



A guide to career research skills

Choosing what you want to do requires time and commitment. You will need to gather lots of information and reflect on your findings before you decide.

There are a huge range of options available to you - probably more than you think! Your options are likely to fall into one or more of the following areas.

[UK full time degree courses, diplomas or certificates](#)

[Sponsored Degrees linked to employers](#)

[Overseas university degree courses](#)

[Sports Scholarships, UK](#)

[Sports Scholarships, USA](#)

[Apprenticeships](#)

[School Leaver schemes](#)

[Gap Year programmes](#)

[Going straight into a job](#)

Looking at more than one area allows you to see the range of possibilities open to you and this approach is highly recommended. You don't want to miss something!

There are some key research skills that will help you find information and weigh up whether an option is right for you. These skills have lifelong use and can be used again whenever you need to decide about your career.

- Having self-awareness
- Collecting information
- Evaluating sources
- Planning & scheduling
- Being open-minded
- Finding solutions
- Critical thinking and analysis
- Decision making

Having self-awareness

Having self-awareness about what you enjoy doing (your interests), what you are good at (your strengths) and what's important to you (your values) will help you when it comes to identifying options that most closely fit with these areas. Choosing options that fit well with all these areas may increase your chances of enjoying the option you have chosen and having successful outcomes.

Reflecting on your personal strengths, interests and values can also help to generate ideas perhaps for a degree subject, apprenticeship or a career to explore.

The following quick quizzes can help you to see subject and/or career suggestions based on what makes you tick.

[The Wheel of Strengths](#) to discover the jobs that could suit you based on current skills, interests and personality.

[16 Personalities](#) to see your personality type and career suggestions.

[The Buzz Quiz](#) to see your strength, what makes you tick, subject choices and jobs that could suit you.

Collecting information

To make an informed choice you are going to need information. This can be gathered from different sources such as:

- University websites
- University search & compare websites
- University League Tables
- Apprenticeship search websites
- Online reviews
- Open days, visits, career insight days

See the list of recommended websites on the [FutureSmart Careers Resources Hub](#).

A note about using university league tables such as [The Guardian](#), [The Times & Sunday Times The Complete University Guide](#), [Quarelli Symonds](#) and [Times Higher Education](#). These tables provide some data about entry standards, student satisfaction, employment prospects, teaching ratios and spend per student among other factors. Courses are ranked according to combined sets of data. To get the most out of league tables, always think about the things that are most important to you as these might differ to what the publisher thinks is important. Read more here: [Guide to Using League Tables](#).

Evaluating your sources of information

For information to be useful you will need to consider what source it's come from and how reliable it is. Ask these questions...

- Is the information up to date?
- Is it objective or someone's opinion?
- What bias is attached?
- Is it marketing information with a positive spin?
- Does the source provide the full picture?
- Where else could you get information?
- Who else could help you?

Planning and scheduling

Good research should involve some planning and scheduling. You need to start researching your options early enough to gather information and meet any application requirements and deadlines.

Application Timetables

Lots of options have specific timetables of deadlines and you will need to find out what these are.

- For students applying to most university courses in the UK the deadline is 15 January for applications.
- For Oxford, Cambridge, Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary courses the deadline for applications is 15th October.
- For students applying to Law, Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine you may be required to sit additional admissions tests (LNAT for Law, UCAT or BMAT for the medical courses). Each have their own deadlines.
- Some courses at Oxford & Cambridge require the completion of an Admissions Test too and these are usually sat a few weeks after the application deadline.
- For Overseas universities the deadlines vary and are often set by the university rather than by a central admissions organisation.
- Apprenticeship application deadlines are set by individual employers.

Other dates to schedule

[University Open Day Visits](#)

[University taster days and courses](#)

[Employer Career Insight Days](#)

Make time for Work experience

Placements, work shadowing or other work-based experiences are needed for some university courses such as Medicine, Veterinary, Dentistry, Nursing, Physiotherapy and sometimes for Law and Psychology too. Work experience can be useful for many other courses too and many apprenticeship providers like to see evidence that you have had some experience of a relevant work environment too.

You will have to make time to find and source placements and the following links may be useful for you:

- [Student Ladder - Work Experience – Various Sectors](#)
- [Work Experience in the NHS](#)

- Dentistry Work Experience
- Medicine Work Experience
- Legal Work Experience
- SpringPod Virtual Work Experience (different sectors)

Being open-minded

Open-mindedness is sometimes referred to as “divergent” or “non-linear” thinking. When you explore more than one option and use a range of sources, some new ideas and possibilities should emerge. Some new ideas may be a better fit for you than your original plans or they may help you to see other plans you had in a new light.

Open-minded thinking can also have a downside. If you research options without drawing any conclusions, you could become overwhelmed and paralysed with too much to think about. If you reach this point you could postpone a decision if there is time, or you will need to apply some critical thinking about the best way forward.

Using critical thinking skills

With these skills you use a more linear and analytical process to select some solutions and reject others. This should help you reach a judgement. These are some of the things you can do to help you evaluate your options:

- Use your strengths, interests and values to see how well an option meets them. Eliminate those which meet them less well.
- Ensure you have information from a range of reliable sources and that you are not relying on other people’s opinions on their own.
- Consider whether an option is realistic i.e., could you meet the grades required?
- Consider how well an options fits into any career plans.
- Is it achievable?
- Is it affordable?
- Do you have enough time to meet deadlines?
- Does it offer good value for money?
- What are the consequences of choosing this option?

The downside to a very focused approach is when it’s used too early. Narrowing options before undertaking any wider research can result in the best solutions remaining hidden.

Take your time to explore widely and openly first.

Decision making and a grid process

At the end of the research process, you should be able to decide about the options you have looked at. You can also decide to not make a choice and this can be valid, especially if the timing isn’t right.

If you are still finding it difficult to make any final decisions, you may wish to use a decision-making grid to help you weigh up different factors. The Careers Service at Oxford University provides some details on [using a grid process](#).

And finally

If other people are trying to influence your decision, it's worth considering that the best outcome for you and what others think is best for you are not always the same thing. Discuss your thoughts with the person who is trying to influence you. You must live with the consequences of the choice not them, so taking on someone else's ideas could prove to be hard work in the long run.

**© FutureSmart Careers Ltd
April 2022**