

PhD guide: Dissecting the application process



A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE
Including my top tips, interview questions and
much more!

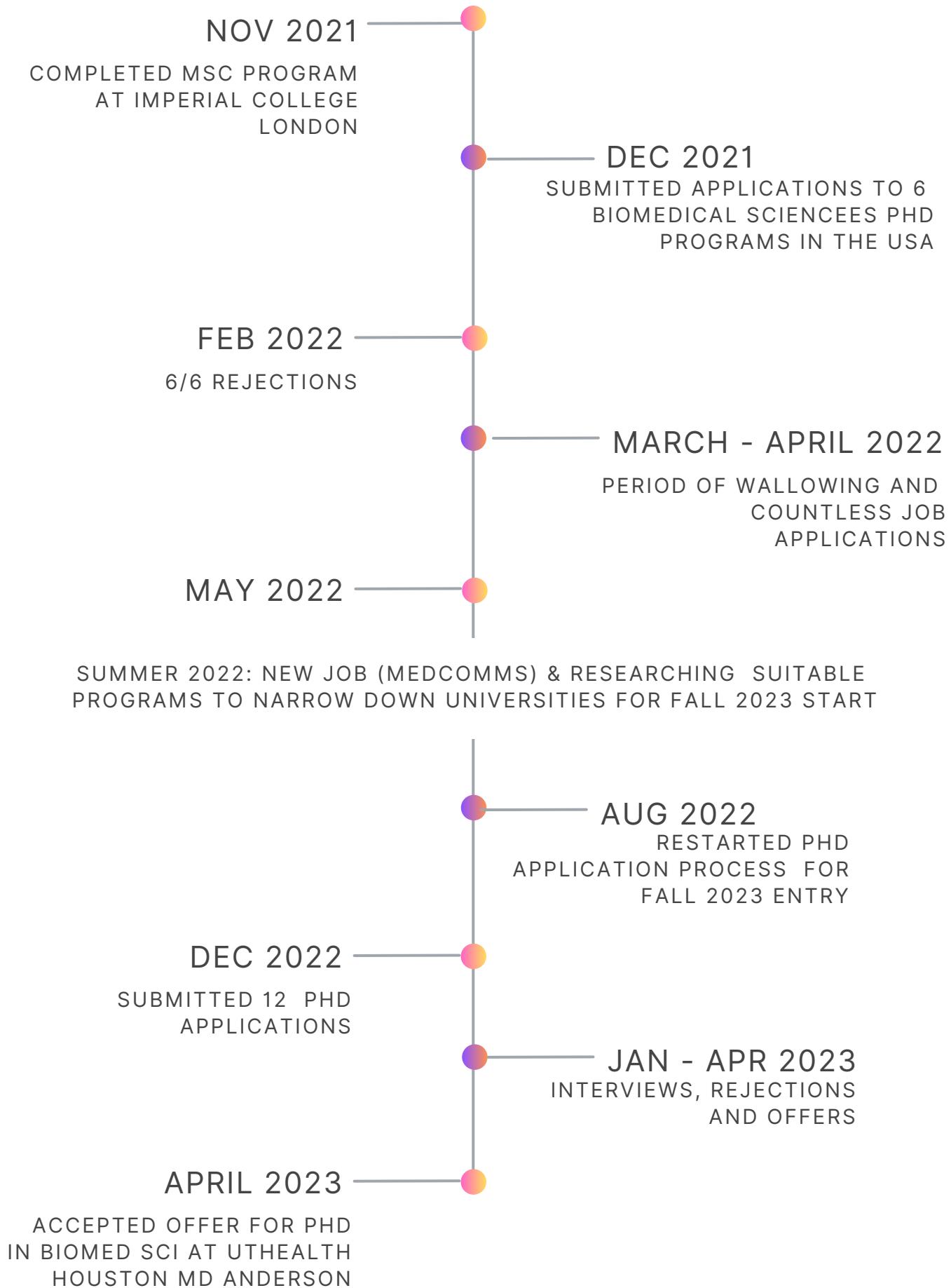
Hello!

HI THERE! I'M MIRRAH.

Welcome! I will begin a PhD in Biomedical Science at UTHealth Houston MD Anderson this fall in 2023. This guide will detail my experience applying to the United States as an international student (UK national). I also applied the year before but was rejected by all programs without an interview. This guide is based on what I have learnt and what is essential to help maximise your chances! I will also elaborate on all my interviews, how I prepared and more!

This guide aims to be as comprehensive, transparent and helpful as possible. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out via the contact tab on my website.

