

APPING Guide

Introduction to Apping

Apping is another avenue as placement that relatively few graduates choose nowadays. With increasing concern over the state of the American economy and India Shining (yes, there is concern over that too!), more and more students are skeptical about going abroad (especially the US). However, in good cheer, apping is not dead as yet and it is in this optimistic spirit of helping it survive that I shall preach.

There are certain facets to the apping procedure that set it apart from the placements procedure. There are things like recommendations, written statements etc. which make the apping process more complicated compared to a job interview. The evaluation of a potential app candidate is completely virtual and based on what he/she submits in writing while applying.

Most importantly, the skill sets that potential "employers" look for in a candidate are quite different from those in a typical job scenario (though some of the HR jargon like team spirit, etc. lingers around here too). Apping can also be an expensive process if carried out carelessly.

Apping, like placements, requires its own preparation albeit of a different nature.

Unfortunately, the amount of documentation that exists for apping is almost non-existent and the little that exists is difficult to locate because it is generally locked away in the hard disk of a person who toiled hard to obtain it in the first place.

The purpose of this guide is to provide answers to some of the questions that students generally face while undergoing the apping process. The ideas/advice/suggestions in this text are based solely on my own experience while apping for a Doctoral position in Chemical Engineering for Fall 2008. I have tried to make the text as "chemeng-free" as I could. Any reference to the profession shall be explained in the relevant context wherever necessary.

Any suggestions as to the improvement of the text are welcome. We shall now launch into the steps involved in a typical apping procedure. The activities described are in no particular order though there is an element of chronology in some places.

The list of activities is as follows:

- Deciding that you are going to app
- Taking the relevant tests like GRE, TOEFL etc.
- Coming up with a list of potential universities that you are interested in
- Writing personal statements
- Recommendations
- Filling in tedious forms
- Mailing relevant material to each university

In the following chapters we shall deal with each of these facets separately discussing things from their definitions, costs, importance, some fundae etc. I sincerely hope you are not getting bored already.

Should I App or not?

This is perhaps among the few abstract/introspective parts of the apping process and generally a very painstakingly slow and torturing one (it was for me at least). Most of the IITian crowd believes that a high DR always apps by default. They fail to see other reasons as to why a person might be motivated to maintain his/her CPI through 4 years. Anyway there shall be plenty of opportunities to lament and bemoan the IIT thought process later on. The basic question we want to address is "Should I app or not?" We shall look at the viewpoints of people across academic and financial backgrounds. Most people including me who have opted for a PhD still have very little idea about the kind of life we are going to lead. To tell you the truth our choice is quite similar to our JEE branch selection process i.e. we don't know much about the future. Ideally this should not be the case. As clichéd as it may sound, the decision to app should be based on your liking for your subject and to know whether you like your subject or not

you need to explore it. There are other considerations too like future prospects, finances etc. but a strong desire to explore your subject/field is still a critical requirement.

The most common avenue one has at his/her disposal to explore an area are courses and projects. While courses give you information on the building blocks and foundations of your subject, projects provide you with a chance to do your own thing in the field. When I talk about courses I am talking about your interest in the courses and not your scores or grades. What you need to gauge is how well your courses appeal to your curiosity even if you end up performing miserably in them. The same applies to your projects. Don't try to correlate your interest with your grades or publications etc. Talking about CPI, you should know and understand why a person with a higher CPI has a better chance of getting an app. The reason is fairly straightforward. Faculty in most universities look for a strong foundation in the field that a candidate applies for. Coursework and relevant grades are a direct method of gauging the candidate's understanding of concepts as well as his/her academic capabilities. Please note that doing several projects while neglecting your coursework can sometimes backfire. As an undergrad it would be prudent to limit yourself to about 3 projects (including the BTP). A publication is an added bonus but your CPI remains a critical factor. Having mentioned this, a word for those with not very good CPIs. For reasons expressed above, some students may not have the best options open to them and whether or not to use them remains their call.

