

## Foreign Education – Graduate (MS / PhD) Admissions in US

### 1. Why do I need to study in US?

US universities are by far the best in terms of infrastructure facilities and education quality. While there are more than 1500 institutions of higher learning, I would not attribute that statement to all the colleges and universities. There are below average universities / colleges even here. US News publishes university rankings every year. I would say top 200 institutions in that list are better in terms of facilities and education. Again don't go by this ranking completely. US News takes in to account lot of things which are not even necessary. So you have to consider individual program rankings. For example, Harvard / Wharton / Stanford / Kellogg are best for MBA or Economics programs, while University of Arizona is best for Optical Science & Engineering, Astronomy, and MIS. The reasons to study in US are plenty. I will list some of them below.

- Very good infrastructure
- Unmatched research facilities
- Freedom to select courses within a program
- Quality teachers (Some would be pretty bad even here). You would have the chance to interact with Nobel laureates and world renowned professors.
- Value based education (Meaning you would know what you are studying practically. Students just don't memorize and write exams to get marks here)
- Brand US (US degree is deservedly valued higher around the world)
- True cosmopolitan country. In some ways you enjoy more freedom in US than in your own country. You just have to use it positively.
- One of the very few countries where you can still live like an Indian (Meaning you can get all Indian food items, meet lot of Indian friends, can go to temple etc.)
- Chance to work in US after study and settle permanently in US. No other country on earth gives you as much opportunity as US. You can work here and go back to India or you can get Green Card or you can get citizenship. You can do lot of things. There will be small hurdles along the way, but those are nothing compared to hurdles you would face in any other country.
- Some might refer to bad incidents here and there. But they are very few exceptions.

### **Overall Graduate School ranking – Includes Private and Public Institutions**

Graduate school ranking is different from Undergraduate ranking or overall ranking. Below link gives the Graduate school rankings by subject.

<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>

## 2. What are the requirements for US Graduate (Master's / PhD) Admissions?

Graduate program refers to both Master's and PhD degrees in US and the college offering these programs is usually referred as "Graduate School". The good thing in the US graduate school admission process is that they don't go by just one criterion to select students. Each university has got its own set of requirements in terms of admission. While most of the universities require GRE and TOEFL score as part of their admission process, some universities require just TOEFL. But if you want to secure financial aid through teaching or research assistantships, it is better to have a good score both in GRE and TOEFL. Almost all the universities require GMAT and TOEFL for MBA Admissions. Some of the common requirements are listed below. But for specific university and programs, please check the university website.

- 4 Year undergraduate degree is essential to start a graduate program in US. If you have done a 3 year undergraduate program in India, then you must have masters to apply for US graduate programs (US Universities require 16 Years of formal education before starting Graduate Programs). Most of the universities require 3.0 GPA on a 4.0 point scale while some top universities require 3.3 – 3.5 on a 4.0 point scale. There is no clear requirement if you have GPA on a 10 point scale. I would say anything above 7.0 - 7.5 GPA / 10.0 should be fine for most universities.
- Some universities don't offer Master's program at all. They admit students directly for PhD program. While doing the PhD program, you can opt to get a Master's degree. Example: University of California, Berkeley. So search the university graduate admission website for more details depending on your requirements.
- Completed Application
- Application Fee (Ranges from \$30 - \$200)
- Official Academic Transcripts (Overall degree Mark sheet sent directly from your college to the university with official college stamp. If you are not able to get that, you can get attestation from USIEF and send it.) USIEF stands for United States – India Education Foundation. They are located in all the metros in India.
- Three solid recommendations from your professors (professor evaluation of how good a student you are, your strengths and how US education will help you to become successful etc.)
- Statement of purpose (You have to personally write why you want to study in US, your interests and how studying in a particular program in the university you are applying for, will help you and what you want to become in life etc.)
- Resume indicating your extra-curricular activities and other achievements
- GRE test scores sent directly to the university (GRE test format was changed last year to test the students ability to complete the graduate program in a better way. Previously GRE Test contained Verbal Section for 800 points maximum, Quantitative section for 800 points maximum and analytical writing section measured in a 6 point scale. The new

format essentially contains the same sections but scored differently. Verbal – 130 to 170 Quantitative sections – 130 to 170 Analytical Writing – 6. GRE score requirement depends on the university and program. Some top universities might require combined score of 310 and above and some would be fine with 280 and above. Analytical writing score- 4.0 and above).