Overall timeline

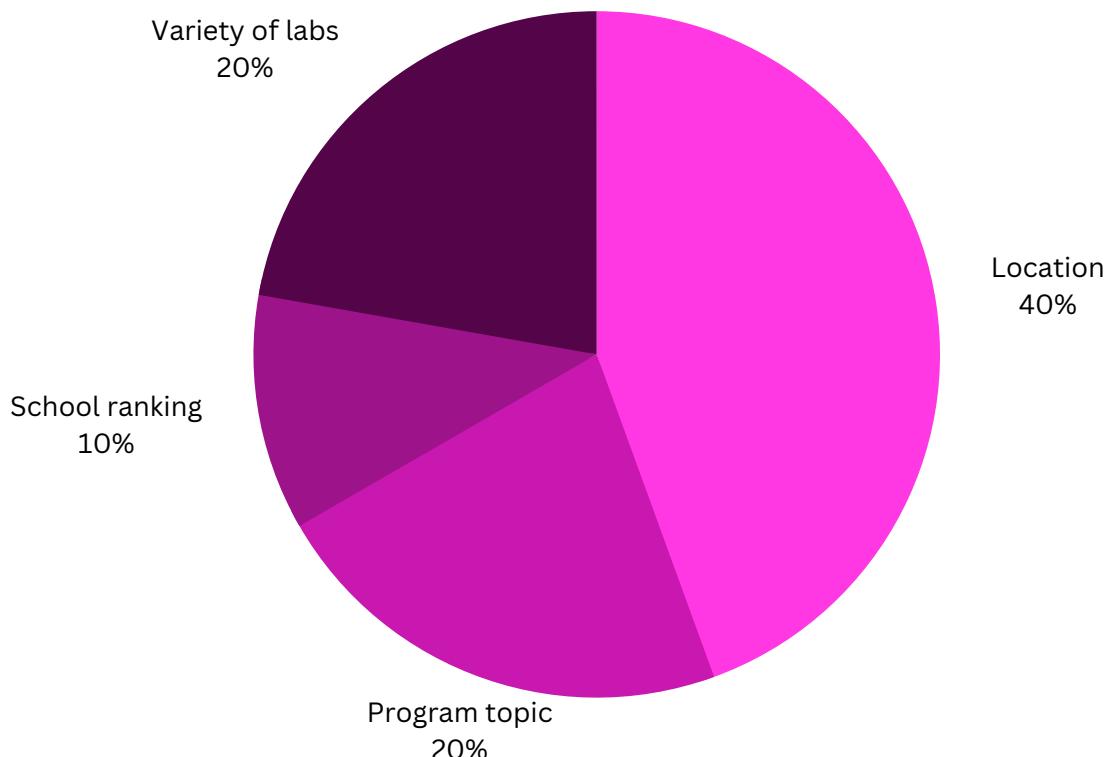


Choosing programs to apply to

1. MAKE A LIST OF FACTORS TO CONSIDER

PhD programs in the US are extensive - wherever you end up is where you will spend a lot of time. So, naturally, I considered many factors when choosing programs to apply to. I began with broader ones such as program topic, geographical location and school ranking. I then moved on to other specifics such as the variety of labs and faculty, family/friends in the city, length of program and program structure (number of classes and rotations etc) and cost of application. Once you have figured out which factors matter to you, I recommend ranking them in order of importance. This provides more clarity and allows you to rank your chosen programs. There is nothing wrong with prioritising personal factors such as location, family and friends or finances over academic ones! As I said, wherever you end up will be a place you stay in for a long time - you need to be comfortable!

The chart below is an example of the weightage I gave to some of the broader factors. This is an estimate and was quite fluid! If you have any questions on why I gave a certain weightage to any element, feel free to reach out, and we can discuss!



Selecting programs

1.1. TALK TO CURRENT STUDENTS

I cannot stress how important this is. I spoke to *at least* one student from each program I considered applying to. Hearing real student experiences is crucial to understanding program culture and environment. It also gives you direct insight into the daily life of a student in the program. To find students in each program I:

- checked the program website for a student directory
- searched LinkedIn and direct messaged
- emailed program administrators to be connected to students (for privacy reasons, they may not share contact details but instead will ask students to email you!).

1.2. REACH OUT TO FACULTY

This was important not only to understand the various labs and research projects at the institution but also to make yourself known to someone at the school. Many admissions pages will tell you that this is not a requirement, and while this is true, it was something I felt was super important in my application process. Most professors will either not reply or tell you to list them to interview with, but someone might just agree to a Zoom call to discuss their work and give tips and advice for the application! Huge bonus!!

If I managed to secure a call with a faculty member, there were a few talking points I would use to guide the call. Remember, you are requesting the call so you must lead it:

- Thank them for making the time
- Briefly mention what you know about their work and ask if they can elaborate more
- What are the current projects going on in the lab (if this is not discussed already)
- What are the typical techniques a new student would learn in your lab?
- How many students does your lab typically take each year from this course?
- How would you describe your mentorship style?
- Do you have any advice for my application to the program?

