

Alternative Format: Dissertations and Research Projects Toolkit

Landing Page

Welcome and thank you for accessing this toolkit which has been designed to help support you with your academic skills development during your time at Edge Hill. Click 'Get Started' to start the toolkit from the beginning or alternatively select the most relevant heading(s), from the contents below. We recommend completing the sections in order, but you are welcome to work through this toolkit in the way that suits you best.

Accessibility

Our commitment to accessibility

As an Edge Hill student you are part of an incredibly diverse learning community. As part of our ongoing commitment to ensure an equitable and inclusive learning experience for all students, we have placed accessibility at the heart of UniSkills support, which enables all students to participate.

Alternative Formats

This is an alternative format for the Dissertations and Research Projects toolkit.

Welcome from UniSkills

“Hello, we are the [Student Engagement team](#) – otherwise known as UniSkills! We are the people you’ll meet (in real life and online) through various support channels, as we help you develop your academic skills while studying at Edge Hill University. Later in the toolkit you will have the opportunity to explore our wider support, but this is your chance to [find out more about the team](#)”.

Access the video below to hear more about UniSkills and how to use this toolkit from our friendly Student Advisor. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a [Word version](#) or [PDF version](#).

How this Toolkit can Help

Recognising that dissertations and research projects have a different purpose and structure to that of an essay is essential for achieving a strong submission.

Access this short video, featuring one of our friendly academic skills advisors, who will tell you more about why dissertations and research projects are important. Alternatively, you are welcome to access the transcript as a [Word version](#) or [PDF](#) version.

Top tip: Already received some assignment feedback or wish to jump to a specific word or phrase within this toolkit? You can click on the magnifying glass in the top left-hand corner of the navigation panel to access a search box, search for key terms and learn more about that skill. Depending on the device you are using to access the toolkit, and whether you are in portrait or landscape mode, you might need to click on the 3 lines '≡' in the top left-hand corner of your device to access this search feature.

Toolkit objectives:

This toolkit will:

- Help you to understand how to define and refine a dissertation question or title.
- Help you to feel confident about planning and structuring your project.
- Enable you to identify different research methods and methodologies, and to understand the importance of research ethics.
- Provide helpful tips and advice for your supervisory meetings and for becoming a part of academic communities.
- Signpost you to referencing support.
- Outline the final steps in refining your submission.
- Direct you to further resources for developing your research skills.

Completing this toolkit supports the following graduate attributes:

- Literacy
- Critical and creative thinking
- Planning and organisation
- Communication

Writing a Research Proposal

In many cases, the first step in embarking on a research project is writing a research proposal. This is an initial idea of what your research might look like, and it may well change over time. Depending on your subject, there will be different elements to your proposal or even a different name for your proposal. Always check your assignment guidance to be sure.

You may be asked to:

- Identify a working title that clearly states your focus.
- Provide a brief outline of the focus of your project.
- Clearly state what your project's objectives are and what you hope to achieve.
- Consider why you want to conduct this research, and what contribution you can make to your field.
- Situate your project in the wider context of research that already exists. Consider whether there are any gaps in existing literature.
- Outline your methodological approach - will it be literature-based, or will it engage in qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods research?
- Acknowledge any limitations with your research, and highlight potential implications including impact on current research.
- Outline sources used, and potentially sources you intend to use.

Top Tip: It might seem counterintuitive to already be thinking about limitations, implications, and potential issues with your research, but please remember that this is not a bad thing! Displaying a degree of self-awareness at this stage can only strengthen the authenticity of your project. It is inevitable that you will encounter some bumps in the road, and this is a great opportunity to hone some problem-solving skills. Discussing these openly, with colleagues and your supervisor(s), is a good part of a critical approach and, ultimately, a solid research project.

