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International Students and Master of Laws (LL.M.) Programs in the U.S.:
What U.S. Law Schools Will Not Tell You About Choosing the “Best” School, Getting Admitted, Succeeding in Their LL.M. Programs, and Getting a Good Job Post-Degree

by George E. Edwards

I. Introduction

1. The “Best” U.S. law school or LL.M. program for each international student

Over 100 ABA-approved law schools in the U.S. offer Master of Laws (LL.M.) degree programs. Most of the 6,000 students enrolled in these programs each year are “international students,” in that they earned their first law degrees outside the U.S. These students hail from every major legal system of the world and from diverse legal education systems. They have lived in many countries, speak many different languages, and have widely diverse cultural backgrounds. Each student is different, with individualized academic, personal, and career needs and aspirations.

Each U.S. LL.M. program also differs from each other. Each has different academic offerings and resources, and different administrators and faculty who have varying levels of commitment to students and to the educational process. Schools and programs differ in size, and indeed none is large enough to accommodate all 6,000 international LL.M. students each year. Nor should all students want to attend any one particular school, because any one particular school cannot be the best school for every student.

Ideally, a student’s strengths, interests and expectations will lead them to choose a U.S. law school that is prepared to complement the student’s strengths, and satisfy the student’s interests and reasonable expectations. In theory, there is a “best” or “ideal” U.S. LL.M. program for each international student. The best program for one student may not be the best program for another student. A prospective student’s goal is to find the best or ideal program for himself or herself.

2. International students’ questions and concerns; Getting answers—reliable information sources

Despite prospective students’ individualized nature, students from around the world tend to possess the same or similar basic pressing questions and concerns regarding graduate legal education generally, including whether they should even pursue an LL.M. degree. Once they choose the U.S. for their LL.M., they must decide which is the “best” school or LL.M. program in the U.S. for them, and then sort out how they can get admitted, how they can pay for their U.S. degree, how they can succeed academically in the program, and how they can secure a great job or otherwise reach their career goals after they receive their LL.M. degree. Each student will necessarily answer these questions differently. Nevertheless, all students must gather critical information, weigh it, acknowledge and honor (or possibly ignore) their own personal prejudices and predilections, and then make informed decisions based on rational, legitimate criteria that they consider important in the short and long term.

But where and how do prospective students obtain the accurate, comprehensive information they need to make informed decisions about LL.M. programs, based on rational, legitimate criteria? One could write a book on the topic. And, indeed I did write such a book—LL.M. Roadmap.¹ There are many sources of

¹ George E. Edwards, LL.M. Roadmap: An International Student’s Guide to U.S. Law School Programs (Aspen / Wolter Kluwer Law and Business) (September 2011) (www.LLMRoadMap.com). In over 500 pages LL.M. Roadmap discusses international students and LL.M. programs, from the earliest decision of whether to pursue an LL.M. to how international students can satisfy their career
information other than LL.M. Roadmap that the book directs you to, and that include direct stakeholders in the transnational legal study marketplace, as well as many more objective sources. U.S. law schools may provide you with substantial, very helpful information, but they may be unwilling to, or unable to, tell you about some aspects of their program.  

3. Outline of this Article

Part II of this article identifies stakeholders in the international education market, some of their very high stakes, and some of the conflicting interests that may detract from the ability of an international student to receive the high quality education he or she seeks at a U.S. law school’s LL.M. program.  

Part III discusses international LL.M. students’ reasonable expectations. This part discusses 218 criteria outlined in LL.M. Roadmap for a prospective student to consider when choosing a U.S. LL.M. program, with those 218 criteria reflecting characteristics that an LL.M. program should possess if the program expects to be able to meet students’ reasonable expectations. Part III also discusses two principal areas in which LL.M. students have high expectations of LL.M. programs: (a) LL.M. students want to receive a high quality education; and (b) LL.M. students want to share with students information about how the school diverts LL.M. tuition revenue away from the LL.M. program leaving students information other than LL.M. Roadmap that the book directs you to, and that include direct stakeholders in the transnational legal study marketplace, as well as many more objective sources. U.S. law schools may provide you with substantial, very helpful information, but they may be unwilling to, or unable to, tell you about some aspects of their program.  

2 Chapter 8 of LL.M. Roadmap, on pages 169 – 171, lists numerous sources of information, including individuals, entities, LL.M. fairs in the U.S. and abroad, websites and books.  

