

**I don't know
what I want to
do!**

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It's OK.

'I don't know what I want to do' is one of the most common phrases we hear at the Careers Service. Don't worry! It's normal not to know what you want to do after you leave university.

For most people, their 'career' develops over time, as they figure out what they're good at, what they enjoy and what opportunities are out there. Most people have several different careers over their working life, so don't focus too much on the big question 'what am I going to do with my life?' Let's just concentrate on the next step! Think 'evolution', rather than 'master plan'.

People explore, and make choices in different ways. It's like going to a supermarket. Some people have it all planned out, take a list of what they need and stick to it. Others go with no list but a fair idea of what they like, then see what's there, what's on offer, or new things they can try. Both approaches are ok. There's no right or wrong answer, and it's the same with your 'career' – the only person who can tell if it feels right is you.

This guide contains a number of suggestions for ways to reflect on what is important to you, what skills you have (or need) and what jobs you could explore.

If you work through some of the ideas in this guide you should start to build a picture of some jobs or careers which you might enjoy and are a good match for you.

Section 1 – What do I enjoy? What am I good at?

If you understand what you're good at and what you enjoy doing, it's easier to choose jobs that will make you feel fulfilled. Some employers even use 'strengths interviews' to recruit people who enjoy using specific skills and qualities, and are good at them. So in addition to understanding yourself better, considering these questions will help you be more aware of what you have to offer an employer.

To find out what drives you, ask yourself the following questions – and remember, there are no right or wrong answers:

- A. What am I good at?
- B. What do I enjoy?
- C. What things are important to me?

A. What am I good at?

All jobs require a broad range of skills such as problem solving, communication, team-working and customer orientation. Specialist skills may be important in some roles. Understanding where your strengths lie could help you choose a job or career you would be particularly good at.

Consider:

- What makes me good at my part-time job? (e.g. being organised, motivating others, team work, IT skills, working under pressure).
- What makes/made me successful in my studies? (e.g. researching skills, working under pressure, writing, visualising problems, co-ordinating team projects).
- Outside studies and work, what am I good at? (e.g. consider hobbies, extra-curricular activities, societies, social activities)
- What am I less confident/skilled in doing? (e.g. last minute working, shy about leading a group).

- What skills helped me attain my greatest achievements? (e.g. persistence, organisation, creativity).

Ask your friends and family what they think you do really well. If they are honest and tactful, they may also be able to suggest areas that you need to improve? Also, consider all the things you can do now that you couldn't do many years ago - things you take for granted such as IT skills, language skills etc - and make a note.

Make a list of your skills using the above examples to get you started. You should aim for a list of at least 10 skills. Ideas can be found on our website:

www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/employable

Circle the skills that you feel are your strongest. Pick at least 5, and be as honest as you can. This list is for your eyes only, so don't downplay something you are really good at, or rate yourself highly for a skill you have barely used. Distinguishing what you're great at and what you're just ok at can help you decide what careers might be a better match for you. Those skills you have circled are the things you are good (or even great) at, and what you could do well in a job.

B. What do I enjoy doing?

Look at the following questions to explore what drives you in your life. Consider all aspects of your life – not just education or work. Your interests and hobbies can also tell you something about what is important to you. Consider not just the activity, but also what skills or abilities you use.

- What do I like about my degree subject? (e.g. research, lab work, being creative, team projects, etc.).
- What do I enjoy about my part-time job? (e.g. customer contact, solving problems).

- What are my hobbies? What does that say about what I enjoy doing? (E.g. helping others, co-ordinating people, team vs. individual games).
- What do I *not* enjoy? (e.g. lab work, pressure of deadlines).

Make a list of activities you enjoy and the skills that are part of those activities. As with the exercise above, aim for a list of at least 10 things.

Circle the activities that you find most enjoyable from your list. E.g. playing chess (strategy), planning social events (organisation), hockey (team work), blogging (writing skills/communication), etc. Pick at least 5. These are the things you are likely to dedicate time to, and which motivate you. A job related to any of these activities or the underlying skills could be one you enjoy.

What are you good at... AND enjoy?

Revisit your top rated activities and skills for the above. What patterns emerge? What skills or qualities are common to both these highlighted groups? These are your real strengths, because you are good at these things, *and also* enjoy doing them. Have this list handy when looking at possible careers; it will help you make a more informed decision about the options that may suit you best.

C. What things are important to me?

Your values and ideas of what is important have a strong impact on whether you might find a particular job or career fulfilling. Some employers look for particular values in potential employees, so it's helpful to become more aware of what is important to you.

Start an Important / Not important list

Creating these lists will help you when considering specific jobs or career options, and they will grow over time as you become clearer on what's

important to you and as you gain exposure to different career choices you can make.

