

# An Unofficial Guide for the Indian Business Ph.D. Applicants

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## **Abstract**

This document details the application process for International Business Ph.D. programs from an Indian standpoint. We illuminate factors that disadvantage Indian Ph.D. applications – including but not limited to lack of relevant research experience, inept academic writing, grade penalties, and limited access to international faculty, and recommend ways around them. We also discuss aspects usually overemphasized, notably exceptionally high test scores and published research output. We subsequently discuss steps as well as documents required for Ph.D. applications, including that of the European programs. Taken together, we hope that some of these pointers will come in handy to organize and navigate the admission process, notwithstanding the fair amount of uncertainty involved.

**Keywords:** Business School, Graduate Admissions, India, Management, Ph.D.

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# 1 Introduction

We initiated this document with two broad objectives in mind. First, we have benefitted immensely from the research ecosystem at ISB and synthesizing some of our learnings as RAs and Ph.D. applicants seems one of the most befitting ways for us to pay back. Second, having talked to people in the field, we realize that Indians remain disproportionately under-represented in the international business academic community: a closer inspection alludes to institutional barriers – including but not limited to lack of research orientation, inadequate exposure, and high information asymmetry – that invariably disadvantage Indian Ph.D. applicants. Experiencing many of these problems first-hand compelled us to formalize and document information that may otherwise be difficult to obtain and access for the new generation of scholars.

Our wider goal is to democratize knowledge we acquired through our shared experiences and help Indian applicants secure admits from research-oriented international business Ph.D. programs. However, as we encapsulate insights to the best of our understanding, we also remain cognizant of the amount of subjectivity involved and refrain from getting too specific. Correspondingly, we request not to construe anything and everything mentioned in this document as indispensable given how idiosyncratic this entire process can be! We rather advise using this guide as a quick reference to inform and not substitute your judgement about the Ph.D. application process.<sup>1</sup> We are also aware that our understanding of the Business Ph.D. application process is limited as many RAs who have contributed to this document will be pursuing Ph.D. in Management (i.e., Organizational Behavior, Organizational Theory, and Strategy). But we still hope that the document will be useful – albeit to a lesser extent – for applicants applying for PhDs in allied disciplines such as Finance, Operations, Accounting, and Information Systems. This might explain why we refer to our document as “unofficial”.

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<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed overview of the Ph.D. application process, we request you to kindly also refer to [“A Guide to Business Ph.D. Applications”](#) by Abhishek Nagaraj and [“The Complete Guide to Business School Ph.D. Applications”](#) by Stephen Turban and Megan Gorges. Both these documents are available online for free.

## 2 What led us to Academia?

Unlike corporate, academia as a profession remains highly obscure, especially for an outsider. More often than not, we wish to pursue a Ph.D. with an innocuous belief that it is the only gateway to university-level teaching. While teaching is indeed a quintessential part of an academic career, the modern-day profession fundamentally centers around research. Everything about this field – be it career progression, incentives, or field-wide recognition – depends on one’s research productivity. Staying true to this overarching spirit, most Ph.D. programs, domestic or international, prepare students for a successful career in “research” and not teaching per se. It becomes incredibly important to note this distinction, especially for those who deem a Ph.D. in Business an exclusive training ground for college-level teaching. Many applicants also think of Ph.D. as an advanced version of an MBA and seek this qualification for professional growth. Unfortunately, Ph.D. is not the most optimal choice always if one plans to pursue career in industry in the long run<sup>2</sup>. For a matter of fact, these two have very less in common: unlike MBA, a practice-oriented and generalist qualification, Ph.D. emphasises developing a strong hold on academic theory with a more niche and specialized focus. As a result, it is expected that a Ph.D. graduate pursues an academic job given their training is more relevant for the academic career than industry-based roles<sup>3</sup>.

For better or worse, one should be aware of the long gestation period but higher career uncertainty relative to corporate – especially at a [pre-tenure](#) level. This sounds intimidating, right?<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, even we wonder that what really transpires an individual to embark on this incredibly laborious pathway? The answer is far from simple and somewhat philosophical. First, while academia may not offer lucrative compensation, it provides immeasurable

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<sup>2</sup>May not be true as industry scope and prospects vary across research specializations. For example, a Ph.D. in Finance often come in handy to secure jobs in banking/financial industry including multi-lateral organizations.

<sup>3</sup>Needless to say, Ph.D. does equip a candidate with industry-relevant skills, but the program is overall geared towards honing students for academic and not corporate jobs. However, there is no such compulsion that one should continue in academia if they do not enjoy it.

<sup>4</sup>It is no longer uncommon to see doctoral candidates taking up to six or seven years to finish their PhDs. The academic job market also tends to be highly competitive and illiquid, which may force doctoral candidates to spend additional years in their respective programs or join as a post-doc elsewhere. The total time taken to obtain a Ph.D. increases further if you take into account the number of years worked as a full-time RA/pre-doc.

authority and flexibility to work on projects that pique one's intellectual curiosity. Becoming a business school professor allows an individual to not only create knowledge and advance theory but also make sweeping contributions to managerial practice by disseminating those insights via teaching. While these contributions may seem piecemeal and incremental to many, the knowledge compounds over a period and influences policy and potentially empowers a much larger community. Second, an academic career accords the opportunity to collaborate with some of the brightest and smartest people in the world and become a better version of oneself along the way. Based on our discussions with the fellow RAs, many of them decided to quit their well-paying corporate jobs because they did not see themselves growing intellectually. These are some of the reasons that motivate people to largely self-select and foray into this profession in the first place.

Does that mean one should romanticize academia? Definitely not! Just like any other field, academia is blighted with its own set of idiosyncrasies that are unreasonable on many counts. One just needs to recognize the larger picture and spend enough time contemplating and developing reasonable clarity about Ph.D. and the academic career that follows. Remember -

- Ph.D. should not be treated as an escape from corporate. It will probably be more demanding and require investing more time and effort and that too in a highly unstructured environment.
- Ph.D. should not be mistaken for any other undergraduate or graduate degree as pursuing Ph.D. is a considerable trade-off not only monetarily but also experientially. Some individuals may have to work around their family-related responsibilities – more so if they are married.

Having a holistic view of the situation before committing to a five-year-long degree, sometimes stretching even more by a year or two, becomes a must so that it does not turn into a liability. We strongly recommend interacting with the broader academic fraternity – including both Professors and Ph.D. students and ones who have switched back to the industry. Speaking with some of these people should fetch a more realistic overview of the academic career to inform your decision. Here is a link to a self-assessment tool called [“PhD Competence Model”](#) used by PhDs to closely monitor and track their developmental progress. It can help you learn more about yourself and see if you will be a fit for a career like this.

All things considered, we cannot emphasize more how important it is to educate oneself about the pros and cons of Ph.D. and the academic career. What works for someone else may not work out for you considering how “personalized” this journey is. Especially, as Indians, our inability to resist the temptation of comparing ourselves against our peers across different walks of life can make things even more stressful. Seeing people working in far more remunerative non-academic jobs can possibly discourage one from pursuing research over time. There is always an option to switch back to industry, during or after Ph.D., but it is sub-optimal to invest our time in a degree that does not add up to something substantive. Unfortunately, it is next to impossible to dig deep into all such contingencies: we can only encourage potential applicants to take a comprehensive view of this career before they begin with the Business Ph.D. application process, which itself is pretty demanding and exhaustive, and therefore an exclusive focus of this guide. Through this document, we share our collective insights to help future Indian Business Ph.D. applicants navigate the admission process using a more targeted and structured approach.

In the next section, we highlight the importance of knowing yourself and your aspirational levels before heading into preparation. Through Sections 4 and 5, we discuss the factors that could negatively affect quality of Indian applications and possible ways to work around them and subsequently explain how re-calibrating strategy by ascribing less focus on areas usually over-emphasised can be helpful. In Section 6, we break down the entire application cycle into three distinct yet overlapping steps to make it easier for you to understand and navigate the process. Sections 7 and 8 provide a broad overview of European Ph.D. programs and the process involved therein.

