

# Writing effective UCAS references



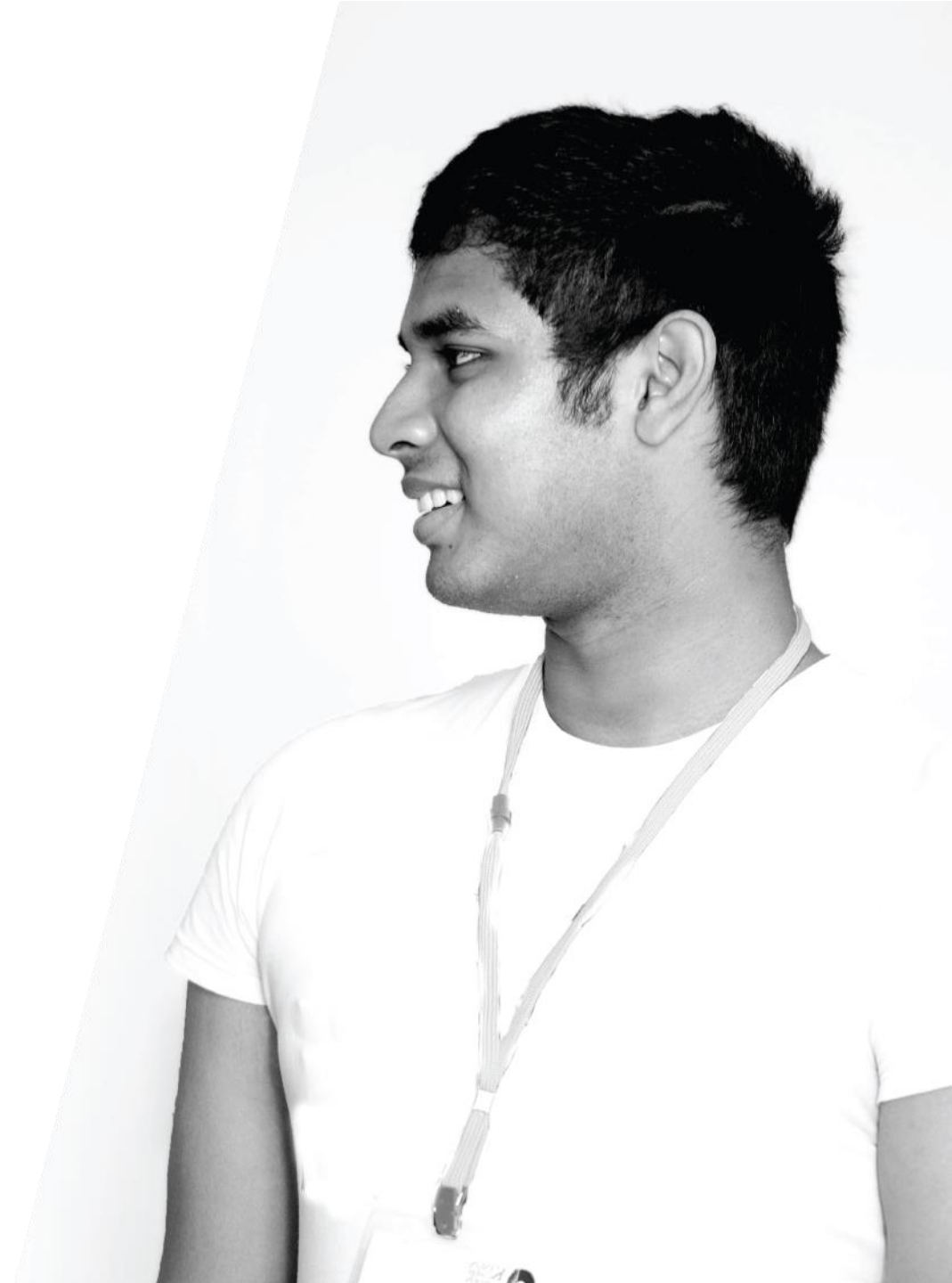
University of Birmingham / University of Bristol / University of Cambridge  
Cardiff University / Durham University / University of Edinburgh  
University of Exeter / University of Glasgow / Imperial College London  
King's College London / University of Leeds / University of Liverpool