Be prepared to talk about your background and research interests as well

1.3. ATTEND INFORMATION SESSIONS (IF AVAILABLE)

Most institutions have information sessions that run before the application season. These are either general webinars about the school and why you should attend, or they are specific to the program - both can be super useful! Attending these sessions taught me different things about the school and course, and I used them in my essays as part of the common 'why this school' or 'why this program' question. It also shows the admissions team that you have done your research!

Lastly, details on these sessions were not always easy to find (some I only found out about when contacting faculty to discuss their work) so you may have to do some digging on the website to see if they run them. When in doubt, emailing the institution admin to ask if they host them is always a good idea.

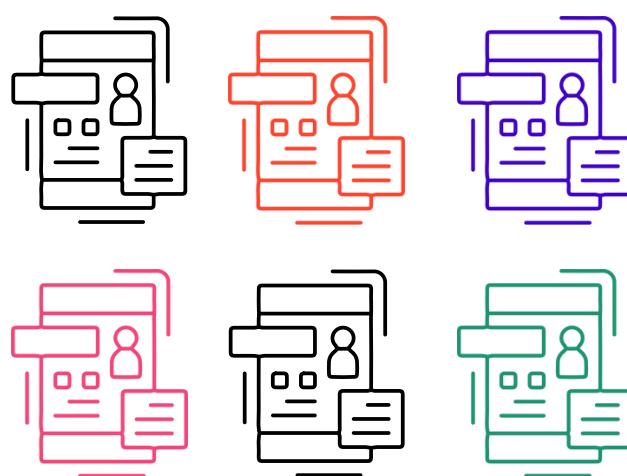
Remember to take notes from all of the above. You will end up talking to many people and attending many sessions, and you will only be able to remember some of them! I sometimes took screenshots of slides I found exciting or helpful during the information sessions.

1.4. KEEP IT DIVERSE

One of the mistakes I made in my first round was choosing only six programs, all of which were very high-ranking schools with low quotas for international students.

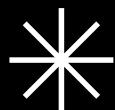
In my second round, I doubled the number of programs I was applying to and added some programs at lower-ranking (but still very good!) schools. Remember, the overall ranking does not necessarily reflect the program's quality. Some mid-tier schools have excellent programs!

Yes, adding more schools usually means more money due to application fees. But many schools do not have application fees, and programs have a fee-waiver program you can check eligibility for.



CHAPTER 2

The online application



This chapter looks into different aspects of the online application and my recommendations on how to approach them.

Get organized

2.1. MAKE A 'PHD CRIB SHEET'

So you've chosen where you want to apply - now what?!

Each school will have a different application format and requirements. It's easy to feel overwhelmed and lose track of things. Staying organized from day one can really help with this. I began by creating a straightforward spreadsheet with the following headings:

Institution name

Program title

Deadline

Application fees

Essays

Reference submissions

Application link

Password

Notes

2.2. SELECT AND CONTACT YOUR REFEREES

Recommendations are a crucial part of your application. It is important to consider who would be a suitable referee for you. It is equally important to contact your chosen referees to ask if they are willing to submit a reference on your behalf and allow them a generous amount of time to do so. Choosing a referee is not as simple as choosing someone who won't write negatively about you.

Your referee should ideally:

- hold a high academic position
- have worked with you directly and can comment on your academic and/or laboratory skills
- be close enough to write a reference unique to you. Some references can be positive but generic - I understand these add less value to your application.
- be able to comment on your potential to complete a PhD successfully

The above can get tricky. In my experience, for research projects during my academic courses, I usually worked more closely with other lab members, such as the post-docs, than the actual lab PI. I learnt from the information sessions that while these are acceptable referees, these letters hold a lot more weight if the lab PI co-signs them. Even if the lab member has a different and higher position now, they weren't the PI when they knew you, so co-signing is quite important!

For reference, here are the referees I chose for my application and why:

- **Undergraduate thesis project supervisor** - we built a strong connection during my time in the lab in 2016-2017, and we have stayed in touch since then. I was confident they would write me a good reference. As mentioned above, this was co-signed by the lab PI.
- **Northwestern lab PI** - I spent two years working closely with them in the lab, and we developed a strong relationship regarding my academic goals. All my publications so far were during my time at their lab. There was no one better to write a reference for me!
- **MSc course director** - I was my MSc's academic course representative and constantly communicated with them; they were also my tutor for my literature dissertation. This way, they were able to comment on my academics and other qualities as a student.
- **MSc thesis project supervisor** - they held a high position in the institution and are well known in their field. I received a good grade on my project and felt they would be able to comment well on my lab skills. Once I contacted them, they were also very open to hearing what I would like them to focus more on, and this allowed the reference to hit all the points admission committees were looking for

Most of my applications required at least three referees. Some allowed adding more (no more than five total), while some did not. As you can see, I had four possible referees, all happy to submit them for me. When I could not submit more than three, I chose the ones I worked more closely with.

Flip to the next page for a template for contacting referees.

