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REVIEW ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL PHDS: DEMYSTIFYING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Making a successful international PhD application is always a nightmare to graduate students after the completion of their masters degree. Numerous documents need to be prepared to file in an international PhD application. There are different modes and specific processes involved in this task. Making the right use of available resources and expertise will lead to a desired PhD position. This short communication will serve as a cookbook to graduate students, guide them in a step-wise manner and encourage them to pursue their PhD overseas.

INTRODUCTION

How does it feel to be left blindfolded after finishing your master's degree in life sciences in a college/university from a tinier part of India? I experienced it personally and desperately needed someone to show me the path and lead me somewhere where I could research. All my seniors, friends, faculty members and family members fed me with ideas and concepts that rather confused me than clearing my mind. Driven just by intuition, I determined to do a PhD. Well, I do not regret now. I started to look into online resources for information and dug deeper to find a PhD position abroad. At some point, I badly needed a cookbook kind, which would just ask me to do some sequential steps to make a PhD application. Remember your mom's recipe for making instant food, as simple as that. Sadly, I could get only a rocket engineering design and not a cookbook. Somehow I survived those initial struggles (had some bruises though) and finally got admitted to a Canadian university, which was well reputed for its agricultural sciences research. Looking back now, if only I had someone to guide and some sort of starting material, it could have made my PhD application processes easier. Back to reality, now at almost the end of my PhD, I wanted to demystify the application process involved in international PhD degrees. I always find personal experiences and stories more relevant than any other information. This short essay, written in simple words, is intended to guide and encourage students towards international PhD applications, with special focus on life science graduates.

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Where the heck does the tunnel start?

Here you go. You need to have the following materials ready to start your PhD applications, a motivation letter, statement of purpose (SOP), curriculum vitae (CV), research proposals (in some cases), recommendations letters and English proficiency test score. Sounds Latin to you? Don't panic. Let me explain. A motivation letter is a short summary explaining you on what motivated to apply for a PhD position. It is a letter of intention in other words. It can be a two page document where your general interests in science and your evolution of knowledge in life sciences is explained. For example, you could start with your elementary school education science fair, how it influenced you to take life science as a major in your higher secondary education. Then sail through your undergraduate degree's dimensions and how well did you make use of it. Include your participation in conferences, which kindled the research fire in you. But remember, this is not your curriculum vita. Keep it simple but well explained. A statement of purpose (SOP) is a document where you have the space to convince the principal scientist or the recruiter of a particular program, which you are applying to. The difference between a motivation letter and a SOP is just semantic. In a motivation letter you explain your past, whereas in a SOP you explain how would you do justice to that particular program/position. That's easy. A curriculum vita (CV) or Resume, here is where you sell yourself. A well written CV is half done in your application. Never underestimate the importance of your CV in getting you the position. Since there are numerous documents and information on writing your CV, I am not focusing on them here in this short essay. However, I warn not to provide any

false detail in your CV. Sometimes, don't discipline us than the do's. For example, in "Techniques known" section, students tend to give many techniques for which they only have theoretical knowledge and no hands-on experience. Caution! A 2-D gel electrophoresis is done differently than it is learnt. Few universities demand a research proposal with your application. The intention is just to check your prospective research ideas and understand if you would fit in their research group. I suggest proposing a research, which is feasible, doable and less complicated. It is possible to do this by creating a research question and finding logical answers to it. You don't have to compromise by keeping your creativity low, at the same time, address issues more sensibly. Again, don't let your wild imaginations kill your readers. The recommendation letters are vital in your selection procedures. Always request your recommendation letters from professors, faculty members who are well aware of your research capabilities and analytical skills. You can be wiser in choosing your referees. Don't choose an ecologist to refer you when you apply to a position that demands molecular biology skills. Always provide your referees with maximum information about the university/position you are applying, for them to write a better recommendation letter.

Let someone test your English

English being accepted as the universal language, all your international PhD applications would require a score, which tested your English proficiency. There are many English language testing systems/exams, which you can appear for. The most common exams are Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS). GRE has two divisions, a subject GRE and a general GRE. Similarly, IELTS has academic IELTS and non-academic IELTS. As a research student, you are expected to appear for an academic IELTS or a subject GRE. Most of the universities in the United States, demand a subject GRE score, universities in Australia prefer IELTS. Every university has its own choice of these exams. Many prospective students would have undergone a primary education where English is not the medium of instruction. All I can tell them is, it is just an other language. A few weeks/months of self-preparation would lead you to master these exams. Each of these exams will have individual components testing your reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. If you are targeting a particular university, carefully review their website to know which is their choice of exam. These language proficiency exams are not cheap and you wouldn't want to waste your money in sitting for a GRE, when the university required a TOEFL. All these exams are Internet based and will take just 3-4 hours of your time to complete. The information regarding these examination, fee, date availability, exam centers, preparation materials can be obtained from their individual websites, <http://www.ets.org/gre/contact>, <https://www.ets.org/toefl/contact/india>, <http://www.britishcouncil.in/exam/ielts>. Now, you are ready to start your application processes. Ahoy!

