

Planning the Application Process

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Often we see ourselves finishing our assignments at the last minute, leaving exam preparation for the last one month, preparing for an important presentation only the night before. But today we are going to discuss something that can never be left to a last minute schedule. The process of applying to Universities and Institutes abroad is a daunting, complicated, and expensive task, which necessarily needs to be well planned and scheduled. This applies to all students whether applying for undergraduate studies, an MBA, or even a Ph.D.

ENTRANCE TESTS

Identifying the entrance tests required for your study program and the minimum requirements for test scores would give you a goal to work towards. Finishing the entrance tests at least 6 months prior to the application deadlines gives you sufficient time for the rest of the application procedure. Typically the



entrance tests are SAT for the undergraduate programs, GRE for the graduate studies and GMAT for the management studies. TOEFL is a mandatory entrance for all the international applicants whose native language is not English. All these tests are held by Education Testing Services (ETS), Princeton, New Jersey.

SELECTING SCHOOLS

Let's start with probably the most

important issue: Selecting the right ones amidst hundreds. Start by assessing a broad-range of schools (30-50) in a systematic manner before finally narrowing down the list to schools one is applying to. Each university has under its name different colleges like the college of engineering, college of architecture, college of law etc. Identify the college you will be applying to and consider the following:

Size of University: It can be estimated by the number of colleges under its name like the college of engineering, college of law etc. The larger the University, the better the chances of funding and wider the selection of courses and study opportunities.

Student Demographics: University prospectuses also mention the profiles of their current students viz. male / female ratios, number of international students, admit rates, etc. These numbers will indicate to you your suitability for that school.

Financial Funding: For those students who require financial aid, they will have to look for universities providing aid. The universities mention the type of financial aid they provide and the criteria for providing aid.

Specialization ranking:

This would indicate how well the school is ranked (or reputed) for the area of interest. In the department of your interest, check for number of sub-departments; for example, in Electrical Engineering one may have

Systems Engineering, Electronic Design and Development, etc. as sub-departments. This would also give an idea of the academic flexibility in courses and in case one would like to change area of study within departments.

Faculty Profile: Number of professors working in one's areas of interest. The higher the number, the greater the chances of getting a good advisor and research assistantships. Also, if the professors were PhDs from the top schools, then it would definitely reflect

in the quality of education.

Curriculum: Some schools offer thesis and non-thesis options during the Masters degree. Thesis option requires course work and substantial research work in specific research area while non-thesis option requires course work and an ordinary project or just course work. The advantage of non-thesis option is also that one can finish earlier. However for students wanting to pursue a PhD, the thesis option is required.

Placements: The placement scenario is generally better if the university is strategically placed near a major city or town. Every university normally has a Career Development Centre, which provides necessary guidance to the students and organizes job fairs. One could check these details with current students.

Fees and Cost of Living: The cost of living will be higher in urban areas than in the rural areas. Also the West coast has a relatively higher cost of living when compared to the East coast. Places like Texas, Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, Virginia and Arizona are some of the preferred locations due to lower living costs. Also, the tuition fees vary from university to university. Fees in a private college will definitely be higher than fees in public college. This is fairly important especially for MBA students.

Since every application involves a non-refundable application fee, you cannot afford to apply to all the schools and a recommended number is between 7-10. Having decided on the schools, we need to work on the application to reach these schools within the deadlines.

APPLICATION PACKET

Being an international applicant, it is only your application packet, which speaks on your behalf to the evaluator. Thus you need to make sure every document is in place and in the best of shape, so that we maximize our chances of getting in. Below is a list of the documents that typically go in an application and finally the deadline for these documents to reach the school.

Covering Letter

The cover letter introduces the applicant. It mentions the list of the documents that are in the package. If any documents are missing, the candidate can use this as an opportunity to explain why the documents are missing. Also any differences in the way the name has been spelt or written should be mentioned.

Onward!



Application Form

The application form should be correctly and neatly filled in answering all questions and attaching all supporting statements.

