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WRITING UCAS REFERENCES

Notes for tutors

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Writing UCAS References – notes for tutors

This information is designed to provide some information and guidance for those staff in schools and colleges who write references for UCAS applicants. It is intended as general information – separate guidance is available for applications for medicine and for health-related courses.

This information is not intended to be comprehensive or to provide a blueprint: different universities apply different criteria for assessing applications and you should ensure that you and your students are aware of any particular requirements. We hope, however, that this will help you address some of the issues in writing an appropriate reference for entry to higher education.

The UCAS form presents a variety of types of information: objective (actual GCSE and AS-level or similar results); self-reflective (personal statement) and subjective (reference). The admissions tutor will distil all this information but there is no doubt that the content of the reference is key in the decision-making process.

Admissions tutors need to gain an informed opinion of the candidate's academic ability, including predicted grades/results, and motivation for study. They will also expect a reference to identify and explain any particular issues or circumstances that have, or might, affect the candidate's final assessment results.

It is therefore essential that the reference:

- ◆ is written – or at least substantially prepared – by a member or members of staff who know the candidate and his/her performance, **and**
- ◆ places the candidate and their actual/predicted results in context, **and**
- ◆ supports the statements made by the candidate in their personal statement, **and**
- ◆ gives an honest, fair and relevant assessment of the candidate's potential to succeed at higher level.

The reference therefore needs to cover the following:

1. School/college context

1.1 Admissions tutors find it very useful to understand the context in which the candidate is studying. The school/college context should be described briefly and include:

- ◆ the type of school or college
- ◆ the number of students in Year 13
- ◆ the policy on qualifications *i.e.* number of AS/A-levels taken and policy on AS-level certification, whether General or Vocational A-levels are offered, *etc.*

1.2 If the school/college is in an area that is designated as a widening access target (for instance in an Excellence in Cities area, or with other known low participation indicators), it is helpful also to present this information.

Examples 1

“XXXX Sixth Form College offers A-level, AVCE and BTEC programmes to students from the local area. Students are also given the opportunity to obtain Key Skills qualifications. Over 25% of our students receive EMA payments or Learner Support funds and 22% are from Widening Participation backgrounds.”

This shows that A-level studies are not necessarily the norm for candidates from this Sixth Form College, and indeed that for many students, progression to FE might have been beyond family expectations.

“Most students study three A-level subjects in Year 12 and then take them through to A2 level. Although AS-levels are given certification, students can re-sit modules as necessary to improve their grade. There is also the opportunity for students to take Key Skills in Communication, Application of Number and IT.”

A number of universities now expect students to take four AS-levels and might well assume that taking only three implies that the candidate was not deemed to be capable of success in four subjects. This explanation clearly shows that the candidate had no option to extend his/her Year 12 studies.

2. Academic performance and predicted grades

2.1 AS-level results are useful indicators of performance when they are very high or very low, but mid-range results do not (as yet) give admissions tutors a real sense of overall performance at full A-level. University admissions tutors therefore still rely heavily on predicted A-level grades.

2.2 For ease of reading, it helps if the subjects and predicted grades are listed together (either at the top or the bottom of the reference) and then the candidate’s performance in each subject described separately. If the predicted grade is well above an actual AS-level result, then this needs explanation.

2.3 As well as the grade prediction, the candidate’s ability in the subject, development of skills, particular insights, and any problems they might have had with the academic study should be described. This will help the admissions tutor to gauge the candidate’s suitability for university-level study, especially if AS-level results are not very good.

Examples 2

“Mark is a competent and perceptive student of **History**. His written work benefits from a commendable economy of delivery, and a relevant, direct approach to the question. His factual understanding is immediate even when the issues are complex and his thoughtful contributions in class and insightful coursework show him in addition to have a naturally sceptical mind: very healthy in a historian. He is reading widely in his research of the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917.”

This describes an intelligent student who is already showing the skills he would need to undertake university study in History successfully. The specific topic mentioned would help any admissions tutor who wished to interview Mark.

“In his studies of Psychology, Paul showed a keen awareness of how this discipline could unlock opportunities for deeper understanding and analysis in both his other two A2 subjects. His rather disappointing C grade was in no small part a reflection of the difficulties the school and his class faced as a result of two lengthy periods of absence through sickness of the subject teacher. In these circumstances his C grade could be seen as creditable.”

This honest explanation of the teaching problems, plus a positive statement of the candidate’s understanding of Psychology beyond the A2 discipline, gives a strong sense that the grade achieved was well below the candidate’s actual ability.

3. Personal qualities and difficulties

3.1 Although admissions tutors will be concentrating on candidates’ academic ability, they will wish to read comments about a student’s personal qualities, particularly those that are relevant to university life and study, e.g. motivation, self-discipline, team-working, relationships with tutors.

Examples 3

“Sarah is an exemplary student. She is very hard working and extremely well-organised, always meeting deadlines and can be relied upon to complete any task with the minimum of fuss. Displaying quiet ambition, Sarah is unfailingly pleasant, polite and helpful.”

