

Teacher and Adviser Conference 2026

Schools Outreach and Widening Participation Team

Session:	Supporting Competitive Applications, Personal Statements and Reference Writing
Speaker(s):	Sophie Meehan and Megan Forster- Undergraduate Admissions
Session Bio:	Hear insights from our admissions selectors on writing effective personal statements and references, and tips on supporting applications to competitive courses.

Session Notes:

Why is the personal statement important to us?

- Many applicants have similar academic profiles, so the personal statement is a key opportunity to stand out.
- Durham only interviews for Primary Education.
- The personal statement helps selectors understand the person behind the academic profile.
- This is particularly important for competitive courses, where many applicants have similar predicted or achieved grades.
- All personal statements are read at Durham.

Personal Statement Structure

The personal statement now consists of 3 structured sections. Each section requires a minimum of 350 characters. There is flexibility if you have more to say in one section than another.

Section 1 – Why do you want to study this course or subject?

- Why do you want to study the subject or course?
- What do you like about it?
- What books, articles, or academic content have you engaged with?

Section 2 – How have your qualifications and studies helped you prepare for this course or subject?

- What transferable skills do you bring?
- What skills are needed for the course?
- What have you done to demonstrate these skills?

Section 3 – What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

- Extracurricular activities, work experience, employment or volunteering
- Don't waste words in this sector on mitigating circumstances- the reference can be used to support this.

Substitute Personal Statement

- Optional and only required if you're applying for a different subject with us.
- Follow the same parameters as the main statement
- Durham selectors look at this instead of the UCAS statement.

Feedback from Durham Admissions Selectors on the Reformed Personal Statement

What's working?

- Structure makes it easier for selectors to read and assess
- Applicants are more likely to use paragraphs.
- Helps applicants stay focused.
- Section 3 provides a space to discuss wider experience, which selectors value.
- Particularly helpful for applicants with limited support.

What has not worked well?

- Reduced creativity and more standardisation
- Some statements don't naturally flow as well.
- Increased use of lists rather than expanded points. Applicants need to focus on the impact on what they have learned.

LNAT (Law national aptitude test)

- Requirement for Law applicants at Durham.
- Do not take the LNAT in the summer before applying- results will not count as the test needs to be sat in the year of application.
- Students must share their LNAT results with Durham by selecting us as an institution they wish to share their results with.

General Admissions Points

- Competitiveness of each course changes year on year.
- Most competitive courses (at time of slide preparation) are Law, Biological Sciences, Economics, Politics & International Relations, Accounting, Finance & Management. Personal statements play a huge role in selection for these subjects due to similar grade profiles and high competition.

- Least competitive courses (at time of slide preparation) are English Literature, Languages, Chemistry, Theology & Religion and Archaeology.
- Applicants should not assume that grades alone guarantee an offer
- Applicants should use a personal email address for their UCAS application
- We value the EPQ but it does not form part of the offer or entry requirements. EPQs can demonstrate transferable skills and build critical engagement.
- Deferred entry is considered for most courses except Law, History and our foundation programmes.

The UCAS Reference

Structured into three sections:

1. School/college context
2. Extenuating circumstances
3. Other supportive information

It does not matter if there is nothing to complete in section two of the reference –this is just there if there are extenuating circumstances to tell us about.

It is okay if you tell us more than we are looking for – we know different providers will be looking for different things.

Referees should use professional work email addresses.

Admissions Updates Going Forward

- New admissions system expected to be in place for September 2026- includes a new student portal
- WV53 Music and Philosophy joint honours programme withdrawn. Single honours routes still available
- Business and Economics routes no longer possible in Liberal Arts but can still be taken in Combined Honours in Social Sciences.

Questions & Answers

Q: How does Durham decide on a referral offer?

If an offer cannot be made for the original course to which an applicant has applied, a referral offer for a different course may be made where there is clear merit and potential in the application. Admissions selectors may review the application to identify relevant interests, skills, or academic alignment with an alternative course.

Q: Are BTECs viewed less favourably?

No. Durham accepts a range of BTEC qualifications. Exceptions apply only where subject-specific requirements exist. Full details of accepted qualifications and combinations are published on the course database.

Q: For Scottish qualifications, does Durham consider the bands within Highers?

No. Durham only considers the grade and does not take the bands into account.

These notes summarise a session delivered at the Durham University Teacher and Adviser Higher Education Conference on 26th March 2026. They reflect information shared at the time and are intended as a general overview only. For the most up-to-date information, please refer to Durham University's website.