

the International Jurist

NEWS ADVICE GRADUATE LAW PROGRAMS

Two-year J.D. programs for foreign students are spiking

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By Angela Morris

The number of law schools offering a two-year J.D. program for international lawyers has grown steadily over the past eight years, and observers expect the trend to continue.

"I just think people are seeing there's a market for it. They see there's demand. From our perspective, the other impetus behind this is it really adds to a richer experience in the classroom," said Amanda Wolfe, director of global programs at The University of Arizona, James E. Rogers College of Law in Tucson. "We put a premium on an international experience here."

Wolfe said Arizona Law had the nation's first two-year J.D. for international lawyers, and each year since its launch in 2010, she's noticed other schools launching their own programs. Both Wolfe and Andrew Horsfall, assistant dean of international programs at Syracuse University College of Law in New York, which launched its two-year J.D. for foreign attorneys in 2015, said they expect more such offerings.

"The J.D. allows students more time to be students and prepare for a bar exam," Horsfall said. "It exposes them to more time in law school, which also places emphasis on building your professional persona and preparing to enter the legal profession. The legal job market in the U.S. is also more familiar and comfortable with a J.D. when hiring."

While the programs may seem like potential moneymakers for law schools — particularly as U.S. student enrollment has been dropping — that's not necessarily the case. Adding such students can be risky because their academic performances are part of the school's measurables.

Horsfall said Syracuse Law keeps its two-year J.D. for international attorneys program small. It's current and past students number just 10, and therefore the program doesn't bring significant revenue to the law school.

"The program can be a great fit for the right student who has a strong academic background and seeks to pursue a professional career with a license to practice in the U.S.," Horsfall said. "However, the stakes are quite high for law schools as performance by these students is measured within the J.D. program statistics reported to the ABA and [U.S. News & World Report]. We make very conservative admissions decisions so as to ensure high quality and potential for success."

When a law school admits an international lawyer into a two-year J.D. program, the school grants the student one year of credit for his foreign law study as long as those courses would have counted for credit in the U.S. This practice is allowed by standards by the American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, which accredits U.S. law schools.

During an international attorney's first year at the U.S. law school, the student must take all of the regular first-year classes. Some schools offer a fixed curriculum the second year with just a few electives left up to the student, while other law schools grant more leeway for electives. After graduation, the student's J.D. is no different than the law degree of a

traditional law grad. Next, the international lawyer can sit for the bar exam and become a licensed U.S. attorney in any state.

According to data culled from internet research, at least 22 law schools currently offer a two-year J.D. for foreign lawyers. Wolfe and Horsfall said that number sounds right, based on what they've observed. It's difficult to verify the number with officials because the ABA doesn't track the programs, said ABA spokesman Bill Choyke. The Law School Admission Council doesn't track the foreign lawyers who apply and gain admittance, said LSAC spokeswoman Wendy Margolis.

Wolfe said that Arizona Law caps its program at 25 students per year. Since 2010, it's graduated about 115 students, and currently has 42 enrolled. The average age of a student is 27; many hail from East Asia, although they've come from around the globe, from Japan to Poland to Ghana to Mexico, and many other nations.

In contrast to studying for an ultra-specialized LL.M., earning a J.D. gives an international lawyer a very solid, basic foundation in U.S. law, she said. While only a handful of states allow a foreign lawyer with an LL.M. to take the bar exam, having a J.D. gives access to the bar exam anywhere, opening the door to licensure in any U.S. jurisdiction.

"There can also be more opportunities for professional development," she said. "We have a very good success rate in placing students in externship programs."

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