

## **The 2015-2016 Class Writes: The International Law Clinic Experience**

The International Law Clinic program offered by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam gives students the possibility to work as Research Associates (RAs) for the Netherlands Office of the Public International Law and Policy Group (PILPG), a global pro bono law firm that provides free legal assistance to clients on a variety of issues in international law and transitional justice.

Under the supervision of Dr. Marieke de Hoon (Director and Senior Counsel at PILPG Netherlands), the RAs that are enrolled in the International Law Clinic receive training and, as of recently, have the opportunity to become mentors for the summer interns from undergraduate programs. The Law Clinic is a dynamic platform for students to develop both professionally and personally. Each final product is a result of excellent coordination and cooperation between all members of the team, and a reflection of diligent research.

Marieke de Hoon has created and nurtured a very special program where students learn professional legal skills in a practical client based environment. With exceptional supervisors like Julie Fraser, Brianne McGonigle Leyh and the many Senior Research Associates of PILPG that are involved, the Law Clinic is a perfect opportunity for students to improve their own abilities, learn on their feet and strive for success. It moreover provides a unique opportunity to contribute to societally important projects, for which the organization has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Being part of the Law Clinic program further means being part of the immense network of international expertise in which PILPG-NL operates and of a professional and intellectual environment in which there is room for broad personal development. The students of this year's Clinic are happy to share their experience with the programme.

### **The VU International Law Clinic – Experiences of the Research Associates (2015-2016)**

#### **Andrew Merrylees (LLM Public International Law, UvA)**

**On the ASP and working relationships:** The International Law Clinic was the prime reason that I came to the VU. I was extremely attracted by the vast opportunities and responsibility that working at the Clinic would allow me. The International Law Clinic has been invaluable to my legal training as it allows me to complement my academic knowledge with highly sought after practical skills. The Clinic has been great in exposing me to valuable networking opportunities where I have been able to meet and learn from some of the most highly skilled international lawyers, who I aspire to be like in the future. Given my passion for international criminal law, I particularly enjoyed being able to attend the Assembly of States Parties to the International Criminal Court. Spending two weeks amongst the delegations of State Parties and attending plenary sessions and side events was inspiring and invigorating. It was great to be in the presence of and listen to speakers such as the Chief Prosecutor of the ICC. The access to practice and these institutions that the clinic has given me has been unparalleled and wholly worthwhile. Of equal importance is the working relationships I have formed while working with the team. The Clinic has really taught me the value of having a dynamic and close-knit team, that supports and drives each other. I have learned more than I could possibly have imagined than had I just been studying in the library!

**Robin de Ruiter (LLM International Trade and Investment Law and Public International Law, UvA)**

**On the Documenting Human Rights Violations Handbook and the MH17 Project:** Our first assignment as part of the Law Clinic program was to review the handbook for civil society documentation of human rights violations. This assignment offered me a good introduction to the extensive and impressive work already done by the PILPG-NL team under the guidance of Marieke de Hoon. Part of this assignment was joining an expert meeting at The Hague Institute for Global Justice, where several international experts came together to discuss the work done on the reference book and offer feedback. This meeting and our level of involvement in our first month showed me immediately the great amount of responsibilities we are given, that we are expected to live up to high expectations and that we are really part of the team in all aspects.

In January, we were involved in another high profile case. We were asked to draft a document concerning possible legal avenues for the downing of flight MH17, which was presented to the parliamentary hearing in January 2016 where Marieke de Hoon testified as an expert. Although the project had a very short time frame, the dedication and expertise of the PILPG team made it into a great success, and led to the publication of the white paper “Legal Remedies for Downing Flight MH17”.

Personally, the amount of faith that Marieke de Hoon has in her RAs and the expectation that we should immediately participate in all activities of the Office is something that I highly appreciated. Although the first assignment felt like we were thrown in at the deep end, it is precisely this way of working that allows us to make the most out of this experience. Both the Handbook and MH17 are examples of projects that have allowed us to gain practical experience in the field of international law, transitional justice, and public policy. It further shows the societal importance of the work done through the Law Clinic and the dedication of Marieke de Hoon and the team she collects around her to actually make a difference. I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to PILPG’s projects that all have such topical relevance at this point in my studies, as opportunities like these for students are very rare.

**Ksenia Kutyreva (LLM Law and Politics of International Security, VU)**

**On the practice-based learning:** The International Law Clinic has been an amazing learning experience for me. It tested everything I’ve learned during my Bachelors and Masters programmes about international law, international relations, politics, and justice. Because of my participation in the Law Clinic, I have gained more confidence in my knowledge. The Law Clinic it is not just about the abstract principles in international law. It is about applying them to real-life situations, where your decisions have consequences for real people. Before advising, for instance, on matters of jurisdiction or whether to bring charges against someone, you first have to become a mini-expert on the topic. My fellow Research Associates and I have taken on that role throughout the Law Clinic this year. I am convinced that this expertise and experience will stay with me for a long time, as the knowledge and skills gained at PILPG-NL are not something you will forget. I am sure that everything I’ve learned during the International Law Clinic with PILPG will be extremely useful for my career and will set me aside from the rest of the applicants.

