

# SRHE

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## ***“Why Not Me?” - The Extent to which students’ Academic Identity impacts their sense of Community and Mental Health***

**Research report**

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

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## **Executive Summary**

This project explored the impact of belonging and academic identity on student mental health and wellbeing. We propose that although mental health and wellbeing are generally considered at the level of the individual, a more promising approach is to consider them at the community level. We believe that students who feel a strong sense of academic identity and belonging to their school are more likely to see themselves as part of a community and therefore seek support when experiencing challenges. This in turn will lead to positive mental health and wellbeing. In contrast, students who do not feel like they are part of their school community are less likely to seek support when they experience challenges and in turn will experience poorer mental health and wellbeing.

Our research questions were:

- (i) What does the literature tell us about how universities can promote positive academic identity and what ‘gaps’ are there in the existing literature?
- (ii) How are universities currently promoting improved mental health and wellbeing through the development of a positive academic identity?
- (iii) What are students’ experiences and views on academic identity, and
- (iv) How has academic identity played a role in the state of students’ mental health and wellbeing during their studies?

To answer the first two questions, we have conducted an in depth literature review exploring the current research investigating how universities can promote positive academic identities and how this impacts upon students’ sense of community and mental health. We also explored current practice around mental health and identity. This is presented below.

To answer the third and fourth questions, we conducted a quantitative study where students in both law and psychology completed questionnaires measuring their sense of belonging, stress and mental wellbeing. Results from this supported our hypothesis in that sense of belonging was associated with reduced stress and more positive mental wellbeing. In addition, we found that psychology students experienced higher belonging and more positive mental wellbeing than law students. We then conducted a qualitative study in which students participated in online focus groups where they answered questions about their mental wellbeing, sense of belonging and how they felt their school supported this. Thematic analysis of this data is ongoing but preliminary analysis suggests that schools are somewhat successful in promoting belonging and mental health and wellbeing in their students; psychology students experience a stronger sense of community with their peers whereas law students have a stronger sense of community with their lecturers. In addition, students can see clear links between their sense of belonging and mental health/wellbeing and can suggest ways in which this could be improved.

# **“Why Not Me?” – The extent to which students’ academic identity affects their sense of community and their mental health**

## Literature Review

### **Selecting the Literature**

In order to inform the project research question, it was agreed between the team members that the review would examine the psychological and pedagogical literature on education; the growing body of literature on legal education; policy and regulatory documents relating to legal education; and examples of good practice in higher education. Although our aim was not to focus solely on legal education, we did find lots of literature relating to law students specifically and much less relating to students of different subjects. The documentary research was intended to serve as background to, and to complement, the empirical research undertaken with students in focus groups.

### **Introduction**

#### *Mental Health and Undergraduate Students*

Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety disorders and alcohol and drug use disorders, affect more than one in six people across the European Union in any given year. In addition to the impact on wellbeing, the total costs of mental ill-health are estimated at over EUR 600 billion – or more than 4% of GDP – across the (at time of writing) 28 EU countries (LaFortune, 2018). There is rising concern about young people’s mental health, and about the mental health of university undergraduates in particular, who are experiencing ever-greater levels of psychological distress (Stevens and Wilson, 2016). The 2018 HEPI study of more than 14,000 students indicates that undergraduates are more likely to have lower levels of mental wellbeing than other young people between 20-24. Concerningly, only 17% of undergraduates felt that their life was ‘highly worthwhile’ and they were ‘very happy’. This was lower than the approximately 33% of young people who were the same age but not at university. There are particular concerns with reference to the mental health of Law students. As Duffy, Field and Shirley (2011: 250) highlight:

35.2 percent of law students experience high levels of psychological distress. This can be compared with 17.8 percent of medicine students who experience high levels of psychological distress and 13.3 percent of people aged between 18 and 34 in the general population.

More recently, the IPPR report highlighted a number of disturbing findings (Thorley, 2017: 4):

- The number of students to disclose a mental health condition to their institution has increased dramatically over the past 10 years, with variation in rates of disclosure between different groups of students.
- In 2015/16, 15,395 UK-domiciled first-year students at HEIs in the UK disclosed a mental health condition – almost five times the number in 2006/07. This equates to 2 per cent of first-year students in 2015/16, up from 0.4 per cent in 2006/07.
- Mental health conditions account for an increasing proportion of all disability disclosed by first-year students (17 per cent in 2015/16, compared to 5 per cent in 2006/07).
- Female first-year students are more likely than male first-year students to disclose a mental health condition (2.5 per cent compared to 1.4 per cent) (2015/16). In 2009/10, male and female students were equally likely to disclose a mental health condition (both 0.5 per cent).
- Undergraduates are more likely than postgraduates to disclose a mental health condition (2.2 per cent compared to 1.4 per cent) (2015/16).
- Just under half of students who report experiencing a mental health condition choose not to disclose it to their HEI.
- Students experience lower wellbeing than young adults as a whole, and experience lower wellbeing than was the case in previous years.
- Young adults aged 20–24 are less likely than any other age group to record high levels of wellbeing (life satisfaction, feeling that things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and low anxiety). In 2017, less than 1 in 5 students reported high levels of each of these four key wellbeing indicators.’

