

Rethinking Private International Law Education - Insights from a Global Webinar

Guest Blog: Rethinking Private International Law Education - Insights from a Global Webinar

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Private international law (PIL) plays a critical role in shaping how future legal professionals and citizens engage with a complex, interconnected world. On 23 September 2024, the University of Sydney Law School hosted a webinar event in collaboration with the American Society of International Law (ASIL), Professor Xandra Kramer from Erasmus University Rotterdam and Utrecht University, and Professor Laura Carballo from the University of Vigo.

The webinar offered fresh perspectives on the evolving landscape of PIL education around the globe. Moderated by Associate Professor Jeanne Huang, co-director of the Centre for Asian and Pacific Law (CAPLUS) at Sydney Law School, the event featured insights from leading academics across Europe, Asia, and Africa. It also celebrated the launch of an exciting new book titled *Research Methods in Private International Law: A Handbook on Regulation, Research and Teaching*, which was co-edited by Professor Xandra Kramer and Professor Laura Carballo.

Professor Xandra Kramer began with a brief introduction to the motivations and themes explored in the book. Traditionally, research in PIL has been largely concentrated on the qualification and interactions of private and public international laws as well as comparative laws. However, Professor Kramer explained that this book seeks to broaden these horizons by integrating emerging themes such as empirical legal studies, law and economics, and feminism. The book consists of three main sections: the first part concerns the regulation of private international law; the second part explores different research methodologies; the third part discusses how the future of PIL can be shaped through wider educational aspects, and served as the focus of the seminar

discussion.

Professor Laura Carballo further elaborated on the importance of viewing PIL not only as a regulatory tool but a framework for global governance, embracing the contributions of colonialist, feminist and various other emerging perspectives from around the world. This broader view aligns with the changing demands of legal education, where students are increasingly required to engage with both local and international issues. The book's approach signals a shift towards making PIL more inclusive and responsive to contemporary challenges.

The first speaker, Professor Veronica Ruiz Abou-Nigm from the University of Edinburgh, began by stressing that PIL should not only be limited to legal professionals or students, but also plays a crucial role in shaping the next generation of citizens in society. She identified three key features that she considers crucial for understanding and teaching PIL: *intersystemic*, *heterarchical* and *pluralistic* thinking.

Professor Ruiz Abou-Nigm also argued that educators must cultivate intercultural competence, awareness and dialogue, all of which are essential in helping students to appreciate diverse cultural contexts and navigate different legal systems to solve real-world problems.

Next, Associate Professor Sai Ramani Garimella from South Asia University discussed how colonial legacies continue to shape PIL in South Asia. Interestingly, Associate Professor Garimella noted that although a significant amount of scholarship on international law had emerged in India over the past 50 years, the vast majority of such academia still viewed the private international law discipline as falling under the broad umbrella of domestic law.

Using the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy in India as a case study, she explained how PIL mechanisms were underutilized, reflecting a reliance on outdated frameworks. Associate Professor Garimella emphasized the need for a shift towards localised legislation and jurisprudence that reflects regional realities, enabling PIL to serve justice more effectively in postcolonial contexts.

Echoing this sentiment, Dr Chukwuma Okoli from the University of Birmingham highlighted how PIL remains underdeveloped in many African countries including Nigeria. He expressed concern over the lack of emphasis on PIL in Nigerian law schools as well as the scarcity of active scholarship in the field, significantly

hindering students' ability to engage with cross-border legal issues. Dr Okoli also suggested creating more local moot court competitions focused on PIL to encourage student interest and practical learning in Africa.

Professor Aukje van Hoek from the University of Amsterdam highlighted the EU context of teaching PIL in the Netherlands. She advocates an approach that stimulates multilevel and interjurisdictional thinking. This approach equips students to work across legal systems, though Professor van Hoek cautioned against overloading students with too much content. She recommended focusing on critical attitudes and practical skills over rote learning, enabling students to construct creative arguments from different perspectives, rather than being confined to what is the 'correct' law.

During the panel discussion which ensued, the speakers grappled with the challenges of designing effective curricula and assessment regimes for PIL. One issue which educators often grapple with was whether to cover a wide range of topics or focus on specific areas such as commercial or family law.

An insightful discussion also took place regarding the traditional teaching sequence for subtopics in the PIL course and whether they vary across university classrooms. For example, whether the subject should start from jurisdiction, then choice of law, and finally judgments. This is the typical way for courts addressing PIL cases. However, due to the overlapping of jurisdiction and judgments, it is not unusual that these two subtopics are taught together.

Moreover, the webinar underscored the need to move beyond Eurocentric and Anglocentric frameworks in PIL education. Professor Ruiz Abou-Nigm called for legal systems in the Global North to engage meaningfully with traditions from the Global South. Similarly, Associate Professor Garimella commented that including perspectives from South Asia and Africa enriches global legal discourse, promoting more inclusive frameworks.

Dr Okoli further stressed that comparative law can foster intellectual independence, encouraging African legal professionals to develop context-specific solutions rather than relying on borrowed precedents. The speakers unanimously agreed that collaboration across regions is essential for building a more dynamic and inclusive field.

The webinar session concluded with reflections on the future of PIL education,

towards which Professor van Hoek harbours a simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic view. The speakers emphasized that teaching PIL is not just about technical expertise — it is about fostering openness, intercultural competence, and critical inquiry. By introducing students to critical theories and promoting cross-cultural dialogue, educators can better prepare them for the demands of an increasingly interconnected world.

A recording of the session can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9Vyd3xoXIs>.