3 For example, an LL.M. program may be unwilling to share with students information about how the school diverts LL.M. tuition revenue away from the LL.M. program leaving the LL.M. program lacking in support services, or unwilling to share with the students about how untreated dysfunction within the school’s administration adversely affects the LL.M. program.  

The school will be unable to share information the administration does not possess. For example, the administration may be unaware of high levels of current student and graduate discontent with the school. The administration may be out of touch due to apathy, lack of understanding of the need to monitor student or graduate satisfaction levels with the schools, or inability to convince students and graduates of the need to give comprehensive, constructive feedback to the schools so the schools can provide as great of a service as they can. Some schools may be oblivious to the fact that some LL.M. students and graduates – even large numbers – foster negative views about the school. Schools cannot share information they do not have, irrespective of how or why the school does not possess the information.

II. Stakeholders and high stakes in the transnational legal education marketplace; “cash cows” and “diploma mills”

1. Who are the stakeholders?

The most important stakeholders in the transnational legal education marketplace are students—prospective, currently enrolled, and graduated. Students are most directly involved in acquiring a direct and lasting commodity—a high quality, affordable legal education. Prospective student stakeholders include persons trained in law outside the U.S. who may want a U.S. law degree, including lawyers working for U.S. or overseas law firms or as in-house counsel for corporations, overseas law professors or judges who want to further their education, and overseas recent law graduates who not yet have entered the workforce.
Current LL.M. students want to succeed, and LL.M. graduates want to reach their post-U.S. law degree goals.

Other stakeholders include: foreign government education and scholarship ministries (who advise citizens of their countries on studying in the U.S., and who provide them funding); overseas law professors and academic advisors (who teach and counsel international students); U.S. State Department and other U.S. government officials (who advise and fund international students); U.S. Congress (which sets immigration rules for international students coming to the U.S.); U.S. law school administrators, librarians and other staff (who work with international students); educational agents and admission consultants (who work with international students and U.S. law schools on LL.M. program recruitment and placement); and overseas parents (who want U.S. law degrees for their children, and who pay their children’s U.S. tuition, fees, and living expenses).

2. What are the stakes in transnational legal education? How high are those stakes?

Individuals and entities involved in transnational legal education have competing goals and expectations—proposed outcomes that would make them happy. But, transnational legal education is not a zero sum game. Conflicts can be resolved among stakeholders without unduly trampling upon the interests of other stakeholders. Stakeholders take risks, and assess prospects for returns on their investments.

The financial stakes in U.S. LL.M. programs are high.

International students in U.S. law school programs easily generate an estimated $200 million in tuition and fees revenue income to U.S. law schools each year. Tuition at many U.S. law schools is over $40,000 per year,

High tuition revenues entice schools. Though many law schools are non-profit institutions, they nevertheless prefer to operate with revenues greater than expenditures.

The U.S. economy, and the economies of localities where the law schools are located, benefit from revenues generated by international students. International students spend a considerable amount of money on housing, food, insurance, local transportation within the U.S., mobile phones, law school books and supplies, entertainment and other expenses. Students have expectations when they spend that money.

Foreign governments invest considerable sums in scholarships for their students to receive LL.M. degrees in the U.S. The U.S., through the Department of State and other offices, invests considerable sums to sponsor international students to receive U.S. LL.M. degrees through the Fulbright, Muskie and other scholarship programs. Corporations and law firms send lawyers to the U.S. for LL.M. degrees, and overseas judiciaries send their judges. Parents, family members, and other benefactors of international students invest a great deal in sending students to the U.S. to study for LL.M. degrees.

Investing stakeholders expect returns.

Top 4 questions posed by international prospective LL.M. students who are interested in studying in the U.S.

1. Which are the “best” U.S. law schools? Which schools should I apply to? How do I choose?
2. How do I get admitted to the “best” U.S. LL.M. Program?
3. Can I get a scholarship to pay for my U.S. law degree?
4. Will I get a great job after I finish my LL.M.?

4 The U.S. government factors international student spending in its balance of trade calculations. See LL.M. Roadmap, Chapter 1, page 4.

3. Conflicts among stakeholders – competing stakes – “cash cows” or “diploma mills” as examples

All the individuals and entities mentioned above have a stake in the LL.M. marketplace, and some of these stakes conflict with each other. For example, a U.S. law school may decide that its goal is to maximize the amount of revenue it gathers from international LL.M. students, and wants to minimize the school’s expenses associated with international LL.M. students. Thus, the school may decide not to reinvest LL.M. tuition revenue into the LL.M. program, but may decide to use LL.M. revenue for the J.D. program. If the school diverts LL.M. revenue away from the LL.M. program, the school may not be devoting appropriate levels of funding for LL.M. academic assistance programs, English-language tutoring, or LL.M. career services. In other words, the school would treat the LL.M. program like a “cash cow”—using revenues from the LL.M. program for non-LL.M. purposes and otherwise not providing the LL.M. program with adequate funding, leaving the LL.M. program with insufficient resources to meet the reasonable needs and expectations of the LL.M. students. LL.M. students have a negative experience, and indeed suffer due to
this conflict.\footnote{I emphasize that an LL.M. program does not become a “cash cow” simply because it charges a high tuition rate. Schools are indeed businesses, and they, like any other business, charge what the market will bear. An LL.M. program is a “cash cow” if it fails to reinvest the LL.M. tuition revenue into the LL.M. program or otherwise provide adequate funding, and the LL.M. program lacks resources it needs to meet the reasonable expectations of LL.M. students.}

Similarly, conflicts arise and international LL.M. students suffer if the LL.M. program possesses characteristics of a “diploma mill,” for example, if it has low or unenforced academic requirements for admission, success in, or graduation from the program, and essentially bestows LL.M. degrees at a high price but with little worth.\footnote{For a discussion of “diploma mills”, see Chapter 6 of LL.M. Roadmap.}

III. Meeting LL.M. Students’ “Reasonable Expectations”

Students seek LL.M. degrees in the U.S. for different reasons, and they have different expectations about their LL.M. programs and how the programs will help them reach their post-LL.M. goals.\footnote{For a discussion of 17 reasons that international students choose the U.S. for their LL.M. degrees, see Chapter 2 of LL.M. Roadmap.} No two students will likely have exactly the same reasons for pursuing the LL.M. or precisely the same expectations or post-LL.M. goals.

Questions arise as to whether student expectations are reasonable, whether U.S. law schools meet students’ reasonable expectations, and whether and to what extent students attain their post-LL.M. goals.

1. Reasonable Expectations

For an international student to have an excellent LL.M. experience in the U.S., that student’s expectations must be reasonable, and those reasonable expectations must be met. Their expectations may be wide-ranging, but notably relate to: (a) the quality of their education (e.g., receiving an appropriate knowledge base and training); or (b) their post-LL.M. goals (e.g., finding a job after graduation). Generally speaking, the burden is on the school to ensure that students’ reasonable expectations are met regarding their education quality and career goals, though students also have the burden of, for example, studying hard, excelling on exams, and following guidance of LL.M. academic faculty advisors, LL.M. career coaches, and others who provide sound advice.\footnote{Students must of course assume some responsibility for their own personal and professional success, and cannot rely wholly on the school. Again, both the school and the students must do their respective parts.}

Chapter 7 of the LL.M. Roadmap lists 218 characteristics, in 26 categories, that U.S. LL.M. programs should possess in order to be able to meet students’ reasonable expectations.\footnote{The 218 Chapter 7 characteristics are labeled as “Criteria for Choosing the “Best” LL.M. Program For You”, and fall into the following 26 categories: “type” of LL.M. program; specialized or general LL.M.; law school faculty; LL.M. coursework and academic credit requirements; nature of LL.M. instruction; school and LL.M. program size; non-classroom academic credit (clinics, internships, moot courts, etc.); other degrees & certificates offered; nature of school and the school’s philosophy; LL.M. and J.D. student integration; thesis or substantial writing; grading schemes; academic support on campus; law journals and law reviews; career development office; jobs—on campus, summer, OPT; LL.M. handbook; J.D., LL.M. and S.J.D. student body; alumni; law school administration and staff; law library; bar exam preparation; finances – expenses, scholarships; location; campus facilities; ranking and reputation; “best” law school to meet your goals and applicant self-assessment.}

Examples of the LL.M. Roadmap 218 traits that relate to quality of education include that an international LL.M. student can reasonably expect U.S. schools to offer courses on the U.S. legal system, English as a Second Language (ESL) support for students who need it, tutoring on study skills and U.S. law school exam-preparation, and instruction on

a. Quality of Education

A high quality LL.M. education for an international student requires a broad, yet focused curriculum in an institution that possesses a breadth of qualities and characteristics. If schools do not possess these traits, they will not be able to meet students’ reasonable expectations.

