

Providing References for University Employees Guidance

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1. Introduction

If a colleague or former colleague asks you to provide a reference for a new job, there are some things you need to know before you do it. This guidance is for when you have been asked to give a reference for people who have carried out paid work for the University. This could be tutors, post-graduate researchers or students who have undertaken paid work for the University.

This does not apply where you are asked to provide a reference for an internal process, such as recruitment to an internal role. Separate guidance also applies where providing a reference for students in relation to their studies, see [Writing Academic References](#).

2. What is a University Reference?

A University reference is when you give a reference as a representative of the University and can be issued on University letterhead. You should only give a University reference if you are the current or previous line manager of the person the reference is about or are more senior than the line manager. HR can also provide a limited factual reference confirming dates of employment and positions held on behalf of the University.

3. What is a Personal Reference?

A personal reference is when you give a reference based on your own experiences and observations, not as a representative of the University. We usually don't recommend giving a personal reference for a colleague or former colleague. There may be times when it's appropriate, like an academic staff member who needs an extra reference about their scholarship.

If you do give a personal reference, make sure it's clear that it's from you personally, not from the University. Don't use University letterhead. You can mention how you know the person you're referencing (like a work colleague, Principal Investigator, family friend, etc.).

If you're giving a personal reference for a colleague or former colleague you should include the statement: "This reference is provided in a personal capacity, and in no way expresses the views or opinions of the University of Strathclyde. To obtain an employer reference, an email request should be sent to humanresources@strath.ac.uk".

4. Do I need to provide a reference?

You're not required to give a reference for anyone. You should make sure you handle all reference requests in the same way to avoid claims of unfairness or discrimination. If giving a reference makes you uncomfortable, it's okay to say no but be ready to explain your reasons if the person you're referencing wants to talk about it.

When you give a reference for a current or former colleague, you should make it clear whether this is a personal or University reference, otherwise it can be assumed that the reference is on behalf of the University. You need to know as the person giving the reference that you have a responsibility to both the future employer and the person the reference is about. If the University gives an incorrect reference, legal action can be taken. This could happen if the new employer suffers a loss because the person didn't do their job well. At the same time, if the person doesn't get the job because of a wrong reference, they could also take legal action. That's why it's very important to make sure references are correct and suitable.

5. What is the process for providing a University reference?

Before you send a University reference, it needs to be approved by the HR team. You can do this by emailing it to hr-references@strath.ac.uk. The HR team will look at the reference and compare it to the person's employment record before they approve it. They'll check things like when the person worked there and what their job was, and if there's anything that might affect the reference. However, they won't check if what you said about the person's academic skills, publications, or job performance is correct. Sometimes, it might not be right to give a detailed reference about a current or past University employee. If that happens, the HR department might tell you to not give the reference, and to tell the person asking for it to contact the HR department instead.

6. What should I include in a reference?

Start the reference with “Private and Confidential – For the Addressee Only”. This helps prevent the reference being shared inappropriately. Add a note at the end of the reference that says “This reference is given to the recipient privately and only for the reason it was asked for. It’s given honestly, based on the information the writer had when it was written. But neither the writer nor the University of Strathclyde is responsible or liable for any harm or loss caused to the recipient or anyone else if they rely on it.”

7. Can I include my opinion in a reference?

When you’re writing a reference, make sure it’s true, correct, and fair. You should be able to back up what you say with evidence and examples. You can share your opinions, but they should be based on facts. It should be clear which parts are facts and which parts are opinions. Don’t feel like you have to say if someone would be good or bad at a new job if you don’t have the right experience, like if you didn’t manage them directly, or if the new job is very different from their job at the University. Avoid talking about personal things like their attendance, health, race, ethnicity, political views, religious beliefs, union membership, sexual orientation, criminal record, or anything else personal; just focus on their work. Saying the wrong thing about these topics could lead to a discrimination claim. Remember to follow our Dignity and Respect policy when you’re writing references.

Remember you shouldn’t include anything in the reference that you wouldn’t say to the person directly. Data protection legislation does not entitle individuals to access confidential references about them. However, you should be aware that in some circumstances, such as legal proceedings, references may not be considered confidential and could be disclosed to the subject of the reference.

Details that can safely be included in a reference include:

- Dates of employment
- Job title
- A short description of the role undertaken and level of responsibility
- The reason for leaving, e.g., resignation, redundancy etc.

8. Can I provide a telephone reference?

Keep in mind that everything above applies to all kinds of references, whether they're formal or informal. By law, the same rules and responsibilities apply to giving a formal reference and to sharing any opinion about a current or past employee that a future employer will use. Try to avoid giving references over the phone because they could be misunderstood. If appropriate you may offer to provide a written reference in line with the guidance provided above.

9. Can I fill out an outline form?

Try to fill out the form as a draft first and then send it to HR for review before you finalise it. If you can't do that, let HR know by email that you need to complete an online form. HR will then look at their records and tell you if the reference can be provided or not. Keep in mind, HR will not be able to cross reference details in the same way as a free text reference so extra care should be taken to ensure all details are factually accurate and opinions are appropriate. Only answer questions that you feel qualified and able to answer.

10. Further Information and Support

If you have any queries about this guidance, please talk to your manager or contact [Human Resources](#).

11. Review

This policy is reviewed by Human Resources on a regular basis. To see when the next review is due, please see our [Policy Review Schedule](#) (staff login required) on our People Hub.