

# Teaching in Non-Western Universities

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I just returned from a 2-week stay in Rwanda. I visited the National University of Rwanda where I gave some lectures. The visit was part of an ongoing collaboration between the University of Groningen and the National University of Rwanda, including the exchange of members of staff for research or teaching purposes. Some colleagues and friends asked me how my teaching and overall experience was and here I am gathering my thoughts in a blog post. The usual terms and conditions apply: the following thoughts are (of course) subject to one's teaching style and experiences as well as to where precisely one is teaching. And the fine print includes that your insurance may not cover adventures such as riding motor taxis: you are on your own, which is not always such a bad idea, right?

## Is Teaching International Law Different in Different Places?

People mostly asked me whether teaching in Kigali is somehow different than teaching in Groningen where I am based. The answer is a definitive "yes!". At the same time, it is also true that our classrooms in many West-bound universities get increasingly international due to the different nationalities and backgrounds of students – the so-called "global or cosmopolitan classroom". I am not very fond of this term and I am not entirely sure *where* this "global classroom" is or what it really means for lecturers, for the discussions that we have in class and for learning approaches (see [here](#)). Having benefited from a 4-year stay in Qatar where I taught teaching international law and human rights (you can read more on this [here](#), if you wish) I strongly believe that it is an entirely different thing to physically dislocate yourself and teach at a place completely unfamiliar to you – this would be a university outside the West, if you will. There is a sort of an uprooting and grafting process involved when one is asked to (re)contextualise their knowledge and experiences, to become/remain relevant in a different place, to get exposed to different ways that people think about and experience international law, to try to understand other concerns and priorities.

## Teaching in Rwanda

I gave a series of lectures ranging from procedural issues in international dispute settlement to the progress of the African System of Human & Peoples' Rights or cybersecurity and human rights protection. While doing so, I saw a considerable part of Rwanda since I had to travel to teach in different programmes: the LLB programme is based at Huye (3-4h drive South of Kigali); the LLM programme in International Criminal Justice and Human Rights takes place in Kigali; and the Police Academy is in Musanze (2h drive North of Kigali and very near the borders with DRC and Uganda). An interesting fact about the Police Academy in Rwanda is that it has a notable curriculum: when students enter the Academy they follow the full academic schedule of a discipline of their choice in addition to their police training (they have a choice between law, computer science or languages).

## **Get Out of Your Comfort Zone!?**

Granted – any visit or research stay enriches our academic and life experiences but certain places truly take us out of our comfort zone. For me – a white woman, Europe-educated and mostly Europe-based academic – these places are outside the Western world. What are these places for you?

## **Go With the Flow**

We may have to let go of something as to the way we do things if we want to try to understand a new place. I call it “going with the flow” which is not always easy and it is not mess-free either. Rwanda, as it is the case with many places in the Middle East where I have taught, has a different landscape. It is the land of a thousand hills and people navigate physical space by using landmarks. Physical addresses do not matter that much. I am not used to navigate space on these terms – well, I am horrible at orienting myself either way. Going with the flow may mean that you ride the motor taxis (everybody was surprised when I did); or it also means going with the flow of the dynamics in class. Students may be different from what you are accustomed to: there is more hesitance for students to speak up or a lot of excitement to participate depending on the circumstances. You may have read [the sentimental life of international law by Simpson](#) but it is a long way to actually speaking geography or international law in new ways.

## **Acknowledge the Funny-Looking Elephant in the Room**

In case you are wondering, yes, it is me who is the elephant in the room. I am a white European woman who went to teach in Rwanda. I started all classes by acknowledging this elephant – meaningful teaching requires us to show vulnerability, use our sense of humour and even appreciate the ironies involved. A huge irony in my case was that many students were taught by me for the first time about the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. I wish this wasn’t the case and I told them so.

## **Spoiler Alert: You Are Not There to Enlighten Anyone; You Are There to Share Some Knowledge, Engage and Be Open to Learn**

It takes a lot of white privilege and white-saviourism to teach elsewhere – trust me, I know. I was able to work on white-saviourism throughout the years but you cannot beat white privilege. It’s always there – like your most fundamental, silently ingrained operating system working in the background. It’s in the way you walk and talk. If you ask me, white privilege is to be acknowledged in the open and try to work on it in whatever I do. Most of the time it takes two to tango. I ask questions in class so that I learn and we co-produce. Students in Rwanda were delightfully interactive – I wasn’t sure what to expect. I had the great pleasure to encounter critical and curious legal minds having acquired a high level of legal knowledge in theory and in application. They also have a heightened common sense and practicality – great qualities for (international) lawyers. While teaching first-year students at the Police Academy we discussed what the African Bill of Rights is. One of them said “it is a project”. I was

taken aback by how direct and insightful the term *project* is – a project of aspirations, hopes and legal techniques.

### **Dress to Impress (or Maybe Not?)**

Let's face it: academics, especially in certain disciplines, including law, dress up to teach or to simply show up at the office. How one feels comfortable is a matter of personal style. I do not feel that I *have* to dress up so that I give a lecture and, if I do, I conveniently choose not to meet such expectations. Usually, I am casually dressed in class unless I feel like dressing up. In many places (certainly in the Middle East and Africa in my own limited experience) it is expected even more to be formal when going to teach. I showed up for my lectures semi-casually dressed knowing that I would be underdressed for the occasion. Guilty as charged! But something interesting happened. When I finished a lecture at Huye, a female student approached me outside the classroom and said in a very exciting fashion "I never thought that academia could look and be like *this*". I asked her what *this* meant and she replied "woman, not formally dressed, making jokes". Yeah, academia should look the way we feel being ourselves.

### **Decolonising the Curriculum and Ourselves Starts With Eating Food**

Can we please stop going only to expat-friendly, a.k.a. white-like spaces to get pasta or pizza?

Yes sure, I enjoyed a lot the rich variety of restaurants and cuisines from all over the world that one may find in Kigali. But can we please try local food? Rwandan cuisine is fantastic (e.g. cassava leaves; yams; many banana-based stews; goat BBQ brochettes; banana wine; milk bars everywhere). Insist, if you have to, because locals may think that you are not up to the task. Food connects you to a place and its people. And if you are not sure whether you are hungry, we will "get hungry together", as Etienne remarkably noted.

### **You Will Have Your 15' of Fame Wherever, Whenever You Are**

Depending on who and where exactly you are you may have to deal with the fact that you are the centre of attention. You may like it; I generally don't. I am a white woman and, when I am in Rwanda, people stare. It can be an unsettling feeling. Eventually one learns how to deal with it. I never promised that dislocating yourself will be (only) a pleasant experience, did I?

Happy travels!

**P.S.** Many thanks go to Denis Bikeshya, Etienne Ruvebana, and Jean-Paul Mazimpaka, colleagues at the National University of Rwanda, for making space for me in their classes, for being hospitable and for making different sorts of logistic arrangements. Jean D'Amour Bizimana (a former graduate student in Groningen and now State Attorney in Rwanda) was too kind to me.

**P.S.** If you would like to read a nice novel, [Baking Cakes in Kigali](#) would be it.

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