- GRE Subject Test Score (Some universities require this for specific programs)
- TOEFL scores sent directly to the University (Internet based TOEFL test scores vary according to the university. 80 is the minimum for most of the universities. But having a score of 90 and above would help you to get financial aid)
- Bank letter showing enough funds for the university you are applying (If you secure financial aid, you don't need to submit this)

### **3. How do I submit my application and supporting documents?**

There are two methods widely used by the universities.

- Universities like “University of California – Berkeley” require finishing everything online. In such cases, you can upload copies of all your documents online and submit the application by paying application fee. You can send your GRE and TOEFL test scores directly to the department you are applying to.
- Some other universities require finishing the application online and send supporting materials like recommendation letters, statement of purpose, your transcripts etc. through post / FedEx. GRE / TOEFL scores have to be sent directly to the department.

Look for this information in the specific university website.

### **4. What criteria universities follow in the admission process to select students?**

US universities don't follow any set criteria. They differ on individual basis. In essence they try to attract culturally / ethnically diverse talents. They evaluate each student based on the academic performance, GRE scores, GRE Subject Test Scores, TOEFL scores, recommendation from professors, Statement of purpose and your extra-curricular activities. Then they assess the individual student's overall fit to the program among the student pool and award the admission. What this means is, securing 9 GPA out of 10 in in your UG Degree definitely helps in the process, it does not necessarily get you the admission in good universities in US if you don't fit in to the program based on this overall assessment. You might have 8 GPA in your UG Degree but still can get admission in good universities if your GRE and TOEFL score is high and your other materials (Statement of purpose, recommendation and extra-curricular activities) are strong. So there are lots of things involved here and all you have to do is TRY and leave everything else to almighty.

## 5. What is GRE and how much score would ensure an admission?

The GRE tests the skills you require to complete the graduate program: Verbal ability, Quantitative ability and analytical writing. Your strength in these areas is important for success in graduate program. Verbal and Quantitative section are for maximum of 170 points and analytical writing is scored on a 6 point scale.

**Verbal Reasoning:** This section is for 60 minutes (Two 20 question sections – 30 Minutes for each section). This test measures your ability to analyze and evaluate written material and synthesize information obtained from it, analyze relationships among component parts of sentences and recognize relationships among words and concepts. Higher the score better the chance to get admission in top universities with financial aid. Score of 160 and above will get you admission and financial aid in top universities. Score of 153 and above will definitely help you to get into at least in one university.

**Math:** 70 minute section (Two 20 question sections – 35 Minutes for each section). This section measures problem-solving ability, focusing on basic concepts of arithmetic, algebra, geometry and data analysis. Higher the score better the chance to get admission in top universities with financial aid. Score of 160 and above will get you admission and financial aid in top universities. Score of 155 and above will definitely help you to get into at least in one university.

- **Analytical Writing:** 30 minute section. This section measures critical thinking and analytical writing skills, specifically your ability to articulate and support complex ideas clearly and effectively. This is scored in a 6 point scale and most of the universities require a score of 4 and above. Higher the score better the chance to get financial aid.

**Overall:** Combined score of 310 and above in Verbal and quantitative section and a score of 4.5 and above in analytical writing is great and will help you to secure admission in some of the top universities with financial aid. A score of 300 and above will help you to get admission in good universities with some form of financial aid. Students with less than 300 GRE score will get admission in good universities without any financial aid or reasonably good universities with financial aid. Several permutation and combinations will work here. So just don't get bogged down on only GRE score.