London School of Economics and Political Science / University of Manchester  
Newcastle University / University of Nottingham / University of Oxford  
Queen Mary University of London / Queen's University Belfast  
University of Sheffield / University of Southampton / University College  
London University of Warwick / University of York

## Coming up...

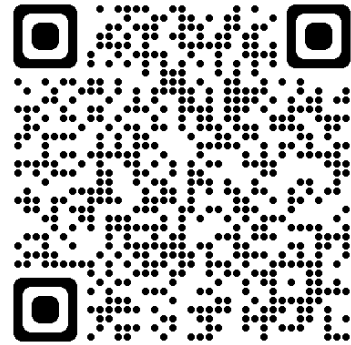
- UCAS references – some of the basics
- Dealing with common questions/misconceptions etc.
- Examples of effective references



## Evaluation quiz...

We are always trying to improve the resources and guidance we offer to teachers and advisers. We would greatly appreciate you completing two short quizzes in this session to help us improve!

Complete the quiz using this link:



<https://bit.ly/AAUCASreferences>

(Remember to make a note of whether you've completed question set A or B as you will complete the other set at the end of the session).



**True, false or not sure?**

**In your groups try to sort the statement  
in to one of the three columns.**

**The answers could be debateable!**

**“The maximum length of a reference  
is 47 lines or 4000 characters,  
whichever comes first”**

## The basics

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- 47 lines or 4,000 characters (whichever comes first)
- You can begin writing the references as soon as the applicant registers with UCAS
- Applications are available to read in full in Adviser Track
- Copy and paste in from a word processor
- Save a copy of each reference you write





# Why do universities value the academic reference?

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## The reference provides:

- an informed assessment of the candidate from an education professional
- an understanding of the student's achievement within their education and home context
- a fair assessment of the student's potential to succeed at university
- additional information on the student's academic suitability for their chosen subject.





**The applicant is able to see a copy  
of their reference, even if I don't  
share it with them**

**The best way to present contextual information about a school in a reference is to include a URL to a page on the school's website**

# The great URL debate!

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We have heard divergent views from universities on this issue...

- UCAS recommend including a link to a “web page giving your school or college’s qualification offer and the rationale behind it”
- Something else for you to decide is whether to also include further “contextual information” about your school or college
- On the plus side the URL means you can include much more information that you can fit in the reference, however some university staff may look at printed copies of the reference

## Context: school/ college

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Russell Group universities are interested to know:

- What type of school is it?
- How big is the school?
- What are the class sizes?
- What is your typical provision?
- What percentage of students are eligible for FSM or receive pupil premium?
- How many students progress to HE?
- How many students progress to: Oxford or Cambridge, a Russell Group university, a university ranked in the top third?
- Any resource/ timetabling constraints.

**Three to four lines should cover the main points, with an additional URL if you choose**



**Admissions tutors don't place much importance on the reference. They know that "every reference is a good reference"**

## How important are references

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It could be the case that *some* tutors at *some* universities place less importance on the reference. However...

1. It is highly unlikely that this attitude will be taken at all five universities to which the applicant is applying
2. The reference has become more important within a changing qualification landscape (in explaining your school/college policy)
3. Universities place increased importance on “contextual factors”, some of which don’t come up in the application form



**I should include the student's predicted  
grades in the UCAS reference**

**AND**

**I should explain disparities between KS4  
performance and expected KS5 performance**

# Predicted grades

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These are already entered elsewhere.

You should provide further explanation in the reference if:

- They do not match the entry requirements of the courses
- They are not consistent with the student's level 2 academic performance
- They do not match the information given in the reference
- If your predictions are based on in-school examination results or mock examinations.