2.3. PREPARE FOR ESSAYS

Once you have all the above information in one place, it's easier to see what is common and what is different between each application. You can then group applications by type. This is especially important for the essays. For example, most of my applications required a single essay to include academic and personal experiences while some required a separate personal essay and a separate research statement.

2.2.1. TEMPLATE EMAIL: REQUESTING A REFERENCE

Below is the email I sent to my MSc course director (see above) to request a reference for my PhD applications. My goal was to keep it brief and to the point and only provide further details once they confirmed they were happy to do so.

This is by no means the only way to do so. I am sharing this more to help provide a starting point. Feel free to contact your preferred referees in a way you feel most comfortable with!

Subject line: Request for reference - PhD applications

Dear xxxx,

I hope you are well!

You may remember, I was a student on the MSc Applied Biosciences & Biotechnology course at Imperial College London, batch of 2020-2021.

I am currently applying to US-based PhD programs for a Fall 2023 start. As the course director who worked closely with me in my position as an academic course representative and as my academic tutor for my tutored dissertation, I was wondering if you would be happy to write a reference for my applications.

Once you confirm and are happy to do so, I can elaborate on further details and submit the requests that will be directly sent to you.

I have attached my latest CV for your reference.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Thank you and best wishes,

Mirrah Bashir

background and context - my program was UK based so I was clear that these will be for the US + a hint at why I think they will be a suitable referee

a brief and clear subject line

a reminder of who I am (just in case)

acknowledging that the reference request will be sent directly to them and that I will not see the reference they upload

this helps them see what work I have done since I was a student (as well as any previous achievements!)

ESSAYS

2.4. TYPES OF ESSAYS

As mentioned earlier, there were a few types of essays that I came across in my applications. *Please note this is based on the particular applications I submitted* - there may be different institutions that have types of essays not listed below:

- **A single statement of purpose** - one essay to include both personal and academic experiences that have prepared you for a PhD, your motivations and reasons for applying to the specific school & program. The word count ranged from no word count to a maximum of 2 pages.
- **Personal and research statements** - separate essays with the research statement exploring your most significant research experience (or multiple if you can fit them in!). These were usually limited to 1.5-2 pages. But remember, whether personal or research, the aim is to portray that you are ready for graduate school.
- **Supplemental essays** - extra essays that are optional. for example a diversity statement. If you feel that you have something to share that fits under a diversity statement, I highly recommend writing and submitting one. In my experience, they add a lot of value to the application and allow you to share parts of yourself that are equally important and do not necessarily fall under the above categories.

2.5. OUTLINING

If you struggle with starting essays, try 'word vomit'. This is where you don't focus on the grammar, format or structure and jot down everything you think would be good to include. I usually make a messy list of bullet points. Seeing your ideas on paper helps clarify things in your mind and gets the creative juices flowing, allowing you to think of more.

2.5.1. USE ALL YOUR RESOURCES

Remember those information sessions and student and faculty conversations? Use those! I mentioned in my essays that I have spoken to current students/faculty and how the things they have shared with me have shaped my decision to apply. If you begin the essay before attending or scheduling these, leave room to include it later! Your essay will undergo many rounds of edits over time as you make your way through the application process.

Some of the students I met with virtually were happy to share their essays with me (while some were not), which was a great help as it was an example of a successful essay.

However, remember to use this only as a guide and not plagiarize any ideas or text.

I avoided asking students to review my essays as they are quite busy, and this would be free use of their time, but some offered on their own, so again, it can be very worthwhile reaching out to current students!

Some institutions will give clear, detailed instructions and guidance on what you can mention in the essay, while others will not. This is okay! Most applications are looking for the same thing, so you can use guidance from one school for the other. You can also always talk to current students for advice on what to include.

2.5.2 GET CREATIVE



The overall theme to get across in your essays is 'PhD preparedness and readiness'. In simpler terms: *'How have the different things in your journey prepared you for taking on something as challenging as a PhD?'* While this seems obvious, there are several ways you can address this to help your application stand out.

Of course, you will include your academic history and experiences but don't hold back on the personal! Your personal experiences have shaped you and likely given you a lot of characteristics that are beneficial in pursuing graduate school. For instance, I mentioned several non-academic experiences that have made me more organized, curious, motivated and resilient.

This works both ways - you can also elaborate on how your academic or research experiences aided your personal growth. For example, my two years of work experience at Northwestern was when I built many relationships and matured in various ways in my life, and I made sure to include this. This shows that you can have a holistic student experience.

Additionally, make sure to address any gaps in your academic or professional journey. For example, if you have taken a gap year, make sure to mention this and address what you did with your time during that year and how it has helped you so far.

GIVE YOUR ESSAY SOME PERSONALITY!

You will spend many years at this institution; what will you bring to it? Most of the applicant pool meets the minimum criteria for application, so what makes you different? Don't focus too much on what you *think* the admissions committee *wants* to hear. You never know what part of your application will appeal to a reviewer so try to be open to your personality coming through!

