

# **A Rough Guide to Applying to Graduate Programs Overseas**

By Alison Fernandes

This advice was originally intended for Australian undergraduate students applying to graduate philosophy programs in the UK and North America. But now its scope has widened, and I believe other students may find it useful as well. It's based primarily on my own experiences of applying in 2009–2010, not on any other expertise. I haven't much to say about whether postgraduate study will be the right choice for you. Instead, this is more of a nuts and bolts guide to what the process will actually involve. I've organised the material roughly chronologically, with the assumption that you intend to start graduate school in the (Northern) Fall term. I was applying to a lot of programs, so if you apply for just a few, you can probably get by with less organisation and stress than I did. Don't get scared off by the lengthy nature of what's below; the whole process really is manageable.

## **1. As Early as Possible**

### **Get Involved in Philosophy**

Attend any talks or seminars that your department offers, even when they're not in your area of interest. It will give you an idea of other areas you may want to pursue later, and will give you a chance to get to know the academics in your department, as well as visitors (who may all be useful contacts). You will also present as a keen and interested student. Talking afterwards can also give you insider information on what academic life is really like.

Attend conferences when you can, even when you're not presenting a paper. Present when you have material, and offer to help out with planning or running conferences. Consider publishing. Talk to your supervisor about any material that you could submit to a professional journal, or else consider various undergraduate or online publications. Join your student philosophy society and the Australian Association of Philosophy. These memberships are useful in themselves, and look nice on your CV. Start putting together a CV and note where some gaps might be. Use the above activities to fill them in.

A few scholarships will also require you demonstrate an interest and commitment to leadership and helping the community outside philosophy. It might be worth undertaking some formal extra-curricular activities if you're interested in applying for such scholarships.

### **Where to go?**

Start thinking about where you'd like to go for your graduate study. Firstly, think about where your own interests lie—what you're good at, what you've done some of and would like to do more of. Keeping a written record of these interests will also be useful for composing your personal statement. As you're doing your own research, keep an eye out for philosophers who share your

approach or interests and where they're currently located. You'll also need to consider how flexible your financial and living situation is. Are you reliant on a scholarship? Do you have dependents? Talk to whomever you can about your ideas and what particular places are like (other students, faculty, visitors to the department). Check out online guides to applying, which offer quite a bit of useful advice. *The Philosophical Gourmet Report* (<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/default.asp>), though flawed, is a useful starting resource. I'd put together a rough list of places at this stage, noting down why you've chosen them, but save the details for later.

## **External Scholarships**

With most high-ranked Universities, your applications for admission and funding are one and the same. However, you will be asked about whether you're applying for external scholarships, and if you are eligible, it is certainly worth doing so. It will look good on your application and CV, and may entitle you to more money. External scholarship applications are usually due earlier, and will typically have more and stranger requirements. There are various online guides to these and you should also visit your university's scholarship office. You'll need to look both in the country you're coming from and the country you're going to, and look carefully at the criteria. For example, the British Chevening Scholarship is not available if you plan to complete a masters before a PhD, while the American Fullbright Scholarship requires you to return to Australia for 2 years before working in the States. Don't worry at this stage about scholarships that are specific to universities or colleges, as these do not usually require separate applications.

## **2. July–August–September**

If you haven't already, search online for advice on applying to graduate programs. Particularly look out for advice from faculty involved in admissions. The Leiter blog is useful here too, and provides some information on faculty movements ([http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/philosophical\\_gourmet\\_report/index.html](http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/philosophical_gourmet_report/index.html)). With this in mind, take the list of programs you're interested in, and start looking at them more closely. Check out the university sites (with details about the programs) and start talking in more detail with your supervisors, other faculty, students, etc.

I ended up applying to 15 places, which I thought was too many, although it is becoming more the norm these days. This was partly because I was undecided about what sort of philosophy I wanted to do. Talk to other people, but I'd suggest somewhere around 8 to 12 would be more reasonable, spreading them across those that are harder and easier to get into. Fewer applications is quite okay, of course, particularly if you have specific interests or requirements. Don't apply to anywhere that you wouldn't accept. You may have financial limitations—application fees can be up to US\$125. But I would definitely revise the list in light of new information as it comes up.

