

# Writing effective UCAS references

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UCAS

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# Importance of the UCAS reference

Are they actually **read**?

**Who** by?

**When**?

**How** are they used?

Can they actually **make a difference**?

# How the UCAS reference can be used

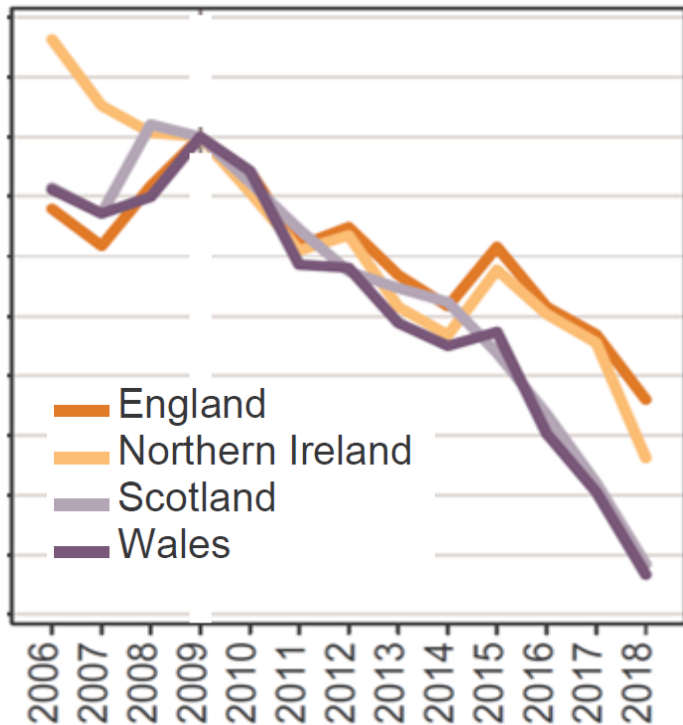
differently by different universities

At a very **competitive** choice, probably predominantly for **differentiation**, and to verify an applicant's **personal statement**, **ability** and **potential** as assessed by a fellow professional.

But the applicant's **personal statement** probably take precedence

At the other end of the entry requirements spectrum though, the **reference** may well be the **leading document** in the consideration process.

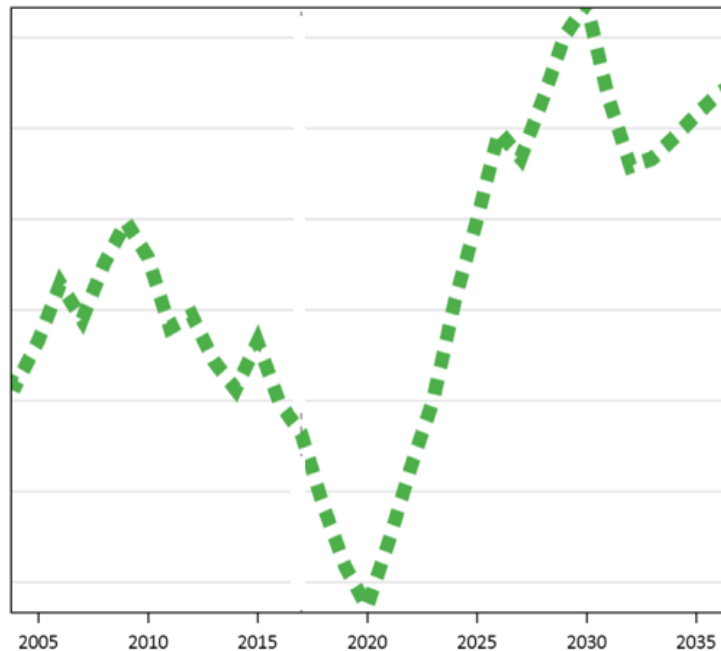
# Remember: things change



UK domiciled 18 year olds make up the largest group of UCAS applicants each Year.

◀ What does this graph show?

And this one? ▶



# Plan ahead: **references**

To support the writing of **effective** UCAS references, you need to ensure that your centre has a **robust process** in place.



Ensure **all** contributors know **what** parts they will play and **when**.



**Train**, **share good practice** and provide relevant **support resources**.



For **subject reports** encourage tutors to keep **observation logs** through Year 12.

