Europhotonics Application Handbook

Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD)

Main contributor: Martina Grandi, Class Representative 2023-2025
Supplementary modifications: Vivi Maldonado, Class Representative 2024-2026

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Welcome to Europhotonics!

What this Handbook is about

Hello there!
If you're reading this, you're probably considering joining one of the most international, exciting and beautifully chaotic academic experiences you can imagine.
We (your slightly older, slightly more sleep-deprived current students or alumni) created this handbook to help you navigate everything we wish *we* had known before applying.
We've been there: applying to an Erasmus Mundus programme feels exciting, but also a bit intimidating! Between documents, deadlines, recommendation letters, and the desire to present yourself in the best possible way, the application process can seem overwhelming.
But don't worry! Here, you'll find practical advice, honest stories, and checklists, collected from students across all partner universities. Our goal is simple: to make your application easier and help you take this bold step.
We are not making anything up: all the relevant information you find here is contained on the website, which we strongly recommend you visit and consult several times.
In case you can check it out at: https://www.europhotonics.org/wordpress/how/
From time to time, you'll find a box like this, it has all the tips from current students and alumni!

Just try!

It is really worth it to try to apply at least!

Let's start by summarising everything we will say with a very important piece of advice: your application is made up of many parts, including quantitative measures like your grades and qualitative qualities like how you present yourself.

Show who you are

The selection here is not at all about your scores, It's about how you present yourself as a person to the panel. The motivation letter depicts your personality, your personal and professional interests. You could show yourself as anything you want through your motivation letter. Choose wisely, narrate wisely because that's how they know what person you are. For the interview, confidence is the key. They may ask questions that you're not able to answer but don't hesitate, be confident of what you've done in your field. I think the whole application procedure lies on how you present yourself, be honest, show dedication and you can ace it!! (Europhotonics student from class 2025-27)

So now take a deep breath, get comfortable, and let us guide you through the application process step by step. Your journey into the world of photonics starts here — and we're excited to help you begin it.
For any further questions, please contact us at: europhotonics@em-a.eu

Eligibity & Requirements

Okay, up to now, everything is clear. Let's go in the details of what you are looking for!

Academic background

Europhotonics welcomes students from a variety of scientific paths: what matters most is having a solid quantitative foundation, then motivation and curiosity will make the rest!
Suitable applicants must hold a Bachelor's degree (a diploma corresponding to at least 180 ECTS). Your degree could be in Physics, Engineering, Photonics, Physical Chemistry, Electrical /Mechanical /Biomedical Engineering, or a closely related field. Remember, you need at least 12ECTS in physics and maths.
Provided that you have a solid base in physics and maths, you will do fine. Changing universities and countries is something that involves a lot of effort and energy, so it is important that you are comfortable with your academic base. This said, students arrive with very diverse strengths, and the first courses in the programme aim to build you up while considering that each intake includes people from all kinds of backgrounds. Make sure to highlight your academic strengths in the application!

Believe in yourself!

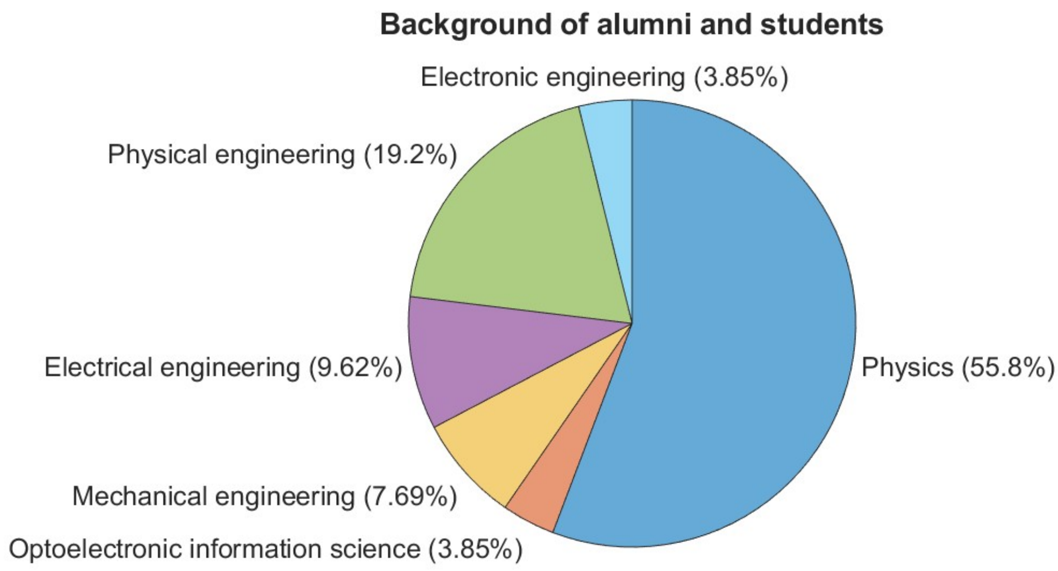
Go for it, you and your CV may be better than you think.