As far as projects are concerned, the best time to use them is during the summer vacations. The three months provide ample time to devote to a project as well as use on campus facilities for some extra curricular activities. One should note that the vacations after the first and the second year are typically ones in which one gets to choose his/her work. By the end of the third year one is typically required to take up an internship and by the time the fourth year summers arrive you are out of the institute. The internship also provides a good opportunity to gauge your merits in research although some might argue that doing a research internship might affect chances of landing a good job, which need not always be true. There have been several cases where the internship has proved to be a turning point leading to an obvious choice of career.

Having said that, the nature of the PT is something one must choose wisely depending on what one wants to test. If you are more inclined to a research line and would like to test your aptitude in a job scenario then an industrial PT might help and vice versa. In short a PT must provide you with sufficient background in the career choice that you have less of an idea about so that your decision of a career is not a misinformed one. Higher studies abroad are an expensive affair and not affordable by average Indian middle class families. In most cases students being admitted are offered some kind of financial support in the form of assistantships, waivers, scholarships etc. and should not be a cause for concern at this stage of the apping process. As far as apping itself is concerned, the costs lie in the range of about Rs. 5000-Rs.7000 per university applied. This cost includes giving tests like GRE, TOEFL etc., transcripts, couriers, application fees etc. One must therefore make a careful selection of the universities, if apping.

Future prospects after a PhD are something that, as pointed out earlier, I am little informed about and to a large extent are also determined by the field you are pursuing and sometimes

also on your research interests. Academia is definitely an option after doctorate studies but somehow doesn't invoke a positive response, especially in India. Data on university websites suggests a healthy recruitment process for doctoral candidates so I guess the job market is pretty accommodating of PhDs. Many people are of the opinion that it makes no sense to change fields after a PhD as it shall mean a waste of about 5-6 years but placing that kind of a restraint on oneself only makes the decision to apply more difficult. The best people to ask about future prospects are professors and if possible seniors who have made significant progress into their higher studies. These are people who have seen the field from close quarters for quite some time and can sometimes give you some very useful inside information about market conditions.

Please do not fall for popular misconceptions or rumours about the lives of PhDs or the future thereafter. It always helps to analyze the authenticity of your sources of information.

GRE/TOEFL The GRE and TOEFL are standard tests conducted by Educational Testing Services (ETS), USA. These tests are meant to measure a candidate's aptitude as a graduate student and his/her strength in written and spoken English. Both the tests are generally required of all international students although rarely you might find a university that offers a TOEFL waiver. Certain fields like the pure sciences (biology, mathematics, chemistry) might require candidates to take an additional Subject GRE which measures aptitude in a certain field only. Again this may not be part of the criteria of every program you apply to. The GRE is a 2.5 hour exam that comprises a verbal, quantitative and essay writing sections. The verbal and quantitative sections are marked out of 800 each while the writing assignments are graded on a scale of 6.0. Indian students face problems mainly in the verbal section as the English can get a little complicated at times. The quantitative section is simple and requires very little preparation (a few simulated tests is enough) while the writing tasks can be tackled on the spot with some practice on time management. The standard "text" followed for the verbal section is the Barron's GRE guide. The book has a set of 3500+ high frequency words that have appeared in the GRE over the years which by the way, one is expected to mug up. The task might sound trivial and easy at first, but it is only after one undertakes it that he/she realizes the truth. It is suggested that preparation ideally be taken slow and steady as opposed to hoping to improve your vocabulary over the span of a few weeks or days.

