

## Guidance on providing references for University employees

### **1 Introduction**

Please note this guidance relates to a request to provide a reference for a colleague or ex-colleague to a future employer. This includes any paid work for the University, such as tutors and post-graduate researchers. It does not apply to the provision of references for students (unless the reference relates to paid work the student has carried out for the University), or to the provision of references for internal processes, such as promotions. For guidance on the provision of academic references for students, see [Writing Academic References | University of Strathclyde](#).

You may be asked by a colleague or ex-colleague to provide a reference for them to a future employer. There are a few things you need to be aware of before providing any such reference.

### **2 Should I give a reference?**

You are not obliged to provide a reference for anyone. However, your approach to when you will or will not provide a reference should be consistent to avoid any allegations of discrimination or unfair treatment. If you feel uncomfortable with providing a reference, you should decline the reference. You should think carefully about your reasons for declining the reference and be prepared to discuss these with the subject of the reference if appropriate.

If you do give a reference for a colleague or ex-colleague, it may be viewed as an employer's reference, i.e. a reference on behalf of the University. The provider of an employer's reference has a duty of care to both the prospective employer and the subject of the reference. Legal action can be taken against the University if an inaccurate reference is provided that leads to a loss for the new employer through, for example, the incompetence of the subject of the reference. At the same time, the University could also be sued by the subject of the reference if they are denied employment as a result of an inaccurate reference. It is therefore extremely important that references are accurate and appropriate.

### **3 Is it a personal or a University reference?**

If you have been requested to give a reference on behalf of the University, you can only do this if you were/are the line manager of the subject of the reference, or more senior than the line manager. HR can also provide a limited factual reference confirming dates of employment and role on behalf of the University.

The University does not normally recommend that you provide a personal reference in relation to a colleague or ex-colleague. However, it is acknowledged that there may be circumstances where this is appropriate to do so e.g. where an additional reference is required for an academic member of staff regarding their scholarship.

If you do provide a personal reference, it should be clear that you are providing the reference in a personal capacity, and not on behalf of the University. The reference should not be on University headed paper. You can state in what capacity you know the subject of the reference (e.g. Work colleague, Principal Investigator, family friend etc.).

Where you are providing a personal reference for a colleague, or ex-colleague, your reference should contain the following wording:

“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](mailto:humanresources@strath.ac.uk) .”

#### **4 I do want to provide a reference, what do I need to do?**

All University references should be sent to the HR department for approval prior to sending. This can be done by emailing [hr-references@strath.ac.uk](mailto:hr-references@strath.ac.uk). The HR department will review the reference, and cross check it with the personnel record prior to approving the reference. HR will check details such as dates of employment and role title, and whether there are any matters that would impact on a reference being provided. HR will not however check the accuracy of any statements made about the subject’s academic ability or publications or general ability to perform their role. There may be some circumstances where it is not appropriate to provide a detailed reference in relation to an employee/ex-employee of the University. In these cases, you may be advised by the HR department to decline the reference, and/or to direct the requestor to the HR department.

#### **5 Can I give my opinion in a reference?**

In providing a reference, you should take care to ensure the information contained in it is true, accurate and fair, and does not give a misleading impression. You should also be able to back up your statements with professional evidence and examples. While you can give opinions, any opinion should have a proper and legitimate basis. It should also be clear which statements are factual, and which statements are opinions. You should not feel obliged to give an opinion on whether someone would be good or bad in a new role if you do not have the experience to do so, e.g. you did not directly manage them, or the new role is very different to the role that they worked in at the University. You should also avoid making any comments relating to a person’s attendance record, health, race, ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, sexual orientation, criminal convictions or any other personal matters relating to the individual; instead focus on their work. Inappropriate comments about these matters could result in a claim of discrimination being made. Please also remember the principles in our [Dignity and Respect policy](#) when drafting references.

The reference should not contain any information that you would be unwilling to say directly to the subject of the reference. 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 or where references are not considered ‘confidential’, they may be disclosed to the subject of the reference.

Details that can safely be included in a reference include:

- Dates of employment
- The subject’s job title
- A short description of the subject’s role and level of responsibility; and
- The reason for leaving, e.g. resignation, redundancy etc.

#### **6 Is there anything in particular that I should include in a reference?**

When drafting a reference, you should:

- Head up the reference as “Private and Confidential – For the Addressee Only”, to avoid the reference being improperly circulated.

- Include a disclaimer at the end of the reference, stating “This reference is given to the addressee in confidence and only for the purposes for which it was requested. It is given in good faith, and on the basis of the information available to the writer at the time it is given, but neither the writer nor the University of Strathclyde accepts any responsibility or liability for any loss or damage caused to the addressee or any third party as a result of any reliance being placed on it.”

## **7 I have been asked to provide a telephone reference, can I do this?**

Please remember that the above information applies to any type of reference, whether it is a formal or informal request. Legally, the same rules and obligations can apply to the provision of a formal reference, and to any opinion relating to an employee/ex-employee which will be relied upon by a future employer. Telephone references should be avoided due to the potential for them to be misinterpreted. If appropriate you may offer to provide a written reference in line with the guidance provided above.

## **8 I have been asked to fill out an online form, can I do this?**

Where possible, the form should be completed in draft and sent to HR for review prior to finalising. If it is not possible to do this, you should email HR to advise that you require to fill out an online form. HR will check their internal records and advise whether the reference can or cannot be given. Please note 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.