

20 years of International
Master Programmes at
Flemish universities

New skills for helping Peru cope with natural disaster risks

When in 2000 *Ingrid Olortegui Guzman* started the Master of Human Settlements in Belgium, it was not a rash decision. Volunteering as a Bachelor student after one of the 1996 earthquakes in Peru – with students registering affected houses and professors evaluating the types of damage – she realised that the reconstruction went beyond physically rebuilding houses. It required taking a step back and looking at the planning of the entire area. Seventeen years later, a natural disaster struck the country again, with *El Niño* causing floods and mudslides in many areas. Since the beginning of 2019, Olortegui Guzman has been working on a project by the country's Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs for reconstruction in the aftermath of *El Niño*.

“ I had just finished my architecture degree in Lima when I started the Master course in Belgium,” Ingrid Olortegui Guzman recalls. In September 2000, she started a Master in Human Settlements at the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven) with a VLIR-UOS scholarship, as she

wanted to know more about sustainable construction, taking into account ecological and bioclimatic factors in construction and working with natural materials, and rural development. “The architecture in Belgium and Leuven was very impressive, old but well-maintained. Cities were relatively well-organised.

The differences with Lima were astonishing,” Olortegui Guzman recalls of her first impressions in Belgium. Learning more about other types of architecture and urban planning by living in a city different from her own was just the start of what her time in Belgium would bring about for her, both personally and professionally.

Professional self-confidence and a more holistic perspective

When we ask Olortegui Guzman about the skills that she picked up during her Master in Belgium, she names several: “When working on my thesis in Belgium, I was mainly focusing on the negative side of things. I remember one of my professors pointing out to me that I had to focus more on opportunities rather than on problems. Now, being a design professor myself, I primarily focus on indicating a thesis project's potential, and only afterwards do I tell students about the aspects to be corrected – a change of focus which has had a very positive impact on them.” Olortegui Guzman also mentions having become more analytical and solution-oriented since the Master programme.



Students from the Master of Human Settlements during a photography workshop.

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The Master course taught me to look at a project from various angles for an integral view.

The Master programme still influences her work to this day, as she has more professional self-confidence and a holistic perspective. “The course covered many themes: planning, architectural economics, renovation, urban topics, architecture and history. It taught me to look at a project

from various angles for an integral view.”

The importance of context

In the Master at KU Leuven, field trips play an essential part in broadening students’ views on urbanism, planning and architecture. “The

study trips were key,” says Olortegui Guzman. “In every new location we were able to analyse how the architecture was linked to urban design, history, economics, and more. We visited several countries, Spain, France and the Netherlands, among others, and we could compare different patterns in each country.”

“One of the most fundamental goals of our programme is to have students understand context,” explains **Bruno De Meulder**, former promoter of the Master at KU Leuven, who has been teaching ‘Urbanism’ and ‘Urban Design’ within the programme. “Fieldwork is essential – if you want to work in a certain context, you can’t stay behind a desk.”

Ever since the programme started, its content has changed according to contextual factors. For the past few years, there has been a

greater focus on sustainability, climate change and urban planning, for example. Cities are very vulnerable to climate change, yet at the same time responsible for a large chunk of energy-related greenhouse emissions. According to United Nations data, about 70% of energy-related greenhouse emissions come from cities. Cities can therefore play a key role in the fight against global warming by reducing their emissions. For example, urban designers and planners can change how cities are planned, conceived, managed and powered.

Putting the newly-gained knowledge into practice

Once she had the Human Settlements degree in her pocket, Olortegui Guzman returned to Peru, with a noticeable advantage on the job market. “Having a Master degree from a European university is an important asset when applying for jobs in Peru,” Olortegui Guzman explains. “KU Leuven also invited me to the World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 2006 and to the International World Urbanisms Seminar in Leuven in June 2019, which is an added value on my CV as it shows that I am aware of worldwide trends that are still very new in my country.” “I started my professional career as a researcher at the metropolitan municipality in Lima. Subsequently, most of my experience has been

in research in the field of planning, specifically in coordinating and leading positions, for example the coordinating position I now have with the Peruvian Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.” Olortegui Guzman has also started teaching at the University of Applied Sciences (UPC) in Lima at Master level, propagating the holistic view she picked up at KU Leuven. “For example, in design classes, I permanently remind my students to take into

account *all* conditions that define the specific functions at a site, with economic dynamics being particularly relevant. For example, I usually tell my students that in architecture, it is easy to get distracted by the aesthetics of a project and forget that a beautiful but over-sized project will eventually not be executed because it is not financially viable.” De Meulder stresses the significance of an ICP diploma for both the students and their

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A picture taken by Ingrid Olortegui Guzman from her classmates at a field trip to the Netherlands.