Planning your Proposal

Whilst you may be used to planning assignments, when conducting a research project it is also important to plan your proposal, before you even start planning what you will write! Use the prompts in this timeline to help you start planning and structuring your proposal:

1. Aims:

- What problem do you seek to solve?
 - What question might you answer?
 - What purpose does your research serve?
 - What do you hope to achieve?
2. Rationale:
- Why do you want to conduct this research?
 - Is there a particular topic/area that you are passionate about? Why?
 - Has something stood out to you in lectures/seminars?
 - What is the expertise of your tutors?
3. Literature Review:
- How much research has already been published on this topic?
 - What issues or debates are highlighted?
 - Are there any gaps in the research?
 - How might your research contribute to the existing literature?
4. Methodology:
- Is there a particular methodology that is favoured in your field?
 - Which methodological approach best suits your aims?
 - How feasible is your chosen methodology?
 - Do you need to consider ethical approval?
5. Limitations and Implications:
- Are there any restrictions to the scope of your research?
 - Is there anything you are choosing not to address? How will you justify this?
 - Does your contribution change/challenge existing research?
 - What might further research explore?
6. Reference List:
- Do you know what style of referencing is required?
 - How many sources might you need?
 - Where will you search for sources?
 - How confident do you feel? Do you need support?

Visit our [UniSkills webpages](#) for further support with referencing, or navigate to the Referencing section of this Toolkit.

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Activity: Now have a go at answering some of these questions to help you formulate some initial thoughts for your proposal.

You might find [Chapter 5](#) in The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project useful. Whilst proposals will differ depending on departmental requirements, page 93 gives a helpful example.

Top Tip: Writing a research proposal is a valuable skill beyond approval for the project going ahead. It can help to hone your ability to write any sort of convincing proposal for a project that is feasible, worthwhile, interesting, and sometimes even investable! Think about your goals for the future, and how the skills you are developing now might transfer to your career aspirations. This could include applying for funding for a PhD, proposing and/or managing a project, writing an abstract for publication, or possibly even featuring on Dragon's Den!

Narrowing your Focus

Now that your research proposal has been approved, you can begin to hone in on the precise details of your project. This is a process, so don't worry if your focus changes a little over time. Still, ensuring that the focus of your research is precise is a key aspect of the research process. Too broad, and it will lack depth and criticality; too narrow and it will be difficult to evidence.

Activity: Access these Credo Reference videos on [How to Select a Topic](#) and [What to do When Your Topic is too Broad](#). You may need to use your Edge Hill login to access these. As you work through the videos, try to think about how they relate to your specific project.

Activity: Having accessed the videos, consider now what makes the following titles 'strong' or 'weak'. What differences can you identify?

'Weak' Title	'Strong' Title
Representations of neurodiversity in Twentieth Century literature	An analysis of how AuDHD is represented in slam poetry from 2000-2024
Exploring the mental health of teachers in England	A qualitative study on the mental health of Early Career Teachers in Northern UK

The role that Artificial Intelligence plays in the Media	Artificial Intelligence: the role that ChatGPT plays in magazines and newspapers
Nursing practice post-Brexit	The impact of Brexit on nurse retention, progression, and wellbeing in the UK

Activity: Now that you know what a 'strong' question or title looks like, have a go at creating one of your own.

Refining the Scope of your Research

In addition to ensuring that your focus is as narrow as is feasible, you will also need to consider the scope of your research. This includes deciding where and how you will obtain your information, and could include:

Literature Searching

Some things to consider when searching your literature are:

- What your search strategy will be. What key terms, phrases, and synonyms you might use.
- What databases you will explore.
- Whether there are any subject-specific sources you need to attend to.

For more information, access your [Subject Resources](#) page.

For a more in-depth exploration of literature searching, please access our [Finding Academic Information webpage](#).

Primary Research

If you are conducting primary research (whether it be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), there are some key considerations you will need to make. These include:

- How many respondents you want or need.
- Whether you will restrict this by age, race, ethnicity sex, sexuality, ability/disability, or any other factors.

- Whether there is a specific geographical location or chronological timeframe you wish to focus on.
- What ethical issues may arise, and how you can anticipate and mitigate these.

For a deeper exploration of this, please navigate to the Methods, Methodology, and Research Ethics section of this Toolkit.

Top Tip: Whilst part of your assignment brief might include creating an original contribution to knowledge (or something similar), try not to be too worried about this. 'Originality', in this context, can mean a number of different things. It may be that you are collecting new data, but it could also be that you are offering a new perspective on or asking different questions about existing data - this is an 'original contribution' too!

Planning and Structure

Planning

As with any assignment, planning is a vital component of the process. It is particularly crucial for an extended research project, as there are many elements that you will need to keep track of.

