

# PROMOTING MENTAL WELLBEING OF LAW STUDENTS: BREAKING-DOWN STIGMA & BUILDING BRIDGES WITH SUPPORT SERVICES IN THE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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*This article discusses a pilot project as part of a regional law school's initiative in response to findings of elevated levels of psychological distress experienced by law students during their tertiary studies in Australia. The project involved an inter-disciplinary collaborative approach to developing and implementing modifications to the content and assessment of an existing third year law course offered both on campus and online. The main goal was to improve the psychological support to law students at time of need. This included several interrelated components: raising awareness about mental wellbeing and some of the barriers to maintaining it (stigma and isolation); introducing coping strategies while studying law; and improving student connections with their peers, their course leaders and with psychological support services. The preliminary results provide both useful and unanticipated outcomes.*

## I INTRODUCTION

In 2009, with the support of the legal profession, the Australian Law Deans and the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation, the BMRI report titled 'Courting the Blues: Attitudes towards depression in Australian law students and legal profession' was released.<sup>1</sup> It sent a shockwave across the legal education sector in Australia. The report, like previous and subsequent studies, confirmed psychological distress is widespread within the legal profession. The causes for high levels of poor mental health and distress amongst legal professionals are still being determined,<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Norm Kelk, et al, *Courting the Blues: Attitudes Towards Depression in Australian Law Students and Lawyers*, (2009) Brain & Mind Research Institute Monograph: <<http://www.cald.asn.au/docs/Law%20Report%20Website%20version%204%20May%2009.pdf>> ('BMI reports').

<sup>2</sup> While the BMRI report does not identify the causes of psychological distress in participants, high levels of distress in the legal profession have, for example, been linked to the use of billable hours, disjuncture between high expectations of graduates and the reality of practice, poor public perception of the profession and either a competitive or unethical workplace culture in some firms,

beyond the scope of this paper. However, for the tertiary sector, it was the confirmation that law students are particularly prone to depressive mental illness and distress that was most disturbing.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, student participants, like practicing lawyers, were found to have a low level of understanding of mental health issues. This was accompanied by a low level of confidence in, and knowledge of the role and value of helping professions such as psychologists and counsellors.<sup>4</sup> The report recommended three strategies to improve mental health outcomes of legal educational institutions:<sup>5</sup>

- Increasing awareness of mental health issues in both legal educators and students;
- Increasing the skills of legal educators in supporting law students generally and offering support to law students exhibiting psychological distress in particular; and
- Establishing effective links between law schools and potential sources of professional treatment for those students requiring professional help.

#### A *Mental Wellbeing Initiatives Post the BMRI report*

In the years following the release of the BMRI report, a range of initiatives have been implemented by law schools in Australia. A network of teaching and learning law deans was established. They obtained funding and prepared a bundle of good practice guides to be shared amongst law schools.<sup>6</sup> Larger, more established or well-funded

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typically imbued with pressure to overwork or with elements of intimidation, bullying or harassment. See, for example, Briana Everett, *Perils the profession can't ignore* (12 December 2011) Lawyers Weekly <<http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/news/repairing-the-paradox>>; Claire Chaffey, *Repairing the paradox* (14 November 2011) Lawyers Weekly <<http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/features/perils-the-profession-can-t-ignore>>.

<sup>3</sup> The law student sample indicated that the number of reported higher levels of psychological distress (35.4%) was three times greater than that of the general population (13.3%). See BMRI report above n 1, 12.

<sup>4</sup> While over 70% of students reported they would seek assistance from a family member or friend if they were depressed, over 50% also said they would turn to a personal trainer, exercise manager or relaxation institution for help. A similar percentage would seek assistance from a psychologist (54.5%) or counsellor (58.8%) but 39% said they would not seek help from a professional. See BMRI report, above n 1, 20.

<sup>5</sup> BMRI report, above n 1, 43, Summary viii.

<sup>6</sup> The Good Practice Guides are an initiative supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council and the Law Deans of Australia having reference to national and international statements on competencies, skills and knowledge of law graduates and the descriptors located in the Australian Qualification Framework for Bachelor Degrees. Many examples of useful approaches can be found in, for example, the TLO 6: Self-Management guide, see Judith Marychurch, *Good Practice Guide (Bachelor of Laws) Self-Management (Threshold Learning Outcome 6)* (2011). See also, Council of Australian Law Deans, *Promoting Law Student Well-Being: Best Practice Guidelines* (2012).

law schools have also introduced a range of classes and courses to assist their students to manage their health and wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

There has also been a considerable increase in studies and publications about the mental or psychological state of law students<sup>8</sup> and legal practitioners.<sup>9</sup> The evidence of success or otherwise of various efforts being made in an attempt to better respond to the mental health needs of members of the legal profession is receiving higher levels of critical attention.<sup>10</sup>

The BMRI report's findings have limitations. They were based on a survey of 4<sup>th</sup> year law students and practicing solicitors and barristers who self-reported particular symptoms. They were not based on any formal diagnosis. Importantly, this paper neither praises nor dismisses the findings of the BMIR report or the various studies or findings in Australia and overseas on the mental wellbeing of law students. Nor does it evaluate the veracity of such studies or critically analyses the potentially dangerous as well as productive techniques used to govern the mental wellbeing of students in law schools. Instead, this paper recognises the attempts to act on reports of negative experiences of law students. Together, the literature offers a rich source of information, experiences and approaches that opens dialogue and discussion about curriculum design that aims to minimise the exacerbation of symptoms of mental ill health in those either studying law or providing legal services. As such, this project developed with an acceptance that law students remain members of the wider community where an estimated 'one in five' in Australia suffer from mental health problems at some point in their lives.<sup>11</sup> Most, including law students, are consequently likely to benefit from exposure to relevant current information on

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive list of initiatives and publications, see Rachel Field and James Duffy, 'Better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness: promoting law student well-being through a first year law subject' (2012) 12(1) *QUTLJJ* 133. Also, Rachel Field and Sally Kift, 'Addressing the high levels of psychological distress in law students through intentional assessment and feedback design in the first year law curriculum' (2010) 1(1) *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 65.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Everett, above n 4; Chaffey, above n 4.

<sup>10</sup> Poorly implemented mental health programs and a clear lack of educated managers about mental illness and how to manage its effects continue to be reported and criticised for contributing to the continued high incidences of depression in law firms. Leanne Mezzani, *Poor mental health programs failing lawyers* (19 February 2013) *Lawyers Weekly*, 24 <<http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/news/poor-mental-health-programs-failing-lawyers>>. Others acknowledge the efforts of some firm's 'genuine desire to try and ameliorate this problem with high rates of depression and suicidality' despite acknowledging that they are not 'there yet': see Leanne Mezzani, *Firms' efforts to tackle depression 'genuine'* (21 February 2013) *Lawyers Weekly* <<http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/news/firms-efforts-to-tackle-depressiogenuine>>.

