BA (Hons) Human Geography
BA (Hons) Planning and Geography
BSc (Hons) Environmental Conservation
BSc (Hons) Environmental Science
BSc (Hons) Geography

Level 5 tutorials: Personal and Professional Development
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Personal and Professional Development at Level 5
During your first year at Sheffield Hallam University, you will have got to know your PPD tutor well - and them, you. Barring staff moves and new appointments, you will normally retain the same PPD tutor during your level 5 studies. If you are a direct entrant into level 5, you will be allocated a PPD tutor who you should hopefully retain throughout your studies with us.

The level 5 programme shares similar objectives to the level 4 programme; we hope this PPD programme will help you to:

- make the most of your learning experiences;
- be successful on your course;
- achieve other goals you may have in the future (e.g. suitable employment).

You’ll be supported in this through a range of learning activities and assessments in all your modules, but also through the programme of PPD tutorials timetabled throughout the year.

How will the PPD process help you?
The PPD process helps you to record, review, reflect, plan and monitor your learning and development. It offers information and activities to help you think about your:

- academic development;
- personal development;
- professional development;
- career management.

It is based on these principles:

- to do well you need to improve how you learn;
- Reviewing and reflecting on how you do things helps you to learn. Writing down thoughts also helps. It’s quite different from just thinking.
- Recording your achievements helps when you come to apply for a job. Employers are interested in you, the person, and your skills, as well as your knowledge.

You will add to many of these activities during your course. Consider keeping a special file to record your achievements. For example - you could keep records of useful information for your CV or for job applications (e.g. references, result letters, feedback from tutors or employers).
The Level 5 focus is on:

- developing your academic skills, reviewing and reflecting on your progress so far, identifying your strengths and areas to improve, and then planning how to address these;

- developing professional and employability skills and knowledge - including the skills related to choosing and finding a job (such as CV writing and interview skills), and the role of relevant professional bodies;

- enhancing your research skills, partly to enable you to successfully complete your final year dissertation, but also because the ability to undertake your own research is a crucial element in many different professions and an indication that you have become an `independent learner`.

How will the PPD process work?

As in previous years, your tutor will engage with you personally, and will support you through a range of PPD activities. Each tutor usually has only seven PPD students in each year, and they will usually be closely involved with your specific course. You will be able to turn to them (as well as your course leader) if you have any academic problems here at SHU. They will also be responsible for writing job references for you - both for work experience and placements whilst you study, and after you graduate.

During Level 5, you will meet your tutor at least six times in small groups. These tutorials will appear on your timetable. The tutorials are designed to encourage you to reflect on your personal strengths and areas for improvement, as well as exploring a range of academic and professional study skills to help you to learn more effectively and achieve your long term goals. You will also have one-to-one meetings with your tutor to discuss your academic progress. These meetings will help you to reflect on your progress so far and plan to improve your performance in the future.

There is a special Blackboard site for the PPD programme which has more materials about study skills and other information. You will also be able to contact your tutors and other members of the group through the site. This Blackboard site will also include an electronic version of this PPD Guide. You may prefer reading and using the guide on-line. In particular, you will be able to access all the relevant web links through the on-line version, and this will be a simple way of linking through to additional study support services provided by the University centrally.
Is the PPD Programme Assessed?
The PPD programme is not assessed in the same way as your other modules: it is designed purely to help you learn and achieve your goals on the rest of the course. However, as with previous years, your PPD tutor will ask you complete various pieces of work - for example a personal profile and a Curriculum Vitae (CV). These activities will help you when you begin your search for work and will help your tutor in supporting you through that process.

If you have chosen to undertake the Professional Practice and Placement module, you will be seeking either a short work placement or a full sandwich year to complete that module. So your PPD tutorials will particularly help you in that module. But we encourage all level 5 students to consider gaining relevant employment experience - paid or unpaid. Your PPD tutorials will help you in this process and will also help you to gain the most from your experiences.

