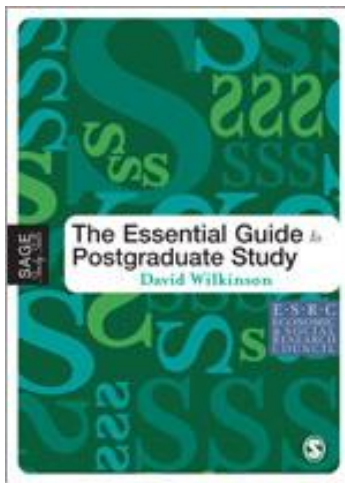


Book Review



The Essential Guide to Postgraduate Study

by David Wilkinson

London: Sage Publications (2005).

Paperback £21.99 (ISBN: 9781412900638)

Review by **Paul Craddock**

As a student embarking upon a multi-disciplinary PhD with the London Consortium, University of London, I have found it somewhat difficult to find relevant guides to the postgraduate experience. Attractively presented, *The Essential Guide to Postgraduate Study* immediately appealed to me for its comprehensiveness and easy-to-read design. Admittedly, my heart sank a little when I read that the book offers guidance for a 'typical' postgraduate experience. I am not a typical postgraduate student. In fact, I know no 'typical' postgraduate students. In my cohort there are students of a wide range of ages and backgrounds, each with their own understanding of what a PhD is - and should be. How can there be a typical experience? Well, there can't be. There is, however, considerable common ground between every PhD student and this book has done an admirable job of making me feel part of a wider research community. Still, I am a specific kind of student and, although Wilkinson claims his book is a guide to postgraduate study, it appears squarely aimed at me, only briefly mentioning other options.

Immediately counting against Wilkinson's book is that the market is saturated with such guides. My biggest concern is with the out of date references (for example, www.researchtogether.com sounds like a superb website yet seems to be defunct) and that there has been no second edition in five years. Still, this guide is presented clearly and with enough excellent content to warrant my recommendation to PhD students. Exactly as it promised, it has guided me very well thus far.

Built into the design of the book are boxes containing snippets of information that offer outlines of various research students' experiences. They are peppered throughout the book and work well, particularly with the section on 'Supervisors', where a variety of student experiences give a well-balanced collection of supervision experiences. Wilkinson also introduces some quite elegant turn of phrase; I particularly like the idea of having prepared a 'cocktail party summary' (p 215) of your work.

The 'Developing Proposals' section has some sound general points that can be applied to any project. Further, it feels a great advantage to have a good range of proposal examples, particularly with the growing taste for multi- and inter-disciplinary work in Higher Education; it is very helpful to have someone walk you through this difficult process of writing a proposal and is particularly important as funding is becoming increasingly hard to obtain.

While I would not deem much of the 'Culture of Academia' section as 'essential' for everyone, it is very interesting and contextualises the experience of being a postgraduate

student in the UK. If, on the other hand, academia is a post-PhD option, then this section would be invaluable, along with the excellently written sections on 'Career Planning' and 'Publishing Opportunities'. Indeed, they are three of the most interesting parts of the book for me. However, this is only by chance, as I do indeed plan for an academic career. Those not wishing to remain in academia should be warned that, although he acknowledges that other routes exist, Wilkinson considers the academic career path as the most 'preferred' (p 218), devoting these chapters to it. Particularly interesting in these sections are the enlightening warnings about institutional politics such as the 'complex mix of people with competing agendas [...]' one would expect to find in HE institutions (p 104-105). Good, solid advice is offered on publishing, too, which covers how, where, when, and what, ranging from advice on how to petition publishers, with helpful examples to indicate best practice (p 246-254), to information about the peer review process when under consideration for publication in an academic journal (p 254-257).

There are also some sections of the book that are redundant, such as the advice to 'obtain a library card' (p 138), though it has often been the case that I have been pleasantly surprised by the quality of the advice on offer, for instance information about resources such as Journal Citation Reports (p 141), and the advice on the relative value of books, journals, and other publications (p 145-146). Also, to the book's disadvantage is the chapter on 'Managing Your Time, Academic Writing, and Presenting your Work', which seems inadequate at best. There are, as always with this book, a few useful pieces of advice but, as the title of the chapter suggests, three *massive* areas are covered in a very short space. I was particularly disappointed by the sub-section on writing which, spread over nine pages, promised much more than it could possibly deliver; the same could be said about the sub-section on presenting.

Some of the information is out of date, being written in 2005. Some of the web addresses link to sites that are now sadly defunct, and the details on academic pay scales are clearly out of date, as is the 'where to study and apply for funding' section. Thankfully, many of the websites referred to are very much alive and go some way towards mitigating the issue. Another issue I would be wary about is the most recent round of funding cuts making much of this advice unfortunately redundant.

Overall, would I recommend this book? Certainly. In general, the book is a well-written, coherent, and comprehensive guide to postgraduate education in the UK. If one is not considering a PhD and an academic career, there will probably be another more suitable publication but the special emphasis on the PhD and academic career route make it a fine guide, if a little outdated.