<sup>11</sup> In 2007, almost 3.2 million Australians were found to be affected by a mental disorder. See *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results: 2007 (Catalogue No 43236.0)* (22 October 2008) Australian Bureau of Statistics <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4326.0Main%20Features32007?open>>.

mental wellbeing and coping strategies relevant to law students and the establishment of fresh links between the law school and professional support services.

A higher education, Australian Qualification Framework approach that involves both knowledge and skills components, was used.<sup>12</sup> This involved minor adjustment to the content and changes to the assessment of a 3<sup>rd</sup> year administrative law course. The changes were especially designed to:

- Increase awareness of mental wellbeing<sup>13</sup> through the introduction of relevant mental health and wellbeing information and time management skills training into the law program (both through face to face interaction and web based materials); and
- Opening up direct channels of support to psychological services, at point of need, by breaking down barriers that may interfere with students disclosing symptoms of distress and actively seeking assistance when needed by providing information on coping strategies and the risks associated with denying, ignoring or hiding episodes of high distress.

Students in this course had not previously received similar content elsewhere in the law curriculum. As such, the methodology used was principally aimed at initiating dialogue about the 'self'<sup>14</sup> between students, teaching staff and a psychologist. Dialogue has been found to provide the flexibility needed to explore and discuss complex real-world, personal problems with a view to finding and implementing solutions,<sup>15</sup> in this instance, managing the self's mental wellbeing as a student. A dialogue methodology was principally chosen because it would provide a format that

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<sup>12</sup> See AQF Council, *AQF Levels* (6 May 2013) Australian Qualifications Framework <<http://www.aqf.edu.au/aqf/in-detail/aqf-levels/>>.

<sup>13</sup> The term 'mental wellbeing' refers to a personal state of being and therefore is open to many definitions. The term used in this discussion is adapted from a well-known description provided by the World Health Organisation as: a state in which students are able to cope with the ordinary stresses of life and study, work productively, interact positively with others and realise their own learning goals and potential. See for example, *Mental health: a state of well-being* (10 December 2013) World Health Organisation <[http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/)>. Mental distress tends to be associated with temporary periods of high levels of stress that interferes with mental wellbeing. Some students may also suffer from depression, anxiety, eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, for instance, which are recognised mental illnesses and similarly fall outside the intended meaning of mental wellbeing. See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (New School Library, 5<sup>th</sup> ed, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> The 'self' is considered the object of introspection as it represents a person's essential being or innermost feelings that distinguishes them from others and therefore can be challenging to share openly with others. There are many definitions of the 'self' such as it is used here and explained in modern social identity theory. See, for instance, Constance Sedikides and Steven Spencer (eds), *The Self* (New York Psychology Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Molly Townes O'Brien, Stephen Tang and Kath Hall, 'Changing our Thinking: Empirical Research on Law Student Wellbeing, Thinking Styles and the Law Curriculum' (2011) 21 *Legal Education Review* 149, 163. Also, David McDonald, Gabriele Bammer and Peter Deane, *Research Integration Using Dialogue Methods* (ANU E Press, 2009) 1-3.

empowers students by giving them a voice, in the classroom and online. The aim was to facilitate a sharing of experiences of psychological struggles associated with studying law. Such struggles can resonate with others in the course and tends to encourage engagement. Further, the presence of a psychologist in the classroom and in online discussion forums allows a familiarisation and de-stigmatising process to begin law in a supervised or safe environment. It also provides an authentication of the school's commitment to implementing institutional measures for sharing information on mental wellbeing and providing better links to support services.

At the time of this pilot project in 2012, much attention in Australia's law schools had been directed towards the first year student experience.<sup>16</sup> However, less attention has been directed to initiatives introduced later in law programs to address student's psychological needs. Formal mentoring programs and student counselling services in the University setting, like elsewhere, did not appear to be meeting the needs of law students.<sup>17</sup> In early discussions about this project with the University student psychologist, it was noted that typically, as compared to the general student population at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), law students had been noticeably absent from the pool of students accessing psychological support services. The psychologist suggested two barriers may be interfering with USQ law students accessing services, stigma and isolation.

Significantly, it was intended from the outset that any positive outcomes of the pilot project could be shared with other course and program leaders for critical discussion about what works well and what may need adjustment. At a program level, the School is considering vertical integration of level consistent mental wellbeing content into the curriculum of the law degree programs.

The following brief discussion of these barriers may be useful in providing greater context to the strategies used in this project. Stigma<sup>18</sup>, along with isolation, are long standing social phenomena that may help to explain the reluctance in law students (especially those studying online) to seek and obtain professional assistance when they experience stressors that negatively impact on their mental wellbeing. In terms of isolation, two issues were considered: online students may be more vulnerable to feeling isolated from student support services, peers and teaching staff available on

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance, O'Brien, Tang and Hall, above n 15. For a US example, see K M Sheldon and L S Krieger, 'Does Legal Education Have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values and Well-Being' (2004) 22 *Behavioural Sciences and the Law* 261.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, Tang and Hall, above n 15, 174.

<sup>18</sup> The term 'stigma' can be traced back to the Greeks who used bodily signs, cut or burnt into the body, to expose and advertise that there was 'something unusual and bad about the moral status' of the 'blemished person' who was to be avoided, especially in public. Today, individuals are stigmatised without the need for physical bodily signs. See Erving Goffman, 'Stigma and Social Identity' in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Simon & Schuster, 1963) 1.

campus; and stigma may be a barrier to sharing experiences or symptoms of not coping thereby increasing feelings of isolation and loneliness.<sup>19</sup>

### *B The Effect of Stigma*

As a profession, lawyers have been found to be significantly more likely than other professions to presume that their workplace would react negatively to someone experiencing depression or anxiety while at work.<sup>20</sup> Arguably, the competitive law school environment may create similar thoughts in students and perpetuate a culture of silence.<sup>21</sup> This response fits within the concept of stigma. Stigma can be described as a ‘complex social process’ that arises in the presence of ignorance or lack of knowledge, and prejudicial attitudes that work together to produce discriminatory, excluding, hurtful behaviour.<sup>22</sup> According to Goffman, stigmatisation begins with a process of categorising people by allocating attributes presumed ‘natural’ for members of that category. It can begin when appearances are used to label difference by anticipating the other’s category and attributes, or ‘virtual social identity’.<sup>23</sup> This process creates stereotypical distinctions. If a person subsequently falls outside normative expectations of the normal, the result is that the person is reduced in our minds to a tainted, inferior one. The discredited attribute transforms into a stigma; sometimes called ‘a failing, shortcoming’ or weakness.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For examples of comments in a recent study by law students about the benefits of ‘a good social network’ and a sense of connection with peers and teachers on their mental wellbeing; see O’Brien, Tang and Hall, above n 15, 167-169. Similar results may be found overseas, in Helen Kerr’s research findings that 20% of 1,200 students surveyed in higher education in the UK consider themselves as having a mental health problem and 13% have suicidal thoughts, see NSU Services Limited, *Mental Distress Survey* (2013) <<http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/Campaigns/20130517%20Mental%20Distress%20Survey%20%20Overview.pdf>>. Also, see Vesna Svab, ‘Stigma and Mental Disorders’ in Luciano Labate (ed) *Mental Illnesses – Understanding, Prediction and Control* (InTech, 2012) 37, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Louise Aston, *Mental Health: the last workplace taboo* (4 April 2014) The Guardian Professional <<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/mental-health-taboo-workplace-empl>>; Beaton Consulting and Beyond Blue, *Mental Health in the Workplace* (2011) Beaton Global <[http://www.beatonglobal.com/pdfs/Anxiety\\_and\\_depression\\_in\\_the\\_workplace.pdf](http://www.beatonglobal.com/pdfs/Anxiety_and_depression_in_the_workplace.pdf)>. For reflections on the mental stress experienced by, and created by, judicial officers see Hon Michael Kirby, ‘Judicial stress and judicial bullying’ (2013) 87 *ALJ* 516.

