UNIVERSITY OF
EXETER

Teacher Information Sheet

Writing a UCAS reference: hints and tips

> **This information is designed to provide advice for those staff in schools and colleges who write references for UCAS applicants. It provides general information and 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.**

What is a UCAS reference?

UCAS references are designed to provide universities and colleges with an informed and academic assessment of an applicant's suitability for further study.

Why is it important to get the reference right?

- It is one of the factors on which conditional and unconditional university place offers are based
- It is the only part of the application that the applicants do not write themselves and as you know your students and we don't, we rely on it to demonstrate the real potential of the student
- It will be read and may be scored to assess whether the applicant has the necessary skills and academic ability to study the stated course.

What are universities looking for?

- That the reference is written by a member of staff who knows the candidate and his/her performance, and
- places the candidate and their actual/predicted results in context, and
- supports the candidates in their personal statement, and
- gives an honest, fair and relevant assessment of the candidate's potential to succeed at a higher level in the chosen subject.

Points to remember before you start writing the reference

- Read the whole application so that you can understand the applicant's intended career direction, chosen courses and preferred places of study.
- When writing your reference, you do not need to repeat information that the student has given, unless you want to comment on it. However, you will need to confirm any personal circumstances that may have affected the student's prior or predicted grades.
- Please note that each university and college chosen by the student will see your reference. Those universities and colleges, however, will not know to which other universities and colleges the student has applied. If you refer to one of them in your reference, this could compromise the application.
- When writing a reference, remember that, under the Data Protection Act, any student can ask for a copy of the reference and any other personal information that we have about them.
- Include information about any special needs and other requirements but do not give information about a student's health or disability without their agreement.
- If you are writing a reference for a course that you are unfamiliar with, a useful starting point may be the details of selection criteria and attributes universities and colleges are looking for as

provided in their prospectuses, websites, or entry profiles on the UCAS website (www.ucas.ac.uk).
- The reference should be written using a standard word-processing package and should not exceed 4,000 characters (this includes spaces) or 47 lines (this includes blank lines), whichever is the shorter. You cannot use bold, italics, underlining or foreign characters (such as á, ë, õ) in the reference. If you are entering the reference directly into the application system, it is recommended that you save your contact details before adding your reference and save it at regular intervals (the application system will time-out after 35 minutes of inactivity and any unsaved material will be lost).

Example format of a reference:

1) Information on the school/college

2) Their suitability for the chosen courses, including: •The student's academic performance in their post-16 education •Their potential for academic success in higher education •Why the course they have chosen is suited to them •Any personal qualities which will benefit them at university such as skills, aptitude, enthusiasm •What they can bring to the university, such as extra-curricular activities and interests

3) Predicted grades (listed separately)

1) Information on the school/college

Include brief details about the school's/college's curriculum policy, to include:

- Size and type of school/college
- Number of students in student's year group and/or class sizes and the proportion typically progressing to HE
- Typical number and patterns of qualifications taken by students
- Information about school policy such as certification of AS-levels and opportunities to take vocationally related qualifications alongside academic GCEs.

Example:

Our School offers A level and BTEC programmes to students from the local areas. Over 30% of our students receive EMA payments and 25% are from widening participation backgrounds. Our standard pattern is 3 A levels and one AS. All students take a critical thinking module as part of the non-examined General Studies programme

2) Describe their suitability for the chosen courses

The most important part of your reference is your assessment of the applicant's suitability for the higher education courses they have chosen. Consider including the following points:

1. Existing achievement and details of performance from subject teachers, with particular reference to subjects relating to the courses for which they are applying or any information you might want to add about performance in individual units of qualifications, for example, GCE AS and A levels that the student has not already given in the personal statement.
2. all qualifications, e.g. Key Skills, Critical Thinking, General Studies
3. motivation and commitment towards the chosen course(s);

4. any relevant skills achievement, whether certificated or not;
5. potential (other than predicted grades);
6. powers of analysis and independent thought;
7. relevant curriculum enrichment and other activities;
8. relevant work experience, such as work placements, voluntary work and so on;
9. proposed career plan and, where relevant, their suitability for training for a particular profession;
10. any factors, such as personal circumstances, that may have affected, or might affect their performance;
11. If the applicant is on an access, foundation or other one-year course you may not have known them long enough to write a full reference. In this case, please say so and explain that you are providing a temporary reference (including as much detail as you can) and will provide a complete reference next spring.

3) Predicted Grades

These are requested in a separate box (rather than within the reference text). Under the heading 'Predicted grades', you will see any AS or A levels the applicant has listed as pending. Please select your prediction of the grade or result from the dropdown list.

- The system is based on predictions rather than actual results so there is no guarantee of accuracy - 47% of predictions are too optimistic and 9% too pessimistic
- Universities appreciate reliability – there is less than a 55% exact match on 3 A level predictions but it is essential that offers are made to the students who can attain these grades
- Underestimated grades can result in no offer being made
- Overestimated grades can result in candidates seeking places via clearing
- If you are the person that signs off the UCAS form, please check that the predicted grades are correct
- If predicted grades are well above AS grades then explain why the students potential exceeds their previous attainment
- If predicted grades are not a reflection of their true abilities, it is useful to state why the student has been disadvantaged and what their intellectual potential ought to allow them to get. For example:

Since joining this college last year, xxx has not had a particularly settled time. He found it quite difficult settling in to establish himself with his peers and at first was not focussed on his studies. In addition we feel that he did not make the best decisions regarding the subjects he chose to study and may have been wrongly advised by others and this has adversely affected his motivation and achievement to date. However, in recent months, he has been considerably more positive, focussed in terms of organisation and hard-working about his studies. We feel that at last he is beginning to see his true potential. His anticipated grades are not high (DDD) but we really feel that this does not reflect his true ability. If he continues to work at the pace he is currently doing so and continues to improve on that (which again he is showing signs of) he is likely to exceed his predicted grades……..

What can students do to help you write the reference?

- Critically appraise their performance (to date and consider means of future improvement)
- Consider evidence of their performance outside of their core subjects
- Consider their contribution to extra-curricular activities both inside and outside school/college

Further Information

http://www.exeter.ac.uk/undergraduate/applications/application.php

http://www.ucas.ac.uk/website/documents/guides/adviserguide09.pdf