



Supporting your Students' Applications: References and the 2026 personal statement

HE Advisers Conference
26 March 2026

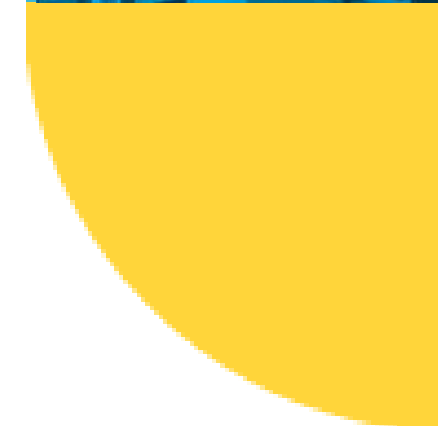
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- Admissions Assistant Managers



Agenda

1. Why is a personal statement important?
2. What makes a personal statement competitive?
3. Our courses (recruiting vs selecting)
4. The new personal statement – feedback
5. Top Tips (summarise 2 + 4)
6. References
7. The LNAT
8. Durham updates and changes
9. FAQs (how to contact us)
10. Questions – over to you



Why is the Personal Statement important?

We have limited information:

- Durham only interviews for Primary Education
- We want to know about the person behind the grades
- An opportunity to talk directly to the Admissions' Selectors

Competitive courses

- High number of applications for limited course places means there is competition
- Students with similar academic profiles
- An opportunity to stand out from the crowd – why they are applying and what makes them an excellent candidate for the programme.



UCAS Personal Statement 2026: Why do you want to study this course or subject?

What are the applicant's own thoughts about the subject?

They could think about:

- Why do they like the subject?
- What books or articles have they read that have stood out?
- Did this prompt them to do more research? If so, what did they find out?
- Is there evidence to support their views?



UCAS Personal Statement 2026: How have your qualifications and studies helped you prepare for this course or subject?

What transferrable skills are they bringing from their academic qualifications or studies?

Things they might like to think about:

- What skills might they need for their chosen course(s)?
- What have they done to evidence they have these skills?
- Have they taken part in any educational challenges or competitions and what does this demonstrate?
- Have they done any additional reading or research and what did they learn from this?



UCAS Personal Statement 2026: What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

Other experiences outside of their education and the ways this has helped them prepare for the course.

This could be through:

- Personal life experiences or responsibilities
- Work experience, employment or volunteering
- Hobbies, clubs, or outreach activities
- Achievements outside of school
- Post-education activities (if no longer in full-time education)



Personal Statements: Subject Focus

Social Sciences:

- Originality and independence of thought
- Engagement with reading & research

Arts & Humanities:

- Engagement with reading & research
- Evidence why they think what they think

Business:

- Originality and independence of thought
- Correct use of terminology

Science:

- Wider reading, their opinions and engagement with what they've read
- Super-curricular activities

Combined or joint honours courses:

Ensure they talk about at least two of the subjects they're interested in!





Durham
University

Personal Statements: Our selectors will be looking for...

Modern Languages
Beyond class (reading, TV etc)

Sociology
Interest in sociological issues

Anthropology
Interest in people and cultures

Criminology
Interest in real criminal justice issues

Mathematics
Mathematical ability & interest

Biosciences
Beyond class (reading, field/ lab work)

Liberal Arts
Interest in each individual subject

PPE
Understanding of how subjects connected

Classics
Interest in language and translation

English Literature
Academic interest in subject

History
Themes over time/ geographical

Computer Science
Less focus on gaming experience



Substitute Personal Statement

- These are optional and only required if you're applying for a different subject with us.
- Same rules, length and format as the main personal statement
- This should be on MS Word Document and uploaded to the applicant portal
- Used instead of the original
- Not an opportunity to tell us how great Durham is!
- You don't need to start from scratch.



Top Tips – Personal Statement

- Don't try to be funny!
- Research your courses, keep it relevant
- Be specific – use examples and give evidence
- Be authentic and don't copy. We want to hear about YOU!
- Get feedback

