What are Russell Group universities looking for in the new UCAS reference?

University of Birmingham / University of Bristol / University of Cambridge

Cardiff University / Durham University / University of Edinburgh

University of Exeter / University of Glasgow / Imperial College London

King's College London / University of Leeds / University of Liverpool

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London School of Economics and Political Science / University of Manchester

Newcastle University / University of Nottingham / University of Oxford

Queen Mary University of London / Queen's University Belfast

University of Sheffield / University of Southampton / University College London

University of Warwick / University of York

Coming up…

- When and why are UCAS references changing?

- What will I need to do differently?

- What will be staying the same?

- What are Russell Group universities looking for in particular from the new UCAS reference?

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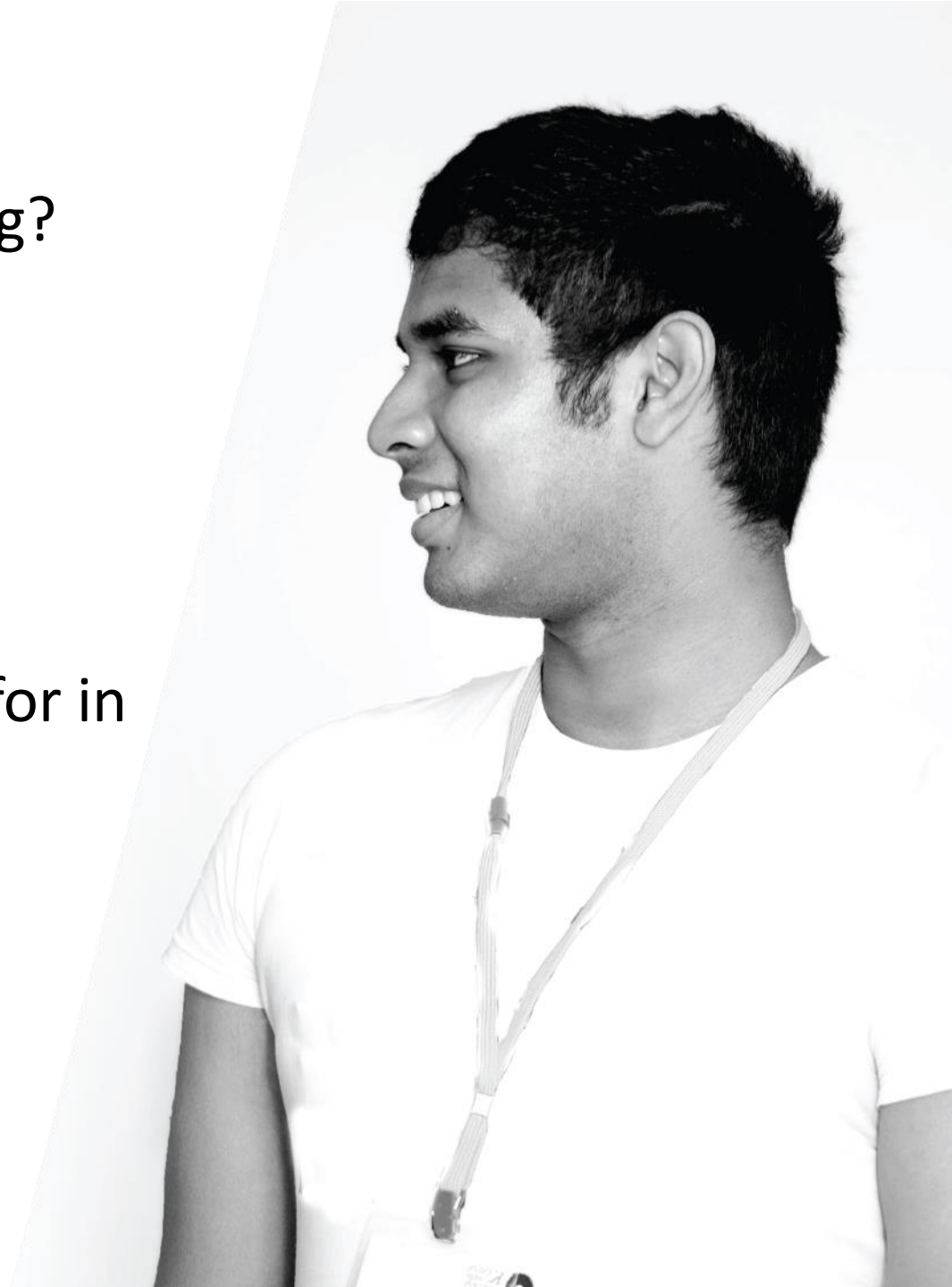
Background

When and why are references changing?

