



A Guide to Using Research Skills

Choosing what you want to do after leaving school will generally require time and commitment to not only gather enough information but also to reflect on the findings before your final decisions can be made.

COVID-19 Info

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, disruptions to Higher Education and the labour market are expected, but exactly what these will be is not yet known. Some universities may be more affected than others and it will be the same story for career sectors. This is a fast-changing landscape and research that you do now may need to be checked again later in the year for any changes.

There are plenty of options to think about and some of these are listed below. It may not be necessary to research all of these in minute detail, but there's certainly value in looking at more than one set of options to gain a broader knowledge of possibilities and to compare and contrast the findings. There may be pros and cons to each depending what your personal goals are.

Options could include, among others:

- University courses in the UK
- University courses abroad
- Apprenticeships – Advanced, Higher, Degree
- Gap Year opportunities
- School Leaver Schemes

Research Skills

Year 12 provides the opportunity to develop a set of key research skills to enable good career decision making about your options now and in the future. These skills will have lifelong use and can be applied again and again such as: in your first job search; evaluating postgraduate study options or changing career direction later in life etc. They broadly fall under the following headings

- Self-awareness
- Data collection
- Evaluating sources
- Divergent thinking (being open-minded)
- Convergent thinking (finding a focus and solution)
- Critical thinking and analysis
- Planning and scheduling
- Decision making

Self-awareness

Gaining self-awareness into what you enjoy doing (your interests), what you are good at (your strengths) and what's really important to you (your values) is the foundation block to evaluating career, training or educational opportunities.

Reflecting on lists of your personal strengths, interests and values can help to generate ideas for degree subjects, apprenticeships or careers to explore and could also provide a filter through which to sift and sort whether an option makes sense. Reflecting on this may involve the following types of questions:

- Does a particular university course use your skills well?
- Is the gap year activity in an area that interests you?
- Does the apprenticeship provide you with the variety and hands-on experiences that you know are important to you?
- Is someone recommending an option because it fits their interests more than your own?

Data collection

To make a fully informed decision you will need information. This can be gathered from some different sources and could include:

- University websites
- University search and compare websites (UK and Abroad)
- Apprenticeship search websites
- Online reviews
- Open days, visits, career insight days

Have look at a list of recommended websites on the [FutureSmart Careers Resources Hub](#).

COVID-19 Info

Many sources of information are now being offered remotely

- ★ University [virtual tours and open days](#).
- ★ Chat online to existing university students through [Unibuddy](#)
- ★ Find out about a variety of Apprenticeships though [online chats](#)
- ★ [Virtual Medical Work Experience](#) is available at Brighton and Sussex Medical School
- ★ Online careers advice is available at helpline@futuresmartcareers.co.uk

Evaluating sources

For information to be useful, you will need to consider the reliability of the information you come across or that's offered to you.

- Is it up to date?
- Is it objective or just someone's personal opinion?
- What bias is attached?
- Is it marketing information with a positive spin?

- Does the source provide the full picture?

Consider these:

- You are weighing up Manchester University vs Oxford Brookes. Your teacher tells you should pick Manchester. They know because they studied there 10 years ago.
- A parent is keen for you to enter the accounting profession as they know it offers a stable career path.
- A prospectus says its university is in the top 1% of universities worldwide.
- A friend tells you not to apply for a particular course because it sounds dull

You may wish to analyse the sources with the following types of questions:

Is the teacher's information up-to-date? Are they biased towards a Russell Group university? How else could you find out about the university and the courses on offer?

How well-placed is the parent to offer advice about the accounting profession? Do they work in recruitment in the sector? Do they understand the current entry routes and options (degrees and apprenticeships)? Where else could you find out? Who else could you speak to?

Where has the university gained the statistic? One league table or more than one? What about the course you are considering – what is the ranking for this?

Did the friend fully research the course to make their judgement? Do you find the same things interesting? Do they want the same things from a course as you do? For example, you may be more interested in the strong employability rate from the course.

A word about league tables...

League tables (The Guardian, The Times and Sunday Times, The Complete University Guide, QS World Rankings etc) may be able to help you narrow down some options. The tables provide data on entry standards, student satisfaction, employment prospects, teaching ratios and spend per student among other factors. Courses are then ranked according to combined sets of data.