### **3 There is No One-Size-Fits-All**

Before you proceed, you should know that, like many other things in life, there is no guaranteed way to succeed in the Ph.D. application process. As you read more, you will realize that as applicants, we supply a wide range of data points as we submit our Ph.D. applications – from educational qualifications and grades to standardized test scores to letters of recommendation. The admission committee reads through the application packet in its entirety before shortlisting candidates for interviews and rolling out offers.

To simplify it more, a part of the information contained in your application packet is relatively static and immutable as it reflects your past achievements and credentials. This usually includes your educational qualifications, grades, previous experience, and certifications, etc. There is little you can do to change them. However, the remaining part of your application is lot more under your control and comprises standardized test scores (i.e., GRE/GMAT), field-specific research experience, SOP, CV, and recommendations. To cut it short, your portfolio includes both static and dynamic components and often the amount of effort you need to put into enhancing the dynamic part of your profile is a function of your static profile and aspirational levels.

For example, someone graduating from IIT, NIT, IIM, or any such prestigious institution is likely to have a reasonably good static profile and should not have much problem targeting a moderately-competitive PhD program<sup>5</sup>. But the same applicant might find difficult breaking into a highly-competitive program unless they have an overall strong profile. On the contrary, it might very well be the case that someone from a “non-elite background” but with quality research experience, exceptional test scores, and strong recommendations finds their way to a top-ranked program. Similarly, if the goal is to pursue Ph.D. from not a very-competitive program, the entry requirements will be more relaxed and suggestions we make in the subsequent sections may not even hold. To avoid any confusion, for the purpose of this document, we assume that readers are highly aspirational – they are eyeing at the most competitive programs and are interested in knowing the process in as much detail as possible to put together a well-rounded application.

To sum it up, each program is competitive in its own right. Some of the best minds intellectually inclined towards academia from all over the world apply for the small number of positions available. It just eventually boils down to you knowing yourself in terms of “where you are” and “where you want to be” and decide accordingly. Once you achieved a clearer understanding of what you want for yourself, you will be in a much better position to customize and organize your plan of action.

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<sup>5</sup>You may want to refer to the list of [Top 100 Worldwide Business School Rankings](#) based on research contributions. Not necessarily a very scientific approach, but for the sake of simplicity, we treat any school ranked in top 50 as highly competitive and the other half as moderately competitive.

## 4 Liability of Indianness

Being an international applicant for Business Ph.D. Programs can be quite challenging and intimidating – especially if one is applying for education abroad for the very first time. Even though there are plenty of online resources available for MBA, not much information is available about the Business Ph.D. Programs except for the two documents mentioned above. Consequently, many aspirants are under the impression that the application processes are nearly identical. But this is not the case.

The Ph.D. admission process is a different ball game altogether as only handful of candidates apply for these programs and applications are assessed directly by a group of faculty in a form of an admission committee. The process is more technical and competitive. For example, Wharton received 154 applications for Ph.D. Program in Management starting Fall 2023, of which they shortlisted 18 for interviews and subsequently made final offers to 5 – yielding an acceptance rate of less than 5%. In most colleges such as Kenan Flagler and Culverhouse Alabama, not more than 2-3 offers are made for a particular research specialization.

Therefore, not knowing how the process unfolds and what matters to the admission committee could be a major deterrent for most Indian aspirants. To that degree, it is recommended to be mindful of factors that impact application quality and overall assessment.

Lack of Relevant Research Experience: The Indian education system does not emphasize research as much as teaching. Therefore, it is challenging for Indian candidates to develop a knack for scholarly research early on. To overcome this systemic barrier, it is strongly recommended that applicants acquire academic research experience by working with faculty.<sup>6</sup> You may gather this experience as part of your undergraduate/graduate study or by becoming a pre-doc/RA in your intended field of specialization or through research internships. Having research experience is not a must considering there have been many successful Indian applicants who have applied without any such stint in the past. But it seems to have become an “implicit pre-requisite”. PhD admissions have grown

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<sup>6</sup>One may wonder what exactly do we mean by prior research experience. Is one required to develop a more grounded understanding of the field by working on academic research papers or having a slight idea about the domain and relevant literature is enough? There is no precise answer to this as expectations vary across programs and specializations. It is useful to scan through the profiles of recently admitted students to have a fair idea about what all maybe required.

a lot more competitive in recent years and it is a rare sight to come across a profile with absolutely no research experience<sup>7</sup>.

Working as a RA is a wonderful opportunity to familiarize oneself with the academic career and its underlying dynamics and develop reasonable clarity about research in intended specialization. Both Moksh and Ahaana worked as RAs at ISB before applying for their PhDs. If visa sponsorship is not an issue, an applicant should also consider applying for international pre-doc programs – ones administered by Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Columbia, Kellogg, NYU, Olin, and others. Refer to Appendix 3 for more details.

Limited access to International Faculty: Most Indian applicants lack access to international faculty. Unlike students in the west who can interact with professors a-priori and develop familiarity with faculty even before they apply for the program, international applicants clearly lack these opportunities. That said, little or no access to international faculty should not discourage one from applying for the doctoral programs if there is strong research motivation and fit. One of the RAs at ISB admitted to a highly competitive PhD Program remarked - “Networking only does little in terms of final selection unless the applicant has overall strong profile. I only had recommendations from Indian Professors unlike most of my peers with at least one recommendation from an international faculty. In retrospect, I do not think it made a huge difference to my applications. If your profile is strong, it will stand out regardless”. This is not to say that familiarity and networking with the international faculty does not help at all. Based on our conversations with the broader community of RAs, we realize that there is a value in building connections but networking alone does not guarantee anything. To that extent, you may consider leveraging the following combination of formal and informal devices to become familiar with and possibly get connected with international faculty.

Some of the formal devices one may employ are as follows:

- Targeted Emails: Sending targeted emails to faculty can be potentially rewarding strategy. While there is a mixed opinion about whether one should write to professors, we are of the view that sending emails should be fine as long as they are authentic, logically constructed, and most

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<sup>7</sup>Look through the profiles of PhD students admitted in the recent years of the programs that interest you. It will help you benchmark yourself on a more objective basis.



importantly do not read run-of-the-mill. If you are genuinely interested in someone's research, it should reflect. Be courteous and sincere but do not engage in flattery of any sorts. Avoid writing to multiple professors from the same department – more so if they engage in different lines of research. It is also a good practice to attach your updated academic CV for quick reference. Most importantly, do not be disheartened if the professors do not respond because they are extremely busy people.

- Research Seminars and Conferences: Attend as many seminars, conferences, and job talks as you can. They serve as a great starting point to touch-base with international faculty. Most IIMs and ISB conduct these events on a routine basis. One should leverage such opportunities to spark meaningful conversations with professors. Follow-up with emails for a more long-lasting impression. If you are totally new to the game, consider requesting your faculty supervisor or mentor to personally introduce you in their network.

By informal devices, we refer to using social media in a targeted manner. Twitter comes in handy to stay updated with the ongoing research and debates in a specific research area. It is also surprisingly yet incredibly resourceful platform to hone understanding about the wider field. If you are on Twitter already, we suggest following these handles and hashtags: [@PhDForum](#), [@AcademicChatter](#), [@OpenAcademics](#), [#AcademicTwitter](#), [#MgmtTwitter](#). LinkedIn is equally helpful to connect with international scholars and stay updated with their recent work. In addition, one may consider creating google scholar alerts to notify oneself about the recent publications by a particular university/scholar.

Before you pick on any of these devices, carefully read through faculty profiles on their official and personal websites. It is extremely important that you read through the information available online before narrowing down the list of colleges they wish to apply, let alone start networking with faculty. Based on our personal experiences, we see most applicants superficially leafing through profiles and that too just before the application deadline. This is clearly not recommended. One should start reading through the faculty pages at least six months before they intend to apply. This buys them ample time to pore over enormous information. It also brings one enough clarity to have a sound and productive email exchange and conversation with the professor of interest and of course develop a more relevant portfolio.