<sup>21</sup> UK Students have been sharing their stories of mental health at university on a specially created site by the Guardian Newspaper. See *Blogging Students* (31 March 2014) The Guardian <<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/31/mind-taboo-mental-health-university>> and <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/31/students-share-your-stories-of-mental-health-at-university>.

<sup>22</sup> Sane Australia, *A Sane Report: A Life without Stigma* (Sane Australia, 2013) 1 <[http://www.sane.org/images/stories/media/ALifeWithoutStigma\\_A\\_SANE\\_Report.pdf](http://www.sane.org/images/stories/media/ALifeWithoutStigma_A_SANE_Report.pdf)>; G Thornicroft, D Rose, A Kassam and N Sartorius, ‘Stigma: Ignorance, Prejudice or Discrimination?’ (2007) 190 *British Journal of Psychiatry* 192-193.

<sup>23</sup> Goffman, above n 11, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Goffman, above n 11, 3-4.

A wide range of mythical imperfections including unpredictability, inferiority, even hostility, tend to be imputed on the basis of the original one. This effectively reduces the career opportunity and life chances of those singled out.<sup>25</sup> Such attributes are antithesis of those typically associated with the attributes of members of the socially constructed category of law students or legal practitioners. Historically, entry requirements into Australia's university law programs created a general perception that law students are amongst the most capable tertiary students. There is a tendency in others and the 'self' to consider students who do not perform well to be lazy or otherwise at fault for failing to perform as expected.

Stigma can therefore result in reluctance to seek help.<sup>26</sup> In the general population, only about half of the estimated Australians affected by mental health problems<sup>27</sup> actually seek treatment.<sup>28</sup> Up to 15% of those seriously affected eventually die by suicide.<sup>29</sup> Depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and so on, are recognised mental illnesses. Psychological distress,<sup>30</sup> which is a vague concept that can be present in the absence of stress, arguably is not. However, if distress is associated with other symptoms it can, when added up, escalate into a recognised mental illness.<sup>31</sup> Since no one is immune to symptoms of mental health problems and associated stigma,<sup>32</sup> reluctance to seek help again logically applies to law students.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For findings of a recent large-scale Australian community survey see Nicola Reavley and Anthony Jorm, *National Survey of Mental Health Literacy and Stigma* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Also, see Sane Australia, above n 13, 5; A Crisp, M Gelder, S Rix, H I Meltzer and O J Rowlands, 'Stigmatisation of people with mental illnesses' (2000) 177 *British Journal of Psychiatry* 4.

<sup>26</sup> Amelia Gulliver, Kathleen M Griffiths, Helen Christensen and Jacqueline L Brewer, 'A Systematic review of help-seeking Interventions for Depression, Anxiety and General Psychological Distress' (2012) 12 *BMC Psychiatry* 81; Lisa J Barney, Kathleen M Griffiths, Helen Christensen and Anthony F Jorm, 'Exploring the Nature of Stigmatising Beliefs about Depression and Help-Seeking: Implications for Reducing Stigma' (2009) 9(1) *BMC Public Health* 61; G Schomerus, H Matschinger and M Angermeyer, 'The Stigma of Psychiatric Treatment and Help-Seeking Intentions for Depression' (2009) 259 (5) *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* 298.

<sup>27</sup> In 2007, almost 3.2 million Australians were found to be affected by a mental disorder. See the *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results: 2007 (Catalogue No 43236.0)* (22 October 2008) Australian Bureau of Statistics <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4326.0Main%20Features32007?open>>.

<sup>28</sup> Sane Australia, *Facts and Figures about Mental Illness* (28 June 2013) <http://www.sane.org/information/factsheets-podcasts/204-facts-and-figures> ; Sane Australia, above n 22, 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> Sane Australia, above n 28.

<sup>30</sup> Psychological distress is a term largely defined as 'a state of emotional suffering' that is typically 'characterised by symptoms of depression (eg lost interest, sadness, hopelessness) and anxiety (eg restlessness, feeling tense)'. See Aline Drapeau, Alain Marchand and Dominic Beaulieu-Prevost, 'Epidemiology of Psychological Distress' in Luciano L'Abate (eds), *Mental Illnesses – Understanding, Prediction and Control* (2012) 105 <<http://cdn.intechopen.com/pdfs-wm/25512.pdf>>.

<sup>31</sup> Aline Drapeau, Alain Marchand and Dominic Beaulieu-Prevost, 'Epidemiology of Psychological Distress' in Luciano L'Abate (eds), *Mental Illnesses – Understanding, Prediction and Control* (2012) 105 <<http://cdn.intechopen.com/pdfs-wm/25512.pdf>>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

This is the case despite widespread evidence that professional treatment, counselling, and medication can significantly mitigate the symptoms and adverse effects of psychological distress and more serious mental health problems.<sup>34</sup>

Psychological distress can simply be associated with exposure to a stressful event and the inability to cope effectively with stressors. Insecurities, such as ontological insecurity or financial insecurity, may also be experienced by some students entering their first year of law studies. These stressors and insecurities may escalate and not dissipate as the law degree progresses. Life stressors about who we are and who society expects us to be are not, in modern times, limited to a given time frame or activity like study. However, there is a social expectation that law students will cope with certain levels of stress associated with tertiary law study and later with the practice of law.<sup>35</sup>

Law schools do not expect their students to have an intimate understanding of the technical meaning of stress, depression and psychological distress, for instance, or available treatments or coping strategies. However, by the end of their studies, law students will have been exposed to reading and analysing a litany of some of the worst and inexplicable acts perpetrated by human beings on each other and on the environment. They will be expected to adopt an emotionally detached or objective posture when responding to life-like problem solving questions. They will also possess a heightened awareness of the potential destructive emotional, physical and social effects resulting from a person's lack of capacity and capabilities in a competitive world.<sup>36</sup> The worst effects of stigmatisation are what benevolent or human rights lawyers attempt to stop or ameliorate. Professional psychological 'debriefing' skills, however, are not part of the law curriculum.