Consider any preferences you have in the following areas. You may not have a preference in some cases, or you may prefer the opposite of the statement – make a note of whatever thoughts come up.

- Work environment – I prefer to work in an office/outdoors/lab/etc.
- Status & recognition – my worth is recognised by the role I do, the employer I work for
- Challenge – I welcome feeling challenged in what I do
- Reward – how important is a high salary (or good job benefits) to me?
- Personal development –there are good opportunities for training, career progression
- Variety – experiencing a diverse range of tasks, frequent change
- Responsibility – welcoming the chance to take on a high level of responsibility
- Helping others – helping people solve their problems and challenges, serving the community
- Values – working in a role which is in keeping with my personal values
- Independence – ability to make decisions and exert some autonomy in my job
- Job security – the role should be secure with as little uncertainty as possible
- Meaning and fulfilment –feeling fulfilled by the job I do, that my work has purpose
- Location – I wish to work in a specific location/area, or I would like travel opportunities
- Work/life balance – it is important for me to have time outside work for other activities
- And.... Whatever else is important to you.

Whenever you hear or read about a type of job, add to your lists until you build up a picture of what you want.

If you can, rank these preferences from most important to least important. What would you be prepared to sacrifice if you had to choose between for example, salary and location? Bear in mind that it's rare to find a perfect job that matches what you want 100%!

How do these exercises help?

Going through steps A, B and C above will help you gain a much clearer idea of not only what you're good at, but also what motivates you. So when you see a job advert, you can review your lists and see if the job matches what you know about yourself. This can give you more confidence that a job might be a good match for you. It can also avoid you getting lured into a great sounding career which isn't really suited to what you want out of life.

Which jobs might be a match for me?

Prospects Career Planner is a great tool to help you work out what's important to you and which jobs might be a good match:

Career Planner asks you a range of questions about what motivates you and that might be important to you in a job. It then matches you with profiles where people in those jobs gave very similar responses.

www.prospects.ac.uk/planner

Section 2 – Exploring Options

If you don't know what your options are, how do you find out? Here are some of the best approaches taken by other graduates:

- A. Research – Read up on different jobs, employers, what other graduates did
- B. Talk to people – friends, family, employers, previous Manchester graduates
- C. Try things out – work experience, volunteer, join societies. Look for ways to use your skills

You might have a natural preferred style, e.g. if you enjoy browsing the web and analysing information you might find 'researching' the most comfortable way to do things. However, stretching outside your natural comfort zone (e.g. talking to employers and recent graduates) will mean you get a lot more useful knowledge. Whilst any one of these approaches can be helpful, the best way is to do a bit of all of them, so you broaden your horizons.

A. Research

There's a wealth of information out there about different jobs, career paths, postgraduate study – in fact it may seem like there's too much! Below we list some of the best places to get started.

Options related to your degree

Prospects 'What can I do with my degree?' provides information on jobs where your degree would be either essential, or useful.

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/options

What have other graduates from your degree gone on to do?

- Find out on Unistats website www.unistats.co.uk
- [Use the alumni search tool on LinkedIn www.linkedin.com/alumni](http://www.linkedin.com/alumni)

Career options not related to your degree

Around 70% of graduate jobs are open to graduates of any degree subject, so you don't have to be limited by what you studied. Employers are aware that graduates who studied different subjects bring different skills and approaches. As long as you can show the right skills and a clear motivation for a particular job, there's no reason you can't apply.

Explore careers websites

- The 'Which Career' section of the Careers website is a great starting point with information on many different sectors and occupations and links to more specialist sites and resources.
www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/whichcareer
- **Prospects** website
Over 500 career profiles with information on what these jobs involve, case studies of other graduates, what skills you need and how to get in. www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles
- **I Could**
Video profiles of people in hundreds of different jobs – real stories to inspire your career. www.icould.com

B. Talk to people

The internet is a great resource, but often there are details you just can't get from the web. That's where speaking to friends, family, employers, graduates and others come in. They can help you get a real inside knowledge of what a job is really like.

Talk to employers and recent graduates

Find out more about different careers by attending talks and workshops on campus, delivered by employers, alumni and professionals. These usually take place in autumn and spring and are a great way to discover more than you would just from searching the internet. They can answer your questions about their areas of work which can help you decide if it's for you.

Find these events in CareersLink www.manchester.ac.uk/careerslink and see our [events page](#) for details of some of our larger events and fairs. www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/events

Ask friends, family and people you know

These people can help in several ways:

- Ask them for feedback - they may have suggestions of careers they think might suit you. They may also point out things they think you're good at, which could help you narrow down your options.
- They can tell you about jobs they are familiar with, particularly about their own careers if they are in work.
- They may also know about the work of colleagues or other friends.
- Even if they can't give you a job, they may know who to write to, which agencies or websites to use to find adverts, or other inside information about a type of work or industry.