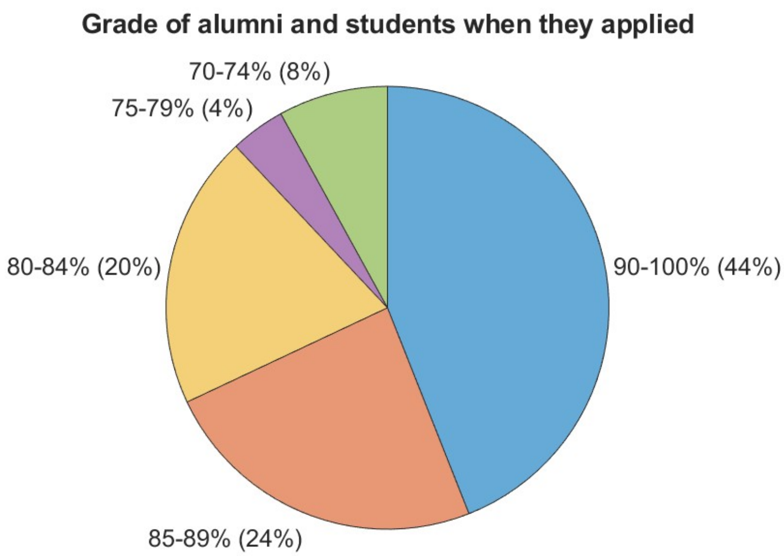
English language requirements

Since the entire programme is taught in English and involves an international cohort spread across multiple universities, strong English skills are essential. Applicants are expected to provide proof of English proficiency through a recognised test (TOEFL / IELTS / Duolingo / TOEIC or equivalent). What we mainly look for is the ability to follow advanced lectures, collaborate in teams, and present your work confidently.
Remember: communication skills are just as essential as scientific knowledge. They enable you to share ideas, ask questions, network and grow within a global community!
At the same time, you can be confident that your English proficiency will naturally improve (and often quite rapidly) during the programme.

Who should apply? Typical profiles

We've told you already many times that Europhotonics attracts students with many different backgrounds, interests, and aspirations. But you are a scientist-wannabe, so you shouldn't trust just our words. And since we are also soon-to-be scientists (hopefully!), here are some fancy graphs to scientifically illustrate this wonderful diversity!
A group of N=26 students and alumni (intakes 2023, 2024, and 2025) replied to a brief survey anonymously. The first two questions were: *"What bachelors did you do?"* and *"What was your approximate grade when you applied?"*. We summarized the replies in the graphs below.





Then we asked them *"What were your main motivations when you apply?"* and we generated a wordcloud with their replies.

Looking at these three snapshots together, a clear picture emerges. Europhotonics is not built around a single "ideal" profile, nor does it expect everyone to follow the same academic path. The word cloud shows instead that the motivations are quite similar: a shared passion for optics and photonics, the opportunity to study in high-quality European universities, and the prospect of pursuing research or starting a career in industry.

We may come from different studies and have different grades, but we're all drawn to Europhotonics for very similar reasons. Different paths, same enthusiasm: that's exactly what makes this community so special. If these motivations resonate with you too, chances are you'll feel right at home in this community and you will be able to face the challenges that come with it (academic and otherwise!).