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Meeting LL.M. Student Expectations

1. International students develop an understanding about what to expect from their U.S. law school LL.M. programs.

2. Schools should make every effort to understand what international students reasonably expect.

3. Schools can then decide whether to meet those student expectations. If the school decides that it will not meet a particular expectation or set of expectations, the school should post a notice on its website or otherwise notify prospective students. Prospective students can then decide whether to attend that particular school.

4. If a school fees that students’ expectations are unreasonable, the school should notify the students and prospective students so they can make choices about their educational futures.

5. For example, international students generally expect a U.S. LL.M. program to help the student achieve career goals. If the school is not going to reasonable help students in that regard, by providing career officers trained in working with international law students, then the school should so notify prospective students. The student can choose a school that has career officers dedicated to work with international LL.M. students.

6. Everyone involved is better off if there is a meeting of the minds up front, and no bait and switch or other false promises.

Furthermore, LL.M. students can reasonably expect U.S. schools to offer very strong legal communication courses that focus on legal research, analysis, writing and oral communications, in English, with such instruction specifically geared towards addressing needs of international LL.M. students. Also, LL.M. students can reasonably expect schools to provide a full complement of required courses and electives and clear academic guidance about which courses are best for which students, guidance on which extra-curricular activities will help LL.M. students reach personal and professional goals, and information about how best LL.M. student health, security and general welfare needs can be met.

Furthermore, it is reasonable for international LL.M. students to expect U.S. law schools to provide capable, available professors, resources to help international students adjust to U.S. legal education and culture, access to law journal or law review membership, and general equity with LL.M. students regarding access to resources and facilities (including membership on faculty committees as J.D. students have such memberships).

It is reasonable for international LL.M. students to expect that their associate dean or other administration official responsible for the LL.M. program lives in the same city or state (or at a minimum lives in the same general region of the country as the school) and does not commute to school and be present only a couple of days a week, that the associate dean will not be an “absent dean” and will be available to handle (and actually does handle, and will handle) problems that arise among LL.M. students, and that the associate dean will work with all faculty and staff at the law school to maximize exposure of the international LL.M. students to non-LL.M. faculty and staff, and vice versa.

It is reasonable for international LL.M. students to have high expectations of the law school dean, who is responsible for all aspects of the school’s operation, including responsibility for the LL.M. program and the LL.M. associate dean. It is reasonable to expect the dean to be vested (or invested) in the LL.M. program, to be actively interested in the welfare of the LL.M. program and its international students, to regularly participate in town hall meetings with LL.M. students, to listen to LL.M. student complaints, criticisms and compliments, to cure any and all defects and dysfunction within the LL.M. program (among students or staff or otherwise), and generally to be wholly engaged with the transnational legal education that is meant to occur in the LL.M. program, the J.D. program, and among all students, faculty and staff. No academic program exists in a vacuum at any law school, and the dean should assume responsibility for ensuring that the synergies of these various learning endeavors combine

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Students cannot acquire a quality legal education in the U.S. if the students are not healthy and secure. Schools must take steps to ensure the well-being of its international LL.M. students.

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LL.M. students are adults and of course can look after themselves. However, when an international student enrolls in a residential LL.M. program in the U.S., it is reasonable for them to expect full service from faculty, administrators, and staff. If an international student wanted to earn a degree without the physical presence on campus of high-ranking administrators such as an associate dean, then the student could have chosen to enroll in an online program, in which case the student might expect an absent associate dean. Chapter 4 of LL.M. Roadmap identifies and discusses 7 categories or types of LL.M. programs operated by U.S. law schools, including residential programs in the U.S., programs with educational components outside the U.S., and online programs. A student’s reasonable expectations would differ depending on which type of program he or she chooses.
for maximum, positive learning among students, faculty and staff. We all learn from each other. A good dean should be a strong leader, and should lead the school in facilitating this very important learning.

A school’s LL.M. program would be deficient if it does not provide basic elements to satisfy the needs and reasonable expectations of international students.

b. Career Goals

Prospective and current LL.M. students, and LL.M. graduates, have multi-varied, individualized career aspirations. U.S. LL.M. programs should have in place policies and practices to help LL.M. students and graduates reach their reasonable career goals.

A student may have post-LL.M. goals of working as a lawyer for the United Nations, or becoming a judge or Minister in their home country. Their goal may be to improve their legal English so they can better perform their current job, or to develop expertise in an area they were not able to study in their first law course. Their goal may be to network with U.S. lawyers and law students, or to gain clients for their own law firm when they return to their home country. Their goal may be to secure a 12-month job at a Wall Street law firm, a teaching position at a U.S. or overseas law school, a job with a non-governmental organization, or employment in another legal or non-legal opportunity.

