

Personal Statement

From my early school days (Trincomalee, which was spent on a smaller less developed coastal town in Sri Lanka) I wasn't able to get the similar exposure to computer science or robotics that some of my peer applicants were able to get. The most exposure to computer science we got was the seminars done on MS Word and Presentation. Undergraduate degrees in top level national universities (such as University of Peradeniya) here were offered based on a national level examination ranking at which we were forced to compete on an uneven ground due to the lack of educational resources.

Upon entering the faculty only I got some type of Programming exposure which had opened up the field of computer science and later artificial intelligence. Still we were plagued with the lack of resources let it be the compute resources (we only had access to an old Tesla K20 GPU who's VRAM was a limitation for experimentation and had to be shared by 1200 students and faculty thus not getting sufficient time to do experimentations) or the lack of connections to internationally know research labs which in some sense limited the scope of the projects we were able to carry out and the amount of internship opportunities that were accessible. Due to these factors for the most part my motivation to explore robotics came from published papers and open source lectures on youtube (Prof Nando de Freitas and Prof David Silver). With only this exposure I was able to publish in top tier international conferences during and beyond my local internship.

My graduation coincided with the pandemic which made the situation even worse for smaller countries like ours who faced a prolonged travel ban from developed nations thus restraining our ability to get research positions in bigger labs as most of my peer applicants did. Not only this constrained me in terms of academic resources but also in terms of financial resources where the cost of running algorithms on personal machines had accounted for 1/4 of my monthly salary and the annual and the grad school applications accounted for the 1/2 of my annual total salary. This scenario is much worse for some of my peer applicants which is something that needs to be acknowledged. I believe that I can rest a strong case for my motivation and ability to pursue independent research in robot autonomy based on the achievements I have made in a resource starved environment and that motivated me to pursue graduate studies in a place where I believe that due to the prolonged investment in Robotics I had explore my motivation unconstrained by the burden of lack of academic resources. Also coming from an ethnically discriminated minority (Sri Lankan Tamil) during and after a prolonged civil war (lasted until 2009, spanned more than half of my childhood) I have faced and understood the impacts of racial discrimination in both the workplace and social setting. This understanding I believe would make me work towards ensuring the goals of diversity that University is committed towards.