

Reference Checks

Policy Number:**Approved by:** Vice-Chancellor**Date Approved:** September 2003**Date Effective:** Immediately**Date of Next Review:** December 2004**Related Policies:** Recruitment Policy**Contact Officer:** Recruitment Manager

1. Introduction

- 1.1 As part of the ongoing improvement of recruitment and selection processes, the process for final reference checking has changed. This is separate to the seeking of written references from the applicants' nominated referees.
- 1.2 The completion of a verbal reference check prior to approval of a selection committee report is now mandatory for all appointments and the guidelines governing this aspect of the process are set out below.
- 1.3 The requirement for a formal verbal reference check includes both internal and external candidates. For internal candidates, referees should not be members of the Selection Committee, even if they are direct supervisors. Alternative supervisor referees should be sought.
- 1.4 Proformas (for academic and general staff recruitments) for recording the outcome of reference checks are attached to this paper.
- 1.5 A summary of background research on the effectiveness of reference checks is also attached and will form the basis of that aspect of selection training which relates to reference checking.

2. General Rules for Reference Checks

- 2.1 Post interview reference checks must be undertaken before recommending any candidate for appointment. This will normally be done via a structured phone interview with a minimum of at least two of the candidates' nominated referees. Although this will mean that same day offers will not always be possible, in the long run this will maintain the integrity and quality of the candidates and recruitment process.
- 2.2 The referee/s should wherever possible always include the candidates' current or a recent supervisor. If this is not possible, an explanation should be included in the reference report. Any referee contacted must have worked closely with the candidate and be in a position to comment knowledgeably about the candidates recent work performance (see section 4 below).

- 2.3 Applicants need to give prior permission to contact their referees and this should be obtained or confirmed (if names of referees were provided in application) at interview. Where the candidate has not nominated their current or a recent supervisor as a referee they should be asked to do so or to explain why such a referee is not available. In such cases, the Chair should discuss with Recruitment to determine if there is a suitable alternative.
- 2.4 Normally, only the Chair of the Selection Committee or a member of the Recruitment Unit may undertake a reference check but this may be allocated to alternative members of the Selection Committee where circumstances require it.
- 2.5 Reference takers need to ask the referee to indicate that their reference is given in confidence and hence assist the University maintaining confidentiality under legislation. The questions at the beginning of proforma should be read out to and answered by the referee to ensure its confidentiality, hence reliability.
- 2.6 Reference information sought must be job related.
- 2.7 Reference takers should cross check and verify resume information and information provided by candidates at interview with referees. In particular referees should be asked to verify key achievements cited in the candidates resume or at interview and provide details of these achievements in terms of their success, importance, degree of difficulty and the contribution of the individual to the outcome. Contribution in this instance may encompass their specific part in a project, leadership skills, research ability, or project management skills.
- 2.8 Reference checks must be consistently and fairly executed.
- 2.9 Reference takers will be trained in how to interview referees as part of the selection techniques training program.
- 2.10 All reference check information should be recorded in writing in the form provided by Personnel and the completed report should be forwarded with the selection committee report. A separate form should be used for each reference check.
- 2.11 Referees will be asked to rank specified criteria on a scale. This provision is specifically included to address inherent weaknesses in the reference checking process.
- 2.12 The University will consider not proceeding with hiring a candidate if complete reference information is not available. Hiring a candidate without such information entails an unacceptable risk.
- 2.13 If negative information is obtained from a reference check, its accuracy should be verified from another source; it must be job related. The alternative source should be from a similar rank/level as the first

reference giver, where possible. It may be necessary to request another referee from the candidate if the existing referees are not as senior as the source being verified.

- 2.14 In order to safeguard the privacy and hence validity of the reference statement, it is recommended that as best practice, no candidates are to be given any indication of preference or results until references are completed.

3. Criteria for Reference Checks

- 3.1 The criteria used in reference checks have been designed to also supplement information collected during a panel interview. Reference checks must use objective rather than subjective criteria.

- 3.2 In addition to the specialist criteria for the position, the criteria include:

- People Skills and Teamwork¹
- Conscientiousness –²
- Integrity and Reliability³

- 3.3 The reference check uses forced choice questions to address the natural tendency of reference givers to provide only positive information.

4. Referees

- 4.1 Some categories of referees have been proven to be unreliable in predicting subsequent job performance. References from co-workers, colleagues, subordinates, acquaintances and personnel officers are

¹ Defined as how well a person works with others. It includes candidates who are helpful, courteous, trusting, good-natured, cooperative, tolerant, and forgiving of other team members. It includes how candidates are perceived as being agreeable, even tempered and calm. High rating candidates do not allow their emotions to interfere with their responsibilities. They are also sociable and enjoy being around others. They tend to be open to new and different ways of doing things.