Read the 'Job Search Guide' for advice on making new career contacts and find out more about the jobs they do:

www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/findjobs/graduatejobs/networking

Talk to the Careers Service

Our careers consultants are independent and won't pressurise you into making a decision which isn't right for you. We can often help by asking you some of the questions you should be considering, and help you think through your options. Just be aware - we're unlikely to be able to guess which job you should do! Ring us on 0161 275 2829 or pop in for more information.

C. Try things out!

Whilst websites can help you research the options, and speaking to people about their work can give you a great insight, sometimes there's no replacement for trying it yourself.

Look for opportunities to get involved, a day of 'work-shadowing' (observing someone doing their job), a week or work experience, a summer internship, student societies and volunteering – these are all great ways to fill in the gaps in your knowledge. Is a career in marketing really for you? Perhaps a few days working in an advertising agency will tell you!

Where to find opportunities

Check the 'Get Experience' section of the Careers Service website. Not all opportunities are advertised, and some - like work-shadowing short periods of work experience - are something you need to arrange yourself. Find tips at: www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/experience

Section 3 - Common career concerns

I'm graduating in less than 3 months what can I do?

Don't worry too much if you aren't clear on what you really want to do and you're reaching the end of your course – all you need to do at this point is decide on your first step. It doesn't need to be a choice for life, just something to help you gain experience and evaluate your preferences once you're in a job or further study.

If you're running out of time, this is a better strategy than hoping inspiration will suddenly strike, by which time you'll have missed out on lots of jobs which might have been a great first step on your career. Find a job which is a reasonable starting point – which matches some of your 'Important' list (see above). Some great 'stepping stone' jobs are:

Graduate Internships

- The Manchester Graduate Programme offers 4-12 month paid opportunities just for Manchester graduates
www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/mgip
- More graduate internships are listed on the Careers Service website at: www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/findjobs/graduatejobs/

A full-time job

Many jobs are open to new graduates which are not specifically a graduate training programme or "Graduate Scheme". These jobs offer great experience, and you can still change jobs later if your plans or ideas change. Find these listed at:

www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/findjobs/graduatejobs/

Other stepping stone jobs

Further options include the following. These roles can sometimes appear easier to get into, or more convenient, just be aware that they generally

provide fewer options to develop a graduate level career, so they are usually most effective as very short-term options.

- Temping: good for getting admin skills. Join an agency.
- Summer/seasonal jobs: Kids clubs, summer schools, hotel & tourism work.
- Continuing a student part-time job and trying to up your hours with a view to getting a promotion may be an option. Perhaps there is even a route to management?

How do I move on from a 'stepping stone' job?

Once you're in a job, learn from that experience - what do you enjoy, what do you dislike? Pick up some skills and achievements along the way - get some good material to add to your CV. Then, find another job which is closer to what you now know you want.

Many "graduate schemes" are now so competitive that you can improve your chances by starting another job, putting some good achievements on your CV, and then applying to top schemes in a year or two.

What about work life balance?

Some people work to live, others live to work. You may have factors such as family or even health that restrict the hours or type of work you can do. But many people make active choices about their work environment so that it fits in with their lifestyle.

Bear in mind that achieving work-life balance can be a challenge in any career, especially when you are starting out. In some careers, hours are long and it's extremely difficult.

What are you looking for?

- A job that you feel passionate about that gives your life meaning. Perhaps many of your friendships and activities will be based around your work.
- A job that allows you to have a life outside where you get your drive and motivation.
- A low stress job that you can leave behind in the office at the end of the day.
- A job where you are under pressure but can achieve impressive rewards.

What salary can I afford to live on?

Some locations, e.g. London, are very expensive to live or study in. So try and work out how affordable your ideas are.

- Would a salary in X job pay enough for you to live on?
- What do you need to earn to live? Consider rent, bills, travel, food. Don't forget other expenses & deductions like tax, NI, pensions
- Can you house share to keep costs down e.g. with other new graduates?
- Can you get enough funding for the course you want to pursue to help with living costs? Will you need to find a part-time job?

Are grades an issue?

Some jobs require specific grades for a Degree, A levels, even GCSEs. It can be quite off putting if you don't have those and you may think that everything is closed to you. Don't worry, there are always options:

- If the sticking points are GCSEs or A levels find out if they will consider applicants who don't have the exact grades or not. It usually takes a phone call.

