Think Tanks

What is a think tank?
Think tanks engage in research and advocacy in different policy areas. The main areas are social policy, political strategy, political risk, the economy, the environment, science or technology, industrial or business policies and military advice. They are usually identified with particular positions on the political spectrum; left, right, green, and liberal. Though some think tanks do in-depth research into social and economic affairs, the focus is on the political and policy implications. They are not overtly ‘campaigning’ organisations, rather their purpose is to influence public policy and debate rather than directly campaign for policy changes. In order to do this they use the media and direct contacts with politicians, civil servants and other organisations in the policy community to disseminate their work. They generally initiate their own work and seek funding for it rather than working on contract to public or private bodies (though some work may be done at the behest of ‘friendly’ political parties). They are generally funded from charitable and corporate sources and most are relatively new organisations with over half having been established since 1980.

Are there any I might have heard of?
Here is a list categorised by area of focus:

International affairs defence and security
- The International Institute for Strategic Studies
- Royal United Services Institute
- Chatham House
- Royal Institute for International Affairs
- Centre for Defence Studies

Democratic government
- The Constitution Unit
- New Local Government Network (NLGN)
- Institute for Public Policy Research

Development
- Institute of Development Studies
- International Institute for Environment and Development
- Overseas Development Institute

Economy
- Catalyst
- Centre for Economic Policy and Research
- The Centre for Economic Reform and Transformation

Ethnicity and equality
- Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations
- Commission for Racial Equality

European integration
- Global Britain
- The European Policy Centre
- Centre for European Reform
- Centre for Economic Policy Research
- Centre for European Policy Studies

Work and employee relations
- The Work Foundation,
- The Institute for Employment Rights

Below are examples of how think tanks might be grouped according to their ideological outlooks:

Conservative
- International Institute for Strategic Studies
- Heritage Foundation
- American Enterprise Institute
- Centre for Strategic and International Studies
- Hoover Institution
- Progress and Freedom Foundation

Conservative / libertarian
- Cato Institute
- Reason Foundation

Centre-right
- RAND Corporation
- Centre for Policy Studies
- The Institute of Economic Affairs
- Adam Smith Institute
- The Bow Group
- C Change
- The Centre for Social Justice

Centrist
- Brookings Institution
- Carnegie Endowment
- Council on Foreign Relations
• Freedom Forum
• Progressive Policy Institute
• Institute for International Economics

Centre-left
• The Fabian Society
• Institute for Public Policy Research
• Urban Institute

Liberal / left
• CentreForum
• Economic Policy Institute
• Institute for Policy Studies
• Twentieth Century Fund
• Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities
• Economic Policy Institute
• Centre for Law and Policy

Progressive
• Institute for Policy Studies
• Institute for Public Policy Research
• Economic Policy Institute
• Twentieth Century Fund

Independent
• Demos
• The Federal Trust
• The Foreign Policy Centre
• Institute for Citizenship
• The Social Market Foundation
• New Policy Institute
• Nexus
• Politeia
• The David Hume Trust
• MigrationWatch,
• Policy Exchange
• Reform

Finding other think tanks
Here are useful websites to research lesser known think tanks

www.gotothinktank.com
www.worldpress.org/library/ngo.cfm
www.policylibrary.com (click on world think tank directory)

What roles are there?
The majority of think tanks are quite small (even some of the bigger ones only have 40 employees) therefore, there are not many vacancies at any one time. Some organisations only employ experienced researchers on contract work. There are several tiers of research positions in think tanks. The most common entry point is at Research Associate or Junior Researcher level. Most Research Associates are hired with a Master’s degree and about five years of research experience. Next are Senior Associates, typically DPhil level researchers with several years’ experience. Many of these think tank employees are also affiliated with a University, often in a part-time teaching capacity. About half of these researchers come from academia, while the other half is promoted from within the think tank. These researchers can progress to become Senior Fellows or Research Fellows and are appointed because they hold outstanding credentials as nationally (and sometimes internationally) recognised experts in their field.

What skills do I need?
Team working, networking, excellent written language and research skills, a keen interest in public policy, current affairs or a specific strand of the think tank’s work are essential. At the level of Junior Researcher desk-based research and talking to people will be central but you will probably also have to do a lot of your own administration. Most employers expect prospective entrants to have detailed knowledge of research techniques which may be acquired by taking a taught Masters in social research methods or obtaining a research degree in a particular area. The work of think tanks utilises a wide range of research methods and involves extensive dissemination activities. Academic research is often used by think tanks, including rigorous and sophisticated quantitative and qualitative techniques such as surveys, mapping exercises, interviews and focus groups. In-depth knowledge of an area central to the organisation’s work can be crucial. Many think tank websites include staff profiles; it is useful to look at these to see how current think tank employees have reached their particular positions.