Lack of insight or knowledge about the spectrum of symptoms that can destabilise their mental wellbeing and how these can be successfully managed can lead to feelings of inferiority and insecurity. This can lead to secrecy, attempts to hide and obscure symptoms, which in itself is a source of continuous stress about unforeseeable consequences.

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<sup>33</sup> The BMRI report found 39% of law students said they would not seek help from a professional if they were depressed. Further, a large sample fears the unanticipated side effects of medication. See BMRI report, above n 1, 22. Similar findings of reluctance by law students to seek help has been documented in overseas studies, see for example, Jennifer Jolly-Ryan, 'The Last Taboo: Breaking law students with mental illnesses and disabilities out of the stigma straightjacket' (2010) 79(1) *UMKCLR* 123, 123-124 and for UK students, The Guardian, above n 21.

<sup>34</sup> Jolly-Ryan, above n 33; Ian Hickie, et al, 'Perspectives of young people on depression: awareness, experiences, attitudes and treatment preferences' (2007) 1 *Early Intervention in Psychiatry* 333; S Naismith, et al, 'Effects of mental health training and clinical audit on general practitioner's management of common mental disorders' (2001) 175 *Suppl Medical Journal of Australia* S42.

<sup>35</sup> See Field and Duffy, above n 7, 140.

<sup>36</sup> The concepts of legal capacity and confidentiality are taught early in law programs in courses like Contract Law and Torts and continue to permeate most law courses. Concepts of vilification, discrimination and stigmatisation tend to be covered throughout law programs in Criminal Law and later in greater detail in law elective courses.

The process of self-stigmatisation may develop and reinforce the decision to remain silent. It can lead to fear of being rejected or of less value to society or the self.<sup>37</sup> Numerous studies have found that people who self-stigmatise are more likely to be isolated, alienated, and socially withdrawn than those who do not.<sup>38</sup> Research on self-stigma has also shown it to create a 'vicious cycle' of fear that if psychological distress or other mental health problems are disclosed, this may be taken as evidence of an inability to perform as expected or mental instability. If disclosure does not occur, then there is fear of being 'found out' creating additional fear that can worsen existing symptoms and also interfere with the seeking of treatment.<sup>39</sup>

For law students, fear of disclosure can be associated with their perception of how that information will be received and used by the university, the faculty, lecturers and fellow students. There are concerns about the potential impact on their education and future admission to, and continued acceptance in, the legal profession.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, for law students who do not self-disclose, their psychological distress remains undiagnosed and unresolved. The Dean of the Faculty of Law at UTS stated, '[this] has implications both for the law school curriculum and for professional development'.<sup>41</sup>

For these reasons, it was decided to include materials and discussions about stigma and isolation as part of this project.

## II A REGIONAL LAW SCHOOL INITIATIVE: THE BACKGROUND

### A *Law school diversity and USQ demographics*

While law curriculum has uniform requirements in terms of legal content, law schools are widely divergent in their budgets, student communities, the modes of delivery of law courses and so on. It is a diversity associated with local conditions and settings that the BMRI acknowledges must be taken into account when implementing its recommended strategies.<sup>42</sup> The University of Southern Queensland has a smaller, newer regional law school (currently in its fifth year of operation). It provides legal education both on campus (in Toowoomba and Springfield) and

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<sup>37</sup> Sane Australia, above n 22, 11.

<sup>38</sup> E Brohan, et al, 'Self-Stigma, Empowerment and Perceived Discrimination Among People with Schizophrenia in 14 European Countries: The GAMIAN-Europe' (2011) 129 *Journal of Affective Disorder* 232.

<sup>39</sup> O Wahl, *Telling is Risky Business, Mental Health Consumers Confront Stigma* (Rutgers University Press, 1999) cited in Sane Australia, above n 13, 11, and 28; D Peterson, et al, *Fighting Shadows: Self-Stigma and Mental Illness: Whatwhai Atu to Whakama Hihira* (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Frances Gibson, 'Psychiatric disability and the practising lawyer in Australia' (2012) 20 *JLM* 391; J Jolly-Ryan, 'The Last Taboo: Breaking Law Students with Mental Illnesses and Disabilities Out of the Stigma Straitjacket' (2010) 79 *UMKC Law Review* 123, 124; Wendy Hensel, 'The Disability Dilemma: A Skeptical Bench & Bar' (2008) 69 *U Pitt LR* 637.

<sup>41</sup> BMRI Report, above n 1, foreword iii (Jill McKeough).

<sup>42</sup> BMRI Report, above n 1, 48.

online. There are two law programs available including the undergraduate LLB program and the postgraduate JD program. In 2012, for example, around 77% of law students were enrolled in the LLB program and 23% in the JD program. Less than half of active USQ law students were studying on campus. The majority (64%) were studying online, or a blend of the two.

The law student demographics, like other disciplines at USQ, are diverse. Students may be located anywhere in Australia or overseas. Some are incarcerated. Some are refugees escaping a traumatic past. Consistent with the findings of the BMRI report, most are female (62%). However, unlike the report's findings, only 43% of USQ law students fell within the 'traditional' university age range of 18-25. The majority (57%) fell within a more mature group. This represents a mature-age student profile that is consistent with estimates of the Australian Bureau of Statistics reporting that new growth in people accessing higher education are over 25.<sup>43</sup> Enrolments also suggest that most USQ law students study full time, with only 16% studying part time. Like at other law schools, many of these students have dependents, work more than one job, experience financial restraints and are often time-poor.<sup>44</sup>

### *B Project Developmental Steps*

Four main steps were taken in the developmental stage of this project. They included the following:

1. Identifying a qualified mental health professional who was willing and available to assist the legal educator in designing and developing mental wellbeing strategies that could be introduced into a law course. Such strategies had to be compatible with both on campus and online delivery. It proved especially useful that the professional had intimate knowledge of the unique stressors experienced by law students and especially those associated with distance education. For the purposes of this pilot, a psychologist with 8 years of experience counselling USQ students, and who also had two family members studying law degrees (one by distance), agreed to invest in the project.
2. A collaborative approach was necessary to brainstorm the 'best approach' to meet the specific teaching and learning objectives of the course while also working within available resources. This step is important when merging the ideas of psychology and law within an organisational structure where the

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<sup>43</sup> The proportion of Australians between the ages of 15-64 years with a Bachelor degree or above in 2012 was 25% while those between 25-34 years was 37%. See, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Education and work, Australia, May 2012' (Media Release, cat. no. 6227.0, Canberra 29 November 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Leanne Mezrani, *Feeling the pressure* (13 February 2013) Lawyers Weekly <<http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/features/feeling-the-pressure> at 28.6.13>. Further, 39% of the Australian population is currently studying and 59% of those students are working at the same time. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, above n 43.

objectives of the legal educator and mental health professional are quite different. This involved establishing, at the outset, clear roles and responsibilities. For example, the psychologist remained focused on mental health awareness training and psychological support. Course content, in terms of the law and the assessment, remained the domain of the legal educator. The materials developed and changed to meet the objectives of this project were reviewed by both the legal educator and the psychologist for compatibility and to minimise any inconsistencies in, for instance, language, timing of release of the information and so on.

