

## MAIA Alumni Story Sharing by Ms Jiang Yang: Never Say Never— My PhD Application Journey



My name is Jiang Yang and I graduated with an MA in International Accounting (MAIA) from the Department of Accountancy. In the 2021 Fall semester, I will be a PhD student in business administration and management at Bocconi University. It is my honor to share my PhD application story to provide some inspiration and suggestions. All of my applications were directed to schools in the UK or continental Europe, so my personal experience is based on my European PhD applications. Although I did not have a research degree or thesis, my story shows that background does not determine everything.

My application experience can be divided into four parts: target PhD programme/supervisor choice, application material preparation, connection with potential supervisors, and interviews.

### **Searching for a suitable PhD programme**

The first part is fundamental as it is related to future research directions, research environment, methodology training, and job placement. For example, I found that some schools only offer one-year rigorous PhD courses to students, while some like Bocconi University provide two-year training. As I wanted to gain more research skills before starting a thesis, I preferred the longer training. It is wise to think about what you need before taking action because PhD programmes vary widely.

### **Preparation of application materials**

I started my applications in the summer of 2020, after which I prepared my application materials step by step. Personal statements, recommendation letters, and a CV can be formed based on past academic or research-related experience and written with the help of friends or teachers. As one of the key materials, the research proposal (RP) to some extent decides the outcome of the application. In my experience, it is a good idea to contact potential supervisors with logically organized research ideas first, then modify your RP according to their advice and school requirements. Then, the RP will normally be accepted. Some materials such as GMAT/GRE scores and a language certificate might be optional. Check that all written materials submitted meet the requirements of different schools.

### **Contact with potential supervisors**

Although PhD enrollment decisions are made by committees, relationships with supervisors are critical. Sometimes a good supervisor is a top priority. I sent dozens of emails before getting a positive reply and spent weeks modifying one RP. One of my friends wrote three RPs during the same period for three different potential supervisors. I found that making contact with tutors had no direct causal effect on the final result. The situation always changes, and more opportunities mean more success probability. During the process, you can get a feel for different supervisors' style and whether it matches your personality. I recommend following these rules: never email more than one professor at the same school simultaneously, always be humble, and stay honest.

### **Interview preparations**

Normally there will be at least two interviews. The first is meeting supervisors before they decide to supervise your RP. The second is with a committee that will ask about your proposal and study motivations in detail. Prepare well! Lots of information is shared on websites that can offer great help. I think that the interview process is not about giving perfect answers, but expressing what you truly want to research and how prepared you are for it.

### **Some suggestions if you want to apply for a PhD programme**

Get as much information as possible. As the saying goes, “know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat.” Online websites such as schools’ official websites, ChaseDream, and FindAPhD, social media such as Xiaohongshu and LinkedIn, professors, classmates, senior schoolmates, study abroad agencies, and Chinese students at your target school are all great resources.

Make a schedule. Every school has its independent application and scholarship process. It is wise to arrange all materials in advance so that you do not miss opportunities.

Prepare early. I have had my research interest since my second undergraduate year. After that, I led two municipal-level research programmes with ¥10,000 sponsorship and had three publications. I think these provided an advantage for me, although I did not have an MPhil. thesis. Unfortunately, I did not continue with my research interest during my Master’s. If you have research interests, just try it; you will not regret it.

In conclusion, this process is not easy and I hope sharing the above information will help you with your PhD application journey. I especially appreciate what CityU offered me, not only knowledge but also help from my professors. My MAIA Taxation class teacher Dr Raymond Wong gave me lots of inspiration about my research ideas and helped me with a recommendation letter with great patience. Dr Zheng Liu also answered many questions about the CityU PhD programme. Without their help, this process would have been more difficult.

