NOT ONLY LAW STUDENTS:
high levels of psychological distress
in a large university sample

Dr Wendy Larcombe
Associate Professor, Melbourne Law School
with Dr Sue Finch and Ms Rachel Sore
Statistical Consulting Centre, University of Melbourne
BACKGROUND

- 2009 Courting the Blues: Attitudes towards depression in Australian law students and legal practitioners, Kelk et al
  - 35 per cent of law students recorded elevated levels of psychological distress compared with 13 per cent of the general population
  - The problem of ‘law student distress’ was not or no longer a US phenomenon
- Australian National University 2010 study of student wellbeing
  - Students enter law school with rates of wellbeing no lower than those among the general population – see Townes O’Brien, Tang and Hall (2011) 21 LER 149
  - Levels of psychological distress rise significantly in first year law
- Melbourne Law School 2011 study of student wellbeing
  - Findings re prevalence of distress similar to the ANU study and Courting the Blues
  - No statistically significant difference in rates of psychological distress between undergraduate LLB students and postgraduate JD students
- Melbourne Law School 2012 student wellbeing survey
  - Confirmed 2011 findings regarding prevalence of psychological distress
  - Identified course- and participant- related factors associated with elevated levels of psychological distress among law students
    - See Larcombe and Fethers (2013) 36(2) UNSW Law Journal 390
2012: I was invited to present the 2011 Law Student Wellbeing Project findings to a meeting of Melbourne University’s Teaching and Learning Development Committee (TALDEC)

Several academics from other schools and faculties indicated there that they thought the issue of student psychological distress was not unique to law

- Academics with pastoral care responsibilities were noticing that more students appear to be visibly more distressed in recent years
- Confirmed by the Director, Counselling and Psychological Services

A TALDEC working group on Teaching, Learning and Student Wellbeing was formed in 2012

A Learning and Teaching Initiative grant was secured to fund a student wellbeing and course experience survey in 2013

Deans in the six participating faculties also pledged support
THE 2013 RESEARCH TEAM

Juris Doctor (Law)  
Associate Professor Wendy Larcombe

Bachelor of Biomedicine  
Professor David Williams

Bachelor of Science  
Associate Professor Raoul Mulder

Bachelor of Arts  
Associate Professor Parshia Lee-Stecum

Bachelor of Engineering  
Professor Sandra Kentish

Doctor of Veterinary Medicine  
Dr Chris Murray

Centre for the Study of Higher Education  
Dr Chi Baik

Counselling and Psychological Services  
Ms Orania Tokatlidis

Statistical Consulting Centre  
Dr Sue Finch

Statistical Consulting Centre  
Ms Rachel Sore
The Student Wellbeing Survey, conducted with five cohorts in April-May 2013, attracted more than 5,000 participants.

Response rates between 44% and 70% of cohort (where data available):
- Science (Undergraduates and Masters) – 1842 respondents (RR)
- Engineering (Undergraduates and Masters students) – 537 respondents
- Bachelor of Biomedicine (Undergraduates) – 655 respondents
- Bachelor of Arts (Undergraduates) – 1328 respondents
- Veterinary Medicine (Undergraduates and Masters students) – 342 respondents

Law students were surveyed in August (consistent with previous law student wellbeing surveys):
- (Juris Doctor – Masters students) – 357 respondents

The 2013 Student Wellbeing Survey was an adapted version of the survey developed for the 2012 law student wellbeing survey:
The survey included the 21-item Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21)
- Students were also asked a range of questions to identify personal and course characteristics that may be associated with high levels of psychological distress
- The DASS-21 is a well-validated instrument that measures (and distinguishes) depressive, anxiety and stress symptoms
- Asks ‘to what extent did the following apply to you in the past week?’; answers range from ‘not at all’ to ‘most of the time’
  - Depressive symptoms
    - Low mood, pessimism, inability to become interested
    - eg ‘I couldn’t seem to experience any positive feeling at all’
  - Anxiety symptoms
    - Panic, fear, apprehension
    - eg ‘I felt scared without any good reason’
  - Stress symptoms
    - Irritability, easily upset, intolerant of delays or interruptions
    - eg ‘I tended to over-react to situations’
- The scale developers provide cut-offs to classify symptom levels as: normal, mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe
OVERALL DASS RESULTS

- Across all UOM cohorts, 26% of students recorded a severe+ DASS result
- A significant proportion of students in each program – at least one in five – reported experiencing high levels of psychological distress
- The results for the UOM combined cohort were significantly higher than those reported in a general population sample of 18-24 yr olds – Crawford et al, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall DASS: Highest category across all 3 scales:</th>
<th>Percentage for ‘highest DASS category on any scale’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All cohorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal or mild</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe+</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Mean DASS-21 scores: UOM, Melb Law, general population
The overall levels of DASS distress (% severe+ on any scale) in each of the 2013 UOM cohorts were similar to, or higher than, those measured in the 2012 Law Wellbeing survey.

Relative to Law students in 2013, the odds were higher for:
- Bachelor of Arts students in reporting severe+ depression (Odds ratio 1.9, p=0.002)
- Bachelor of Arts students in reporting severe+ anxiety (Odds ratio 1.4, p=0.054)
- Veterinary Medicine students in reporting severe+ stress (Odds ratio 2.1, p=0.001)
- Other differences in Odds ratios for reporting severe+ DASS levels between students in non-Law programs and Law were not statistically significant

These results were unexpected...
Levels of psychological distress were high in professional and general programs, at both graduate and undergraduate levels. Differences in DASS levels between graduate and undergraduate students were generally small and not statistically significant.