For more detailed information about GRE tests, please explore the below links. You will get to know all the information you need (Including how GRE is scored) about GRE tests in the below links. This test is conducted by Educational Testing Service (ETS).

<https://www.ets.org/gre>

[https://www.ets.org/gre/revise\\_general/faq/](https://www.ets.org/gre/revise_general/faq/)

## 6. Where can I get the GRE preparation materials?

This is a big industry here in US. There are lots of guides and online courses available to you to get yourself familiarize before you take the test. Barron's GRE Guide and KAPLAN GRE Premier guide are some of the useful ones. You can buy Barron's / KAPLAN GRE guides from Amazon.com. There are lots of sites asking for \$300, \$1000 etc. You don't need that. Few good guides and online practice tests are enough. Don't spend more than \$200 (Rs. 10,000) for guides and tests. You can get Barron's GRE test preparation for less than \$100.

<http://barronstestprep.com/gre/>

But whatever guides you use, do make sure you get the official test preparation guide from the Educational Testing Service (which is the closest thing you would get) and practice it. You can buy the official GRE preparation guide / GRE Online practice tests (Some are free) from the following link. Also practice all the tests available in the below website.

[https://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/prepare?WT.ac=grehome\\_testprep\\_a\\_121008](https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare?WT.ac=grehome_testprep_a_121008)

## 7. How much preparation is needed and how to register for GRE exam?

Depending on your current skills in English language and basic math, test preparation time varies. If you are a brilliant student who had a good schooling, you probably would be very good in English and Math. So you would probably need just 2 months of preparation. If your medium of instruction until college is not English, then you have to catch up a lot in English and that would require few months of preparation. If you are not a good student in Math, you have to practice a lot in Math section. **For an above average student who is reasonably good in English and Math, 4 months of preparation is enough to get a good score.** Remember that these skills are something you have been acquiring since your childhood. If you never had an interest in Math and English, it would probably a daunting task to acquire it in few months' time. Such students don't need to try GRE just because you are interested to come to US. Follow your passions in India itself and you will be far more successful.

You can register for the test using the following link. The fee to register for this test is \$175 (Rs.9, 100). You can choose the date you like from the available dates as GRE is offered year round internationally. But it is better to take this exam 1 or 2 years prior to start applying so that if your score is low first time, you will still have time to take this exam second time to improve it.

[https://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/register/](https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/register/)

**8. What is TOEFL, why it is needed, where I can get the preparation materials and how do I register?**

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is required for all the students who are non-native speakers of English language as English is the medium of instruction in all the US universities. TOEFL tests your ability to read, listen, write and speak in English and the maximum score is 120. Most of the US universities require a minimum of 80 but higher the score better the chance to get admission and some financial aid. You can get all the details about TOEFL in the below link.

<http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/faq/>

You can get official test preparation materials from ETS from the following link.

<http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/>

Barron's TOEFL guide can be purchased online from Amazon.com or at the following link.

<http://barronseduc.com/1438093055.html>

You can register for TOEFL by paying \$165 at the following link or at the TOEFL test center if it is available nearby.

<http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/register/>

Depending on your ability in English language, TOEFL preparation might take anywhere from 2 weeks to 2 months.

**9. When do I need to start the process?**

If you are serious about studying in US, then you have to start the process 1 ½ years before the intended enrollment semester. Fall semester (Beginning in August) admission is the most common one even though you can enter in spring or summer too. So let me give you a sample plan for someone interested to join in 2014 fall semester.

- Start preparing for the GRE/ TOEFL exams in Jan 2013.
- Start searching for programs you like and the universities.
- Finalize Universities and programs.
- GRE test is offered year round. So take GRE in June 2013 and make sure ETS sends the GRE scores directly to the institutions / department you are applying to.