Inept Academic Writing: There is a common perception that, as Indians, while we exhibit a natural flair for quantitative analysis, we are not quite proficient in qualitative part of the job, i.e., academic writing. As remarked by Professor Jena “Writing is a currency to have a successful academic career, especially in fields such as management and strategy”. Whilst the emphasis on academic writing as a parameter of evaluation varies across departments and fields, one should not leave it unattended. There are plenty of ways to highlight one’s ability and prowess for academic writing with SOP being the primary evidence for the admission committee. As academic writing inevitably involves field-specific knowledge and jargon, we suggest spending enough time drafting SOP instead of relegating the job to someone else. We will discuss SOP at length in the subsequent section.

Even though optional in most cases, schools have started requesting writing samples. We believe that submitting a well-drafted piece of scholarly research as a writing sample can strengthen and possibly set apart your application. Ideally, you should submit solo-authored work to eliminate any ambiguities in terms of who may have written it. As a case in point, one of the RAs at ISB was explicitly asked to submit a solo-authored writing sample post interview. This was despite him submitting the co-authored work as part of the application packet. Well, this could very well be an exception as having a solo-authored research paper may not always be feasible. In such cases, it is better to submit a research proposal, term paper, thesis written at the undergraduate or graduate level, or even blogs. If you have not written anything solo ever, there is no other option but to submit a co-authored piece. If it is a working paper, do not forget to seek your co-author’s consent before sharing it externally.

Overall, the importance of writing samples is not very well established. But they seem to come in handy for programs with strong disciplinary emphasis. For example, it is mandatory for Sloan’s Ph.D. Program in Finance and Kellogg’s Ph.D. Program in Management, Organizations, and Sociology. One may wonder how to go about it. The recommended strategy is to get started with academic writing in the initial phase itself. It is often the case that RAs/pre-doc prioritize empirical analysis and become oblivious to academic writing. However, just like any other skill, it takes time and practice to get a hang of scholarly writing – so it is recommended to start early.

Our colleague Shashi recommends the following resources to develop a knack for academic writing:

- [“Air Light Time Space – How Successful Academics Write Hardcover”](#) by Helen Sword (2017)
- [“They Say / I Say ? The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing”](#) by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2014)

Unwarranted Grade Penalties: While many colleges accept as-is GPAs, i.e., GPAs as reported on the official transcripts, some colleges such as Michigan Ross, BU Questrom, and Penn Smeal may require applicants to convert and standardize GPAs on a 4-point scale. It is no surprise that most Indian applicants experience downward adjustment in their GPAs due to arbitrary third-party conversion rules. We suggest checking with your respective undergraduate or graduate university if university-specific conversion scale exists. It is usually a much better alternative as it recognizes and compensates for stringency of the grading pattern. If no such conversion rubric exists, one must use third-party converters, i.e., WES, Scholaro, etc. to standardise GPAs. Convert your GPA in advance as some of these portals begin to charge during the application season. The grade conversion document is usually uploaded along with your transcripts on the application portal.

If you may feel excessively penalized because of some arbitrary conversion, consider writing to the PhD Office for an exemption. You can also mention your class rank and percentile in the application form and CV. It will allow the admission committee assess your academic performance on a relative basis.

## 5 Recalibrating Focus

In this section, we explain why it makes sense for applicants to re-calibrate their strategy by ascribing less focus on areas that may otherwise be overemphasised.

Aim High but Don't Obsess over Test Scores: Get standardized tests out of your way before anything else. Acing these exams requires a formulaic approach, whereas for rest of the application, you will have to spend time reading and scoping the literature and get a little creative in terms of how you put everything together. Not to exaggerate but the overall application requires multiple revisions before submitted on the portal. It is for this reason that we strongly recommend taking GRE/GMAT during the first half of the year – an aggressive estimate would be sometime by March/April – so that you have

ample time to draft and subsequently revise materials required for rest of your application (i.e., SOP, CV, Writing Sample, etc.). There is also a tendency in students to delay scheduling the exam thinking they will be better prepared if they take it later. While this may or may not be the case, it certainly detracts one from paying attention to less objective yet important parts of an application. More like, prioritizing GRE/GMAT over everything else. While these scores certainly play a role in getting your foot in the door, they do not guarantee final selection. It is high time we stop “over-emphasising” them. You should aim for a reasonable score so that your profile qualifies the initial screening and moves to admissions committee for subsequent evaluation. This should not be interpreted as if scores do not really matter. High GRE/GMAT scores can compensate for low grades or lack of research experience and help you get past the preliminary screening. But good scores alone do not guarantee an admit unless you have an overall well-drafted application.

The exact definition of a decent score remains ambiguous. But considering most of us are raised in highly competitive Indian education environment, a score corresponding 85/90 percentile or more in both quant and verbal sections should be sufficient for subsequent review. Do not take it as an absolute requirement considering an applicant will always be evaluated in relation to a wider pool of applications received for that particular year. Look through past admission statistics to have a fair idea of probable cut-offs. Many schools including Wharton and Boston Carroll report GRE/GMAT scores of the admitted batch. QA and VA scores can be assigned different weights depending on the field you are applying for. For quant-heavy doctoral programs such as Economics, Finance, Operations, and Accounting, QA is likely to be assigned higher weightage.

It is equally important to survey the application requirements well in advance because it may so happen that a particular college has a strong preference for one of the two. For example, Goizueta Business School prefers GMAT for PhD in Organizations and Management whereas Stanford Graduate School of Business only accepts GRE for its program in the same specialization. Likewise, for applicants interested in Marketing, London Business School strongly prefers GMAT. Scan through the application requirements, and if possible, attend the PhD information sessions to avoid any last-minute surprises<sup>8</sup>. There are also

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<sup>8</sup>Many colleges including but not limited to HBS, Stanford GSB, MIT Sloan, Duke, Columbia Business School, Kellogg, Smeal, UC Berkeley, USC Marshall, NYU Stern, INSEAD, Wharton, Ari-

programs that do not require GRE/GMAT scores. If you are averse to taking standardized tests, consider applying for programs that have waived GRE/GMAT or are test optional. For example, Michigan Ross' PhD Program in Strategy/Management did not require GRE/GMAT scores for Fall 2023 admissions. In cases where test scores are not required, it becomes even more important to put together a really convincing application as no standardized metrics will be used to narrow down the applicant pool.

Prioritize Process over Output: Many believe that published research output is an absolute prerequisite to a strong PhD application. This is just not true! There is certainly no need of having published papers at this stage of the career. Getting fixated over publications at a pre-PhD level defeats the very purpose of pursuing a doctoral degree: Ph.D. by its very nature involves fair amount of experimentation and as a prospective doctoral student, you should explore the wider scholarship before you even commit to a specific area or topic.

Even from an operational perspective, having a publication in a top-tier outlet is a not very realistic goal unless someone is spending 4-5 years as a RA/pre-doc. We are not sure if spending so much time as a pre-doc makes any sense. Well, if you think about it, getting a paper published in top-tier journals require not only long gestation period, but also a substantive understanding of a domain, which is quite difficult to acquire without structured doctoral training. This explains why Ph.D. applicants are tempted to publish papers in the lower-ranked journals for more immediate publications<sup>9</sup>. In fact, publishing in lesser-known journals can be counterproductive: the admission committee is likely to discount the quality of work and form an unfavourable perception your ability to conduct high-quality scholarly research.

We rather encourage RAs/pre-docs to focus on the fundamentals. They should utilize their pre-PHD experience to scope the wider field and subsequently deepen understanding of sub-domains and areas that interest them. This will

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zona Eller, and BU Questrom organize Ph.D. Information Sessions starting September onwards. As most of these sessions are usually not advertised on social media, we recommend either signing up for the PhD updates section for each of these colleges and keep checking their websites on an intermittent basis to stay updated.

<sup>9</sup>While we do not personally advocate for any specific academic journal rankings, most Ph.D. programs prepare its students to conduct novel and cutting-edge research, which can be subsequently published in top-tier publication outlets.

help an applicant develop a broad-ranging understanding of the field including prominent scholars in the field, major theoretical perspectives invoked, methodological breadth, and avenues for future research. The time is also better spent developing working drafts of the papers than targeting immediate publications. One gets exposed to different stages of academic research (i.e., conceptualization, theorization, and operationalization) and develops a flair of academic writing. A well-written working paper comes in handy to meet the writing sample requirements. Again, it is not absolutely necessary to have working papers for a strong Ph.D. application, especially if applying for areas – such as Micro Organizational Behavior and Consumer Behavior – where research usually involves multiple lab or field-level experiments and takes longer time to finish. But if you are keen on developing a working paper, you may very well give it a shot. Remember that no one expects it to be perfect. A typical working paper goes through several revisions before it is submitted to a journal. The working paper, however, offers an important window into quality of your work as a researcher. Therefore, it certainly aids the application process and helps establish your legitimacy as a potential Ph.D. student.

