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THE 'I BELONG IN THE LLB' PROGRAM

Animation and promoting law student well-being

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The well-being challenge in 2016

The empirical research on law student psychological well-being in Australia continues to grow in volume and sophistication.¹ Law schools across the country remain indebted to the Jepson family, who engaged the Brain and Mind Research Institute ('BMRI') at the University of Sydney to conduct the first Australian empirical research into lawyer and law student mental health.² In 2016, the wider Australian legal community can reflect on the resultant 2009 *Courting the Blues* report and appreciate not only the evidence base it established, but also what it led to: further empirical research on law student and lawyer well-being at different Australian law schools; frank conversations within law faculties about the pervasive and nuanced nature of law student psychological distress; a collegial and committed Wellness Network for Law with members from across the academy, the profession, and the student body; annual Wellness for Law Forums; and finally (and perhaps most importantly) a growing body of rigorous evidence and scholarship on which law faculties can base appropriate and justified action.

This article argues that there is an imperative for curricular and extra-curricular strategies to support law students' well-being, and highlights recent initiatives at QUT Law School designed to achieve this end. We explain the Law School's approach to developing a program aimed at promoting law student well-being — the 'I Belong in the LLB' ('*I Belong*') program. In particular, our focus is on exploring one element of that program — the development of an animation as a tool to engage law students with the important issue of protecting their mental health. As a medium, animation has a number of inherent advantages when attempting to engage students with a sensitive topic.³ More broadly, it can also serve as an informative and symbolic organising feature of a law school wellness program. In our well-being program we have used animation as a means to an end — a way of engaging law students about the importance of mental health to the efficacy of their study, their lived tertiary experience and their future career in or beyond the law.

Well-being programs in law schools

The strong body of empirical research on law student well-being has created an imperative for law schools to take action.⁴ Given that students enter law school with similar levels of psychological well-being to the general population (18- to 34-year-olds), the percentage increase in the number of students reporting elevated levels of psychological distress is a serious issue.⁵ Simply put, if this is happening in our law schools on our watch, then, ethically, we must act to do something about it.

The question is what should we do? Perhaps an obvious answer to this question is that we should do more of (or encourage) the things that promote psychological well-being and do less of (or discourage) the things that decrease well-being.⁶ The reason for including the words 'encourage' and 'discourage' in parentheses is to make it clear that law students are our partners in the well-being challenge. There are things that law schools and legal educators can and should do to promote well-being, but their effects will be negligible if students do not appreciate the importance of their own psychological health, and the individual responsibility and effort that goes into maintaining good mental health.⁷

This is one of the primary reasons why an integrated, holistic and intentionally designed law school well-being program — as opposed to a series of well-being activities — can make an important contribution to law student psychological health. In our view, a positive and proactive mental health program is the best strategy for creating a culture of good mental health, where issues relating to psychological well-being are brought to the fore in the tertiary learning experience.

Students, in all their diversity, will inevitably have different attitudes to, and motivations for, valuing psychological well-being. They may be interested in, or concerned about, their own mental health, the mental health of friends or family, the effect that well-being may have on their academic performance, and the importance of mental health to their future careers (including the process of achieving admission as a lawyer). This list suggests that every law student has a reason to be interested in their own mental well-being. Our experience however, is that it can be difficult for law students to accept this issue as one that warrants serious attention. As law lecturers we often witness behaviours, and hear anecdotes, that are inconsistent with positive mental health.⁸ Our goal at QUT Law School then was to create a well-being program that speaks to law students in different ways.

Our starting point was to formally articulate our end goal. In previous work, we have explicitly stated that our goal for our students is that they become happy, healthy, competent professionals — in law or any other area of professional endeavour they choose.⁹ This was also our starting point and end goal for the I Belong program at QUT. With this goal in mind, we designed various elements of the I Belong program including: wellness days and pop up wellness events; collaboration with the law library for exam preparation; collaboration with the careers and counselling services within the university; and a buddy program operated in collaboration with the QUT Law Student Society. We also engaged in curriculum reform to ensure that issues of well-being are addressed in the core curriculum in our first year Dispute Resolution (LLB103) and third year Ethics and Professional Responsibility (LLH302) subjects.

In our opinion, the overarching goal of the I Belong program cannot be achieved without direct conversations about the (sometimes) stressful nature of legal education and legal professional practice, the things that we believe contribute to law student and lawyer psychological distress, the nature of mood disorders such as anxiety and depression and, ultimately, where responsibility for mental well-being might lie. The difficulty, of course, is that these conversations are tricky. There is a fine line to be walked between educating students about mental health in the law and discouraging students from pursuing a career in the law. From a student perspective, we can understand why there might be resistance to, or even outright rejection of, well-being initiatives. Studying law requires a large financial investment, and requires a lot of cognitive and emotional energy over a number of years. Given the significant investment of resources and effort that is required for a law career, it is understandable that law students might push back against negative information concerning the mental health of law students and the legal profession. Knowing that this cognitive dissonance may arise within some students contributed to the strategy of our well-being program, the theory underpinning our program, and the different mediums we considered as part of the program.

