Preparation for your Future: Study Skills to get ready for university, college and work
Angela Hepworth
Universe of Learning Ltd. (2013)
Review by Steve Briggs

Searching Amazon (UK) for ‘study skills’ books generates almost 80,000 results. This highlights how saturated this market is becoming. Consequently, it is important that new titles have some form of unique selling point (USP). At first glance, a possible USP for this book is length. The book only comprises around 115 pages (of which around 40 are dedicated to title, contents and exercises). Considering the target audience (students about to commence Higher Education (HE)), I would anticipate that such a parsimonious introduction to study skills could be popular.

The first chapter provides an overview of factors to consider when selecting a college or university. Areas that are addressed include course selection, scholarships, completing an application, preparing to commence studies and how university differs from school. If a student has never considered attending university then he or she is likely to find this chapter useful. If, however, a student has already undertaken some preliminary research around attending university then it is unlikely that this chapter will provide anything new.

Chapter 2 sets out the study skills that students need to master in order to be successful within HE. This is by far the largest part of the book, comprising 62 pages. In brief, this chapter addresses areas such as assignment planning and writing, time management, presentation skills, criticality, referencing and examinations. Some consideration as to how a degree can be enriched (for instance, through volunteering) is also included. Given the size of the book it is unsurprising that topics are covered briefly (for example, 5 pages are dedicated to note taking / 2 pages to presentations / 5 pages to essay writing – all inclusive of related exercises). This brevity might increase accessibility but left me feeling that additional reading would be needed in order to really support skill development.

The section of chapter 2 that addresses referencing (pp.68 — 72) could be confusing for prospective students. Hepworth states: ‘...the best system to use is the Harvard system as your lecturers will understand it and think it to be the professional way to treat references’ (p.69). For some students this advice will be incorrect. For example, many psychology students adopt American Psychological Association conventions whereas OSCOLA conventions are commonly used within law. Given the target audience, I believe such a sweeping statement would have been best avoided.

Chapter 3 includes an overview of ‘skills development for employability’. This relates to areas such as leadership, motivation, team work and problem solving. Each area is briefly discussed and readers are encouraged to complete related exercises.

Chapter 4 summarises some of the areas to consider when attempting to find a job. It very briefly covers career searching, researching potential employers and constructing a CV. I would anticipate that students might find the lists of UK and US job search websites and ‘key words’ for inclusion in personal statements to be particularly useful. That said, some annotated examples of what good personal statements should look like would have strengthened this chapter.

I felt that this book would benefit from a glossary of key terms. Throughout the text there is terminology which might be unfamiliar to the target audience (such as ‘module’, ‘course’ or ‘tutor’). However, I didn’t feel these were properly explained prior to usage – this could cause confusion. Related to this, there may have been merit in explaining that such terms are not universally used within HE along with providing some alternatives that students might encounter (such as ‘unit’, ‘programme’ or ‘lecturer’).

The book would have also benefitted with some ‘find out more’ signposting at the end of each chapter. This could have directed readers to supplementary online materials developed by the author and/or to open access content (such as the excellent range of materials available via the Learn Higher website). Through doing this I believe that the author could have retained a short book length USP but given readers the opportunity to build on the basic introduction that is provided.

It was also a shame that there are parts of the book where proofreading could have been more robustly undertaken. For example, ‘...even though the cost of your degree may be a daunting prospect, the actual achievement on obtaining you degree can be such a gratification for all your hard work’ (p.115).

In summary, many prospective university students may be intimidated by or unwilling to engage with substantial study skills textbooks. Consequently, there is real value in a short introduction to study skills aimed at students making the transition into HE. This book does provide a basic introduction to some key study skills and
I believe would be accessible to many would-be students. However, I disagree with the testimonial on the back cover that ‘...this book provides all you need to know before going to study at university as well as throughout your course through to planning your career and future goals’.