

# Writing UCAS references for SWAP students

The SWAP East team are there to assist throughout the year. If you have questions about the information in this booklet or if you need advice or guidance at any point, please email us at [\*\*Swap.East@ed.ac.uk\*\*](mailto:Swap.East@ed.ac.uk) You might also find what you are looking for on our website: [\*\*scottishwideraccess.org/east\*\*](http://scottishwideraccess.org/east)

## Hints and Tips on Writing UCAS References

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Please note that for 2024 entry, the reference section has changed. Click [here](#) for UCAS guidance on these changes and please also read pages 3 & 4 of this document for additional information on these changes from SWAP.

### Why your reference is important

Universities receive many more applications than they have places. SWAP partner universities are committed to considering applications from SWAP applicants (assuming, of course, that they are on a relevant access programme); however, this does not mean that they are under any obligation to offer them a place. Universities will only offer a place to applicants who can provide sufficient evidence of their academic ability, passion for and good understanding of their chosen subject and the motivation and transferable skills needed to succeed in higher education. University admissions staff will look for this evidence in the applicant's personal statement and in the tutor's UCAS reference. **The purpose of the reference is to give universities an informed and academic assessment of an applicant's suitability for further study.**

### Before you start

For you to access UCAS APPLY and TRACK you will need to create a log-in and password. If you haven't already logged into UCAS as an adviser, this is the link to do that:

<https://accountsucas.com/Account/Login>

This will allow you to see your student's application, approve and add your reference. It will also allow you to see the universities' responses to each student after the application has been submitted.

Read the application and check that the student has:

- applied to UCAS via SWAP East (and not via the college);

- filled in the *Education* section fully, including details of all the units they are studying this year and anything they studied before starting the access programme;
- made it clear that they are currently enrolled on a SWAP programme and registered as a SWAP student. If they don't do this, they may not get a SWAP offer.

The UCAS guidance notes for students is within the Preparation for HE materials in the homepage, within the Induction section [Applying to University](#).

## How to start

Go to the section on the application which is headed Reference & predicted grades.

For 2024 entries, The layout of the reference on UCAS has changed. The 1<sup>st</sup> section asks you to give a statement about the School/College/Centre that the student is attending. This section should be about the Scottish Wider Access Programme.

Here is the text that SWAP has put up on UCAS to use for this section. If you wish to use it, simply click on **Add reference template text** within the reference section. This will then automatically populate Section 1 with the text below. You can then amend as you wish.

*The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) is a partnership of colleges and universities in Scotland. Its role is to widen access to higher education by delivering programmes and giving pathways into HN and degree study for adult returners who come from socio economic groups that are under-represented in higher education.*

*Most SWAP students are adult returners with few or no formal qualifications coming back into education after a break. Most SWAP students are first in family to go to university, whose previous study was below SCQF level 6. More than a third live in a SIMD 10 or 20 area. Some are care experienced, or were young carers, some are refugees. Many faced circumstances that prevented them from taking their education further when at school.*

*SWAP access programmes are one year full-time intensive programmes run at F.E. colleges throughout Scotland. The Scottish Wider Access Programme recognises the maturity and life*

*skills of adult learners. SWAP is an alternative route into higher education designed especially for them. Intensive academic preparation is delivered alongside tailored support and guidance, giving students opportunities to develop their skills and confidence at the same time as gaining qualifications.*

This takes up 1266 characters. You should also add a sentence at the end of this section to say that \_\_\_\_\_ (name of student) is a SWAP student studying on a SWAP Access to \_\_\_\_\_ (name of programme) at \_\_\_\_\_ (name of college). Like the personal statement, you are allowed 4,000 characters for the whole reference. If you feel that leaves you short for everything that you want to say in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> sections, then feel free to shorten the suggested text.

For the second section, they want to know if the student has faced challenges that may have impacted on their current or previous education, or in their life up until now e.g. refugee, care experienced, young carer, single parent, significant disruption to their secondary school education (caused by e.g. illness, mental health issues, undiagnosed learning needs, bullying), lack of opportunity, poverty etc.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> section is where you would give any other relevant supporting information about the applicant and the course they have applied to, that you would want the universities to be aware of. This section would most likely be similar in content to what you normally would write.

### **What to cover**

Admissions officers are looking to get a good overall picture of an applicant and an idea of how they are likely to get on in a university environment. Information on academic ability is obviously important, but so too are details of the applicant's transferable skills (e.g. communication skills, presentation skills, organisational skills, team working and leadership skills) their commitment and attitude to their studies and whether they would be an effective independent learner at university.

Things to consider:

- How is the student coping with the demands of the programme so far?
- How well suited is the student to studying at university and to studying their chosen subject?
- Have they demonstrated commitment and motivation? Do they attend regularly and submit work on time?
- How well and how willingly do they contribute to class discussions and group work?
- Are you aware of any achievements or skills that are relevant to their chosen subject?
- Has the student had to cope with any major obstacles or personal difficulties during their studies? (See the section below on exceptional circumstances).

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Try to highlight individual strengths or skills where appropriate. If none are mentioned, it could be implied that the applicant does not possess any.	Write a standard reference for the whole class - admissions officers may see multiple applications from the same class or college. Little or no variation between references makes them meaningless.
Comment on the applicant's likely suitability for university level study, backed up with relevant evidence.	Feel obliged to comment on the applicant's suitability for their chosen degree programme if it is a subject or a course you know very little about. You can limit your comments to their general suitability for university level study.