- Can you retake a GCSE or A level? Weight up the value of retaking them (and setting your career back a year) vs. looking at alternatives and moving in a different direction. Check that resits would be considered by the employer or course provider first though.
- Achieving less than a 2:1 is not a disaster! It's still a degree and although some of the bigger companies may want a 2:1, many employers do not require a specific grade. Recently some employers have started taking a more holistic approach and will take candidates with good experience rather than just those with a good degree. Alternatively they may take a lower degree result if your A Level grades (or equivalent) were good. Find more advice here: <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/career-planning/317737-how-to-job-hunt-if-you-get-a-2-2-when-you-graduate>
- Mitigating circumstances: if there were reasons why you did not get the grades you were expecting and these were recorded at the time then an employer may take these into account. <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/applications-and-cvs/370688-what-are-mitigating-circumstances-for-graduate-job-applications>
- As an international student you may need to help employers understand international education. Here are some tips: www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/international/cvs/ucas

I need a job for a fixed period

If you are planning to go travelling or perhaps do a postgraduate course you may have a limited period of time when you are available to work. You could look for graduate internships or seasonal jobs depending on the time period. Consider temping with an agency or finding short term contracts or maternity cover roles. If your plans are flexible could you

consider taking a permanent job and putting your plans on hold if you love it?

I'm planning to travel and need a job when I come back

If you are going travelling overseas and looking for a job on your return you need to plan carefully.

- Apply for a graduate job and see if they will defer entry for a year (not always possible)
- Think about the time of year you are planning to be away. Is it the time when all the interviews and assessment centres are likely to be? It's likely you will have to come back for part of the process so put funds aside.
- Plan ahead who you want to apply to so that you can track when applications open.
- Bookmark your favourite jobsearch sites so you can quickly check if there are opportunities.

Section 4: How do I decide what to do?

Hopefully by now you have some ideas about what is important to you and the options available, but that can still leave a lot of doors open, so at this point consider how to select those which suit you best. It can feel difficult, narrowing things down – don't think of it as limiting your options, after all is it possible to do everything?

What you're really doing is deciding on your first step, based on what you know of yourself and the opportunities open to you. You can always change direction later if you choose to – many do, it's a natural way most people's careers evolve as new opportunities open up. Often our personal circumstances play a large part in our choices too, so consider those as part of your decision making. This section will help you focus on the right choices for you.

Consider what's important to you

Revisit the Important/Not Important lists mentioned in Section 1. There's a good chance not all of these are met by some of the jobs you are considering. Consider which are the most important, non-negotiable things you need (e.g. location), and which are desirable, but not essential (e.g. salary). Can you rule some options out at this stage, or are you prepared to compromise? For example:

- Location – is the job you want available in the place you want to be? Or do you perhaps need a visa, and what are the chances you will get one?
- Salary – are you holding out for the best salary, or can you be flexible?
- Are you waiting for a job with a very narrow list of employers, or will you consider a broader range of opportunities?

Holding out for the perfect job may mean you are job hunting a lot longer than you intended. Consider compromise jobs if they help take you in the right overall direction.

Look at the Pros and Cons

From the options you are still considering, write down what you feel are the positive aspects that attract you to that type of work, and also the negative aspects, e.g. a lot of travel might be a positive for some people, but others might not enjoy it. Use this to help you evaluate your options and see if things are any clearer.

Head vs. Heart

Does your heart say one thing but your head another? Is there a dream job there but you worry it's not realistic? Perhaps it's a sign that you haven't explored your dream job enough, or perhaps other decisions and factors are involved (e.g. worries about relocating, how others might see it, can I afford to support myself?). Acknowledging these thoughts can help you find a resolution. If there's something you really want to do, is there a compromise, or perhaps it's something you can work towards?

5. What do I do now?

We hope the ideas described above are helpful in working out what you want to do. There is no 'one perfect way' to decide what you want to do, everybody finds their path in a slightly different way. So if talking to people or trying things out helps you get a clearer idea, rather than surfing the web – go for it. The ideas presented here are just that – ideas, you can take and use any which you find useful.

Take action

Having an idea of your career direction is valuable, but it's also vital to take active steps forward.

Even if you aren't sure about what you want, doing something is always better than doing nothing while you wait for inspiration. Research shows that most successful graduates do some fundamental things which help build their CV, their skills, their knowledge and contacts.

Use the tool below to find out how you are doing, and what steps you need to take next.

Try the My Future Questionnaire

Whether you have already started exploring your options or are just beginning, take the My Future Questionnaire to will help you work out your next steps. This short questionnaire asks you to assess yourself on the actions you have taken which can improve your chances of getting into a good graduate-level job, shortly after graduating.

Log into My Manchester, on the My Future tab you will find the My Future Questionnaire.

Talk to the Careers Service

If you would like to discuss your ideas or how to get started, ring us on 0161 275 2829 or pop in for more information or to book an appointment.

Check out the Careers Service website for some useful tools to help you work out what you really want from your career:

www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/whichcareer/idontknow

Good luck in your search and above all remember the Careers Service is here to help you!

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