In addition to planning your time and structure, it is also important to consider the personal element of project management. This includes ensuring that you treat your participants, supervisors, stakeholders, and yourself with care and respect.

SMART Goals

SMART Goals help you to create manageable and realistic expectations of the work you are able to complete. They can also help you to prioritise tasks. Instead of having a full day stretch ahead of you with little focus (which can lead to procrastination and lack of productivity), having a list of clear goals can help you use your time in a much more fruitful manner.

For example, rather than thinking of the larger task of writing your entire project, you might break it up into the following SMART Goal:

Specific: I will write 3,000 words this week.

Measurable: I will complete at least 500 words per day.

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Attainable: I can block off at least two hours per day.

Relevant: I want to write as much as possible so that I have time to proofread and edit.

Time-Bound: I have a supervisory meeting next week.

It might be that you set multiple of these smaller goals per day/week/month, which is perfectly fine - chunking your tasks like this makes them much more attainable and will therefore add to your sense of achievement.

Activity: Why not make a start now by planning yourself some SMART goals for the day, the week, and even the month.

The Pomodoro Technique

Pomodoro comes from the Spanish word for tomato, and involves breaking your tasks up into small chunks of time (or slices of tomato!). This is an excellent tool if you find yourself sitting for prolonged periods of time and getting little done, or if you struggle with even starting a task. It limits and focuses your time, and ensures that you factor in regular breaks.

It is worth bearing in mind Parkinson's Law here - the theory that the more time we allot to a task, the harder and more daunting it is to complete. Pomodoro focus tools can really help to make tasks feel manageable, and to alleviate feelings of being overwhelmed.

Activity: Choose a small goal you need to complete. Now have a go at using this [Pomofocus tool](#) to help you complete it.

GANTT Charts

GANTT charts are project management tools that help you to plan, schedule, and monitor a research project.

[TechSkills](#) are able to support you with creating GANTT charts, but you can also follow their [self-help guide](#).

Activity: Using the guide from TechSkills, have a go at creating your own GANTT chart.

Inspiration 9 IE

Being a student at Edge Hill University allows you access to a mind-mapping tool called [Inspiration 9 IE](#). This can be found on all Edge Hill computers, and is also available to download on your own

device. Inspiration 9 IE not only allows you to create a mind-map of your ideas, key themes, and discreet aspects of your research; it also provides the option of converting this into a linear plan. You might then use this to think about structuring your response.

As an Edge Hill student, you can also take advantage of our range of [assistive technologies](#) to help with a variety of study skills strategies.

Activity: Access or download Inspiration 9 IE, and have a play around with its different features.

Structure

Just as important as planning your time is planning the structure of your project. Again, whilst the structure and content may differ depending on your subject, there are some common elements that often feature in research projects:

- Title: Ensure your title is concise and gives an accurate flavour of what your project is about or seeks to achieve.
- Abstract: Your abstract should provide a snapshot of the aims, methods, and findings of your project.
- Introduction: Use your introduction to guide your reader - tell them where you are going and how you will get there.
- Literature Review: Your literature review should situate your project within the wider context of your subject, highlighting any pertinent issues and/or debates. It can also outline any gaps in research and where your contribution might lie. For more support with writing a literature review, visit our [UniSkills Dissertations](#) webpage.
- Methods/Methodology: This is where you outline how you will go about your research, and why your chosen methods are appropriate to your project.
- Findings: This section often takes the form of a systematic presentation of the findings of your research.
- Discussion of Findings: This is your opportunity to make sense of your findings, and to outline their relevance and significance.
- Conclusion and Recommendations: This is your mic-drop moment! You might refer back to your introduction in order to summarise your project and confirm that you have achieved what you set out to do. However, you might also take this opportunity to reiterate any limitations and to make some recommendations for further research.

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- Reference List: Ensure that you follow your specified referencing system here, making sure that all sources are accurately presented.
- Appendix: Finally, include any additional information that you have collated and made reference to in your project.

Remember that if your project is more literature-based and thematic, you may not have all of these elements.

Structure

When considering your structure, there are some key considerations you need to be making. This is to ensure that your project has fluidity and demonstrates a logical progression between sections. Not only will this help you to build your argument, it will also guide your reader.