3. Requisite ethical and privacy dimensions had to be considered. Support to proceed with the project was obtained from supervisors and heads of school, and the Faculty prior to obtaining ethical approval from the University.
4. Seed funding to purchase the services of the psychologist to prepare teaching and learning materials tailored to the needs of the law students was obtained from a small Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee grant.

### *C Changes to the Administrative Law Course*

The main changes made to the course included:

1. Introducing mental health and wellbeing information relevant to level three law students as part of the course content and assessment;
2. Introducing a psychologist as part of the teaching team to build links through familiarity and break down the stigma barrier;
3. Stimulate dialogue through active communication and group activities in the classroom and on the Study Desk; and
4. Develop students time management skills to avoid a potential stressor and put new knowledge into practice through resilience planning.

The following discussion provides examples of the changes made and associated preliminary findings.

### *D Focus: Building knowledge and links with support services*

#### *1 Course content*

Subtle changes to the content of the administrative law course were made by introducing learning materials about mental health and wellbeing in the context of administrative law. The topic of mental wellbeing was introduced in the first week of the semester and was referred to and built on during the semester. For instance, as part of their studies of administrative law, students must learn about review processes of government decisions, including those made by tribunals.

The syllabus and course materials were modified to include tribunal decisions involving legal practitioners with mental health issues.<sup>45</sup> This allowed for critical analysis of the findings of the tribunal and dialogue to begin and links to be made with earlier discussions about mental wellbeing. For example, the lawyer's psychological condition at the time of the questionable conduct, stressors that may have led to the lawyer's state of mind, the lack of disclosure of symptoms, and the tendency of those before the Tribunal to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs instead of seeking assistance from a mental health professional could be discussed openly while very much in the context of administrative law. In addition, the materials allowed links to be made to potential stressors in future legal practice and further discussion about coping strategies.

## 2 Assessment

Despite limited empirical research regarding assessment in legal education, especially from the perspective of law students,<sup>46</sup> assessment was considered by the teaching team to be a useful vehicle to apply new knowledge about mental wellbeing and managing stressors in this third year course. It was assumed that with assessment linked to the topic of their mental wellbeing and coping strategies that it would be taken more seriously by students.<sup>47</sup> Further, since assessment itself can be a source of stress for students,<sup>48</sup> it provided a useful platform to practice new skills safely.

It has been argued in the law literature that for law students, the significance of performing well in their assessment could explain associated or consequential elevated psychological distress.<sup>49</sup> Assessment remains the basis on which grades are determined. Accordingly, the level of success that students achieve in their

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<sup>45</sup> For example, *Legal Services Commissioner v Winning* [2008] LPT 13; and *Legal Services Commission v Cooper* [2011] QCAT 209.

<sup>46</sup> Emily Zimmerman, 'What do law students want? The missing Piece of the Assessment Puzzle' (2010) 42(1) *Rutgers Law Journal* 1, 4.

<sup>47</sup> See David Boud, 'Assessment and learning – unlearning bad habits of assessment' (Paper presented at the Conference on Effective Assessment at University, University of Queensland, 4-5 November 1998) 3, 7 <[http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/conferences/A\\_conf/papers/Boud.html](http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/conferences/A_conf/papers/Boud.html)>; Also, a recent study of 18 science students has shown that students undergoing assessment as part of their degree experience physiological changes associated with elevated levels of stress, suggesting that students take assessment seriously. See Phil Evans, et al, 'Stress, arousal, cortisol and secretory immunoglobulin A in students undergoing assessment' (2011) 33(4) *British journal of Clinical Psychology* 575.

<sup>48</sup> See Boud, above n 47, 6; Australian Law Students Association, *Mental Health Supplement* (2011) [http://www.alsa.net.au/images/2011/2011\\_ALSA\\_Mental\\_Health.pdf](http://www.alsa.net.au/images/2011/2011_ALSA_Mental_Health.pdf); *Law exam stress must be eased:* ALSA (9 February 2010) *Lawyers Weekly* <<http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/lawyer2b/law-exam-stress-must-be-eased-alsa->>. Also, for a review of the literature on the topic of law assessment and stress, see Rachel Field and Sally Kift, 'Addressing the high levels of psychological distress in law students through intentional assessment and feedback design in the first year law curriculum' (2010) 1(1) *International Journal of First Year Higher Education* 65, 66.

<sup>49</sup> Zimmerman, above n 46, 77.

assessment is linked to their future educational and professional opportunities.<sup>50</sup> Arguably, students are therefore more likely to ask questions if they are unsure about the assessment requirements. They are also more likely to engage in open discussion with others about the materials in the classroom, online or in study groups if it is linked to assessment.

Since assessment can represent a potential source of stress for students, especially if it is linked to their perception of high workload, conversely it presents an opportunity to constructively reduce stress. For example, this project altered the assessment in the course to involve students. The aim was to give students a choice in their assessment to help them develop a sense of responsibility and autonomy for their learning.<sup>51</sup> They were able to choose two out of six brief but equally weighted items of assessment. Each assessment item was carefully crafted to link to an administrative law review process that aligned with the learning objectives of the course, tutorial exercises and the final examination. Students committed to their choices via the submission of a resilience plan due early in week two of the semester (see attachment 1). It was suggested to students that they could choose their optional assessment with a view to relieving their stress around peak assessment submission times for other courses. In addition, the resilience plan gave students the opportunity to have as much of the assessment for the administrative law course done as early or as late in the semester as they wanted in order to allow some 'breathing space' in the event of unexpected contingencies.

### *E The Resilience plan*

Effective time management has been identified as a means of significantly reducing stress of a law degree.<sup>52</sup> Research studies have found that the risk to the mental wellbeing of those who study law is associated with pessimistic and perfectionistic

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<sup>50</sup> For instance, top ranked law schools in the US like Harvard and Stanford have reportedly eliminated traditional grading to use a pass/fail system so as to make it more difficult for employers to distinguish top performing students and therefore allow more students the change of a competitive interview. See, Catherine Rampell, *In Law Schools, Grades Go Up, Just Like That* (21 June 2010) *The New York Times* <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/22/business/22law.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>>. In Australia, see Thomas Gaffney, 'Disposing of the Bell Curve: Purpose and Process' in Australian Law Students Association, above n 41, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Boud, above n 47, 8; Kennon Sheldon and Lawrence Krieger, 'Understanding the Negative Effects of Legal Education on Law Students: a Longitudinal Test of Self-Determination Theory' (2007) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 883, 894; Maryelle Weimer, 'A Role for Student Choice in Assessment?' on *The Teaching Professor Blog* (21 June 2011) <<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/a-role-for-student-choice>>.

