

## Executive LL.M. Programs: Offering Flexibility, Not Shortcuts

Experienced lawyers not interested in changing firms or countries have new degree options.

By V. Wish, Jul 22, 2010



Part-time, "executive" degree programs are nothing new, but they still seem like a novelty to the legal profession. While there are already hundreds of Executive MBA programs for experienced, working professionals, only a handful of law schools have adopted a similar concept.

"If I were to put a roomful of Boston attorneys and academics together, and asked how many of them had degrees that they earned part-time, let alone from non-traditional programs, few hands would go up," says Ian Pilarczyk, director of a new Executive LL.M. program at Boston University School of Law.

"Some of this is a product of time and place, of course," says Pilarczyk. "But it's also true that legal education has not always been as nimble and innovative as other fields."

Pilarczyk says that traditional, full-time residential LL.M. programs fail to "address the needs of a considerable segment of the market" - that is, lawyers who cannot afford to take nine months to live and study abroad. The BU Law Executive LL.M. program, which begins in March 2011, blends intensive two-week, on-campus residencies and distance learning.

Executive programs can also be a good fit for "happily ensconced" lawyers with little or no interest in changing firms or even countries. It also gives them the chance to stay in their jobs while deepening their expertise or branching out into a new field.

"Professionally, there can be interesting synergies between remaining immersed in the working world while studying one's field in greater depth, or moving laterally into a related subject area, or

even diversifying out into another area of subject matter entirely," says Pilarczyk.

Tax lawyers enroll in New York University's Executive Tax LL.M. for similar reasons, according to the program's faculty director, Joshua Blank.

"I don't think they're really interested in getting the degree solely so they can get a different job," says Blank of his students. "Many of the Executive LL.M. students already have jobs; they want the substantive knowledge."

The NYU Executive Tax LL.M. is delivered completely online, which Blank says offers the students flexibility – perhaps the program's biggest advantage. Lawyers working in different time zones can watch recorded lectures – the same lectures delivered to on-campus LL.M. students – in their own time. They use an online forum to discuss questions with professors and classmates, and must pass the same exams as the full-time students.

Despite the advantages, Blank acknowledges the stigma sometimes associated with distance learning programs – the notion that they represent a "diluted" or "abbreviated" version of a full-time program. Blank, however, insists the NYU program delivers "exactly the same degree as our bricks-and-mortar program."

"We're not providing any kind of shortcut," says Blank. "It is the same offering. The only difference is that students have more control over when they view the classes."

One possible disadvantage of the online versus on-campus experience, however, is the lack of interaction with professors and other students in-person. Most NYU Executive Tax LL.M. students are US lawyers who might not need this, but foreign lawyers might miss the opportunity to immerse themselves in US legal culture and improving their English.

### **Executive ≠ part-time**

Another important difference is that unlike most full-time LL.M. programs, graduating from an Executive LL.M. program generally do not qualify lawyers for a US state bar exam.

"Because they are more established, our students aren't worried about that," says Janet Garesche, director of Northwestern Law School's Executive LL.M. programs.

Instead, Garesche says her programs' students – most of whom are practicing business law attorneys with five to ten years of work experience – are focused on getting the knowledge they need in a formal, structured setting. Northwestern offers the programs in partnership with universities in these global hubs, such as IE Law School in Madrid and KAIST in Seoul.

"Most of these students need it for their work right away," says Garesche. "They need a foundation in the American legal system. They might have dabbled in international law in their work, and they need to know more."

Students complete the coursework on weekends and evenings, mixed with some online coursework.

The challenge is that these programs must be completed in a normal academic year, but this is a challenge Garesche says experienced lawyers are typically well-equipped to handle.

"They already have work and family commitments," she says. "They do the modules and then they have to go back to work and still manage exams and papers. That's why we like older, established students who have already had to manage many things in their lives - either professional or personal - so that they can manage Executive-style curriculum."

So, will the Executive LL.M. become more widespread at the world's law schools? All signs point to yes. Young, ambitious lawyers will certainly continue to flock to London, New York, and elsewhere for the nine-month campus experience (and the hope of landing a good job afterward).

Meanwhile, an increasing number of business schools are partnering with schools on distant continents to offer joint, executive-style MBA programs. If more law schools follow suit, we could indeed be seeing more international, executive LL.M. programs in the coming years.

According to Ian Pilarczyk, this would be another way for law schools to reach new audiences, expand their global footprint, create another revenue stream, and "leverage or develop subject matter expertise in a particular field as part of that institution's brand."

Meanwhile, Janet Garesche says Northwestern aims to strengthen and build its ties with universities in Seoul, Madrid, and beyond.

"Our goal is to globalize our school," she says. "We believe that is the trend. How could it not be? The world is becoming smaller with the internet and communications. I know that's the direction we are taking."

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