

Beyond the Written Word: Exploring the Challenges of Academic Staff in Supporting Undergraduate Applications for Master's Programmes

Bowen Zhang

Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom

Research Domains

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Abstract

Reference letters are a routine yet underexplored element of academic work. This study investigates how academic staff navigate the emotional, ethical, and institutional complexities of writing references for final-year undergraduate students applying to Master's programmes. Drawing on qualitative interviews with staff from multiple UK universities, alongside an autoethnographic account, the study explores key themes including inconsistent institutional guidance, emotional labour, and tensions between advocacy and objectivity. Particular attention is paid to the burden placed on early-career academics and the challenges of comparing students within a cohort. The findings reveal how this seemingly administrative task reflects broader questions about academic responsibility, equity, and institutional care. By centring staff experiences, the research contributes to discussions on academic labour and fairness in admissions processes, highlighting the need for clearer policy frameworks and better support for those performing this vital, yet often invisible, work.

Full paper

Reference letters are a longstanding yet understudied component of the university admissions process. For undergraduate students applying to postgraduate study, academic references are often required to attest to their intellectual ability, potential, and character. While transcripts and personal statements are standardised outputs from students, reference letters remain uniquely dependent on the judgement and discretion of academic staff. As such, they carry implicit assumptions about advocacy, professionalism, and institutional norms. This research seeks to critically examine how academic staff perceive and navigate the task of writing reference letters for final-year undergraduate students applying to Master's programmes—an often taken-for-granted practice that reveals deeper tensions in contemporary academic work.

The project originates from my own experience as a new lecturer in the UK, responsible for providing academic references as part of my advising duties. One request required me not only to write a letter but also to rank the student against peers—a demand I found ethically troubling. Like many early-career staff, I had limited interactions with the student and no comprehensive knowledge of the cohort. This experience highlighted broader concerns about fairness, institutional expectations, and the emotional labour involved in reference writing.

Despite its routine nature, reference letter writing sits at the intersection of several key pressures in higher education: student support, academic workload, institutional policy, and equity in postgraduate access. Reference letters can play a decisive role in shaping student trajectories, particularly in highly competitive or oversubscribed programmes, yet the process of writing them is underexplored in both research and policy. Much of the existing literature focuses on how to craft 'strong' or 'effective' letters, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds (e.g., Houser & Lemmons, 2018), or analyses the content of reference letters to detect bias or inequality (e.g., Madera et al., 2009). However, there is limited qualitative work investigating the lived experience of academic staff who perform this task, particularly in the UK context.

This study aims to address that gap. It asks:

How do academic staff perceive and navigate the challenges of writing reference letters for undergraduate students applying to Master's programmes?

The research takes a qualitative, interpretive approach. I will conduct semi-structured interviews with 10–15 academic staff members from at least five UK higher education institutions, using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure disciplinary and institutional diversity. The interview protocol is organised around key themes: (1) professional expectations and decision-making; (2) institutional guidance and support; (3) emotional and ethical tensions; and (4) perceptions of impact and responsibility. As the project is also autoethnographically informed, I will include a reflexive account of my own experience in reference writing as part of the data corpus.

I anticipate several key findings. First, the requirement to compare students against their peers—whether explicitly (as in some institutional templates) or implicitly—poses particular challenges for fairness and equity. Academics are often reluctant to rank students, particularly when they have not taught or assessed the entire cohort. This practice introduces the risk of reinforcing biases or penalising students with less visible academic profiles. Second, the study is likely to reveal inconsistencies in institutional expectations and the lack of formal support for staff engaged in this work. Staff are often left to interpret vague templates or rely on informal norms passed down through mentorship, leading to disparities in tone, content, and rigour. Third, academics—especially early-career staff—experience emotional and ethical tensions in balancing advocacy and objectivity. For many,

writing a reference is not a neutral task but a relational and affective one, shaped by their connections to students, their own workload, and broader concerns about fairness.

The findings will contribute to broader conversations about academic workload, transparency, and institutional equity. By drawing attention to the hidden and affective labour embedded in reference writing, the study contributes to research on academic professionalism and care (Nicholls, 2014; Lynch, 2010). It also intersects with debates on access to postgraduate education, where informal practices like reference writing play a significant but unevenly regulated role in shaping student outcomes.

In general, this paper invites reflection on the lived experiences of academic staff who play a crucial but underacknowledged role in enabling (or inhibiting) student mobility. By centring the voices of those who write references, this study opens up new questions about academic responsibility, professional identity, and institutional care in an era of intensifying pressure and performance metrics. It also contributes to policy discussions on how institutions can better support staff and students alike in navigating the often opaque mechanics of postgraduate admissions.