The I Belong program is a work in progress. Our approach has been informed by Stephen Tang's thoughtful and rigorous guidance on 'doing' well-being at law school, and his commitment to the importance of developing an integrated well-being strategy based on appropriate theory and evidence.¹⁰ According to Tang, promoting well-being and preventing psychological distress are usually distinct objectives, and there is benefit in articulating which objective is guiding a particular program and how it relates back to the strategy as a whole.¹¹

Positive psychologists such as Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson have similarly stressed the difference between these two ends,¹² with Peterson claiming that those interested in promoting well-being 'need to start with different assumptions and to pose different questions from their peers [who focus on alleviating psychological distress]'.¹³

The I Belong program seeks to proactively promote law student well-being, and its approach is informed by understandings from the field of positive psychology. The main thrust of the positive psychology movement is that the scientific study of what goes right in life is just as important as the study of mental illness and what goes wrong in life.¹⁴ Adopting positive psychology as a guiding philosophy for our program allows us to broaden the law student well-being agenda and reframe the law student well-being challenge in a way that is potentially more appealing to students. That is, the focus is on encouraging students to engage with strategies to promote mental health and well-being because mental health is made directly relevant to their success as law students and also their future professional success.

These insights from positive psychology inform our belief that students will be much more engaged with the idea of building upon their personal skills, strengths and values — what is going right — rather than attempting to prevent or ameliorate mental health pathologies such as anxiety and depression — what is going wrong. Evidence also suggests that a focus on strengthening what goes 'right' with people can also buffer individuals against psychological distress — an important consequence of any well-being promotion program.¹⁵ Taking the BMRI statistics as a guide, if 35 per cent of law students are suffering from high levels of psychological distress, then 65 per cent are not. Our belief is that a law student well-being program should speak to all students regardless of their baseline level of mental health. There should be information, tips and advice for the 'very wells', 'the OKs' and the 'not so wells', who might all be interested in ways that their mental health can be promoted. Theories of well-being that exist under the umbrella of positive psychology such as PERMA,¹⁶ identification and deployment of signature strengths,¹⁷ and self-determination theory¹⁸ are utilised and adapted in our program, so that we can promote a wellness agenda that is inclusive and appropriate to our local university cohort and conditions.

Animation as an intentional design strategy to engage students with mental well-being

At an early stage in the design of the I Belong program, we agreed to use animation as the entry point to the program's website. Our key intention with choosing animation as a strategy was to find an engaging way to foster students' appreciation of mental health. But we also had a number of other goals in mind. For some years now, QUT Law School has been concerned about the psychological well-being of our students,¹⁹ and we want our students, and also the legal academy and the legal profession more broadly, to know that we are serious about intentionally designing our curriculum (defined inclusively as both curricular and extra-curricular contexts)²⁰ to create a learning environment that supports success and well-being. We also want students to know that there is rigorous theory and science that informs our approach to well-being — positive psychology, self-determination theory and also good pedagogical practice.²¹ Further, our aim is to increase student mental health literacy, and to encourage students to feel safe to engage in help seeking behaviour when they need to.²²

The I Belong program brings together all our activities into one online space, and the animation serves as a focal point for this space. Once students access the I Belong site they can engage with other resources, explore podcasts on mental health, and follow links to further information and fact sheets. Our hope is that in time, the website in combination with other I Belong program initiatives will contribute to a strong culture within the law school that values mental health and an understanding of the importance of well-being as a foundation for effective learning, professionalism and future personal/career success.

Our animation centres on two students within the QUT Law Library who are experiencing considerable levels of stress about their workload, upcoming assessment, job prospects, and work/life balance. We use both visual cues and narration to acknowledge that law school can be very stressful for students. The primary visual cue here is that the desk at which the students sit is wonky and unbalanced. A QUT Law academic approaches; he is carrying a toolbox, which he places on the desk. From the toolbox jump several animated tools, which proceed to stabilise the desk for the students. The animation then moves to a classroom, where students are being taught about positive psychology. It concludes with the students graduating from QUT Law School as happy and helpful professionals.

The message conveyed in the animation is that through the I Belong program and website, we hope to provide the tools to help law students deal with the stressors of legal education. These tools appear as minor characters in the animation — including an anthropomorphised spirit level as a metaphor for balance — and the animation ends with the tools lying in a QUT-branded toolbox, which the graduating students are able to take with them into practice.²³ In the animation, we also emphasise the supportive role played by the QUT Law School and its staff. To situate the animation in the students' lived experience, the buildings in the animation are recognisable as QUT buildings and the main action takes place in the QUT Law Library, where

many students spend time during semester and exam periods.