Overall, the idea of pre-PHD research experience is not to turn into a publication machine but to familiarize yourself with the chosen field of study, assimilate fundamentals of quality research, and develop insights about your future work. Utilize this time to decide if you really wish to commit to a full-time career in academia and perhaps clarity about potential research avenues you wish to explore as a Ph.D. student. This will be more rewarding in the long run.

## **6 Ph.D. Application Process**

Now that we have talked about some of the major factors affecting Indian applications, it is time we describe the Ph.D. application process from start to finish. We specifically focus on the timeline and documents you should keep in handy. The process begins way before its official timeline: while a majority of applications are due in December (1st/15th/31st), it is strongly advised to have the initial draft of the application packet ready by September/October so that there is sufficient time and space for you to proofread, collate and incorporate feedback, and make college-specific edits. We have included a Ph.D. Application Tracker Template in Appendix 4 to help you organize your applications.

Keeping this in mind, we break down the entire application cycle into three distinct but overlapping phases viz. identification, preparation, and evaluation.

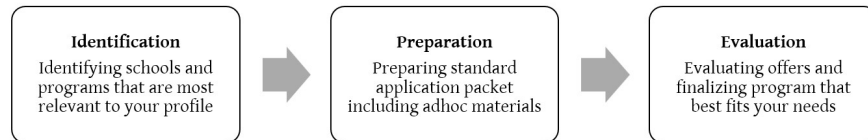


Figure 1: Ph.D. Application Process Overview

### Phase I: Identification

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Determine the Intended Field of Study: Whilst you focus on developing flair for scholarly research in the domain that interests you, be open and receptive to different areas and fields as there is a fair chance that you may be interested in something else altogether. Remember, it is lot easier to experiment at this stage of our career considering most of the skills that we acquire as a researcher are “transferable” and not “domain-specific”.

The best way to familiarize yourself with research in a particular area is to start skimming through the authoritative journals in that field<sup>10</sup>. For example, someone applying for Strategy should be reasonably aware of journals such as Strategic Management Journal, Academy of Management Journal, and Journal of Management. Likewise, a candidate interested in Quantitative Marketing is expected to know about Journal of Marketing, Marketing Science, and Journal of Marketing Research. Refer to Appendix 3 for the list of top tier (i.e., FT50 and UTD-indexed journals) in different business research groups. One should consider applying for particular domain if they feel committed to an area and have developed the required understanding of that field. For example, Moksh

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<sup>10</sup>Business research is highly interdisciplinary. Some applicants may find it challenging to narrow down to a particular field due to the cross-disciplinary nature of their research interests. For example, an applicant interested in “Mergers and Acquisitions” may feel conflicted between Finance and Strategy as potential Ph.D. areas. In such cases, some familiarity with journals help big time.

applied for sociology-heavy programs despite not having any formal background in the subject. Whatever knowledge he acquired about the field was primarily through research. Similarly, many other RAs at ISB have applied for and got through programs in totally unrelated fields.

Identify Most Relevant Ph.D. Programs: After identifying your broad research interests, the next important step is to identify programs that empower your scholarly vision and pursuits. Management as a field is highly interdisciplinary and one may encounter a substantial overlap between different sub-fields – such as Strategy and Organizational Theory, Finance and Strategy, and Micro Organizational Behavior and Consumer Behavior (CB). If you are interested in topics that sit at the intersection of two or more sub-domains and torn between where to apply, the recommended strategy would be to “prioritize people and not departments”. To illustrate, Moksh applied for programs depending on the faculty and research fit. He opted for Macro-OB programs at some places but also applied to strategy departments if he found a better fit there. One of the other applicants ended up in a Micro-OB department even though his research was mostly CB. There is no need for applicants with inter-disciplinary interests to box themselves into one specific sub-category. Rather, one should spend time poring over faculty profiles and deconstructing program’s overall research orientation/leaning (i.e., disciplinary vs. phenomenon-based) even though it is highly unlikely that there will be a complete research overlap. But knowing about the department and faculty in general through formal and informal devices will help identifying Ph.D. programs where you fit the most. This will save you both time and energy, and of course money!

An additional tip for future applicants is not to fall for the herd mentality. Do not blindly apply for the prototypical set of colleges assuming these are the only good programs. There is always a possibility that you would miss out on a college with strong research fit and overlap just because that very college is not seen as mainstream. For example, one of the RAs interested in Strategy/OT did not apply for some of the most sought after colleges such as INSEAD and Duke Fuqua because of zero research fit. He rather opted for lesser-known but really outstanding programs such as PhD in Organization Studies by Boston Carroll and Ph.D. in Strategic Management by University of Alberta given their long-standing name and reputation in qualitative-based Strategy/OT research.

Craft an Optimally Distinctive Profile: Spend enough time contemplating and



crafting your unique positioning as an applicant. Do not feel obliged to pursue research interests identical to your professors or fellow applicants. If pursuing pre-PHD research experience, scope the broader field and figure out specific research areas that interests you along the way. We are of the view that identifying what really interests one as a researcher can make their doctoral journey a more streamlined experience. It does not mean that you should know precisely what questions you seek to answer as a doctoral student/candidate. It is just that having some idea of the related literature can help ace interviews and make the entire Ph.D. experience more rewarding.

Not to forget, an applicant is expected to dig deep into literature and articulate specific research topics in their SOP and interviews. This is because talking about the broader field does not convey anything specific to the admission committee and hold you in a good stead. For example, Ahaana specifically talked about her interest in multi-stakeholder collaborations, sustainable business models, and the business of climate change. Likewise, given his interest in OT, Moksh talked about specific avenues such as organizational agency, collaborative social action, and employee activism to come across as someone who has read the literature and has some idea of the domain.

## **Phase II: Preparation**

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Letters of Recommendations: They perhaps comprise the most important part of a doctoral application. Many of us may not really stress about LORs thinking it is faculty's sole prerogative or maybe because we do not fully appreciate their relevance and importance in the admission process. However, as this is the only part of the application where someone else is advocating and vouching for you and your research aptitude, LORs wield disproportionate influence in the overall selection process.

To that extent, we consider that a successful application requires joint preparation by applicants and their professors and an LOR is a testimony to it. Do not hesitate having an open conversation with professors and asking upfront whether they will be willing to write a strong recommendation or not. We rather suggest prioritizing faculty with whom you have worked extensively on a research project. This way, it is natural for them to feel compelled to write you a strong recommendation. As a good practice, obtain their consent to write

you a letter in advance – ideally three to four months before the application deadline and generate triggers on the portal accordingly. Being ahead of time helps you in two ways – first, it provides enough time to a faculty to write a detailed LOR; and second, it buys you slack to search for an alternative in case any of the professors refuses to write a letter.

We would also like to address the raging debate about the relative efficacy of LORs from Indian and international faculty in the application process. There seems to be a huge misconception that international LORs are must to get into international doctoral programs. While having LOR from someone who is more recognized at an international level certainly elevates your profile, the name alone does not amount to much unless the letter speaks strongly about you and your research abilities. Nonetheless, for Indians, it is particularly difficult to obtain international LORs and therefore it is much advised to focus on content of the letter instead. As outlined above, engage in an open conversation with professors, coordinate with them to help them write a strong recommendation. Supply them with the relevant material – the list of programs, professors you intend to collaborate with, academic CV, SOP, and a draft containing a detailed description of work one has done under their guidance to name a few. But do not ever feel that domestic LORs affect your chances of success – make sure they are well-written and talk highly about you and your research credentials.

Statement of Purpose: There is plenty of material available online but most of this information is applicable for students planning for masters. As indicated earlier, Ph.D. application process is slightly different. It is professors and not the administrative staff that reads through the application packet. Therefore, be selective in what you read and do not blindly follow instructions/guidelines available online as they usually do not cater to doctoral-level requirements.

