

Applying to Graduate School and for “Scholarships” (A Guide for those who are not Lazy or Lucky)

PURPOSE of this Guide

This guide is designed to introduce ideas to make you more competitive and give you a greater advantage in winning funding or a scholarship for full-time graduate study (Master’s or Doctorate degree), but many of the ideas also apply to increase your chances of success in being accepted for short-term courses at graduate or undergraduate-level or other professional courses

WHO should read this Guide?

This guide is for those who are seriously interested in graduate study leading to a higher degree (Master’s or Doctorate) and not satisfied just getting a “degree”, regardless of the quality of learning or the quality of the University offering the program, or just because it offers the opportunity to be in a foreign country.

For those who are “lucky”, quickly apply for admission without serious investigation of the graduate program and are successful (I’m sure you know people who have done so!), or perhaps have some special personal connection that guarantees a scholarship or funding --- this guide is NOT for them. No need to read anymore. Congratulations. Let us hope luck will continue and there will always be others who are generous to them.

For others, if this is not the case, then continue reading.

Some QUESTIONS to Start

It is useful to look at the challenge from the other side. Imagine a person or committee perhaps far away in another country, in a University or agency that provides funding, or in Vietnam, reviewing hundreds of applications with a limited number of places and limited scholarship funding. This person or committee has the authority to decide if you get accepted or not, and if you get funding or not, so:

- Why should they select YOUR application to be accepted and reject others?
- Why should they provide funding (a “Scholarship”) to YOU and reject others?
- What makes your application MUCH, MUCH BETTER than the others, and difficult to refuse?
- How have you completely convinced them that YOU are the person they are looking for?
- What is the VALUE/BENEFIT to the University Department to which you are applying of your being a graduate student there?

WHAT are “Scholarships”?

There are many sources of funding and kinds of “Scholarships”. They vary in terms of what they pay for, who awards them, and for how long. The situation changes every year, with new opportunities and possibilities of grants, so it requires careful checking. There is no one place to get this information, and not scholarships are publicly advertised. Through the internet and communication with Universities, foreign embassies, government agencies,

and friends, details can be obtained. You need to be prepared, be organized and be professional. For senior researchers, a “Scholarship” may also be represented as a “Fellowship” where the person may or may not register for a degree program, but is attached to a University or tertiary institution for a period of time to conduct focused research.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

1. National Governments
2. Foreign Governments (directly or officially through an Embassy). Sometimes from a province-level agency (not national) of a foreign country
3. Foreign Government awarded but administered through the National Government (jointly or locally)
4. Foundation, Business Company, or NGO awarded (Local or Foreign)
5. University awarded (Foreign or Local University) through the University, Department or a Professor’s research grant
6. Project-based (Government, NGO, Private Sector)

COVERAGE

Funding can range from full payment (travel, tuition, living expenses, books, thesis or field-work costs, pre-University preparations in the host country, holiday periods) to different levels of payment e.g. covering tuition or part of tuition fees only, travel only, field-work. Or even to attend a workshop.

CONDITIONS

There are often conditions attached to scholarships - some are only for government staff, other scholarships only for non-government applicants. All are usually for a fixed period of time, some allow time extensions, while others do not. Some are gender-based i.e. for women only. Some require you to work with an agency (government or other) after graduation for a fixed period of time, others do not. Some require you to have a minimum period of working experience after your first (Bachelor) degree. You need to check carefully, so you do not waste your time (and theirs).

WHERE INFORMATION IS FOUND ON SCHOLARSHIPS

Scholarship information occurs in many places. Some of it shared but some is hidden and guarded carefully by individuals - this unfortunately is reality. If you look at the section on “Sources of Funding” above, these are also the places that information on available education funding can be found. Some scholarships are offered every year and the dates of advertising and deadlines generally remain the same from year to year, so you need to plan well in advance to expect these.