Don't overthink

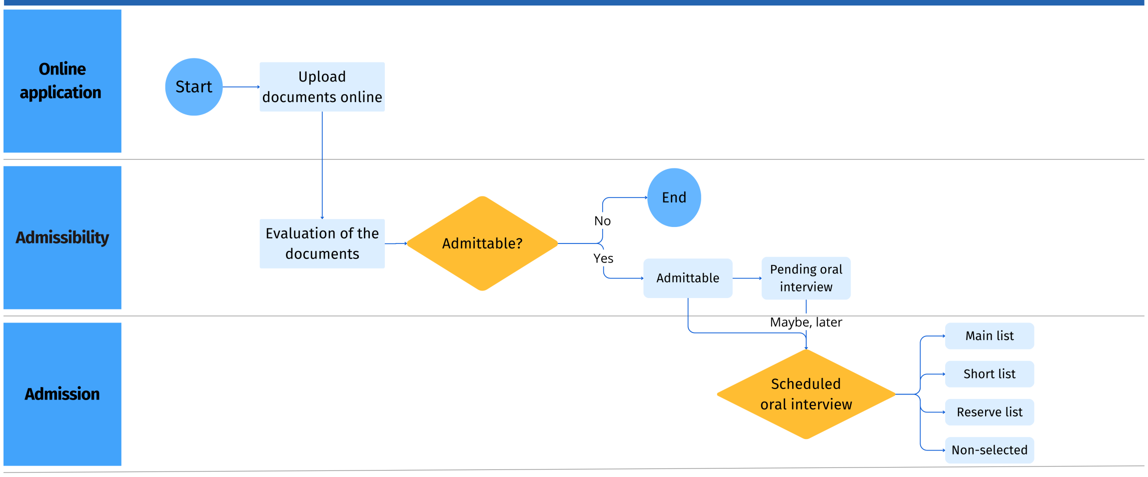
Just apply!! Even if you're not super confident you could get into the program, keep in mind that your application is evaluated as a whole; your grades or CV are not the only thing taken into account. You will meet people from a lot of bachelor backgrounds and everything will be fine.

Understanding the application process

Step-by-step overview of the application

The application procedure is detailed on the website, but here we put a simple flowchart to visualise it graphically. It seems like a lot, but if you break it into small steps, it's less than you think!

Admission Process Map

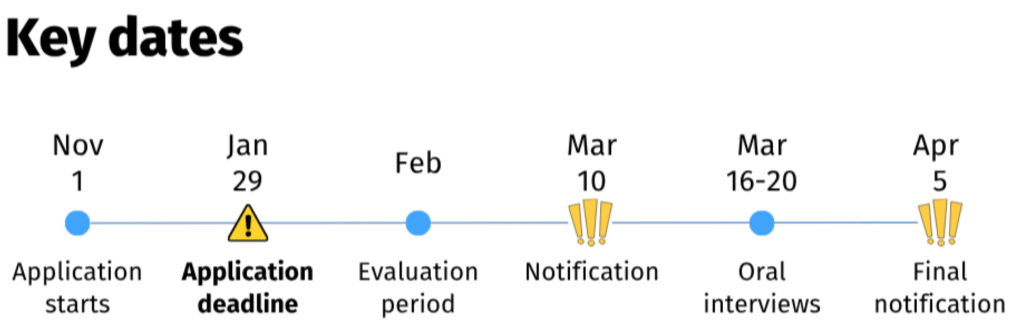


First, you fill out the online application, where you upload everything: your academic transcripts, CV, motivation letter, proof of English proficiency, recommendation letters, and other administrative documents. More info and tips on this are available in the next section.
Then comes the admissibility phase. Here it's not up to you: two independent evaluators from different universities will assess your profile and evaluate your academic records, the quality of your recommendation letters, your motivation, and everything you uploaded.
If your application passes that, congratulations, you move to the admission phase, which involves an online oral interview: a panel will assess your English, motivation, and your technical knowledge. We have a dedicated section for it as well.
At the end of this, the selection committee ranks everyone and divides them into four groups: the Main List, the Short List, the Reserve List, and the Non-Selected List. What is the difference?