**The reference is the best place to raise mitigating circumstances, such as a candidate whose school performance has been affected by bereavement**

**AND**

**There is no need to duplicate information which has been included already in the personal statement**

## Mitigating/contextual factors

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- UCAS recommends including mitigating circumstances with the consent of the applicant. Flag with exam boards when appropriate too!
- There is a difference between duplicating (bad) and corroborating (good). Corroborating mitigating or contextual factors in the reference strengthens the case
- It can be useful to bear in mind that certain contextual information can be gleaned direct from the UCAS application, other things need raising in the personal statement and/or reference

# Context: the applicant

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## Possible contextual information about the applicant:

- First generation to go to university
- In care/young carer
- Disability (need permission)
- Eligibility for free school meals
- Widening participation/ outreach activities.

Include details of any **extenuating circumstances** that may affect/ have affected the applicant's performance. Prioritise this information.

**Place any contextual information  
at the start of the reference.**



# Communicating with universities

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The reference is only one place to mention mitigating or contextual circumstance. The other places are:

- Some universities have a separate extenuating circumstances form which has to be filled in
- The personal statement - anything here can then be corroborated in the reference
- Contact universities directly – for example by email, especially useful if mitigating circumstances develop over time (or for something particularly significant)
- On clearing day students can politely enquire on the phone as to whether extenuating circumstances may be taken in to consideration





# Writing and structuring the reference

# Roles in the reference-writing process

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## **Students**

Provide information about themselves and their reasons for choosing the course(s).

## **Subject teachers**

Provide comments about performance and strengths in particular subject areas. Can also provide explanations for predicted grades.

## **Editor or Tutor**

Provides comments about applicant's personal qualities, attributes and circumstances. Also edits subject information to make it consistent and assembles the reference.

## **Approver**

Approves the final version of the reference.



# Structure

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There is no set in stone structure, but it should include:

- Background on school and applicant
- Academic performance at post-16
- Subject by subject reports (**most relevant subject first**)
- Suitability for course and higher education
- Extra-curricular activities and candidate's personality (relevant information).





# Subject-specific information

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Approximately 80% of the reference should focus on subject-specific information and the applicant's aptitude for study.

Pull together information from **subject teachers** to write about:

- Academic performance at post-16
- Performance in relation to peers
- Achievements and interest in specific modules
- Academic qualities and skills
- Potential for academic success at university
- Super-curricular activities
- Any explanations for predicted grades
- Suitability of chosen course.



# Overview: Suitability for course and non-academic info

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## Suitability for course

- Refer to the course – e.g. Medicine/ Dentistry: have they worked to obtain relevant work experience?
- Comment on specific experiences or skills relevant to the course

## Personality

- Personal qualities such as commitment and enthusiasm
- Transferable skills – e.g. logical thinking, communication, independent working

## Extra-curricular activities

- E.g. positions of responsibility, achievements in non-academic pursuits, part-time job.



# Comparing subject references

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Compare and contrast the two references you have been given

- What do you like about each reference?
- What could be improved?
- Share your opinion with the rest of your group!



10 minutes





## Comparing the two references

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“Amber Vale School serves a deprived inner-city community. 53% of our students are from an ethnic minority background and the school has yet to establish a strong tradition of progression to competitive universities.”

OR

“Amber Vale School is a non-selective 11-18 school. We serve a community with an above average level of disadvantage since 25.6% of our pupils are eligible for free school meals. Approximately half of our students typically take A levels at Key Stage 5 and the other half study for vocational qualifications. Those who study for A levels typically take three subjects with external assessment taking place only at the end of Year 13.”

## Comparing the two references

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"Alice's performance in Maths has been very strong. Her last three test scores for mechanics, statistics and calculus have been 79%, 82% and 84% respectively."