² Defined as hardworking, organized, responsible, and dependable, persistent workers who strive to improve on past performance. High rating candidates tend to be reliant, and demonstrate a strength of character in relation to their job performance. They like to feel that they can be counted upon to get a job done on time regardless of the effort needed. For academics, this would include timely submissions of teaching materials, research grant reports and subject grades etc. They may demonstrate a high degree of initiative, resourcefulness, and practicality in solving problems. They are highly achievement-oriented and have high aspiration levels. They can be quite purposeful and goal-oriented.

³ Defined as those candidates who are reliable, honest, trustworthy and committed to the job. They can be counted on to do their part and attend to details to ensure successful completion. They tend to be honest and responsible. They tend to be committed to their jobs. They are able to accept criticism and do not dwell on negative or embarrassing situations..

generally not reliable and should not be generally used. Personal referees are also unacceptable.

- 4.2 The reference must be obtained from a recent supervisor who held that role for sufficient time to make an informed assessment of the person. Ideally, the reference giver should have supervised the position for a period of 12 months and the reference giver's experience with the candidate should be relatively current ie. within the last 2 years. Should this present potential issues or conflicts within their current employer, appropriate referees should be identified for these candidates.
- 4.3 Vacancies for trainees, apprentices and graduate recruits are exempted from the above limitations on the reference giver.

Modification History

Date:

Resolution no:

Authority:

Details:



Confidential Reference Report – General Staff

* Firstly, thank you for agreeing to provide a reference for (Candidate) _____

* As you are aware, reference reports are important to assist us in assessing the quality and general capability of the candidate to meet the requirements of the position.

* This information will only be available to the Selection Committee and Personnel staff whose duties require it. The University will do its utmost to maintain the continuing confidentiality of the reports subject to the law.

** To assist the University in ensuring its ongoing confidentiality, can you confirm that your report is provided on a confidential basis? _____

Name of Referee: _____

Position/Company of Referee: _____

Relationship to Candidate: _____
(Reference Taker to Verify Relationship to Candidate)

Duration as Supervisor: _____

Brief Description of the Role the Candidate Held in Your Organisation:

Highlight some Job Related Skills: _____

In your opinion, did the Candidate fulfill their responsibilities?

What did you identify as Candidate's key Strengths and Development areas:

Can you confirm the following achievements? What was the Candidate's contribution/role in the achievement? _____

Can you rate the Candidate on the following:

(It is not necessary to ask ALL the questions in each section. Only ask those that will expand on the ratings given as well as address any queries you may have on the Candidate performance in that area)

People Skills and Teamwork: Poor _____ Excellent

Management Skills: Poor _____ Excellent

(only for roles with supervisory responsibilities)

*Describe their relationship with peers, management and clients?

*Describe their Management Style?

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

Conscientiousness:

Poor _____ Excellent



Initiative:

Poor _____ Excellent



*Any examples of when they had identified a gap or introduced a system/process improvement?

*Any examples of when they had performed exceptionally?

*Comment on the Candidate's attitude, achievement and motivation towards their responsibilities?

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

Integrity and Reliability:

Poor _____ Excellent



*Are there any issues in regards to the Candidates' integrity or honesty that we should be aware of?

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

General Questions

-(Describe the role if Job Description was not given) Do you believe that the Candidate has the capacity to fulfill the responsibilities of this role? Why/Why Not? _____

-If given the opportunity, would you rehire the Candidate? _____

Is there anything else that you would like to comment on that I have not covered?

Thank you for your time.

Reference Taker's Note:

(Any impressions gained during the conversation that could add to reference ie referee's enthusiasm or hesitations etc.)

Signed: _____ Date: _____



Reference Report – Academic Staff

* Firstly, thank you for agreeing to provide a reference for (Candidate)

* As you are aware, reference reports are important to assist us in assessing the quality of the candidate, their research and general capability to meet the requirements of the position.

* This information will only be available to the Selection Committee and Personnel staff whose duties require it. The University will do its utmost to maintain the continuing confidentiality of the reports subject to the law.