There were no significant differences in year level within program when other variables were taken into account.*

This means that first year students in BA, Science and Biomedicine were reporting high levels of psychological distress by weeks 6-10 of first semester, in their first year at university.

*The effect of year level in the presence of other demographic, participant-related and course-related explanatory variables could not be tested for the Veterinary Science cohort due to the small cohort size.

Is it university rather than legal education???
In the UOM study, 25 explanatory variables were analysed for associations with each of severe+ depression, anxiety and stress across the combined sample and then for the Law subset:

- **Demographic variables**
  - Age; gender; year level; living arrangements; language spoken at home; hours of study, paid work and family care

- **Participant-related variables**
  - Perfectionism; worry about comparisons with others; financial stress; worry about job prospects; intrinsic motivation; sense of career direction; English language proficiency; grade orientation

- **Course-related variables**
  - Perceived teacher autonomy support; course satisfaction; peer engagement; coping with workload; comprehending course content; attendance; perceived competence; results satisfaction; assessment stress

Each group of variables was analysed to determine independent associations with severe or extremely severe (severe+) depression, anxiety or stress across the combined sample.

A final model was developed to estimate the effect of each explanatory variable in the presence of other explanatory variables.
When comparing the factors associated with elevated distress in the final models for the Combined sample (N=5,061) with those for the Law subset (N=357) some variables showed significant associations with elevated distress for both groups:

- High scores on the Assessment stress scale were strongly associated with severe+ distress on all three DASS scales
- Perceived low English language proficiency (reading) was strongly associated with elevated depressive and anxiety symptoms
- Low Coping with workload was associated with anxiety and stress
- Low Intrinsic motivation for study in the discipline and studying fewer than 5 hours per week outside class were strongly associated with severe+ depressive symptoms
- High Perfectionism and high Worry about comparison with others were strongly associated with severe+ stress symptoms
- Speaking a Language other than English (LOTE) at home appears to be mildly protective against severe+ stress
Some of the variables retained in the final models for Law varied from those in the final models for the Combined cohorts.

Factors associated with elevated distress in the law models but not the combined sample models:
- Worry about job prospects was associated with severe+ depression and anxiety in law students but not in the combined sample.
- High Perfectionism was associated with severe+ anxiety in Law students but not in the combined sample.

Factors associated with elevated distress in the combined cohorts models but not in the Law subset models:
- Low Peer engagement

Different effects:
- Low English language proficiency (reading) showed significantly larger Odds Ratios for depression and anxiety in Law than for other disciplinary cohorts.
Our findings suggest that ‘being a uni student’ is a risk factor for high levels of psychological distress, rather than ‘being a law student’

- We may need to review the weight given in explanations of law student distress to ‘thinking like a lawyer’ or ‘the lawyer’s personality’...
Our findings suggest student wellbeing and learning may be improved for university students in diverse programs by:

- Increasing opportunities and information to encourage students to pursue intrinsically-motivated subject and course offerings
- Supporting students to develop their English language proficiency (reading), task planning and other academic skills (to enable them to cope with the workload)
- Better recognition of student diversity and competing commitments, including via some flexibility in workloads or assessment timing
- Paying attention within programs to assessment design; assessment criteria and performance feedback; peer engagement; and developing students’ sense of intrinsic motivation for study in the discipline
- Offering workshops and resources to manage perfectionist tendencies or worry about comparisons with others (interpersonal sensitivity)
- Enhancing referral networks to ensure students who are experiencing psychological distress are aware of available services and support
- Ensuring support and assistance is available for students experiencing financial stress and those with family care commitments

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT WELLBEING
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research site – The University of Melbourne
- Go8, high prestige, high ATAR for entry at undergraduate level, high competition for graduate places
- Law (and all other professional programs) now taught only at the graduate level (JD)
  - Does the JD structure account for the Peer engagement finding?

Would the findings be replicated elsewhere?
- Some research suggests that levels of student wellbeing are higher at ‘less-controlling’ institutions (Sheldon and Krieger 2007)
- However, other recent research confirms that university students in a range of programs are experiencing high levels of psychological distress – higher today than in past decades (eg Stallman 2008, 2010; Royal College of Psychiatrists UK 2011).
Psychological distress has often been assessed in medical and law students
- Law students consistently report higher distress levels than medical students
- But, the assumption that the ‘pressure’ of demanding, professional courses is the main contributor to uni student distress may be unfounded

Further studies are needed to assess the prevalence of distress among students in a range of academic programs in a range of higher education contexts, and to establish the course-related factors associated with high levels of psychological distress

Self Determination Theory remains a useful theoretical framework for interpreting results (given that few if any demographic variables are associated with elevated distress)

Autonomy, competence and relatedness may need to be supplemented by consideration of insecurity, given our findings regarding financial stress, worry about job prospects, and low environmental mastery

FURTHER RESEARCH IS NEEDED
CONCLUSIONS

- Mental health is a factor that affects student achievement and graduate outcomes at all educational levels.
- Our study found high levels of psychological distress among students in very different academic programs, at both undergraduate and graduate levels.
- Our results indicate that some factors associated with elevated distress levels are common across programs, and would be well-addressed at an institutional level, while some factors are program specific and would be best addressed at that level.
- The issue of ‘student distress’ is not, or is no longer, ‘just’ a law student problem.
- The mental wellbeing of students in diverse programs would likely benefit from increased experiences of autonomy (intrinsic motivation), competence, relatedness and security.
- Universities and higher education providers are uniquely placed to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people.