The following prompts may be helpful to consider:

- Think about your reader: what do they need to know? What do you want them to take away from your research?
- Can you use headings and subheadings to guide yourself and your reader?
- Keep your research question or title in your mind throughout, along with your Learning Outcomes.
- Think about the parts you can control, for example the word count (you might set a limit for each section); the focus (remember to keep the content relevant); and the limits of your research (remember your scope, and the open-ended nature of much research).
- It is not unusual for each section to have its own mini introduction and conclusion. You might consider factoring this into your plan.
- Remember, you are structuring an argument, not just describing. For more information on being critical in your writing, please visit our [Academic Reading and Writing](#) webpages.

Methods, Methodology, and Research Ethics

Debunking the Language of Methodology

Regardless of the type of project you are undertaking, you will need to make some mention of methodology, whether this be a short justification for a literature-based search or a more lengthy analysis of different research methods.

Understanding research methods and methodology can often feel like attempting to understand a brand new language. As such, it is vital to comprehend what all of the different terminology means. Use the following table to explore some key methodological terms and their definitions.

<u>Term</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Qualitative Research	Explores behaviours and experiences through the collection of non-numerical data.
Quantitative Research	Collects and analyses numerical data to test hypotheses.
Mixed Methods	Uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods.
Research Ethics	The moral principles that guide research.
Research Methods	The techniques used by researchers to collect and analyse information.
Research Methodology	The theory of how research should be carried out.
Primary Research	Original data that you yourself have collected.
Secondary Research	Data or information that has already been collected by others.

Whilst this may be new language to comprehend, having a basic grasp on research terminology will greatly help you in understanding and/or conducting research.

In order to further explore this topic, you might like to access Sage Research Methods' [Project Planner](#) and [Methods Map](#). Uwe Flick's text on [Introducing Research Methodology](#) is also a useful starting point. For a more in-depth overview of different elements of research methodology, you can access Bairagi and Munot's [Research Methodology](#). Chapters 1-3 are particularly pertinent.

Which Method to Choose?

It can often be difficult to decide which method best suits your question/title and what you aim to achieve. Below you will find more detailed explanations the three main methodological approaches.

Qualitative Research

This type of research seeks meaning within human behaviour. It tends to be more exploratory than quantitative research, and focuses on the subjective experiences of participants. Qualitative research often involves interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires.

One of the strengths of qualitative research is that it can provide depth of insight into human beliefs, experiences, and behaviours. However, qualitative research tends to be more small-scale than quantitative research, so it can be difficult to generalise findings to larger populations.

Quantitative Research

The aim of quantitative research is to measure and quantify information. It focuses on testing hypotheses and identifying relationships between different variables. Quantitative research often involves large-scale surveys and/or experiments.

One of the strengths of quantitative research is that it can provide precise data that can be generalised to larger populations. However, it may not provide depth of insight into the complexity of human behaviour and experiences.

Mixed Methods

A mixed methods approach combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This means that the research design might include both interviews and experiments.

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A strength of a mixed methods approach is that it can combine the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, this approach can also be time-consuming and may require a larger team of researchers who specialise in a particular method.

Activity: Now you have a deeper understanding of research methodology, have a think about which approach may best suit your research project and why.

Research Ethics

Whether you are conducting a literature-based study (secondary research), or one that engages in primary research, ethical considerations should be at the forefront of each element of your project. You should ensure that you obtain ethical approval and clearance *before* you embark upon any data collection.

Activity: Whilst this video on [Why Research Needs Ethics](#) speaks from a scientific context, it also contains information that pertains to research ethics in other contexts. Take a few moments to access it and make notes.

You might also like to explore the following texts:

[Chapter 4](#) of Doing Research in the Real World offers a useful overview of research ethics.

[The Student's Guide to Research Ethics](#) spans the entire lifecycle of a research project.

Whilst dated, this [Textbook of Research Ethics](#) provides a good outline of different ethical considerations. Chapters 3 and 4 are particularly helpful.

Supervisions and Academic Communities

A potential difference from previous assignments you have completed is the assignation of a supervisor to your project. Along with this comes the opportunity to have a different working relationship with your tutors. In addition, there may be the potential opportunity to establish new working relationships and be involved in academic communities.

