

# Onderwijsvisitatie Rechten

Een onderzoek naar de kwaliteit van de Master of Laws in International and European Law van de Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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# Master of Laws in International and European Law - Vrije Universiteit Brussel

## Introduction

This report concerns the Master of Laws in International and European Law at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). The assessment panel visited the study programme on 24 and 25 November 2014.

The panel assesses the study programme on the basis of the three generic quality standards (GQSs) of the VLUHR programme assessment framework. This framework is designed to fulfil the accreditation requirements applied by the NVAO. For each generic quality standard the panel gives a weighted and motivated judgment on a four-point scale: 'unsatisfactory', 'satisfactory', 'good' or 'excellent'. In the assessment of generic quality assurance, the concept of '*generic quality*' indicates that the particular GQS is in place and that the programme - or a specific mode of the programme - meets the quality level that can reasonably be expected, from an international perspective, of a Master's programme in higher education. The score 'satisfactory' indicates that the programme demonstrates an acceptable level for the particular GQS. If the study programme scores 'good', the programme systematically exceeds the generic quality for that standard. If the programme scores 'excellent', its level of achievement is well above the generic quality for the particular GQS and serves as an (inter)national example. The score 'unsatisfactory' indicates that the programme does not attain the generic quality for that particular GQS.

The panel's opinions are supported by facts and analyses. The panel makes clear how it has reached its opinion. It also expresses a final opinion on the quality of the programmes as a whole, also according to the same four-point scale. Judgements and recommendations made relate to the programmes with all subordinate modes or majors, unless stated otherwise.

The panel assesses the quality of the programme as it has been established at the time of the site visit. The panel has based its judgement on the self-evaluation report and the information that arose from the interviews with the programme management, with lecturers, students, alumni and personnel responsible at programme level for internal quality assurance, internationalisation, study guidance and student tutoring. The panel has also examined the course materials, master's theses, assignments and standard answering formats and numerous relevant reports available. For the student success rate, the panel called on data provided by the Datawarehouse Hoger Onderwijs (DHO). The panel has also visited specific educational facilities such as classrooms and the library.

In addition to its judgement, the panel also formulates recommendations with respect to quality improvement. In this manner, the panel aims to contribute to improving the quality of the programme. The recommendations are included in the relevant sections of the respective generic quality standards. At the end of the report an overview is given of improvement suggestions.

The programme in International and Comparative Law (PILC) was created in 1971, as a postgraduate LL.M. programme. In 2001, PILC was integrated into the newly created Institute for European Studies (IES), which later developed into an acknowledged Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence.

Following the European integration process, and taking advantage of its location in the heart of the EU's capital, the focus of the LL.M. has gradually shifted from international and comparative law to

international and European law. In response to the 2007 VLIR assessment report, the programme's name was changed to 'LL.M. in International and European Law'. The programme has kept its abbreviation 'PILC', however, and will be referred to as such in this report.

The central decision-making body for the programme is the PILC Board, which operates under the IES Executive Board and, for some issues, the highest level of authority at the IES - the IES Board. The daily management of PILC is under the direction of the PILC Programme Director and Co-Director.

Even as a part of the IES, PILC retains its close ties with the VUB Faculty of Law and Criminology. The PILC professors are a part of the staff of either the Faculty of Law and Criminology or the IES. The decisions of the IES Board need to be confirmed by the VUB Board.

Since its foundation in 1971, PILC has attracted over 1,200 graduate students of 107 nationalities from all continents of the world. During the academic year 2012-2013, 37 students were enrolled in the programme.

## Generic quality standard 1 - Targeted Outcome Level

The assessment panel evaluates the targeted outcome level as good.

According to the self-evaluation report, the **overall objective** of PILC is ‘to provide a highly international group of students with a broad advanced education in international and European law in order to prepare them for academic, private and/or public sector employment at high levels’. In fulfilment of its objective, PILC aims to achieve sixteen interconnected learning outcomes. These learning outcomes can be divided into three groups: knowledge and comprehension, application of knowledge and skills, and attitudes.

The programme learning outcomes fully comply with the Flemish qualification framework. The targeted outcome level is demanding and at an **advanced level**: for example, there is an emphasis on ‘thorough knowledge and understanding’, ‘autonomous, critical legal reasoning’ and the conduct of ‘scientifically sound legal research of advanced level’.