CV

2.6. PREPARING AND EDITING YOUR CV

Your CV is an important and necessary part of your application, and preparing it for a research role is crucial. Below I have included a template based on the CV I submitted. There are other ways to do it - this is just as a reference. Some institutions will have information sessions on how they would like you to format your CV; they are super helpful!

Keep your CV clear and concise in an easy and readable format to a maximum of 2 pages.

MIRRAH BASHIR
PHONE: +XXXXXXX. EMAIL: XXXXXXXX WEB: MIRRBIOTIC.COM [IF APPLICABLE]

EDUCATION

2020-2021	Imperial College London, MSc Applied Biosciences & Biotechnology	First Class (Distinctio
2014-2017	King's College London, BSc Anatomy, Developmental & Human Biology	Upper Second (2:1)

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Postgraduate Research Assistant, Imperial College London [ENTER DESCRIPTION]	JUNE 2021-AUG 2021
Post-Baccalaureate Research Fellow, Northwestern University [ENTER DESCRIPTION]	SEP 2017-SEP 2019
Undergraduate Research Assistant, King's College London [ENTER DESCRIPTION]	SEP 2016-MAY 2017

PUBLICATIONS

- XXX
- XXX
- XXX

Keep educational background on the top so its clear and easy to find. Include your overall grade/GPA

Research and relevant experience should be placed before other types

Here I listed out all scientific publications (papers and poster presentations) in a scientific format

MIRRAH BASHIR

PHONE: +XXXXXXX. EMAIL: XXXXXXXX WEB: MIRRBOTIC.COM [IF APPLICABLE]

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Account Executive, Virgo Health

MAY 2022-PRESENT

[ENTER DESCRIPTION]

Founder, Mirrbotic

JUNE 2020-PRESENT

[ENTER DESCRIPTION]

Academic Consultant, Graviton Consultancy

JUNE 2020-PRESENT

[ENTER DESCRIPTION]

Community Manager, OLLMOO

MAY 2022-DEC 2022

[ENTER DESCRIPTION]

DISSEMINATION

- XXX
- XXX
- XXXXX

SKILLS & EXPERTISE

VOLUNTEER WORK

ONLINE COURSES

Then you can include other professional experiences. In the description I would try to use 'buzz words' applicable to a research role



This is an optional section that I included for work related to my science communication blog. You can use this space to include similar work, any other bits you want to highlight or use it to expand the section below



As mentioned above, your non-academic or non-research professional experiences can add value to your application by highlighting transferrable skills that can be important for successfully completing a PhD. In a couple of the interviews, I was asked some questions about my non-research experiences and what I learned.

It's your CV - no one knows it better than you, so you should be able to discuss anything in detail! This means no lying!

TRANSCRIPT EVALUATION

2.7. BACKGROUND

If you are an international student with no US schooling, like me, you must have your transcripts evaluated for your applications.

A transcript evaluation interprets the educational transcripts earned in one country in terms of another country's educational system. In my case, my transcripts followed the UK system and these needed to be evaluated on the GPA scale used in the US.

2.7.1 PROVIDERS AND FEES

I used [WES - World Education Services](#), which I recommend as it seems widely accepted and quick and easy to use.

Some programs stated which provider to use, while some had no preference. Additionally, some had an evaluation platform within the application portal that was free of cost.

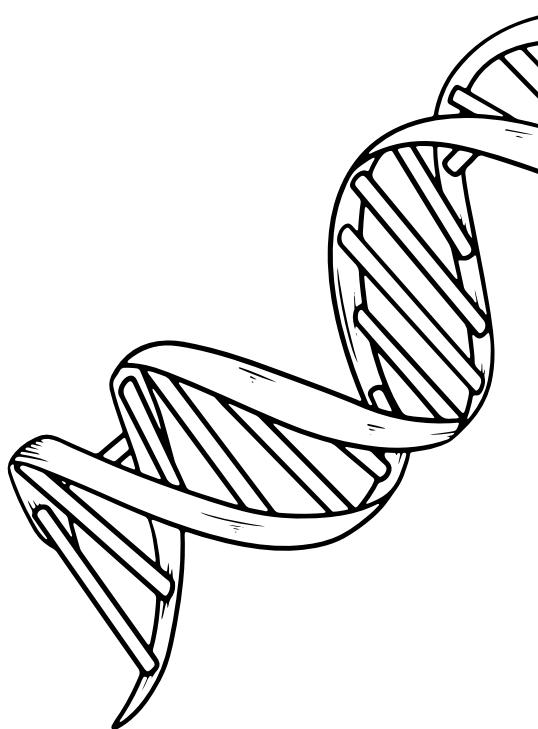
Given that these reports tend to be expensive, upwards of \$100 (I believe I paid around \$300 for my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees to be evaluated), please thoroughly check the evaluation requirements for each program and account for this in your costs.

Lastly, WES has an online GPA calculator where you can input your credential information and see an approximate evaluation. This way, there is little room for surprises!



