

Reference Good Practice for Providers

Reform to the reference format has highlighted some areas of inconsistency in use which is causing confusion and potentially creating additional work. The following good practice guidance has been developed with the sector in response to concerns raised to UCAS, and approved by the Provider Advisory Group in January 2024.

Section 2 and 3 are both optional; for 2025 entry we will strengthen guidance about the importance of including information in Section 3 for all students, refine guidance about Section 2, and decouple and enhance guidance for independent applicant referees. Individual institutions are autonomous in how the reference is used within their admissions decision-making process, and we remind advisors to check local requirements.

Best Practice

- How your institution uses references in admissions process and what you are looking for should be clearly outlined and easily accessible; this supports fair and transparent admissions as detailed in the UCAS Admissions Principles and the Fair Admissions Code of Practice. This could be a brief statement indicating what sections you use, and linking to the UCAS guidance.
- All teams, emails, website pages etc. within your institution need to be updated on how the reference is used, so that there is consistent messaging and practice across the institution. We recognise that institutions may have different requirements across courses; these should be clearly defined as above.
- Additional information in the reference should only be requested if it is critical to decision-making or required for professional courses. When an application has been submitted by a UCAS apply centre, the information in there has already been endorsed; the referee should not be asked to repeat information or provide additional information for context if the applicant meets standard offer criteria.
- When additional information in the reference is required, you should consider carefully whether the request for this is sent to the referee or the applicant. The referee's details are provided so that they can be contacted, although we recognise that there may be situations where the applicant is the most appropriate person to contact, and that it is good practice to keep the applicant informed.

- Requests for additional information need to be specific about what is required and why and have a reasonable deadline as outlined in point 6 of the UCAS Admissions Principles. Asking for a “satisfactory” or “academic” reference without providing further guidance on what is required can cause further delay and confusion. Requests such as “Provide a satisfactory reference” should not be made as part of the offer conditions as this does not support point 5 of the UCAS Admissions Principles.
- Section 2 should be used to identify applicants that need additional support/consideration or to complete any additional extenuating circumstances forms required by your institution. You should have a clear policy that identifies what information is considered and how the information about extenuating circumstances is used, processed and shared.