It may be helpful at this point to highlight the relationship between mental health and mental wellbeing. These terms are often used interchangeably, but they can be defined separately. Mental wellbeing governs the extent to which an individual is able ‘to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community’ (Foresight Report, 2008). It is possible for an individual to have mental health difficulties but to have good mental wellbeing.

Poor mental health – exacerbated by poor mental wellbeing – can have a serious negative impact on students’ achievement at university. One in four students suffer poor mental health during their degree; academic pressure is reported as the main source of stress, with 60% experiencing stress levels that interfere with their daily lives (YouGov, 2016). Academic pressure is also a recurring theme in causes of suicide among under-20-year olds (National Confidential Inquiry, 2017). When

students experience mental health issues, perform poorly academically, or do not feel like they ‘fit in’, there is an increased risk of them dropping out of university (HESA, 2017; What Works, 2012).

The prevailing approach has been to view mental health and wellbeing as an individual problem, whereas we argue that it is more properly seen as a community issue. In the context of undergraduates, the problem needs to be understood as an issue for the ‘university community’ and not simply a problem of individual students. Moreover, universities need to recognise that they have an ‘ethical imperative to act to address the high levels of psychological distress being experienced’ (Field, Duffy and Huggins, 2014: 1).

The idea of a university community is closely tied up with the idea of academic identity, which Archer (2008) defines as a sense of ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’, and which is grounded in interactions between an individual and a community (Henkel, 2005). A positive academic identity may lead students to see themselves as belonging to a community, and may lead to students more actively seeking help from others, such as peers and tutors (Student Minds, 2011). Peer support is one of the most often cited reasons that students feel able to remain in higher education (What Works, 2012). As acknowledged by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011), trying to cope with challenges without support is likely to impact negatively on mental health and wellbeing, whereas seeking and receiving support is likely to improve them. If students are able to access support – and are encouraged to communicate and share their difficulties with each other and with staff – this can bolster their resilience and wellbeing, as they feel more that they belong.

The ‘Why Not Me?’ research project was developed in order to look more closely at this apparent relationship between student mental health/wellbeing and academic identity and a sense of belonging to the learning community. It was conceived by academics in Law and Psychology who are interested in students’ academic and personal development, and who began to recognise differences between their respective cohorts in terms of mental health and wellbeing. These perceived differences reflect the growing body of research – originating in the USA but now being conducted in Australia, the UK, and elsewhere – that Law school undermines student wellbeing (see eg Ferris and Huxley-Binns, 2011).

For example, a 1985 study found unanticipated differences between the wellbeing of Law and Medicine students (Shanfield and Benjamin, 1985); and a longitudinal comparison of cohorts of Law students provided clear evidence that their mental health had been adversely affected while at university. Before they began their Law studies, their level of (self-reported) depression was in line with the average at 3-9%; after commencement of Law studies this figure rose to 17-40%

(Benjamin et al, 1986: 247). Daicoff states that, ‘at least since 1970, studies have found that Law students report an unusually high level of stress, psychiatric symptoms, substance abuse, anxiety, depression and internal conflict soon after beginning law school’ (1997: 1407).

Law is, of course, a postgraduate degree in the USA; the particular pressures of postgraduate study may have an influence on the high level of self-reported depression. Nevertheless, as this literature review will illustrate, Law students in the UK are also particularly vulnerable to mental health difficulties, for a variety of reasons.

### *Law Students and the Law School*

The Law school is not unique in suffering the consequences of a neo-liberal, market-driven agenda in education. As Yorke and Knight acknowledge (2004: 34):

Learning in higher education seems to have taken something of a rational-instrumental turn in recent years, with notions of self and emotion being backgrounded. This may be related to the skills-based instrumentalism being encouraged by governments ... to the detriment of the conception of ‘learning and growing as a person’. A ‘learning outcomes’ approach to higher education seems to risk underemphasizing the importance of the personal dimension of student learning, in that the focus veers towards the delivery of measurable task outcomes.

It appears that Law students experience a particular alienation from the personal dimension of their learning, with resulting implications for their mental health. This can partly be ascribed to the way in which Law students are trained to think; the Law degree seeks to develop their logical, analytical and rational capabilities, also exemplified by programmes like Thinking Like a Lawyer (see eg Jones, 2018). Legal education tends to emphasise doctrinal content and linear thinking, while de-emphasising ‘creativity, personal values, reflexivity and interdisciplinary factors such as justice and social policy’; it also ‘promotes personality traits such as defensiveness, perfectionism and pessimism which can lead to unhappiness’ (Duffy, Field and Shirley, 2011: 250). In addition, the Law student quickly becomes immersed in an adversarial environment, where legal issues are presented as problems; whether it be Crime, Tort, Contract or Property (or any other area), students are required to advise one side or another as to the likelihood of winning or losing.

Tani and Vines’ study (2009) compared Law and Medical students and highlighted some key differences. They found a statistically significant prevalence of characteristics (pp 24-7) amongst law students, who:

- are more likely to be studying Law for external reasons, such as parental pressure;
- are less likely to find their course intrinsically interesting;
- are more likely to believe that future employers are concerned more with their grades than with other personal or social characteristics;
- tend to dislike group work;
- are more concerned with their university's reputation;
- are less likely to say that they are at university to learn;
- are more likely to view and assess friendships in terms of networking and career advancement; and
- see grades as the crucial indicator of their success, rather than helping them to learn.