To get the most out of league tables you need to consider the factors that are most important to you as these may differ from the table's publisher. You can read more here:

[Guide to Using League Tables](#)

Planning and scheduling

Good research generally involves some planning and scheduling and you need to start your research early enough to gather enough information and meet application requirements and deadlines.

Application Timetables Many options have a specific timetable of events and deadlines that differ to a standard UCAS application. These include applications to Apprenticeships, to Oxford and Cambridge universities, Medicine and Veterinary courses and overseas courses. This also applies to assessment tests which include the BMAT or UCAT for Medicine and Veterinary Courses, the LNAT for some Law degrees, SATs or ACTs for USA applications or

the Oxbridge Subject Admissions Tests which all have their schedules. The key in all these cases is to check websites carefully for the details, making a note of any specific deadlines.

University Open Days, Taster Days, Employer Career Insight Days etc, also need planning and scheduling. These provide the opportunities to gain first-hand information, evaluate locations and other facilities. See: [Questions to ask during an open day](#)

Work experience is a key requirement for some courses and you will need time to research what is required, find the opportunities, apply and complete them.

COVID-19 Info

Assessment Tests. During Covid-19 many of the preparation courses have moved online. Check individual websites for information.

University Open Days and Taster Days. universities are offering these online and you can talk to current students through [Unibuddy](#). See [OpenDays.com](#) for dates virtual open days taking place over the next few months and [www.unitasterdays.com](#)

Work Experience - During the Covid-19 restrictions, there is more flexibility on the work experience component required for some courses and there are a number of things you can do instead. Find out more about Virtual Medicine Work Experience at [www.themedicportal.com](#). Some institutions are offering a remote work experience programme such as [Brighton and Sussex Medical School](#).

Online Courses. During Covid-19 these are great way to show that you were using your time productively during the lockdown. [FutureLearn](#) and [Coursera](#) are two of the most well-known platforms.

Information Interviews. Conversations can take place remotely (Zoom, Skype etc) or over the phone during the lockdown.

Divergent thinking

Divergent thinking is a free-flowing, "non-linear" process. New ideas emerge by exploring lots of possibilities and you'll need to take an open-minded approach. Good research will involve looking at more than one option via a range of sources. The benefits lie in discovering new ideas which ultimately could be a better fit for you or seeing your original idea in a new light when it's compared to other options.

University search tools (UCAS, What Uni, The Uni Guide), apprenticeship sites (Not Going to Uni, Rate My Apprenticeship) and careers information websites (Prospects, National Careers Service) present researchers with lots of related ideas to explore, so do look out for these.

Divergent thinking also has its drawbacks. Researching anything and everything without drawing any conclusions may lead to a new level of paralysis, watch out! At some point in the process, options will need to be narrowed and critically evaluated. Alternatively, you may choose to postpone your decision-making.

Convergent thinking, Critical Thinking & Analysis

Where divergent thinking is open-ended, convergent thinking uses a more linear and analytical process to select the most likely solutions and reject others. Here, critical thinking and analysis are needed to reach a judgement. These are some suggestions:

- Use your strengths, interests and values to see how well an option meets them and eliminate any which meet them less well.
- Ensure you have information from a range of impartial sources and that you are not relying on other people's judgements.
- Consider whether an option is realistic.

Here's a sample of questions you might wish to reflect on:

- Does the option fit well with your skills and interests?
- Does the option fit into any career plans you may have?
- What actions will you need to take to secure the opportunity?
- 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 convergent thinking emerges when it's used too early in the research process. The narrow, focused approach may result in the best solutions remaining hidden. Take your time to explore widely and openly first.

Decision Making

At the end of the research process you should be in a position to make a decision or judgement about the options you have looked at or you may decide to not make a decision which is a valid choice, especially if the timing isn't right. If you are finding it difficult to make 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 [here](#).

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. You have to live with the consequences of the choice rather than them, so taking on someone else's ideas could prove to be hard work.

COVID-19 Info

As there may be some changes to the Higher Education and Labour Market landscapes you may feel more comfortable reserving any final decisions until more is known. If this is the case you may need to accept a delay to moving forward and consider how you will use the intervening time. For example, delaying applying to university may result in an unexpected gap year.