Foreign Embassies, Consulates and their Educational Institutes and Information Centers e.g. British Council, US Information Center usually advertise their Scholarships in local newspapers, but it is advisable to visit these as well to meet and see what other opportunities exist apart from the publicly advertised ones. Often, they have a staff member responsible for education, and also publications on University educational opportunities in their countries. In addition, a number of Universities send teams to Vietnam to look for students. You need to keep track of these missions as well and meet with them.

Regional and international agencies also have opportunities e.g. the Asian Development Bank (ADB) compiles information on member country scholarships for which Vietnamese can apply, the ASEAN Foundation etc. On a regular basis the Vietnam Information Development Center (VDIC) in Hanoi (website address is www.vdic.org.vn/), advertises scholarship opportunities. You can register for its monthly newsletter (free) and receive it through E-Mail.

Scholarships through the private sector, NGOs etc. require you to check their websites or visit company offices if you can. Often, private sector companies have a Foundation that offers training. You need to check regularly.

A number of foreign Universities, especially private Universities, offer scholarships directly to applicants (not through the government). This requires you to check their websites carefully (what the Professors, Departments and what the Universities offer), and communicate with them when you are prepared (AFTER you know exactly what you want to do).

In particular, some foreign Universities seem to have a regular number of Vietnamese graduate students. This means that these Universities have a history of accepting Vietnamese students and know they can perform well. So check these especially. Some Vietnamese Universities have official relationships with foreign Universities, where Vietnamese students either study overseas, or in Vietnam in a joint program. This includes Asian, European and American Universities.

In all cases, you need to prepare and communicate with them in an efficient and professional way, after you have carefully sorted out what you want to study, where and why (See the section below "WHAT EXACTLY do you want to study?"). Appreciate the fact that they get many requests, and do not have time for unprepared applicants "who want a scholarship".

Getting Scholarships or Funding is a JOB (if you are serious)

It takes a lot of time. While the number of funding opportunities is increasing, the number of applicants is increasing faster, so the competition is getting harder. How you "position" yourself (in other words, how your TOTAL APPLICATION compares to others) will increase or decrease your chances. The total application includes Hard and Soft parts:

HARD

1. The academic quality of your application (your exam grades and scores, awards, academic achievements)
2. The relevant experience you have and how well you have performed (remember -- experience is NOT the same as performance!)
3. The uniqueness in your profile (1+2) - what is so special about your profile compared to others?

SOFT

4. The "packaging" of your application (attention to detail, spelling, lay-out, reader-friendliness)
5. Your "people-skills" the inter-personal and communication skills (Voice, E-Mail, Non-Verbal, Visual Appearance, Dress), your ability to sound convincing, motivated.

HARD + SOFT

6. Finding out about the terms, conditions, and details of the University programs you are interested in, and Scholarships available

Doing this seriously, putting all this together and building your application carefully takes a lot of careful preparation and time. It is like another job. The amount of effort and time you put into this depends on how serious you are. Are you satisfied to apply to 1 or 2 Universities about which that you quickly find out, easiest to get accepted to, even if it is not really the course or subjects you want, or country you want, or will you do the work to get exactly what you want? The more effort you put in, the richer is the reward.

The APPLICATION APPROACH

-Get Money First or University Acceptance First?

You need to think about this. Sometimes you have no choice as the terms and conditions of the scholarship decide whether you need to be accepted first into a University program or they will select for you or this is done jointly by you and the awarding agency. Generally, though if it is possible, it is advisable to apply to a University first and get accepted and then identify sources of possible funding after, because:

1. It demonstrates to the awarding agency your energy, interest and competence in going through the application process, so improving your chances of a scholarship
2. It saves the awarding agency the cost and effort of applying to the University
3. It is generally easier to get funding if you can show that a University has already accepted you
4. It “locks in” the University, Program and Course of Study YOU want, not what might be selected for you by others

Of course, scholarship funding is limited and award agencies have limits on how much they can grant one person, some Universities are much more expensive than others, so not any and every program can be funded. This decision is however affected by how strong is your total application (academics, experience, performance, packaging, communication, interview etc.), how you can convince the awarding agency the University and program you have selected. And of course also, it helps if the University program to which you have been accepted should also be a priority for the country’s development and government planning. “Happiness” is when all three interests (yours, the awarding agency and the government) are the same.