Any tips?
Be political
If you are interested in having a future career in party politics it is beneficial to think about the fit between the think tank you are working for and the views of the relevant party. Previous experience of working for a think tank which is against the views of the political party you apply to work for will raise some cynical questions at interview!

Have integrity
As with all jobs, you are likely to be more engaged and therefore more successful if you agree with the philosophy of the think tank so it is worth considering this when preparing to apply.

Do your homework
A good first step is to check the individual company website for any relevant job vacancies. If there aren’t any publicly advertised try sending a ‘speculative’ CV and cover letter tailored to the individual think tank.

Think laterally
‘To get your foot in the door’ it could be worth considering administrative jobs within a think tank, e.g. - Demos runs separate media, communications, and audio/visual internship programmes. With small staff numbers you may well become involved on a wider scale and have good opportunities to network.

Network!
A Kings College student once got an interview at a think tank through chatting to the person sat next to them on a train who happened to be recruiting an intern! Obviously this is very lucky and there are no guarantees that you will be so fortunate but taking opportunities to meet useful people can yield results.

How can I get experience?
Internships
If you do not have much research experience, short internships are an invaluable addition to your CV. They
usually consist of a mixture of research and administrative work and are open to students and recent graduates.

**Academic research**

If you are planning a dissertation / thesis, already writing one, or undertaking other research, think about how this may relate to your future aspirations. For example, can you integrate as wide a range of research methods in order to showcase your skills? Can you research relevant topic?

**Student Societies**

Some Universities have established student think tank societies, e.g. - The KCL Think Tank society invites Kings students to write articles for its published journal. For information see www.kingsthinktank.com.

**Further Reading**

**Policy Jobs**  
[www.policyjobs.net](http://www.policyjobs.net)

**Work for an MP**  
[www.w4mpjobs.org](http://www.w4mpjobs.org)  
(job adverts for think tank internships)

**Market Intelligence: Researching Think Tanks**

**Careers Tagged**  
[www.careerstagged.co.uk](http://www.careerstagged.co.uk)

Careers Tagged is an online careers library. Type a keyword (such as ‘Job site’) and you’ll find information sheets, jobsites, blogs, professional organisations and much more. Narrow your search by typing a second keyword (such as ‘France’). All material is vetted and checked by careers staff, to ensure it is useful and relevant. When searching on Careers Tagged enter tags that relate to the resources you are looking for, for example:

THINK TANKS, THINK TANK, POLICY, WAR STUDIES, POLITICAL RISK, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, NGOS

![Careers Tagged](http://www.careerstagged.co.uk/)

...you will find resources such as....

**Chatham House**  
[www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

**Federal Trust**  
[www.fedtrust.co.uk](http://www.fedtrust.co.uk)

**The Department for International Development**  
[www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk)

**Institute of Public Policy Research**  
[www.ippr.org/](http://www.ippr.org/)

**The Careers Group blogs**  
[http://www.thecareersgroup.co.uk/career-advice-and-news/](http://www.thecareersgroup.co.uk/career-advice-and-news/)

Our blog offers advice, information and inspiration to get you started in your career – whether you are interested in policy, risk, politics, intelligence or development. You’ll find interviews, industry insights, internships, job opportunities and much more. Search in the “Peace, politics and policy,” “International development,” and “Charity” categories for relevant content.

Other resources worth looking into (that can also be found using Careers Tagged) are...

**JobOnline**  
[www.kcl.ac.uk/jobonline](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/jobonline)

Use the search term ‘Social and Political Research’ This is our job vacancy database that lists part time, full time and paid internships advertised to students and graduates.

**Getting into International Development Facebook Page**  
[www.facebook.com/internationaldevelopment](http://www.facebook.com/internationaldevelopment)

**Getting into International Development blog**  
[www.careers.lon.ac.uk/blog/development/](http://www.careers.lon.ac.uk/blog/development/)

Don’t forget to also check out our events listing for opportunities to meet employers and learn more about the industry you wish to work in.  
[www.kcl.ac.uk/careers/events](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/careers/events)

**You may also consider:**

**The UK Civil Service Fast Stream**  

**The Local Government Graduate Development Programme**  

**Careers in areas like Public Affairs**

For example, some PR companies work in areas such as political communications. Public Affairs/lobbying concerns itself with those aspects of public relations communication involving relations with governmental or statutory bodies or their semi-official organisations through sophisticated use of political intelligence and pressure.

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