Tani and Vines suggest that these characteristics 'may indeed have a significant impact on law students' likelihood of developing depression', particularly as 'law students may have feelings of less autonomy and less social connectedness than may be optimal for mental health' (p 25). Social connectedness is important in preventing depression (see eg Williams and Galliher, 2006), and the competitiveness that is characteristic of Law students can interfere with their capacity and willingness to connect with peers on more than a merely instrumental level. As Hardee (2016) recognises, law students take a significantly more instrumental approach to their studies than those in other disciplines. In addition, competitiveness is a likely indicator of reduced personal autonomy, because it is related to dependence on external measures for self-evaluation and self-esteem (Tani and Vines 2009: 29). Tani and Vines conclude that these traits 'may help to explain the disproportionate rate of depression in law students' (p 30). Kelk et al (2009) also found that Law students – and younger lawyers – had a higher rate of distress than their non-law peers, and also suffered barriers to recognising and seeking help for their distress,

More recent research conducted by Bleasdale and Humphries (2018) further highlights some key characteristics of Law students, which can help provide an insight into the particular problems they face that may negatively impact their mental health – and their sense of belonging. Law students are considerably more likely to compare themselves to others, with the majority of those comparisons being negative. They expressed concerns about not being as 'smart' as other students, and frequently felt 'lost' because they did not understand as much as everyone else, particularly in the first year. Of course, law students are not a homogeneous group: the widening participation agenda has led to some students from non-traditional backgrounds feeling 'average' in comparison to other students from more traditional university-going families; mature students can feel more isolated both academically and socially; and international students can have less of a support network than the home students.

This literature review aims to map the range of work that has been undertaken on the mental health and wellbeing of university students, as part of a project examining the extent to which students' academic identity impacts their sense of community and mental health. The review examines the psychological and educational literature on the subject. It identifies the importance of the idea of belonging; what it means to be part of an academic community; and what makes the difference to students' feeling of belonging. The review highlights the issue of marginalisation with reference to particular types of student, such as carers and care-leavers; students who commute; BAME students; students with disabilities; and students from working-class backgrounds. The review focuses on the broad themes that emerge from the literature: the meaning(s) of identity and the role of community. It stresses the importance of support networks in breaking the cycle of challenging or limiting mindsets and behaviours, and highlights examples of good practice.

## **Identity and Community**

### *Social Identity*

Students' capacity to develop a strong academic identity is closely related to their social identity and the 'self-esteem hypothesis'. Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity describes an individual's concept of self that results from their membership of a particular social group. Social identity theory holds that individuals will seek to achieve and maintain positive self-concepts. According to Hogg and Abrams (1990), there is a relationship between positive social identity and self-esteem – although others, such as Turner and Oakes (1986), consider the relationship to be more complex. People with stronger social identities are less likely to blame negative life events on internal causes such as personal shortcomings. The literature demonstrates how social identities can support positive responses to stress and failure (Cruwys, 2014; see also Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Jetten et al, 2012).

### *Community and Belonging*

Social identity is strongly linked to a sense of belonging to a community. Furthermore, social connectedness may enhance individual motivation (Greenaway, 2015), which in turn enables students to achieve their academic potential. There are several challenges to students in developing a sense of belonging to the university community – with implications for them being able to achieve their potential. As Ryman (2018) highlights, 'being in a brand-new environment, surrounded by new people, study and exam pressures and financial struggles can all have a

negative impact on any individual's mental health'. These struggles can be exacerbated by the marginalisation experienced by particular groups of students, such as carers and care-leavers; students who commute; non-domestic students; BAME students; students with disabilities; and students from working-class backgrounds.

Widening participation programmes have led to more first-generation students from non-traditional backgrounds coming to university, although the pattern of participation is not evenly spread. For example, the widening participation agenda has not extended to a particularly marginalised group – care leavers. There are 72,000 children in care in England and just 6% of young people with experience of the care system will attend university, compared with almost 50% of the general population (Hall, 2018).

Furthermore, Stanley et al (2007) noted that, while there has been an increase in BAME students, Bangladeshi, Turkish and Pakistani communities remain under-represented in the student population. HESA (2006) noted that disabled students amounted to 6% of total student population; however, the stigma surrounding mental health problems means that this type of disability is less likely to be disclosed. The number of working-class students has increased substantially; but there has been a more rapid increase in attendance from more privileged social classes. This research helps illustrate the potential for marginalisation that is faced by students from particular groups.

A recent HEPI report (Maguire and Morris, 2018) highlighted the marginalisation of commuting students. For example, university campuses, courses, timetables and activities tend to be based on the assumption that students will live nearby, with other students. However, more students (at least 25%) are commuting to university in an effort to save money and cut costs, and this adversely affects their sense of belonging. Commuting students are also more likely to be from other disadvantaged groups: they may be the first in their family to go to university; hail from lower-income households, be mature students; have an ethnic minority background – or a combination of these. In addition, a lack of adequate common rooms and locker facilities can make these students feel that they lack a 'home' on campus. Moreover, living away from halls can interfere with students' ability to socialise, take part in extra-curricular activities, or make connections for studying and group work. Taken together this suggests that although many students may struggle to develop a sense of belonging at university, certain groups may experience this more acutely and this may impact their achievement and mental wellbeing.