The tutorial programme

| Tutorial 1 (wk 11) | Welcome back and review of progress  
|                    | Who am I and what am I good at?  
|                    | Producing a personal profile; Producing a CV |
| Tutorial 2 (wk 15) | How to identify/improve your skills and blow your own trumpet!  
|                    | Key skills reflection and introduction to STAR technique.  
|                    | Review of exam skills |
| Tutorial 3 (wk 20) | Thinking about careers  
|                    | What can I do with my degree? What are my opportunities?  
|                    | What are employers looking for? |
|                    | Christmas & New Year break |
| Tutorial 4 (wk 26) | Critical thinking and critical analysis - what is it?  
|                    | Thinking about literature reviews |
| Tutorial 5 (wk 30) | Employability case studies and producing a personal action plan  
|                    | (Reminder - choosing electives for the next academic year) |
| Tutorial 6 (wk 39) | Looking ahead to Level 6 - getting ahead with your dissertation - key tips.  
|                    | Literature review |
Employability Skills

Who am I and what am I good at?
How well do you know yourself? Increasing your self-awareness can help you make the most of your time at university and relate your strengths, preferences and values to future career opportunities. It can also help you make effective job applications and succeed at interviews in the future. To get started, produce a personal profile to share with your tutor. A personal profile outlines your personal interests/motivations, qualities, skills and plans for the future. The following questions may help you:

- What three personality words best describe you? (Friends and family can also help you answer this!)
- What are you good at?
- What are you interested in?
- What events or moments in your life do you feel most proud of?
- What are the small moments in everyday life make you feel good?
- What are your plans for the future? (these can be career areas you may be interested in - not necessarily exactly what job you plan to do)

There are lots of methods and resources to help you get to know yourself better in your own time:

- Personal reflection on your past experience and your own feelings.
- Reflection upon feedback you may have received from others.
- Learn from other people’s experiences - what do they like about their jobs and why? Can you relate this to your personality and interests?
- Try out new things!
- Self-assessment tools. These are not an exact science but can be a useful way of helping you identify your skills, motivations and desires to help stimulate ideas and get you thinking about your future career. It is useful to discuss results with a careers advisor afterwards. You can try out these examples: Prospects Career Planner and TARGETjobs Careers Report.
What do we mean by 'employability'?

We define employability as "... the knowledge, personal and professional skills and attitudes that will support your future development and employment."

It is something of a jigsaw and the pieces include: generic skills, a positive attitude, subject specific knowledge and skills, workplace experience, commercial awareness, adaptability, resilience and a commitment to self-development.

The ability to convey your employability to employers on applications and at interview is also an essential part of the jigsaw. How you learn from your experiences and the ability to reflect productively on your experiences and translate this into the language of employers is vital. Remember practice makes perfect! Engaging positively with the PPD process and making the most of the Careers and Employment Service will help you get good at this.

You are not alone!

When asked to think about employability and career planning you may have these reactions:

"It's too early to think about a career!"

"I don't have time - I'm too busy being a student and focusing on my studies"

"I already know what I want to do, and I know how to get there"

"I know I could get some advice … but have been putting it off"

"I think I will just wait … and see what happens"

What do you think of these reactions? Do you share any of these thoughts? Is it necessary to see career planning and employability skills in such stark terms?
Some common misconceptions

Career planning does not mean deciding exactly what job you want to do right now. It is an on-going process that involves developing your self-awareness, developing your awareness of opportunities, action planning and opportunity/job seeking. You may go through this cycle several times in your lifetime and/or revisit parts of it. It is a flexible concept; individuals can go through it at their own pace.

Thinking about employability and career planning does not have to be that time consuming. You have already started simply by studying at university and may already be enhancing your employability further through extra-curricular activities, part time or voluntary work. You are likely to enjoy much of this and some time spent on self-reflection and assessment can go a long way when it comes to seeking and securing opportunities.

Producing a CV

It is essential to have a CV (curriculum vitae) to apply for opportunities, whether it is for a part time student job, graduate job or voluntary work. There is a wealth of information about how to write a CV on Careers Central. Click on the 'help with CVs' link on the Employability tab on shuspace to access CV Builder software (a starting point only) and a 'How to create a winning CV' guide. There is also a useful video on shuspace Video on Demand - CV: writing your graduate CV (widescreen version) (log in using this link and then type 'graduate CV' into the library VOD search box). There is also a range of example CVs available for you to look at in the careers resource centre on Owen Level 5 where you can also get individual advice on your CV. Looking at this folder can help you make sense of the advice given in the template below.

Your CV is a living document that will need to be updated over time and adapted to target the particular opportunities you choose to apply for. It is your personal work that must meet your needs. The emphasis each individual gives to each section will depend on their circumstances and needs. Below is a basic CV template that could help you get started:
A CV template

Personal Details: include your full name, address, email address, and telephone number. Also include a LinkedIn url if you have one and actively use it.