In addition to the word lists it is suggested that a lot of general reading be undertaken in the course of the preparation for the exam. Not only does this help improve vocabulary but it also improves your chances with the reading comprehension questions. Another method that is used to mug up the word lists more efficiently is that of using flash cards. These come in packs of 30 little boxes, each containing 100 odd "chits" of paper carrying a word on one side and its meaning on the opposite side. These can also be self made if one is patient and hard working enough. The TOEFL is a simple test that measures your ability to listen, speak, write and read English. It involves routine tasks that are more or less adapted versions of the written comprehension i.e. answering questions based on data that is supplied to you in verbal, written or audio form. In the speaking section you are required to comment on a specified situation and your response is recorded and graded. The TOEFL can be a little tiring as it lasts almost 4

hours. The speaking section was added only about a year back and has been among the lower scoring sections. Accent is generally not a problem in the test.

On the whole, all one needs is some practice on each of the sections and lots of confidence. It is recommended that you give the TOEFL immediately after the GRE since the language preparation for both tests is similar. People often question the importance of scores in the GRE and TOEFL in the context of apping and frankly everyone seems to have their own opinion on this matter. In my opinion these are added criteria that help universities decide between candidates of otherwise equal abilities. It is generally regarded that as long as you are above 1350 in the GRE and above 100 in the TOEFL you are in the "safe" zone which really means that you shall not be rejected because of your scores. High scores are not a guarantee of getting admitted and low scores need not always mean that your chances are dismal. There have been quite a few exceptions at both the extremities. Some universities set a lower limit on the TOEFL score required but these are generally in the range of 70-100 which is very much manageable. TOEFL scores generally reflect on your communication ability and are generally referred to while deciding on whether a candidate can make a good Teaching or Research Assistant (both jobs require good communication skills).

Between the GRE and the TOEFL, the former is definitely more important. If you think that your English needs to be worked on then it is recommended that you start preparation early. Cultivation of good working knowledge in English can take time especially for those who are not well acquainted with the language. Phasing out your preparation over a sufficiently long time period shall give you the advantage of working with little pressure. Both the GRE and the TOEFL cost about \$160 each hence you wouldn't want to take any of the tests a second time. There have been cases where people have had to take a second GRE to make up for a poor performance in their first attempt. Remember, that universities can see all your scores whether good or bad if you happen to report them. Giving a second GRE can be a slightly tricky gamble since an improvement in scores is almost imperative to cast a favorable impression. Deciding Universities Deciding on the universities is something that should be done in the early phases of your apping process. For one, it gets you thinking about the kind of universities you would be interested in, what your chances of getting into a particular university are, rankings, specifsc research groups etc.

Choosing your universities also depends on where you stand in the apping ladder as far as your batch is considered and whether or not people with profiles better compared to yours are also apping to some of the universities you are interested in. This however, becomes important at a later stage. Initially, it is suggested that you prepare a list of universities that you might want to consider. Additions and eliminations can then be made once you have an idea of your chances compared to others. Different people use different yardsticks while deciding on a university. A standard tool of comparison is checking out rankings in publications like US News etc. These publications may be likened to our very own India Today university rankings though they tend to be more comprehensive. US news, for example, lists universities ranked according to general and specific fields. People offer quite varying interpretations of these rankings. Some suggest that the rankings should be viewed in tiers or blocks rather than placing them in direct

preference, for example, the top 5 are tier one and the next 10 are tier 2 etc. Essentially what is being said is that the rankings shouldn't be viewed as absolute and offer a general idea of the standing of the universities.

Other criteria that may affect your choice of universities are climate, proximity to coastal areas, connectivity, campus life etc. I suggest these secondary factors come into the picture when you need to decide between universities that have almost identical profiles in terms of academics, research, career opportunities etc. If you have already made up your mind on your research field then you might also want to concentrate on applying to universities that have the best groups in your chosen field. This is sometimes the case with DD students. One must also bear in mind that while you might apply to the university with the best group in your field, it need not necessarily translate into you being assigned to that same group. Many universities assign students to research groups after the first semester and there are chances you might not always end up with your chosen group. Once you have decided on your potential universities you should decide on the number of universities that you would like to apply to. Again, this is a matter of much contention and dispute. While applying to a large number of universities can increase your chances of getting an admit, it will work only if you have applied intelligently. For example, if a hypothetical 7 pointer were to apply to the same university as yet another hypothetical 9 pointer who also has 2 international publications and very good extra curricular activities etc. then it is pretty commonsensical to expect the 7 pointer to get nowhere. Hope the point is clear. One must make a very genuine estimate of his/her chances of getting into a university however good or bad it may be. This "estimate" is genuine only when you have compared yourself in an unbiased manner with your fellow appers.