### *Supporting Belonging*

The ONS 2018 survey highlights that young people, who are more likely to report symptoms of mental ill health, are also less likely to feel they have someone to rely on or a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood. Whether or not this is a correlative or a causative relationship is unclear; nevertheless, the link exists and is supported by other research and academic literature. For example, the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011) stated that good social networks and peer relationships have a protective influence against mental health difficulties. Warren and Byrom (2016, citing Reavley et al, 2012) point out that only a minority of students are likely to seek support from professionals; 26% would consult their GP and only 10% would approach counselling services. 25% would seek support from friends (25%), with a similar number (26%) asking parents or family for help. This is borne out by NUS Scotland (2010), who found a low level of willingness to approach academics, student services, or external organisations for support.

It is notable that the levels of help-seeking are considerably lower than would be hoped. Yet peer and community support are vital – including the support of the academic community. Unfortunately, according to Grayson (2011), first generation domestic students are less involved in campus activities, and are less likely to feel a sense of belonging to an academic community. Academic identity is a function of community membership (Henkel, 2005), and both academic and social engagement are closely aligned with belonging (Thomas, 2012; see also Vallerand, 1997). As Kelk et al (2009) highlight, it is important to recognise that mental health is not simply a problem for individuals. On the contrary, it is a problem for communities – and society is made up of a series of overlapping communities – including schools within universities.

Kelk et al advocate students gaining support from peers who have had their own experiences of poor mental health, which they see as vital in emphasising social connectedness and group cohesion. Seeing how their peers have managed to regain or maintain wellbeing, in spite of challenges, gives students a real example of resilience in practice. It is also helpful for students to discover that their teachers can also experience difficulties. Work currently being undertaken at Keele University aims to raise students' awareness that mental health challenges can be experienced by everybody, including teaching staff. As feedback from a recent first-year wellbeing session illustrated, students benefit from realising that it's 'OK not to be OK'. Modelling the communication and sharing of feelings and experiences helps students to recognise that their experiences are normal, valid, and nothing to be ashamed of. This communication can, in turn, bolster students' experience of feeling as though they do belong to the academic community, and be less afraid of seeking help. This can help them to face the challenges of community membership with more resilience.

## **Good Practice**

There have been references throughout this review to examples of how universities can support students to develop their academic identity, foster a sense of belonging, and thus help them achieve their potential. The following section includes further specific institutional-level recommendations based on research into good practice. As demonstrated in the discussion of the psychological and pedagogical literature, student involvement needs to be at the heart of policy development, in order to support the autonomy, motivation, connectedness and engagement that is necessary for their mental health and wellbeing. UUK's Good Practice guide (2015) highlights the need to consult and collaborate with students in policy development, suggesting that internal task groups be formed with student representation. The Law school also needs to recognise the particular concerns affecting their students and ensure that these inform legal education. It is interesting to note that the bulk of research in this area has been conducted in Law schools. While some of this is relevant to all subjects there may be some issues which are specific to this group of students. Therefore there are gaps in the literature which could explore experiences in different subjects.

### *Legal Education*

As Coffield observes, 'Learning is viewed as a process of participation in a variety of social worlds' (2008: 8-9). Law schools – and Law students – would benefit from a move towards a model of learning that recognises this. There are two current models: the acquisition metaphor, where learning is focused on gaining individual knowledge, skills, qualifications etc; and the participative metaphor, which shifts the focus from individual learning to learning through participating in communities of practice – 'groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (Wenger and Snyder 2000: 139). Larcombe et al's 2013 research elicited suggestions for improvement from Law students relating to assessment and feedback; staff approachability and understanding; culture, activities and services. They suggest that Law school culture needs to change to be more collaborative and inclusive, rather than adversarial and elitist.

O'Brien, Tang and Hall (2011) highlight the role that legal education can play in increasing students' mental distress. As part of their research, they conducted a dialogue retreat aimed at capturing and rewriting students' narratives. Several themes emerged regarding the impact of studying Law: Law school made them more rational, objectifying, analytical and logical; more competitive, adversarial, arrogant and elitist; and made them feel isolated, disconnected and

intolerant. The authors' proposals for reform included better guidance, feedback and transparency; emphasising the importance of community connection and autonomy.

A key theme throughout this review has been the importance of engaging students in awareness and discussion of mental health from the first year onwards. For example, the First Year Experience Programme discussed by Kift et al (2010) contains three principles for universities to follow:

- Design a curriculum that engages students in learning;
- Foster proactive and timely access to learning and life support; and
- Create sustainable academic-professional partnerships to develop students' sense of belonging via involvement, engagement and connectedness with the university experience.

This programme sees student orientation as a process, supported by peer mentoring, with the aim of developing student agency in facilitating their own learning. Peer mentoring – and peer persistence – is also highlighted by Golsteyn et al (2017) as being key to student achievement. And, as Jacklin (2009) points out, universities need to move from a reactive to a proactive support culture – this involves listening to students to discover what they experience as support. Moreover, it is important to avoid slipping into a 'deficit discourse' and instead to maintain the focus on the social barriers that affect student engagement in higher education.

