

## Appendix F Guidelines for writing references for students

*This information has been extracted from the Guideline, prepared by Queen Mary and Westfield College, London, setting out principles for writing references which was made available to the sector by Professor G Zellick and distributed by CVCP (23/09/96)*

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 A House of Lords decision [*Spring v Guardian Assurance (1994) All England Law Reports 129*] ruled that the author of a reference owes a duty of care to the person about whom it is written, and may be liable in damages to that person if loss is caused through negligence. Hitherto it had been thought that there would be liability only in defamation, and then only if it could be proved that the writer was motivated by malice. Liability may now come about through carelessness either as to matters of fact or in the formulation of opinion. The author of a reference has therefore an obligation to the subject of the reference. The House of Lords did not consider whether the author also has an obligation to the *recipient* of the reference, although such a liability is likely.
- 1.2 These guidelines are intended to provide some assistance in the preparation of references, particularly student references.
- 1.3 The principal aims of a reference are to
  - confirm facts - to confirm the accuracy of the statements made in an application: e.g. qualifications gained, subjects studied, employment dates, work undertaken
  - provide opinions - to give the referee's opinion as to the candidate's suitability for the post/course in question, and his/her potential for the future.
- 1.4 A reference relies on both facts and opinions, and these two should be clearly differentiated.

### 2. Guidelines

*[The following recommended guidelines relate specifically to student references, but the principles are equally applicable to all references]*

- 2.1 Students should be told if there is a departmental policy on references. E.g. whether they can assume their adviser will automatically provide a reference if his/her name is cited in an application, or whether s/he should first be approached for permission.
- 2.2 Remember when writing a reference for a student they can ask the requesting organisation for a copy. Under the Data Protection Act the organisation would have difficulty in not providing the student with a copy.
- 2.3 Try to be fair to both the student and the recipient of the reference.
- 2.4 Ensure that the reference is factually accurate and complete – your Programme Administrator can provide you with a printout of the student's programme history, including their transcript from the Student Record System to enable you to check that you have the full information.
- 2.5 Make sure that your opinions are clearly stated as opinions, are based on fact and that you are qualified to give such opinions.
  - Do not confuse fact and opinion e.g. “*on her performance to date, I would be surprised if X did not get a first class degree*” is clearly an opinion; “*she will get a first class degree*” suggests that the method of classification for Honours is such that the issue is beyond doubt.
  - Ensure that the opinions you state are honest opinions based on facts known to you. Do not make statements which you are not qualified to make. E.g. “*I consider X to be well suited to the post for which s/he has applied, and am happy to support his/her*

*applications*" is better than "X will be a success in the post of..."

- Particular care should be taken where you are asked for a reference for a student who is not known to you (e.g., if the student's adviser is absent, or has left the University). Do not give an opinion which is not your own, just because the person who knew the student has left. It is preferable to quote someone who has knowledge of the candidate, giving the source of the quote.
  - There may be issues on which you are asked to express an opinion on which you have limited knowledge - e.g. honesty and integrity. Here you may have to say, for example, "...I know of nothing that would lead me to question X's honesty ....."
- 2.6 Avoid using ambiguous or 'coded' language. e.g., "X has studied here for three years, during which time he has done his work entirely to his own satisfaction".
- 2.7 If the reference asks for information on the health or medical history of the student you must get the students **explicit** consent to mention these matters. A student asking you to provide a reference for them is **not** sufficient.

### 3. Other

#### 3.1 Telephone references:

The same guidelines apply to references given over the telephone. Do not be tempted to make incautious statements simply because they are not in writing. Ideally, references should not be given over the telephone (you do not know how the information will be filtered as it passes through the various stages of what the enquirer understood you to say; what s/he jotted down; what s/he reported orally to the panel). Limit the information you provide to facts and follow up immediately with an email, letter or Fax.

- 3.2 *Unsolicited reference* (i.e. for a person who has not, to your knowledge, cited your name as a referee) Pass these to Academic Registry who will send a response asking for the organisation to provide the University with consent from the student.