WHAT EXACTLY do you want to study?

Often, applicants are very unclear as to exactly what they want to study. For some persons, getting a scholarship to a foreign country is enough (the feeling is they “must” learn “something useful”, more than they know now, and it’s a free chance to travel). They think they can adjust and adapt when they reach there. The problem is that this approach often results in a bad selection of a University (limited professors, poor facilities etc.), a missed opportunity, and low level of professional competence. Some suggestions to avoid this:

1. DEFINE CLEARLY YOUR CORE PROFESSIONAL INTEREST

You need to define clearly to YOURSELF FIRST (if you are not clear to yourself, then you cannot communicate this to others) what is the focus of your interest exactly, what you want to study. It is not enough to think in general terms e.g. “tourism” or “ecotourism” or “conservation” or “fisheries management” or “aquaculture” or “microfinance” or “climate change” or “commercial banking”. This is a starting-point, but you need to go deeper, so even apart from applying for graduate study, you need to improve your own knowledge about your core area of interest BEFORE you personally contact a University or scholarship awarding agency, and certainly long before your interview (if you are short-listed).

This is especially important for Ph.D (doctorate) degrees, where research is a main requirement. It means that you must read a significant number of publications in your core area of interest and identify from these what is your special research interest. This reading should also help to identify professors and Universities where this research is taking place. But you also need to confirm this by checking the programs of Universities, especially if the publications are not recent.

2. MATCH YOUR CORE INTEREST WITH A STRONG UNIVERSITY PROGRAM

Identify and short-list Universities that offer the program in which you are interested, examine (not only “look”) at what they offer. This has many parts:

- How many courses/subjects are available at the University in your core area of interest?
- What professors specialize in your core area of interest, and how strong is their academic performance (publication record)?
- How many theses from that University have been published in your core area of interest?
- Does your core area of interest require University expertise of developing countries?
- For a Master’s degree, Is a research thesis needed or not for graduation?
- Can the thesis research and field-work be done in Vietnam (if you wish)?
- If your field-work will be in Vietnam, will it require a Vietnamese professor on your Thesis Committee?
- How flexible is the program - how many core courses and how many choices?
- Do you know anyone who has studied there at that University to get a personal opinion?
- What financial support can the University or Department provide OR recommend?
- What are other attractive (positive) and not good (negative) aspects about that University or city?

3. UNDERSTAND THE UNIVERSITY APPLICATION AND ACCEPTANCE PROCESS

As a practical part of your application you need to understand each University’s application and acceptance process, they are not all the same. Specifically:

- When is the deadline for application? Is there more than one deadline?
- To whom must the various documents be sent (application form, grade transcripts, letters of recommendation, TOEFL/IELTS scores etc.) and which ones come from you and which ones go directly to the University from their sources (e.g. Referees), your Vietnamese University, the TOEFL/IELTS office?
- Do they accept original documents only, must photocopies be officially notarized, can some be sent by E-Mail as scanned copies?
- How can you confirm all sent documents are received?
- When will they notify applicants of decisions made, and how?
- Can a University acceptance be deferred to a later date, if so -- who takes this decision?
- Do not wait until the deadline approaches to rush and do everything. You will make mistakes and Universities and Professors do not like to be rushed. It also shows bad planning and organization by you

Remember, Universities receive many applications from many persons from many countries. Yours is not the only one.

4. UNDERSTAND THE GRADUATE STUDENT SUPERVISION SYSTEM

For graduate studies (Master’s and especially for Doctorates) one Professor usually becomes your Supervisor or Technical Advisor. Usually, it is someone familiar with your area of study and interest. This is a decision made by that Professor not by an administrative committee, so no Professor is interested or cannot be identified then it is very unlikely you will be accepted. This is critical to your University acceptance.