Kelk et al (2009) see mental health as an essential institutional goal, as well as a legitimate health problem for which to seek support. They emphasise the need to focus on the known risk factors for poor mental health, establish supportive environments, and maintain strong school, family and institutional connectedness. Law schools should recognise the competitive elements of the course and make support mechanisms available; the competitive nature of legal debate does not need to be taken into the personal aspects of their students' lives. McInnis advocates harnessing the curriculum as the academic and social organising device – the glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together through the interconnected organising principles: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, evaluation, and monitoring (2001, 9; 11).

### *Promoting Resilience through Motivation, Autonomy and Connectedness*

Tani and Vines (2009) found that resilience is much higher in Medicine students than in Law students. They suggest possible strategies to promote resilience through working to improve Law students' levels of intrinsic motivation, autonomy and social connectedness. Suggested strategies

include peer and academic mentoring, managed group work, and programmes that help develop social skills (and identity) by working together on common projects.

Stallman's research in an Australian university evaluated the feasibility of embedding a strength-focused resilience-building seminar within the curriculum. The 'Staying on Track' seminar was 'designed to increase resilience literacy, resilience and help-seeking when needed in university students', introducing students to 'six building blocks of resilience: three that help students buffer against stress (Realistic Expectations, Balance and Connectedness) and three that help students manage stressful situations (Positive Self-talk, Stress Management and Taking Action)' (2011: 124). Student feedback highlighted some key benefits for the seminar. For example, normalising the experience of and reactions to stress: 'although I feel stressed, I am not alone in experiencing these feelings. I was also reminded that I have successfully used resilience strategies in the past, and I must start to use them again' (2011: 127). Also highlighted was an increase in self-efficacy, as students were helped 'to see problems as solvable, move towards goals, be able to make decisions, keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook ... and [be] more confident and competent to independently make changes in their own lives' (ibid; see also Field and Duffy, 2012; Brown, 2016).

### *Recommendations based on the literature*

Bleasdale & Humphreys' research on undergraduate resilience involved interviews with both staff and students at the University of Leeds, and led to a number of recommendations at institutional level:

- In view of the importance of relationships to resilience, and the difficulties many students experience on transition to university, the role of the personal tutor is vital: 'Utilising group sessions, individual sessions, and online support,<sup>1</sup> alongside investment in ongoing training for tutors, is particularly critical' (2018:5). Consideration should also be given to accommodation and space, societies and staff-student events to foster good relationships – including implementation of diversity policies where necessary.
- Staff should understand how their students 'typically present and operate', and universities should recognise the importance of student education services staff (2018: 6).

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell 2018: More than half of England's NHS CCGs have commissioned a free online counselling app called Kooth. Tens of thousands of young people in Britain who are struggling with their mental health are seeking help online for problems such as anxiety, self-harm and depression (Campbell, 2018).

- Universities should develop a working definition of ‘resilience’ so that students and staff understand its meaning in a university context.
- In light of how students experience ‘failure’, universities should develop ‘resources dedicated to discussions of failure and setbacks’ and ‘consider what messages they wish students to receive about academic and personal success’ (ibid).
- Students should be explicitly encouraged ‘to take ownership of their resilience through engagement with appropriate self-care techniques’ (ibid). At the same time, universities should recognise that ‘not every student will possess the same internal and external resources to independently navigate their way through such challenges at all times’ (ibid), and should therefore ensure appropriate funding for necessary services.
- Further research is needed into how feedback can be better communicated and understood.

The ‘What Works?’ programme report by Thomas (2012) emphasised the importance of belonging in students’ ability to participate fully and to make the most of their opportunities, concluding that ‘approaches that promote belonging will have the following characteristics (2012: 72):

- supportive peer relations;
- meaningful interaction between staff and students;
- developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners;
- an HE experience that is relevant to interests and future goals.’

The report suggests a number of strategic implications for universities (2012: 69-70):

1. The commitment to a culture of belonging should be explicit through institutional leadership in internal and external discourses and documentation such as the strategic plan, website, prospectus and all policies.

2. Nurturing belonging and improving retention and success should be a priority for all staff as a significant minority of students think about leaving, and changes need to be mainstreamed to maximise the success of all students.

3. Staff capacity to nurture a culture of belonging needs to be developed. Staff-related policies need to be developed to ensure:

- staff accountability for retention and success in their areas;
- recognition of staff professionalism and contributions to improve retention and success in relation to time and expertise;
- access to support and development resources as necessary;

- appropriate reward for engaging and retaining students in higher education and maximising the success of all students.

4. Student capacity to engage and belong must be developed early through:

- clear expectations, purpose and value of engaging and belonging;
- development of skills to engage;
- providing opportunities for interaction and engagement that all can participate in.

5. High quality institutional data should be available and used to identify departments, programmes and modules with higher rates of withdrawal, non-progression and non-completion.

6. Systems need to be in place to monitor student behaviour, particularly participation and performance, to identify students at risk of withdrawing, rather than relying on entry qualifications or other student entry characteristics. Action must be taken when ‘at risk’ behaviour is observed.

7. There needs to be partnership between staff and students to review data and to understand the students’ experiences of belonging, retention and success. Change across the student life cycle and throughout the institution at all levels should be agreed and implemented and the impact evaluated.

The report also contains an ‘institutional reflective checklist’ to help universities ‘critically review their approach to nurturing a sense of belonging, and enhancing student engagement, retention, and success’ (2012: 70).