While you're doing this, take the evolving list of places and look into their application requirements and due dates. A spreadsheet is a good idea, plus documents and folders containing more details. Application requirements will vary, but will typically include the following: writing samples, recommendation letters, GRE scores, transcripts, a CV and a statement of purpose. I'll discuss these below. Applications tend to be due from early December to mid-February, with most due in early January. Some are entirely online, but most require you to complete some sections online and to mail in others.

## **Writing Samples**

Start on your writing samples. You should have a fair idea by now how long these need to be (usually between 4,000 and 6,000 words, spread across 2 samples or so—although these are usually quoted in terms of number of 12pt double spaced pages). They can be selections from a longer work. While it might be nice to have something on your topic of interest, this isn't essential, and it's more important that it is your best work to date. I chose to take a coursework essay and a section from my honours thesis and rewrote them in light of markers comments. I then got more comments back from the original markers and other sources and continued rewriting and redrafting until I was satisfied. I adapted them slightly to suit the type of department I was applying to and the length requirements. From what I understand, students in North America are less likely to adapt a piece they have already written, and may even research a paper entirely from scratch. Do whatever you think will produce your best work. I'd try to make the samples as punchy and clear as possible. They may be read first by people who don't specialise in the area.

## **Letters of Recommendation**

Start thinking about who could write a letter of recommendation for you. Most programs require 3 or more. At least one needs to be academic, but I'd have them all academic if possible. It may be a matter of choosing your supervisor and two others who you've taken classes with and written good work for. It may come down to selecting specific people for specific universities. There's quite a bit in online guides about how to approach potential referees, which is worth looking over. Approach your potential referees in person if at all possible. What you'll also need to do is organise material for them to base their letters on, such as your CV. I'd try and organise this by the end of October in order to give referees about a month to complete (see below).

## **GRE**

Most Universities in America require applicants to complete the Graduate Record Examination. It's a standardised test with comprehension, vocabulary, maths and writing sections. The test is booked through ETS, and it's worth spending a month or so doing practices before completing the test. I'd aim to take the test around September, but there is no harm in doing it sooner. The most important section is the analytic writing section, where you analyse an argument and write on an issue, and it is worth practicing this section to find out what the markers are looking for. I found the practices tests on the site

sufficient. A 'Review' covers the material you'll need for the maths section—although not the most important, leave some time to go through this, especially if you're rusty. If you're not happy with your scores you can retake the test. When you take the test you'll need to have a list of Universities you'd like the scores sent to, but you can also order additional score reports to be sent after this (which will always incur a US\$20 fee beyond the first 4).

## **Transcripts**

This step is relatively easy. With a fair idea of the number you need, simply approach your student office for certified, sealed copies of your transcript. You'll need one for every higher education institute you've attended. This step may have to be delayed if you're waiting for more recent details to be included. You'll probably need to scan a copy too, noting that you want the best resolution possible while keeping file sizes below 1 MB for some, and below 2 MB for most universities. If your transcript is long, compile it in parts. Also note that most American universities will enquire after your GPA (grade point average). If your university doesn't calculate one, you are not required to provide one. However, it may be useful to include something at some point about how the grading system of your university works, the more official the better. Ask your recommenders or supervisor for advice.

## **3. October**

By now you should have a pretty solid list of places you're applying to, and know their application requirements. You should have taken your GRE test. You should have your writing samples well underway, and at least a good draft of your CV. If you haven't obtained your transcripts, at least get an unofficial copy that you can send to your recommendation writers. Then, send whatever out of the above will be useful to your recommendation writers in a nicely organised packet or email. You've already approached these people in person, but also ask them formally and let them know when the letters are due. It's up to you whether you want to give your referees a deadline slightly in advance of the actual deadline.