OR

"Her average score in these three assessments is the second highest in a class of 19 students and is consistent with students who have gone on to achieve a grade A in previous cohorts."

## Comparing the two references

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“Alice always makes sure that she asks for help when she is unsure of something. Every piece of homework has been handed in on time. Alice is impeccably behaved in her Biology classes and remains on task at all times.”

OR

“In Biology, Alice’s key strength lies in her practical laboratory work. Her teacher has pointed out how meticulously she is able to work in the laboratory, and this is certainly a skill she will require in her degree level Chemistry studies.”

## Comparing the two references

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"Alice is an outstanding young woman; were I to pour out a stream of superlatives it would be no more, no less than she deserves. She is this year's Head Prefect; I can only say that it is an exceptional year group and yet she has stood out."

OR

"Alice is an exceptionally hard-working and committed pupil who is popular with both staff and students and has gained their respect for her friendly and responsible attitude. I will be sorry to see her leave Amber Vale at the end of Year 13."

## Comparing the two references

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“Alice has participated in a long list of extra-curricular activities. She has played for the school football team and has also played the flute in the school orchestra. She has also taken on a part time job at her local Iceland supermarket.”

OR

“Through various extra-curricular activities, Alice has developed transferrable skills which will be invaluable to her at university. Through her involvement with the school football team she has developed teamwork and communication skills and by playing the flute in a local orchestra she has learnt the importance of self-discipline to stay motivated.”



And finally...



# Comparing the two references

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- Provide a **fair picture** of the applicant
- **Explain any changes** in performance
- Include any **mitigating circumstances**
- Include if your school **does not offer** AS-levels or particular subjects
- Make sure the style of **writing is consistent** throughout
- **Provide evidence** that the applicant is suited to the course
- **Build a picture** of the student, including approach to study
- Include any involvement in **outreach activities**
- **Extract and combine** information from subject teachers e.g. 'several teachers..'
- **Involve the applicant** in the process.



## Tell us about your school or college

Universities are interested in contextual information about the school that provides a picture of the student's academic potential. Our resource **How to understand the admissions process** <sup>①</sup> gives more information on how contextual information is used.

### Tell us about your school

- What type of school is it
- What is your curriculum policy (including AS- and A-level)
- What are the class sizes
- What is your typical provision
- What is your admissions policy
- What percentage of students are eligible for free school meals or receive pupil premium
- Describe your school catchment area
- How many students progress to higher education
- How many students progress to:
  - the universities of Oxford or Cambridge
  - Russell Group universities
  - universities ranked in the top third (defined by the UCAS A-level tariff score of entrants)?This information can be found on the **Department for Education website** <sup>①</sup>.

The word count is limited and we want your reference to focus on the applicant. Three or four lines on contextual information should be enough for the most relevant points.

Progression to Russell Group Universities Conference  
2018



## Teachers' References

Maxine Charlton, Undergraduate Admissions Manager, University of York  
Dr Alex Pryce, Head of Student Recruitment, University of Oxford



24 leading universities  
working together with  
schools and colleges



### How to write a good academic reference

The reference you write is valued by admissions staff because it provides an informed view from an educational professional who knows the candidate.

Leading universities are used to assessing applications presenting a wide range of different qualifications. They recognise that there are different curricular and examinations in use across the United Kingdom (and internationally) and there will be different patterns of post-16 study as a result. Universities also understand that there will be variation in the ways different English schools and colleges implement the changes to qualifications.

If it is your school policy not to offer AS-levels, or particular subjects, include this information in any relevant reference.

For more information see our strand three information sheet on **Qualification reform** <sup>①</sup>.

The best references are often written by a member of staff who knows the student well and can provide admissions staff with:

- an understanding of a student's achievements in the education and home context
- a fair assessment of the applicant's potential to succeed at university
- additional information on the applicant's academic suitability for the chosen subject
- information on the school and its social context.

