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Career under the microscope

If you're interested in pursuing research, it pays to closely examine the options, writes **Sue White**.

RESEARCHERS work in every field, from entomology to criminology, but aspiring researchers often find it difficult to determine at which institution to start their career.

The Group of Eight can be a useful launching point. In this coalition of eight of Australia's leading universities (including the University of New South Wales, the University of Sydney and the Australian National University), each institution has a strong research focus.

But a Group of Eight education is not the be all and end all if you're interested in a research career. To determine the right tertiary institution for you, you'll need to do some digging and the Australian Research Council's Excellence in Research Australia initiative has a plethora of information. At 310 pages, this hefty but comprehensive report rates the research performance of universities across the country by discipline.

For those with an eye for detail

(and let's face it, if you're moving into research, this is probably you), this is an incredibly useful resource. But if that seems a little complicated, you may wish to heed the advice of the pro-vice chancellor (research) from the University of Western Sydney, Professor Andrew Cheetham.

"When we refer to research, we refer to the point that you're actually making new knowledge," he says, noting that to get to this stage, you'll usually need an undergraduate degree, followed by an honours year.

"When you know roughly what you want to do [for your undergraduate degree], find a university with a good reputation in teaching that [subject]. Often you'll find that if they have a good reputation in that degree, they'll have a good reputation in research in that field," he says.

Of course, there's not only one type of research, as the dean of the graduate school at the University of Technology, Sydney, Professor Nicky Solomon, points out.

"There's pure research and

applied research," she says.

"One [pure research] is internal looking and builds up knowledge in a discipline; the other is picked up and applied to the world."

UTS's focus is applied research, which is often done in collaboration with industry partners. "Collaborative research is understood as being really important," she says. "The federal government also believes that; its funding supports collaboration."

Solomon says students should start exploring options during their undergraduate degree.

"See if the university's undergraduate degree offers research training subjects, find a match with a discipline or professional field you are interested in and check up on their labs and facilities," she says.

Whichever way you go, one thing is for certain: to succeed, you'll need passion for your subject.



In focus ... size up different institutions before committing. Photo: Nicolas Walker