The programme learning outcomes also comply with the domain-specific learning outcomes. As a matter of fact, the former are **more detailed** than the latter. Moreover, a number of additional learning outcomes have been incorporated, such as the ability to ‘conduct international legal negotiations’ and a ‘positive attitude towards and confidence in (...) a multicultural setting’.

The panel underlines that the programme learning outcomes are well in line with current international trends. The explicit combination of international *and* European law is a particular challenge, but the programme managers have made a well-considered choice. Overall the profile of the programme is **ambitious**, explicitly focusing on the higher echelons of the legal labour market.

The learning outcomes are **well defined, transparent and known** to the students. According to an alumni survey<sup>1</sup>, only 2.6% of students who had graduated were not familiar with the programme learning outcomes.

In its self-evaluation report, the programme stresses that competition for similar programmes is harsh, even within Brussels. Marketing and visibility are therefore mentioned as points of improvement. It is slightly unfortunate that no formal, explicit **international benchmarking** of the profile and learning objectives has been implemented in the self-evaluation report. If the programme is truly aiming for ‘excellence’, such an exercise is necessary.

In conclusion, the panel finds that the programme learning outcomes comply with all formal requirements. The panel is impressed by the ambitions of the programme - truly at an advanced level - and the transparent way they have been articulated. International benchmarking of the learning outcomes needs to become more visible.

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous Internet-based questionnaire of 60 closed-ended questions along a 5-scale continuum, conducted on the 2008-2013 PILC graduates in December 2013 - February 2014. Response rate 48 % (77 out of the 159 graduates).

## Generic quality standard 2: Learning Process

The assessment panel evaluates the learning process as excellent.

The Master of Laws in International and European Law counts 60 ECTS and consists of one year. The programme is divided into **three groups**: compulsory courses (30 ECTS), optional courses on either Business or Public Law (12 ECTS) and the Master's thesis (18 ECTS).

The first three **compulsory courses** (15 ECTS) give a broad overview of the main topics of international and European law, and serve as an introduction or a refresher (depending on, and taking into account, the variance in the students' background knowledge). These courses are accompanied by a block of five compulsory courses (15 ECTS) which deepen knowledge and insights in key fields of international and European law. The **optional courses** on Business Law or Public Law allow students flexibility to specialise their international and European law learning paths along the track they find most suitable in light of their preferred career plans.

The assessment panel finds the structure of the programme **coherent**. The most fundamental, overview-type courses in international and European law are scheduled at the very beginning to facilitate the kick-off academically. The programme might be rather general in nature, but the introduction of two options has created sufficient depth and focus. The teaching is virtually **exclusive**: access to the programme is, as a general rule, limited to the selected full-time advanced Master's level students (a very limited number of students may be admitted to attend an individual course).

There is a good variety of **teaching methods**. Nearly all courses make use of lectures as a means of transferring information. Although some lectures have been described as rather traditional, it is obvious that the classes are in general interactive, with discussions and sharing of opinions. The teaching of 'International Law' and 'European and International Protection of Human Rights' include small research projects in a seminar-type setting to improve presentation skills. Both the Public Law and Business Law option contain a compulsory '**case study seminar**'. This seminar provides the students with practical field experience, and is concluded in mid-May by drawing together and fine-tuning the students' analytical and presentation skills in a real-life simulation with PILC alumni and other experts from law offices, EU institutions and corporations. The first semester also offers practical experience in the form of expert-led **field trips** to the libraries of the EU and the VUB, the major European Union institutions in Brussels and the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg.

In preparation for thesis writing, and to gain experience in teamwork in an international context, all students write a **research paper** in multinational groups of three to four students. In this 'Globalisation paper' they identify and describe a particular globalisation challenge, analyse and evaluate the relevant action undertaken by the competent global governance structures and formulate recommendations for further action.