### *Government Response*

Official figures released by the ONS showed that student suicide rates had risen by more than 20% over the past 10 years, with 95 deaths in 2017 up from 77 in 2006/07. The Office for Students (OfS) has recognised that student mental health must be a ‘top priority’ – with particular attention paid to ‘the transition between school and university to ensure students are getting adequate support during their first year, a period when they are at their most vulnerable’ (Vaughan, 2018). The OfS Chief Executive, Nicola Dandridge, has stated that student mental health is a wider social problem as well as an issue for universities. Nevertheless, she has stated that (ibid):

There is more that universities can and should do and that is exactly the area where we would be wanting to focus our attention ... We’re very aware that many students are struggling with issues around their mental health ... It’s connected with the pressures that

young people are under, the pressures of expectation. It's a very challenging environment that young people are growing up in now.

## **Conclusions**

As Jones (2018) stresses, the Law degree's focus has hitherto been on impartial and objective analysis and logical, rational argument (as exemplified by the 'Thinking Like a Lawyer' programme). The Law degree has to change; the Law school must develop an approach that begins in the transition period and is scaffolded throughout the degree, that enables students to develop a positive academic identity. As the research shows, if students feel that they belong to an academic community that is communicative and supportive, they will be more likely to seek help. Peer support, as well as academic support, is integral to this process. An increased emphasis on community belonging can help mitigate the problems that can arise as a result of the particular characteristics common in Law students.

It is possible that the new Single Qualifying Exam, with its increased role for skills and competencies at university level, will help facilitate institutional recognition of the 'affective domain' (Jones, 2018: 463). And, as the Legal Education and Training Review acknowledges, 'the affective and moral dimensions are critical to professional practice', with 'emotional intelligence' being one of the core professional competencies relating to the affective dimension (2013: paragraph 4.83 and table 4.3).

Furthermore, there is also a lack of literature exploring the belonging and mental wellbeing of students in other subjects, particularly psychology, and studies exploring similar or different challenges they face in their degree programmes should not be overlooked. Students are not necessarily a homogenous group.

None of this is to say that students will – or even should – avoid the stresses of university education. As UUK's report recognises, 'some level of stress does not necessarily have to have a negative impact and can be stimulating'; nevertheless, it maintains that university education 'can also make a positive contribution to mental wellbeing' (2015: 9). The challenge is to continue to build on the body of research and roll out the good practice that has been identified so that this positive contribution can be realised.

# **“Why Not Me?” – The extent to which students’ academic identity affects their sense of community and their mental health**