Personal Profile: a *brief* sales pitch (3-5 lines) - your current situation/what you are looking for and what you've got to offer. This should be targeted to each particular opportunity you apply for. Avoid "adjective soup" and cliché statements such as "can work effectively in a team and on my own".

Please note that this section is not essential; only use it if you are confident and happy with it. It can be useful in certain situations when you use your CV without a covering letter - e.g. on a jobs board or to register with a recruitment agency.

Education: dates, qualifications, institution, predicted or actual grades - most recent first. Include a summary of your secondary/further education and more detail about your degree - *Key relevant* modules, projects, dissertation, subjects.

Work Experience: include paid and voluntary work - most recent first. State dates (month & year), job title & employer. Outline responsibilities and highlight any achievements. Using language well can help you to show the value of any work experience you have had. Be specific about responsibilities/achievements and emphasise positive action words/phrases. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>June - September 2013</th>
<th>Sales Assistant</th>
<th>Topshop, Leeds</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I worked as part of a team in a busy city centre store with a high turnover. Specific responsibilities and achievements included:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Providing consistently excellent customer service;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organising stock control and replenishment;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Paying attention to detail whilst cashing up to ensure accuracy;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Achieving weekly sales targets and achieving the highest target five times;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supervising more junior staff in the absence of the manager.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>the above example makes more of an impression than:</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had to serve customers, handle cash, maintain stock levels and sometimes supervise others.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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**Skills Profile**

Aim for between 3 and 5 skills with a strong example for each, using the STAR technique (briefly outline the **Situation**, **Task**, **Action** and **Result**) - this is covered in more detail in the next section. Alternatively you can bullet point achievements that show you have the specified skill.

A skills profile is not essential but it can be useful if you do not have work experience *directly* related to the job you are applying for as you can highlight relevant transferable skills. Bear in mind if you decide to use one then you may need to save space by keeping the descriptions of your work experience brief. If you choose not to include this section then make sure you clearly outline your relevant skills in a covering letter.

**Interests and Achievements**

*Any* activity successfully completed represents an achievement including; community, sport, performance, cultural. Employers like to see the *whole* person!

**Additional Information**

Another optional section; this is your chance to add anything else that is relevant, e.g. driving licence, language skills.

**Referees**

Usually two - one academic and one work-related (ask for permission). Depending on space you can either: a) include full details  b) provide name, job title/workplace (not entire postal address), email and phone number, or  c) clearly state that references are available upon request.
What are my skills, and do they match what employers are looking for?

You may have chosen your course because you are interested in it as a subject - and therefore particularly interested in the knowledge that you will acquire. However, it is also a key aim of all of our courses to develop a range of skills that are vital for a wide range of future careers. These skills are sometimes called transferable skills because they can be used in a range of different situations. You can develop these in a number of ways - through your course, part time work, work experience, volunteering, student societies, hobbies and interests. The transferable skills you will acquire and develop during the course include:

**Written and verbal communication skills** - for example, the ability to write articulate, well-structured and concise reports is a vital skill in many careers. Also, the ability to communicate your ideas verbally is very important, and adapt your style to suit different audiences.

**Research skills** - in a world in which the volume of available information is growing so rapidly the ability to find and select appropriate information is a vital transferable skill.

**Critical thinking/analytical skills and problem solving** - the ability to find, appraise for validity, interpret, synthesis, analyse and present information and undertake statistical analysis, are all important skills in all careers.

**Numeracy** - the generation and use of diverse data types.

**IT skills** - these will not only develop your ability to use computers for word processing and searching the web, but also for data analysis, searching data bases, and mapping.

**Presentation skills** - these will help you to present and format your work in a professional manner and produce high quality written and oral presentations.

**Teamwork and interpersonal skills** - learning to work with other people effectively and to communicate your ideas.

**Planning and Organising** - planning and prioritising in order to meet deadlines, manage part time work, maintain and develop other interests and hobbies - i.e. working under pressure.
**Project management/Leadership** - if you have taken a lead on a group project, you will already have begun to develop and utilise these skills.

There is a wealth of information about what key skills and attributes employers look for. Exact requirements will vary between jobs and organisations; specialist skills and knowledge may be required but there are transferable skills and behaviours that many graduate recruiters look for.

**Spot your skills!** In addition to the self-assessment tools recommended above there are also useful resources on the Graduates Yorkshire website - [Job Shopping - Step 2](http://www.yorkshiregraduates.co.uk/graduates/jobshopping).