Considering application is directly read by the faculty from a specific research area, you are advised to be a lot more detailed and often technical in terms of how you express yourself. You may want to use field-specific terminology to demonstrate your familiarity with the domain and your determination and passion for research. Here are couple of pointers to get you started with SOP:

- Contrary to the typical approach, do not restate information already captured in your CV. As Indians, we have a tendency to talk about our accomplishments wherever possible but resist that temptation. Do not

emphasise your accomplishments much unless they are a significant part of the overall story you intend to convey to the admissions committee.

- Write SOP in a manner native English speakers would easily understand. It is recommended to use the Hamburger method to write paragraphs. This is a very common way of writing, which even the fifth graders in the US are taught to write. It gives less cognitive load to the reader and is easy to understand.
- Own this space to expound on your research motivation, interests, and how the targeted school is a good research fit for your scholarly aspirations. As there are different ways to expressing our motivation, be creative in how you would want to utilizing this space to convey your passion for the program/field. While there are specific bits of information common across SOPs as mentioned below, think how best you can bring these aspects to the fore:
  - Why PhD?
  - Why chosen area of specialization?
  - Academic/Research Preparation
  - Research Interests
  - Why a particular school and program and how would you contribute to it?
- Do not wait till the very end to pen down your SOP. You would want to have first draft ready by September so that you have enough time to proofread and revise based on your interactions with the professors and graduate students.
- Read through the literature before you state anything remotely related to the field. You may be fascinated by a particular research question and would like to talk about it in your SOP. However, be mindful whether that question has already been investigated and explored adequately via past research or not. If former is the case, it is better to discuss an alternate research area or acknowledge authoritative work in that space and how you would add to it.
- While the standard SOP does not exceed two pages, you can develop multiple variants varying in terms of the word count, page limit, and even the

research interests. Some colleges like Michigan Ross and Wharton ask for more descriptive SOPs with overall length spanning three to five pages.

Curriculum Vitae: An academic CV usually runs two to three pages and is different in terms of its overall formatting and relative emphasis ascribed to education, research, and industry experiences. However, as some colleges (such as MIT Sloan) prefer a two-page CV, it is recommended to have a variant that tightly-knits all the relevant information in two pages. The additional pointers you should keep in mind while drafting your CV are as below:

- Prioritize academic and research experiences over industry experiences. While industry experiences are valuable indeed, they should not supersede your academic and research portfolio unless you have spend significant part of your career as an industry professional.
- Signal that you are adequately prepared for a doctoral program by highlighting and describing research experiences and projects in detail. You may want to emphasize the underlying research agenda, theoretical lenses invoked, and research methods employed.
- If working as a full-time researcher, credit relevant Ph.D. coursework to upskill yourself and your profile. Enrolling yourself in different workshops and seminars – such as ones offered for free by different universities or by TTU CARMA can help you gain some mileage too.<sup>11</sup>
- Consider specifying class rank or percentile. This will help the faculty with a fairer interpretation of your standalone GPA/percentage by letting them assess your academic performance on a relative basis.
- Include information on scholarships, grants, working papers, and conferences where your paper was accepted/presented. You should also include any other published output such as opeds, case studies, etc.

In addition, please refer to [SOPs and CVs](#) of successful PhD applicants to get a sense of how some of these materials drafted.

Optional Materials: Many colleges ask you to submit materials mostly deemed optional. We recommend applicants to attend these sections and utilize them to their utmost advantage.

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<sup>11</sup>To know more about Consortium for the Advancement of Research Methods and Analysis (CARMA), visit <https://carmattu.com/> to hone your technical skills.

- Diversity Statement: This is typically a page long document, approximately 300-500 words, and unfortunately also the widely ignored part of an application. This as a wonderful opportunity to introspect and reflect on life experiences that have led you to apply for graduate study. There is a common misunderstanding that one has to necessarily belong to a disadvantaged section to be deemed “diverse”. That is not true as we all are unique in our own special ways regardless of our demographic affiliations. You may want to attend this section and talk about how you would bring your unique experiences – social, cultural, and psychological – to the program and add to the school and its community.
- Writing Samples: In addition to what we stated earlier, we strongly advise applicants to submit writing samples to demonstrate their academic writing ability. Colleges that request candidates writing samples include HBS, MIT, Kellogg, Cornell Johnson, UC Berkeley, Penn State, and Ross. They may also be compulsory for certain fields/disciplines – Ph.D. in Management, Organizations, and Sociology at Kellogg and Ph.D. in Finance at MIT Sloan.

Further to documents enumerated above, one may be asked to submit a brief research proposal, especially, if applying for a European Ph.D. We discuss it in detail in the subsequent section.

Ph.D. Interviews: Most schools conduct at least one round of interview before rolling out an admission offer. Sometimes, an applicant may not be even asked for an interview, yet they are a top priority. It totally depends on how the committee that year wants to go about it. To illustrate, for its Management Ph.D. Program, NYU Stern had sent direct invites for campus visits without conducting any prior interviews. This was a little surprising considering visit invites are usually sent after an interview. Few programs may also roll out a direct offer without any interviews or visits – OB Programs in Stanford GSB and Kellogg to name some. Still majority of schools will schedule an interview or two before they make final offers. Based on our experiences, these interviews can be broadly categorized as structured and unstructured.

- Structured and semi-structured interviews involve assigning a research paper to an applicant for discussion with panelists. An important tip for successfully navigating these interviews is to critically analyze the paper in terms of underlying research motivation, theory, methods, and overall contribution. Merely summarizing a paper does not meet the bar as one

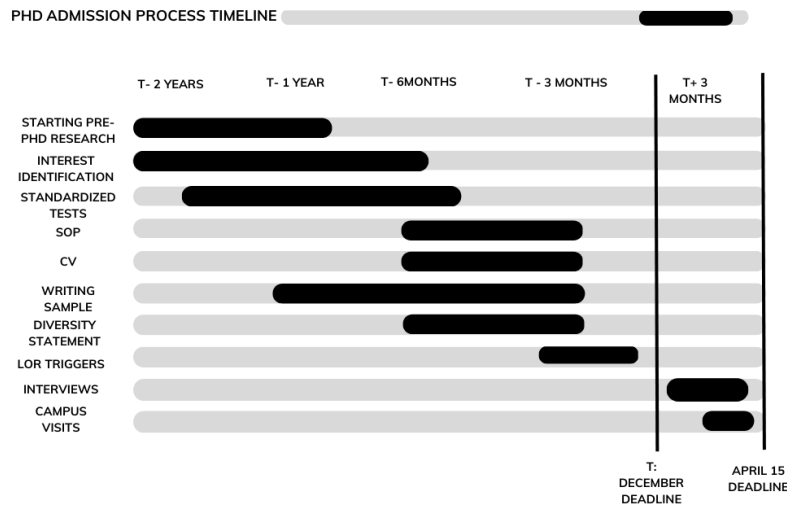


Figure 2: Ph.D. Application Process Timeline

is expected to read between the lines and logically argue what could have been done better to enhance the scientific and logical rigor of the paper. Think of yourself as a reviewer and scan through the paper to find areas of improvement.

- There is no paper reserved for discussion in unstructured interviews. These interviews usually begin with pretty standard questions: Why Ph.D.?, Why Ph.D. in a specific discipline?, etc. The faculty will most probably ask to explain some of the research projects mentioned in your CV and SOP. So be prepared to talk about the papers at length. For example, in most of his interviews, Arnab was questioned quite extensively about his SMJ R&R. It was expected of him to know everything about the paper and he was asked questions about theory, methods, and falsification tests. This can be intimidating but also a great opportunity for you to showcase your intellectual preparation and aptitude to carry out independent scholarly research. For most part, these interviews involve a free-flowing conversation where questions that follow depend on applicant's responses to the earlier questions.

We have compiled a list of questions that some of the Indian Ph.D. applicants for Fall 2023 were asked during their interviews. As you would notice, most questions are straight-forward. However, in select cases, questions required deep thinking and introspection, such as – “Tell me about research you have done that is different the mainstream work done in the field”, and “Elaborate more on what would you do from third year onwards of your Ph.D.?”