- You have already written your last reference using the 'old' format! The reference is changing starting for the 2024 entry cycle i.e. for applications submitted from this autumn onwards

- Feedback to UCAS has suggested that long subjective descriptions of applicants in references are not always helpful in enabling universities to make admissions decisions

- The new format will mean you know you are only providing the information that universities require in their decision making

- In a nutshell, referees will now provide responses in three structured sections rather than providing one continuous piece of prose

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Won't this create more work for us?

- Whilst it may take a little time for you to get familiar with the new system, we expect that overall writing references in the new format will be less time-consuming when compared to the old format

- Previous time which was invested in reference writing can now be used in other ways, for example supporting applicants to research courses and make decisions

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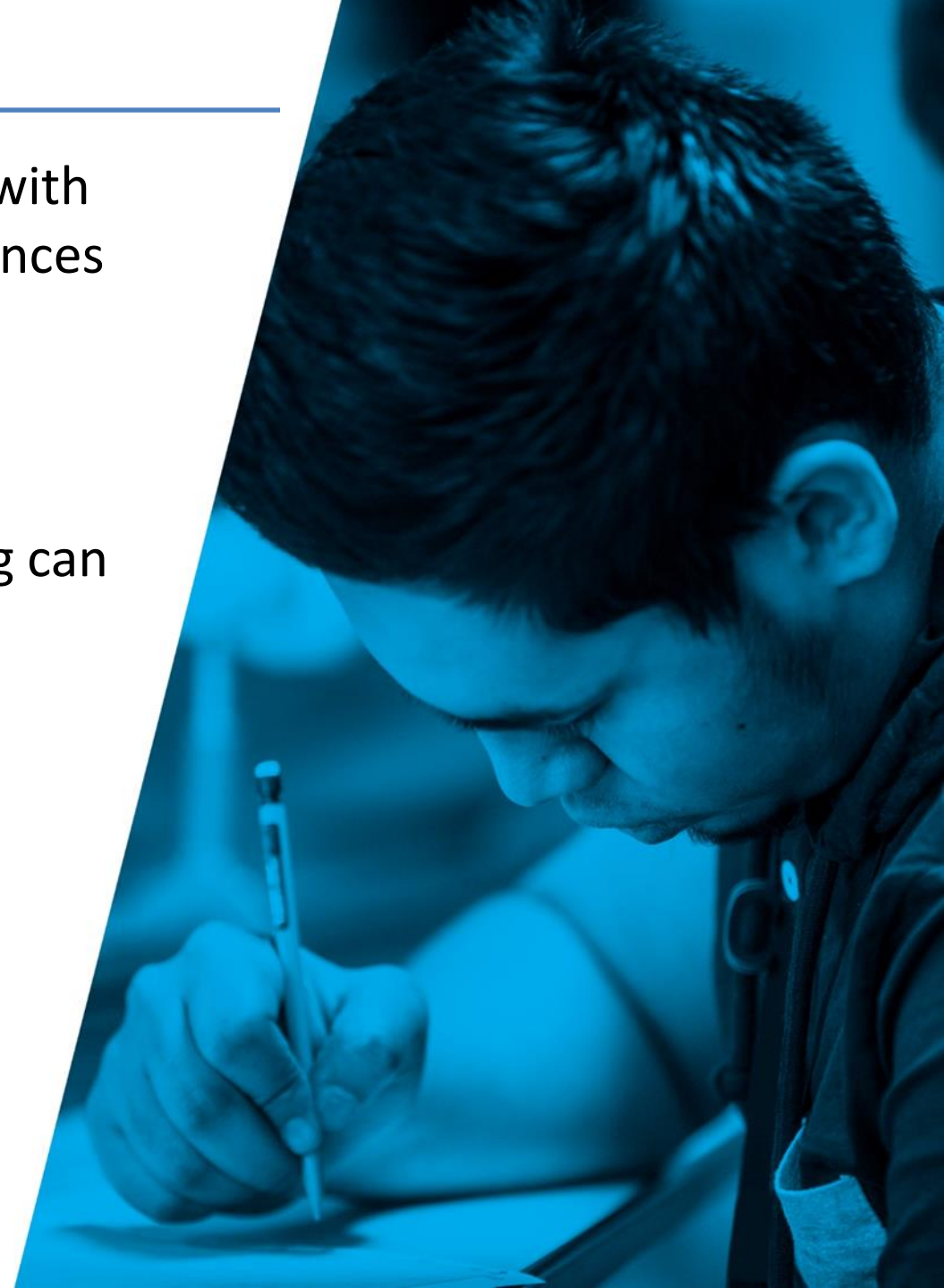
Timeline