All those goals could be reasonable. Any of those goals could be attainable. It is reasonable for LL.M. students to expect U.S. law schools to provide assistance in attaining those goals...at least at a level in equity with assistance provided to J.D. students. Many schools do a fine job in this regard. Some do not.

2. Reasonable or unreasonable expectations—Problems.

Problems arise when students have reasonable expectations of a school but the school is unwilling or unable to meet those expectations. Furthermore, it is problematic if a student has unreasonable expectations, in which case the schools also will not meet those goals. In both instances, there is no meeting of the minds between the students and schools. They are out of sync.

Let’s say that an international student has a goal of working at a law firm in the U.S. for one year post-LL.M. On its face, that goal is reasonable since U.S. government policy allows international students to engage in post-LL.M. “practical training” work, and various states, such as New York, permit international LL.M. students to sit for their bar exam. But to secure the job, the LL.M. student may need the assistance of the school. To be successful at the job once hired, the school must have provided the LL.M. student with appropriate, adequate training.

The student will need to be well versed in aspects of U.S. law, and must be able to communicate effectively with colleagues at the firm and with clients. Thus, U.S. law schools have an obligation to help ensure that the student receives training necessary to be able to conduct legal research, write legal memoranda, and communicate legal opinions orally. Schools should provide legal communication training that specifically targets LL.M. students, that takes into account that LL.M. students hail from many different legal systems, were trained in different legal education systems, and may not speak English as their native language. Teaching legal communication to international LL.M. students requires special skills and training, and is significantly different from teaching legal communication to domestic U.S. J.D. students.


Student and schools must be on the same page with regard to demand for services and attention and the supply thereof.

Students base their expectations in great part on information obtained from various sources, including from LL.M. students and graduates, from LL.M. websites and blogs, from LL.M. program websites,

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12 Students formulate career goals before they join an LL.M. program, and may change their minds about goals once they arrive in the U.S. and learn about their LL.M. classmates’ goals or are introduced to opportunities by LL.M. career coaches.

13 Chapter 26 of LL.M. Roadmap discusses 88 strategies to help prospective, current and former students achieve their many, multi-varied career objectives.

14 In a scheme known as “Optional Practical Training” (or “OPT”), the U.S. government permits international LL.M. students with a F-1 visa to work in the U.S. in a law-related job for up to 12 months following receipt of their LL.M. degree. General information about the OPT can be found in Chapter 27 of LL.M. Roadmap. Current rules can be found on the website of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) (http://www.ice.gov/sevis/students/opt.htm). For information about post-degree “Academic Training” available for students with a J-1 visa, see Chapter 27 of LL.M. Roadmap and www.ice.gov.

15 As of May 2011, New York has new rules in effect for international LL.M. students who wish to sit for the New York bar. These new rules are discussed in Chapter 28 of LL.M. Roadmap. Additional information can be found on the website of the New York State Board of Law Examiners (http://www.nybarexam.org)
from publications about LL.M. programs (such as *LL.M. Roadmap*) and from law schools themselves.\(^{16}\) Some information sources are more reliable than other sources. If the information is comprehensive and accurate, it may be more likely that students’ expectations will be more reasonable.

Law schools must ensure that they provide prospective and current students with reliable, accurate, complete, and transparent information about their programs and their offerings. For example, if a law school announces on its web page that it will not help LL.M. students find short term or permanent jobs in the U.S. post-LL.M., and will not offer guidance to LL.M. students as to how to prepare for a U.S. bar exam, then it is not reasonable for a student to expect such assistance. Otherwise, it is reasonable for LL.M. students to expect the school to help them find jobs and provide guidance to them about bar exams, since every U.S. law school knows that *many* international LL.M. students may wish work in the U.S. for a year post-LL.M. and the students may not decide to pursue that work opportunity until after they enroll in the LL.M. program, and may only then decide to sit for the bar exam in a U.S. state. Though job opportunities may be limited during periods of economic downturn, schools are nevertheless obligated to assist LL.M. and J.D. students compete in the employment marketplace.