### **Phase III: Evaluation & Decision**

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Having steered through a grueling process spanning over six months, it is now time for applicants to carefully evaluate final offers. As candidates typically apply to ten or more programs, there is a fair chance of receiving multiple admits. You should definitely talk to your letter writers, discuss the program extensively with them as well as faculty coordinators and current Ph.D. students/candidates, and read through the finer details contained in the admission letter before accepting the offer.

- Campus Visits: Most colleges organize campus visits to acquaint incoming students with the wider department. Leverage this opportunity to experience the college first-hand and familiarize yourself with the local city and its environment. Indian candidates may find it challenging to arrange a traveller visa on a short notice given unusually high visa waiting time. In such cases, you should consider requesting the college to arrange a virtual visit instead.
- Offer Letter: Read the admission letter carefully and check for the important bits of information, such as overall compensation and if it is contingent on your services as RA/TA and whether housing and medical allowances will be covered for the entire duration of the Ph.D. program or not. Talk to current graduate students for more information. Look up for cost of living and do basic calculations about the monthly expenditure – rentals, commute, groceries, and potential investments if any – and see for yourself if the stipend would suffice.
- Advanced Degree Option and Placements: Refer to the placement record of the program. You may want to read through its composition, i.e., industry and academic, to infer if the program is supportive of students foraying into industry-based careers post completion. You may also want to refer to graduate student career website to source this information.

Further, we suppose most programs award a master degree (in some cases even an MBA) after a Ph.D. student finishes the coursework and therefore you may want to check if your program has any such provision. Having an additional degree serves as a much-needed exit option during the course of the program.

- Declining & Withdrawing Applications: After you have decided not to proceed with a particular college, it is important that you withdraw and decline the offer in writing. We recommend writing to the faculty coordinating Ph.D. admissions or anyone who may have approached you during the interview phase. Be careful about how you draft these emails. While the idea is to intimate the college about your decision, do not forget to express your utmost gratitude for being considered for the opportunity and thank them for the time they spent evaluating your application. Ours is a small community and you would not want to come across as ungrateful and inconsiderate.

## **7 Thinking above and beyond US**

The PhD application process in Europe is largely different from that of universities based in the US or certain European universities that follow the '5-6-year model' of a doctoral program similar to the format followed in the US. For instance, select universities like Bocconi University in Italy, Rotterdam School of Management in Netherlands, INSEAD in France or London Business School in the UK usually follow a similar application process encompassing submitting standardized test scores, a motivation statement, and two or three letters of recommendation. However, majority of universities based in Europe offer three-year doctoral programs which unlike the 5-6 year model mandates a master's degree for your application to even be considered for review by the assessment committee. If you are applying to a management program, you do not necessarily apply to a broader domain like you would for schools following the 5-6 year model with themes like Marketing, Organization Behavior, Strategy, Information Systems, or Operations. Instead, you need to research a bit about the different research environments in the universities and find faculty who publish in your field of interest. Applications tend to be all year round for universities following the three-year route. January, April, August, and October tend to be periods when universities advertise most of their



positions. This could vary depending on the funding situation for the departments. The deadlines for application could be as short as two weeks to as long as three to four months.

There are different routes to applying for a PhD program in a European university. One way would be to submit an application in response to an advertised position within a given department of the university. In this case, an applicant would be required to share transcripts from both undergraduate and post-graduate studies; submit a five-page research proposal where you pitch an idea that aligns with the overall objectives of the call and the research environment of the department; an academic CV enlisting publications if any; a cover letter tailored to the specific position, and in some cases, recommendation letters from two or three academic mentors. Here, the research proposal almost always plays the key deciding factor in finalizing your candidacy for the position. It is a good idea to establish contact with faculty from the concerned department, have them provide feedback on your proposal, and get advice on how to improve your chances in the process. This demonstrates initiative and helps you network with the research environment in your field of interest. A second route would be to apply for a project that the department has received sufficient funding for from a third-party institution. You have little flexibility in writing your proposal as your idea needs to align with extremely specific objectives of the project. However, if you have obtained some pertinent experience in the past, this is a great opportunity to leverage your knowledge and skills. Another route is what Europe refers to as an industrial PhD position where your current employer funds you to pursue research on a relevant industry-focused topic in a university environment. In some cases, the candidate will be funded partially by the university and partially by their employer. It is very important to note that funding options vary significantly between European universities. For instance, the concerned university or your faculty may not have enough funds to support you even if you are being considered for the position. In such a situation, you may have to apply for scholarship separately. The funding options are provided clearly in an advertised PhD position. In Scandinavia, you are both a PhD student and an employee with teaching obligations and are primarily funded by the government. In Denmark for instance, you are expected to spend a significant time of your PhD on teaching while pursuing your own research and crediting doctoral courses across the three years of PhD journey. It can be daunting but if you find a collaborative and supportive research environment, which is usually

a big part of the Scandinavian culture, the process can feel less overwhelming.

Besides the differences in years spent on the doctoral program, courses offered, and funding options, one overlooked aspect is your research inclination. In American universities, you tend to have more flexibility as you mandatorily spend the first two years mastering the subjects first before deciding your research question to work on for the next three years. In Europe, however, you need to have a relatively clear idea about where your research interests lie as you will be spending all your time intimately with your idea over the three years of your doctoral journey! That said, knowing why you want to pursue a PhD program and having vague idea about where you want to spend the next three to six years of your life is good point to start with before you begin to prepare for applications.

## **8 Concluding Remarks**

In all probability, it must be overwhelming to read through all this information. In fact, it took us a great deal of time to acquaint ourselves with most of these details through first-hand experiences as RAs. Since we have experienced the process unfold up close and personal, we decided to document some lesser-known facts and insights to help potential applicants strategize better. We hope that some of these pointers come in handy to scope the overall application process and avoid the usual mistakes in the face of floating misinformation. But we also realize that a significant part of this knowledge happens to be tacit and can only be acquired on the go. Talking to faculty, fellow pre-PhDs/RAs, doctoral students, and people in conferences and seminars will significantly enrich your understanding of the process and the field in general. Explore as much as possible and figure out what works best for yourself and your application.

Nonetheless, the only guaranteed way of rejection is not applying in the first place. Even if you believe to the slightest extent that you have what it takes to succeed in a program, go ahead and apply. There maybe people who will ask you to tone down you aspirations but simply do not if you believe in yourself. You would never know unless you apply, so better do not "self-reject" yourself at any point during the process. Even after investing time and efforts, there is a chance that you do not to make the cut. One would have put together a really

convincing application, yet they may not get into a program of their choice. Indeed, this can be very disappointing. But do not let the process and most importantly the outcome affect your confidence and self-worth. No matter how organized the process looks from the outset, it is way too random and subjective! For example, an application can be rejected just because the candidate wants to work with faculty who is no longer accepting Ph.D. students. Or else, an applicant could be interested in topics that no longer commands scholarly attention. There are so many “confounding variables” that even a well-drafted application can be turned down albeit for a very inappropriate reason; it is just that we will never know. To that degree, even getting accepted into a top-notch program barely guarantees anything in the long run.

We finally conclude saying that the application process is fairly rigorous and requires targeted preparation but there is also no denying that it is pretty stochastic and uncertain with too many unknowns – just like the usual academic life during and after Ph.D. The most we can do is to put our best foot forward without thinking too much about the final outcome.

And in case if you are still wondering about what this career holds for you, here is a meme to bring you some good laugh.



Figure 3: Credits- High Impact Ph.D. Memes

## **Appendix 1: Frequently Asked Questions**

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### **Is pre-doc/RA a must for applying for a Business PhD program?**

In our opinion, prior academic research experience has become extremely valuable in securing PhD admits due to increased competition over the past few years. Most Indians do not have research-based degrees and therefore find it difficult applying for a doctoral programs right after their graduation. In such cases, either working as a full-time RA, pre-doc, or a part-time researcher comes in handy to get acquainted with modern-day scholarly research and academic career. If you have adequate academic research exposure during your undergraduate or graduate education in the form of thesis, dissertation, or independent/co-authored work, you may consider applying for the doctoral programs right away. It usually depends on how relevant your prior research work is for the program you are applying for and how confident you feel about your application on an overall basis.