Be tactful but honest. It does not do an applicant any favours if they are recommended for a university place that they are not ready for or likely to be able to cope with.	Repeat information the student has already provided in their personal statement, unless you want to comment on it in some way.
Double check everything before you submit. Once the application has gone to UCAS it can't be amended.	Mention any universities by name. Admissions officers only see details of the course the student has applied to at their institution.

### Exceptional circumstances

If there are exceptional circumstances or disadvantages which have impacted on a student's performance, consideration should be given to mentioning these in the reference. This would most likely fit into the 2<sup>nd</sup> section of the reference, but in some instances, may also be relevant to the 3<sup>rd</sup> section. Admissions officers can take such circumstances into account when considering the application. Examples of such issues include health problems, close family bereavements and disruptions to course delivery, such as a tutor being long-term absent. **You must obtain the student's consent to mention any health or disability issues.** Where the matter is highly personal or confidential, the applicant may wish to contact admissions offices themselves, which they should feel free to do.

When problems of this nature do not emerge until later in the academic year, we can consider giving details of the mitigating circumstances to the university or universities when submitting the student's results. Contact the SWAP East Office for advice if such a scenario arises.

### Second references

SWAP tutors sometimes feel that they don't know some of their students well enough at the point they are required to write UCAS references for them. Nonetheless, it is important that all references are as detailed as

possible to help admissions officers make well-informed decisions. In any case, some degree programmes require a second reference, including nursing and social work. If that is necessary, you will likely be contacted directly by the admissions office at the relevant university.

Supplementary references should be returned directly to the university admissions office and not entered on UCAS. If students wish to supply a 2<sup>nd</sup> reference from e.g. an employer, then SWAP East can submit in on their behalf, if they wish.

## **FAQs**

### **Who should write the UCAS reference?**

UCAS references for SWAP students are usually written by SWAP tutors in consultation with the other subject tutors. Ultimately, it is up to the college to decide who is best placed to write UCAS references; however, in each case, it should be a staff member who knows the student and is able to evaluate their academic credentials authoritatively.

### **Is there a word limit?**

Yes. The limit is 4000 characters (including spaces) and 47 lines. You will be timed out after thirty-five minutes of inactivity and will lose any unsaved work.

### **Should I include predicted grades?**

Some tutors do and some just put *pass*. You should only include predicted grades if you feel confident enough to do so and provided you have received the necessary information from the other subject tutors.

### **Do I need to check the student's degree choices and personal statement?**

This varies from college to college. Some colleges have guidance staff who support students working on their UCAS applications and personal statements, while other colleges leave this responsibility to SWAP tutors.

It is very important that there are arrangements in place for the students to access support with the UCAS application process, including feedback on drafts of their personal statement. A student's degree choices are their responsibility, but tutors should check to make sure they match the agreed progression routes and that they are appropriate for the student (i.e. sensible and fit with the content of their personal statement).

Guidance on applying to UCAS is available in the [Applying to university](#) section of the Prep for HE on the home page of the SWAP East website. This includes advice on what to include in the personal statement. If you need advice on supporting your students through the UCAS application process, please read this document. SWAP will also look at students' applications and advise/check where possible.

**I'm concerned that the student is an unsuitable candidate for their degree choice. Should I say anything in the reference?**

This can be tricky and should be handled carefully. If you believe that the student lacks certain key skills then you then should flag this. Needless to say, you should go about this in a tactful and non-critical way (e.g. [Student name] is exceptionally motivated, but he/she has some work still to do on improving her X and Y skills if he/she is to be successful in becoming a [job title]).

**I have spotted a problem with the student's UCAS application. Can I send it back to them?**

Yes. The UCAS system allows you to send the form back to the student with feedback on what they need to amend. The student will need to return the form to you once they have made the changes, so that you can then submit it to UCAS.



## **A SWAP student has applied to UCAS via the college rather than SWAP. What should I do?**

You will need to return the application to the student as nothing can be done while it is with you. The student can move to another Centre by

Application **status**

**Centre information**

Application linked to  
Scottish Wider Access Programme,  
East

Group  
SWAP East Staff



going to the home page of the application

where it says Application status and clicking on

the 3 dots. Then click on *Change Centre* and

then say *yes* to proceed. Then click on

*continue*. At this point it will ask the student to

enter the buzzword of the Centre that they wish to be moved to. After

that, SWAP will accept the student into the SWAP's UCAS school. The

same applies if the student has applied as an independent applicant.

**N.B. This cannot be done once the application has been submitted to UCAS.**

## **What should I do once I have finished writing the reference?**

Provided all other parts of the application are complete and no changes are required, the reference must be approved before you can then submit the application to UCAS. **N.B. No changes can be made once the application is submitted.**

## **Can a student ask to see their reference?**

Yes. Under the Data Protection Act the student can ask to see a copy of the reference.

## Further Information and Guidance

UCAS Guidance on writing references

<https://www.ucas.com/advisers/references/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-references>

University of Exeter: Hints and Tips on Writing a UCAS Reference

<https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/webteam/shared/undergraduate/documents/teachersresourcespresentations/writingaUCASreference-hintsandtips.pdf>

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