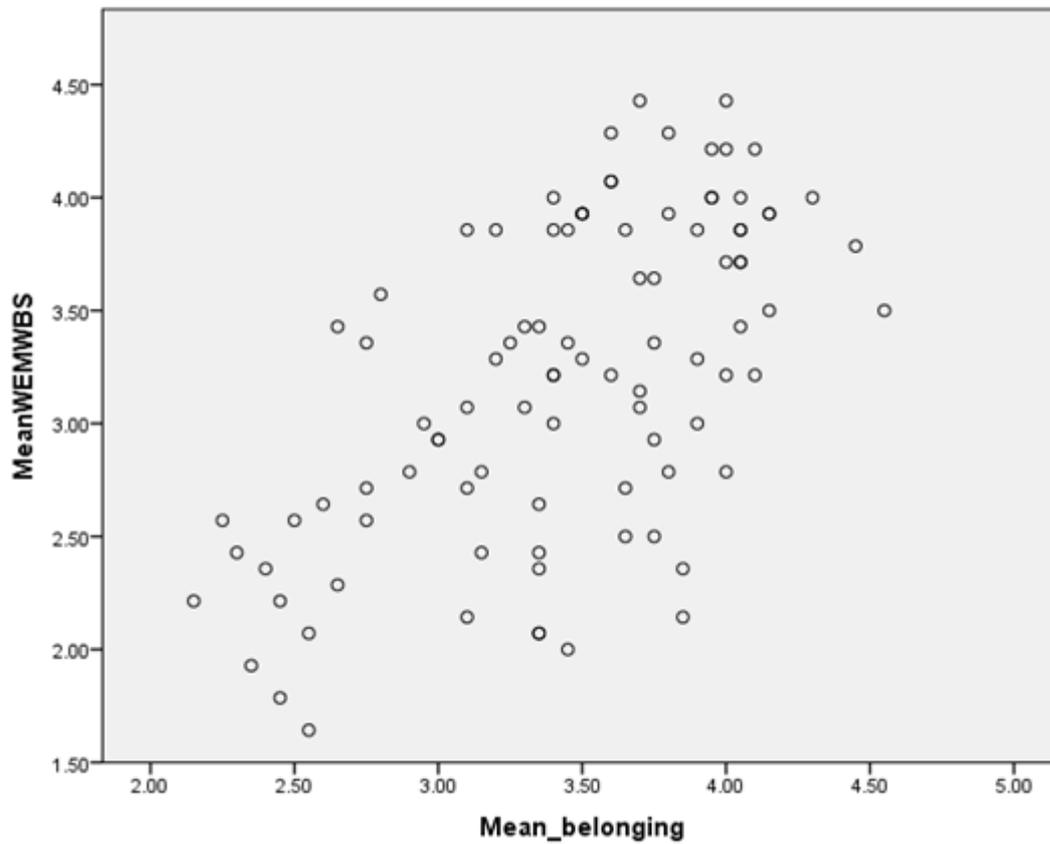
## **Research**

### **Study 1: A Quantitative Study Exploring the Relationship between Belonging and Mental Wellbeing**

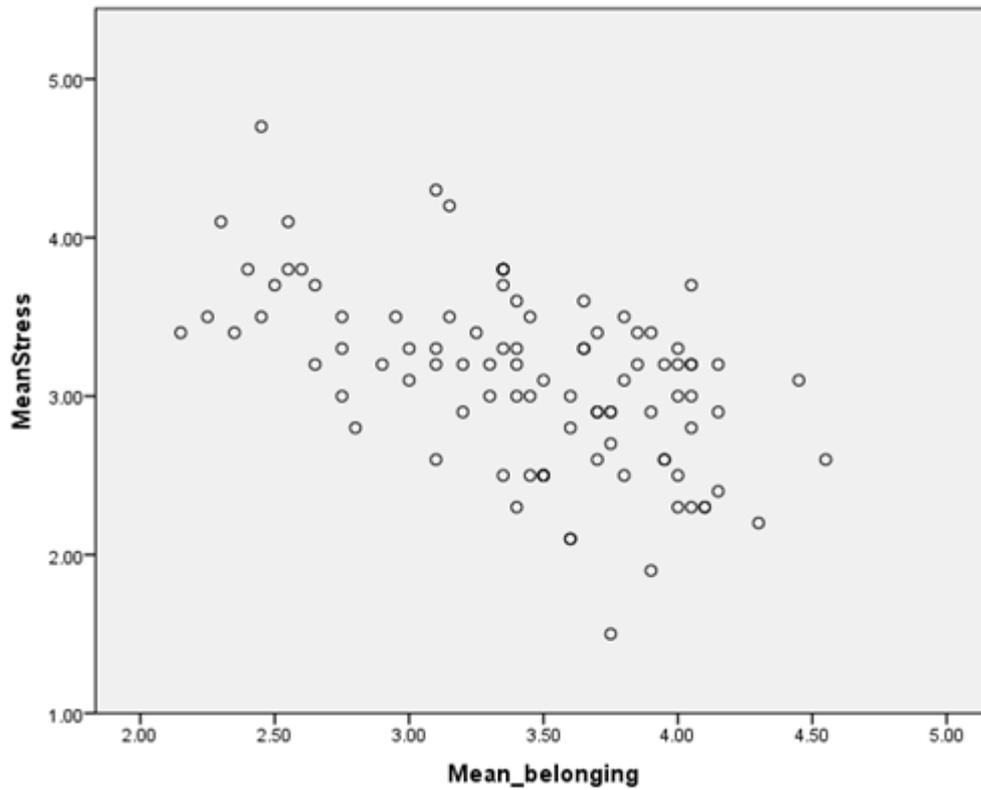
We conducted a survey with 95 students aged 17-27. Approximately 50% were from Law and 50% from Psychology, two thirds were White British and most were home students with no disability. We explored the relationship between belonging, stress and mental wellbeing. Students completed the following measures:

- Mental Wellbeing WEMWBS: explores wellbeing and psychological functioning (Huppert & Johnson, 2010). Example item: “I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future.”
- Perceived Stress Scale PSS (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983). Measures feelings and thoughts during the past month. Example item: “In the past month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?”
- Academic belonging (Ingram, 2012). Example item: “I felt that am a member of my school”

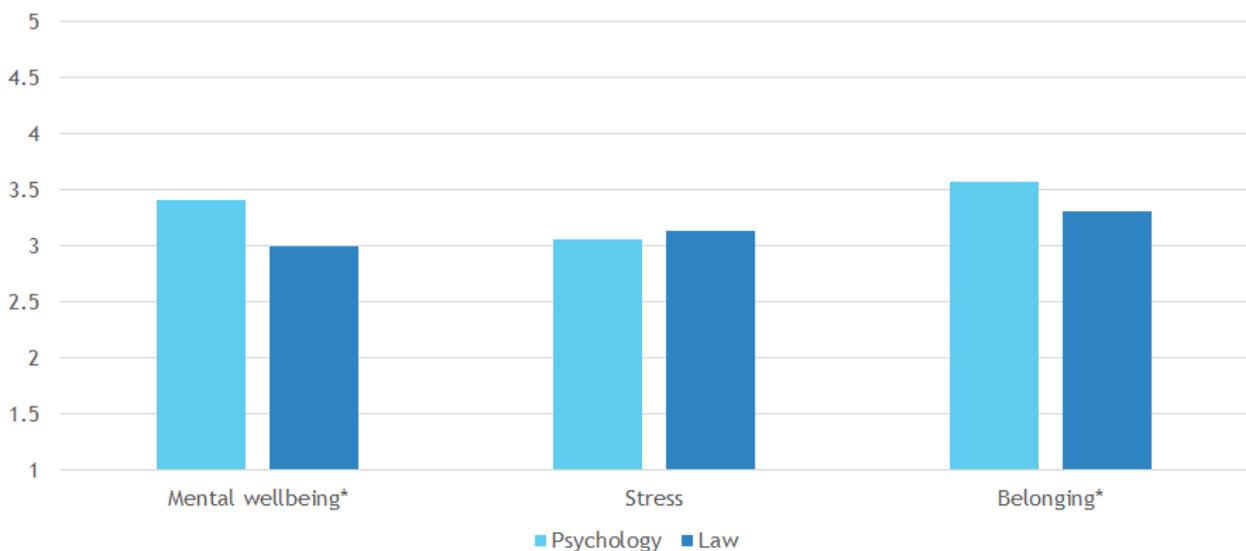
Using multiple regression, our results show that 36% of the variance in mental wellbeing can be predicted by students' sense of belonging ( $R(1,93)=17.17$ ,  $p<.001$ .  $R\text{ square} = .360$ ).