<sup>52</sup> For a more explicit consideration of underlying pedagogical issues around workload stress and assessment see, for instance, Alf Lizzio, Keithia Wilson and Roland Simons 'University Students' Perception of the Learning Environment and Academic Outcomes: implications for theory and practice' (2002) 27(1) *Studies in Higher Education* 27, 36-7. See also Australian Law Students Association, *Depression in Australian Law Schools: A handbook for law students and law student societies* (2009) 11 <[http://www.alsa.net.au/assets/publications\\_ALSA\\_depression\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.alsa.net.au/assets/publications_ALSA_depression_handbook.pdf)>.

personality traits, fuelled by a culture of success and competition and the stress caused by a disruption of the sleep-wake cycle or long working hours.<sup>53</sup> Good time management skills can be invaluable in organising busy life commitments so that goals are achieved and stress is alleviated.

The resilience plan was introduced into the course to facilitate time and stress management associated with the students' learning goals. The importance of time-management skills were also linked to professional work in busy law practices. This was done by recording on a single document all assessment as well as any work and personal commitments that the students thought would impact on their study time over the course of the semester. Learning resources including an instruction video were provided by the psychologist. The resources focused on discussing differences between 'normal expected stresses' associated with the study of law and regarded as a necessary rite of passage for legal practice, and excessive stress that can lead to high levels of distress and mental ill-health.<sup>54</sup> Time-management strategies as well as tips on how to manage stress during the semester and prior to the examination were highlighted.

Links were provided on the electronic study desk to additional online resources such as mindfulness training and time management You Tube clips. It was anticipated that rewarding students for managing their workload by budgeting time carefully with a 5% mark towards their final grade would encourage them to engage more seriously with the content and process than if it was unweighted. On the other hand, the grade was kept low so as to avoid unintended stress associated with a new type of assessment early in the semester.

### *1 Preliminary Findings*

The resilience plan generated a great deal of interest amongst the students. Student feedback with regards to the resilience plan was obtained anecdotally during the semester in the classroom and a discussion forum on the Study Desk, by email, and formally via a reflective question in the final examination. Students developed and practised critical reflection knowledge and skills as part of this course to better prepare them for the examination question. Since the question involved personal reflection, arguably the answers could be more authentic and less stressful (no right or wrong answer).

Of the 144 students enrolled, 120 students responded to this question on the examination. Seventy per cent of these responses stated that the resilience plan and

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<sup>53</sup> See for example, K Berkley, 'Putting the Stress on Dealing with Depression' (2006) *Law Institute Journal* cited in Australian Law Student Association, above n 52, 7, and 16; also Lawrence Krieger, *The Hidden Sources of Law School Stress: Avoiding the Mistakes that Create Unhappy and Unprofessional Lawyers* (Krieger, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> James Duffy, Rachel Field and Melinda Shirley, 'Engaging Law Students to Promote Psychological Health' (2011) 36(4) *Alternative Law Journal* 250, 252.

time-management skills generally, were useful for law students. A further 50.3% also extrapolated the value of this tool and skills to a legal professional working in a busy law firm. Only two students (1.6%) did not see the relevance of this planning process.

An unanticipated lesson learnt from this process came from a significant number of responses by students suggesting that this assessment ought to have been offered in the first year of the law degree. Resilience planning and time management skills were considered by students to be valuable and necessary as part of their tertiary study. However, most also stated that resilience planning ought to be repeated again in the latter part of the degree to reinforce the merits of this practice.

### *F Isolation Barriers*

Peer support has long been recognised as an important dimension of a healthy and higher order thinking and learning environment.<sup>55</sup> The provision of social support for dialogue, interaction and extension of ideas along with feedback from peers and mentors has been identified as a requirement for ‘effective support’ in distance education.<sup>56</sup> If this is so, then logically, it can be assumed that learning in isolation can be a significant stressor for students. When we experience episodes of elevated distress, simply having someone to talk to about how we feel has been identified in mental health literature as a means of helping us all manage these events.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, research studies inform us that limited access to a support network and higher than average feelings of loneliness make it more difficult to manage the effects of distress.<sup>58</sup>

Many online flexible learning tertiary institutions have responded by providing compulsory face to face workshops, facilitating study groups or providing accessible tutors with whom students can interact. USQ also takes isolation through distance education seriously. As stated by the Chancellor in her speech at the recent law student graduation ceremony, ‘USQ is doing much to close the isolation gap’ sometimes endured by regional communities.<sup>59</sup> It provides an array of similar

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<sup>55</sup> See for example, J Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Open University Press, 1999); V Tinto, ‘Colleges as Communities: Taking Research on Student Persistence Seriously’ (1998) 21(2) *Review of Higher Education* 167; K Nelson, C Quinn, A Marrington, and J Clarke, ‘Good Practice for Enhancing the Engagement and Success of Commencing Students’ (2011) 63(1) *Higher Education* 83 <<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/40257/1/41122.pdf>>.

<sup>56</sup> Catherine McLoughlin, ‘Learner Support in Distance and Networked Learning Environments: Ten Dimensions for Successful Design’ (2002) 23(2) *Distance Education* 149, 152.

<sup>57</sup> Sane Australia, above n 22.

<sup>58</sup> Sane Australia, *Sane Research Report 1: Mental Illness and Social Isolation* (August 2005).

<sup>59</sup> USQ engages in numerous activities to overcome the isolation barriers in the region such as Girls in Engineering Mentoring, Residential Scholarships for Rural and Remote Students, Indigenous Connections, and so on. Bobbie Brazil, ‘Chancellor’s Graduation Speech’ (speech delivered at the Graduation ceremony for the Faculty of Arts, Business and Law, Empire Theatre Toowoomba, 7 September 2013). This is reinforced by an earlier statement by the former USQ Vice Chancellor, which described USQ’s connected program designed to expand, encourage and enrich student

learning support services as other universities, however, they are generally peppered throughout the degree programs, and most study groups and mentoring programs are voluntary.

Since 75% of USQ students study online, opportunities for creating relationships with other students or a support network of peers sometimes remains limited. This can be distressing, especially when students are attempting to manage additional stressors like a full time study load and other demanding responsibilities. Added stress associated with learning by distance may include difficulty accessing additional language and ICT literacy support. Some students starting new lives and educational opportunities after fleeing war torn countries and associated atrocities may also be unknowingly suffering from post-traumatic stress or other mental health problems. Those whose first language is not English and those who have disabilities may require extra support. These factors can contribute to a feeling of isolation and loneliness that can be detrimental to the student's learning experience.