There are a number of reasons why Professors may not accept to be a Supervisor and Technical Advisor for a student, so it is good to think of these in advance and have answers to overcome these, if any are presented to you:

- S(he)is not impressed by your academic record or “profile” or language skills and feels that you will not be successful (and s(he)will not look well in the Department) plus waste a graduate student space. Or your profile is good but there are better students applying
- The communication (personal “chemistry”) exchanges between you and the Professor did not go well

- S(he) already has too many graduate students to supervise
- S(he) does not have the expertise or interest to supervise your special interest
- S(he) does not have funding to give you (if you asked for this)

Professors and Departments also look to see what value or benefit YOU can bring to THEM -- their work, reputation and personal situations. For example -- will your presence there increase opportunities for them to get funding or do research (e.g. in Asia or Vietnam), does it provide a new link/contact with a organization (e.g. an NGO, government agency, University, private sector, in your country) in which they are interested, does it fill a quota or improve the "profile" of the Professor's student group or research team? They look to see how their Graduate Students "FIT" into their programs of work, their team of students, and professional interests (personal and departmental)

It benefits you to research the University Department and Professor who may be a possible Supervisor/Technical Advisor carefully. This can be done even if you are in Vietnam, by:

- Checking the Department's Web page, and Professors' web pages. A number of Professors also have "Personal Web Pages" (linked to their University web pages) in addition to their official University web pages in the Department. You can sometimes see their CV's (Resumes), the courses/subjects they teach, course outlines, download their publications, see what their students have done graduate theses on, where their former students are now working (an indicator of the quality of the graduate degree), the Professor's present interests, the financial grants they have received etc.
- Checking Yahoo, Google Scholar and Google Advanced Scholar to see if you can download the Professor's publications, or at least Abstracts. If you have access to other web-based databases as OARE, AGORA, HINARI, more information can be got.
- Reading their publications
- Checking persons at Universities in Vietnam who may know professionally of the Professor's work, or that University's program in your core area of interest.

Having up-to-date information on the Professor's work is extremely important in communication with him/her and in sponsoring your application (agreeing to be your Supervisor/Technical Advisor, increases the possibly of providing financial support etc.).

5. CONTACTING PROFESSORS

You should contact Professors only AFTER you are reasonably clear what you want to study, and AFTER you have checked out their University Department and Web Pages to confirm they are the right ones to contact, including understanding their present research interests (i.e., read their publications) and AFTER your CV/Resume has been updated (in case they ask for it, then you do not have to rush to make one) and AFTER you have prepared a brief "Research Concept/Brief" (if a thesis is required) and also a "Personal Statement".

The Research Concept/Brief is a short description (2-3 pages) of research you wish to do for a Thesis (if that University program requires a thesis) and the Personal Statement an equally short (2-3 pages) that describes your career interests, what you will do on returning to Vietnam, and other personal information not on your CV/Resume e.g. the personal context and reasons for your study choice, your strengths, what you are doing now to improve your skills. They may or may not ask for these (CV/Resume, Research Concept, Personal Statement) but it is safer to have them in case you are asked (then you do not have to apologize and say you are not ready, or rush to write them in a hurry and do a poor job). In any case, many graduate school applications do include similar information so the information in these will be used when you apply officially on an application form.

6. SUMMARIZE & COMPARE WHY YOU WANT TO GO TO THE SHORT-LISTED UNIVERSITIES
After your checking the Universities in which you are interested, it is useful to compare what they offer. This is important for 3 reasons: (1) for you to make a high quality, personal decision so you are clear in your own head, (2) for you to convince and persuade the scholarship or funding agency that your decision is logical, technically sound and knowledge-based, and (3) for you to convince and persuade the University as to why you have selected them. It is better if YOU select what Universities you wish to apply to, rather than have a selection committee do that for you.