Curricular offerings should be spelled out expressly on websites, along with course offerings (especially electives) available for specific semesters of LL.M. student residence, information about which professors may be on sabbatical (and whether the associate dean will be in residence or will be working at different law school for a semester), the availability if any of thesis writing along with the rules for writing theses, whether LL.M. and J.D. students will be graded together on the same scale, minimum GPA for remaining in good standing, whether the school facilitates J.D. and LL.M. student integration outside of class, whether the school seeks to expose LL.M. students to professors who do not routinely teach LL.M. classes, possibilities for transferring into the J.D. program with or with taking an LSAT, and all other aspects that are spelled out in *LL.M. Roadmap*’s 218 criteria for choosing an LL.M. program.

LL.M. programs should provide accurate, transparent, and comprehensive information so that prospective students will be able to form reasonable expectations about the program, and can make more informed choices about whether to enroll.

\(^{16}\) See *LL.M. Roadmap*, Chapter 8, pages 169 – 171 for a list of additional LL.M. program information sources.

4. **What can a current international LL.M. student or an LL.M. graduate do if they believe their law school is failing or has failed to meet the student’s reasonable needs and expectations?**

Not every U.S. law school or its LL.M. program satisfies all of its responsibilities to its current LL.M. students or LL.M. graduates. Certain deficiencies in these programs may be *de minimis*, causing virtually no harm to students or graduates. However, some of the deficiencies are greater, and negatively impact students and graduates who are seeking to fulfill their personal, academic and career goals. LL.M. programs—through their administrators, policies and practices—can foster the blossoming of students and graduates, or can crush the goals of students and graduates.

If you are an LL.M. student who is dissatisfied about some aspect of your current LL.M. program, the time to raise the issue is as soon as you become aware of the problem. The same goes for graduates, if you feel you are not getting appropriate post-LL.M. career assistance from the school, the time to raise the issue is as soon as you become aware of the problem.

Of course it is the responsibility of law school administrators to monitor students and graduates, and to engage them in open dialogue, so the schools can not only become aware of “problems” before they exist, but also they can become well-position to resolve any problems the second they arise.

Unfortunately, not all schools are great at keeping their fingers on the pulse of their LL.M. students’ or graduates’ experiences. Also, unfortunately, not all LL.M. students and graduates feel as though they can freely communicate school deficiencies to LL.M. administrators. Though some students or graduates may rationalize or make excuses about their inability or unwillingness to directly tell administrators about problems, it is critical that students and graduates find a way to overcome any reticence, since full knowledge is needed before deficiencies can be cured.

### a. Rationalizations or excuses why international LL.M. students may choose not to complain about a school’s inability or unwillingness to meet LL.M. students’ reasonable expectations

Below are several reasons that current LL.M. students or graduates may feel that they are unwilling, or unable, to complain about deficiencies in their school’s LL.M. program.

(i) **Students’ culture doesn’t permit questioning authority.** Some international LL.M.
students hail from cultures where authority figures, such as professors and deans, are not to be challenged by students. Such students, when faced with an LL.M. program that is breaching its implied and expressed promises, may find it difficult to confront the U.S. school’s administration about those deficiencies.

(ii) **Students have no time or energy to deal with administration deficiency problems.** If the U.S. law school is breaching its promises to its LL.M. students, those students may feel that they do not have the time, or energy, to devote to trying to convince the school to honor its pledges. International LL.M. students invest substantial sums of money, time and energy getting accepted into an LL.M. program, acquiring a visa, enrolling, and trying to adapt to the U.S. legal education, which can be substantially different from what they encountered in their first law degree back home. During their first LL.M. semester, they are learning U.S. law and tradition, being exposed to the Socratic method perhaps for the first time, become immersed in reading and writing homework assignments at levels to which they are not accustomed—in English or their mother language, and are fretting about exam preparation, thesis research and writing, and other aspects of the U.S. LL.M. world.  

(iii) **Students can “live with” problems for 9 months.** International students may feel that they are in residence for only 9 or 10 months (2 semesters), that they can “live with” the deficiencies because of the short duration of the program, and that it would anyway likely be a waste of time to raise the issues with the administration.  

(iv) **Students fear retribution if they complain.** Some international students may believe that if they accuse the school of bait and switch or otherwise not honoring their promises, then professors or administrators may retaliate against the students and refuse to provide letters of recommendation, job search assistance, and other services that administrators otherwise routinely provide for students or graduates. Students may also feel that they may receive lower grades if they complain. These fears are very real, and have been expressed to me personally, on more than one occasion.  

b. How international LL.M. students can help ensure that U.S. law schools and their LL.M. programs fulfill their promises to the LL.M. students  

I can understand the above-mentioned reasons that an international LL.M. student or graduate may refrain from complaining to or confronting a professor or administrator about deficiencies in the LL.M. program. However, I would encourage international LL.M. students to seek to find a way to raise the issues with the administration, and make the administration aware of the severity of the problem.

(i) **Confide in a professor.** International LL.M. students might find a professor at the law school they can trust, and confide in that professor, and that professor may raise the issues with the administration—without revealing the identity of the LL.M. student or students affected.

(ii) **Form LL.M. student group to liaise with LL.M. administration.** International LL.M. students might form a student organization that focuses on the needs of LL.M. students, and through the leaders of that organization raise the issues with the administration. The organization could be named “Master of Laws Association (MLA)” or have a similar title, but its purposes might include soliciting feedback from LL.M. students, and passing that information on to the administration, and then reporting back to the LL.M. student body. The organization would act as sort of a liaison between the students and the administration.

(iii) **Students disseminate information about the schools.** International LL.M. students may actively comment about their programs on LL.M. blogs, websites, or listserves. An LL.M. student can disseminate positive feedback about their LL.M. programs, based on the program’s success in satisfying LL.M. students’ reasonable expectations. Similarly, if a program does not satisfy LL.M. students’ reasonable expectations, then students can spread the word about the program’s deficiencies. Spreading the word may encourage the program to modify its practices immediately, to the benefit of current students. Or, the program might institute changes for the coming year, which may benefit prospective students. In any event, all students – current and prospective – can benefit from LL.M. students speaking up and impacting a program’s policies and practices.  

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17 Positive information about LL.M. programs spreads swiftly, as does negative information. A school might benefit if positive information spreads about it. For example, such a school might experience an increase in application and enrollment levels. A school may suffer if credible, negative spreads about it. That school could experience a sharp decline in applications and a decrease in enrollment.

If you learn that a school has had large swings upwards or downwards in applications or enrollment numbers, you might ask the school administrators “why”. Also, seek information from other stakeholders, such as current students and graduates. Assess the information you receive, and seek to make decisions based on transparent, comprehensive and
(iv) **Call for town hall meetings and open dialogue.** International students might call upon the administration to hold town hall meetings in which LL.M. students and the administration engage in a conversation about pressing issues. Though students would not be anonymous in these meetings, perhaps LL.M. student leaders could speak as “spokespersons” for the students. A benefit of this approach is that the administration and students are in the same room together, and the administration may be more inclined to listen, and respond favorably.

5. Are there really U.S. law school LL.M. programs that are “cash cows” or “diploma mills”? Are there international students who do not care whether they received a high quality legal education, so long as they receive an LL.M. degree from any U.S. law school?

In Chapter 6 of *LL.M. Roadmap*, and elsewhere in this article, I define “cash cow” and “diploma mill”, and give examples of characteristics thereof. In Chapter 7 of *LL.M. Roadmap*, I list out 218 criteria that I believe U.S. LL.M. programs should possess, and that I believe international students should consider when they are choosing an LL.M. program. Prospective students, armed with a self-assessed determination of their own personal aspirations and needs, and armed with comprehensive, reliable information about different schools, are in solid positions to determine, in their opinion, whether a school or program meets the cash cow or diploma mill definition. Prospective students are also in a good position to determine whether they would personally be satisfied attending and graduating from a cash cow or diploma mill program. I cannot imagine recommending to a prospective student that they attend an overwhelmingly deficient school. But I recognize that there very well may be an “ideal” school for virtually any international student who has the financial and other means to attend. It is no secret that some LL.M. programs admit the overwhelming majority of students who apply with minimum qualifications, and that sometimes admission decisions may be motivated more by whether the student (or the student’s family or government) can afford the expensive tuition, rather than motivated by the applicant’s academic prowess or potential.

IV. **Conclusion**

Each international student who travels to the U.S. to study for an LL.M. degree does so for different reasons, and each student develops a set of expectations of their U.S. school, their school’s LL.M. program, and their U.S. educational experience generally. For LL.M. students to succeed in their LL.M. programs, they must study hard, perform well on their exams, and comply with rules and regulations. They also should set reasonable expectations and set reasonable post-LL.M. goals.

Schools must develop and implement policies and practices geared towards satisfying LL.M. students’ reasonable expectations, and then the schools must actually meet those expectations. This will increase the likelihood that students (and graduates) will be able to meet their post-LL.M. goals, and that schools will reach their own goals of educating students while staying solvent.