January 2023	UCAS publishes [Future of undergraduate admissions](#) report with details of new three section reference approach
February 2023	UCAS provides guidance to advisers on the new reference approach
March 2023	UCAS receives feedback from advisers and small number of universities concerning the new references. UCAS enhances their guidance in light of this feedback and this is provided to advisers
May 2023	The new UCAS cycle (for 2024 entry) will open and referees can start to use the new reference format
September 2023	The first applications with references in the new format can be submitted

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What has Advancing Access been doing?

- In March, Advancing Access consulted with 10 of our partner Russell Group universities to find out what they were looking for from the new reference format

- We asked them what sorts of responses they might expect to receive in each of the new reference sections

- We will present general advice in this session, however you are encouraged to check advice from individual universities too on their websites

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Russell Group statement on references

"Our members have engaged positively with UCAS to make additional improvements to the final guidance to references for applications to 2024 entry and are satisfied that the new format and supporting guidance will be able to capture the information needed to make fair and informed admissions decisions.

In particular, the changes made mean that students applying to our universities will not require an additional reference to the one provided to UCAS, ensuring the system remains streamlined for students, schools and colleges and universities.

It's important that changes to the admissions system increase fairness and transparency so that talented applicants of all backgrounds with the drive to succeed can access world-class education. We look forward to engaging with UCAS next year on how well these changes have supported equality of opportunity and improved the quality of information supplied to universities."

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What did references used to look like?

Referees used to be given a single free text box where they could write up to 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text. We used to recommend this structure:

Details about the school/college plus contextual or extenuating circumstances about the applicant

Academic information – typically details of performance in each of the applicant's A level subjects (or equivalent), covering the applicant's potential to succeed on the university course.

This section was the main bulk of the reference.

Details of extra-curricular activities, work experience, applicant's character and personality etc.

What is staying and what is going?

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....

→ School/college information and extenuating circumstances will now each have their own section

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→ You should typically expect in future to provide less academic information than before, focussing on the most relevant subjects. Academic information might only inform selection decisions at the very most competitive universities

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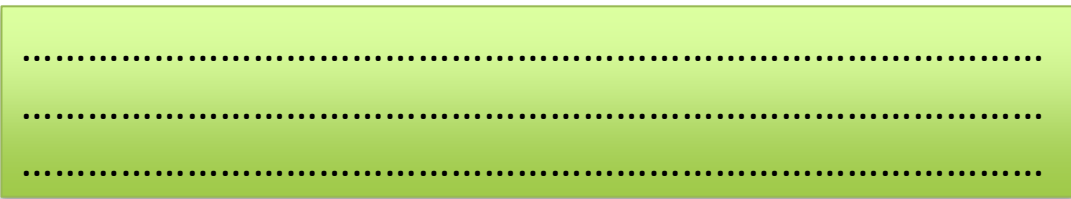
→ You may end up providing less extra non-academic information than before

# Principles from the 'old' reference which remain the same

- Applicants will be provided a copy of their reference if they contact UCAS

- The maximum length remains as 4,000 characters, this will be the total limit across 3 sections

- You can begin writing the reference once the applicant registers with UCAS

- You can write the reference in Word and save your own copy (securely and not indefinitely)

- You can read applications in the UCAS portal and make sure that references correspond well with applications

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The three sections of the new reference

For each applicant, you will be able to enter a response in each of these three sections:

1. Enter a general statement about your school/college

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

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

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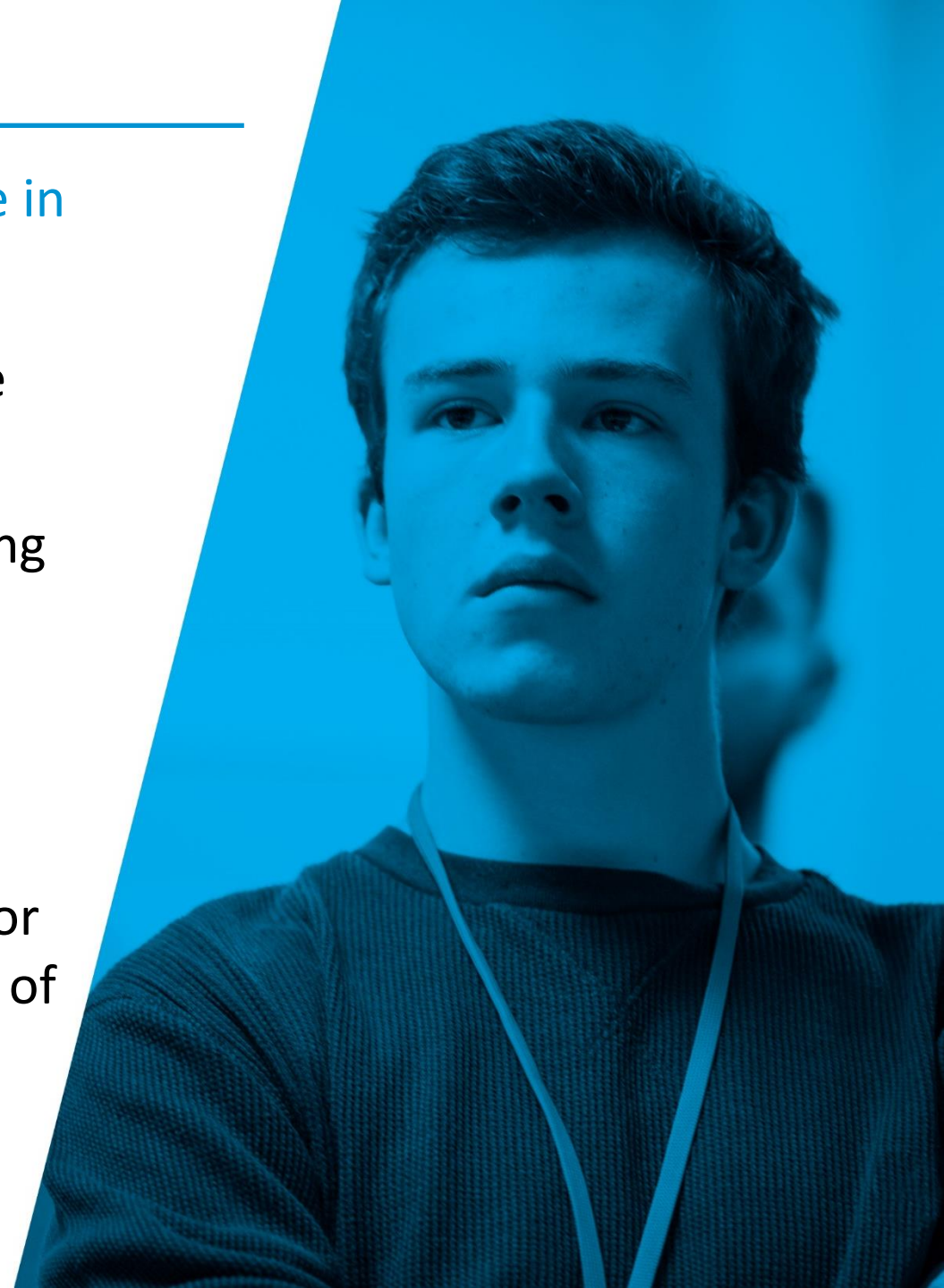
Roles in the reference-writing process

Students

Complete their application and personal statement, which the referee should look at.

Senior leaders

Senior leaders at your school or college can agree on a statement about the school or college which is included in every reference

Subject teachers

Subject teachers may provide some input, though they may not all need to contribute and they may provide less detail than before

Form tutor

A form tutor might be the one who draws together all the information needed to complete sections 2 and 3 in the reference

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Section 1 – details about your school or college

School overview

You might set the scene by stating...

- What type of school is it? For example, state funded or independent, sixth form or FE college, single-sex or coeducational?

- How big is the school/sixth form/college? And what are the class sizes?

Details of your qualifications policy

- What types of qualifications do you offer?