	Join	Full tuition fee waiver	EMJM scholarship	Other scholarship
Main list	✓	✓	✓	-
Short list	✓	✓	✗	Maybe
Reserve list	✓	✗	✗	✗
Non-selected list	✗	-	-	-

Important deadlines

The Europhotonics timeline is quite structured, so keeping an eye on the key dates will make your life much easier.
This year, the applications open on November 1, and you have a few months to prepare your documents before the January 29 submission deadline. But be careful! In order to avoid unpleasant surprises, we advise you to have everything ready some days in advance.
Once everything is submitted, the consortium spends February reviewing all applications for admissibility. You'll hear back around March 10, and you will be informed by email about whether you passed this first stage.
If you are invited for an interview, expect it to happen between March 16 and March 20.
After that, the final results start arriving in your inbox from April 5 onwards, indicating whether you are placed on the Main List, Short List, Reserve List, or, unfortunately, not selected.
You may also be admissible, but with a "Pending Oral Interview". This means that you may be called for an interview at a later stage if you want to participate as a self-funded student or if there is a drop-out from the Main / Short List applicants.



If you believe a serious procedural error affected your evaluation, you may submit a written appeal within seven working days of receiving your result. Keep in mind that appeals cannot challenge the decision itself, but only mistakes in the selection procedure, and no new documents or information can be added at this stage.

Preparing a strong application package

A successful Europhotonics application is more than a collection of files. It should be a coherent narrative about who you are as a scientist, what you aim to become, and why this programme is the right environment for your growth.
This section guides you through each document required in the application and shares strategies to make your profile shine.

Curriculum Vitae

Your CV is the way you describe what you *did*, so it should give a clear and organised impression of your academic and practical journey.
Try to foreground the experiences that genuinely shaped your interest in optics and photonics, whether they come from physics, engineering, computer science, or any interdisciplinary field.
Even short research projects, summer internships, or coursework assignments can say a lot about your curiosity and dedication if you describe what you **actually did** and what you learned from it.
A well-structured CV is easy to read, so it shouldn't contain long, bulky texts, but make sure each experience includes enough context to be understood.
If you have technical skills, don't hide them: mention the tools, instruments, software, and methods you know, and *be honest* about your level.
Europhotonics welcomes diverse profiles, and your background — even if slightly unconventional — can become a strength when presented clearly and confidently.

How to present your previous experiences

When describing your past experiences, aim to show *progression* rather than simply listing tasks. Explain how your responsibilities evolved, and what **impact** the experience had on your academic interests. If you worked in a laboratory, share what techniques you used or what aspects you were responsible for. If you contributed to a group assignment or published work, describe your role with precision.

> Previous experiences were very important during my application, make sure to highlight everything that could contribute to your profile, everything counts.

Motivation Letter

Your motivation letter is the most personal part of the application. It is your chance to speak directly to the selection committee, not through grades or certificates, but through **your own voice**. A strong letter reads like a short story, it shows your past, your present and your future in a fluent and coherent way. In practical terms, you should explain where your interest in photonics comes from, what you are doing to pursue it, and what contribute you will bring in the field thanks to this programme.
Avoid trying to sound *overly* formal; aim for a tone that is sincere but not casual. Try to sound clear, and genuinely passionate about what you want to learn. Show that you have taken the time to understand what Europhotonics offers and how it aligns with your own plans.
Due to the nature of the programme itself, showing openness, adaptability, and enthusiasm for learning in different environments makes a strong impression.

Overall, we suggest that you consider the following general questions in your letter:

- Why are you interested in this program? What in particular do you like about the program?
- How did you become interested in Optics and Photonics? Are you particularly interested in any specific field (e.g., quantum optics, biophotonics, optical engineering, etc.)?
- How is your academic and research background relevant to the scope of the program, and how does it prepare you for it?
- Which mobility track would you prefer, and why? Where would you like to carry out your first-year research internship, and in which field and location would you like to complete your Master's thesis? Please explain your choices.
- What are your short-term objectives after graduation and your long-term life goals? How will this Master's program help you achieve them?
- What experiences do you have outside of academics and research? How have those experiences contributed to your personal development, and how would this program strengthen them? (Mention briefly and only when relevant to the programme; avoid anything too personal.)

