Improving your search results – too few results?

If your search only finds a few references, or most of the references are not relevant to your research topic, consider the following:

- Check your spelling - It is very easy to make a simple typing or spelling error (which will need correcting!)
- Has anything actually been written on your chosen topic? - If you are writing a literature review and cannot find any relevant research (having used all the right techniques) you may need to discuss the possibility of changing to a new topic with your supervisor.
- Is the search question too narrow? - The sections on defining your search question and identifying search terms may help you broaden your topic.
- Have you used Boolean operators correctly? e.g. have you used AND where you should have used OR, for example?
- Do you need to search more databases? Are you searching the most appropriate databases?
- Could you add more search terms to your search strategy? Are there any more synonyms or alternative words you could use to broaden your search.
- Are your date limits too restrictive? Check if you have you only searched the most recent section of the database? Might there be some earlier papers that could be relevant? This will depend on your topic.

Improving your search results – too many results?

Sometimes database searches can produce very large numbers of references. Depending on the scale of your project, this may not be a bad thing. For example, if you are doing a systematic review, you need to ensure your search is very comprehensive so you vital papers are not missed. Consequently, you may find thousands of results which you will need to scrutinize individually to see if they meet your inclusion criteria for the review. However, if you are retrieving too many
irrelevant results, you could consider the following to make your search more effective without compromising the results.

If you find too many results, consider the following:

- Is the search question too broad? See the guidance sheet on identifying search terms to help with this.

- Have you used Boolean operators correctly? Have you used OR where you should have used AND, for example?

- Could the search be limited by date? Be aware of the date ranges offered by the database but chose the range that is relevant to your topic. For example, if you are looking for reports of a disease that was only identified 30 years ago, you can restrict your search to this time period rather than searching the whole database. Most databases have a limit (perhaps in the form of a drop-down menu) you can use to adjust the publication date range of your results.

- Could you limit the search to English-language material? If you are conducting a full-scale systematic review and have the resources to translate non-English-language papers, then include them to minimise bias. Otherwise you may consider it appropriate to limit your search to English-language material.