

FAQ for Students

* Notes for potential students, incoming students and curious onlookers

All you need to know about MIT can probably be found in MIT's extensive websites (which, being so extensive that you probably can't find what you need). Therefore, we have decided to compile some short notes about life at MIT from the student point of view. First of all, we have decided to clear some misconception or justify some facts about MIT:

1. Expensive MIT

A full year tuition fees at MIT can quite easily amount to USD\$40 000 including expenses. However, most students are under some sort of financial aid. Most graduate students undoubtedly hold position either as a research assistant, teaching assistant, or fellowship which waived the tuition fees and provide monthly stipend enough to cover your living expenses in Boston. MIT admit students based on a need blind policy (ie we take you in first, and let's talk about money much later, shall we?).

2. Life at MIT? What life? Aaaaa!!

So are most things in life...career, relationship, ignoring chocolate cravings. Unrelenting professors and occasional over enthusiastic TA (Teaching Assistants) meant that problem sets and labs required lots of critically *critical* thinking. Nevertheless, one might see this as an opportunity, energy permitting, to learn and interact with highly motivated and like-minded group. While the workload isn't exactly a stroll in the park, one should take time off and explore the various active sports and societies peppered around MIT (see point 4).

3. You work from early morning till early morning

Possible during crunch time. For undergraduates, being at the mercy of trigger happy professors and Teaching Assistants, you will generally have a rather fix schedule of class notes and problem sets to finish. Expect to work anywhere from 6 to 10 (or possibly 12 hours) a day during term time. As for postgraduate students, your life generally starts after passing the dreaded qualifying exams (difficulty varies from department to department, from non-existence to slaughterhouse).

4. All work makes Jack a dull boy...

...until he discovers MITMASA, of course! MIT has wide range of social groups and sports affiliation, ranging from Malaysian Student Association to Outing club to Ballroom Dancing to Malaysian Student Association. Most of the clubs offer activities at both recreational and competitive level. One big plus of being at MIT is its proximity to the lively Boston, home to lively Bostonian Broadway, world class Boston Symphony Orchestra, buzzing restaurants and pub scene, ever underperformed Red Sox (baseball team) and etc. It is very nearly impossible to get bored or dull at all. On a side note, Boston has been recently voted as on of the top five best city to live, in terms of safety, education etc.

5. Dramatic shift in the bell curve

Think you are the top in your school? The good thing about that is, it is a positive and constructive thought. The bad thing about it is, the professors think so too, and it is well reflected in problem sets and exams.

6. MIT is too Techie

You *do* have a choice here. There are many opportunities to be involved in the arts, be it music, literature, political science etc. The MIT Choir, performing arts, symphony orchestra are very active, having performances a few times a term. If you would rather enjoy the performance rather than performing, Boston is home to the world class Boston Symphony, Boston Ballet etc.

Less important IAQ (Infrequently asked question): click at your own time loss:

1. Any Malaysian restaurants in Boston?

Penang (in Harvard Square and Chinatown) and Aneka Rasa (Brookline) serves rather good Malaysian food, and is easily accessible from MIT. Try the crispy Roti Canai and it really calms your craving, as long as you can suppress the urge to peep at the price. Pinang at Quincy Market is an upscale Malaysian restaurant, and draws its name from a tree that gives Penang state in Malaysia its name. Northern Malaysian rule supremacy here. There's also Island Hopper along Mass Ave in Boston but it actually serves South East Asian food – close enough to Malaysian food though.

2. Haven't seen snow?

Or a frozen river? Never fear. After a year at MIT, you would have seen snowmen and snow angels, snow and ice packed up to 6 feet high along the sidewalk. Once we had a rather fertile season, and a few cross country skiers took the opportunity ski all over Boston. And you don't have to pray for a white Christmas.... And speaking of ski, Massachusetts, Maine and New Hampshire boast some rather good ski places (one to two hours drive away) at reasonable prices. It's true that sun-laden places like San Francisco has all year warm weather, but it is really a heck of experience surviving the Bostonian winter.

3. Does MIT ever close?

On a typical busy semester day, the thought may pop up once or twice over lunch. MIT is practically open all year round, 24 hours a day (a quivering silhouette casting shadows down the hall at 3am may be an overworked and staggering graduate student). The only time which MIT probably close in living memory was during the record breaking blizzard of 2003. Of course there was that other time but that was 6 years ago...

4. Numerical MIT and naming conventions

Ever been to MIT? You will soon taste MIT's affection with anything that's numerical. All buildings (from Student Centre to halls) are given numerical names (thankfully at least it is a base of ten), starting with Building 1 (Civil Engineering building claims this honour).

There are, however, buildings where normal names are more popular than their numeric names, such as the Stata Building, Zesiger Sports Centre (Z-Center). Few ways you can immortalise your name. 1) Donate millions to MIT buildings (and do consider about giving away fellowships to poor graduate students while you are at it), 2) become the president of MIT and soar her to new heights, or 3) become a legendary housemaster and you will have the hall to your name.