Universities are interested in contextual information about the school or college, such as your post-16 provision (for example, whether you offer AS-levels), the catchment area, the proportion of students eligible for free school meals and the percentage progressing to higher education.

### Section 4 References

#### Tell us about your school or college

- What type of school is it
- What is your curriculum policy (including AS- and A-level)
- How big is the school
- What are the class sizes
- What is your typical provision
- What percentage of students are eligible for free school meals or receive pupil premium
- How many students progress to higher education
- How many students progress to:
  - the universities of Oxford or Cambridge
  - a Russell Group university
  - a university ranked in the top third (defined by the UCAS A-level tariff score of entrants)? \*

\* Available on the Department for Education website <sup>①</sup>.

## Tell us about your school or college

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### Tell us about your school

- What type of school is it
- What is your curriculum policy (including AS- and A-level)
- What are the class sizes
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- What is your admissions policy
- What percentage of students are eligible for free school meals or receive pupil premium
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- How many students progress to higher education
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  - the universities of Oxford or Cambridge
  - Russell Group universities
  - universities ranked in the top third (defined by the UCAS A-level tariff score of entrants)? This information can be found on the [Department for Education website](#).

The word count is limited and we want you to use only one or four lines on contextual information should be included. If you want to include more information about your school, provide this information on your website and provide the link.

Remember that some admissions staff will not be able to access your website easily. So, you should include the most important pieces of contextual information of your reference.

### Predicting grades

- You do not need to include predicted grades in your reference.
- If your predictions for a student's achievement are significantly better than their level 2 results, you should include this.
- If your predictions are based on in-school assessments, note this in the reference too.

## What should be included in the reference?



Identify the key pieces of information about your school or college that university admissions staff might find useful in a reference. Consider:

- the information about your school or college that should be included
- where you would find this information.

 10 minutes

ADVANCING ACCESS

Slide	Topic	Key points
2	<b>Session introduction</b> Outline the aims of the session, which are as follows: This presentation will help teachers and advisers who contribute to a student's academic reference. By the end of this session, colleagues will have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a deeper understanding of what universities are looking for in an academic reference</li> <li>• considered ways to improve the academic references provided by their school or college.</li> </ul> Let your colleagues know that this session requires their input. A key aim is for colleagues to share their experiences and ideas.	Participants should share best practice and explore any challenges faced when writing academic references for students
3	<b>Why do universities value the academic reference?</b> The academic reference is the only opportunity for universities to get an informed assessment of a candidate from an education professional. It is valued by admissions staff as it provides them with important information about the applicant's educational and home context. Contextual information will be covered in more detail in a moment. Importantly, the reference provides admissions staff with a better understanding of the student's potential to succeed at university.	The importance of the academic reference to admissions staff in universities
	<b>What are universities looking for in an academic reference?</b> Universities want to gain a more complete understanding of the student's economic background and social context. They also want to know more about the student's achievements (e.g. whether you offer AS-levels) and their performance in school meals. They also want to know about the student's interests and hobbies, and how they compare to their peers. They also want to know about the student's predicted grades and whether they have been predicted the student's predicted grades.	Contextual information to include in a reference



## Evaluation quiz...

Please complete the quiz set you did not complete at the start of the session using the links below:

Question set A



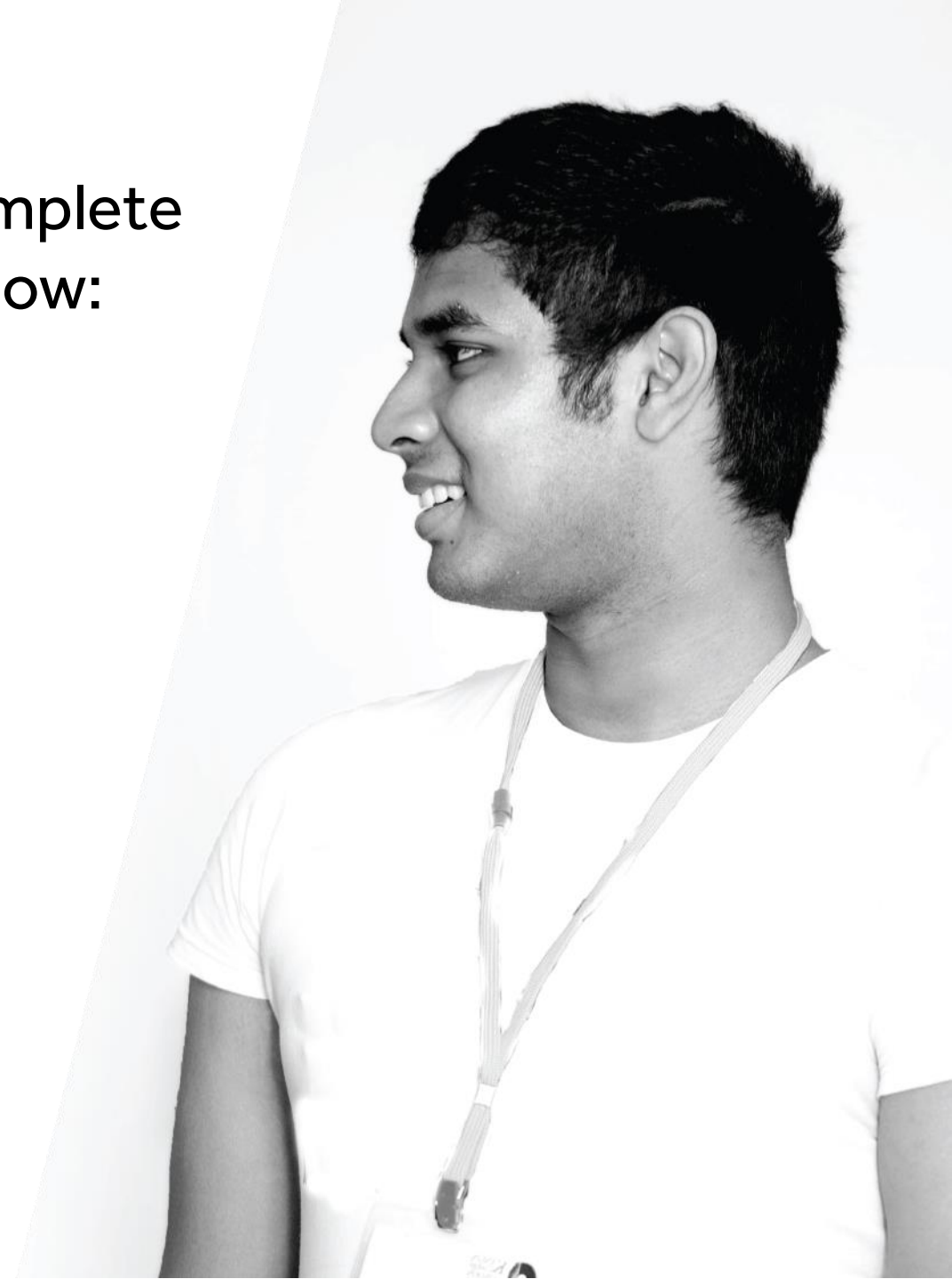
<https://bit.ly/AAUCASreferencesA>

Question set B



<https://bit.ly/AAUCASreferencesB>

Thank you for your support!



# Questions?

enquiries@advancingaccess.ac.uk



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Durham University / University of Edinburgh / University of Exeter / University of Glasgow / Imperial College London  
King's College London / University of Leeds / University of Liverpool  
London School of Economics and Political Science / University of Manchester / Newcastle University  
University of Nottingham / University of Oxford / Queen Mary University of London / Queen's University Belfast  
University of Sheffield / University of Southampton / University College London / University of Warwick / University of York