- When students take A levels, how many do they take? Do they take externally accredited AS levels?

- Are additional qualifications available, such as EPQ, Core Maths or Welsh Baccalaureate?

- Are there any combinations of subjects which are not possible?

- How do you arrive at predicted grades? Are there some qualifications you don't predict for?

- Do you have any particular entry requirements?

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Factors which could apply to you

You might mention these if they apply to you and you think they're relevant:

- High proportion of free school meals/pupil premium students

- School or college serves disadvantaged community

- High proportion of SEND students

- School or college level extenuating circumstances (e.g. fire, flood, staff shortages)

- Low Ofsted rating

- Below average attainment level

- Small proportion of students progress to university/Russell Group/Oxbridge etc.

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Finding statistics on the GOV.UK website

Use our website tool to construct your school or college statement

Details of your school or college - brainstorming

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You can use this page to help you think about what to include in section 1 of the reference. Once this has been decided, the same passage can be included in every reference.

If you are not responsible for writing this and have already been provided with text to include then you may wish to skip this and the next page.

Answer these questions first to help you put together a passage of information about your school or college. Press the download button once you have finished to open your responses in a Word document.

Your school or college

How would you describe the size of your school?

○ Small ○ Medium ○ Large

How would you describe your school or college type?

○ State comprehensive sixth form

○ State FE college

○ Selective state school

○ Independent school

○ Other

What is your typical qualifications provision?

○ Most students are studying A levels (or other academic qualifications)

UCAS references CPD module

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Configuring the UCAS website

- Once a senior member of staff in your organisation has agreed upon a final version of a statement about your school or college, the same statement can be used for every application

- In the UCAS portal, it is possible for each application centre to add a reference template with your school or college details. This will need to be done by someone who has permission to access to the 'Centre Management' section of the UCAS website

- Referees can then use the 'add template text' option to insert this template automatically

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UCAS

Centre management 2024

UCAS Training School

UCAS centre number: 19048

Centre and reference details

Contacts

Centre linking (buzzword)

Qualification shortlist

Groups

Application fee payment methods

Referee contact details

Reference template

Reference template

Edit

The information you enter in this section can be added to each applicant reference in the reference section of the Application details page.

Note that if you update the information here it will not update references that you have already added this information to.

This text will count in the 4000 character limit for applicant references.

USE THIS TEMPLATE TO ADD YOUR MANDATORY SECTION 1 (ESTABLISHMENT DETAILS) FOR THE REFERENCE.

AT THE POINT OF ADDING A REFERENCE (UNDER APPLICATION MANAGEMENT) CLICK 'ADD REFERENCE TEMPLATE TEXT' TO INPUT THIS TEXT YOU HAVE PREPARED.

Reference

If a staff member at your centre has entered reference template text in 'Centre management', you can add this to the reference using the button below. This will be included within the character count for the reference.

Add reference template text

Please enter the reference here. There is a limit of 4000 characters (including spaces, headings and line breaks). Bold, italics and underlining cannot be used in the reference. Character counts may differ if your input has been pasted from another electronic source and/or you have entered non-English characters and/or symbols such as £, €, among others.

Establishment details *

Enter a general statement about your school/college.

Type here

Characters used here: 0, remaining overall: 4000

What are Russell Group universities looking for?

You should aim to include all relevant factors, but our sample of universities suggested that these were the top 3 factors they were most interested in:

School-level extenuating circumstances (e.g. fire, flood etc.)

Any restrictions on particular qualifications choices or combinations

Whether the school catchment area is within a socioeconomically deprived neighbourhood

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Section 2 – extenuating circumstances

Section 2 – extenuating circumstances

"If applicable, enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement"

- This section is optional and there is a box to tick to indicate if there are no extenuating circumstances

- It is likely that you won't complete this section for most applicants

- Applicants will not be disadvantaged if they don't happen to have any extenuating circumstances

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Possible extenuating circumstances (not exhaustive!)

Possible contextual information about the applicant:

- Disability or special educational needs

- Illness

- Bereavement

- Caring responsibilies

- Multiple teachers in a short space of time

- Student looked after in care

- Applicant is refugee or asylum seeker

- Lack of access to necessary technology

- Lack of suitable study environment at home

- Limited choice of subjects (at an individual level)

- Other adverse circumstances

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Attainment trajectory

You could offer some commentary on actual or predicted attainment in section 2, for example:

- There is a mismatch between actual grades at GCSE level and predicted grades at A level (or equivalent)

- The student is not predicted to meet the advertised entry requirements of the course

You don't need to state predicted grades as these are entered elsewhere.