5. Is MIT an ivy-league university? What's an ivy league university anyway?

Well, no. Ivy league, coined by Stanley Woodward, *New York Herald Tribune* sports writer in the early thirties, usually refers to 8 universities (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale). Apart from maintaining ivy-cladded buildings, the phrase refers to the agreement between the 8 universities in upholding and continuing intercollegiate American Football. In the mid 50s, the sports have expanded to basketball, soccer and etc.

If you are still with us, now, here's the relatively more serious stuff which you might be mildly interested in.

Disclaimer: the FAQ is compiled using the experience of the author, and should be kept as a rough guideline. We are also not responsible if you follow them and gain admission to MIT.

Admission FAQ:

For graduate students (SM and PhD):

1. How do I apply and more importantly, be admitted?

See <http://web.mit.edu/admissions/www/graduate/index.html> for complete information. The graduate admissions are very much departmental based, and it is best that you check with your individual department. Roughly speaking, you may need the following:

Letters of recommendation: Up to three letters of recommendation from your academic advisors and employer (if you are working at the moment). These, alongside with the statement of purpose, are probably the most important part of your application, so choose your pawns carefully.

Statement of purpose: Here's your chance nail in your research passion (preferably in the department's interest too). If you haven't got a slightest clue on research topic, don't worry; 80% of the admitted graduate students don't either. Nevertheless, you still need to have a field of interest (eg Geotechnical Engineering, or Structural Engineering).

GRE (Graduate Record Examination) and subject test (for certain departments). While not really a critical admission factor, good GRE results may swing glamorous fellowships in your way. Also, if you come from non English speaking countries (alas, Malaysia is included as the first language isn't English), you need to take for TOEFFL. However, if you have lived or studied in an English speaking country, it's worth applying for a TOEFL waiver from your department.

Good undergraduate results.

Another good practice is to correspond with the professor whose field of research interest you. This gives you better insight into the research environment, availability of funding, and if MIT is really where you want to spend the next 2 to 6 years of your life.

2. The length of the program

A rather frequent (and often emotional) question. If you pursue a Masters of Engineering (MEng), it is one year. Master of Science (SM) takes about 2 years on

average. PhD, well, expect anything between four to seven years (the average being five).

3. What are RA, TA and Fellowship?

These are the common funding opportunities for graduate students, providing you with comfortable monthly stipend to cover your living in Boston and waived the tuition fees (pew!). Teaching Assistant (TA) is expected to spend 20 to 30 hours a week residing on tutorials (informal lectures with students), create problems sets, and perhaps mark them. Research Assistant (RA) works on research projects (which may or may not be your PhD thesis). These projects may be long term (better make it your PhD!) or short term contract research work with companies. If you can incorporate the research into your thesis, then you may actually find extra time to pursue other interests. The best of all is, of course, a fellowship (scholarship). You have no teaching or research obligations when holding a fellowship and can pretty much pursue your research interest.

Admission FAQ

For undergraduate students:

It's a pretty straightforward process. Just refer to the admissions website at <http://web.mit.edu/admissions/www/undergrad/index.html> for complete information.

Every year, MIT alums in Malaysia will organize an admissions info session. It is probably a good idea to try to attend this event to ask questions about MIT, see if it is the right school for you and find out from people who have been through and survived MIT life first hand how to improve your chances of getting admitted.

The usual standardized tests and application whatnots aside, here are a few points that might help in your application.

1. Extra-curricular activities

MIT prides on its diversity so it is probably a good idea to cash in on your extra-curricular activities as well as your academic achievements. If you are an Olympiad medalist or a virtuoso violinist, then excellent but average Joes need not despair. You just need to show that you can keep a healthy balance between your studies and other activities. Show that you are interested in other things too and are willing to commit yourself to doing it say volunteering frequently for social work, learning music, or simply by being an active member of your favourite club or sports.

2. Recommendation letters

A good recommendation letter helps a lot too. Try to get teachers and people who know you well and can vouch for your achievements as well as your personality (like your sports coach, volunteer center coordinator etc) to recommend you. But don't swamp the admissions office with these letters. Just a few would be effective enough.

3. Admissions essay

Admissions essays play an important role too although most essays probably only get

a few minutes of the admissions officers' time. Which is why, you need to keep this in mind when you write so that your essay should catch the reader's attention from the first few lines. Also, don't ramble on your academic prowess as those are probably already listed out somewhere in your application form. Make use of your essay to show the officers who you are, how you think and your dreams. In short, you need to show them your personal side and your essay is the channel for you to do so.

Finally (but not to be neglected), it's best to type out your essay to make it easier for the reader and remember to check for spelling and grammatical errors.