



Applying to the Middle East

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APPLYING TO THE MIDDLE EAST

In the Middle East, there are a diverse array of universities with different application procedures, fee structures, courses and degree and non degree programs offered with their own individual requirements. Careful individual research is required on the part of the applicant in order to find the most suitable program in this region.

In the last few years, there has been a large amount of investment in educational institutions in the Middle East, which has attracted the involvement of world class colleges and universities from across the globe and as a result has drawn a lot of interest from students. These institutions offer quality education in an environment that is more familiar for Pakistani students as well as slightly less expensive than the West, making them an attractive option.

There is no perfect formula to getting the search process right. However, trust your instincts and research, and you will surely make a good choice. It is a process of elimination, weighing options, and long hours of thought.

Here is a suggested set of steps that you may follow to apply:

1. Research universities and available courses using the internet or publications
2. Check requirements such as deadlines, essays, testing and documents
3. Many universities require SAT I and often SAT II Subject Tests / TOEFL so register for the appropriate testing
4. Shortlist five to six universities where you wish to apply based on criteria that are important to you (location, cost, academics, scholarships and more)
5. Early Decision vs. Early Action vs. Regular.
6. Recommendations and supporting documents
7. Essays and Personal Statements
8. Financial Aid forms and documents (if applicable)
9. Admissions Decisions and Responses
10. Once your university choice is finalized, begin the visa process
11. Get ready for university

1. Research universities and available courses

Research a wide variety of universities and available courses using:

- a. Institutional and other websites (e.g. The American University of Dubai www.aud.edu, Kuwait University www.kuniv.edu, Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar www.qatar.cmu.edu,

American University of Sharjah www.aus.edu, Heriot-Watt University Dubai www.hw.ac.uk/dubai, NYU Abu Dhabi www.nyuad.nyu.edu etc.), college references and guide books.

- b. Friends and family, preferably alumni of Middle Eastern universities or relatives of students who have attended these universities.

Please remember that every source has its own way of ranking universities and presenting information. It is up to you to sift through all the information to determine what is accurate and relevant to your needs.

Select several universities in this initial phase so that you can research them in-depth before deciding on the final five to six where you will apply.

2. Check requirements such as deadlines, essays, testing and documents

You should pay special attention to specific deadlines and other requirements. It is very easy to misread requirements and missing out on the university of your choice due to a preventable mistake would be a real tragedy!

There are different deadlines for International Applicants but there may also be specific deadlines for Priority Applications, Early Decision / Early Action, Housing, Testing, Financial Aid and so on. You must determine which one applies to your particular situation and it is always a good idea to email or call the institution if you are unsure which ones apply to you.

Once you know the deadlines for all your institutions, make a complete plan to ensure that you do not miss any of them. The easiest way is to get the work done well in advance, knowing that you will need to fill in things as they become available. **Remember, you can always send things early since being late is the problem!**

3. Most universities require SAT I and often SAT II Subject Tests / TOEFL so register for the appropriate testing

Students should plan to give the SAT I at least twice to ensure that they provide the strongest possible result. It is always a good plan to register early for the SAT I or SAT II Subject Tests as the Karachi testing center gets filled up very quickly. Registering for the SAT I must be done online at www.collegeboard.com and payment is made by credit card.

Our recommendation is that the first SAT I be taken in January of the A1 year, with a second test in October of the A2 year. SAT II Subject Tests should be taken in November or December of the A2

year. If necessary, November, December and January of the A2 year can be utilized for additional SAT I or SAT II testing.

TOEFL is often required to demonstrate ability in the English Language. Registration for the test is done online at www.toefl.org and paid for by credit card.

Some institutions might accept other English language tests or results of O / A Level examinations. You may also request a letter from school in support of your request to waive the English Language testing requirement but they do not always work!

Most institutions prefer that test scores be sent directly from the testing agency. Each institution has a unique code that must be entered into the appropriate form to ensure that test reports are delivered accurately. Each test offers some free reports as part of the initial fee but then more reports are available at an additional cost.

4. Shortlist five to six universities where you wish to apply based on criteria that are important to you (location, cost, academics, scholarships and more)

Rank institutions based on what is most important to you. Keep a clear focus on what your 'wants' and 'needs' are. The institutions that rank close to the top of your list are the ones that you should consider.

Basic questions about your wants and needs

- Are you comfortable with the size of the school? Why?
- Are there social activities and organizations on campus that appeal to you?
- Is there racial, socioeconomic, and religious diversity on campus?

Financial questions

- How much is each school going to cost you? Figure in all expenses: college tuition cost, room and board, books, computer labs, and various living expenses.
- How much financial aid is available? Is this financial aid that you can count on for the entire time you are in school? What about scholarships?
- Do you qualify for financial aid or scholarships based on income, major, academic achievements, athletic prowess, citizenship etc.
- Is their admissions process need blind, i.e. do they consider whether you have applied for financial aid when they are deciding to offer you admission?
- Is each college worth the price tag? If your first choice costs \$30,000 a year and your second costs \$20,000, is the first choice worth an extra \$40,000 over four years?

Academic questions

- Does each college offer the kind of majors that interest you?
- If you have a particular major in mind, how good is that department at each school?
- Find out what the faculty/student ratio is at each school, and what percentage of classes are taught by professors (as opposed to teaching assistants or instructors).
- What is the academic culture like at each school?
- How academically motivated are other students?
- What kinds of academic advising and study skills assistance are available to students?
- What job placement and graduate school admissions profile does the college have?

Geography questions

- Is the geographic setting of the school suitable to you?
- What will it be like to live in the town or area surrounding each college?

You should be realistic about your expected grades in estimating your chance of admission to particular universities. That said, remain hopeful but do not expect to be certain of university admissions offers or of meeting those offers until that actually happens!

5. Early Decision vs. Early Action vs. Regular

While this is not a common strategy, it is important to understand that these Early programs are available at some Middle Eastern institutions (for example the American University of Technology in Lebanon has an ED program) and have their benefits as well as drawbacks. Students, parents and counselors should review the information below and, if appropriate, encourage an early application. Do remember there are implications for applying early including earlier deadlines, limited financial aid information and more. What the College Board website has to say about Early programs in the USA applies to most of the Middle Eastern institutions as well:

From The College Board Website:

Who should apply early?

Applying to an ED or EA plan is most appropriate for a student who:

- Has researched colleges extensively
- Is absolutely sure that the college he or she is applying to early is a first choice
- Has found a school that is a strong match academically, socially, geographically, and so forth
- Meets or exceeds the admission profile for the school for SAT scores, GPA, and class rank

- Has an academic record that has been consistently solid over time

Applying to an ED or EA plan is not appropriate for a student who:

- Has not thoroughly researched and visited colleges
- Is applying early just to avoid stress and paperwork
- Is not fully committed to attending the schools to which he or she is applying
- Is applying early only because friends are doing the same.
- Needs a strong A2 fall semester to bring his or her grades up

6. Recommendations and supporting documents

Requesting supporting documents such as transcripts and recommendations must be done on time. Most Middle Eastern institutions require a complete academic record from Grade 9 onwards. It is important that your most recent transcripts show academic strength as they are more likely to be the focus of any admissions review.

Do not include too many certificates or awards because they will simply clutter your file and not add much to the admissions decision. Choose two or three important accomplishments and highlight them for the admissions committee. These are more likely to get noticed and appreciated compared to a stack of certificates that nobody will bother to go through.

Your recommendations should be complete and reflect your accomplishments as well as your future potential. It is important that you make your referee(s) aware of anything that is important to highlight in your recommendation. Again, do not give them long lists of things because it will not help them choose what to include and what to leave out. Pick the important things and give them the easy task of incorporating these accomplishments into their own words.

Ensure that you meet all documentation deadlines for having your recommendation written by your counselor or teacher so that there are no problems when the time comes to send your application. Remember, if you are late and there is limited time, your reference is likely to be written in a hurry and may not turn out as well as it might have!

7. Essays and Personal Statements

Some universities require a personal statement as part of their application. All personal statements and essays are reviewed for plagiarism and it is in your best interests to follow the simple guidelines provided by each institution when writing yours. Essays are your opportunity to speak to the universities about your strengths as a person and a student; why you have chosen a particular educational path; how your educational choices fit into future career plans; to highlight any major

accomplishments or to answer specific questions posed by the institution. **DO NOT** use this as a chance to provide a laundry list of activities or fill it with large words. The best essays are simple, direct and informative while highlighting a few things that distinguish you from the thousands of other applications that they will be reading. So it is best to be selective in what you put forward so that the person reviewing your application can focus on what is special about you and why you deserve a chance to attend that university.

8. Financial Aid forms and other finance related documents

Some universities offer financial aid or scholarships. If you are applying for such, you must complete the forms accurately and provide any required documentation. Once again, do not provide any inaccurate or fake documents as they can have a negative impact on admissions and the visa process. Omitting information or documents is equivalent to misrepresenting facts and is treated in the same manner.

9. Admissions Decisions and Responses

Hopefully, you will have a number of university choices when the final admissions decisions are published. At this time, you will have to compare the options available in the context of all the factors that you considered when you selected your initial set of universities. Working with your family and counselor, you should analyze all aspects of the available choices and make your best decision. Do not hesitate to research the institutions further or contact the admissions office (or others) for additional information before your final decision. This is one of the most important decisions of your life and you must give it the appropriate time and respect to ensure that you make the best one!

10. Once your university choice is finalized, begin the visa process

Different countries have different procedures for their visa policy. Make sure you check the international students section of the university you have been admitted to, to understand what the procedures are. Try and be as early as possible in fulfilling all formalities and applying for the visa to ensure there are no complications.

11. Get ready for university

Apart from your parents, friends and counselors, there are several online resources available to guide you through the process of getting ready for university.

A few points to remember while applying to the Middle East are:

- Obtain complete information about your responsibilities
- Make sure that you meet all required deadlines

- Pay attention to every detail, read the fine print. Before you sign anything or make a commitment, make sure you read it and discuss it with your parents.
- Spend carefully, always keeping your budget in mind.
- Remember cultural norms for your new country, things are likely to be very different from what you might be familiar with.
- Be knowledgeable about changes in laws and societal expectations.
- Know your rights as a student and individual within the university and beyond.
- Be sure to know the location and contact information for your embassy in case you should ever need assistance from them.
- Develop strong relationships with the International Student Office at your university.
- Get familiar with your surroundings at university and the local area.
- You will meet lots of new people and the important thing is to be open and friendly, while using good judgment about your associations. Find people who can be mentors and guides throughout your university years.
- Enjoy university but never lose sight of your primary purpose, i.e. to succeed at obtaining the best education possible.
- Adjustment to the freedom of university is one of the biggest initial lessons you will learn so manage your time wisely and set your priorities well.

Before you start at any university or college in the Middle East you need to make sure you have everything ready, such as accommodation arrangements, finances, travel arrangements, books and equipment required for the course. Most universities provide guidance to help you prepare for higher education and advice on where you can find further support.