In addition, 29% of students' stress levels can be predicted by their sense of belonging ( $R(1,93)=38.38$ ,  $p<.001$ .  $R\text{ square} =.292$ ).



We also found that students in the School of Law had lower belonging and poorer mental wellbeing than those in the School of Psychology.



Wellbeing:  $t(93)=-2.98$ ,  $p < .05^*$ .

Stress:  $t(93)=.74$ ,  $p > .05$

Belonging:  $t(93)=-2.32, p<.05^*$

The results indicate that a greater sense of belonging leads to improved mental wellbeing and reduced levels of stress. Psychology students have a greater sense of belonging and more positive wellbeing than law students despite psychology and law students being equally stressed. This suggests the importance of more literature exploring different experiences in different subjects and how we can use practices and lessons in these different subjects to improve different experiences. Therefore we conducted study 2, a qualitative study, to explore in greater depth student perceptions of belonging and identity.

### **Study 2: A Qualitative Study exploring the Relationship between Belonging and Mental Wellbeing**

In this study, we invited all Year 2 and 3 psychology and law students to participate. We hosted 5 asynchronous online focus groups. Participants included 17 psychology students and 4 law students. The reason for the disparity in numbers is that we were able to offer credits to psychology students credits for participating in the study, but this option was not open to law students. Students were from a number of different ethnic groups and the sample included home and international students.

The questions we asked were:

- Do you have a strong identity as a psychology/law student? Why/why not?
- How did you identity as a law/psychology student develop over time? Are there any key things/times/activities which helped you develop this identity?
- Do you personally feel a strong sense of community with the law/psychology school? Why/Why not?
- Do you feel that other people experience the law/psychology community in the same way you do? Why?
- What have staff in law/psychology done to support or hinder a sense of community?
- Do you feel like the other students in law/psychology are supportive and help create a sense of community or not? Why?
- What important times or events during your degree have helped or hindered you in feeling part of the law/psychology community?
- Did your academic identity or sense of community affect your response to stressful times?

- Do you feel part of the broader community of law/psychology professionals? How does your school currently facilitate this and how could they do this better?

We are currently performing a thematic analysis on the data, however, preliminary readings seem to suggest that psychology students gain a sense of community from other students while law students feel that they are in competition with their peers, which hinders the development of a community:

*“We do help create a sense of community - at the time of writing this our group chat is flooded with messages between people helping each other with what could be covered in essays.” (Psychology)*

*“While some students are really kind and helpful, many students I have come into contact with are usually focused on themselves. It is understandable in this subject area but not everyone benefits from the ‘survival of the fittest’, especially those who do not wish to pursue a legal career. I feel the attitude of most students does make it very hard. It seems as though the message is that you have to disregard the feelings of others if you wish to succeed.” (Law)*

*“I don’t feel as close with my fellow students because at the end of the day we compete against each other for jobs and placements.” (Law)*

Students in psychology experienced a strong peer-to-peer, horizontal community, speaking to friends and other students for support; in contrast, law students experienced a strong student-to-lecturer vertical community, and appeared to be more likely to go to their lecturers for support.

*“The lecturers do nothing but support every student they come in contact with which will obviously help with a sense of community. The students do help but clearly hold things back to prevent you knowing everything they do. Keeping their edge.” (Law)*

*“I don't think staff play a major role in my experience with the 'community' of the psychology department as students often tend to talk amongst themselves and try to help each other, which I personally think is a positive thing.” (Psychology)*

In addition, students did see a clear link between community and mental health

*“I think if I felt a stronger sense of community I would have dealt better with stressful times.”*

*“...the knowledge that help is quite literally an email away is reassuring when stress and anxiety starts getting to me.”*

*“... knowing there is people around you can really help.”*

Further analysis of this data is ongoing.

## **Dissemination**

We have presented our preliminary findings at three national conferences: the Association of Law Teachers Annual Conference 2018 at Keele University, the Educating for Uncertainty Symposium on Legal Education at Leeds University, and the Oxford University Press Celebrating Excellence in Law Teaching Conference 2018. These presentations have allowed us disseminate our findings and to link with a number of colleagues across institutions in the UK (such as Leeds University and the University of Greenwich) but also Australia and the USA. We will also be presenting our work at the SLSA Annual Conference in April 2019 at Leeds University and have been accepted to present at the RAISE conference in Newcastle University in September.

We intend to produce 3 papers from this data.

A literature review for ‘The Law Teacher’ entitled: A literature review exploring mental health in law students

A mixed methods paper for ‘Studies in Higher Education’ entitled: How sense of community impacts mental wellbeing and stress in law and psychology students.

A qualitative paper for 'Higher Education' entitled: Law and Psychology students' sense of community and the impact this has on their mental health

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