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organisation. "The majority of our alumni return to their home country, often to a former employer, where they can take a step forward in their career and strengthen a department at a university or a ministry with the newly-gained knowledge." The alumni's organisations often have a considerable influence or impact in partner countries, such as ministries, municipalities and planning services. Some graduates also start working as lecturers or researchers at local universities. "On a higher level, the ICPs connect students from developing countries, allowing exchange that is visibly

meaningful to the participants and on how they professionally perform afterwards."

Connecting people and partners

The ICP in Human Settlements also collaborates intensively with partner institutions that offer similar programmes, stimulating the co-production of intensive urban design workshops and short courses. The Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture (UAH), for example, is an important partner of the ICP programme. Together, ICP staff and alumni are contributing

to the setting up of a similar Master in Urban Design at UAH. This programme is adapted to the local context of South East Asia and targets students from Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, among others. The Master offers research-based education, integrating, for instance, design studios focusing on urgent development issues and involving local stakeholders such as local communities and government authorities.

Upgraded skills in the aftermath of *El Niño*

The most recent episode of the weather phenomenon *El Niño*, which resulted in extreme rainfall with floods and landslides, left a trail of destruction in Peru. Many lives were lost and numerous assets destroyed. "Most parts of the Peruvian coast were in a state of emergency, the water level in the rivers had risen and the heavy rainfall devastated major parts of the rural areas as well," recalls Olortegui Guzman. "I wanted to do something about this." Since the beginning of 2019, she has been involved in the Peruvian government's *El Niño* reconstruction planning, this time professionally. "I was

Students from the Master in Human Settlements on a field trip in Vienna in February 2019.



called to be part of a team to supervise the urban planning activities for the Peruvian Housing Ministry," she says. Nowadays, Peru has made disaster risk management a high priority at national level and is undergoing institutional reform at all levels.

Olortegui Guzman's official role is Chief of Supervision. She coordinates everyone involved in the urban planning process as well as the processes themselves. When working on the Housing Ministry's project, she says the multi-sided focus from her Master degree provides an added value for the team. "At the moment, I am the monitoring team leader for the regions most affected by *El Niño* in Peru. What we're doing right now with the Housing Ministry is evaluating local urban planning processes, so that cities can be adapted to be more resilient in the face of possible new natural disasters in the future. In short, we're improving the authorities' risk management. To achieve an appropriate planning in this evaluation, we look at the technical, social *and* political aspects."

And what about Olortegui Guzman's original goal of having a greater impact on people's lives? Does she feel that investing in herself by following the Master in Belgium has helped her in doing so? "My contributions are definitely more solid now than when I had just started working in risk areas. I have gained expertise in urban

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I am having a greater impact with my work right now.

design and management, construction, regulations and working with communities. Because I have been in contact with so many professionals with various backgrounds, I have been exposed to a wide range of approaches and my knowledge has increased significantly." Olortegui Guzman thinks her current job puts her in a good position for impact. "From my current position, I can influence the development of urban plans and help direct the necessary change – something for which I am very grateful. I am certain that I am having a greater impact with my work right now," she concludes.

Peru



26 projects

1	Institutional University Cooperation programme	€ 5,930,000
10	Crosscutting projects	€ 425,207
7	Own Initiatives / TEAM projects	€ 1,517,066
8	South Initiatives	€ 344,359

1998 - 2018 period	 8,216,631 total budget (in €)
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Partners

- a) • Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú
- Universidad Nacional Agraria La Molina
- Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería
- Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos
- Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia

b) Universidad Nacional de Cajamarca

c) Universidad Nacional de Trujillo

d) Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia

Get Together Night 2018: Best wishes to VLIR-UOS

Each year, one of the five Flemish universities organises the so-called 'Get Together Night', where ICP students from all Flemish universities can meet and share experiences. 2018 was a special edition celebrating 20 years of VLIR-UOS – birthday cake included! A few birthday wishes from the scholars:

