

# FULBRIGHT – LIFE AFTER THAT!

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## Before Fulbright came to me

My Fulbright journey began long before I even thought of applying for a scholarship for post-graduate study in the United States.

In 2006 I applied for and got into a summer programme for undergraduate students in the US. This programme was sponsored by the U.S. State Department. Applicants were screened, interviewed, and selected by the United States Educational Foundation in Pakistan (USEFP) and then sent to the U.S. on a two-month programme. Then began a whirlwind tour of various cities of the US incorporated with an intense programme of study at two U.S. colleges, various workshops, conferences, and formal and informal interactions with a host of interesting groups and individuals in the U.S.



It was through this experience that I really came to know about the USEFP, its work in Pakistan, and learnt more about the Fulbright programme. Prior to this, I had known of a few Fulbright scholars but had no idea what the application process is like. I would soon find out.

## Getting to know the programme

Since its inception over 60 years ago, the Fulbright Programme has become one of the best known and most prestigious scholarship programmes in the world. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, the programme offers merit-based scholarships for several degree and non-degree programmes of study and teaching in the US, and abroad, as part of an effort to improve intercultural communication, and further academic achievement across the world.



As awareness about the Fulbright programme has increased in Pakistan, so has the number of people interested in applying for the scholarships.

In the summer of 2006, I visited several cities and universities in the U.S. I knew then that I wanted to come back for my Master's, preferably to Boston, one of the most popular 'college towns' in the country. Rich in history and esteemed universities, New England is undoubtedly one of the best places to live and study in the U.S.

At the time I was still enrolled in an undergraduate programme in Pakistan and began making my post-graduate study plans even as I was tied up with course work for the ongoing academic programme.

I didn't wait till the very end to begin applying for the Fulbright scholarship. The application process itself is quite rigorous and requires one to plan ahead. Also, once applications are turned in, it takes several months for them to be processed and for interviews to begin. About a month after interviews close, recipients are shortlisted and informed that they have been chosen as recipients of the Fulbright grant.



### Get set... go!

I began working on my application in December 2006 and was aiming to apply in May 2007. The initial steps were preparing and enrolling for the GRE and TOEFL tests. At that point in time, test scores for both had to be submitted along with the application. Now the requirement has been reduced to just the GRE. The tests themselves cost about \$190 and \$160 respectively - not including the cost of preparation books and material. If the scores aren't at par with the USEFP (or university) requirements, applicants would end up having to retake the tests.

The TOEFL didn't require any real studying so I first set about the task of studying for the GRE test. The GRE includes verbal and quantitative sections as well as an analytical writing section. Regardless of how good your language or math skills are, it would be a big mistake to walk into the exam without having taken diagnostic tests in preparation. I spent about three months preparing for the GRE.



Test results can take some time to be mailed to your chosen institutions. In my case, they took a lot longer than the time stipulated which caused a lot of long distance phone calls to the TOEFL centre to trace my results, anxiety as the deadline drew closer, panic induced nail-chewing, and then having to reorder results twice more because for some reason, they never reached their destination.

Then began the task of filling out the extensive application form, writing the two essays required, getting all the transcripts, degrees, and test scores in order, collecting three recommendation letters -- which proved to be nothing short of a nightmare -- and spending endless hours online studying university websites, and programme descriptions and requirements to decide exactly where and what I wanted to study. All of this took a lot of time.

If your university administration is anything like mine was, expect glitches and hurdles every step of the way. Expect them to take forever to issue transcripts. Expect to miss deadlines because of them. Anticipate every kind of delay and get your academic records in order as early as possible.



I requested recommendation letters a good two months before my application deadline. Despite their best intentions, busy professors and professionals had many other things on their plate that took precedence over writing, signing, sealing, and handing me my recommendation letter. One of my professors failed to write the letter after agreeing to do it and I had to scramble for an alternative.

