

# **Guidance on Completing the University of Otago Reference Check Questionnaire**

## **Preparation**

This reference check questionnaire has been designed to facilitate obtaining references by telephone. However, it could alternatively be emailed to the referee to complete, for example for overseas referees.

If you are completing the reference by telephone, remember to keep notes during your discussion. All reference checks must be documented and kept on file for 12 months. References for appointed candidates should be held on their employee file in Human Resources.

You may wish to tailor the questionnaire, being mindful of the referee's time. Select the questions which are most relevant to this appointment. You may wish to add questions to address any specific queries resulting from the selection process or relating to specific skills or experience required for your position.

You may wish to organise a time for the telephone reference in advance. Referees may find it useful to see the questions beforehand. If the referee has an opportunity to prepare, they may be able to provide you with more detailed information.

Make sure that you have the candidate's CV, covering letter, interview notes and other information to refer to during your conversation. You should only share with the referee specific claims that you need to verify or clarify.

You may find it useful to read the guidelines available in the manager's toolkit section of the Human Resources website.

## **Before you start the questionnaire**

Your first step should be to introduce yourself and the purpose of the telephone call. For example: "the candidate has given your name to act as a referee regarding their performance at (Organisation). Were you aware of this? Do you have about xx minutes to answer a few questions or would another time be more convenient?".

Remember to advise the referee that information is being requested on the understanding that it will only be used to evaluate the candidate's suitability for the role and will remain confidential to those involved in the recruitment process. If you communicate with the referee by email, please include a statement to this effect. Note: The information is to be used for evaluative purposes only as per the New Zealand Privacy Act 1993 Section 29(1)(b).

Then briefly describe the position for which the candidate has applied.

## **Confirming the relationship and employment details**

### **RELATIONSHIP AND CONFIRMATION OF EMPLOYMENT DETAILS**

- What is/was your working relationship with the candidate? (e.g. direct manager)
- When was the candidate employed with your organisation? (if possible, please give start and end dates)
- Do you know why the candidate left, or why they are considering a change?

Always determine the relationship between the referee and the candidate. It may be helpful to confirm the candidate's position title and the referee's position title at that time.

Try to ascertain the dates that the candidate worked for the company, and match these dates with the candidate's CV. If prior dates of employment do not match, it is advisable to check dates of employment with all previous employers.

If the candidate has had more than one position within a company, try to determine how long they were in each position, who they reported to, how the change or promotion came about and what period of time this referee is able to comment on.

### **Questions from Standard Reference Questionnaire**

#### **KNOWLEDGE/SKILLS**

- Can you describe the key functions and responsibilities of the role that the candidate is/was employed to do?
- How would you describe the candidate's performance in that role?
- What are the candidate's major strengths?
- What would you describe as the candidate's main areas for development or improvement?
- Please describe the candidate's ability to learn new tasks, and their technical aptitude.

#### **ATTRIBUTES**

- Have you ever had to question the candidate's honesty or integrity?
- Have you ever had any concerns about the candidate's time management?
- How would you describe the candidate's work ethic and reliability?
- Can you describe the candidate's ability to work as part of a team?
- How does the candidate respond to objective feedback?
- How would you describe the candidate's management style and philosophy?  
(Only if management is involved in the position applied for)

### **Questions from Academic Research and Teaching Reference Questionnaire**

#### **RESEARCH**

- Please comment on the quality and significance of the candidate's published work.
- How would you describe the candidate's abilities in defining research projects, and securing research funds?
- How would you describe the candidate's effectiveness in building and maintaining productive research collaborations?
- How would you describe the candidate's effectiveness in planning and completing research projects?
- How would you describe the candidate's approach to supervising postgraduate students?

#### **TEACHING**

- What teaching experience does the candidate have?
- Can you describe the quality of the candidate's teaching, including the outcome of any formal teaching assessments?
- Please describe the quality of the candidate's curriculum development and teaching materials.
- Can you comment on how the candidate plans and organises their teaching activities?
- Does the candidate have experience of co-ordinating papers, including team teaching situations? How would you describe their effectiveness in this role?

#### **GENERAL**

- How would you describe the candidate's approach to supporting and developing less experienced colleagues?
- What has the candidate contributed to your academic department/school?
- What are the candidate's major strengths?
- Have you ever had to question the candidate's honesty or integrity?
- Have you ever had any concerns about the candidate's time management?
- How would you describe the candidate's work ethic and reliability?
- Describe the candidate's ability to deal with conflict situations.
- From your understanding of our position, would you like to add any other comments on the candidate's suitability in terms of knowledge, skills, experience and attributes.

## **Tips and Hints**

If the referee finds it difficult to answer any of the questions, try asking them to think of an example, a particular project, or deadline.

If you would like more information, ask follow up questions, e.g. "Why?" or "What happened?".

If you are finding it difficult to understand the referee's comments, or if the referee's comments cause concern about the suitability of the candidate, you should seek clarification. Be sensitive to the fact that the referee could be uncomfortable about sharing the information. Depending on the circumstances, you could try:

- Explaining to the referee that you are having difficulty understanding, and asking them to repeat, or explain the answer in a different way;
- Asking for an example;
- Coming back to the topic later, perhaps by asking a slightly different question;
- Repeating their statement back to them to confirm that you have understood correctly.

If necessary, to make the referee feel more comfortable, let them know that you prefer to be aware of any development needs or support the candidate may need so that you can plan induction and training if the appointment is made.

Throughout the questionnaire, you should be verifying information provided by the candidate in their CV and during the selection process.

For any of the questions, the referee may tell you they don't have information about the candidate relating to the question, or that they can think of nothing significant. This is fine; you do not need to push for an answer.

If a referee is unable to verify key information from the CV, or is unable to answer too many questions, it may be appropriate to seek more information. In some cases, for example if the referee is unable to confirm dates, this may be a simple request for a record of service from the organisation's HR Department. In other cases, you may need to ask the candidate to provide an additional referee. This may depend on the quality of the candidate's other referees.

You may wish to add additional questions to focus on areas of competence needing further clarification e.g. their experience in specific technical skills, project work or dealing with confidential material.

If the position involves managing staff, you should try to find out how the candidate deals with people they manage. You could prompt the referee by asking if the candidate tends to be authoritative, participative or consultative. You could ask the referee to describe how the candidate has dealt with any performance or attitude problems.

### **SUMMARY**

- Would you re-employ the candidate in a similar position?
- Is there anything else you could add that I should know?

At the end of a telephone reference check, remember to thank the referee for their assistance.

## **Documentation**

If you completed the reference by telephone, write up your notes then sign and date the form. Information obtained in the referee report must be kept confidential and must not be released to the candidate or to any person other than those considering applications for the position. Neither can it be used for any other purpose.

If you are recommending the candidate for appointment, please attach all the references to the appointment paperwork. These will be held on the employee file in Human Resources. The references for any other candidates should be stored securely for 12 months then confidentially destroyed. The Recruitment Team in Human Resources can store these in the vacancy file.