Individualize!

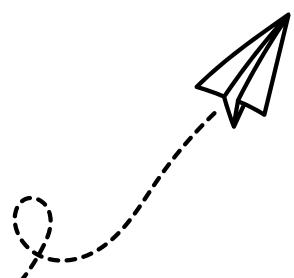
I found that the general requirements for the essays were the same, but there will be some differences, and you have to ensure that each requirement has been met. This makes using the same essays for all your applications a bit tricky. I advise allocating a good amount of time to appropriately edit your essay(s) for each application, cross-checking against the specific guidance provided.



Check, check and check again

Editing and reformatting essays for each application takes a lot of work - especially if you're trying to reduce the word count. I would constantly keep checking my essays and everything else in my application to ensure everything was clear and accurate!

Stressing this just because I found many typos in some of my submitted essays - and it was too late by then!



Submission and beyond..

Once you have submitted your applications, the first thing to do is, relax and take a BREAK! The application period is tiring, and it is vital to take some time to recuperate.

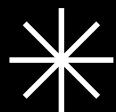
Interviews usually begin as early as January and can extend into April.

The next section of this guide will be on my specific journey, the schools I applied to, when I heard back, interview questions for each and much more!

If you have questions or want to know more about any specific programs I applied to, please email me!

CHAPTER 3

My pathway to a PhD



The programs I applied to, important dates,
interview questions and more!

The aims of this chapter

This chapter will specifically explore my experience in applying for PhDs in the US, including the specific programs I applied to, when I heard back, which programs I interviewed with and much more. While doing so, I will also share my thoughts on what went wrong and what I feel went well.

While this will be specific to the institutions and programs I applied to, it can be helpful in generally preparing for PhD interviews!

As a reminder, if you have any other questions not answered by this guide, please feel free to email me!

3.1. MY APPLICATIONS

In the following two pages, I have summarised the schools and programs I applied to with details on when I heard back and the interview sessions (if I was invited). I have also included the outcomes of each.

The purpose of including the outcome is to show how varied the process is for each university. Some schools did not invite me to interview while higher-ranking schools did. Some of my interviews went well, but I was still not admitted while I was admitted to those I felt did not go as well.

In the final chapter, I share more thoughts on the process and how to battle the negative feelings after receiving a rejection.

School name	Program (PhD)	Date applied	Response	Interview process	Admission
University of Texas - Austin	Translational Science	1st November	7th February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> virtual panel interview (4 faculty members) to be held in March 	I withdrew from interview*
Boston University	Biomedical Sciences	1st December	22nd December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> virtual x3 separate 30 min interviews early February information sessions in between 	Waitlisted - February 23rd
University of Chicago	Biochemical & Molecular Nutrition	1st December	5th January	N/A	Not admitted
University of Illinois Chicago	Graduate Education in Biomedical Science (GEMS)	1st December	20th December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> virtual scheduled for mid April x4 separate 30 min interviews 	I withdrew from interview*
Icahn School of Medicine	Biomedical Sciences	1st December	20th December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in person 2 day session in early February with 3 faculty interviews housing provided and ticket compensation of \$500 	Not admitted - February 17th
Columbia	Nutritional & Metabolic Biology	1st December	23rd December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> virtual 2 rounds starting in January panel interview with 3 faculty members 	Not admitted after first round - 23rd January

*by this time I had decided to go elsewhere and withdrew to release my spot for any waitlisted students

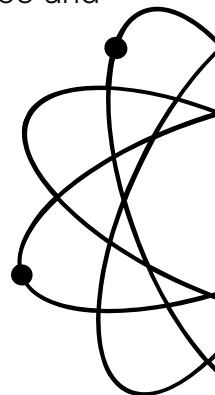
School name	Program (PhD)	Date applied	Response	Interview details	Admission
University of Michigan	Biomedical Sciences	1st December	19th December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> virtual panel interview with 4 faculty members 	Not admitted - February 10th
Rush University (Chicago)	Integrated Biomedical Sciences	22nd January	February 10th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in person but virtual options, held in March 3 separate faculty interviews information sessions in between 	Admitted - 13th March
Tufts University	Biochemical and Molecular Nutrition	1st December	January 11th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> virtual, held in January 2 separate faculty interviews on different date 	Not admitted - Mid march
Northwestern	Biomedical Sciences	1st December	5th March	N/A	Not admitted
NYU	Neural Science	1st December	14th March	N/A	Not admitted
UTHealth Houston MDAnderson	Biomedical Sciences	1st December	21st December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in person with virtual options, held mid-end March x4 separate faculty interviews with sessions in between 	Admitted - 30th March

COLUMBIA

Naturally, I was super excited to have been invited to interview here, but they sent me the invitation on 23rd December for the first rounds held on 9th January. I felt this was inadequate time to prepare for an interview and thought it was a bit unfair (especially because the Christmas holidays were in between!).