Some points you might want to consider while making a comparison: CPI, DR, publications, recommendations, etc. Please bear in mind that everyone wants to get into a good university and hence everyone with the least bit of chance will definitely take it. It's good to be optimistic while applying to some of the best universities but only in moderation. Apping as pointed out earlier is expensive and taking chances when you stand none is pure waste as it could have been used to apply to a place where the odds were in your favor. Apping to about 10 universities should be more than enough to get you an offer. However, if you are willing to spend the extra buck you might want to apply to more universities.

A popular concept is that of the "Safe Univ". A Safe Univ is one where you apply as a backup and where you are almost sure of getting an admit from. Depending on your credentials and standing, this univ is typically a rung lower compared to your other preferred universities. One should generally avoid a clash in the Safe Univ to maximize chances. The number of Safe Univs lies generally between 1 and 3 depending on the level of competition. The next phase is coordination with other people who are apping along with you. By definition, this process is supposed to optimize and better the chances of everyone getting an admit. The process is more or less an agreement between individuals to apply to some universities and not apply to certain others in order to avoid clashes, especially in places which are known to have given offers in the past. The process is beneficial as it gives you a direct idea of your chances in a particular university.

If some university has many people above or equal to you applying to it, then it makes sense to reconsider your choices and go for universities where you face lesser competition. Coordination is generally not a very formal procedure although some departments do have an "apping cell" set up with the sole objective of coordinating the apping process. With some idea about the universities that others with you are applying to, you should now be able to filter from your original univ list, the universities that you shall be finally applying to having considered the factors pointed out earlier. It also helps to take the advice of your professors/recommenders as they might give you some inside information about universities or about how good your chances at a particular university might be. Personal Statement and Essay As I had indicated in an earlier chapter, the interface between the "employers" and the potential "employees" in the apping process is quite different compared to placements. There are no formal interviews, no HR questions, no case studies etc. All that is asked of "you" is/are written statement(s) describing your goals, objectives, inspirations etc. These written statements take on various names and titles like statement of purpose, diversity statement, statement of objectives etc. Now, there are literally hoards of fundae on how to go about writing a personal statement. Unfortunately, in most of these fundae the emphasis is more on the reader than on the writer, which means that these fundae focus more on casting a good impression on the reader while totally discounting the person the entire essay is all about in the first place i.e. you.

Also, I have developed, over the course of 4 years at IITB, an almost religious trust in the capability of imbecile seniors to pass on the most moronic fundae to their hero worshipping juniors (you and I might be an example of this phenomenon). It is this belief that gives me the liberty to safely assume that with or without this guide, these fundae on writing personal statements will definitely reach you. If they don't, consider yourself lucky and if they do then please consider them in light of what I have said above and what I say below. A personal statement is meant to be just that i.e. personal, which also means that you write about your objectives and goals AS YOU PERCEIVE THEM. A few formatting and aesthetic tips might help but the content is all you, you and you alone. A personal statement is the result of sound introspection, something not all of us are good at. It takes time to tie up events in your life and link them with a common thread. Please note, the personal statement is your only way of getting your strengths across to the admissions committee.

There are several things one can convey through a personal statement, some are obvious, others are more subtle:

1. Your ambitions and how research fits into the picture.
2. Your immediate and future objectives: again, what place research has in them.
3. How your present and past has helped you mold yourself into the person you are today: point out some of your plus points
4. How you have learnt from your mistakes, if you think you have made any.
5. Your ease of communicating complex ideas.
6. Your thought process and level of maturity.
7. Your strengths, if you are aware of them.