There is strong empirical evidence that presenting learners with verbal and visual information in a coordinated way, such as through animation, can promote more meaningful learning and contribute to better conceptual understanding.²⁴ To harness the advantages of animation, the final product needs to be professionally done,²⁵ eye-catching and engaging as a first-exposure landing point for students, and it also needs to provide the key organising information for the program's website, which means introducing relatively complex concepts such as positive psychology, self-determination theory, resilience and mindfulness in an accessible way.

Animations are not *inherently* beneficial as a learning and engagement tool – they must be carefully designed to reduce rather than increase the cognitive load of the learner.²⁶ Poorly designed animations may place a higher cognitive load on a viewer than might be expected for static images, because the transitory nature of animations can make information more difficult to retain and process.²⁷ A carefully mapped narrative structure can help to make learning animations easier to follow,²⁸ and pacing is also likely to be important for reducing cognitive load.²⁹ For this reason, we applied Kombartzky, Ploetzner, Schlag and Metz's cognitive strategy for effective student learning from expository animation, and developed a hybrid form of animation that takes advantage of the best elements of expository animation techniques along with more engaging short narrative techniques.³⁰

While there is ample literature on the benefits of animation as a teaching and engagement tool, most studies focus on the use of animation in the physical disciplines such as science and engineering.³¹ Our project — using animation to raise awareness about mental well-being among law students — is largely uncharted territory.³² Our goal was to present information about well-being in a way that made it accessible and which broke down resistance to the idea of acknowledging and addressing mental health issues. More than reducing the cognitive load associated with learning new concepts, we wanted to reduce the emotional load that makes mental health a confronting topic for many law students.

Designing an animation about mental well-being has its own unique challenges. In particular, it was important to us that we did not trivialise the experience of psychological distress by using a 'cartoon' to discuss mental health. We took inspiration from the successful use of animation in other well-being initiatives, such as the World Health Organisation ('WHO') animation, 'I had a black dog, his name was depression' for World Mental Health Day in 2012,³³ and the animations created for the 'Headspace' meditation app.³⁴ From these animations we drew lessons on style and tone in balancing the 'lightness' of animation with the seriousness of mental health as a topic.

We diverged from the WHO approach, however, in our use of metaphor. A key purpose in designing this animation was to encourage students to prioritise their mental health. Our primary message was therefore one of empowerment and positive action. For this reason, we made a deliberate choice to avoid the heavier metaphors usually associated with depression and anxiety, such as dark clouds or WHO's black dog, which we considered might alienate law students from the topic of well-being. Instead, we adopted metaphors designed to empower. For example, at one point in the animation we use the air-safety rule of fitting your own oxygen mask first before helping others, to present and frame the idea that law students must prioritise their own mental well-being in order to develop into helping and successful legal professionals.

The utility of our animation comes from its ability to broach the topic of mental well-being with students, and for this reason it may become one of our most important resources within the I Belong program. Our intention in the future is to empirically evaluate the efficacy of our program, including students' responses to the animation, in order to contribute to the body of evidence-based approaches that law schools around Australia, and internationally, might adopt to support their students' learning success through the promotion of student psychological well-being.

Conclusion

The creation of a culture that values psychological well-being in law schools is no easy feat. Achieving changes in thinking and behaviour around the issue of mental well-being requires education, activity and outward representations — symbols — that organise and capture a range of activity and thought in a tangible way. The name of our well-being program (I Belong in the LLB), its logo, and the well-being animation will hopefully become enduring symbols of a law school that is committed to the quality of its students' learning experiences and that values their psychological well-being. Animation and law student well-being are not obvious bedfellows, but their combination offers a unique opportunity to engage students with an important message for their success at law school and beyond.

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3. Shaaron Ainsworth, 'How Do Animations Influence Learning?' in Daniel Robinson and Gregory Schraw (eds), *Innovations in Educational Technology that Facilitate Student Learning* (Information Age Publishing, 2008) 37.
4. See, eg, Field, Duffy and James, above n 1, for a summary of this evidence.
5. Kelk et al, above n 2. This endeavour is obviously complicated by the fact that we cannot pinpoint exactly what causes decline in law student well-being across entire cohorts.
6. As we discuss later in this section, this suggestion is informed by understandings from positive psychology.
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16. PERMA stands for Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Purpose, Achievement. See Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (Free Press, 2011); and see also the helpful summary of PERMA <<http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/perma.htm>>.
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25. We are indebted to Will James' animation talents and skills and his generous contribution to this project while a student in his final year of animation at Griffith University.
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