This will enable you to:

ehu.ac.uk/uniskills

ehu.ac.uk/lis

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- Establish yourself within that academic community.
- Discuss your ideas and progress with fellow researchers and your tutors.

Supervisions

Supervisions are your chance to engage in exploratory discussions regarding your project. They can be a fruitful and deeply satisfying aspect of your research journey, as you engage in challenging and critical conversations with your tutor or tutors. Remember the following tips to make the most of your supervisory meetings:

- Come prepared: Have a notebook, drafts, plans, or ideas and be prepared to engage in an active discussion about your project.
- Set deadlines for meeting: Use a GANTT chart or diary to work towards meeting deadlines.
- Have realistic expectations: Your supervisor cannot proofread or write your project for you.
- Be resilient: Not all of your theories or studies will go to plan - your supervisor can help you to navigate this.
- Know where you can access support: [UniSkills](#), Module Lead, Personal Tutor

Academic Communities

As an undergraduate, and certainly as a postgraduate researcher, it is likely that you will have the opportunity to engage with various academic communities. Although such communities may initially seem intimidating, remember that no-one knows everything and your contributions (and questions!) are valid. As long as you feel prepared, these communities can be important supportive and dialogic networks to engage with. Explore some of these different types of communities below.

Conferences

Conferences are meetings or events where researchers can share and discuss their work.

Researchers will present a short paper that provides an overview of their research, or outlines a key aspect of it. There is usually time allowed for questions, so be prepared for this (whether it be asking or answering questions). Researchers may also present on a panel, where you might be expected to respond to the work of other researchers. Finding out about your co-panellists and/or other speakers is a really useful way to feel prepared and confident when attending a conference.

Symposia

From the Greek *symposion*, meaning a gathering of the educated, symposia function in very similar ways to conferences. However, the term is often used to refer to a smaller gathering that focuses more on discussion rather than/in addition to the formal presentation of papers.

Research Seminars

'Research seminars' can mean a number of different things. Sometimes they feature as part of a thematic series, with each seminar being hosted by a different academic, researcher, or student. It may also refer to students gathering together, under the guidance of a tutor, to explore and discuss research. Regardless of the format, research seminars (like symposia) always feature an element of discussion.

Workshops

Workshops are often interactive sessions that facilitate the exploration of different facets of research. These will be held locally in your faculty, institution-wide by [UniSkills](#), along with some being held nationally and internationally. Workshops can be a really valuable place to learn about, and hone, your research skills.

Networking

Networking is the opportunity to share information and ideas with others in your field. This often occurs in informal settings, and may be built into a conference schedule. Although traditionally catered to more extroverted individuals, there are now plenty of opportunities to network that do not require a typically 'outgoing' nature. [LinkedIn](#) is an excellent place to get started.

For more support with presenting your work, visit our [UniSkills Presentations](#) webpage.

Activity: Complete a quick search for conferences, seminars, and workshops in your field. Why not consider signing up for some? Remember, whilst competitive, there is always a possibility of applying for funding to attend.

Referencing

It can be tempting to leave your references until the very end – if you have done this previously, try to make an effort now to organise your references as you move through your project. It is important that you keep track of your references as you work through your project, as it is likely you will have many, and you don't want to lose any! Moreover, being organised in this way from the outset will benefit your overall project in terms of synthesising information and supporting your arguments.

It is important that you follow your department's or discipline's specific referencing criteria and guidelines. Most subjects at Edge Hill University will use Edge Hill Harvard Referencing. Harvard Referencing differs across institutions, so be sure to follow the Edge Hill Harvard Referencing Guide.

You can also explore our [UniSkills referencing webpage](#). This provides guidance on Harvard Referencing along with other styles such as OSCOLA, Vancouver, and APA.

[RefWorks](#) is a reference management system that Edge Hill can support you with. For further support with this, do book an [Information Skills one-to-one](#) with UniSkills.

Top Tip: Remember also to stay organised with drafts of your work. Don't rely on automated systems to save your work for you! It is a good idea to back your work up in multiple places to avoid losing anything - just remember which draft you are working on at any given time!