Additionally, as it was my first interview, I was very nervous. It was a 20-minute (very short!!) interview with three faculty members. I found them to be quite cold, bordering on rude and found the whole process quite rushed. I was not happy with the experience and was not surprised (and quite pleased) when I did not make it to the second round.

- Tell us a little about yourself
- Expand on your research project
- What did Columbia's program 'not' have?
- Why this program? (then offshoot questions about what mentorship means etc)



TUFTS

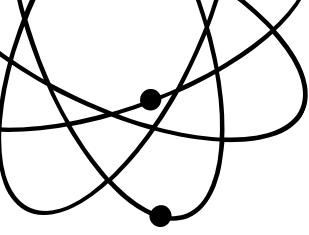
For Tufts, I had two individual one-on-one faculty interviews on separate days (but all interviews had to be held before or on January 26th). The admin sent me an email, after which I had to reach out to the given faculty member to schedule the interview. My interviews were amazing and smooth, and I had a lovely time during each. They went very well, and I was confident and clear. However, they told me the outcome much later, by the end of March (a lot of ignored emails and no strict date given), to find out I had not been admitted. I was very bummed out about this one! I emailed my interviewers, who reassured me that they gave a high recommendation, so my assumption is it was more of an administrative issue that I did not get in, but who knows!

- Background
- Future plans (looking to stay in academia vs industry?)
- Describe a time where you had to deal with not receiving support and how you handled it
- What are you looking for in a mentor?

UMICH

My first interview invitation! This was one interview session attended by four faculty members, but only two asked me the questions. A very relaxed and friendly interview where I felt comfortable. I felt positive about this one, but the specific track I applied to only accepted one international student each year, so I knew my chances were slim.

- Tell us a bit about yourself.
- Expand more on your research projects (followed up by specific questions about the project, such as the mouse model used etc)
- Why Michigan?
- Why this program/ research interests



ICAHN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

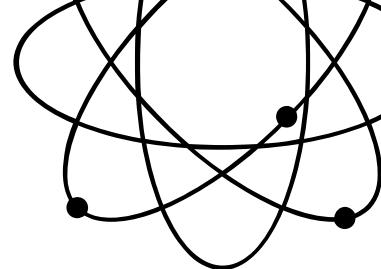
This was the only interview that required in-person attendance. As mentioned in the previous tables, they provided accommodation (a shared hotel room) and compensated up to \$500 for air travel for international students. It was a 2-day session. Day 1 included a welcome and three separate faculty interviews. Day 2 was full of information sessions and meetings with students and faculty. Overall, I found it extremely long and tiring. There were also 150 students being interviewed; this was only half as they had another batch later in the week. I knew my chances were slim from a pool of 300(!) interviewees, and I generally felt the interviewers could have been friendlier (except one!) and ask more relevant questions.

- Why this specific track?
- Why Icahn?
- How do you manage all your different responsibilities?
- Why the USA?

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

There was a little hiccup during this one as my first interviewer could not join due to Wi-Fi issues, and this threw me off a little bit, but overall the day was quick and informative. They were very clear with the number of applicants and when we can expect to hear back. I had three individual faculty interviews, and they were all extremely nice. I was thrown off by one where I was asked a lot of technical details about ALL (yes, all) my research projects (I have three so far). In addition, this interview session was only two days after the Icahn one, and I was exhausted, so being waitlisted here was on me! I could have been better prepared and performed better to increase my chances.

- Give us some background about yourself
- Research interests, future plans
- A lot of detail about research projects? (why did you do this step, what would you do next to continue the project? etc.)
- Why Boston?



RUSH UNIVERSITY

One of my most pleasant interview experiences. Instructions and set-up were very clear, and I was interviewed by faculty members that ranged from the program head, physicians and PIs, and everyone was lovely and encouraging. I was lucky enough to have been offered an admission. However, there were a few things to consider:

- The college does not have funding for international student stipends. They can cover tuition fees, but for your stipend, you will need to secure a professor willing to pay your stipend through their grant. While this is extra work, the college admin were super helpful and certain it would not be an issue
- The program cohort is small, with about 10-12 students

With that being said, Rush is an excellent university with a great medical school that the PhD program is closely associated with, providing students with several opportunities to work in clinical settings. I was delighted with the idea of going here!

- Background
- Research interests
- Why Rush?

UTHEALTH HOUSTON MD ANDERSON

Last but not least, the offer that I accepted! The interview day was long, and frankly, I was drained by the end of it - all for good reasons, though! I had four individual faculty interviews, multiple information sessions, and time to speak with students and faculty from all the different tracks under the umbrella program. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was amiable, helpful, and honestly did a great job convincing you why you should join the program! Students were also very candid about their experiences and shared great advice. With all the stats, achievements of the school and emphasis on student support, it wasn't hard to say yes!