Almost all letters are submitted online now, so what you need to do is register for the programs you're applying to and enter in the recommenders' email addresses into the appropriate section to send off the requests. Some programs are tricky in that you need to complete parts of the application before the recommenders can submit their letters, and in these cases I'd let the recommenders know they'll receive a request to submit a letter later.

Now is also a good time for writing your personal statement. Most of it will be the same for each department, with perhaps a paragraph or two personalised for each. Length requirements vary, but are typically 1–3 pages. The bulk of mine was spent talking about my philosophical interests in general terms, the work I'd done and the activities I participated in. I organised mine by interest, spending a paragraph on each, but I gather I have more diverse interests than most, so a different style may suit you. For the last two paragraphs I talked about why that department in particular was of interest to me. I mentioned

things about the program (such as the workshops they offered, or the teaching experience provided) as well as which faculty I'd be interested in working with. They're not interested in a specific research proposal, but it helps if you can say what sort of work you'd like to do and who with. If you're familiar with a person's work, all the better, mention this. Otherwise you may have to look through faculty bios, CV's, journal indices, etc., to get an idea of their work. It might also be useful to talk to your own faculty about the departments.

One thing you may also consider is writing directly to the faculty members that you're interested in working with. I wouldn't do more than a few of these (say 4). I'm not sure whether it really does help you stand out from the crowd come admissions time, but the faculty, if they reply, may suggest other people you might be interested in working with. Don't be disheartened if they don't reply—they're busy academics—and don't hassle them.

#### **4. November–January**

By now, things should be coming together to the point where you can actually start to complete applications. Having worked on your personal statements, you should have an even stronger idea of what the various departments are like. This may revise your decision as to which places you want to apply to.

The online applications themselves take some time to complete, so I'd start each at least a week before the deadline, just in case anything new comes up. For example, some require you to list all the texts you've studied. I'd put together a timetable detailing when applications are due, when you should start working on the online part, and when specific things need to be mailed in (these can have different deadlines).

Keep an eye on your letter writers, and check they haven't forgotten about you. Programs are generally quite forgiving of late letters, but don't let it become an issue.

My earliest applications were due mid December, the latest by the beginning of February, most in early January. So most of December was spent madly sending things off, and January was spent mopping up the final bits. Try not to get stressed about it. Give yourself enough time to do the usual things in life, even if it means putting other work on hold. Enjoy the satisfaction of completing things. But once you've sent them off, put the whole applying thing out of your mind if you can, and go do something else for a bit.

#### **5. February–March**

The first response I received actually came at the end of January, but most seemed to come in late February to mid March. Sometimes I received responses by phone, sometimes by email, and sometimes by post. You'll get one of three responses: an offer, a rejection, or a rejection and a place on a waiting list. Depending on where you are on the waiting list, you may have a good chance of receiving an offer, since most schools will go to their waiting

list to fill a set number of places (although it's unlikely they'll sponsor a visit to the department). If you're still waiting on responses by mid-march, you should feel free to contact the department directly and politely enquire how things are going. I'm told that it's students on the waiting list who often have to wait longest for a response.

## **6. March–April**

If you're lucky enough to receive an offer, several things should start happening. People from the university as well as the department should be contacting you with details about the offer, including financial arrangements. You may also be put in touch with current students to answer your questions, but always feel free to contact students directly yourself, and definitely do this if the university does not put you in touch with students. And most universities in North America will also invite you to visit the department, offering a subsidy to help cover travel costs. As far as I know this does not happen at UK universities. Most of the advice that follows is for North American graduate schools.

Firstly, visits to the department are highly recommended. They vary in time from one day to four. Most involve meeting members of the faculty for 30-minute interviews, meeting current and prospective students for lunches, dinners, activities and parties and attending workshops, seminars and colloquia and other departmental events. Most universities will also offer to house you with a current graduate student during your stay, which is invaluable for finding out what being part of the program will really be like. You should also have some free time to wander around campus and the city. These visits are great for helping you decide between departments, but are also a good opportunity to get to know the department and city you have already settled on and to get a head start on arranging things like housing.

