and leave out some of the more unnecessary practical advice. Indeed, the tone is somewhat didactic in places, e.g. observations about the need to wash regularly and avoid processed food.

The next two chapters deal with managing money and time. Accruing a large student loan is often a significant barrier facing students when thinking about university, particularly for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Callender and Mason, 2017). Therefore, it is noteworthy that alongside the practical tips on how to budget and save money, this book reframes the student debt as an investment. In regards to time, the focus is on developing as an independent learner and making the most of what appears as 'free' time. By exploring different time management strategies (using an information hub, recognising 'time-suckers', and using 'trapped time' (p. 50, 54-5)), the individual nature of each learner is prioritised. These examples remind learning developers/skills advisors of the importance of offering an array of support strategies to meet individual needs. However, considering the growth of digital software/programs to help manage time (Todoist, Trello, Wunderlist etc.), it is a shame that more examples are not cited. In fact, the importance of supporting students' digital capabilities as a whole is an underexplored area in the book (JISC, 2018).

From chapter 7 onwards, the focus changes to academic skills and shifts gear. Although the content will be familiar to learning developers/skills advisors, the authors do bring vast experience and some useful examples to the next few chapters. This is the section most relevant to learning developers/skills advisors; the activities can easily be adapted (with permission) for workshops and one-to-ones. The first section concentrates on developing reading practices that allow students to digest research quickly and efficiently. It is structured around a couple of activities that teach students to read a paragraph for purpose, gradually speeding up their approach as they learn to scan for meaning. In the chapter on writing, the authors take a slightly unusual approach and choose not to focus directly on essay structure or common grammatical errors, but instead on a trickier

aspect of student writing, the inclusion of research into one's own writing. Through a demonstration of how to quote, summarise and paraphrase someone else's work, the section is able to cover a lot of useful ground: accuracy, clarity, and sentence structure. Towards the close of the chapter, there are a couple of paragraphs on assessment feedback. This is a growing area of interest with many studies recognising that students struggle to implement feedback effectively (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Winston and Nash, 2016). Therefore, it may have been more beneficial to have a slightly longer section here, including strategies that learning developers/skills advisors use when helping students to engage with feedback.

Chapter 9 introduces students to the world of referencing, an often bewildering and anxiety-inducing experience for many. Although plagiarism is discussed, the chapter chooses not to dwell on the negative aspects of inaccurate referencing, but instead concentrates on why referencing is good academic practice. Another simple but effective activity allows students to practise some aspects of the Harvard referencing system. A couple of online citation tools are promoted, but perhaps an opportunity is missed to discuss referencing management software that universities often subscribe to (e.g. EndNote and RefWorks).

Summary

In the concluding chapter, the authors acknowledge that there is a lot more to be said in relation to academic skills, but 'now is not the time for us to overburden you' (p.86). Quite rightly, this handbook deliberately limits its scope, recognising that students are often overloaded with information in their first few weeks. Therefore, this handbook provides sufficient guidance to ease transition without overwhelming. Although there is little in the way of new content which would make this book essential reading for learning developers/skills advisors, the authors cover some basic points of student life in a friendly and engaging manner; this clearly conveys their commitment to supporting new students in their transition to university.

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