- Background
- Research interests
- Why Houston?
- Future plans

Given that I was successful in securing an offer from both these schools, I am happy to discuss my applications specific to these schools with anyone interested.

Interview preparation

- You should be able to discuss anything and everything from your essay and application.
- Revise the work from your research experiences (both current and previous). Prepare an answer briefly summarizing the project and a detailed one, including techniques used and results obtained.
- Don't forget to brush up on the technical details of your projects (animal models, data analysis and future directions)
- Please read up on each faculty member that will be part of your interview, including recent or current projects ongoing in their lab. Prepare at least one or two questions to ask about them.
- Have answers prepared for why you want to attend the specific school and program you are interviewing for. This could be a mix of academic and personal reasons but ensure that your answer is unique so they know you have done your research!
- You do not need to have a detailed or definitive answer prepared for your future/post-PhD plans but be prepared to talk about your career interests and how a PhD will help you achieve those.
- Additionally, ensure you are clear about what you hope to gain from a PhD. This can include specific lab skills but also other transferrable skills. You want to portray that you are prepared for a holistic student experience.

Additional questions you can prepare for:

- Tell us about a time you faced difficulty in your research and how you dealt with it.
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? (This is similar to the future plans question)
- Tell us about a time you displayed leadership qualities.
- What would be the next steps if you were still working on your previous research project?

Interview preparation

Interviews can be nerve-wracking but you'll be surprised as to how relaxed and friendly some faculty members can be. Be confident (even if you fake it!) and be yourself. As mentioned before, it's great to let your personality come through!

Lastly, always remember that interviews are bi-directional. This is also an opportunity to learn more about the school and program and decide if it is a good fit for YOU.

Some questions you can ask during the interview:

- How many applicants (especially international) are admitted each year?
- Why would you recommend this program to a prospective student / what do you think is the best part about the program?
- What would you say is different about this school/program vs any others?
- What resources for support are available to students if they encounter any difficulties during the program?

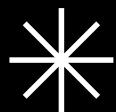
(Some of these may be covered in any welcome sessions on the interview day, so pay attention!)

If you are interviewing one-on-one with a faculty member you are interested in working with, you can ask similar questions to what you may have asked faculty before applying:

- Please elaborate on your current research projects. (Don't shy away from asking any follow-up questions based on their answer)
- What are the main techniques used in your lab?
- How many students do you take each year from the program?
- How would you describe your lab environment and mentorship style?
- What are you looking for in a student joining your lab?

CHAPTER 4

Take-aways



Lessons, dealing with rejections and tips on staying calm during the whole process.

Give yourself time

As you can see from this guide, much preparation and work goes into applying for PhDs. To say the experience was tiring would be an understatement. Like me, most of you will work, study, or both while applying. Therefore it is crucial to allow a significant amount of time to prepare and ensure your application is in good shape.

This was the biggest difference between my applications this year vs last year. While on paper, I met all the requirements of the application, last year, I spent very little time and effort on them. In hindsight, I can see where I went wrong.

Find time to destress



Another reason it is important to give yourself time during the application process is that this gives you time to take breaks and relax where needed.

PhD applications require your mental, physical and even emotional energy. Rest is important to recharge your batteries and be more productive during the time you allocate for applications.

Nothing is worth damaging mental health, so please always prioritize that.

Dealing with rejections

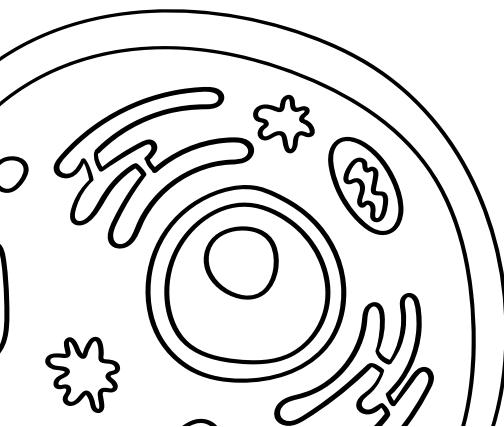
The first step in dealing with rejections is understanding that it is often NOT ABOUT YOU, and rejections do NOT reflect your potential for success.

PhD programs in the USA are highly competitive. The applicant pool is too large vs the number of available spots.

Several factors outside of your academic and professional background are considered at the time of application, such as departmental plans, policies and system requirements.

Programs usually have limited spots for international students as funding for us is more complicated and often limited. This includes funding for visas all the way to your stipend during the program. Being an international student with no schooling in the USA (like me) makes the competition even tougher!

For example, I spent two years working at Northwestern, presenting a poster at a conference and publishing two co-author papers. Yet, I was not even interviewed for the program, even the second time. This was despite revamping my application and having a student contact mentoring me throughout. It stung, but given that I was offered interviews from schools and programs that were just as prestigious, I realized it was not about me.





Good luck!

For further questions about my application journey or content from this guide, please send me an email at mirrbiotic@gmail.com.