If your responses to most of the above points were, "What's that?" then perhaps it's time for some introspection. Every decision has a basis and a personal statement, simply put, is a written explanation of your basis and the ideas that led to your choice. Some points that one might consider: academic career (school, high school, JEE etc.), courses, projects, internships, work ethic, guidance from professors, exposure to research, turning points etc. People adhere to different formats while writing their personal statements, some divide it into sections, some begin or end with a quote etc. I have even heard of a personal statement written completely in verse! So the formatting is up to you. Just make sure you don't make it too long drawn because the person at the other end means strict business. Ideal word limit is between 1000-1350 words.

Another thing, while you scan your entire life for writeable material you will find many incidents that you might want to include on your personal statement. With all due respect to your feelings, please bear some caution in your choice of subject and language. It helps to consider that the people who read your statement have had years of experience reading such documents. Melodramatic stuff, pompous claims, indicated ideals etc. might not go down too well unless justified in a befitting manner. In short, try not to sound like an empty vessel. Apart from your statement of purpose (SOP)/personal statement/statement of objectives, some universities also ask for a diversity statement. A diversity statement is an essay in which you explain how your cultural and ethnic background shall add to the diversity of the particular university. This is one place where your extra currics can enter the picture. The purpose behind asking for such an essay is to gauge you outside the academic arena. Activities like sports, music, singing, non academic reading and writing, drama, dance etc. are all welcome here. While describing your interests in these fields your emphasis should be on how you can add to the diversity rather than on your achievements alone.

Some people also describe the diversity statement as the non academic personal statement. Also, this is one place where you should include your family background (parents, siblings etc.). Diversity statements are generally shorter than personal statements and a suggested word limit would be about 750 words or less. Some universities place special restraints on the size of the personal and diversity statements. Please make sure you adhere to these limits and are aware of them well in advance. Based on these restraints you might also have to trim down your essays. This process should be done with prudence. Try incorporating all points of the original while cutting down on the details.

Recommendations constitute another aspect of the apping process that sets it apart from the placements. By definition, a recommendation, at-least in the context of apping, is an evaluation of a candidate's potential as a graduate student by a person who is acquainted well enough with the candidate (by way of guiding him through projects or coursework) to carry out an objective evaluation. This person in the general case is/are professors/researchers with whom the candidate has worked at some point in his academic career. Recommendations act as a third eye for the universities helping them gauge a candidate from the viewpoint of a person who holds a position similar to theirs and hence should be able to evaluate a candidate on relevant scales. A typical application requires a candidate to furnish 3 recommendations. Some universities are fine with two while some like CalTech allow up to six recommendations per

application. Choosing recommenders is by far the most common dilemma faced by students while applying.

There are several yardsticks one can use to identify a potential recommender: the time spent working under the person, performance and feedback obtained from the person (whether favorable or not), recommendation limit imposed by the person, status of the person in academic circles, contacts in universities you are applying to, history of the person as a recommender etc. By default, the BTP/DDP guide is always one of the recommenders because in most cases these are the people under whose guidance one happens to have worked the most. One down two to go. The amount of work done under a particular professor and the evaluation of the same are crucial factors in determining if he/she can give you a favorable recommendation. Remember, no one will volunteer to inform universities about your screw-ups and universities understand the advantage the freedom to choose recommenders gives to the applicants. So, it's best to ensure that your recommender is going to give you a positive review. These things are of a more abstract nature and one should be able to guess from the person's attitude or behavior.