- Take TOEFL before June 2013 or in Aug 2013 and make sure ETS sends the score directly to the university / department you intend to enroll.
- Finalize the recommendation letters, your statement of purpose (SOP) and resume.
- Get copy of your college transcript (mark sheet) attested and sent directly from the college or you can get it attested by USIEF in Chennai and you can sent it directly to the school along with recommendations and SOP.
- Apply online by paying the application fee. If you are unable to pay some universities offer fee waiver too. You can use credit card.
- Try to apply as early as October 2013. If you are a brilliant student and you need financial aid, then applying early helps.
- Make sure all your materials and application is in by October 2013 – November 2013.
- Look for the financial aid section in the application and make sure to check the check box requesting financial aid.
- For specific university deadlines, go to the university website and search the application deadline for the intended program. It widely varies by university.
- Usually university makes early application decisions by January of every year. So you will get the decision by Jan 2014.
- To be considered for financial aid, you have to apply early. Financial Aid deadline is different from application deadline.
- Most of the universities make all decisions by May for the fall semester.
- So you will get the decision by May 2014. Once you get admitted, university will send you" I 20" forms which is needed to get visa.
- Fix the visa date with the US consulate in June 2014. For Tamil Nadu students it is Chennai.
- Take "I 20" forms and supporting documents to the US consulate for the visa interview.
- If you get the visa, you are all set to join the university in August 2014.

You can also explore below link to get more information.

<http://www.usief.org.in/Study-in-the-US/Graduate-Study.aspx>

#### **10. I feel my GRE / TOEFL score is low. What to do?**

If your GRE and TOEFL scores are high (GRE – Above 310 and TOEFL – Above 90), you can apply to top universities like University of California- Berkeley or University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. If your score is low, apply for the universities which are ranked less. Based on your score and academic credentials, you have to choose the university where you have the maximum chance of getting admission with financial aid. If you are not sure, you can contact the graduate chair

(Usually a professor in the concerned department) or graduate admissions coordinator to check if you have a chance to get admission with financial aid for your credentials. Some respond and some don't. Don't lose your heart if you don't receive any reply. Look for other universities. There are enough in US. Lower ranked university does not necessarily mean lower quality education. Most of the top 200 institutions offer almost similar programs.

See the link below for the program wise rankings.

<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>

### **11. How much it costs to study in US? (1 dollar = Rs. 52)**

It varies widely from \$ 15,000 to \$40,000 in tuition cost alone per year depending on the university and the geography. Harvard costs you close to \$40,000 per year while University of California - Berkeley cost you around \$29,000 per year for a professional degree. Please see below couple of links showing tuition costs.

Tuition cost for University of California – Berkeley

<http://registrar.berkeley.edu/Default.aspx?PageID=feesched.html>

Tuition cost for University of Michigan – Ann Arbor

<http://www.ro.umich.edu/tuition/tuition-fees.php>

So depending on your financial status, you do have options. Check the university websites for detailed tuition costs and living expenses. The total per year cost for the Graduate degree including living expenses vary from \$ 30,000 to \$ 65,000. But Graduate programs offer better opportunities for financial aid and if you are an above average student and manage to get an admission, you will definitely get some financial aid.

### **12. Is financial aid available for International Students?**

Yes. Graduate programs offer better financial aid opportunities than Undergraduate programs by way of teaching and research assistantships. If you are offered teaching / research assistantships, most probably they will waive the tuition fee as well and essentially you can study for free (You can even save some money). Mostly graduate admissions committee decides financial aid on merit basis. But for some programs like Biological science (Plan Breeding, Plan Pathology, Biology etc.), you have to contact individual professors with grants. If that particular professor is impressed with your qualifications, then he will ask you to apply for the program and will provide the financial aid to complete the program. If you have good

academic record, good GRE and TOEFL score, most probably you will get financial aid. You don't have to apply for aid separately. There will be a section in the application asking you if you need financial aid or if you are interested in Teaching / Research assistantships. You just need to say 'YES' and you will automatically be considered for financial aid. In fact if you get admission in the universities like 'university of California – Berkeley', you will not be denied the chance because of funds. They will find a way to support your study. Please see the below links showing assistantship opportunities (Just an example).