Final Steps

Now that you have finished all of the hard work of researching and writing your dissertation or research project, it is important that you allow time for fine-tuning it.

This process involves proofreading and editing. More information on this can be found on our [Academic Reading and Writing webpage](#).

You will also need to spend some time formatting your work. Your department may have specific expectations with regards to layout, font size and pagination and this information will be detailed within your module area on Blackboard.

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You can also access further support through [TechSkills](#)' self-help information on Long Documents and Formal Reports.

It is important that you leave enough time for your final and professional finish. Your dissertation is a culmination of your academic writing skills developed at university – take pride in it.

Related Resources

Useful Reading

To learn more about writing research reports and dissertations, you might find the following text useful:

Ó SIOCHRÚ, C., 2022. A Student Guide to Writing Research Reports, Papers, Theses and Dissertations [eBook]. Oxford: Routledge. Available

from: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/edgehill/reader.action?docID=7105089> [Accessed 7 March 2024].

If you are a postgraduate researcher, you may also find this text helpful:

ALLEN, J.A., 2019. The Productive Graduate Student Writer: a Guide to Managing Your Process, Time, and Energy to Write Your Research Proposal, Thesis, Dissertation, and Get Published [eBook]. Oxford: Routledge. Available

from: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/edgehill/reader.action?docID=5808041> [Accessed 7 March 2024].

Useful Links

This resource from [Manchester Academic Phrasebank](#) can help with the 'phraseological 'nuts and bolts' of academic writing.

Check out our [Academic Reading and Writing webpages](#), which include an interactive opportunity to learn more about criticality.

UniSkills Blogs

UniSkills write regular [blogs](#), including a monthly focus on library resources and academic skills. In these quick reads you can learn about useful resources, how to access them and their benefits to your studies. You might even find us exploring new ways of thinking!

Other Resources

Check out [LinkedIn Learning](#) for access to free, unlimited access to thousands of high quality online courses and video tutorials written by industry experts.

UniSkills Support at Edge Hill University

As well as our toolkits, there are many ways you can access support for your academic skills development. No question or query is too big or too small. Whether you are new to studying or need to refresh or develop skills, we have a range of options for you to access at both graduate and postgraduate taught level.

Webpages

Reach your potential and visit our [UniSkills web pages](#). Find out more about the support designed to help you develop your academic skills and confidence at university and beyond. Whatever your subject or level of study, UniSkills has something to offer.

Workshops and Webinars

[UniSkills workshops and webinars](#) are an opportunity for a deeper dive into a specific skill that will support you on your academic journey. Facilitated by our friendly and knowledgeable Academic Skills Advisors, these sessions provide an informal safe space where you will be supported alongside other students in a small group setting.

Appointments

All students are able to book [a one-to-one appointment](#). Our experienced Academic Skills Advisors can help you develop your academic skills and strategies throughout your time at university. One-to-one support is available on a wide range of topics including academic reading, writing, and referencing, finding information, and preparing your assignment for submission.

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AskUs

For any questions across any of our library and learning services, you can [Ask Us](#) online.

Campaigns

Explore our year-round [UniSkills campaigns](#) to enhance your academic journey at Edge Hill. From pre-arrival prep to acing your exams, we've got something for everyone!

Keep in Touch

Library and Learning Services Instagram

Make sure you're following us over on [Instagram](#) for all the latest Library and Learning Services news, events and support.

You'll discover weekly 'what's on' stories; reminders about upcoming campaigns and events; fun, interactive polls and competitions; hidden treasures from our Archive; and reading for pleasure recommendations.

Library and Learning Services Blog

In the [Library and Learning Services \(LS\) blog](#) you'll find lots of information, ideas and support curated by a wide range of staff and students from across the service.

Browse through all our useful blogs via the Home tab or visit individual areas of interest via the sub-blog headings along the menu bar.

Your Views Count

Thank you for engaging with this toolkit.

We'd love to know what you thought, and you can share your feedback in our short [UniSkills Toolkit Satisfaction Survey](#). The survey should take you no longer than five minutes to complete.

Your feedback helps us to continually improve our support - thank you!

You have now completed this UniSkills toolkit and can close the window. We hope you found it useful, and we look forward to continuing to support you with your academic skills development.