



Book review: Wilson, C. and Wilson, R. (2025) *University and you: strengthening your skills and developing your potential*. Abingdon: Routledge.

A must-read guide to help students navigate higher education with confidence

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In *University and you*, Catriona Wilson and Rebecca Wilson offer a valuable workbook for students who are transitioning into and navigating their university journeys. Though its intended primary readership is likely students new to higher education (HE), the material may also be of interest to parents, Careers Advisors, and Wellbeing Practitioners looking to enhance the academic skillset and career potential of students at any stage. The book is also appropriate for Learning Developers looking to coach and tutor students through the processes of self-reflection, self-awareness, motivational thinking, and positive action. Each chapter contains learning outcomes and activities based on scholarly models that use questioning or scenario-based learning to enhance reflection. The adoption of skills attributes from an educational and professional perspective delivers on Wilson and Wilson's blurb promise of 'a holistic approach' to skills development. In providing comprehensive coverage of the main themes, the authors strive to support students' overall preparedness and confidence within HE. Academic skills – including research, reading, time management, and communication – and professional skills – like connectivity, leadership, and diversity – are covered with frequent acknowledgement of the transferability of skills between educational study and workplace development.

The authors use a combination of research-based advice and practical tips to help students consider 'where are you now?', 'where are you going?', and 'how will you get there?'. The book's opening chapters use this structure to help students explore their motivations in applying to university. This approach encourages the reader to recognise

their individual strengths and achievements and, through goal setting, address areas for improvement. For instance, activities such as the 'Sequencing, Scheduling and Contingency' model (p.98) inspire students into action, helping them prioritise, remain focused, and stay on track.

There is frequent reference throughout the book to the traits and characteristics associated with positive outcomes – both within and outside of the HE classroom. The reader is encouraged to complete reflective activities to enhance their self-awareness and self-coaching towards healthy and productive mindsets. In this way, *University and you* does not merely offer a list of the skills required to be successful in HE; instead, it contains clear explanations of theoretical models (such as Beckhard and Harris's Change Equation) to help readers understand and overcome difficulties through reflection.

In Chapter 5, 'Your skills and attributes', Wilson and Wilson introduce a detailed 'Skills Wheel' that they have developed to visualise the skills required for students to be successful in HE. Throughout the remaining chapters (6 to 11), there is exploration of how each skill in the wheel connects to and complements each other. Students are encouraged to identify their strengths and prioritise what to change by plotting on the wheel their current attributes in each area. What is particularly refreshing about the content here is how it promotes the idea that success is measured not just by completing and passing assessments but by reflecting on small achievements and the values, attitudes, and behaviours we hold as individuals in preparation for learning and employment.

Importantly, the book offers advice about the helpful attributes a student can develop, alongside traits that can perhaps inhibit personal growth. In doing so, Wilson and Wilson encourage a growth mindset, recognising with transparency the difficult emotions and bumps in the road students will face whilst studying in HE. To support students through such periods, the book offers a cognitive reframing approach, using example affirmations to replace negative beliefs, and pairs these with activities to counterbalance unhelpful thinking. An example is the focus on developing resilience to combat stress through the ABC (adversity, belief, and consequence) adaptability model (Ellis, 1991). Such topics are dealt with constructively in the context of improving and sustaining confidence and guiding students to assess their reactions and challenge their beliefs.

Most activities include helpful follow-up questions and note-making templates – such as charts, tables, and visual diagrams – to record reflections and actions. The use of student and practitioner insights are an effective inclusion that highlight the positive and challenging aspects of university life, whilst complementing the reflective activities and adding to the overall accessibility of the book's interactive approach. Appropriately, the authors refer students to support where necessary and recommend students investigate such services before starting at their specific universities.

Wilson and Wilson's openness about the various challenges students encounter demonstrates their awareness of the student experience and challenges of studying in contemporary HE. The chapters referring to connectivity and community, for example, align with recent research acknowledging the difficulties students face in achieving a sense of belonging in their institutions (Jackson and Blake, 2022). Likewise, the authors recognise the importance of core curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activity. This is evident through their exploration of agency, where participating in activities with other students or within the community is considered a precursor to academic improvement and resilience in learning (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021).

The book's appeal is highlighted further by its coverage of diversity, where skills such as the understanding of cultural differences, inclusive decision-making, integrity, listening, and conflict are addressed. This approach aligns with calls for HE institutions to evaluate their racially inclusive policies and promote practice to ensure positive relationships and experiences for all (Campbell and Duke, 2023). Furthermore, the references to neurodiversity are sensitively pitched throughout the book to raise awareness and foster respect for differences within the student population.

The style of writing is supportive and motivational in tone. Communicated in plain, accessible English, it caters to a broad readership. The use of metaphors to compare situations and strategies is especially worthwhile, and terminology is demystified by encouraging students to consider their own definitions before the authors offer detailed and lucid explanations. The case study and examples provided throughout the book are relatable to student interests and hobbies, such as using the joining of sports teams to explore the importance of 'tenacity'.

The book is a useful tool for developing professional skills, even though the title perhaps does not quite capture this focus. There is consistent reference, for instance, to how academic skills support successful entry to work such as highlighting the positive and negative aspects of social media as tools of connectivity with staff, other students, and professional networks. Similarly, the text refers to verbal and written skills both useful at university and in the workplace, but anyone looking for more specific advice on the practical application of completing varied, more specific education assessment types would need to make use of alternative resources. Notwithstanding, many academic skills are effectively covered in a more general and introductory manner, such as critical thinking, time management, and research.

University and you does not claim to offer advice on how to be the perfect student: its goal is more aligned with achieving confidence and a balance in expectation of what is to come and what is possible. There is a lot to digest and do in this book, but its theoretical underpinning and use of varied activities makes it a beneficial tool for those wanting not just to prepare for success, but to improve in strength of character generally. The book has a definite 'self-help' quality, encouraging independence and autonomy in learning, along with continual consideration on ambition and future achievement. I will no doubt revisit this text in the future for its helpful reflection and development-focused skill building activities. It is a valuable resource and, as a Learning Developer and former Careers Guidance Practitioner, I highly recommend it to any student looking to build their confidence and improve their academic and professional development whilst in HE.

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