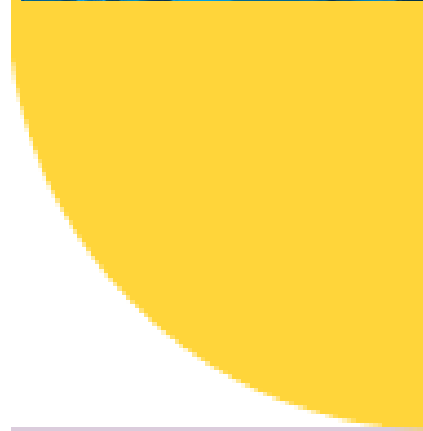
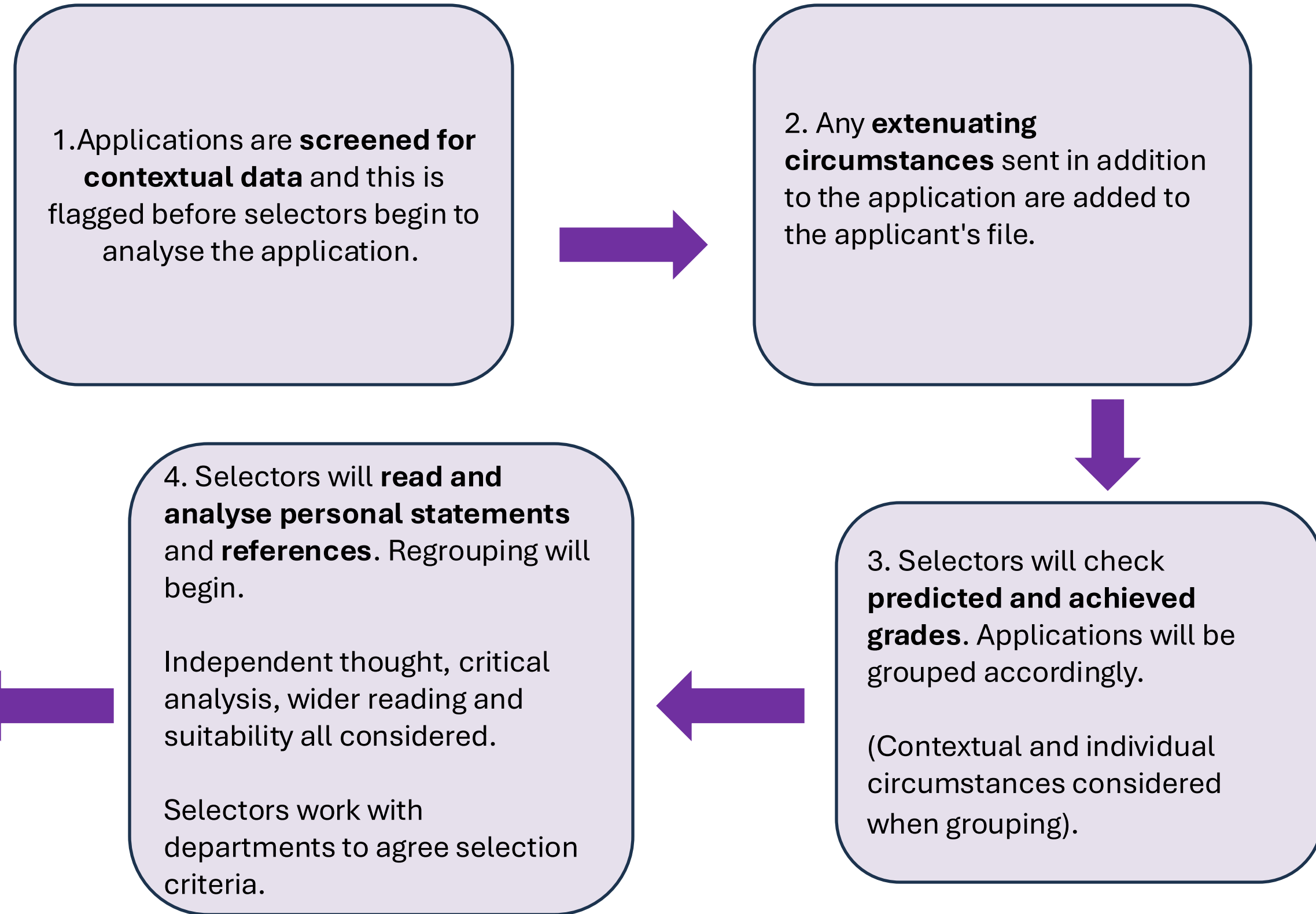


- Avoid lists and don't waste characters
- Avoid Repetition
- Always think about why you're telling us something – what do you want us to take away from it?



How are successful applicants chosen?

The selection process



Durham University is committed to recruiting the best students for the courses that we offer, irrespective of background.

What are your most competitive courses?

Myth Buster

"You don't read personal statements"

"You will get an offer if you are predicted the grades"

"I can just change course when I get there"

[Admissions-Policy-2025-6.pdf](#)

Our most competitive courses (25/26)*

Law
Economics
Politics and International Relations
Accounting, Finance and Management
Biological Sciences

Our less competitive courses (25/26)*

English Literature
Languages
Chemistry
Theology and Religion
Archaeology

Our competitive courses change year on year. This is entirely dependent on applicant choice and interests which often shift. Applicants should not become complacent. **Things change daily!** *Information correct at time of creation and subject to change.