Finally, when all the paperwork was ready, I mailed it and hence began a long wait that fortunately ended with an interview call. I had to fly to Islamabad for my interview at about a day's notice. Once I reached the USEFP office, I was given about 10-15 minutes to write an essay on recent political developments -- thank God I had been reading the news! Then after a long wait, I finally found myself before a four-member panel of interviewers.

One of my interviewers grilled me hard about the area of study I had chosen because I had not studied it in my undergraduate programme. What made me think I could compete with people coming in from political science backgrounds when I didn't have one myself? (I had studied Literature but wanted to study Journalism and International Relations in the US.)

Fortunately, I had researched the programmes I was interested in extensively and knew that although preferred, specific backgrounds were not pre-requisites for admission. I was able to build my case based on this knowledge.

Fulbright applicants are expected to have a very clear idea of what it is they want to do. Interviewers are not impressed with vague study and future career plans.



By October 2007 I knew I had received the Fulbright scholarship and would be going to the U.S. in fall 2008. I was ecstatic! Then began the

next series of steps - applying through the USEFP to the universities I was interested in. From that point on, the Institute of International Education (IIE) became involved in helping place applicants in universities.

### **On a roll..**

Fulbrighters don't automatically qualify for university admission so after receiving the grant, the process of applying to and waiting to hear from universities began. One or two universities I applied to had specific requirements that required additional work. Also, one of the universities I applied to had an early deadline. Because my university didn't issue my transcripts on time, and took several extra months to do so, I ended up being placed on a waitlist till my documents were complete. In the end I received my documents too late to be considered for the fall academic session.

Fortunately, I was accepted at a programme of my choice in one of my preferred universities so I went ahead and accepted it.

Finally, about a year and a half after the process first began, in August 2008, I was on my way to the U.S. to start an over two year long programme of study. It was an exciting time but I have to admit I was a bit nervous when I stepped out of Logan Airport and got into a cab that took me to my first apartment in Boston - I moved twice more in the months to come.

The next day, I met my academic adviser and chose the classes I would be taking over the semester. Two days later, I found myself in my first class at BU, Intercultural Communication, and I discovered that there's no such thing as going slow in grad school.

My German-American professor, Joachim Maitre, spent the first few minutes on introductions, then presented us all with a semester plan detailing what we would be studying on each day of class, including required reading - hundreds of pages each day. Then without further ado, we plunged right into the coursework.

An avid reader himself, Prof. Maitre was notorious for inundating students with additional reading. Everything was structured and not a minute was wasted. The semester plan included dates for mid-terms, research paper deadlines, and finals. The same happened in every class I went to. Thus began a mind-bogglingly busy, thoroughly engaging, and immensely rewarding graduate school experience.

The programme began at a feverish pace of study that continued till the very end. I was not only able to complete a wonderful academic programme taught by accomplished faculty and some exceptionally brilliant professors, but also gained enormously from travelling across the U.S., and attending talks and events that enabled tremendous personal growth.

Apart from studying harder than ever before, I learnt to live in the severe Boston cold, dabbled with new things like ice-skating, glassblowing, and zumba, and acquired important life skills such as cooking, cleaning bathrooms, doing laundry, keeping house, reading maps and finding my way around strange, new places, and living on a budget. I also met some incredibly accomplished people from all over the world at a Fulbright enrichment seminar in New York City.

Finally, I returned home with a degree in hand that landed me my current job.

There is a certain prestige attached to being a Fulbright scholar and although I am back in Pakistan now, I continue to receive invitations to Fulbright events and every now and then, am presented with new opportunities to interact with some of the best minds in the world. People look at me with new respect when they find out I'm a Fulbright scholar -- and this is particularly useful during job and visa interviews.

Sadly, there are not many platforms available to Pakistani students interested in studying abroad. Fulbright is one platform that is available, and all those who have availed it can vouch for the fact that it is worth every bit of the hard work that it entails.

### **Reference:**

Maria Kamal, Fulbright-Life after that, US magazine for the youth (The News), June 17, 2011, Pg 8-11.