

## UCAS References

At the University of Oxford and Wadham College, we are looking for specific information from teachers about their pupils and their suitability for our courses. Below is some advice on what we find helpful, broken down into the three sections of the UCAS undergraduate reference.

### **Section 1: Enter a general statement about your school/college/centre.**

- Contextual information on the candidate's school, particularly GCSE school (e.g. "large mixed-ability comprehensive serving a large rural area and 24% of pupils FSM eligible" or "highly selective independent school with 70% of pupils achieving 8+ A\*s at GCSE").
- Keep this section concise to allow focus on the other sections.
- Any policies or processes used for predicting grades (e.g. internal assessments).
- Any school constraints that may have led to a particular decision (e.g. Further Maths not available, students only allowed to select 3 A-levels, student taking an A-level elsewhere).
- Context where A-level combinations seem odd (which may be related to the above point).

### **Section 2: If applicable, enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement.**

- Background on applicants where they have experienced circumstances that might have led unrepresentative GCSE results or to contextualise great GCSE results in the face of adversity. Similarly, background to contextualise A-level predictions, progress in class, or attendance. For example: the candidate is an asylum seeker, they have had severe or prolonged illness, they may have had family problems, they may be a young carer or have suffered bereavement during or just before exams.
- Family background in Higher Education. For example, are they the first in their family to go to university?
- If there are any circumstances that may affect, or have previously affected, the student's performance. Or, if these arise after the UCAS application has been submitted, contact the College directly.

**Section 3: Outline any other supportive information specific to the applicant and relevant to the course(s) applied for that you think universities/colleges should be aware of.**

- This is the section that tutors find most helpful. What tutors find useful are distinguishing things about candidates, alongside facts that help understand the candidate's qualifications:
  - An honest student rating within cohort (i.e. "For X, Jack is in the top Y% in their year").
  - *Evidence-based* academic strengths rather than generalisations: e.g. "Jane is excellent with X, as proven by their outstanding performance in Y exam where they achieved..."
  - Skills and qualities that are relevant to their chosen subject area.
  - Evidence of *motivation* for their subject and not just competitiveness with peers or need for teachers' praise.
  - Whether exam success in a subject is indicative of real talent or rather generally high levels of academic competence.
  - Evidence of interests in subject beyond the curriculum. For example, demonstrated by a project that they have undertaken or a club they have started or joined.
  - A degree of candour from referees which might list a slight weakness, giving more credence to otherwise entirely laudatory references.
  - How applicants would be likely to cope with the discovery of limits to their abilities to perform well in exams.
  - Whether candidates can handle having views challenged.
  
- What tutors find less useful:
  - Congratulatory references that lack proof or reference to achievements that back up any claims made.
  - Lack of distinguishing facts about candidates that would help with any decision-making.
  - Information relating to a candidate's popularity.
  - Extra-curricular activities in themselves are not helpful but can be for other universities so we understand why they're there. They can be helpful if students are able to manage extra-curriculars with high achievement and can show they may have spare capacity when work gets harder.
  - Information on attendance (unless it's problematic, in which case this is useful).