

When people should apply, some people are under the impression that you need a lot of research or research publications in order to apply for the PhD and getting a masters beforehand is always a good idea. But I will push back that a little bit. In my experience there are two tiers of applications when it comes to PhD applicants. And the tiers of expectations are really separate. If you are a fresh undergraduate and you apply, then the expectations are different than if you have a masters. If you have a masters the expectations are higher, you should be able to do high quality research often leading to publications. But if you are bachelor, then we understand that you have had very little opportunity to do research, not everybody has an undergraduate research program. So if you have a bachelors the bar is in some sense lower. This is what I want to get across. If you apply straight after your bachelors for PhD it may be in some sense easier, because if you have a masters you are going to build up your credentials and so the bar is going to be higher after those 1-2 years of masters. So if you go for masters it is fine but it may backfire a little bit. If you have a masters you have to achieve that higher level of credentials/publications in order to get to the same program.

PK: What are looking in master's applications and what are you looking in PhD applications?

Ben: We want the super stars but at the same time we want to lower our risk. If they are great there are chances that they may fail completely. So with great scores and GPA, faculty are looking for students those will at least do well, who have good scores but also do a good job and have what it needs to do a good PhD. For that we look at letter of recommendations which has assurances that the student has the right mentality, has the right drive, has the right personality and really wants PhD. Coz many times students who start and not get a PhD coz they are not eager or they just don't care enough. Lot of students have that drive, they really want to understand deeper, and they want to learn how to do research, so making that point come across. Some students have this question 'do I want to do a PhD' you need not have that answer. PHD is designed to for you to explore research and explore what you want and it is ok if you have done some research and down the line you think you don't want a PhD. Right now students are very conservative, they think unless I am absolutely absolutely sure I want a PhD I'm not going to go for it instead I may do a masters. That is not helpful to anyone. You have to pay for the classes and then you come back for PhD you are not getting credits for those classes or the credit is not the same as for two full years so you are also losing sometime along the line. So basically I am suggesting to apply early directly to PhD and in terms of materials, just give the best you can.

Q. What will qualify as research during undergraduate studies which will show off well in the application? What does research for an undergraduate student mean?

Ben: things have changed in the last 10 yrs or so. It used to rare to see really solid undergraduate research and even today it significantly depends on the school, there is no global standard saying you must have 'this much' research, this type of publications in order to count has undergraduate research. The real question is, what has the student done with the resources that he has? So normalise based on the school, the environment, the department that the student has access to. If they have access to a faculty member who is prolific and publishes quite a bit then we would expect to see that in the application and that the student has a publication but if the resources or environment is difficult and not conducive to undergraduate research then that's ok, people understand and you write down what you've done and try to explain you effort and how to tried to explore the research. That is sometimes more important than actual publication or where the publication's at. So the process and what efforts you put in that really really important.

PK: Sitting in the US how do you figure out what resources are available to me as an undergrad here?

Ben: We don't know. We have some ideas. So it is helpful if you go to a school where we have a faculty member we know. So if you are from IIITD we can get information from PK, some specifics but in general you can explain in your Statement of Research telling us about the how the environment is, if it is difficult if there are few faculty who are interested in undergraduate mentorship and what you had to work with. That should help a lot.

PK: So in the SOP I should give a little background about the resources, the faculty available to get a sense of what to expect from my application

Ben: yes sending the context to us, knowing remembering that helps us normalise.