

Providing References for Academic and Professional Purposes Policy

1. Introduction and background

- 1.1 The University is committed to supporting its students to make a successful transition into the workplace or to further study. One key aspect of this is the provision of academic references.
- 1.2 References are designed to confirm facts about a candidate's experiences and outcomes to date. They may also be designed to elicit opinions about a candidate's suitability for a job or course of study.

2. Purpose and scope

- 2.1 This policy is designed to provide a framework within which those providing references can work, to ensure that any references provided are written in accordance with relevant legal frameworks.
- 2.2 This policy applies to students studying on site at the University of Northampton and to Distance Learning students directly registered with the University of Northampton. Where students are studying with partners they would normally be expected to seek a reference from a member of staff at the partner institution.

3.0 Definitions

- 3.1 For the purposes of this policy, where an individual role is named this refers to that role or a nominee.

4.0 Key principles

- 4.1 Staff are normally expected to provide an academic reference for a student or graduate. However, there is no absolute requirement to provide such a reference and there may be limited situations when a member of staff considers that it is not appropriate to provide a reference. In any such situation the member of staff needs to provide the reasons for that refusal carefully to avoid implying a negative view of the student/graduate. A reference cannot be refused on the grounds of any of the protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act.
- 4.2 Where a member of staff does not feel able to provide opinions on a student or graduate's suitability for a position or course of study, s/he could choose to give a merely factual reference – e.g. confirming course studied, degree outcome, dates studied etc.

- 4.3 A member of staff must consider carefully whether serious breaches of the Academic Integrity and Misconduct Policy, and/or of the Student Code of Conduct, must be included in references. As a standard, such information should only be included if it is necessary to do so to provide a reference in accordance with 4.5 below. As noted above, an alternative is to provide a merely factual reference as noted in 4.2 above.
- 4.4 If a member of staff does not feel able to answer reference questions in the format requested by the student/graduate/employer/education provider they should provide a reference in whatever format they feel is most appropriate.
- 4.5 References should be factually accurate, true and fair and should not give a misleading impression. Comments must be supported by evidence and there must be a clear distinction between fact and opinion. Comments should be as clear as possible.
- 4.6 A reference will normally be provided by a member of academic staff who has/had a relationship with the student, for example a Personal (Academic) Tutor, Dissertation Supervisor or Programme Leader.
- 4.7 An academic reference is provided on behalf of the University; the University is therefore legally responsible for the content of a reference given on behalf of the University by a member of staff for a student or graduate.
- 4.8 References must comply with data protection and equality requirements; in particular:
- Where a reference is requested all efforts should be made to confirm that the student or graduate has given permission for that request; in some instances this will require the member of staff to contact the student or graduate to confirm this.
 - A reference should avoid referencing any behaviours that could relate to one of the protected characteristics in the Equality Act.
 - A reference should avoid the inclusion of sensitive personal data or of confidential information.
- 4.9 Where possible, references should be provided in writing to ensure control over the information provided. Oral references are not encouraged.
- 4.10 The member of staff providing the reference is responsible for taking reasonable steps to ensure the authenticity and veracity of the request prior to submission. This will normally include, for example, checking the authenticity of any email or postal address and of the individual from which requests for references are sent.
- 4.11 A member of staff providing a reference should consider themselves to be free to provide the subject of the reference with a copy unless this is specifically forbidden by the person requesting the reference. Where disclosure to the subject of the reference is forbidden, a member of staff may wish to consider whether to decline to provide a reference.

- 4.12 Notwithstanding 4.11 above, to protect the member of staff making the reference from that reference being passed to other parties without the member of staff's consent, an academic reference would normally be provided with the following disclaimer:

"This reference is confidential and intended solely for the information of the person or body to whom it is addressed. It is not to be disclosed to the subject of the reference or to any third party without the referee's express permission. Although every effort has been made to ensure that this reference is fair and accurate, neither the referee nor The University of Northampton accepts any liability for any direct or indirect loss or damage you may suffer by relying on it."

- 4.13 Where a member of staff provides a personal, rather than academic, reference for a student it must be made clear that the reference is personal. For example, a University email account, University headed paper or University crest should not be included.
- 4.14 Members of staff who wish to discuss whether a request for a reference can be refused, and on what grounds, should contact their Dean or the Academic Registrar.
- 4.15 When a reference has been produced, this should be saved in the student's e-folder (if available).

5.0 Key responsibilities

- 5.1 Student/graduate – provide permission to the member of staff to provide a reference.
- 5.2 Programme Leader, Personal Academic Tutor, Dissertation Supervisor – provide an academic reference in accordance with the principles listed above.

6.0 Links to related external documents (e.g. QAA)

- 6.1 Equality Act 2010
- 6.2 Data Protection Act 1998 / General Data Protection Regulations

7.0 Appendices

7.1 Summary Sheet

Summary Sheet:

Policy Title:	
Providing References for Academic and Professional Purposes	
Purpose of Policy and to whom it applies (please specify cohorts):	
To set out how requests for academic references from students or graduates should be handled	
Owner and Department:	
Nikki Harford, Interim Academic Registrar, Academic Registry	
Principal contact:	
Nikki Harford	
Dissemination and implementation plan:	
Via SEC and SSECs On Web	
Date of initial committee approval (state committee name):	July 2017
Date of Senate approval:	January 2018
Date for implementation and cohorts to which it applies:	April 2018
Proposed date of annual update:	June 2024
Date of last annual update:	June 2023
Proposed date of full review:	June 2024
Date of last full review:	n/a
Version number and date:	2.0 June 2023