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Support you have in place

- In section 2 you can tell the university if there is any particular support you have put in place to enable the student to succeed at school or college

- Universities may be able to offer similar support themselves in future

General points

- Seek the consent of the applicant first before including extenuating circumstances

- You should still mention extenuating circumstances that the applicant has chosen to mention themselves in the personal statement

- You can also flag extenuating circumstances with exam boards, though you should mention you have done this in the reference to avoid 'double counting'

- References cannot be amended once submitted. If extenuating circumstances emerge further down the line, contact universities to tell them

- Some universities may have their own extenuating circumstances form to fill in, especially in cases where applicants have faced particularly difficult circumstances (if you have sent a separate form you can state this in the reference)

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Students can flag things up too…

Remember:

- There is another section of the UCAS application where the applicant themselves can identify if they…

  > Have been in receipt of free school meals
  > Have parents in the armed forces
  > Are estranged from their parents
  > Have caring responsibilities
  > Are a refugee or asylum seeker
  > Have been looked after in care
  > Have parenting responsibilities

You can see our blog post on these questions that were introduced from 2023 entry onwards.

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Section 3 – Additional supportive information

Section 3 – supportive information

"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 your chance to provide other relevant information to support the application

- This is **not** necessarily a place to add everything you would have put in the "old" reference – expect to write a little less than you did in the past

- When supporting applicants for some of the most competitive universities, expect to write around 2,000 characters in this section

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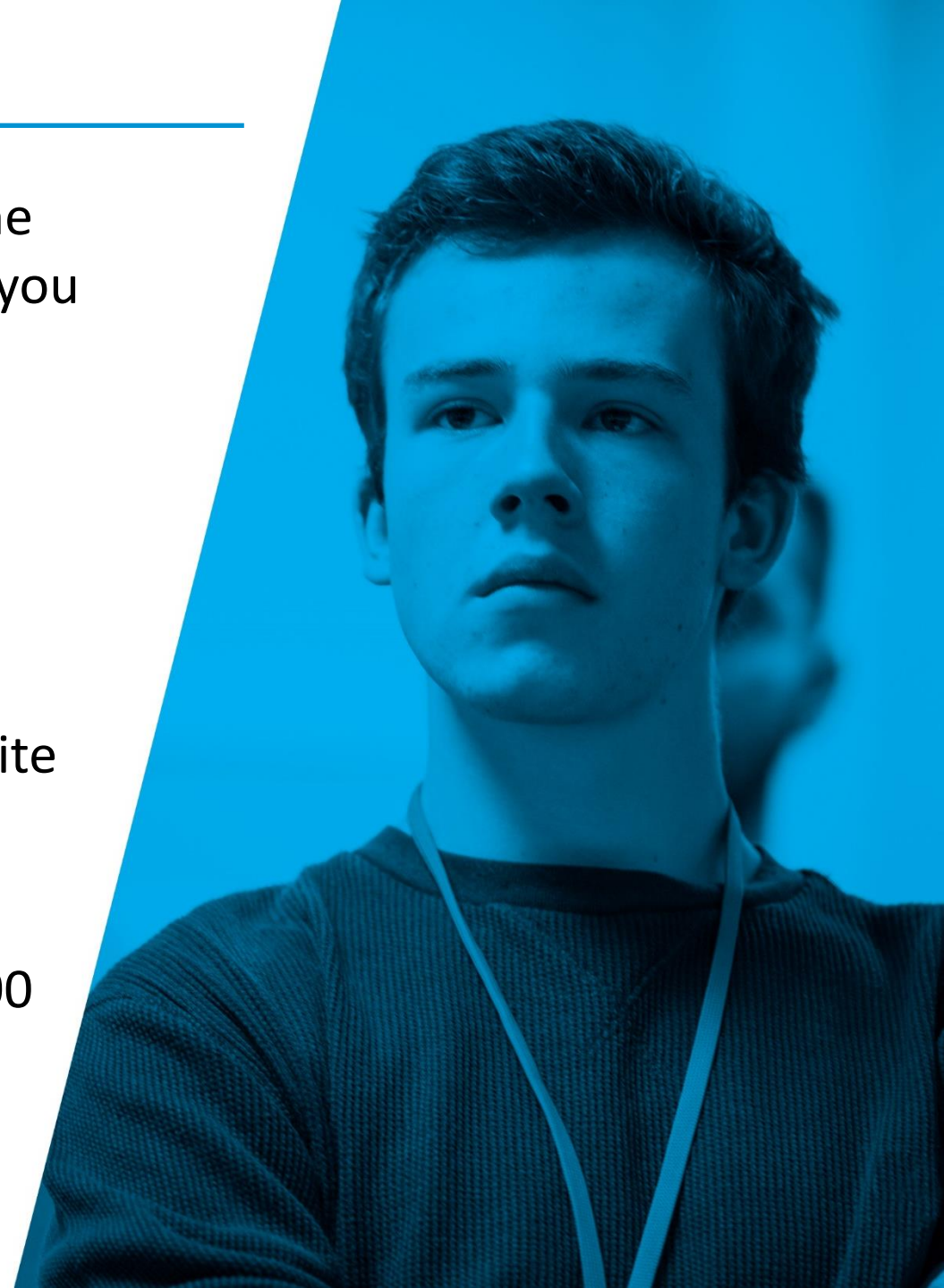
Supportive information