Students are expected to conduct research in an independent and scientific manner and to write an 18-22,000 word **Master's thesis** in the English language on a legal subject concerning international and/or European law. The ideal frame of reference is a law review article. In a special Thesis Workshop in early October the students can establish initial personal contacts with all PILC professors with regard to the areas of law they are prepared to supervise theses in. While the PILC Teaching Guidelines stress that the subject 'must preferably be selected from among the topics dealt with in the courses of the programme', the self-evaluation report mentions that PILC

professors are able to supervise on a wide range of topics, 'also outside the fields of law covered by their courses'. Students have to give regular updates on the progress being made, in particular at specific control points. Apart from this roadmap, a separate set of rules applies to thesis writing. The latter is distributed to the students at the beginning of the year and explained in (voluntary) Methodological lectures given by the Programme Director. The thesis supervisor has the main responsibility in guiding the student in his/her work. The promotership can also be divided between two people. The assessment committee finds that in this manner the programme has established a strong mix of procedural and substantive measures of supervising the thesis process.

Students **eligible for PILC** are graduates with a basic law degree at Master's level or equivalent degree that entitles them to practise the legal profession in their home country. A maximum of forty students are selected each year. According to the self-evaluation report, the programme typically receives around 90-120 applications. To attain the target number of 30-40, a Selection Committee chooses 50-60 students on the basis of e.g. academic merit, motivation and (international) work experience. The committee takes into account a balanced representation of geographic regions, including (when possible) the legal advancement of developing countries. The students' acceptance is also subject to an **English language** certificate.

The assessment panel is satisfied with the intake policy and procedures. The assessment panel understands the desire expressed by the PILC management to handle all student applications directly (instead of depending for this on the central VUB administration), as this kind of programme is situated in a highly competitive environment.

The intensive introductory courses at the very beginning of the programme serve as early control points on language skills: in the rare instances where the students have passed the admission requirements despite insufficient oral and/or written English skills, they are directed to take English courses elsewhere. The programme itself begins with a special Welcome Week, which aims to quickly put the students on friendly terms with one another and initiate them intellectually. Due to the strength of the social bonds within the group, students feel at ease. Although the programme is seen as 'intense' and 'demanding', **drop-out rates** remain very low.

The PILC professors are appointed chair by chair, specifically and exclusively for the purpose of teaching the PILC course in question. The selection committees routinely contain professionals from outside of the IES so as to ensure an external input. The **PILC staff** currently consists of 14 members, together representing 1.6 full time equivalents. Given the relatively low student numbers, this does not negatively affect the student/staff ratio. The staff further consists of six nationalities and is divided into 8 'academics' and 6 'practitioners'. The dividing line is fluid, however: most PILC professors have elements from both profiles.

Beyond the PILC professors themselves, input from the **academic** and **professional fields** is integrated in at least four ways. First, courses on EU Economic Law and Globalisation have hosted a large number of academic and professional experts over the past years. Second, a wide range of experts has been integrated into the programme through the recurring IES Lecture Series. Third, external experts (Competition law counsels from Brussels) are involved in the Business Law Case Study, and experts from EU institutions and the IES in the Public Law Case Study. Fourth, numerous researchers from international research groups at the VUB teach on the programme. The assessment panel is satisfied that the programme employs the best legal specialists in each of the fields involved.

The classes by practitioners are highly valued by the students. These teachers give examples from their daily job experience and go - as one alumnus put it - 'straight to the problem'. Surveys among PILC students and alumni show that both groups are satisfied with the teachers' performance, in particular with regard to 'knowledge of the subject matter' and 'approachability'. 'Educational skills' score only slightly lower.

The assessment panel applauds the dedication of the staff and their attention to **multicultural sensitivity**. The programme cohort regularly consists of over twenty nationalities from (almost) all the world's continents, creating an ideal setting for constant, intensive interactions across multiple cultural boundaries. It is true, therefore, that students are in a multicultural environment and they come into contact with other law systems. The 'Globalisation paper' for example divides all students into groups of participants with as diverse backgrounds as possible in the very beginning of the academic year. According to the panel, this setting could be actively used to further sensitise students to working in a multicultural environment, for example by increasing the number of elements in the curriculum that explicitly address this topic.

**Administrative support** is in safe hands. The PILC Secretary works under an 80% part-time contract and is the first-line contact person of the students. She receives very positive feedback in both alumni and PILC evaluations for, e.g., providing individual guidance and assistance to the students and professors on a daily basis, in addition to her regular organisational and secretarial functions. While the PILC Secretariat has a central role in the programme, the IES Secretariat at large also has a role in terms of financial issues, visa and registration, etc.