### **How much does it cost to apply?**

The process is slightly expensive. It costs \$100 on an average for an application. For colleges located in the states with higher cost of living, such as California and New York, the application fee is likely to be even higher. You will spend approximately INR 1 Lakh in application fee alone assuming you apply for ten odd programs. This precludes the amount spent on taking standardized tests and sending over the official scores to the universities. We understand that for most Indians this could be prohibitively expensive – we therefore strongly recommend making targeted applications and applying for the fee waivers wherever eligible. Refer to the next questions for more details.

### **How to request a fee waiver?**

Most colleges either do not offer a fee waiver or have reserved it for the US nationals. As a result, Indians may not be eligible for a fee waiver in the first place. Nonetheless, there are colleges that let applicants apply for the waiver if they meet the underlying criteria irrespective of their nationality. Some of the colleges that quickly cross our minds include LBS, Olin, Harvard, Cornell, Alabama, Questrom, and Yale. Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are strongly encouraged to avail these waivers to fund their applications. You may be asked to provide documentary evidence (i.e., bank statement, position statement, etc) to back your request for a need-based fee waiver, so keep the documents handy.

**Are there other ways to reduce the application cost?**

We recommend applicants to separately check with colleges if they can submit GRE/TOEFL scores after they have received the official decision. Many colleges do not explicitly mention this on their application webpage and sending official scores at the time of submitting the application cost about \$50 extra. So, it is a much better strategy to write to the PhD Office and request for sending official scores once accepted into the program. You may also want to explore graduate programs, mostly European, with highly subsidized or no application fee.

**Should one consider Ph.D. after considerable work experience?**

There is a common perception that applicants with industry experience are at a disadvantage – contrary to what most people may think, there is no ideal age to pursue a Ph.D. It is a huge financial and emotional commitment and not everyone will see merit in doing a Ph.D early on in their careers. As a matter of fact, prior work experience can add distinctive value to your profile if you can articulate how your professional stint dovetails with your research aspirations. Applicants with substantial industry experience should not treat themselves any lesser compared to folks with more traditional backgrounds.

## Appendix 2: Ph.D. Interview Questions

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### Harvard Business School

#### Ph.D. in Strategy

- We went through your profile, and it seems you are already in the realm of strategy research. However, you are trained in mathematics in grad and masters, what motivated or interested you in getting a Management PhD?
- You talk about technology convergence and its influence on firms' competitive advantage, can you tell us what is "technology convergence"? And if any particular technology converges, why should firms adopt it at all?
- We went through your paper that you are revising for SMJ (the paper is on identifying economic nationalism and how it adds to liability of foreignness), but the paper seems to ask a question on biases. We know biases exist, what is so novel about the paper?
- You conducted topic modelling to "identify" economic nationalism, what sort of additional tests did you conduct to bolster the identification as "clean"?
- Following up from the previous round of interviews you had with us, we want to know how do you plan to pursue further research in technology and innovation in the HBS strategy program?
- Imagine you are given a research grant of 100k USD, and you are free to pick up an interesting area and work on a research question that is relevant and impactful to academia and in general. What area would you pick and what will be your research question?
- As your statement suggests, you are interested in looking at the economics of technology and innovation. But technology as a processual phenomenon is very dynamic. Don't you think your research that might be very relevant today might get outdated in a few years with new facets of technology coming up?
- We will come back to you again, but for now do you have any further questions for us?

*The applicant found both rounds quite intense. HBS covered everything from interests to working paper, and plans for research*

**MIT Sloan School of Management  
Ph.D. in Economic Sociology**

- Why do you want to a PhD? Why Economic Sociology?
- What fascinates you about the field?
- Describe your experience as an academic researcher so far. What are some of the avenues you see yourself exploring after you come here?
- Any specific scholars and articles that you may have read to come up with your research interests.
- Why do you think employee-led activism is an important topic to investigate? Has this phenomenon not already explored in the extant literature?
- What do you think discourages Indians from pursuing sociology?
- How did you get access to handbooks? (I had mentioned about reading handbooks to scope the wider field)
- Any questions about the doctoral program?

*The applicant says "Even though it was a conversation, I was cross-questioned wherever possible to test my understanding of the domain and clarity of thought. I felt good in a way because it helped me establish my legitimacy and credibility as a potential doctoral student, more so, because I do not have formal background in sociology. The overall feel of the interview was however more personalised compared to earlier interviews as the professor prescribed me a book to read in the middle of the conversation and seemed eager to exchange philosophical moorings about academic research."*

**Columbia Business School  
Ph.D. in Strategy**

- Can you tell us in brief why are you interested in a strategy PhD ? Given that you are a graduate in mathematics, we wonder how you got interested in management and innovation.
- Please tell us about your paper. Did you ideate, or was your contribution empirical? Your letter writers spoke volume on your empirical and

methodological skill, do you think you are also capable of asking interesting questions

- Do you know about the broad research that CBS faculties and researchers do? Technology and innovation is something that is very impactful in business research, what are your broad ideas that you would like to pursue here in CBS?
- Tell us about a paper on technology adoption that really caught your interest. Do you see yourself doing similar research if you are in Columbia?
- Your SOP speaks about technological convergence, and how it influences the relative capabilities of firms. Can you elaborate on this? The economics of technology is quite an important part of innovation research; however, do you think that your mathematical understanding and technology expertise would deviate you towards operation-research and not strategy?
- You spoke about a new methodological paper you are working on in sample selection correction. We found the idea quite fascinating. So Heckman selection correction is a popular method to address endogeneity and selection, how different is your methodology from Heckman? And what big problem are you solving with this method?
- Which other schools did you apply/ got offers from?
- We would now like to answer the questions that you have for us. Please feel free to ask questions that might help you know more about the CBS PhD program and its research.

*The candidate remarks "It seemed that the interviewers were already verse with my profile. They wanted to know if I am flexible enough to transform myself into someone who can ask interesting questions in strategy. They were trying to ensure if I am hinged to strategy research and not technology and operations management."*

### **The Wharton School Ph.D. in Management**

- Why PhD? Why PhD in Management? Why us?
- Describe your research interests.



- Which part of institutional theory you want to invoke? Economic or Sociological?
- Name some papers that you may have read to come up with your research interests.
- What challenges do you foresee yourself experiencing as a doctoral student?
- Rapid Fire Round (To be answered in not more than a sentence)
  - How would you allocate time between research, teaching, and consulting?
  - What do you think your supervisor would say about your dissertation?
  - What do you see yourself learning during the first two years of your doctoral study?
  - What do you see yourself doing after completion of your PhD?
- Any questions for us?

*According to the applicant, this was the most casual interview of the season. It took him time to digest that faculty conducted a rapid fire round as part of the interview process.*

**Yale School of Management  
Ph.D. in Organizations & Management**

- Let's talk about your interest in technology and how do you find the marriage of technology and strategy research.
- When you talk about technology, do you intend to look at the firm-side economics to technology and its dissemination, or do you intend to use technology in strategy research?
- You mentioned digital organizational twins and RCTs. Please tell us more about the digital twins and how a virtual twin of an organization can be constructed? Do you intend to simulate an organization?
- Yale is so far an OB-heavy school; however, we are trying to get more faculties and researchers on strategy and innovation management. How

comfortable are you in working with new faculties and furthering research on these areas?

- Can you tell us what else schools you applied to, and if we roll out and offer to you, will you be willing to take it?
- Do you have any questions for us? Please feel free to ask questions to know more about our program and faculties.

**Michigan Ross School of Business**  
**Ph.D. in Strategy**

- Can you tell your personal story about what led you to academia?
- What do you think the five years of PhD journey would look like?
- Can you elaborate more on what would you do from third year onwards?
- Where do you see yourself after completion of your PhD?
- Tell me about research you have done that is different the mainstream work done in the field.
- Tell me about any issues or challenges you faced and how you overcame them.
- You have mentioned about green bond transaction and reputational spillovers in your SOP? Could you elaborate a little?
- You have mentioned about the possibility of board political capital becoming degenerate. What does it imply?
- Name the article/paper that has inspired you the most? Why? (I talked about the 1985 paper written by Mark Granovetter and how it incredibly contributed to renaissance of economic sociology as a field)
- Any book that you have read that inspired your scholarly interests? (I talked about the handbook on economic sociology by Alejandro Portes)
- Can you explain your paper on glass cliff appointments and structural equality? Does it have any implications for appointments of lesser-known people as CEO?
- Do you have any questions about our PhD Program?