How to show your motivation

The best way to express motivation is through **specific examples**. If a course, project, or encounter sparked your interest, **tell that story**. If you have a long-term research goal, explain how Europhotonics brings you closer to it. You don't need to sound dramatic, the committee should feel your commitment and sees that your goals are coherent with the programme's philosophy.

> Be sincere and let your interest show. Think of your longer-term academic/professional goals and how the program can help you achieve them.

Letters of Recommendation

Recommendation letters work best when they come from people who *genuinely* know you, like professors, supervisors, or researchers who have directly supervised your work. Indeed, they can provide concrete insights into your abilities.
Remember that many professors are usually very busy, so asking early shows respect for their time and usually results in a better, more thoughtful letter.
The point of recommendation letters is helping the committee imagine what kind of student you would be in the dynamic, research-oriented atmosphere of Europhotonics.

Transcript & Diploma

Your transcript shows the committee how you performed academically and what are your main strengths.
Make sure the document is official, complete, and, when necessary, accompanied by a certified translation into English. If your university uses an unusual grading system, you may want to ask to your university to include a small explanation of it (if they don't do it already).
If you have not yet graduated by the time applications are due, do not worry: provisional certificates are common and fully accepted.
What matters most is **academic transparency**.

Grades matter but they are not everything. Make sure to showcase any other strengths of yours (e.g. experience in the field is a valuable asset).

In the pie chart, you saw that not all the students have the maximum grade. Keep in mind that every grading system is different; for example, according to the French system, an excellent student has an average of around 75%. The commission is well aware of this, and they do take into account the differences across countries. Moreover, consider that the program is demanding not only from an academic point of view. You need to be able to follow top-quality level courses while coping with time-consuming bureaucracy, looking for your new flat, and getting accustomed to a new culture. While preparing this document, we talked with Prof. Amélie Litman, the program coordinator.

About grades, from Prof. Amélie Litman

Our hope is to enrol students who are having a great time, both in their studies and in their personal time. Having difficulties with your studies because you are struggling with lacks in your scientific background is very difficult, both emotionally and in terms of time management and daily life.

Common pitfalls & How to avoid them

One of the most common pitfalls is being ***too generic***. Europhotonics receives many strong applications, and what makes yours memorable is authenticity. Try to avoid long, unfocused paragraphs or repeated, commonplace statements of enthusiasm. Instead, keep your tone personal and your ideas well organised.

Another pitfall is ***inconsistency***: if your CV says one thing and your motivation letter says another, reviewers may become unsure about your interests. Double-checking that all documents point toward the same story helps create a strong impression.

In the same time, ***repetitions*** should be avoided as well. You shouldn't restate the same idea in every document, each one should contribute something unique. Your CV focuses on facts, your motivation letter gives meaning to those facts, and your recommendation letters provide an external perspective on your strengths. When each piece plays its own role, the whole application feels coherent, fresh, and engaging, eventually giving a much clearer sense of who you are.

Also, don't underestimate the importance of ***English clarity***. You do not need to be a native speaker — few applicants are — but your writing should be easy to follow and free of major errors. A friend or mentor reading your documents can make a big difference.

This leads us to the use of ***generative AI tools***. These tools can be helpful for polishing your language, reorganising paragraphs, or checking the overall flow of your text (we used it as well writing this handbook!), but they should never replace your own voice. Committees can sense when a motivation letter feels impersonal or overly polished, and this doesn't make a good impression at all. *If* you decide to use AI assistance, treat it as a supportive editor and not as a ghostwriter: write your own text first, then use the tool to adjust the grammar while keeping your tone, your story, and your personality intact. In the end, what you submit should still feel 100% yours.

Finally, don't let ***technical problems*** ruin your efforts. Submitting early avoids stress, and uploading clean, legible PDFs shows care.

Interview

What is the purpose of the interview?

The interview is your moment to *shine*. After reading your documents, the selection committee already has a good sense of who you are on paper, but talking to someone has a much higher impact. It allows the reviewer to understand your motivations, your curiosity, your way of thinking, and how you might fit into an international, multidisciplinary programme like Europhotonics.
At the same time, the interview is also a chance for the panel to confirm your academic readiness. Europhotonics is a demanding programme, and the committee wants to ensure that admitted students have the scientific foundations, analytical mindset, and problem-solving attitude needed to complete it. This does not mean the interview becomes an exam (it's very unlikely that you will be asked to derive Maxwell's equations on the spot) but they may explore your academic background, the projects you've worked on, or how you reason through scientific questions.
Think of it as a balanced conversation which is not meant to intimidate you or make you uncomfortable. The professors are humans, and generally genuinely curious about you, yet also they will be attentive to your potential to succeed in a rigorous master's programme.