The amounts universities will subsidise these visits varies. But given that accommodation is taken care of, it is really only the airfare you have to worry about. For most North Americans, they will be visiting one department at a time, travelling home in between. Coming from Australia, my only viable option was to combine several visits, which also meant I could cover all my travel costs. Given these tight arrangements, I was not always able to attend on the official visiting days. But I found that visiting the department at other times to be just as useful. While you will probably not meet any other prospective students, you may get a more personal experience meeting the current students and faculty. You'll get more of a sense of what the department is usually like, when they're not on show.

For American universities, you must accept offers by April 15. If you've decided to decline an offer, spare a thought for the students on the waiting list, and let the university know as soon as possible. Ideally you'll already have your options ranked, and can just decline anything lower than your top choice (if you're lucky enough to get several). Next to ideal, you decide between choices as they're given to you, always keeping one on top. And next along, you limit your options to a top few you're interested in. I ended up

visiting 4, which I thought was too many. 2–3 would have been much more reasonable. While visiting is great, it's also time consuming and exhausting.

How do you narrow down the list before you visit? Other than going back to the things you considered in applying, you should definitely get back in touch with anyone you know who is in or has recently been through the program and see what they say about it. You're particularly interested in what the student and departmental culture is like. See if any of the faculty you're interested in are likely to be retiring soon, or considering offers from elsewhere. Look more carefully at how the program is structured, and what exactly you'll be doing. You may also want to look more carefully at the lifestyle on offer. What is the town/city of the university like, and where is the university located in it? What can a student afford on their stipend? Basically this is a chance to focus more closely on details that you may not have had time to look at before.

There are some things I think you should definitely *not* focus on. Firstly, there's likely to be some small variations in the financial offers from different universities. In the long run, these are insignificant compared to other factors. While larger variations (of say more than a few thousand dollars) may have an impact on your quality of life, don't presume that you'll have a better experience or be more welcome at a university offering slightly more money. By all means use these sort of smaller financial considerations as tie breakers—just make sure that all else really is equal. I've heard of students who regretted basing their decision partly on the size of their offers. Secondly, I would ignore rankings from now. By this point you're considering what being a student in the graduate program will be like—how impressive the faculty list is is no longer important.

If you do end up going on a visiting tour, pace yourself. I found 3 days at a university plenty, 2 would probably be enough, and I'd allow at least 1 day for looking at the city. All up, allocating 4 days to a place was good. Students can often pick you up from the airport, so I found evening flights worked well. Don't forget to account for jetlag. And don't feel you have to attend everything scheduled: take time off for yourself, and remember that the visit is for your benefit, not anyone else's.

The department will either ask which faculty you want to talk to, or suggest you arrange appointments yourself. These appointments vary from relaxed and chatty, to distinctly interview-style, with you asking the questions. Either way, it's good to have a think in advance about what you'd like to ask each person. It's not essential to know about their work, although it will help if you really are interested in working with them. But don't just talk to people in your area. You may also want to talk to: a) someone who's been around a while, and has seen the faculty go through long term changes; b) someone who's a bit of a rebel in the department who can offer a different view (although it can be hard to tell who this is); c) someone who's recently come to the faculty who can offer an outside perspective; d) someone from a minority group (philosophical, ideological, racial, gender, etc.) to see how they feel in the department. If you're concerned about faculty leaving, or retiring or how much

they're around the department, feel free to ask them (politely) about it. I usually ended up talking to 8 faculty or more. But you'll also usually have other opportunities to talk to faculty at receptions and the like, and you can always email them to ask questions.

And don't underestimate the amount of useful information that current students are willing to provide. Most are very upfront about the nature of their department and the dealing's they've had with faculty. Ask them about specific faculty and interests. In this regard, I found hanging around the student lounge very useful—you get to see something of student culture yourself, and you can get several opinions at once.

Good luck. I hope the process goes well for you.

If you have any suggestions regarding the above, please feel free to contact me: [alisonsfernandes AT gmail DOT com](mailto:alisonsfernandes@gmail.com)