**Articulating your skills - The STAR Technique**

It is very important to remember that you have these skills when you start applying for graduate jobs Employers want to see evidence of your skills. The STAR technique is a useful way of articulating your skills on your CV or application form and in interviews. It helps you to prepare ahead and give a structure to your answers for competency based questions. It stands for:

**Situation:** give the interviewer a context by describing the situation - Where were you and what were you doing?

**Task:** what was your goal/problem/challenge?

**Action:** tell the interviewer what your specific actions were - spend most time on this part.

**Result (and possibly Reflection):** the end result and what you learnt – make sure it shows you in a good light, and if the overall project was not a success say what you would do differently another time.

Try to think of at least one specific example of when you have used the skills listed above.
Here are two example responses to the question "Give me an example of when you have had to manage your time effectively in order to meet multiple demands".

In my first year at university I had a part time job as a waiter and also played for the 3rd hockey team. Around Christmas time my hours at work doubled and I had deadlines to meet. My regular hockey commitments continued. Although this put me under some considerable pressure I managed to plan and prioritise my work to meet all of these demands.

This answer gets the basic point across and may be enough for a skills section on your CV but it is too short for an interview or application form; the "action" part is barely there at all and the result part is limited. Try to really show employers how you behaved and what actions you took. A better answer could go along these lines:

In my first year at university I had a part time job as a waiter and also played for the 3rd hockey team. From the beginning of December my hours at work doubled to fifteen hours over the Christmas period to cope with the demand for office parties. During this time I had three academic deadlines to meet and my twice weekly hockey commitments continued.

In order to plan my time effectively, I scheduled every lecture/seminar, hockey commitment and work shift in my diary. I then blocked out study time to make sure that I could meet deadlines. I also checked the match availability of the reserve hockey players as this gave me some flexibility in case I needed some extra time for university work. I also made sure that I had some time for rest but said no to social activities perhaps more than I normally do, at least temporarily. This was worth it as I completed my university work on time and to a good standard, earned some extra money and still played in all the hockey matches. I actually found that under pressure I studied more effectively, and I maintained a high quality of work. In addition I learnt the value of time management and developed the discipline to stick to a routine.

More information about STAR can be found on Target Jobs.
What can I do with my degree? What are my opportunities?

There is a vast array of career opportunities available to graduates and many graduate jobs are open to graduates from any discipline. For more information about jobs open to all graduates and jobs directly related to your degree, good starting points are the 'Options with your subject' section of Careers Central and Prospects - Options with your subject. These sites include careers information, case studies of recent graduates and links to further specialist information.

Other sources of information include:

The Royal Geographical Society - Our Work - Careers with Geography - Career Profiles -
http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Careers+and+Further+Study/Careers+with+geography/Careers+with+geography.htm

Lantra - the sector skills council for the environment and land based industries sector - http://www.lantra.co.uk/.

The Energy&Utility Skills Group - the sector skills council for the gas, power, waste management and water industries. http://www.euskills.co.uk/


The Chartered Institute of Housing- http://www.cih.org/careerdevelopment


CIWEM - The Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management -

ENDs Job Search - http://www.endsjobsearch.co.uk/.

Choose (at least) one source of information to explore in your own time.
The PPD process helps you begin to develop your career management and employability skills and knowledge. This is an on-going process and the Careers and Employment Service offers support whilst you are a student and for up to three years after graduation:

**One to one advice and guidance:**
You can book appointments with an adviser in the Careers and Employability Centre next to the main entrance Owen level 5 reception or phone 0114 225 3752.

Make an appointment with a **careers adviser** to discuss any issues relating to your future career plans. They offer:
- Guidance to students unclear about their career direction
- Support for students who may experience specific difficulties entering the labour market
- Specialist guidance and support for students with a disability /international students

Make an appointment with an **employment adviser**. They offer:
- Job/placement seeking support (including using social media)
- CV and application form support
- Support with interview/assessment centre preparation

The employment adviser linked to your course is Laura Kerley who offers one to one appointments within the department. Please visit the Owen level 4 helpdesk or phone 0114 225 4267 to book an appointment.

**Careers workshops** - a full programme of workshops such as "Help with application forms", "Commercial Awareness - what it is" and "Are you LinkedIn?"
For full details and to book a place visit the Employability tab on shuspace - Centre Diary.

