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Life at E.MA

Since the first batch of 50 or so E.MA students was let loose on the world in 1998 armed with a European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation, more than 1300 individuals have joined the ranks of E.MA graduates.

But what exactly is this thing they call E.MA and what does it involve?

E.MA students spend the first semester (mid-Sept – end of Jan) attending classes in the rarified surroundings of the 11th century San Nicolò monastery on the Lido, a long narrow island which shelters the Venice lagoon from the Adriatic and hosts the annual Venice Film Festival.

The monastic setting is fitting. Just as monks take a vow of chastity so do E.MA students devote themselves wholly and unconditionally to an intense interdisciplinary study of human rights.

The Morning

First semester week days are chock-full of compulsory activities. All students must attend (attendance is monitored with great assiduity!) the morning classes from 9.15 – 12.45 in the Aula Magna where a rich diversity of topics is covered in what never seems to be enough time.

Following a couple of days of orientation and introduction activities in the middle of September, students begin grappling with human rights in the context of international law, human rights in the context of EU law, the human rights protection mechanisms established by the UN and various regional bodies such as the Council of Europe and the African Union. Having been thrown into the deep end of human rights law,

students then navigate the equally exciting waters of human rights history, philosophy and anthropology. This is followed by an examination of human rights in the context of regime change, elections, democratisation, security and economic globalisation. An all-too-brief break at Christmas is followed by a week of classes dedicated to field missions and practical human rights work.

Each week an average of between 2 and 4 experts take up (teaching) residence in the monastery to instruct students in the topic of the week. While most teachers are drawn from academia, students also benefit from classes with representatives of bodies such as the European Commission, NGOs like FIAN and organisations such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

After Lunch

Classes after lunch include optional workshops (every now and then); weekly Rolling Seminars in International Law, International Relations and Philosophy (students must choose one of these 3 Rolling Seminars); week-long clusters which run from 14.30 – 18.00 Monday – Friday on topics such as Gender Relations and Human Rights, Human Rights Defenders and Development and Human Rights (students must choose only one Cluster).

The first semester is punctuated by a number of exams which never feature on students' lists of E.MA highlights.

Despite the intensity of the first semester schedule, students find time for extracurricular activities such as weekly film screenings in the Aula Magna and a human rights film festival which usually takes place over the course of a weekend at the beginning of December. This year students also organised a very melodious E.MA Choir; conducted "Kaminfeuer" meetings, informal gatherings where those interested met to share their practical human rights experiences; held exercise classes reported to be energising and exhausting in equal measure; and staged a rapturously received end-of-semester performance of the play *Vagina Monologues*.

To top it all off, this year's E.MA class kicked off an advocacy campaign called [Migrants Matter](#) which aims to improve conditions for migrants through awareness-raising and by advocating for states to ratify the UN Migrant Workers Convention. The campaign, like E.MA, is going from strength to strength.

Other Highlights

One of the many highlights of the E.MA Programme is the field trip to a post-conflict country which usually takes place toward the end of the first semester. Since 2004 the E.MA field trip has been to Kosovo. Co-ordinated by the indefatigable Marijana Grandits from the University of Vienna, the field trip is a heady mix of info-packed meetings and frenetic social activity. The meetings with representatives of NGOs, media outlets, international organisations and others at the coalface of efforts to promote human rights and the rule of law in Kosovo are informative, insightful and oftentimes disarmingly honest when it comes to the failures and challenges faced by those in the field.

Students spend the second semester (Feb - July) at one of the 41 universities which are currently part of the E.MA network.

If the distinguishing features of the E.MA Programme are its transnational and interdisciplinary character, the highlight of E.MA is the people involved. Most of the dozens of academics and practitioners who come to teach, and most of the students (currently around 90) who enroll in E.MA, are animated by a genuine belief in the paramount importance of human rights and the urgent need for the translation of human rights from theory to practice. The result is that despite the striking diversity of the E.MA class – this year students were drawn from 38 different countries and ranged in age from 21 – 50-something –

there is a palpable *esprit de corps*. Or should that be *esprit d'E.MA*?

Alan Desmond, *E.MA Fellow in International Law*