An admissions tutor’s dream!

“David is working through the realisation of his potential. Above all, he has shown independence of thought and the capacity to pursue an academic course logically and maturely. He has a well-grounded personality and is liked by both his contemporaries and peers.”

This is perhaps less fulsome than the previous example, but suggests more depth in the candidate’s understanding of the study process.

If a candidate has experienced personal or study difficulties, these should be reflected in the reference. Some students can regard this as either intrusive or “making excuses”: as a referee you should explain to them that admissions tutors do need this information in order that they can properly assess potential: such information would never be held against a candidate.

“Michelle has had to deal with a lot of trauma at home over the last fifteen months due to a serious ongoing illness involving her mother. In the past this has coincided with examinations. She has coped well in the circumstances. With Michelle what you see is what you get: an honest, hardworking and fiercely determined student with potential.”

No admissions tutor could fail to recognise the recent and ongoing disruption such a situation would have on a student. The character summary nicely balances the description of the problems, and creates an extremely positive sense of the candidate.

5. Overall recommendation

The reference should end with an overall view as to the candidate's suitability for higher education and for the course chosen.

"Claire is a polite, thoughtful and hardworking young woman. She has thought very carefully about her options for Higher Education and is taking a year out to travel. Her enthusiasm for many aspects of art is clear when speaking with her. Claire has good communication skills and illustrates a good awareness of what is happening in the world. We highly recommend her for Higher Education."

This is a well thought-out summary of the candidate, giving the admissions tutor confidence in her choice of subject and intellectual interests, her choice of institution and decision to take a gap year.

Dealing with tricky cases

How to write a reference for a straight-A's student

It can be tempting to assume that a very high-achieving candidate's past and predicted examination performance speaks for itself. However, particularly for highly competitive subjects, admissions tutors will be selecting from a set of applicants with identical academic profiles. Obviously the personal statement will be very important but equally the reference needs to allow the admissions tutor to differentiate.

There are various approaches that a referee can take:

- i. identify particular entry requirements and describe how the candidate fulfils these

Many universities will describe the entry requirements in terms of skills and aptitudes as well as A-level results. Although your student will probably be applying for six institutions there will be one or two which are preferred: you should write the reference with the requirements of these universities in mind.

- ii. give examples of the candidate's intellectual reach and interests

"In Government & Politics Robert's ability to draw comparisons and make contrasts between different political systems is particularly worthy of praise. Robert's up-to the minute knowledge of political affairs, his ability to generalise from his knowledge and relate current events to relevant political theories is most impressive."

Contrast the impact of this reference with the following from another straight-A's student:

"Helen has approached her A-level study of French with an enquiring mind and a determination to achieve the highest standards. She has shown a keen interest in all aspects of French society and language and has applied her knowledge to very good effect. Very capable of independent thinking and study, Helen demonstrates initiative and self-motivation and her natural aptitude for languages makes her an excellent degree level candidate."

The latter is highly complementary but rather vague.

How to write a reference for a candidate whose predicted grades are poor

If you have a candidate with obvious ability but whose actual and/or predicted grades are low, then clearly you have a difficult task in writing a fair but supportive reference. Admissions tutors will be happy to accept extenuating circumstances as a reason for low performance, but will require substantial evidence of ability. A realistic, detailed and balanced reference will afford such candidates (and your school/college) greater credibility than one that flies in the face of the facts.

“Since joining this school in the sixth form, James has not had a smooth or settled time. He found it quite difficult to establish himself with his peers and in Year 12 he was not focussed on his studies. In addition, we feel that James made some bad decisions regarding the subjects he chose to study and this has adversely affected his motivation. However in recent months he has been considerably more positive about his work and we feel we are at last beginning to see his true potential. Although his anticipated grades at A2 level are not high (DDE) he is without doubt an able individual. If he continues to apply himself positively he is likely to exceed his predicted grades.

James’s teachers are unanimous in recognising that he has the potential to succeed in higher education. He is a bright student who is quick to grasp concepts and relevant theories. He is quite articulate and confident enough to participate in class discussion. He is able to construct a strong argument both orally and on paper. He has a respectful manner towards staff and enjoys a good working relationship with his peers. His written work is of a good standard and he has a mature writing style.

James is determined to turn things around and has decided to resit most of his AS modules in January. He has researched the courses he has applied for thoroughly and seems well suited to them. We think he is worthy of your consideration and sincerely hope that he is able to achieve his ambitions,”

What decision would you make?

Final thoughts

Making a decision on candidates is obviously somewhat subjective and so it is essential that admissions tutors have as much information as possible to avoid leaving questions unanswered in their minds. The best service you can do for your candidates for higher education is encourage them to research their HE options thoroughly, guide them in their preparation of their personal statement, and ensure that your reference completes the picture.

Note: all the extracts quoted here are taken from real references submitted to Keele University in 2003/4 and are as originally presented. The names of the students have been changed.