** To assist the University in ensuring its ongoing confidentiality, can you confirm that your report is provided on a confidential basis? _____

Name of Referee: _____

Position/Company of Referee: _____

Relationship to Candidate: _____
(Reference Taker to Verify Relationship to Candidate)

Duration as Supervisor: _____

Brief Description of the Role the Candidate Held in Your Organisation:

Highlight some Job Related Skills: _____

In your opinion, did the Candidate fulfill their responsibilities? _____

What did you identify as Candidate’s key Strengths and Development areas: _____

Can you confirm the following achievements? What was the Candidate’s contribution/role in the achievement? _____

Can you rate the Candidate on the following:

(It is not necessary to ask ALL the questions in each section. Only ask those that will expand on the ratings given as well as address any queries you may have on the Candidate performance in that area)

Teaching: Poor _____ Excellent
● ● ● ● ●

*Can you describe the Candidate’s Teaching style?
*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

Own Research:

Poor _____ Excellent

Research Supervision:

Poor _____ Excellent

*Can you comment on the Candidate's approach to research topics and activities?

*How was the Candidate's research skills regarded by their colleagues?

*To your knowledge, were there any factors that may have influenced (positively or negatively) the Candidate's research career and/or research supervision of students?

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

Administrative Experience:

Poor _____ Excellent

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

People Skills and Teamwork:

Poor _____ Excellent

*Describe their relationship with colleagues within Department/Faculty, management and students?

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

Conscientiousness:

Poor _____ Excellent

*Comment on the Candidate's attitude, achievement and motivation towards their responsibilities?

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

Integrity and Reliability:

Poor _____ Excellent

*Are there any issues in regards to the Candidates' integrity or honesty that we should be aware of?

*Are there any examples or points you would like to highlight in this area?

General Questions

(Describe the role if Job Description was not given) Do you believe that the Candidate has the capacity to fulfill the responsibilities of this role? Why/Why Not?

If given the opportunity, would you rehire the Candidate? _____

Is there anything else that you would like to comment on that I have not covered?

Thank you for your time.

Reference Taker's Note:

(Any impressions gained during the conversation that could add to reference ie referee's enthusiasm or hesitations etc.)

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Summary of Validity Information on Reference Checks

Background

Reference checks are generally used for 3 purposes:

- a. to verify information given by job applicants through other selection processes (eg. interview, resume)
- b. to serve as a basis for predicting job success of job applicants, and
- c. to uncover background information on applicants that may not have been identified by other selection procedures.

Job applicants sometimes give inaccurate or incomplete information on prior employment, education, and acquired job skills in order to enhance their employability. Applicants often fail to report background information when they believe it will affect their chances for employment. Therefore one purpose of a reference check is to verify what applicants have stated. When used for this purpose, reference checks are useful only when they fail to confirm previous selection measure information. In this context, reference checks serve more as a basis for negative selection than for the identification of the most qualified applicant.

The second purpose of the reference check is to serve as a predictor of job success. A reference check used in this way assumes that past performance is a good predictor of future performance. While an application form may summarise what applicants say they did, a reference check is meant to assess how well others say the applicants did. It is presumed that information provided by others can be used to forecast how applicants will perform on the job in question.

Reference checking is a common practice of many employers. It is one of the most popular pre-employment procedures for screening job candidates. Several surveys have documented that over 95% of firms sampled engaged in checking references. When information is collected, a significant number of organisations state they use the data for prediction rather than just for verification purposes. For example, a survey of 250 public and private organisations showed that more than 50% utilised the method to obtain additional information about an applicant.

Types of Reference Data Collected

Generally speaking, 4 types of information are solicited through reference checks:

- a. employment and education background data
- b. appraisal of an applicant's character and personality
- c. estimates of an applicant's job performance
- d. willingness of the referee to rehire an applicant.

Generally, questions should not be asked of referees that could not be asked of an applicant.

Methods of Collecting Reference Data

Reference information is usually collected in one of three ways: in person; by mail, or; by telephone. In person reference checks are generally not undertaken because of the expense, written reference checks have been generally found to be unreliable and have inherent difficulties.

Telephone checks are overwhelmingly used. There are a number of advantages associated telephone checks which account for this widespread use:

- a. Reference givers can be questioned and ambiguous comments clarified.
- b. Information may be given orally what would not be given in writing.
- c. The reference checking process can be speeded up.
- d. It is easier to ensure that reference comments are being given by the person named rather than by a secretary
- e. The way oral comments are given may be revealing of what a person really thinks.
- f. A telephone reference check can yield a better reference return rate.
- g. The personal nature of the telephone check contributes to greater responsiveness of the reference giver.

