

A mini-guide/summary on applying abroad. Everything I have written here comes from my own experience, and my experience of reading lots and lots of websites. Written initially for my juniors at the Ecology department in Pondicherry.

Application Deadlines:

I start with this because these are what will help you plan your application process. Applying for a PhD abroad takes time. Be prepared to invest a lot of effort and time in applying. If you want to study abroad, you will have to work for it. Most deadlines for M.Sc. and PhD programmes start on December 1st of the previous academic year. This means all your application materials need to be submitted by this date, say Dec 1st 2013 if you want to join in August 2014. Some universities have January deadlines, and some have March. But, for most, if you want a fellowship or any kind of funding, the earlier you apply, the better. Remember that the things that take the most time are Transcripts and recommendations- you need to start these especially early. Most application processes are largely online nowadays.

Funding:

Funding is not very good right now, for many programmes, because of the current economic situation all over the world. However, you can find fellowships, scholarships, or assistantships, to fund your study. An assistantship is usually either a TA (teaching assistantship), or an RA (research assistantship), where you teach UG students, or get paid to do research respectively. Many universities offer one of these to all admitted PhD students.

What they ask for:

Application Form- Usually made up of a series of online forms, where you fill in your personal details, what course you are applying to, GPA, GRE and TOEFL scores, SOP, referee names, and so on [see below].

GRE (Graduate Record Examination) General exam Scores –link www.ets.org/gre - essentially a test of English and basic mathematics. The GRE is required for most post-graduate studies in the US, usually not required for the UK/Europe/Australia. Ideally should be taken between June and late September- early October. NOT later. When I wrote it in 2009, this exam cost Rs. 8000. Check the cost before applying, and be sure that you want to apply to the US (Not very useful otherwise). Scores take 2 weeks to be reported after your test date, and you should keep a month for them to reach the university you are applying to (Same for TOEFL).

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)- link <http://www.ets.org/toefl>. An English exam (much simpler than GRE English), required mainly to prove that you know enough to speak/read/write English when you're going to European/Australian/American universities. It is largely for the visa requirement that they ask for this exam. This exam cost Rs. 6000 when I wrote it in 2010. IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is another accepted English exam. Which test you should take depends on the country you are applying to. TOEFL is more for the US, and IELTS more for the UK. But both are accepted in most places.

CV- Curriculum Vitae- also called a Resumé. You do not have to include your address and a line saying "Objective". Most people write "To get a PhD in your university." This is too obvious an objective, and

does not help you at all. I would suggest leaving it out. To look at my CV for some ideas on formatting, you can look at- <http://anushashankar.weebly.com/cv.html>. There are many many resources on the internet for CV formats- don't just base yours on one, but instead look at multiple ones.

Statement of Purpose- This is a description what you want to do. This has to be very well written, so make sure you ask someone who knows a little bit about writing to help you, or edit once you are done. Your SOP has to include why you want to pursue M.Sc./PhD/..., why in that particular university, how will this course help you, why you would fit well with their programme (spelt program in the US), your short-term and longer-term professional goals, and a brief description of how your past experiences will help you achieve this. SOPs are usually 1-2 pages long. However, some universities have word limits in the application which you will have to stick to. It is always a good idea to prepare a draft, and carefully modify it each time you are uploading it to an application, to be specific to the university. Working on your SOP carefully, and revising it as many times as it takes, is a good idea- plan that it might take you one month. Ask your friends and/or seniors for their SOP formats, and ask them to look at yours.

Recommendations- This is a very important part of your application. Most universities ask for 2-4 people who can give you recommendation. It is usually the practice, when you're applying for PhD, that at least 2 of these people have taught you or guided you on a research project. The other can be more of a character reference, or can be a teacher as well. It helps if 1-2 of these people are well known in the field.

Transcripts- These are official attested copies of any one of, or a combination of, the following: semester mark sheets, consolidated marksheet, provisional degree certificate, degree certificate. You will need to get the same from both your UG and PG colleges, in sealed stamped envelopes. Each university has its own requirements for what you should send and when you should send it- some don't need it during application, but only if you are admitted. Others need transcripts along with the application.

What they don't always ask for, which you should do:

Write to profs!!- Around August-September, you should start searching for universities and professors whom you would like to work with. Once you find them, write to them saying you are interested in their work on ____, your past experience is with ____, and whatever else might be relevant. Your email should ideally be 2-4 paragraphs long- enough to catch their attention but not too long and boring. It is normal to attach your CV (Curriculum Vitae) or resume to this email, so they can choose to see a detailed description of your previous experience/academics. If they do not reply, you can safely resend the email after about 3 weeks, asking if they had the time to see your email. This writing to profs is very necessary for doing a higher degree abroad, as in many places they will accept you only if a professor has agreed to take you as their student.

What advisors look for:

I'm writing this in April 2013, after having joined the PhD program in Stony Brook in August 2012. I see now that advisors are very different in what they want from a student. But the key thing to understand is that there is so much luck involved in the whole process. The people you want to apply to must have funding, must have space in their lab for a new student, must have the departmental support to take an international student, must be looking for someone with your skillset, and so on. This is why you must

write to many many many professors. Because just statistically, more than half will not have an available position. You need to check their website, see if it has anything about opportunities for students. If you have a good peer-reviewed publication or two, and are applying to the US for a PhD, your chances of getting in are good given all the luck aspects I just mentioned. You need research experience for sure, decent to good GRE scores and grades (because not just the prof takes you in, you are also competing with other applicants for funding from the department, and you have to measure up).

Make sure your cover letter is attention grabbing, make sure your grammar is correct, that you have attached your (properly formatted) CV. **Write again** if they don't respond in 2-3 weeks. Many professors expect you to persist, because they are sometimes too busy to reply to emails unless you bug them a little (there is a line when it becomes too much). If you are really really interested in their lab, write to their PhD students. There is a lot of interaction between advisors and other professors in students in some departments, so it might help to get in touch with a student who might reply faster. Do not ask obsessively about money in the first email you send to any of them, but definitely bring it up after a conversation has started.