<http://ag.arizona.edu/arec/grad/funding.html>

<http://www.eecs.umich.edu/eecs/graduate/EECSFinAid/ECEFinAid.html>

<http://sociology.usf.edu/grad/ma/assistantships/>

<http://www.econ.iastate.edu/graduate-programs/prospective-students/financial-assistance>

<http://www.princeton.edu/gradschool/financial/assistantships/>

**13. If I get partial aid or tuition waiver, what other options are available to meet the living expenses and other costs?**

If you get partial aid or tuition waiver, that itself is good news. If they waive the tuition fee, then you just need to take care of living expenses. International students are allowed to work on campus for 20 hours per week. Usually you get paid @7 - 8 dollars per hour in such jobs. So you can make around \$600 per month which is enough to meet your living expenses here (If you share the room with other students). Remember, your goal is to study well and complete the degree. So you have to manage with whatever money you have for couple of years.

**14. I am not able to secure financial aid. Is it worth spending my own money to complete a Master's degree?**

Yes. It is. Once you complete the degree, you are eligible to work in US. If you get into a decent job, you can pay all your loans (if you have taken loans) within couple of years and then you are a free bird to do whatever you want. You can work for few more years and go back to India or you can get a green card / citizenship or you can go back to India and get a good job there with US degree or you can work in other countries too.

**15. What are the ways to minimize the expenses in the whole process?**

- Get the guides and books in India. GRE / TOEFL books are available in Chennai / Delhi / Hyderabad / Mumbai / Bangalore etc.
- You can also go to USIEF library to access preparation materials.

- Apply to public universities. Public universities are as good as private universities in US. Some are even better than private universities. Public universities offer the same programs with less tuition.
- Apply to universities in geographies where cost of living is less. For example Florida, Texas, Arizona, Kansas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Iowa, New Mexico etc.
- If you think you have a good chance to get financial aid, then you can apply to any university.

## **16. Where I can get more information?**

INTERNET. If you have decided to come to US for studying, then you should be ready to spend significant amount of time in the internet. Go to each and every university (You can get the university list from the link I have given in the first page of this document) website and look for the following links. Most of the university websites contain these links and you can get all the information you need from the official university website.

- Prospective Students
- Graduate Programs / Graduate School
- International Students
- Graduate Admission Process
- How to Apply
- Program Requirements
- Application Process
- Application Deadlines
- Tuition / Cost
- Financial Aid
- Assistantships

Most of the universities will have “frequently asked questions” section. Below link is one such example.

<http://grad.arizona.edu/admissions/admissions-faq>

## **17. I am interested in MBA. What do I need to do?**

You need to write GMAT and TOEFL to get into MBA programs. Most of the world’s best management schools are in US. Some are given below.

- University of Pennsylvania (Wharton Business School)
- Harvard University (Harvard Business School)
- Northwestern University (Kellogg)
- Stanford University (Stanford Graduate school of Business)
- University of Chicago (Booth school of Business)

- University of Michigan (Ross School of Business)
- University of California – Los Angeles (Anderson School of Business)

To know more about GMAT test please explore the link below.

<http://www.mba.com/>

### **18. How do I select the Program and Universities?**

Program – You know what you want to study. So you need to be clear on that first. University selection is a tricky process. You have to consider several things and finally decide where you have the maximum chance of getting admission with some financial aid.

Things to consider in university selection

- Your academic credentials, GRE / TOEFL score
- Your financial position
- Whether the university offers financial aid
- Whether the university offers the program you are interested in
- Whether the university is in the location you want (Let's say Florida or Texas)

Don't worry about these things to start with. If you start the process, then everything else will fall in place.