*The candidate remarks "This was a pretty formal interview. It seemed as if the professor had prepared a list of standardized questions to ask all the PhD applicants. Unlike the previous interviews, the professor cared to read my SOP and asked some critical questions based on the information I had supplied. That said, the professor didn't dig deep too much into my responses and seemed satisfied with the answers despite his poker (expressionless) face. That's precisely the reason we were able to wrap up the interview in time."*

**London Business School  
Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior**

- What does your ideal school/PhD program look like?
- Name two papers that have influenced you. (Wiltermuth and Gino, 2013; Kang et al., 2016)
- Design an experiment to test your hypotheses (Social class and goal setting). There are several follow up questions on participant recruitment, incentive design, and the mediators that one must consider.
- Would you prefer a hands-on or hands-off approach from your advisor?
- What makes you believe that you would be successful as a PhD student?
- We see that you have some working projects in your resume. How would you proceed once you join the PhD program? Would you continue working on them?
- Tell us an instance where you made a significant contribution to the direction of the research paper
- Tell us an instance where you proposed something that went against the opinion of your advisor? Did you stick to that proposal later?
- What other programs have you applied to? / What other programs are you considering at the moment? (Even a vague answer would suffice)
- What criteria have you considered before applying to our program?
- You already seem to have some research experience. What is the toughest aspect about research according to your experience till now?
- Why did you make the transition from Economics to OB? (Individual specific question)

**Haas School of Business**  
**Ph.D. in Management & Organizations**

- Paper Assigned: The Impact of Mandated Pay Gap Transparency on Firms' Reputations as Employers (2022)
- Why do you want to a PhD?
- Why our school?
- What is the main claim of the paper?
- What do you think about the quality of evidence they present to support their claim(s)?
- Any other alternative plausible explanations you can think of?
- If you were to design this study, what would have you done and why?
- Based on this paper, what are the possible ideas that can be explored for future research? (Written response had to be submitted)
- Describe one of your research projects?
- What was your exact contribution to the paper?
- Any questions about the doctoral program?

*The applicant says "I found the interview quite technical and impersonal during the first half. Towards the end, it became more of a conversation about how the department will be a great ecosystem to pursue my research interests. I was genuinely surprised that considering my strong predisposition for sociology, I could convince interviewers with intense leaning towards economics that I will be a great fit for the program. They were kind enough to acknowledge individuality of my thought process and made me feel welcomed."*

**Purdue Krannert School of Management**  
**Ph.D. in Strategy**

- Why do you want to pursue a Ph.D. in Strategic Management?
- Why are you interested in the Krannert School of Management at Purdue University?
- What experience makes you a good Ph.D. Candidate?

- Please share something about yourself that's not in your application materials.
- How would you explain Strategic Management to your grandmother?
- What do you think is today's biggest business opportunity and please explain why?

### **Mixed Bag**

#### **Ph.D. in Strategy**

- Describe a normal working day for you as a third year PhD student.
- How do you see yourself 5 years post the completion of a PhD?
- How do you want people to talk about your dissertation 10 years from now?
- What would be the ideal mentoring style of a potential advisor? (Aim was to understand how much structure you prefer)
- Describe the job responsibilities of your ideal job post the completion of your PhD
- What, according to you, are your major strengths and weaknesses as a Doctoral student?
- Tell us about a book which you recently read and which had an impact on you.
- Who are your role models in academia and why are they your role models?
- Tell us about a research paper which has influenced your thinking to a great extent.
- What does your ideal school/PhD program look like?
- Briefly describe one of the research projects you have worked on. (Take us through the research question, methodology used, your contribution, findings, your interpretation of findings)
- How would you evaluate the potential impact of ChatGPT on businesses?
- Why do you think, if at all, that platform-based companies will significantly change how businesses operate in future?

- How do you think AI and machine learning will change how research is conducted in future?
- What are some the math courses you have taken at undergrad/graduate level and what was broadly the topics covered? (Aim was to check familiarity with calculus and linear algebra)

### Appendix 3: Useful Resources for Business Ph.D. Applicants

Resources	Links
Research Rankings	<a href="http://www.tamugarankings.com/">http://www.tamugarankings.com/</a>  <a href="https://jsom.utdallas.edu/the-utd-top-100-business-school-research-rankings/">https://jsom.utdallas.edu/the-utd-top-100-business-school-research-rankings/</a>
Other Free Business Ph.D. Resources	<a href="https://phdproject.org/">https://phdproject.org/</a>  <a href="http://businessphdwiki.com/doku.php">http://businessphdwiki.com/doku.php</a>  <b>RA Induction Guide</b> prepared by Shashi Kant Kumawat <a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/11-DCiEjkkZe-Kdq3hkn0ZHs5mwLL_hb7scDg6t-1tmg/edit#">https://docs.google.com/document/d/11-DCiEjkkZe-Kdq3hkn0ZHs5mwLL_hb7scDg6t-1tmg/edit#</a>
Pre-Doc/ RA Opportunities	<p><b>India:</b> ISB and Selected IIMs</p> <p><a href="https://www.isb.edu/en/careers/academic-openings.html">https://www.isb.edu/en/careers/academic-openings.html</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.iimb.ac.in/programmes/nsrpredoc">https://www.iimb.ac.in/programmes/nsrpredoc</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.iima.ac.in/the-institute/administration/working-with-us">https://www.iima.ac.in/the-institute/administration/working-with-us</a></p> <p><b>Overseas:</b> Almost all major B-Schools. However, most of these opportunities are reserved for US citizens.</p> <p><a href="https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/programs/research-fellows">https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/programs/research-fellows</a></p> <p><a href="https://mitsloan.mit.edu/diversity/mit-sloan-predoc-opportunities">https://mitsloan.mit.edu/diversity/mit-sloan-predoc-opportunities</a></p> <p><a href="https://olin.wustl.edu/EN-US/academic-programs/PhD/Pages/predoc-research-fellows.aspx">https://olin.wustl.edu/EN-US/academic-programs/PhD/Pages/predoc-research-fellows.aspx</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/research-support/research-fellows.aspx">https://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/research-support/research-fellows.aspx</a></p> <p><a href="https://academics.gsb.columbia.edu/research-opportunities/predoc-fellows-program">https://academics.gsb.columbia.edu/research-opportunities/predoc-fellows-program</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.stern.nyu.edu/programs-admissions/phd/academics/pre-doctoral-program">https://www.stern.nyu.edu/programs-admissions/phd/academics/pre-doctoral-program</a></p> <p><a href="https://doctoral.wharton.upenn.edu/pre-doctoral-training-opportunities/">https://doctoral.wharton.upenn.edu/pre-doctoral-training-opportunities/</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.hbs.edu/predoc">https://www.hbs.edu/predoc</a></p> <p><a href="https://michiganross.umich.edu/programs/phd/bridges-program">https://michiganross.umich.edu/programs/phd/bridges-program</a></p> <p><a href="https://predoc.org/">https://predoc.org/</a></p>
PhD Stipend Information	<a href="http://www.phdstipends.com/">http://www.phdstipends.com/</a>

### Appendix 4: Ph.D. Application Tracker Template

S. No.	School Name	Program Name	Faculty of Interest	Deadline	Information Session (if any)	Fee (\$)	Fee Waiver Available	LOR Status			Other Application Material Status				Official Scores Sent*
								R1	R2	R3	SOP	CV	WS@	DS#	
1	NYU Stern	Management	Prof. XYZ, ABC,..	Dec 31, 2022	Nov 4, 2022	100	No								No
2															
3															
4															
5															
6															
7															
8															
9															
10															

@ WS: Writing Sample

# DS: Diversity Statement

\* GRE/GMAT and TOEFL/IELTS official scores to be sent only if required