The **infrastructure** is state-of-the-art. The programme is housed in the brand new IES facilities in Brussels, right near the VUB campus and easily accessible by public transport. All classes are organised in one, fixed classroom, stimulating the group feeling among students and their sense of cohesion. The PILC Secretariat is located on the same floor. The presentation software and other electronic devices are up-to-date. The teaching materials used in PILC receive generally a high mark in the student evaluations.

The IES offers a small but focused research library specialised in international and European law. The office rooms, social spaces and modern conference rooms for up to 100 people at the IES provide a multitude of spaces for group work, seminars, case study role plays etc. PILC can also use the general VUB infrastructure (such as the library) as well as other important resources located nearby, such as the European Commission library and the library of the Université libre de Bruxelles.

The IES is with its in-house EU Modules platform a pioneer in developing **on-line learning** methods in European law and policy. Participation in PILC entitles the students to full usage rights in this virtual, interactive learning environment, which consists of over 400 pages divided into 5 individual EU Modules. During the on-site visit students praised the access they have to online documents.

In the previous assessment (2007), PILC received a number of suggestions on how to further refine the programme. The self-evaluation report has listed these **recommendations**, explaining in detail how they have been addressed. Most fundamental suggestions - such as moving away from comparative law, introducing an element of choice in the programme, but also with regard to staff, facilities and quality assurance - have been implemented since then.

The **PILC Board** consists of the PILC professors and two PILC alumni representatives, as well as one or two student representatives. The Board meets five to six times per year. Its main function is to

determine a vision for PILC, and to take initiatives and make proposals in fulfilment of the vision. The student representatives serve as a link between the students, the programme management and the professors.

The assessment panel is convinced that the programme is adapted to current developments. The VUB organises surveys of all its alumni and the results of these have been incorporated in the self-evaluation report. A so-called e-evaluation, a regular electronic student survey organised from central VUB level, has not been that successful in collecting student feedback on the professors' teaching and examinations. Despite consistent encouragement by the PILC management, the students' response rates have been poor. However, PILC itself also conducts anonymous **student assessments** of its professors' performance across five criteria (knowledge, presentation skills, materials, structure, accessibility). This survey is not limited to individual courses, but starts with the category 'Programme overall', where views on issues such as facilities, workload and satisfaction with PILC experience overall are collected. The PILC Survey also measures the Programme Director, not as a professor but as the manager of the programme.

Prior to the assessment, PILC students engaged in an effort to analyse the programme, which resulted in a document assessing various aspects of the programme. While highly valuing the PILC survey, the panel recommends that regular focus group interviews should continue to be organised with students to supplement the information that is already collected e.g. in the survey on the programme as a whole, on the separate courses and on the Programme director.

After the previous assessment, the **alumni association** APILCA was founded to form an active network between the over 1,200 PILC graduates (many of them in senior positions in EU Institutions, high-profile international law firms and organisations in the public and private sector). A number of initiatives have been introduced, such as the PILC Career lunches, at which an alumnus from a selected background (private, public, academia, NGO etc.) is invited to an IES-sponsored lunch with the current students. To get a large group of alumni together remains difficult, because many of them are living abroad.

In conclusion, the panel is convinced that the teaching process makes it possible for the students to achieve the learning outcomes. The curriculum is coherent, with a good mix of a public law and a business law track. The panel is impressed by the staff quality. The infrastructure, educational facilities and on-line learning methods are state-of-the-art. Recommendations from the former assessment have been addressed. Thanks to a streamlined organisation and procedures, the daily management is running smoothly. Having a certain status apart from the other VUB faculties, PILC is able to conduct a more independent and self-supporting course, led by a dedicated programme director. Because of the high level of legal expertise of the teaching staff, the disciplinary and attentive organisation, the excellent facilities and the challenging programme it offers to a relatively small community of motivated and qualified students, the panel stresses that this programme can be considered as a 'best practice' in international perspective.

## Generic quality standard 3 - Outcome Level Achieved

The assessment panel evaluates the outcome level achieved as good.

There is a clear central policy which guarantees the monitoring of evaluation methods. This policy builds on the key aspects of the VUB's Vision of Evaluation, but also received specific attention of the PILC Board which is consciously aiming at striking a balance between the advantages and disadvantages that each of the methods have. As a result, there is a rather even spread of the use of oral (12 courses) and written (all 17 courses) forms of evaluation. In 12 cases - e.g. in the case studies - both oral and written forms of evaluation are in use. Within written evaluation forms, there is an even split between closed-book exams with open questions (8), case studies (6) and open-book evaluations (5). The choice of the evaluation methods employed is discussed between the PILC board and the professors.

