

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

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# 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
    - See Larcombe et al (2013) 35 *Sydney Law Review* 407
- **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

# NOT JUST LAW?

- **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**

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**Ms Rachel Sore**

# THE 2013 STUDENT WELLBEING SURVEY

- 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
  - See Larcombe W and Fethers K, (2013) 36(2) *UNSW LJ* 390.

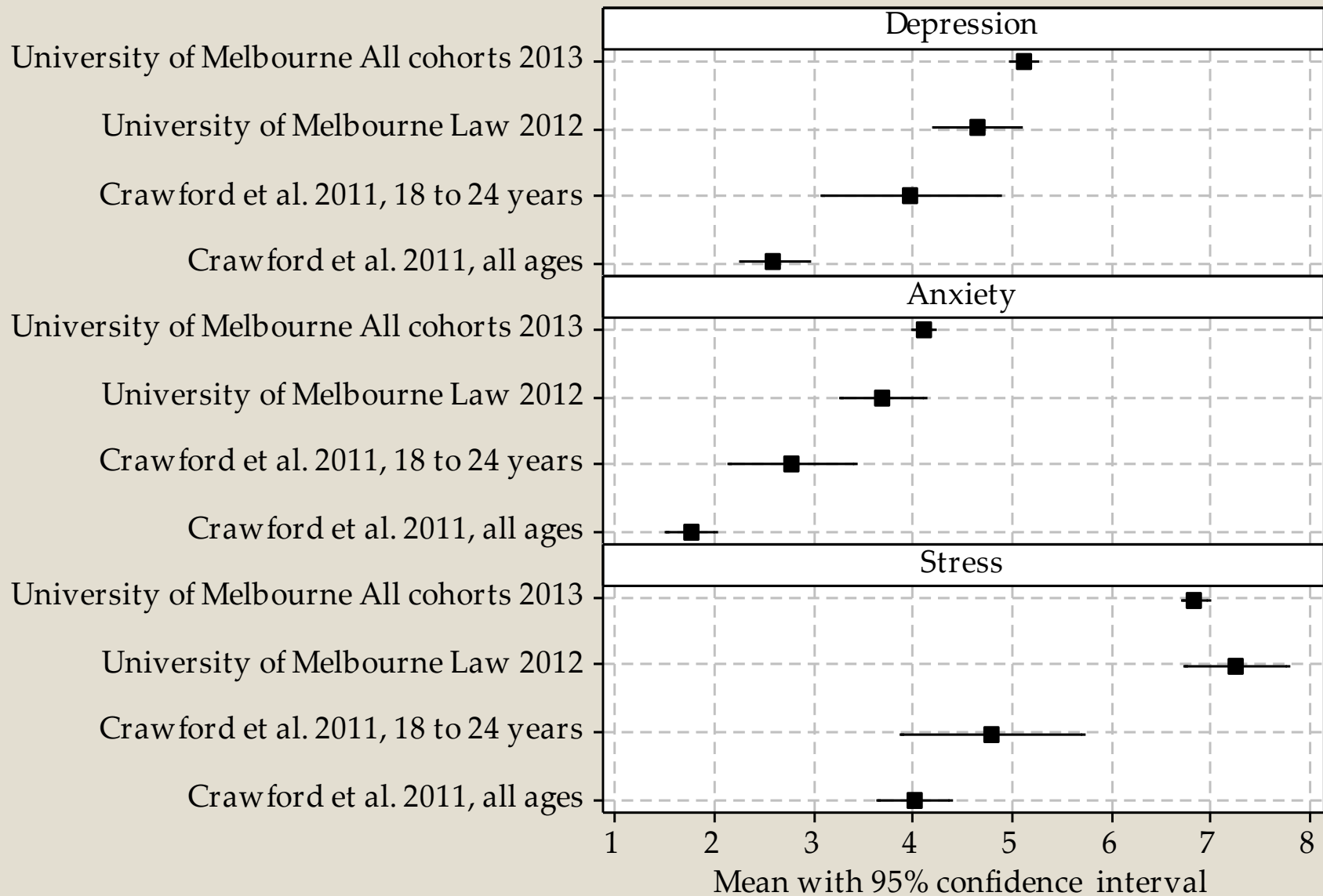
# SURVEY ELEMENTS

- 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

Overall DASS: Highest category across all 3 scales:	Percentage for 'highest DASS category on any scale'						
	All cohorts	Biomed	Science	Eng	Law	Vet	BA
Normal or mild	52.4%	56.2%	55.7%	59.8%	51.2%	45.3%	45.0%
Moderate	21.8%	22.5%	21.6%	17.4%	21.5%	23.5%	23.2%
Severe+	25.8%	21.4%	22.7%	22.9%	27.4%	31.2%	31.8%

- 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



**Mean DASS-21 scores: UOM, Melb Law, general population**



# DASS FINDINGS: LAW AND NON-LAW

- 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...

# MOREOVER

- 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???

# OTHER EXPLANATORY VARIABLES

- 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.

# COMMON STRESSORS: LAW & ALL-COHORTS

- 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 DIFFERENT STRESSORS IN LAW?

- 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

# IMPLICATIONS FOR LEGAL EDUCATION?

- 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’...

# IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT WELLBEING

- 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

# 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).



# FURTHER RESEARCH IS NEEDED

- 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

# 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.

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