### **19. US Admission process looks lengthy and appears daunting. Will I be successful?**

Nothing is easy or simple in life if you want to be successful. You need to have the motivation to succeed in spite of hurdles. If you have everything at your hand and then succeed, that is not success. If you face adversity in every step and still succeed, then that is what success is all about. You need to have confidence in yourself and should be ready to take calculated risks in life in order to succeed in this competitive world. So if your heart says "YES", then start the process, do it to the best of your abilities and apply as soon as universities start accepting applications. Believe me; if you work hard, then you will definitely get something in return. How do I say it? I just walked down the path in which you are about to start walking. So I know a thing or two.

### **20. I am from a middle class / lower middle class family, studied in government schools that too in a regional language like Tamil / Telugu. Will I be able to succeed?**

Absolutely Yes. All you need to have is the following.

- Desire to be successful in life

- Motivation to finish the task when you face hurdles
- Willingness to Improve on things you lack (English or Math)
- Ability to Get good score in GRE / TOEFL

English is just a language like Tamil. Don't give too much importance than it deserves. If you can learn Tamil, learning English is piece of a cake. You don't need to be a Shakespeare to get good score in GRE and TOEFL and you don't need to be from these so called sophisticated "convents" to speak well in English. Believe in yourself and work towards that goal. You will succeed. How do I say it? The question exactly applies to me and lots of my friends as well. I am from a lower middle class farming family, studied in government schools in Tamil medium and have done it. Lots of my friends have done it. YOU CAN DO IT TOO.

### **21. What is the one great thing about graduate programs in US?**

If you work hard and plan the process diligently, you can study Master's or PhD program of your choice essentially for free. Graduate programs in most of the universities offer generous financial aid for talented students and no other country on earth offers such opportunities.

### **22. Is everything about US is good? No negatives at all?**

Fortunately / unfortunately there are not that many negatives. But you do have some.

- Cultural difference – If you have spent 18 years in a conservative environment in India that too under the guidance of parents, suddenly you will enjoy enormous amount of freedom in US. Some people might stray and presence in US might prove to be counterproductive. But most of the students succeed. Exceptions are there everywhere.
- You will miss your parents and family and you can't see them when you want to.
- Financially you will be constrained for few years.

Honestly, these are not problems at all if you are from a middle class family and want to succeed in life. There can be other small negatives and that are applicable to every college / university / country.

### **23. Are the information's given above correct?**

All the information given above is accurate as of 10/10/2012. You don't need to pay thousands of rupees to some stupid consulting companies in India to get this information. You can do it yourself by spending time in the internet.

#### **24. Who are you? Why you have prepared this document?**

My name is Kumaran Seenivasan. My father was a farmer and farming provided just enough to make both ends meet. My parents were primary school dropouts. In spite of that, they tried to educate my two sisters and me. I studied in government schools in Tamil medium and was not good in English language till my college days (Hopefully you think I have improved a lot after reading this). Did my under graduation in "Agriculture" at TNAU. Secured ICAR fellowship to study my first Masters in Haryana. Wrote GRE & TOEFL and got Assistantship and complete tuition waiver to study my second Masters in "Agricultural & Resource Economics" at the University of Arizona. Currently I work as a Senior Statistician in US.

If you see, I have essentially studied for free. So I have come across most of the difficulties that every middle class boy / girl from India faces and I think I have been fairly successful. There were not many people to provide this information readily for me and my friends. We actually did it on our own and faced lot of struggles while doing so. We actually wasted few years in trying to get all this information and confidence. Hence, in order to help prospective students, I have prepared these questions & answers based on my personal experiences. Even one student uses this and becomes successful, that will fulfill my goal of preparing this document.

I don't consider myself extraordinarily brilliant. There were lots of students more talented than me but could not / did not study further and many could not succeed even though they had more talents. Some with very average talents have succeeded better than I. So, just having talent is not enough. Motivation, confidence, desire to succeed, perseverance, ability to survive in the midst of adversity and willingness to take risks are some of the other things you need in abundance to be successful in life. If you don't have it, try to develop it from now onwards. GOOD LUCK!