

Writing Academic¹ References

This document provides guidance to Personal Tutors on writing references for students and graduates. Employers and postgraduate Admissions Tutors ask for references to confirm facts (accuracy of statements made in any application), and to provide relevant opinion on the candidate's skills and suitability.

As with all tutee queries, a student requesting a reference can expect a response from you within 3 working days wherever possible, initially to establish the procedure for providing references and the deadline for the reference.

The general guidelines provided will advise students and academic staff on how to ensure best practice while also adhering to the [University's Data Protection policy](#) when writing confidential references. This information was developed after consultation with a range of Careers Service employer contacts.

In addition to the information held in the Student Record and [Enhanced Transcript](#), which details University-recognised [co-curricular activities](#), you can also ask your tutees to complete the Academic Reference Request Form which will provide you with additional information about their studies, employment and career plans.

TYPES OF REFERENCES

Written references

Most employers and universities will contact you either by email or letter to ask you to comment on a student's suitability for a job or course of study. Often, you will be asked to complete a pro forma – in hard copy or through a password protected website – with a range of questions about the candidate. In some cases, you may also be invited to write a letter with your comments which can be returned either in hard copy or electronically. If you provide your reference electronically, **please check the authenticity** of the email address or website and send from your University email account. Always use University letter-headed paper for hard copy references and mark the envelope as “private and confidential”.

Telephone references

It is also possible for an employer to contact you by telephone to ask for comments about a student or graduate. Some employers prefer this method of collecting references, however, **it is not recommended to give out information over the telephone if at all possible**. If you do give an oral reference, it is important that an accurate record of the discussion is made and retained. You should be aware that the information given will be treated in the same way as a written reference. Therefore, it is important to ensure that only factually accurate information is provided and that the discussion is not used as a means of communicating “off the

¹ This document gives guidance on providing academic references only. If you are asked to provide a reference as an employer (for example, having employed a student on a summer project), much of the information will still apply, however, you may wish to contact the Careers Service (careers@abdn.ac.uk, T: 01224 273601) for further information and guidance.

If you are asked to provide a personal reference, i.e. as a friend rather than a tutor, colleague or supervisor, then this document does not apply. Please also note that, in this case, you must not use University stationery to supply your reference.

record" information. As with electronic references, you may wish to check the authenticity of the request by requesting the name, job title and contact details of the caller and returning the call.

Open testimonial

Some students may request an open reference for general use, for example, if they are taking a gap year or returning to their home country. The content of the letter is entirely for you to decide, but, as above, should only contain facts that can be substantiated. You may wish to refer to the section on what to include in a reference for guidance. In some cases, you may be approached for a more detailed and specific reference in addition to an open testimonial. If this happens, you may wish to inform the student/graduate.

CONTENT

When providing a reference, you must ensure that it is factually accurate, fair and not misleading in the overall impression it gives to the recipient. You will be asked to provide your opinion of the individual's performance, strengths and achievements. However, any comments which you make must be supported by evidence and every effort should be made to distinguish between facts and opinions.

Key points to include in a reference for students/graduates:

- Description of your relationship with the individual e.g. Personal Tutor, Course Co-ordinator etc.
- Confirmation of the dates of study
- Confirmation of the degree title/courses undertaken
- Competitions/prizes awarded
- [Extra-curricular/co-curricular activities](#) in which the student has been involved
- Work experience or internships undertaken
- Comments on [Aberdeen Graduate Attributes](#) developed, such as critical thinking, teamwork, communication etc.
- Personal qualities you have witnessed whilst working with the student such as their interaction with peers, motivation levels, confidence in the classroom etc.

Key issues to **exclude** from a reference:

- Information about absences on account of a disability, pregnancy or childcare problems
- Comments of a personal nature e.g. generalisations about "attitude" etc.
- Information relating to any allegations made against the individual
- Disciplinary warnings which are deemed to have been spent
- Comments which could be construed as defamatory
- Information which could be deemed as "sensitive personal data" under the Data Protection Act e.g. information relating to health, race, religion, spent criminal convictions etc. (unless the individual has given express permission to do so)
- Any other comments which provide a subjective view about an individual's performance, conduct or suitability without evidence to back up your statements

Please note that you should not provide this type of information even if you are requested to do so as part of a standard pro forma. If you prefer, you may provide your own written reference.

LEGAL ISSUES

The Data Protection Act 1998 provides the main statutory reference point and permits individuals to request sight of "personal" information, including references. Therefore, it is best to take into account, when writing a reference, that the student might see your comments. You must also ensure the safe storage of references and ensure others can have access should you be absent. If you receive a request from a tutee who wishes to see a reference which you have provided, you should email the University's Data Protection Officer

(dpa@abdn.ac.uk) prior to responding, so that the query can be logged and resolved in accordance with legislation. The University has, by good custom and practice, adopted a policy, in the interests of transparency, of releasing references by the University about its students to the respective student but it reserves the right in any particular case, in its absolute discretion, as decided by the Director of Academic Affairs, and in terms of the Data Protection Act 1998, Schedule 7 paragraph 1, to withhold that reference by the University as confidential.

There is no statutory duty to provide anyone with a reference. However, it is established practice at the University of Aberdeen and part of the role of a Personal Tutor to provide academic references for tutees. If you are uncomfortable, unable or unwilling to provide a reference, please inform the student/graduate immediately, giving clear reasons for refusing, so that he/she can make alternative arrangements. If you are contacted by an employer or admissions tutor without having agreed to provide a reference and are uncomfortable or unable to provide a reference, you can, again, refuse, however, communicate your decision carefully to avoid negative assumptions. Alternatively, you may wish to provide a purely factual reference confirming dates, degree title, courses taken etc. **Failure to ask for permission to name you as a referee in itself is not a reason for refusing to provide a reference.**

If you have any concerns or queries regarding the legal aspects of providing references, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer (dpa@abdn.ac.uk) for further guidance.

KEY POINTS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

- Respond with an initial decision or acknowledgement of any request for a reference within three working days. Agree a deadline by, and the format in, which the reference should be provided.
- Use the most appropriate sources to gather information on your students/graduates. Ask them to submit a CV and/or complete the [Academic Reference Request Form](#) if you require further information.
- If you think a student's application (CV, covering letter, personal statement etc.) is poorly executed, refer him/her to the [Careers Service](#) for further guidance.
- Remember to provide only information which can be backed up by evidence.
- Submit the reference to the agreed party/parties within the agreed timeline.
- Store references in an appropriate place.
- Refer any requests for disclosing references to the Data Protection Officer.