Developing Constructive Personal Relationships

Personal support and advice can be useful. Selection decisions will be made by people, so its helpful to understand their areas of interest, concern, bias etc.

- It all starts from the first contact. You only have one chance for a first good impression, and whether you realize it or not your application and the image others have of you starts from the first time you contact an awarding agency, University, or Professor, or Secretary.
- You can contact persons or friends who are studying on graduate scholarships. Their personal experiences can be very helpful - with advice on experiences of interviews, interactions with the Universities, student life at the University, course content etc.
- You can contact persons who may know professionally of the Professor's work, or the University's program in your core area of interest. This, of course, has to be done professionally, but can help identify a good program, and sometimes this can give you a direct professional link to the Professor or University

Starting from WHERE YOU ARE NOW

After you make a hard assessment of your graduate educational interests (following ideas in the section above ("WHAT EXACTLY do you want to study?"), checked graduate programs, got application forms, identified when you wish to start, compare where you are NOW in relation to these.

Update and improve your CV/Resume (your present "profile"), including identifying possible persons who will act as Referees to provide recommendations for your application and imagine you are on the Selection Committee (University, or Embassy or Government) or a Professor of a University in whose Department you wish to study - will you definitely accept this person as described in your CV, and provide funding if not - why not? What do you think their overall reaction will be - strongly positive, average (slightly good or slightly bad impression) or strongly negative? Some important questions:

- What in your "profile" (background) will catch their (positive) attention? What content makes your application special, what special value do you think YOU bring to that University program, department etc. And what might they consider negative?
- What can you do now and over the next few months to improve your "profile" to add the missing things that will improve its quality, add new skills and competencies, and overcome less favorable parts of your CV e.g. if you have low course grades, low exam scores etc.?
- For those persons whom you wish to act as Referees to write Recommendations for you, are you in regular contact with them, when is the last time you have interacted with

them? Will they suddenly hear from you after many months of no contact, just for this request?

Some "COMMUNICATION ETIQUETTE"

It is useful and important to be sensitive of the situation of the persons with whom you communicate (by E-Mail, telephone, letter, personal or other contact). Some points to consider:

- When using E-Mail, reply/answer quickly. At least, let persons know you have received their E-Mail and will provide the information soon (state a specific reasonable time). Do not leave them waiting (days, weeks) without answering, while you collect the information requested, and then apologize - it's too late then
- Use a spell-checker in correspondence (E-Mail, Letters, Application Forms). If there are spelling mistakes it shows you are careless and lazy (or unqualified)
- Try to understand the correct way to address the persons, their names, the cultural or personal sensitivity. Under-respect and over-respect should be avoided
- In terms of using telephones, land-lines are more reliable (and clearer) than mobile phones. Do NOT use text-messaging.

SUMMARY. Putting it all together.

Because of the large number of applicants (many of whom may have a similar academic background as you), you have to be competitive, stress your advantages, master all parts of the application process, not only "fill out the application forms" and hope to be "lucky". Others who work harder at it will be "more lucky". This includes personal communication and attractive packaging of your application, based on knowledge you have found out about the University, Department, Professors.

It is important to remind yourself that acceptance in graduate school by a foreign University is not only an administrative decision (especially for doctorate degrees), but a technical and human and personal one, including developing a personal professional relationship with a Professor who will be your Supervisor/Technical Advisor.

Remember the questions asked at the beginning of this Guide:

- Why should they select YOUR application to be accepted, but reject others?
- Why should they provide funding (a "Scholarship") to YOU, but reject others?
- What makes your application MUCH, MUCH BETTER than the others, and difficult to refuse?
- How have you completely convinced them YOU are the person they are looking for?
- What is the VALUE/BENEFIT to that University Department of your being a graduate student?

Have the confidence in yourself, and do not sell yourself short (e.g. apply without careful selection for a University that has a strong program in your area of interest). If you take the application process seriously, it is a big job to do, lots of time needed. You need to be organized. But you will be successful.