UCAS References

What tutors find useful:

- Contextual information on the candidate's school, particularly GCSE school (e.g. "large mixed-ability comprehensive serving a large rural area with 24% of pupils eligible for free school meals" or "highly selective independent school with 70% of pupils achieving 8+ A*s at GCSE");

- An honest student rating within cohort (i.e. "For X Jack is within the top Y% in his year");

- Evidence-based academic strengths rather than generalisations: e.g. "Jane is excellent with X, as proven by her outstanding performance in Y competition/exam where she achieved…";

- Background on applicants where they have experienced circumstances that might have led to them achieving unrepresentative GCSE results or to contextualise great GCSE results achieved in the face of adversity. This could be that the candidate is an asylum seeker, or that 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 (this list is not exhaustive).

- A degree of candour from referees which might list a slight weakness, giving more credence to otherwise entirely laudatory references;

- Any school constraints that may have led to a particular decision (e.g. Maths taken in Year 12 as a matter of school policy);

- Context where A-level combinations seem odd (which may be related to the above point);

- Evidence of *motivation* for their subject and not just competitiveness with A-level peers or need for teachers' praise;

- Evidence of interests in the applicants' subject beyond the curriculum. This might be demonstrated by a project that they have undertaken or a club they have started or joined;

- Help with understanding qualifications where they are less straightforward than the norm.

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;

- Information on attendance (unless it's problematic, in which case this is useful).

A couple of quotes from tutors:

"Most valuable of all is the information the referee sometimes provides about the school context. Simply to be told "big mixed-ability comprehensive serving a large rural area with 24% of pupils eligible for free school meals" or "highly selective independent school with 70% of pupils achieving 8+ A*s at GCSE" is pure gold, and enormously appreciated. Otherwise it's useful to have candidate-specific contextual information providing mitigating circs for poor GCSE or AS results, and sometimes indications of specific independent projects the candidate may have undertaken."

 "It would be useful to know how applicants would be likely to cope with the discovery of limits to their abilities to ace exams; whether candidates are genuinely motivated by subject matter or rather by competitiveness or by marks or by esteem from those in authority, for instance; whether exam success in a subject is indicative of real talent in that area or rather of generally high levels of academic competence; whether candidates can handle having their views challenged; and other fine-grained judgments along these lines. If a teacher could address these and say distinguishing things about candidates, alongside facts that help us to understand the candidate's profile of qualifications, I would advise them to do so. It is not very useful to know that candidates were elected Head Girl or Head Boy, or are popular, or committed to charitable or voluntary work, or leaders among their peers, and that sort of thing."