In conducting the check, prepared questions may be asked or questions may be developed and posed by the reference taker during the interview. If an unstructured approach is used over the telephone, the utility of the data collected will be highly dependent on the skill and training of the telephone interviewer.

Sources of Reference Data

There are a number of common sources of reference information:

- a. Former employers. Former employers are an important source for verifying previous employment records and for evaluation an applicant's previous work habits and performance. Information from previous supervisors is particularly valuable.
- b. Personal References. Personal references supplied by the applicant are another source. As might be expected, most applicants will choose individuals as references because they believe they will receive a positive evaluation.
- c. Investigative Agencies
- d. Public Records including criminal records checks.
- e. Educational Records. Some Universities will confirm whether an applicant possesses a degree as stated.

Only references in category (a) above are normally used by the University although criminal record checking is sometimes a statutory requirement.

Usefulness of Reference Data

Referees

One essential element to having useful data is the referee. Unless the giver provides reliable and valid data on applicants, the information will not be helpful to selection decision making. For data to be useful, individuals serving as referees must meet four conditions:

- a. they must have had a chance to observe the applicant in relevant situations;
- b. they must be competent to make the evaluations requested;
- c. they must want to give frank and honest assessments, and;
- d. they must be able to express themselves so their comments are understood as intended.

Many different types of individuals, such as friends, relatives, academics, immediate supervisors, co-workers, subordinates and HR managers can serve as referees. Because these individuals are likely to differ in areas such as the opportunity to observe the applicant, freedom from bias, and knowledge of the applicant, there are differences in the quality of their reference information. The validity and leniency of ratings given by different reference groups has been studied.

It has been found that supervisors and acquaintances provided reference data predictive of subsequent job performance, whereas personnel officers, co-workers and relatives did not. With respect to rating leniency (ie. giving higher rating than may be deserved), friends and previous subordinates were most lenient, previous employers were least. Another study found that the past supervisor, as opposed to the personnel department of the previous organisation, was viewed as most beneficial. Supervisors are generally in the best position to comment on applicant's work habits.

Reliability and Validity of Reference Data

Despite the widespread use of reference checks, there is limited research evidence regarding their reliability and effectiveness in predicting applicants subsequent job performance. Studies of reference data reliability have been rare. When reliability data has been reported, it typically involved interrater (eg. among supervisors, acquaintances and co-workers) reliability estimates of 0.40 or less. Although these estimates are low, they are not all that surprising. Different groups of raters might focus on different aspects of referees and judge them from different perspectives. These differences will contribute to different ratings and thus lower reliability.

Of the 10 or so studies reporting validity data, their findings generally show that the relationships between reference ratings and measures of employee success (performance ratings and turnover) are low to moderate at best. For example, one review of 7 studies of the validity of reference checks estimated an average validity coefficient of 0.14 for supervisory rating and turnover criteria.

A meta-analysis of the validity of reference checks showed that validity ranges from a low of 0.16 for promotion criteria to a high of 0.26 for supervisor rating criteria. Several factors apparently have some bearing on the utility of references in predicting job success. Some conclusions regarding the impact of these factors are:

1. References are likely to be more useful in predicting employee success when completed by an applicant's previous immediate supervisor
2. Prediction is enhanced when the reference giver on the previous job had adequate time to observe the applicant.
3. The old and new jobs are similar in content.

Why don't reference checks perform better in predicting an applicant's subsequent performance? There are several possible explanations. First, the criteria or success measures with which reference checks have been statistically correlated have generally suffered from low reliability. Many of the criteria used in studies of the validity of reference data have had poor reliability. Supervisory ratings have frequently served as criteria, and these are notorious for their subjectivity and sometimes low reliability.

Another explanation for the apparent low value of reference measures in the narrow or restricted range of scores characteristic of many reference reports. Quite often scores tend to be high with little negative information being given on an applicant. If all applicants generally receive the same high reference scores then it is unreasonable to expect a reference check to predict how applicants will perform on a subsequent job. If we used only positive information we would predict that all applicants would succeed. Yet we know that differences in job success will exist.

A third factor accounting for low validity of reference data is the problem of applicant's preselection of who will evaluate them. Because applicants recognise that references may have bearing on their employability they are most likely to choose those who will have something positive to say about them. Leniency is the rule rather than the exception. Preselection of references by applicants only exacerbates the restriction of range and inflation problems.

Other factors may also contribute to the effectiveness problem. Reference givers may not have had sufficient opportunity to observe the applicant on a job; they may not be competent; they may distort their ratings to help the applicant and they may not be able to adequately communicate their evaluations.