You might provide details of:

- Evidence of the applicant's suitability for the course

- Details of **relevant** work experience which has been completed (may not be necessary to include part time jobs)

- Challenges in balancing school or college work with other responsibilities

- Positions of responsibility, e.g. Head Girl or Class Representative

- **Relevant** extra-curricular activities

- Verification of things mentioned in personal statement (which are not verified elsewhere)

Academic information

- Details of academic skills and achievements in **relevant** subjects (for example, a subject which is being applied for or is a pre-requisite for the course being applied for)

- Information about super-curricular activities and evidence of engagement of a subject outside of the school or college syllabus

- Details of students who are near the top of their class in particular subjects

- Information can be presented in bullet point style

- You may not need to cover all subjects the student is studying and are likely to require a smaller contribution from subject teachers than in the "old" reference style

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Put your best students in context

Instead of:

"Alice's performance in Maths has been very strong. Her last three test scores for mechanics, statistics and calculus have been 79%, 82% and 84% respectively."

Go for:

"Alice's average score in her last three assessments is the second highest in a class of 19 students and is consistent with students who have gone on to achieve a grade A* in previous cohorts."

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Details of barriers

You might describe in this section certain barriers the student has faced or could face, such as:

- Barriers in accessing suitable work experience opportunities

- Factors which might affect an applicant's performance in an interview

- Difficulties a student may have faced in putting together a portfolio for an art or design course

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Other resources

Additional resources

From Advancing Access:

- ['How do I write an effective UCAS reference?' interactive CPD module](#)

- [Request a references CPD session for your school or college](#)

- [Sign up to our mailing list](#)

From UCAS:

- [Changes to undergraduate references for 2024 entry](#)

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Upcoming Advancing Access Teacher and Adviser CPD conference

Our next free Teacher and Adviser CPD Conference will be held at **Hertfordshire Development Centre in Stevenage** on **Tuesday 27th June 2023** from **9.15am to 3.15pm**.

Advancing Access events enable teachers, careers advisers and careers leaders to support more of their students to progress to some of the UK's most competitive universities. Our events are suitable for any professional who might be advising young people about their future.

The following CPD sessions will be will be delivered by university staff members :
> Supporting students to leave home and study at a Russell Group university
> Looking forward - how can choices at 16 impact university and future career choices?
> Understanding contextual admissions processes
> Creating impactful encounters with HE throughout secondary school
> Supporting students to decide between degree apprenticeships and traditional university degree

15 Russell Group universities have confirmed their attendance at the conference. There will be an UCAS update (delivered by UCAS) and a keynote from The Sutton Trust.

Timings for the day can be found in our event programme.

Find out more and register your place on our website.

Questions?

enquiries@advancingaccess.ac.uk

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Durham University / University of Edinburgh / University of Exeter / University of Glasgow / Imperial College London

King's College London / University of Leeds / University of Liverpool

London School of Economics and Political Science / University of Manchester / Newcastle University

University of Nottingham / University of Oxford / Queen Mary University of London / Queen's University Belfast

University of Sheffield / University of Southampton / University College London / University of Warwick / University of York