**Providing an Effective Reference for your**

**Access to HE Students**

After speaking with HE Admissions Tutors at various events, the following key areas have been identified and listed below. We do realise that all tutors will be aware of the correct protocol for writing references but we hope that by compiling a checklist this may assist tutors and reinforce the message from admissions tutors, especially during such a busy period within the academic year.

**The basics**

A student reference can either be a Full reference – Sections 1, 2 and 3 of UCAS’ guide, or an Alternative reference - section 2, and should follow guidance from UCAS which you can find [here](https://www.ucas.com/advisers/references). An ideal length of a student reference should be no longer than 4,000 characters/47 lines of text (including spaces and blank lines) and include:

* Context of the learning environment – particularly if the student studied during the Covid-19 Pandemic
* Extenuating circumstances that may relate to the applicant, such as potential grade results and actual grade outcomes that demonstrate a particular situation for the student
* Academic performance and preparedness for studying in Higher Education (HE)
* Achievements of the student within their group/cohort
* Skills, qualities such as aptitude and enthusiasm, work experience and/or extracurricular activities, suitability for chosen course/career plan
* Possible additional information from specific tutors[[1]](#footnote-1)

You can begin writing a student reference as soon as the applicant registers with UCAS. Applications are available to read in full in the Adviser Track section of UCAS. For Access to HE students, you may not have known them very long when you have to begin writing a reference. UCAS suggests that you should say this and that this reference is a temporary one (providing as much detail as you can about the student) and confirm that you will provide a more complete reference next spring when you know the student much better. **Always remember to quote the applicant’s personal ID.**

**Be careful when cutting and pasting**

Some tutors have many references to write and the ‘cut and paste’ option can save time. However, care should be taken to ensure that the names are relevant to the application. If a reference is for one person and then refers to another, this could seriously undermine confidence in the reference and could hold up the process if admissions tutors have to seek clarification.

**Personalise the reference**

Admissions tutors prefer to see tailored rather than standard references, though it might be beneficial to include a standard introductory paragraph about the Access to HE Diploma studied, as admissions staff tend not to be as familiar with the qualification as they are with A-Levels. It is important that the reference sounds as if it has been written about the individual applicant and that you read the whole application so that you can understand and support each student’s intended HE choices and career directions. Use names and refer to the student’s suitability for the courses to which they are applying (without direct reference to any particular university or college), referring to their extra-curricular interests and work experience, if relevant. There is no need to repeat any of the information that the student has already given, unless you want to comment on it.

**Describe the suitability of the student for the chosen courses**

The most important part of your reference is your assessment of the applicants’ suitability for the HE courses they have chosen. If you are writing a reference for a course that you have little prior experience in recommending an applicant for, it might be useful to consult university prospectuses, websites or entry profiles which outline the academic skills, personal qualities, interests and experiences they are looking for in applicants to particular courses. They will also be interested to know about more generic details, such as how much research applicants do around their subjects, whether they show commitment and motivation, whether they enjoy their subjects and whether they show the skills of analysis or independent thought that are key to success in HE.

**Predicted grades**

Give as much helpful information as you can, based on the student’s attitude and academic achievement to date, whilst noting that it is not possible, on a one year course, to give a reliable predicted grade because of the limited time you have had with the student. You can use the vocabulary of grading to indicate the student’s performance to date, but need to offer to send an updated reference once there has been more opportunity to observe and assess the applicant’s development and performance. Admissions tutors will contact tutors for updated references if requested to do so. Any supplementary references should be sent directly to all the chosen institutions and should include as much detail as possible to ensure that the new material is easy to match with the original application (full name, date of birth and degree course).

**Contextualise your students’ positive qualities**

When describing your students as capable, diligent, hard-working, motivated, enthusiastic, insightful, good communicator, valuable member of the group etc, giveexamples to support how these qualities have been demonstrated and show how, in your opinion, they relate to the applicant’s suitability for the courses applied for. Where describing a student’s attitude, motivation and commitment, say how these characteristics would help them to succeed on their chosen courses or career, if this has been mentioned elsewhere in the application.

**Predicted Grades**

Although we do not provide predicted grades on Access to HE like two year A Level courses do because ‘the structure of the qualifications makes this inappropriate’ (UCAS, *Principles for predicting grades*), we can reference the level that the student has been working at to date and the expectation of progress that the student should take. You may want to explain that 45 credits will be graded, 15 will be ungraded and the types of units these groups are and that there is no overall grade for the Diploma.

**Be consistent**

Check that your reference is consistent with the rest of the application. Where there is inconsistency, this should be explained, as mixed messages can confuse.

**Spelling and grammar**

Be sure to check your spelling and grammar and look out for typing errors. If there are mistakes, admissions tutors may lose confidence in the reference and applications containing grammatical or spelling errors can be discarded as part of the early filtering process.

**Get agreement from students before mentioning personal circumstances**

If you wish to add details about the applicant’s personal circumstances including health or disability issues, that may have affected, or might affect their performance, or to give information about any special needs or other requirements they may have, you need to get agreement from them first.

**Level 2 Maths and English**

Although there is still the option of including Level Two units within the structure of an Access to HE Diploma, very few of our centres include Level Two units within their provision. This has primarily been driven by HE offers that only focus on Level Three credits and grades. Where a student is required to demonstrate Level Two Maths and English, this is likely to have been an entry requirement of enrolling onto Access to HE within the college. During Information, Advice and Guidance documents, students will have been alerted to the likelihood of the need to already have these Level Two qualifications in order to be successful in HE applications.

**If the applicant completed the Access to HE course several years ago**You may be asked to provide a reference for a student you taught some years ago. If s, just write about his/her performance and potential when you knew them. If the student has mentioned what they have been doing since leaving your Access to HE course in the personal statement you may wish to comment on this, if you feel it is appropriate.

1. UCAS.com 2021/*advisers/references for 2022 entry* – accessed on 10/11/2021 [https://www.ucas.com/advisers/references] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)