In case you are not sure, it always helps to politely put the question to the professor and discuss the issue with him/her. It's better to sort this issue with the professor in person (even if it is embarrassing) rather than have an unfavorable recommendation do the rounds of your admissions committees. Professors who readily agree to give you a reco can be safely assumed to be in your favor though there can be exceptions. Use your judgement wisely, one bad recommendation can literally close the doors on all your applications. An important suggestion, courtesy Prof. Bellare, is about making sure that you get recommendations from all project guides listed in your resume. Listing a project on your resume automatically gives it high significance and not having the concerned person's recommendation might appear a little out of place. Universities can sometimes come forward asking you to get a recommendation from a project guide you had listed in your resume but hadn't approached for a reco. So, it's advisable to bear a little caution before listing a project on your resume.

Coming back to the choice of 2nd and 3rd recommenders, these are generally picked from seminar guide/summer project guides/ internship guide/course instructors/ a combination of all these. My second recommender was my seminar guide and I had also taken a course of his in which I had performed well. My third recommender was a summer project guide and I had also taken a course under him. If you haven't taken up any summer projects then doing a good research internship can be very helpful. The basic idea is to develop a healthy interaction with professors by way of projects/ performance in courses/ seminars etc. Recommenders are generally asked to describe in what capacity they have known a particular candidate. If your recommender has only taught you one course chances are he would not know enough about you to put in a good word. If a desperate situation does land you in such a spot, pick someone with whom you have interacted on a personal basis as the odds that he/she would have something good to write about you are higher. For many professors, writing a recommendation is at par with creative writing, something not everyone may like. So, sometimes there is a tendency for veteran recommenders to follow a set format for a recommendation.

This is understandable given their schedules. At the end of the day, your recommender will put in a personal note about you somewhere. It is up to you to make sure that note is a positive one. The latest on-line application systems allow for on-line recommendations but some profs still prefer the old style of hand-written paper recommendations. If your prof is fine with on-line recos then nothing better than that. All you need to do is give his email id in the on-line application and the rest is handled between the university and the professor. However, there is generally some following up to be done especially near submission deadlines unlike hand-written recos. Typically, professors also ask for documents like transcripts, SOP, resume, etc. to get to know a candidate better. It's generally good to ask a prof what he needs and supply them with the relevant details well in advance. For those who prefer giving paper recos, one needs to give the relevant printed paper recommendation forms for each of his/her universities and envelopes to the prof. While collecting paper recos one should check if the professor has sealed the envelope properly and signed across the seal. Paper recos are typically sent as part of the application material couriered to the department (transcripts etc.). Paper recommendation forms are generally available on the admissions website of the university.

Professors in a department are often approached by more than one person for recommendations, especially if they happen to have a reputation in their field. So, how does the scenario change when one (or more) of your recommendations clash with another candidate? Assume for the moment that you also happen to have some common univs between yourselves. From what I have been told, when univs see a prof recommending multiple applicants, they revert to the professor to rank them in his order of preference. This makes the task much simpler for them if they need to choose between the two applicants. It is a good idea to have at least one recommender not clashing with anyone else when applying to a particular univ. Not all professors choose to rank their students but in case somebody does some candidates might find themselves at a disadvantage. Online forms/Transcripts Congratulations if you have made it this far! It's an achievement in itself and probably means that you are well suited for research so you might just take it to the end. We now enter the paperwork phase of apping, the most frustrating of them all. This phase has on-line forms, off-line forms, transcripts, envelopes of every size, glue, staplers, pins, printing, copying and of course lots of paper. The formal application process consists of the following: submitting the on-line form, reporting test scores and sending application material.

Apping requires several on-line and phone transactions, hence access to a credit card is a must. The on-line forms are definitely a relief compared to the paper forms but are a nightmare anyway. The forms ask for very general information and some academic information like previous institutions attended, grades, honors and achievements apart from demographic data like name, address etc. The forms also contain fields for you to type/paste your personal statement and other essays. Recommender information like email address, address, contact etc. are also generally entered in this form. On-line forms can be filled in multiple sessions and all the information in a session is saved while closing it. Some univs may ask for information on courses taken (textbook used, grade obtained etc.). This information may be required to be entered in text fields or as a Word/pdf document. Once submitted, you cannot make any more

changes to an on-line application hence ensure the correctness of all information before paying the application fee and submitting the application.