Students decide what expectations they deem reasonable, schools assess whether the school wishes to meet those expectations, schools inform the students as to which expectations the school will seek to meet, then the school meets those expectations. Some schools do well at meeting students’ reasonable expectations, and, unfortunately, some schools fail.

As a prospective student you are encouraged to strive to join an LL.M. program that has a proven track
record of meeting the needs of its students who share your interest and aspiration. ¹⁸

While you are enrolled in your U.S. school, and after you receive your LL.M. degree, you are encouraged to become a reliable information source for future generations of prospective students seeking to study for an LL.M. degree in the U.S. Find a credible method of providing honest and accurate information about your experiences with your law school, and your experiences with your LL.M. programs faculty, staff and students. Report on the local community in which your school is located, and other aspects of your exposure and experience, that might offer helpful insights to a future student. Be honest and fair in your reporting. Tell the many stories that U.S. law schools and their LL.M. programs are unwilling or unable to tell. You have a strong and credible voice.

By spreading accurate information, you can help the next generation of LL.M. students make informed choices. Not only will you provide a very helpful service, but also you may be make networking contacts that may benefit you, personally or professionally, later. When a prospective student reaches out to a graduate, the graduate can become a trusted advisor, a mentor, or a friend. A prospective student with whom you share information could in turn end up mentoring you, and becoming your trusted advisor and friend later on, maybe many years later. Reach out and extend a hand, as appropriate. Benefits are reciprocal, and can be lifelong.

About the Author: George E. Edwards received his J.D. from Harvard Law School where he was an Editor of the Harvard Law Review and Associate Editor of the Harvard Journal of International Law. He is the C.M. Gray Professor of Law and Faculty Director (Founding), Program in International Human Rights Law, Indiana University School of Law, Indianapolis. Professor Edwards is also the Director (Founding) of the Program in International Human Rights Law, and the Faculty Director (Founding / Former) of the Master of Laws (LL.M.) Track in International Human Rights Law at Indiana. However, Professor Edwards resigned from his LL.M. roles at Indiana in 2011 and maintains no administrative responsibilities for his school’s LL.M.

¹⁸ If you are joining a newly created LL.M. program without a track record, you are encouraged to gather a level and type of information that instills in you faith that the program will satisfactorily meet your expectations.
LL.M. ROADMAP TO U.S. LAW SCHOOLS:
AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT’S GUIDE TO U.S. MASTER OF LAWS PROGRAMS


Part I—International Students Earning U.S. Law Degrees: What is so Special about U.S. Legal Education?
Chapter 1: Globalization and the Need for Transnational lawyers
Chapter 2: Seventeen reasons to earn an LL.M. degree in the U.S.
Chapter 3: Seven Types of LL.M. Program
Chapter 4: General and Specialized LL.M. Degrees
Chapter 5: U.S. and Foreign Legal and Legal Education Systems

Part II—Ranking, Reputation & Reality: 218 Criteria for Choosing the “Best” U.S. LL.M. Program for You
Chapter 6: Law school ranking & reputation: Choosing the “best” U.S. law school for you (And avoiding Cash Cows and Diploma Mills)
Chapter 7: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ): 218 criteria for choosing the “Best” U.S. LL.M. Program for You

Part III—How Do I Get Admitted to the U.S. Law School I Choose?
Chapter 8: Getting Admitted – U.S. Law School Admission Policies and Practices; Mission Statements; Educational Agents & Admission Consultants
Chapter 9: Your LL.M. Program Application: How to Convince a U.S. Law School to Admit You?
Chapter 10: Personal Statements, Essays, CVs, Writing Samples, and Interviews
Chapter 11: Recommendation Letters
Chapter 12: Parlez-Vous English? English Language Proficiency Requirements
Chapter 13: Other Components of an LL.M. Application (Document Authentication & Verification; Financial Resources Proof; and Scholarship Requests)

Part IV—School Replies to Your Application: What to Expect Next
Chapter 14: Receiving the School’s Letter or E-mail Message: You Are Admitted (Firm or Conditional); Not Admitted; or Put on Hold, or Waitlisted
Chapter 15: Degree Requirements for LL.M. Programs (Tips on How to Do Your Best and to Succeed in Your LL.M. program
Chapter 16: How Do They Teach at U.S. Law Schools?
Chapter 17: Legal Communication: Legal Analysis, Research and Writing
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