Students told the assessment panel that they are satisfied with the examination process. Much effort has been put into transparency and validity. The specific means of evaluating the students, including model questions, are communicated as mandatory parts of the course content descriptions. Professors also explain the means of evaluation as a part of their course. The course syllabi contain detailed information on the exams. In the oral examinations, a policy of accompanying the professors with a third-party assistant is in force to allow for a verification of the procedure.

While all professors use evaluations in one or more summative ways to check whether learning outcomes have been reached, they also provide feedback on students' progress. On the basis of the on-site visit and the interviews with students and teachers, the panel is convinced that the further development of this formative evaluation is in safe hands with the PILC board.

Regarding the Master's thesis, each member of the Reading Committee (a Supervisor and two readers) prepares an evaluation report on the student. The evaluation criteria to be considered are outlined in the PILC Master Thesis Evaluation Template. The thesis also has to be defended orally. Students confirm that the evaluation criteria are known to them. In addition to the evaluation template, the grading itself is explained in 'thesis assessment guidelines'.

Prior to the on-site visit, the assessment panel read a relevant sample of Master's theses. Overall, the quality is satisfactory and corresponds to the grades that were given.

When interviewed by the assessment panel, students and alumni both praised the 'practical applications' of the programme and the fact that it is 'not overly academic'. The positive results regarding employability seem to confirm the practical nature of the programme. The PILC alumni survey indicates that in 2008-2011 a third, and in 2011-2013 a half of the graduates had been employed in less than one month. Over the six-month period following graduation, the rate of becoming employed increased from 66% to 83% in the same timeframes. Among the alumni are a prime minister, directors of EU institutions and employers at international law firms. The assessment panel feels that the high level of the legal professions in which the graduates are employed reflects on the quality and good reputation of the programme.

Only 5-10% of the surveyed alumni were dissatisfied with their current job. During the on-site visit alumni stressed that it may take some time to find a job in the EU Institutions, as competition is harsh. Graduates acknowledge, however, that a PILC degree always 'opens the first door' for an

internship. The programme is also considered a good preparation for the European Commission concours.

Some measures have been taken to enhance the employability of the graduates, such as the (already mentioned) career lunches, a PILC Job Applications Workshop and a PILC Job Market. Participation in PILC also gives access to the VUB Career Centre, which specifically takes into account international and European lawyers' profiles and job opportunities. Nevertheless, according to the self-evaluation 'there is room for improvement in informing the students of professional opportunities and in supporting their recruitment'.

The study yield of the programme is good. The average mark of the graduating PILC students has varied between 70% and 77%. In 86-100% of cases students graduate within the intended one-year timeframe. It is obvious that these figures are strongly related to the adequate selection policy (see GQS 2).

In conclusion, the assessment panel finds that the learning outcomes are achieved. According to the alumni survey, only 3% of the graduates feel that the programme objectives have not been met. PILC has a clear, reliable and transparent system of assessment, testing and examination. Clearly, the PILC board is giving much thought about the evaluation policy, including formative evaluation, and has developed a strong vision on this. As a result evaluation methods are varied and embedded within a solid policy framework, in particular with regard to the Master's thesis. The student pass rates are high. Although competition on the labour market can be harsh, graduates are well positioned and rightly qualified to enter (whether or not via internships) international law firms and international organisations.

## Final judgement of the assessment panel

Generic quality standard 1 - Targeted Outcome Level	G
Generic quality standard 2 - Learning Process	E
Generic quality standard 3 - Outcome Level Achieved	G

As generic quality standard 1 is evaluated as good, generic quality standard 2 is evaluated as excellent, and generic quality standard 3 is evaluated as good, according to the decision rules, the final judgement of the assessment panel on the Master of Laws in International and European Law is good.

## **Summary of the recommendations for further improvement of the study programme**

### **Generic Quality Standard 1 - Targeted Outcome Level**

- Conduct an international benchmarking of the programme learning outcomes.

### **Generic Quality Standard 2 - Learning Process**

- Consider continuing focus group interviews with students at a regular interval.

### **Generic Quality Standard 3 - Outcome Level Achieved**

- Make sure that more professors incorporate formative evaluation in their courses.