**Maite van Rinsum (MSc International Relations, UvA; LLM Law and Politics of International Security, VU)**

**On the Professional Development Program:** In addition to the exciting substantive work, the International Law Clinic also provides participants with bi-weekly Professional Development sessions. Every two weeks the Clinic invites academics, practitioners, and attorneys from within and outside the larger PILPG organization to train the Law Clinic participants in essential skills such as legal writing, public speaking, negotiating, and networking. For example, the Professional Development session of April 24 included the annual PILPG Careers Panel, where a number of professionals in the field of international law were invited to discuss the various aspects of their different careers. Research Associates were actively involved in the process of organizing the event, and were free to decide on the questions asked. This year's panel included a lawyer from Allen & Overy, a researcher from the Peace Research Institute Oslo, and the assistant director of the Dialogue Advisory Group – a small, Netherlands-based NGO. The panel answered many of the RAs' questions regarding making career choices, work and life balancing, and work satisfaction, all highly relevant topics for the RAs that are about to enter the challenging job market. In sum, the numerous training sessions have contributed significantly to our professional skills and career prospects. And I also really appreciate that Marieke de Hoon does a great job keeping everyone involved and motivated, and makes sure that all participants fully use these sessions to develop professional skills. The Professional Development program adds great value to the International Law Clinic by combining training and developing skills, as well as the opportunity to create a network, with substantive research.

**Mike Videler (LLM Public International Law, UvA)**

**On being part of the PILPG Global network:** One of the things I enjoy most about the International Law Clinic is being part of the global team of international lawyers that together form PILPG Global. As a participant of the Law Clinic and working for the PILPG, I benefit immensely from being part of PILPG Global, a pro bono law firm with offices in, among others, Washington D.C., New York City, Istanbul, South Sudan, Kosovo, and Burma. At each of these field offices, a team of experienced lawyers work directly with local clients. Because all offices are integrated into PILPG Global, I get to work with people from around the world and I stay up to date with current negotiations, projects and political and social developments which news media does not have access to. This network of offices also helps me to better understand the needs and wishes of our clients.

Field offices regularly reach out to the Netherlands Office with requests for support on their projects, making the Clinic very dynamic. We often work with tight deadlines as political situations tend to change rather quickly. Working with field offices also means that the work we do at the Netherlands Office has a direct bearing on dispute settlement and post-conflict situations around the world. This is a very rewarding feeling, because I actually help make a difference in a variety of countries around the world. That is certainly something I did not expect to be able to do so early in my career, considering I am still completing a master's program. I am incredibly grateful to the committed and remarkably capable members involved in the International Law Clinic, and in particular to Marieke de Hoon, for leading this unique project.

**Thomas Verstege (LLM Law and Politics of International Security, VU)**

**On Professional Work Environment:** One of the biggest advantages of participating in the Law Clinic is the opportunity to work in a professional work environment. The team at PILPG-NL is a mix of master students at the start of their professional careers and senior research associates and senior counsel with vast experience in international legal practice. This diversity in the team allows for a great opportunity to gain experience in working in a professional organization while still completing our master studies. This is an opportunity that not all students are offered, and allows the Research Associates to distinguish themselves. The professionalism that is expected of us is for instance demonstrated by the bi-weekly team meeting for which the entire team is expected to be prepared for and participate in, in a professional manner. Although this may sound simple, it is actually very valuable to already have some experience in this area. Furthermore, the Law Clinic teaches me how to communicate with colleagues – both equal and more senior – in a professional manner. This includes, for instance, professional communication on project work, collaboration in a team of other research associates, and writing formal emails. In addition, I learn a lot from working with a team of people who already have so much experience in this field. These skills contribute to my ability to work with people in a professional environment after graduation. Since people skills are so important in the field of international law and politics I am very grateful to have this opportunity to improve these skills during my studies.

**Adina Nistor (LLM International Crimes and Criminology, VU)**

**On legal work, StratCom and networking:** After only a few weeks in the Research Associate position I was assigned to work on a legal memorandum that required in-depth and thorough research on a topic that was new for me. I learned very quickly how to apply the knowledge learned during the Public International Law course I had at the VU, and turn it into specific client-oriented work. Previous to this master I studied Journalism and Anthropology, and during my time at the Law Clinic I became part of the Strategic Communication team. I love the fact that I was given the opportunity to make the best use of my skills, and combine my passion for reporting and photography with an intense legal training. The heart of the programme, Marieke de Hoon, has provided us with ample opportunities to develop professionally, to meet valuable people and extend our network. I am extremely grateful for this opportunity, as I have met and befriended people that I admire, gained confidence, and broadened my perspective. I have grown a lot, I feel more driven, more inspired, more efficient, and I have Marieke and the whole PILPG team to thank for this. As part of a strong network of extremely talented people, I know that the experience gained over the past eight months will help me immensely in my professional life.