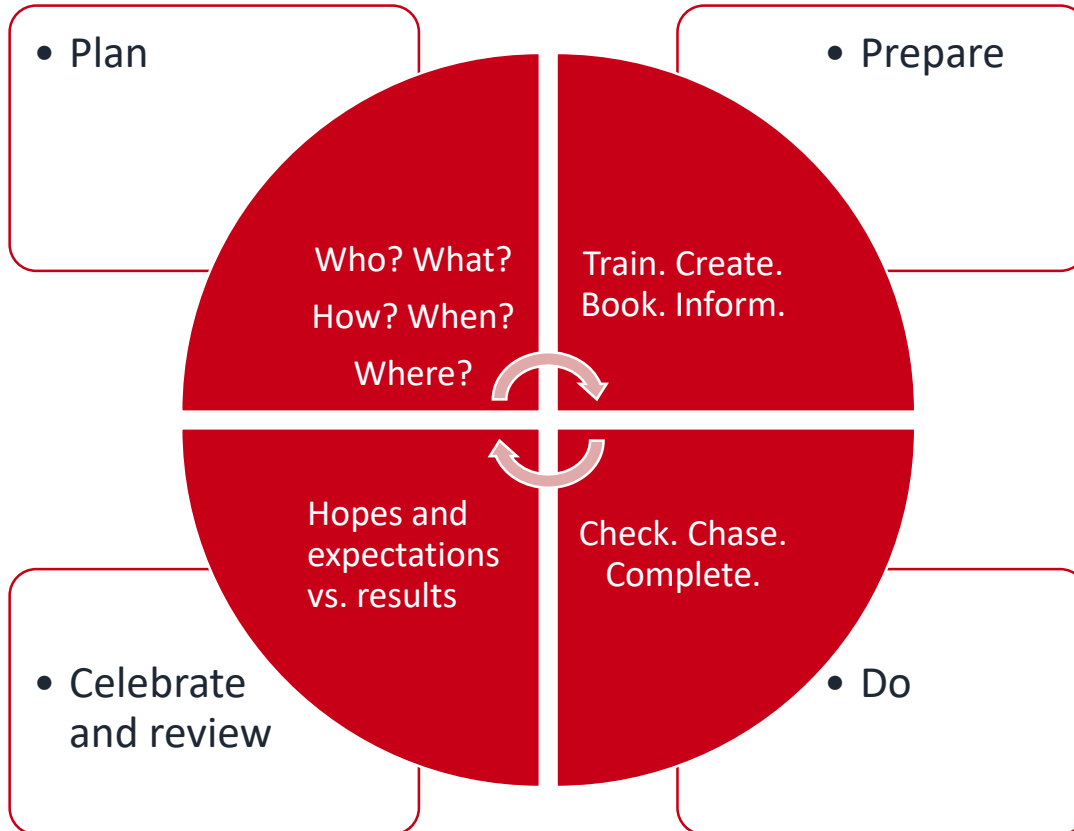


Set-up student/referee **meetings** for **before** and **after** the reference is written.



Have someone **different** **approve** the reference.

# Planning for application cycles



# Some things to consider...

Do referees know which **universities** and **courses** the student is applying for?

Do they know what **skills** and **qualities** are being sought?

Have they seen the student's **research** log?

Does the student see their **predicted grades** or **reference**?

Has the student been **asked** if there is anything they would like the **referee** to write about?

Have they seen a **strong** or **final** version of the **personal statement**?

# Avoid discrepancies: you don't want **universities** asking things like...



“Is this reference really about the **same person** who wrote the personal statement?”



“How come they're predicting an **A at A level**, when she never got better than a **B at GCSE** and a **C at AS**?”



“**How much** of what's written here is about **this actual individual**? – Just now he was a '**he**', now he's a '**she**!'”



“Didn't I just read **exactly the same thing** about another applicant from this school?”



# Remember...

- The **reference** and **personal statement** need to work **closely together** to give a unified portrait of the individual applicant.
- The reference should **support** and **build upon** other information provided in the application and be **objective** and **insightful**.
- You can start to populate the section as soon as the student registers.
- An applicant can request a copy of their full application (including reference) post-submission...  
**and they no longer have to pay.**



# Predicted grades

Concerns over **accuracy**



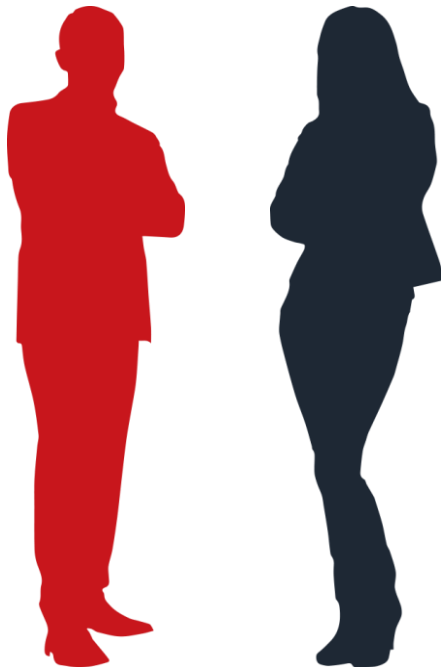
Most **overpredicted**



Some **underpredicted**



Have been getting increasingly **less accurate**



Unis still **want** them



Could lead to offers which **can't be met**



Could lead to **no offer**



**New** guidance on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com)

# Predicted grades info on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com)

Predicted grades are a key part of the application process. We've worked with a group of experienced advisers to develop the following guidance to help you when making predictions for your students' applications.