Know your roads

Before getting into the application processes, it is always good to be aware of different modes of applications. Selecting

a particular mode is purely up to the individual's decision. Broadly speaking there are 4 modes of applications:

1. Applying through international PhD calls made by the individual universities, for e.g., Calls made by Max Planck, Oxford University, University of Zurich, Munich etc., (Check: highly competitive).
2. Applying to individual scientists who are working in your own field of interest (Less competitive, needs high motivation).
3. Applying to scholarships made by international trusts and educational organizations, for e.g., Wellcome trust, Rhodes foundation, Rock Fellers etc.,
4. Through governmental scholarships e.g., Indo-UK, Indo-Chinese, Indo-Mexican etc., (Check out <http://mhrd.gov.in> for info and announcements). This is comparatively less competitive and easier to get through.

That being said, how do you proceed with these modes explained? Phew!

Now the gullies

All those explained above are just modes of applications. We have few kinds of application processes to proceed with the modes. They are

1. Online applications, where they just ask you to give the details of referees and don't have to attach the recommendation letters. They shall contact your referees personally and get to know about you (e.g., CNB, CNIO Spain applications).
2. Online applications, where they ask you to attach the confidential reference letters with your application online (e.g., University of Bath, UK).
3. Online applications and they ask your referees to send their confidential recommendation letters to the university directly (e.g., University of Alberta, Canada).
4. Paper applications (to be sent through air mails, go for it only if you can afford to pay the postal charges) e.g., some Italian universities.
5. Online applications with a fee for the entry (pay using your credit card). I personally think that they are cheaper than paper applications, e.g., National University of Singapore (NUS) and some universities in the US.

Once you complete all these processes, all you can do is just to wait for them to intimate you the results. My personal experience was, initially most of my PhD applications overseas were rejected. It took me a while to realize what caused the rejections. Sigh!

Learn from your mistakes

An application can fail when,

1. If you are a fresh graduate without any professional experience and research publications.
2. If the programs that you applied for were highly reputed ones with heavy competition from potential candidates all over the world.

3. If your motivation letter, academic profile, SOPs were not convincing enough to offer you the position.
4. If they ask you to fund your own research (in most of the cases, you are provided with a research stipend, which is not possible in this case).
5. If you do not have a valid English proficiency score or if your score expired by the time of application.

These factors should not slow down your application processes, instead should motivate you to make the next application successful. Remember your high school perseverance poem.

World in your hands

Information era had put the world in our hands and it is now possible to pull out any information from the Internet just in a fraction of second. Google it. In a country like India, where Internet is not sporadic and is available almost everywhere, you will be able to browse through hundreds and thousands of websites related to your discipline. I strongly suggest graduate students to enter online academic/professional networking sites such as LinkedIn, Academia, and Research Gate etc., to know their opportunities and connect with experts in their field of interest. Facebook doesn't hire life scientists. Here are some useful links, www.education.nic.in, www.scholarship-positions.com, www.naturejobs.com, www.findaphd.com, www.college-scholarships.com/free_scholarship_searches.html, www.scholarshiphelp.org, www.scholarshipsinindia.org, www.internationalgraduate.net.

Mint a lot more

If you are held to predisposition that doing a PhD outside your own country would be expensive, it is definitely wrong. The stipend paid to students in an international program is usually attractive. Universities in the United States and Canada pay not less than 21,000 \$ per annum, which is approximately 12 lakhs INR. University of Oslo, Norway pays up to 26.5 lakhs INR per annum to deserving PhD candidates. Mostly these scholarships are tax-free. One can work part-time during his/her PhD and earn some extra money, which is a healthy top-up to their stipend. If cutting edge technologies and expertise present overseas doesn't attract you (ain't underestimating research labs in India here), at least the monetary advantages should do.

Few concluding thoughts

One might wonder if it is really worth doing a PhD, considering the amount of time and effort involved in it. Above all the difficulties involved, the sense of accomplishment you feel on your defense day, is worth the difficulties. People address you as Dr. I will very soon experience that Aha moment in my life. Perfect planning makes the international PhD application process simpler (You can never make it to the simplest, I should say). I want this essay to help graduate students in making a successful international PhD application. There is light at the end of the tunnel.
