

Summary | What I would have told myself (a BS-MS student)

Way before applying (1st, 2nd year)

- Read books (consider Kindle + text-to-speech/audible; also helps with the pronunciation).
 - E.g. About famous scientists etc.
- Try to have at least some experience in the field where you would like to work.
- Try to organise sessions where you can teach and learn from your peers. Teaching is perhaps the best way of learning. Official organisation lets you also mention it in your CV.

Before Applying (3rd year)

- Plan roughly when you plan to do what. There used to be an overload semester, so balance that accordingly.
 - E.g. Place the GREs, TOEFL/IELTS; possibly start preparing
 - Keep ample time for applying; keep the submissions bespoke and that takes time.
- European applications are less structured usually but are not worth neglecting.
- Try to get good summer internships. Make the most out of whatever opportunity you get. These experiences help you scientifically and a good performance means you can have a wider selection of reference letters for your applications.

While applying

- Communicate with your peers.
 - Try to avoid conflicts if you are applying to the same department (there are plenty of universities with essentially the same external profile).
 - Pool the resources to keep abreast of any new opportunities and deadlines
 - Have a smaller, closer set of friends
- Avoid formatting errors, spelling errors, especially in names. Try to re-read the application after a few hours before finally submitting it. Ensure your SOPs are peer-reviewed. Perhaps have one quickly glanced at by a professor to ensure you are targeting the right level.
- Remember: Professors are looking for good students just as much as you are looking for a good position.
 - In addition to your academic performance, letters of recommendation etc, they seek evidence of independent thinking, being able to fit into a new environment, overall curiosity/passion etc. The summer internships come in handy; if you have helped with teaching (even if it is in a self-help like group), mention it.
 - Having a good publication is always a plus but it is not necessary.
- Do not expect professors to reply outright. Don't be shy to remind them at regular intervals about your enquiry (say once a week or so; three reminders used to be my ball-park).

Acceptance and after

- Once you have one offer, you can sometimes leverage it to obtaining other offers or quicker responses.
- Do not rely too much on the fellowship/scholarship amount as an indicator of anything significant. Costs of living (such as rent, food etc) vary widely.
 - In the US, you can usually rotate between labs/groups.
 - In Europe, it will be mostly project specific, so your boss will likely be fixed in advance (there are exceptions of course).
 - In both cases (but especially the latter), try to write to students who are already in those groups to get an understanding of the culture etc. It pays to have the right people guiding you.

- For some people, the location matters. If you are into hiking, or outdoor sport, or if you enjoy specific activities which you feel are essential to your happiness (I'm a robot, so I had no requirements), factor that in.
- Try not to exhibit too much happiness; others might still be unnerved waiting to get their acceptance. If this happens to you, hang in there. It is easy to while away time at this phase; try to stay productive.

Belgium specific

- Here, the science funding agency, the FNRS, accepts applications from around the world.
- PhDs are four-year positions.
- These applications are written in collaboration with a professor and are highly specialised; they chart out the entire project and give a timeline of how the research project is intended to evolve through the four years.
- Sometimes professors also have their own grants and can hire students themselves. These students can then apply for FNRS grants for which the professors can help. [this is the path I followed; it was risky because the initial funding was for just one year]
- A lot of the information in the French speaking world, is unfortunately only in French. However, one can always write to seniors in the various places for specific application procedures (I have some friends who did/are doing their PhDs in places in Portugal, Germany etc who should be happy to help, should you have specific questions).