What to expect during the interview

Interviews last around 20–30 minutes and are held online. You will meet at least 2 academic staff members from partner universities. The atmosphere is usually friendly and conversational—they want you to feel comfortable enough to express yourself honestly.
The discussion may begin with a short introduction from you, followed by questions about your academic background, your motivation for joining the programme, and your future goals. Some interviews include a few technical or reasoning-based questions, but these are not designed to trap you. Often, interviewers want to see how you approach a problem rather than whether you know a specific formula by heart.

> The interview was not too difficult but bring a good slides and be sure you know everything you put on it. (Bachelor in physics, from Colombia)

You can also expect questions about international mobility, teamwork, and adaptability. Since Europhotonics brings together students from all over the world, with multiple moves across countries, interviewers like to check that you are aware of this and ready for the journey.

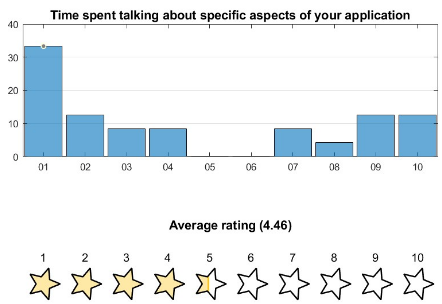
> Be professional and confident and don't hesitate to show your eager towards to the program.
>
> Prepare to answer questions related to the topic of your interships and research experience

Common types of questions

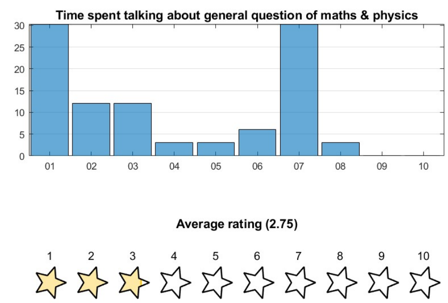
We asked the same set of N = 26 admitted students and alumni how much time they spent talking about four major topics (past research experience, motivation, general theoretical questions, specific aspects of something written in the application) during their interview, on a scale from 1 ("not at all") to 10 ("almost the entire interview"). The histograms below show the distribution of their answers and give you a clear idea of what you might expect.

(a) Past research experience

(b) Motivation



(c) Specific aspects of the application



(d) Generical questions about maths and physics

The topic that tends to occupy the most time during the interview is your past research experience. Whenever applicants have completed a project, thesis, or internship, interviewers often explore it in depth to understand their scientific background and how they approach problems. You can use this at your advantage: since it is something that you did, you (should) know it very well and people usually love hearing one explain their own work passionately.
The second major focus is usually motivation: the panel wants to hear why you chose Europhotonics and how you see the programme fitting into your academic or professional plans. This also should cheer you up: it confirms that motivation *truly* matters, but also that the committee is interested in more than just your enthusiasm.
Discussions about specific aspects of the application come next and vary widely from one interview to another; they generally appear when something in the candidate's profile requires clarification or invites further explanation. If this happens, it doesn't necessarily mean that your application was bad: also an unusual academic path or an interdisciplinary background can raise more detailed questions.
Finally, general questions in maths and physics tend to take the least amount of time. Most students reported that these were brief, conceptual checks rather than technical examinations.
All in all, what can we say? For sure, interviews are highly personalized. Still, a common thread emerges: your motivation and your practical or academic experiences tend to be at the heart of the conversation, while broad technical questions usually play a much smaller role than many applicants expect.

Application checklist

☐ Check the eligibility requirements

☐ Double-check deadlines

☐ Prepare your CV (max 2 pages)

☐ Write your motivation letter

☐ Request 2 recommendation letters

☐ Prepare transcripts and diploma

☐ Verify English proficiency requirements

☐ Submit the online application