

Experiences from the graduate school application process, compiled by a member of the IUB BCCB class of 2004.

Introduction

These lines are a compilation of limited impressions and experiences and should be treated only as such. Since they are the collective work of only very few students, no general applicability should be inferred. The first two paragraphs contain information on the application process to graduate schools/programs in the UK and the US, while the last paragraph describes commonly required standardized tests.

Britain/UK

In most cases, graduate programs at British universities are organized/administered a bit differently from the American ones. A perspective student should usually make his/her interest known to a specific group leader and not an admission committee or officer. Writing a letter directly to the group leaders of the groups of your interest will first of all arouse their interest as well and second of all hopefully make your inquiry stand out slightly from the enormous masses of emails professors receive. It is usually advised to keep this first letter rather short, to merely state your purpose and to give as short and comprehensive an overview of yourself, your background and your interest in this particular location as possible. Additional data may be required and you will hear from the respective contact whether he/she is willing to give you a position for graduate study, possibly linked to specific conditions. Official admission to the actual program of interest is then "mediated" by the professor. Generally, the sooner the better applies for this process, since decisions take time and information on graduate positions is usually available rather early, so contacting someone 1.5 years in advance is not necessarily a bad idea.

United States

In the United States, graduate programs usually have a tightly-regulated system of admission that does not involve you contacting potential supervisors in advance, although questions may be asked whether you have done the latter – it really is up to you. However, application and admission are not involving professors directly: most universities have implemented online application systems that require you to fill out an online form and usually instruct you to have transcripts sent by post directly from the university registrar (request these early enough so that they reach within the deadline!). It is said that besides GPA and GRE scores, the Statement of Purpose is one of the major criteria for graduate school admission. You should therefore explicitly state your reasons why exactly you are applying to that particular program – implying of course that you do have those reasons (if not, don't even try) in your statement. Due to the online form, the application process is far more straightforward and homogeneous for United States applications as compared to other systems. Deadlines for international applicants range from the middle of December of the preceding year till the end of January or even later. Make sure that you allow ample time for your professors to write letters of recommendation (not just a week), for you to fill out the application form and to decide about which programs to apply to; looking up some programs' websites during your summer internship might prove essential. Doing the latter will also enable you to make up for certain courses that are required for entry into your graduate program of interest and that you missed earlier during your studies. Extreme examples for Biochemistry Ph.D. programs include

physics, organic-, inorganic-, analytical- and physical chemistry, differential and integral calculus (at least one year each for all of the latter ones) and of course courses in cell and developmental biology, basic biochemistry, molecular biology and genetics (Stanford University).

Standardized tests

The **GRE General Test** (www.gre.org) is required by nearly every university in the United States for entry into a graduate program. There are currently three permanent test centres in Germany (Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich) where the computer-based test can be taken all year long on appointment. Additional dates for paper-based tests should be taken from the GRE Information and Registration Bulletin. The test consists of three sections: Verbal, Quantitative and Analytical Writing. Both Quantitative and Verbal sections are comparable to the corresponding SAT sections regarding question types, however, the Verbal one is based on considerably more difficult vocabulary than its SAT counterpart. Practising for the Quantitative section should be self-understood, while even extensive vocabulary study might not help on the Verbal section if you are having a bad day. Instead, learning certain answering techniques from preparatory materials might prove far more useful (e.g. from Kaplan or ETS itself). The Analytical Writing section is made up of two parts: "Present Your Perspective on an Issue" and "Analyze an Argument". You should be aware that you will have to type your essays in a computer-based test center. More detailed information on question types and sample questions can be found in the Information & Registration Bulletin and on the GRE website. You should take the test no later than October to give yourself enough time with the results (and your professors with the recommendations !) to decide about your applications.

In addition to the GRE General Test, some graduate programs may require that you provide results from the **GRE Subject Test** in Biochemistry, Cell and Molecular Biology. Often, this test is named as a further source of information for reviewing your application, but not explicitly required: thus, it will always be a good sign of your determination if you have these scores to show. This test includes questions from the formerly mentioned topics as well as basic chemistry and developmental biology. Experience shows that actively following General Chemistry, Advanced Biochemistry & Cell Biology and Advanced Cell Biology lectures at IUB will allow for very good scores on the test; Developmental Biology is probably the most prevalent deficit you should try to cover to a basic extent outside of class. Subject Tests are administered exclusively paper-based and only on specific dates. To ensure that you have enough time to base your decision to which programs to apply to also on your GRE scores, you should take the Subject Test no later than October, preferably earlier (test registration in July/August).

UK and US institutions unanimously ask for the **Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)** from non-native English speakers, although other tests may be accepted instead, depending on program and institution. Testing involves listening, writing and reading in permanent computer-based test centers (see GRE above) or – on certain dates – in additional places on a paper-and-pencil basis. Even if you have not taken this test before you start applying to graduate schools, the level of this test and the questions asked should not be an actual challenge for you after three years of IUB.