### *G Creating bridges through a sense of connectedness*

A review of the course in this pilot project revealed a significant unmet need. There appeared to be an absence of direct contact between enrolled students studying online and those attending classes. This project considered ways of building connections between the on-campus and online students studying by distance through a sense of inclusion and familiarity with others involved in the course. The intention was to build a more supportive and interactive online learning environment in which students could feel safe to discuss sensitive information like what causes them stress and interferes with them achieving their study goals. An important aspect of building this more open and supportive learning environment was to create stronger links with the university psychologist who would be delivering mental health support services to those students who sought assistance.

Law students at USQ all have access to an electronic Study Desk for each course in which they are enrolled. Apart from providing learning materials and course information, course Study Desks allows for the creation of 'forums' that can be used to initiate and encourage communication between students and teaching teams.

In 2011, communication on the administrative law Study Desk was of an informative nature, mainly about the course content. Typically, communications flowed one way from the course leader to the students. Despite the fact that social forums were created and available to students, they were accessed by only 12 students over the course of the semester. These student to student communications were all content focused, seeking clarification of course requirements. Consequently, these forums appeared to be limited in terms of building meaningful connections between students, encouraging peer support and breaking down social isolation.

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participation. See Bill Lovegrove, '\$48.9 million grant to cement USQ's status as leader in distance education' (8 December 2011) <<http://www.usq.edu.au/news-events/News/2011/12/safbid>>.

Changes were made to the forums in 2012. They were aimed at encouraging and elevating participation by students, especially those studying by distance. An informal and voluntary digital Meet & Greet forum was created to 'break the ice' and encourage preliminary connections to be made (see Attachment 2). Both the course leader and the psychologist led by example and made the first entry to begin the familiarisation process with students. Some of the suggested questions also linked to the teaching and learning objectives of the course such as 'written communication'. This was accompanied by vimeos; five minute movies of both the course leader and the psychologist. The vimeos were uploaded to the Study Desk by way of introduction and visual familiarisation.

To continue the familiarisation process, the psychologist attended the first face to face class of the course, on both campuses. The intention was to build a rapport and alleviate fears of the new assessment and, significantly in terms of this project, negative presumptions that student may have about the attributes of mental health professionals (stigma). It presented opportunity for students to ask questions about the information, start dialogue about stress associated with their studies, and dissipate some concerns that students may have about the resilience plan assessment.

For online students, these sessions were recorded and placed onto the Study Desk. The psychologist also attended a one day intensive offered to online students during the mid- semester study break. The intensive was designed to offer students who study by distance, a face to face learning experience. It mainly covered course content and examination preparation. This was also seen as the first opportunity to focus deliberately on time and stress management and to build stronger connections between online students and the teaching team, including the psychologist. Two half hour sessions led by the psychologist were strategically included in the program. They were strategic because they intentionally followed discussions about migration cases that involved graphic and disturbing facts which may have been distressing to some students and discussions about the examination. These brief sessions provided opportunity for open discussions or 'debriefing' about feelings and other experiences of stress and distress that the students may encounter as online students. The sessions ended with brief relaxation and mindfulness exercises to help alleviate stress and that can be applied anytime. Again, recordings were uploaded onto the Study Desk for all students to access at their leisure and when needed.

An informal feedback form was distributed to students after the intensive. The students unanimously ranked the intensive and the two sessions with the psychologist at the highest level. Comments of gratitude were included supporting research that suggests that online students value engagement or interaction, even if only for one day in the semester.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> For a comprehensive literature review and empirical analysis of connecting students' transition and retention with their engagement see Jill Lawrence, 'Reconceptualising attrition and retention:

## *H Point of Need Access to Professional Support Services*

As part of the project, all administrative law students were advised that they would be given priority for appointments with the psychologist if required. They were informed that they could see or speak with her to discuss the resilience plan assessment, make amendments to their plan should unforeseen events occur, or any other mental stress or issue that they may wish to discuss in confidence.

To further break down stigma barriers, students were informed that the reception staff at the university's Student Services (where the psychologist is located) would not ask them questions about their appointment if they simply stated that they were administrative law students. They were also given the psychologist's e-mail address for direct contact. For these law students, this established a confidential, direct access, at point of need link to the services of a mental health professional. Assistance could be provided as early as possible within a 24 hour period either face to face, by telephone or email.

### *I Preliminary findings*

The pilot project findings indicate a significant increase in access by students to the Study Desk. Indeed, access by students was of such a high volume that results are still being analysed. However, by way of example, preliminary findings indicate that in relation to the online Meet and Greet forum alone, 65 students contributed by submitting an entry. This does not take into account the multiple returns to the site, by those individuals, in order to interact and respond to entries by their peers. This response rate suggests a clear desire by students to connect or engage with other law students.

Perhaps the most notable and encouraging result from this pilot project, was the significant rise in contact between the psychologist and administrative law students in 2012. Prior to this pilot and since the opening of the law school, the psychologist reported that she counselled as few as two to three law students (approximately 0.4% enrolled students) a semester from the whole law school.<sup>61</sup> During this pilot, in one semester, the psychologist had 27 contacts from administrative law students alone. This represented contact with 22.5% of the students enrolled in one law course. More importantly, it indicates a 54 times rise in contact between the psychologist and law students, in general, than in any previous year.

Some of the reasons for student contact with the psychologist involved discussions about the resilience plan, other contacts were to disclose personal issues impacting on the student's studies including managing stress and anxiety, balancing family crises

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integrating theoretical, research and student perspectives' (2005) 2(3) *Studies in Learning, Evaluation and Development* 16.

<sup>61</sup> The USQ Student Support Services did not record the specific discipline in which the students of were enrolled when seeking counselling services. As such, the figures presented are estimates.

and coping with depression. It was not an explicit objective of the pilot project to add to current findings on law student mental health issues. Nevertheless, it confirms that USQ law students share similar issues of high levels of distress as reported in other research literature. The pilot also confirmed that face to face, phone and email access to the psychologist all provided the appropriate modes of service delivery to further assist in meeting the hitherto largely unmet and diverse support needs of the students.

### III CONCLUSION

The intention of this project was to test the approach taken in the pilot and apply positive findings to other courses in the degree programs. The preliminary results show that even with modest resources, law schools providing online legal education can institute changes that will better support students who experience episodes of psychological distress in silence.

What perhaps makes this project unique and appealing to other legal educators in smaller regional law schools, is that it also addresses the problem of limited resources by showing a way of embedding a valuable existing resource (university psychological and mental health professionals employed by student services) into a specific course or program.

The aim of the BMRI research project was to build mental health awareness and create better support links for law students at times of mental distress. The volume of publications, public forums, conferences and change to law curriculum that has since followed the release of the report is clear testament that those aims are being achieved. This pilot project adds to this body of knowledge.

It did, however, require a collaborative approach based on considerable interdisciplinary co-operation. For instance, teaching resilience, time management and mindfulness coupled with psychological support services and information were outside the law lecturer's expertise. This required the assistance of a mental health professional. The quality production of specific vimeos, and uploading them to the Study Desk so that they could be accessed by students with ease, also required special expertise and support services.