**Careers Central - new website** - provides useful information and advice about planning your future and getting experience. Also look out for the Options with your subject pages which contain a wealth of specialist info tailored to you.
Employability Case Studies and Personal Action Planning

During your second year, it is important to reflect on your current skills and experience and consider how you can improve these in order to help fulfil your own personal plans for the future. One way of doing this is to produce a personal action plan, which can be updated regularly as you progress through your studies here at SHU (and also in the future as part of your continuing professional development).

But producing a personal action plan can be quite daunting. So first, think about what advice you might provide to other students thinking about their own futures.

Reflect on the four case studies below (assume all these students are also in their second year) and think about the following questions for each scenario:

- What are the main issues each individual is facing?
- What do you think about their perceptions?
- What else might you ask to get a fuller picture?
- What steps could each individual take to help move them forward with their career planning?

**Scenario 1:** John picked a Human Geography degree because geography was his strongest subject at school and also because he thought it would be interesting. He enjoys his studies some of the time but doesn't feel motivated to work hard on all of his modules. If he's honest, he's looking forward to finishing so he can start working. However, he is really unsure of what he wants to do and wonders if he should become a teacher like some of his friends. His parents often refer to him becoming a "professional" in the future.

**Scenario 2:** Sarah is enjoying her Environmental Science degree but she gets an even bigger buzz from part time voluntary work at a local environmental charity. Her role is a Communications Assistant which involves publicising the charity's work and communicating with the public, other organisations and the press in various formats. She thinks she is doing well, but is sometimes unsure. She has thought about pursuing a career doing this type of communications and PR work, but has heard that it is very competitive. She also fears it would not utilise the specialist skills and knowledge she is gaining on her degree.

**Scenario 3:** Adam has always been fascinated by maps and really enjoys the GIS modules he has taken as part of his degree. He is getting high marks and his mother takes great pride in telling family and friends this whenever she gets the chance! He would love to work in this area but thinks that many of the jobs may be outside the local area. He does quite a lot to help his mum and the rest of his family at home and worries about how she might react if he moved away.

**Scenario 4:** Beth loves the outdoors and squeezes in some volunteering around her Environmental Conservation course. The people she works with are mainly volunteers and they have told her that paid jobs "rarely come up". Sometimes she wants to do everything she can to increase her chances of getting paid work in this area and
sometimes she wants to think of other ideas to explore so as not to "put all her eggs in one basket".

Your advice to your peers could easily represent their first steps in producing a personal action plan. So now think about your own position and complete the sections below. This type of action plan doesn't need to be about a specific job - it could just be about a career area, or even other future plans such as travel or further qualifications. But most importantly, it needs to include steps to move you forward in some way.

**Your Personal Action Plan**

**This is where I am now:**

**This is what I want to achieve:**

**This is what is important to me:**

**These are some of the issues that affect my decision:**

**These are the steps I need to take to help me achieve my goal:** (think about skills you may need to develop, who can help you, experience you may need to gain. Try to make your action points SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound)

******

We hope that the above material provides you with guidance and opportunities to reflect on your thoughts for the future and a range of employability issues.
Research Skills

(This section of the PPD Guide is based upon a range of resources, including the Companion for Undergraduate Dissertations, produced by the Faculty of Development and Society in partnership with the Higher Education Academy - http://www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk.)

Your Level 5 learning will build on and enhance the study skills you have developed at Level 4. This section of the PPD Guide focuses on research study skills, and in particular critical thinking and undertaking literature reviews. These skills are relevant to all your assignments - increasingly you will receive feedback which refers to the quality of your critical thinking and writing, and increasingly we will hope to see evidence of good use of existing academic research and literature in all your assignments.

For most undergraduate degree students, however, a significant element of final year study is an independent research project. These projects may vary greatly in scope and nature (e.g. a large-scale written assignment such as a dissertation or extended essay; or the design and production of some type of artefact) but most share a number of key characteristics:

- First, the learner determines the focus and direction of their work.
- Second, this work is carried out on an individual basis – although usually with some tutor support and direction provided.
- Third, there is typically a substantial research component to the project, requiring the collection of primary data and/or the analysis of existing/secondary data.
- Finally, learners will have a more prolonged engagement with the chosen subject than is the case with 'standard' coursework assignments such as essays or reports, with the work consequently expected to be more ‘in-depth’.

Your course requires the completion of a final year dissertation, and we regard it as an essential component of the honours degree. It is the mechanism whereby you can really demonstrate to us that you have become an ‘independent learner’. It should also be one of the most enjoyable modules you undertake at University, as you can select a topic of special interest to you, and hopefully of real relevance
to your future direction. It is also a piece of work which you will be able to highlight in subsequent job applications, and where you might establish contacts to help you develop your future career.

In some ways a dissertation is similar to an essay or a research report. It poses a question and then presents evidence and an argument, and offers a sustained discussion of a topic. The topic is explored in detail, in relation to a substantial body of published work. The major distinction between an essay and a dissertation is that the latter generally involves collecting research data first (i.e. your own primary or secondary research), while the former generally relies on tertiary data (i.e. information from a source already published). Thus a dissertation requires you to be involved in research activity, whether in the library or 'in the field'.

Ultimately you will be drawing together issues of theory, method and methodology, and bringing them to bear on your chosen topic. Those dissertations that can best accomplish this integration are often the most conceptually and methodologically accomplished pieces of work.

For all these reasons, the dissertation can be seen as the culmination of your undergraduate studies. Here you not only demonstrate the intellectual, study, research and presentation skills that you have developed throughout your degree course, but also create something which is uniquely your own.

**Why is this important at Level 5?**

You may be thinking why should I begin to think about my final year dissertation in Level 5? There are several reasons:

- You should already be aware of how you are developing your study skills from merely describing and summarising information gathered elsewhere, to the more complex skills of evaluating ideas, developing your own critical thinking, and forming your own questions and conclusions about that research. Your level 5 assignments will increasingly require these more complex analytical and critical skills in order for you to do well.
• You may also have started to become particularly interested in more specialised aspects of your course - through studying different modules, your own background reading, personal hobbies and interests, or maybe through voluntary work or work placements. Do develop these specialised interests beyond the requirements of particular modules - you will find tutors who share your enthusiasms.

• You will need to think about elective choices for your final year in the second semester of level 5, and it is important to select electives which can help you in successfully completing your final year dissertation.

• Finally, you will complete the mandatory Research Methods module at Level 5. Part of the assessment for this module includes the development of a research proposal. This is designed to prepare you for the final year dissertation, but also allows you to continue working on the research proposal throughout the latter part of your second year independently. You will be allocated to a dissertation advisor in the second semester of your second year, and they will advise you to begin your literature research for your dissertation as early as possible - in order to get a good start to your final year.

So thinking about your final year dissertation begins in level 5, and we therefore use the PPD tutorials in your second semester to focus on thinking around that topic.

The Research Methods module and your Research Proposal

The core Research Methods module is designed to support the preliminary stages in the dissertation process, as well as to provide a more general introduction to different research methods which you may use in your professional life beyond your final year dissertation. You will complete this module in the first semester of Level 5.
An element of the assessment for the Research Methods module includes the development of a Research Proposal, which we hope will set you off in the right direction for your final year dissertation. You do not have to commit to this topic completely in your second year. Some students do decide to change their focus later on. But the process of preparing a Research Proposal is a fundamental part of the dissertation process, and can help you get a really good start to your final year.

During your Research Methods module you will have lectures which introduce you to the nature of research, and different methodological approaches. You will learn about a range of different methods - both qualitative and quantitative - and how they might be applied to different research objectives. You will also have the opportunity to discuss your own ideas for a dissertation in the seminars, which you will share with colleagues from the same course as yourself.

**Critical thinking**

'Critical thinking' and 'critical analysis' are terms which are consistently used by academics in explanations of what is required by students in their university work as well as in feedback about what is lacking in student assignments. But what is critical thinking/critical analysis? Well, confusingly, it's quite hard to define. It can be thought of as better, more rigorous thinking. It has also been described as "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generalised by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication, as a guide to belief or action [or argument]" (Scriven & Paul, 2001:1).

Critical thinking is something you frequently do in your everyday life; it is not something that is foreign to you or something that you don’t know how to do yet. Look at the everyday activities listed below. Which of them involves critical thinking?
### Everyday life activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everyday life activities</th>
<th>Involves Critical Thinking</th>
<th>Does NOT involve Critical Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buying a car</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing courses at University</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brushing your teeth</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving out of home</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding between several job offers</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting a phone or internet package</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jogging</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travelling from A to B with time and budget constraints</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from: James, Scoufis, Farrell & Carmichael, 1999)

### Critical thinking at University

While critical thinking is something we all engage in to manage our day to day lives, the word 'critical' is commonly thought to have a quite negative meaning, for example finding fault with someone or something. At university, however, 'critical' has a broader meaning: being critical involves making judgements and evaluations. Making judgements can involve distinguishing between fact and opinion or evaluating the validity of information sources or the validity of particular theories and/ or their application to particular situations. These judgements need to be well grounded in research, wide reading, and include consideration of all possible viewpoints. Critical thinking in this sense is based on a synthesis of a number of factors, and is not just uninformed personal opinion.

Critical thinking is integral to academia generally because this is the main way that knowledge is added to a field. While academics in a particular field may agree with the conclusions of a particular piece of research, these conclusions may open up other questions which need to be answered. Only through constantly questioning:
• what if?
• how could?
• what does this mean for … ? etc.

is new knowledge added to a field, allowing for the constant evolution of academic disciplines. Critical thinking, or a critical approach, is a desirable skill in ALL aspects of university work because this is what will allow your knowledge and skill to develop and evolve.

So far we have considered the use of the term critical thinking to reflect on your own work; but it can equally be used to ask questions about, and assess other people's writing. You could try asking questions about a text to see how scholarly or scientific it is. What does it claim to be true? Can you believe its claims? Does it provide you with good reasons, evidence, or both to support its claims? How "good" are the reasons, or is it "good" evidence? An important way to demonstrate the quality of your arguments, or evidence in your academic writing is by referring to work by others.

The status of this work depends on how authoritative it is. If you are a critical reader, you look for "authority" in the form of references to relevant supporting work which has been published in academic journals, or text books. In these kinds of publications the content has been "peer-reviewed". This means that it should have been independently evaluated by other qualified academics who will have read it critically to ensure that the material it contains is factually accurate and that the reasoning behind it is sound. This is unlike the material which may often be found in newspapers, magazines or from many online sources, where the content may not have been checked by anyone else, or where the work simply puts forward one person's opinion.

Further guidance around the development of your critical thinking skills can be found in the guidelines provided on the Learn Higher web site: http://learnhigher.ac.uk/Students/Critical-thinking-and-reflection.html.
Literature Reviews

Your critical thinking abilities (and critical reading and critical analysis) will be used significantly during the literature review stage of your dissertation. Your dissertation is a substantial piece of written work that ideally should conform to a number of academic conventions. One of the most important of these academic conventions is the literature review. In short, the literature review is a discussion or ‘review’ of secondary literature that is of general and central relevance to the particular area under investigation.

Your Research Proposal also requires a literature review. This should be regarded as a shorter, initial review of the literature - rather than the comprehensive account required for your final dissertation. But the approach is the same.

Once you have completed your Research Proposal and it has been marked and returned to you, you may wish to continue working on your literature review for the final report. It is a very good idea to make progress with this during quieter times in the second semester of your second year, and certainly over the summer vacation before returning in the final year. You will be allocated to a dissertation advisor during the second semester, and you should arrange to meet up with them to discuss both the feedback on your Research Proposal, and how best to move forward with your dissertation research.

Why is a literature review necessary?
The literature review is an important device in your dissertation as it performs a number of related functions:

- It demonstrates to whoever reads the dissertation that the author of the work has read widely and is aware of the range of debates that have taken place within the given field. It provides the proof that you have more than a good grasp of the breadth and depth of the topic of the dissertation - your dissertation gives you the opportunity to show off how clever you are!
- It should provide the rationale for the research question in the study. This can be done by highlighting specific gaps in the literature – questions that have not been answered (or even asked), and areas of research that have not been
conducted within your chosen field. In this way the literature review provides a justification of your own research.

- It helps to define the broad context of your study, placing your work within a well-defined academic tradition. Poor dissertations often fail to relate to broader debates within the academic community. They may have a well-defined research question, yet without placing this question in the appropriate context, it can lose its significance.

- It allows you to build on work that has already been conducted. For example you might adopt a similar methodological or theoretical approach in your work to one that exists within the literature, yet place your actual emphasis elsewhere. In this way you are building on work that has already been conducted by adopting similar strategies and concepts, yet focusing the question on something that interests you.

**How do I 'do' a literature review?**

Writing a literature review is not as simple as at first it may seem. What follows is a step by step guide on how to go about conducting and presenting your literature review.

1. **Generate a list of references**

The first stage of your literature review is to collect a list of literature that is relevant to your study. Ensure you focus on academic, peer-reviewed journals and text books, rather than too many online resources. The academic literature should provide the foundation of your developing arguments. More populist media (such as newspaper articles or organisations’ own web sites) might help to illustrate some points, but they should not provide the main evidence for your review. Searching for relevant literature is time-consuming. You will be able to use on-line search tools - but do not rely on these entirely. Spend time in the Learning Centre actively searching for useful evidence.