Home/Islands Applicants						
Department	Number of applications	Offered Programme Applied To	% Offered Programme Applied To	Offered Alternative Programme ¹	% Offered Alternative Programme	% Made an Offer: Original or Alternative
Accounting	125	115	93%	0	1%	93%
Accounting and Finance/Mgmt	1000	325	32%	5	1%	33%
Anthropology	245	240	97%	0	0%	97%
Archaeology	240	235	98%	0	0%	98%
Biosciences	790	610	77%	80	10%	88%
Chemistry	550	535	97%	5	1%	98%
Classics & Ancient History	660	630	96%	15	2%	98%
Combined Honours in Social Sciences	355	355	99%	0	0%	99%
Computer Science	840	305	36%	195	23%	60%
Earth Sciences	335	320	96%	5	1%	97%
Economics	1405	690	49%	5	0%	50%
Education Studies	120	115	95%	0	0%	95%
Engineering	1205	1085	90%	0	0%	90%
English Studies	1015	975	96%	30	3%	99%
Finance	645	275	43%	5	1%	43%
Foundation Centre ²	805	205	26%	10	1%	27%
Geography	665	660	99%	0	0%	99%
Government & International Affairs	1085	535	50%	25	2%	52%
History	1195	1160	97%	20	2%	99%
Law	1770	540	31%	25	1%	32%
Liberal Arts	310	305	98%	0	1%	99%
Management	835	540	65%	5	1%	65%
Marketing	210	125	60%	5	1%	62%
Mathematical Sciences	885	855	97%	0	0%	97%
Modern Languages & Cultures	600	580	97%	10	1%	98%
Music	235	230	97%	0	0%	97%
Natural Sciences	1070	960	90%	20	2%	91%
Philosophy	420	390	93%	25	5%	98%
Philosophy, Politics & Economics	480	420	87%	25	5%	92%
Physics	905	780	86%	65	7%	93%
Primary Education	290	185	64%	0	0%	64%
Psychology	1060	1005	95%	5	0%	95%
Sociology	435	390	89%	0	0%	89%
Sport and Exercise Sciences	655	525	80%	0	0%	80%
Theology & Religion	270	270	99%	0	0%	99%
Total	23705	17465	74%	585	2%	76%



The New Personal Statement – What has worked?

The new structure has made it **easier for selectors to read and find the relevant information** they are looking for.

The third section has given **more freedom to share wider experiences** which are valuable to us as selectors.

The structure is useful to **guide applicants**, particularly for those who may not have the opportunity to have as much support.

Applicants are more inclined to use **paragraphs** now.

The new structure has ensured applicants **remain focused** and do not go off on a tangent.



The New Personal Statement – what has not worked as well?

Creativity has reduced.

Many PSs do not **flow** as well as they used to.

Students are writing **more lists** instead of **coherent sentences** which **flow naturally**.

Due to more 'listing' applicants are not always **stating the impact of a comment they are making**.

Applicants are being very specific about **what they have studied** and not what they have **learned or the impact** it has had.

They are **less original** and becoming **very similar**.



The New Personal Statement – Feedback: Ten Top Tips



Applicants should:

1. Still be creative
2. **Show their individuality**
3. Avoid answering the questions as though they are interview questions
4. **Include their individual reflections on learnings**
5. Not list the subjects they have studied
6. **Not share information in a list like manner (even if it is written as a sentence)**
7. Avoid lists in general!
8. **Focus on areas of learning which have had an impact on their understandings/ passions and develop these points**
9. Consider the relevance of each point they are making – what is the impact?
10. **Read their PS back and consider how it flows/reads to others**



The UCAS Reference

Section 1

'School/college context'

A general statement about your school/college

This can be a template and can be applied once to all your applications.

Section 2

'Extenuating Circumstances'

Any extenuating circumstances which may affect the applicant's performance in examinations or other assessments

An opportunity to share context around the applicant's educational journey if they have had external factors which have caused an impact.

Section 3

'Other circumstances'

Any other circumstances specific to the applicant you think universities/colleges should be aware of

'Other supportive information' - the section you tell us all about the applicant, their aptitude, attitudes and achievements



The UCAS Reference – How we use it (Section 1 & 2)

- We use the reference to **understand the applicant's educational journey**.
- This is through considering their **personal and school context** (section one and two).
- Section one doesn't need to be long, but it's helpful if we **know the performance of the school** so we can understand how an applicant's **grades compare in this context**.
- 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.



The UCAS Reference – How we use it (Section 3)

- For our **BA Primary Education applicants**, we will be looking for commentary on the applicant's **suitability as a teacher**, which we would expect to find in section three of the reference.
- For our **Foundation Programme applicants**, who may have been out of education for a long time, we would be looking for more information about their **context and suitability** in section three.
- For **all other courses**, we would expect to see information about the applicant's **aptitude, attitudes, achievements** and anything further you believe would support their application in section three.
- We recommend **applicants meet with their referee** to discuss anything they want to be included particularly e.g. their work experience, a particular essay competition, a recent diagnosis etc.



The UCAS Reference – Top Tips

- **Do not use URLs** (they don't work), please include the information you need us to see in the box.
- Make sure that the email address used in the reference is a **school email address**. There will be delays in processing if a non-school email address is used.
- Ensure applicants apply using their **personal email account** which they will have continued access to over the summer.
- Avoid using **names of particular universities**.
- If the extenuating circumstances you wish to report would not be appropriate to include within the UCAS reference, we accept evidence submitted from the school or other third-party professional to: documents.educators@durham.ac.uk
Please make it clear in the reference that you will be submitting this.



What is the LNAT?

The **Law National Aptitude Test** is required for all applicants to our undergraduate Law programmes (M101 and M105).

The **only exception** is for those who have successfully completed a Durham Summer School.



The Law National Aptitude Test

The test consists of **two parts** – a **multiple choice** section and a **timed essay**

Durham takes into account both the **MCQ score** (multiple choice question score) and **the essay** when looking at LNAT results.
(We do not grade essays with a formal result.)

In our assessment of an LNAT essay, admissions selectors look for **evidence of** the following positive attributes:

- **Focus on the specific** question (don't be too broad!)
- **Clarity of expression** and **fluency of prose**
- A **logical progression and structure**
- Reference(s) to **relevant** evidence
- An ability to **recognise and address counter arguments**
- A **concise and effective conclusion**



LNAT – Key Information



The test should be taken **in the year of application** – this is usually between 1st September and the equal consideration date.

DO NOT take the test in the summer before UCAS applications are submitted.

Results are available to us **24 hours after the student has taken the test**, but only if Durham University has been **selected as an institution** they wish to share their results with.

Every year we have a significant number of applicants who are unsuccessful because we have been **unable to access their LNat results**.

Once the deadline has passed, **we're unable to accept late results**. We do not currently have the capacity to chase applicants with missing results..

The LNat is **not considered in isolation**. We review the whole application **holistically**, taking into account many different factors.

It is possible for someone with a high LNat MCQ score to be unsuccessful and someone with a lower score to be successful..



LNAT – Key Information



Test day problems – any problems encountered on test day should be **reported to the test centre** and an **incident number obtained**.

This should then be **reported to LNAT** for further consideration.

Please **let us know of issues** – we can **access a report directly from LNAT** that details problems/**any mitigation granted**.

If LNAT's processes haven't been followed there's not much we can do.

Applicants are permitted to take the test **only once per academic year**.

Authorised **resits are rare** and granted by LNAT directly if there are mitigating circumstances.

There is an **LNAT bursary/fee waiver** for those who are in receipt of certain state benefits.

This should be applied for before booking the test.

Those who are eligible for **exam access requirements** should apply for these before their test is booked.



Admissions Updates at Durham

New admissions system implementation due for September 2026, bringing a new student portal

Business & Economics routes no longer possible through Liberal Arts but can still be taken within Combined Honours

New route available within Natural Sciences – BSc Biology and Psychology

WV53 Music and Philosophy joint honours programme withdrawn. Single honours routes still available.



Frequently asked questions at our Open Days...And answers!

Can I change my course?

Requests should be made by the UCAS equal consideration date (After this date subject to availability)

One request per admissions cycle

If you're made a change of course offer, it won't be possible to change back

Do we consider the EPQ? (Extended project qualification)

Builds your critical engagement and effective essay writing skills

Support transferable skills

We value the EPQ but it would not form part of your offer

Can you detect Artificial intelligence in a personal statement?

No software out there to currently detect AI at UCAS

All personal statements are read by members of the Admissions team and it can be obvious!

Small differences in writing style and terminology

Can I change my year of entry and how does Durham feel about deferrals?

1 Year deferral considered for most courses, except Law and History.

Able to consider where space is available

Applicants applying for deferred entry are considered within the pool of current applications.



How to contact Durham University Admissions

Ask Us:

www.durham.ac.uk/study/ask-us

Teachers & Advisors:

documents.educators@durham.ac.uk

Call Us:

'Home' Callers:

Tel: 0800 987 4120

Phone lines are open Mon - Fri
10am – 4pm.

International Callers:

+44 191 300 4557

Visit our website:

www.durham.ac.uk/study/undergraduate



Questions





Thank you

dur.ac.uk/study/askus