On-line applications are generally managed by websites like embark.com, applyyourself.com etc. and you are required to create an account with them in the beginning. Depending on the university you are automatically prompted to do this if you do not already have an account. GRE and TOEFL scores are required to be reported to each university that you apply to. Test scores may be reported either by phone or fax. Both the TOEFL and the GRE have a provision of reporting scores to 4 univs for free just when you have finished the test. Depending on when you take these exams you may or may not exercise this option, for example, if you happen to take the GRE in your second year summers you cannot report scores just then since you wouldn't be applying that academic year. Test scores are reported using school codes that are specified on university admissions websites. GRE scores might also require mentioning a department code. Instructions on reporting scores using phone/fax may be obtained from the ETS website. TOEFL scores can also be reported online. Application material includes a copy of official transcripts, paper recommendations and any other hard copies requested by the university (personal statement, resume etc.).

Some univs required more than one transcript so one should apply for transcripts bearing this in mind. Transcripts at IITB cost Rs.500 for the first copy and Rs.100 for subsequent copies in a single application. So you wouldn't want to apply for transcripts more than once. Material is generally sent by couriers like DHL, DTDC, etc. Students are advised to pool their material if the recipient is the same, typically people of the same department applying to the same university. Costs vary with the weight of the shipment and lie between 700-1200 for a package containing about 4 sets of application material. Delivery can take up to a week sometimes. There are generally student schemes during apping time that you might want to take advantage of. However, I definitely recommend pooling applications as it saves a lot of money. Ensure that your packet contains all the required documents addressed to the correct persons. It is also advised to mention on your envelope a summary of its contents and your name and application number if any. Documents of a particular type should be enclosed in a single envelope while preparing your packet. In the end 3-4 packets may be combined to form a single package ready for shipping.

Most univs maintain an on-line interface where students can check the status of their application and also check if their application is complete or not. Keep checking the status of your applications at regular intervals to ensure the receipt of your transcripts, test scores etc. You might have to do some follow-up with your recommenders to complete your applications at the earliest. OK people, time to sit back and wait for the results. Most univs have deadlines around January 15 though some like Princeton have a very early deadline of December 1. You should inquire about application deadlines well in advance to avoid missing a university because it had a very early deadline. Admits start coming as early as the last week of January and continue through February and March till about the mid-April. If you get an app early, you should consider withdrawing from universities lower in preference compared to the univ you have been admitted

to. This increases the chances of others (including your colleagues) who have applied to those universities. Withdrawing is not mandatory but is recommended.

Universities generally do not prefer giving admits to more than a fixed number (around 1-3) of applicants from a particular university. Hence withdrawing might enhance the chances of an applicant below you. Most universities have a deadline of April 15 for accepting or declining an admit but insist that you inform them as soon as you can. If you don't happen to get an early app, well, then wait as there is little else you can do at that moment. Keep track of the results in your field. Sites like thegradcafe.com and on-line forums are a very good interface to obtain this information. If a particular university rejects you, it never hurts to ask them in which areas they found your application lacking. Admissions are known to have come as late as April end so don't lose hope. If a particular univ you have applied to has sent out admits and rejects but hasn't intimated you yet then you probably are on their wait list. In case you have rejects from a majority of your universities, you might want to take a look at universities with rolling admissions. Such universities do not have an application deadline and process applications on a rolling basis till an advanced deadline (an example for Chemical Engineering is the University of Colorado at Boulder). It isn't a bad idea to talk with your guide/recommenders and see what advice they can give you. It might open up some new avenues. Once you have an admit and have sent your acceptance of the same you are almost done. Wait for the formal acceptance letter, visa documents etc. You might want to get in touch with some seniors in your university to start planning your trip. Look up tickets and visa details. If possible, treat your friends, lab-mates and professors to sweets or more!

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