This pilot project focused on improving the knowledge of a cohort of third year law students about mental wellbeing, as well as the strategies that they can use when they experience elevated levels of stress. This involved building connections to an accessible professional that could provide psychological support services, in a confidential and timely manner, when students felt they needed assistance. Other important findings will follow in due course when further analysis of the data has been concluded. However, for the purposes of this paper, the following summarises some preliminary findings as well as unanticipated lessons.

Law students, especially those studying online, have indicated desire for interaction and engagement with their peers. This is not a new concept, but it is a confirmation that connectedness remains a significant factor in online and digital legal education.

Law students are interested in learning about their mental health and wellbeing. They find value in learning about strategies to relieve their stress both in relation to their studies and in their future working lives. Embedding better links to a mental health professional into a law course or program can greatly elevate interaction between students and student support services as and when the students require assistance.

This privileged channeling of administrative law students through a cluster of processes that constitute the pilot project was also intended as a basis for providing learning for the project team. For example, learning about student take-up and results from which to generalise strategies that could be available to all students. The experience of embedding a psychologist into a course in this way also carried unanticipated benefits for the legal educator in terms of building her own resilience and time management skills. The psychologist provided a broad source of information and ideas that helped the legal educator become more aware of what can be done to support law students.

Finally, the significant rise in the students' response to accessing the psychologist in this project has made it clear that if this model is expanded to the whole of the law school, provision would have to be made for the future anticipated rise in the psychologist's workload. The anticipated trade off would be increased retention of students and consequential lessening of financial loss associated with withdrawing, both to the student and to the university, as well as enhanced student and staff psychological well-being.

After careful consideration of student feedback, staff discussions of the project results, the school decided that a modified introductory version of the resilience plan and mental wellbeing information were better placed at the start of the degree programs. These were introduced into the first year program at USQ in semester 1 of 2014. Modifications to mental wellbeing information and a more complex resilience plan to reinforce this important skill remain in the administrative law course.

## Attachment 1

### Assessment 1: Resilience Plan      Due Date: (Monday) 30 July – worth 5%

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please read the following clause before ticking the box to show your acknowledgement of it as a signed pledge to uphold the clause. Further explanation of the effect of this clause is located in the Assessment Document. Students are advised to read that explanation prior to signing and submitting this Plan.

Integrity clause:

**‘On my honour, I solemnly promise that I will acknowledge the work of others that I use in all of the assessment that I submit in this course for marking. Also, I promise I will neither give nor receive any unauthorised assistance’.**

### Assessment Details

*Purpose:* To empower students to achieve their goals by applying self-management skills to meet their personal and learning commitments professionally and ethically.

Prescribed Assessment: This assessment must be completed by all students enrolled in the course.

The **Resilience Plan** is the first step at keeping you on track to meeting your goals this semester. You will be the author of your own Resilience Plan. Once it is submitted and accepted, your plan will reflect your **assessment commitments** and you will be accountable for fulfilling them. You must plan carefully as changes to your submitted/accepted Plan are not permitted except in exceptional circumstances (See below for amendment instructions).

**Marks: 5% of the overall marks for this course.**

**Instructions:** a recording titled ‘General Instructions Useful in Writing Resilience Plan: Recording by Joanne Boyce’ will be located on the StudyDesk. The recording will provide instructions on how to prepare your Resilience Plan. Then,

1. You will need to download two documents: ‘Form A: Assessment Worksheet’ and the Resilience Plan also located on the StudyDesk. ‘Form A’ lists the weekly on-course assessment items, a brief description, value and due date for each item listed. It is simply a tool to assist you to choose items of available assessment that will make up the marks for portfolio 1.

- a. Turn to your Resilience Plan and fill in the different commitments you have in the upcoming semester. **Note:** *The course coordinator and staff involved in the delivery of this course are powerless to make any comment, recommendation or variation to any assessment in any other course in which students may be enrolled and which may present a clash.*
  - b. The Portfolio 1 assessment provides students opportunity to choose two 'available' assessment items. In choosing your two available items, look for possible clashes with other commitments that you have identified when filling your Resilience Plan (other course assessment, work etc). The aim is to avoid unnecessary stress during the semester.
2. After checking that your 2 chosen assessment items do not clash with your other study, work and life commitments, insert these into the appropriate slots in your Resilience Plan. In rare circumstances, some clashes may be unavoidable. Students should consider and pre-plan how they will manage this, and provide an explanatory paragraph at the end of their Resilience Plan so that the examiner knows you have addressed it or you may be seeking assistance.
  3. Save your Resilience Plan as a Word file.
  4. Submit your completed Resilience Plan through EASE by 5pm on Monday 30 July (Wk 3).

Upon completion, your plan can be used as a reminder of upcoming events throughout the semester.

**Note:** *Your Resilience Plan is an important document. It represents the assessment that you agree to undertake and be bound by in this course. It is the student's responsibility to ensure the assessment is the student's own work (see below 'integrity clause'), is completed and submitted in accordance with the instructions in this document and the Study Book.*

**Assessment 2: Portfolio 1**

Administrative Law Assessment & Due Date	Choose 2 'Available' Admin Law assessment items & note their due dates – item descriptions see Form A	Assessments in Other Semester 2 Courses	Other 'Life' Commitments	Marks chosen for admin law items
Item 1.				
Item 2.				
Item 3. Due 30 July	Eg. ( <i>Building Resilience to Change: Knowledge of the Self and the Legal Profession – Why are lawyers unhappy?</i> )			10
Item 4.				
Item 5.				
Item 6.				
Item 7.				
Item 8.				
Student Comments:				

## Attachment 2

### Meet and Greet e-tivity Forum:

**Purpose:** To begin shared student engagement by sending your first written communication to all participants and to reflect on what a peer has written.

Online forums are useful to meet other similar minded students. I see them as one of the tools we can use in this course to create connections and engagement others enrolled in our course.

I want the forums to be safe environments for everyone. To that end, I will be monitoring the forums to ensure that students remain courteous and respectful of the diversity of opinions that different people enrolled in this course might hold. This course deals with controversial issues that can be significantly emotive for most people. As such, the rules are simple.

- Remain courteous and respectful in ALL of your written communications online.
- Ensure you read your messages before you post them to satisfy yourself they are conveying the message accurately and sensitively. With the myriad of participants from different backgrounds and life experience, everyone must be mindful of their audiences.

The forums have endless potential. They are sites where students can let go of their psychological barriers and encourage and support each other. In my experience, busy lives are often lonely lives and we can never have too many friends. So let's see those postings!!!

1. To get started, here are some ideas of information about yourself that you might like to share. Remember this is completely voluntary:
2. What would you like to learn in this course?
3. What makes you happy?
4. What is your preferred mode of written communication and why?
5. What are your favourite pastimes?
6. What do you consider are the three most important characteristics of a professional and why?