Application Fee: All Universities demand an application fee to process the student's application form. The average application fee could vary in the range of US\$75 to US\$200 per university in USA.

Official Score Report: It will take 2-3 weeks for ETS to send the scores to the selected schools. Although the test scores are to be reported to the university by the ETS, the students too have to send a copy of their official score report of the standardized test.

Note: From July 2003, the AWA essays of the applicants would be sent to the individual universities along with the score report.

Statement of Purpose: For all graduate and undergraduate applicants to US schools, SOP is a critical part of the application packet. The admission committee gives the applicant a chance to project one's best qualities, explain the inconsistencies in one's academics or test scores and convince the committee that one has the spark, the seriousness, and the thirst for knowledge that could add value to the existing student community. The key issues that the SOP needs to address are your purpose in graduate study, the area of study in which you wish to specialize, your future use of your graduate study and your special preparation and fitness for study in the field.

Letters of Recommendation: The letters of recommendation can be looked upon as simply supporting evidence for points mentioned in the SOP and application essays. It is an evaluation of you as a student, an employee, and a colleague and about the qualities that make you a promising student for that program, and a potentially successful person long-term. The referee thus needs to have worked with you in close association for a sufficiently long time. For a graduate who is just out of undergraduate school, the undergraduate teachers would be the best people to approach. For an experience person

applying for MBA, the reporting head who has been on a day-to-day interaction would be appropriate to comment on your work style, leadership qualities, inter personal skills etc. Summarizing it all, the points that the recos should touch upon are academic performance, communication skills, innovative thinking, team work abilities, overall personality and the extent of confidence of the referee in the applicant's ability to pursue the chosen study program.

Transcripts: Transcript is a summary of the candidate's academic performance. It should include the number of hours per week that a subject has been taught in class, the marks obtained, the maximum marks along with an explanation of the grading system followed by one's college.

Resume: A resume enables the admissions committee to get an overall view of one's educational background, work experience, hobbies and other extra curricular activities.

Financial Documents: The financial documents though a part of the application packet have no bearing on the admission decision. It is an assurance to the university that in case the school does not offer any financial aid, the applicant would be in a position to support his/her education during the course of study. The supporting statements need to be in the form of bank statements, sponsor's affidavit and solvency certificate showing sufficient funds.

Deadlines: US universities have deadline and the applications are processed roughly on a first-come-first-serve basis. Thus it is advisable to send in the applications as early as possible. Typically schools are open for admission during the FALL (Aug/Sep) semester and SPRING (Jan) semester. The rounds of deadlines for FALL semester are Nov of previous year and Jan and March of the same year while for SPRING are August, October and December of the previous year.

Follow-ups: After the applications are sent it is good to follow up with the graduate office to see if your application has reached within the deadline, if official scores have been reported and when decisions would be made.

University Decisions: The schools take 1-2 months to make decisions on the applications and send an acceptance letter to the student through email or post and when the student signs and confirms an I-20 follows. The I-20 is the official confirmation by the university of the student's application. It also mentions the status of financial funding offered to the student.

Financial Funding: After the university confirms on the admission and before the applicant applies for the visa, the student can follow-up with the university for financial funding in case the student has



not already been awarded one. The professors normally recommend students for research assistantships. Thus if you find a professor's research area matching with your interests it is advisable to write to him a brief profile on your background and research interests.

The final stage of application is the visa application. Normally students apply 1-2 months prior to their actual departure. If test scores are good, you have an admit from a good school and have for documents are in place, it will all be smooth sailing till you reach your school. ■

MIT pulls out of Media Lab Asia

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The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, involved in technology research to benefit Indian masses, pulled out of a collaboration with India in less than two years citing differences with Arun Shourie, the new Minister for Information Technology and Communication, over focus and management of research projects. However, Media Lab Executive Director and senior research scientist, Walter R Bender said that MIT would still be involved in research for Media Lab Asia.

Media Lab Asia was founded in 2001 to help develop technologies to benefit India's masses. The goal was to help transform the economically weaker sections of society with affordable wireless and Internet technology.