- What are predicted grades?
- Challenges for advisers
- Principles for predicting grades
- Associated risks
- Guidance to support internal processes
- Factors to consider
- Case studies

# Parameters of the UCAS reference

- It is short – **47 lines** or **4000 characters** (whichever you get to first)
- Same as the personal statement, but no **minimum** or **similarity checks**

**Must work together with the **personal statement**.**

**Must work for the **most demanding** choice**

Provide **insightful** information that **adds value** and enables **differentiation**

Will your process, timeline and support mechanisms **empower** this?

# Reference **resources** on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com)



## How to write UCAS Undergraduate references


Explore this **section** ☰

View published

We take you through what you need to do if you've been asked to write a reference for a UCAS Undergraduate applicant.

### Providing references

**i** As a referee, you're aiming to give universities assessment of an applicant's suitability for further education.

- You'll either receive an email from us, or if you work the application will be available in Adviser Track.
- Read the whole application so you understand their preferred places of study.
- **Qualification reform** – in the changing qualification an increasingly important role in providing unis and qualifications. To help you when writing references, curriculum and qualification reforms has created  (142.23 KB)

### What to include

- Their post-16 academic performance and their potential for success in higher education.
- Why they're suited to their chosen subject and career path, plus their attitude, motivation and commitment.
- Skills and qualities like aptitude and enthusiasm, plus current or past achievements that will help with their chosen subject area.
- Achievements, work experience, and extracurricular activities that relate to their chosen course(s).
- Any commitments (like January AS assessments) that might prevent interview attendance on a particular day.
- Any **contextual information** which might warrant special consideration. This could include individual circumstances – e.g. mature student, disability, widening participation activities, or information about your school which may affect performance, such as significant staff changes, or damage to buildings.
- Any mitigating factors that might affect their performance, for example serious, acute or chronic illness, or significant adverse personal circumstances (with applicant consent).

# A common format


Information on the school/college

Special circumstances (if applicable)

Subject-by-subject report

Suitability for chosen course

Concluding endorsement



In the changing qualification landscape, the reference will play an increasingly important role.

To help you, SPA's National Expert Think Tank (NETT) on curriculum and qualification reform has created [guidance for school and college references – what HEPs would like to know](#).

# What to **include** in a UCAS **reference**



**Academic performance**, including **predicted grades**.



**Contextual information**.

- Factors that might affect **performance**.
- **Extenuating** circumstances.
- **Commitments**.



**Suitability** for the course.

- Skills and qualities, such as aptitude and enthusiasm.
- Achievements in particular subject areas.
- Relevant extracurricular activities.



**Avoid unnecessary** repetition.

# Subject reports

Often an area of **concern** for both **admissions staff** in universities and **schools/colleges**

- Remember the **audience and purpose**.
- Admissions staff need some ‘**meat on the bones**’ – **insightful detail**:
  - For competitive courses/providers: to help facilitate positive differentiation among students who might otherwise appear very similar on paper.
  - For applicants who are not high academic achievers: to help admissions staff understand context, potential, and what support might be required to empower the student and enable achievement.





# Use language **carefully**

Clear, concise, precise plain language is **preferred**.

*“In addition to her A level subjects, XXXXX passed the RSA Integrated Business Technology stage II examination, and also the Young Enterprise examination. She was an active member of the school’s Young Enterprise group last year, an experience she found challenging.”*

*Some **ambiguity** – ‘an experience she found challenging’ - this could be taken to mean that she **struggled to cope** with the demands of the experience. **Alternatively**, it could mean that the experience was a **positive one which stretched the student**”.*

What do you think might have some caused **concern** for an admissions tutor?

# Be as **positive** as possible...but be **honest**

Rewrite these more **positively** (but without being untruthful)?:

***“Rebecca is not a naturally gifted student, but she sticks at it.”***

***“After a dismal and depressed start, Gavin has rescued a good deal from what could easily have been left as mere wreckage.”***

***“Raxa has had issues with attendance and punctuality that affected the standard of her work in the past, but she has been addressing these of late and her work has shown a commendable improvement as a result.”***

Admissions staff do appreciate a little ‘**shading**’ where possible.

# Supporting **ex-students**

- You could create an **Ex-students group** in Apply.
- If they haven't already registered, you could provide your 'buzzword' so their application is made in the same way as current students. (They would count to your reporting numbers).
- If they have already registered as an **independent** student, you could advise them to login to their application, select **Options** at the bottom of the menu, then either:
  - Send a request to be linked to your centre **or**
  - Send a request for the centre to add a reference only

# Is what you've written...

**T**True?

If it **isn't** (for the individual), **it shouldn't be there!**

**H**elpful?

Remember **audience and purpose!** Will it help **differentiate** or **convince**?

**I**nsightful?

Does it give a real **feel** for the **individual** student? Their **skills, commitment** etc.

**N**ecessary?

What does it **add**? ( E.G. *"Her honesty has never been questioned."* )

**K**ind?

It is meant to **support** the application and **help** the applicant!

# Questions

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# **Thank you**

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