2. **Make sense of your reading**

Once you have a list of references for your dissertation, you now have to access and read this material. You will be reading a large amount of material. Furthermore once you start your reading you might find that some of the literature is of little relevance to your study. Don't panic, this is something that many researchers and
dissertation students go through and is often a necessary part of the process. It is better to read something that is not central to your dissertation than miss something that might be an important and relevant contribution to the field.

While reading, make notes about the central themes and arguments of the book, chapter or article. These notes can then be incorporated into the finished version of your literature review. Try and get a sense of the theoretical perspective of the author - this will be of use when you come to organise and present your literature review. Also, emphasise the way in which the piece of literature you are reading seeks to set itself apart from other literature. Importantly, start to think critically about the piece you are reading; ask: what is this person trying to say and why? How is it different from the way others have dealt with this issue? This critical component is very important as it demonstrates that you are engaging with relevant literature in an appropriate manner and that you can discriminate between different perspectives and approaches that exist within your chosen field.

The questions set out below will allow you to develop a critical response to what you are reading. You might find it helpful to ask yourself these questions when thinking about your reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to ‘ask’ the author</th>
<th>Questions to ask myself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why did you write this?</td>
<td>Why am I reading this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who did you write this for?</td>
<td>Was it written for ‘me’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Is it helpful to my own study]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your purpose?</td>
<td>What am I looking for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What questions were you asking?</td>
<td>What questions am I asking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Of this text; in my own study]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What answers did you find?</td>
<td>Do I find those answers credible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your evidence?</td>
<td>Do I accept that evidence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Does the evidence support the findings/conclusions?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your conclusion</td>
<td>Do I agree with those conclusions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Is there sufficient data and justification for me to make a judgement about the strength of the conclusions]. But above all....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What have I learned? And How can I use it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Organisation and presentation

Once you have generated a large number of notes around your reading you might start to feel overwhelmed by the literature. In terms of the organisation and presentation of your literature review, it is worth dividing your review into two main areas: general reading and literature that is of central importance. You will also need to further divide the literature into specific areas relevant to your study, for example, theories and concepts; policy analysis; empirical studies and so-on.

A focused analysis of both general and specific literature can also serve to bring your empirical or theoretical work into sharper focus. In this sense you are prefacing your work and how it relates to other academic studies by your discussion of it in your literature review. One thing to remember however is that just because you talk about an author's work in your literature review, doesn't mean you never mention it again in your dissertation. In the discussion section of your study you will necessarily relate your findings to those central studies that you have highlighted in your literature review.

Discuss the proposed structure of your literature review with your dissertation supervisor. Many tutors like to see a final conclusion in the literature review chapter which summarises your main findings and then focuses on the questions yet to be addressed or the gaps in knowledge. This more easily allows you to develop a specific set of research objectives which can be addressed in the following Methodology chapter. In this way, you should be able to see a coherent narrative developing through your whole dissertation.

When you have written your literature review, this is not the end of the process. Throughout your dissertation process, you will come across literature that is of relevance to your area of study, do not ignore this material, you can always add more literature to your review as you come across it.

Finally, make sure that you keep a record of all your references, even the ones that have been of little use. This will help you organise your reference list. You may even need to go back and look over something that you looked at earlier in your studies that may have more relevance than you first thought.
Critical Reflection

Your level 5 PPD programme has been designed to focus on the issues of employability and on study skills particularly relevant to research. But we also hope you continue to reflect on your own development throughout your level 5. As at level 4, there will be opportunities to meet your PPD tutor in one-to-one individual interviews to jointly reflect on your progress and consider actions to improve your skills.

By 'reflection', we mean looking back on an experience and making sense of it to identify what to do in the future. It helps you to repeat what was effective and learn from mistakes. Most of us reflect on things after the event ("Our team played well because..", "I wish I hadn't said.."), but some people reflect more readily than others and some may get bogged down in thinking about what happened, rather than moving on to identify what to do in future. We can learn to reflect more effectively.

Reflection is an important skill at University and also in employment, where professionals must know if they are doing a good job. It is encouraged at work via Appraisal and Continuing Professional Development schemes.

Reflection is essential to learning. It is part of what is known as the 'learning cycle'.

(based on Kolb, 1984)

Throughout your time at SHU, in order to achieve greater success in your studies, we will encourage you to reflect on your feedback and learn from all your experiences.