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THE LAW SCHOOL GAME: USING REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS TO EXPLORE THE INFLUENCE OF LAW SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS UPON LAW STUDENT WELLBEING

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I INTRODUCTION

Evidence indicates that Australian law students display worse mental wellbeing relative to both university students from other academic disciplines,[1] and young adults within the general population.[2] Reports of poor law student wellbeing have prompted calls for more effective support strategies.[3] Designing such strategies requires richly understanding the ways in which law school environments impact wellbeing.[4] To this end, the following article reports findings from a semi-structured interview study which sought to extend understandings of the lived experiences of present-day law students, and the ways that law school experiences shape wellbeing.

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1 Elisa G. Lewis and Jacqueline M. Cardwell, 'The big five personality traits, perfectionism and their association with mental health among UK students on professional degree programmes' (2020) 8(1) *BMC Psychology* 1; Margot J. Schofield et al, 'Depressive Symptoms Among Australian University Students: Who Is at Risk?' (2016) 51(2) *Australian Psychologist* 135; Natalie K. Skead and Shane L. Rogers, 'Do law students stand apart from other university students in their quest for mental health: A comparative study on wellbeing and associated behaviours in law and psychology students' (2015) 42-43 *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 81. For a counter-example see: Wendy Larcombe, Sue Finch and Rachel Sore, 'Who's distressed? Not only law students: psychological distress levels in university students across diverse fields of study' (2015) 37(2) *The Sydney Law Review* 243.

2 For an extensive review, see Claire Holland, 'Psychological Distress at a Regional Australian Law School: Reporting on Law Students' Experiences of Depression, Anxiety and Stress' (2024) 34(1) *Legal Education Review* 79.

3 See, eg, Nigel Duncan, Rachael Field and Caroline Strevens, 'Ethical imperatives for legal educators to promote law student wellbeing' (2020) 23(1) *Legal Ethics* 65.

4 Stephen Tang, 'Valuing Persons and Communities in Doing Wellness for Law Well' in Rachael Field, James Duffy and Colin James (eds), *Promoting Law Student and Lawyer Wellbeing in Australia and Beyond* (Routledge, 2016) 8.

Section II begins by reviewing relevant research into the influence of law school environments upon wellbeing. Sections III and IV outline the aims, context and methodology of the research. Section V reports our analytic output and describes the four key themes derived from interviews. Section VI discusses these themes in relationship to existing literature, with particular focus towards potential practical applications of our findings with respect to the goal of creating law school environments which support wellbeing.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into the capacity for law school environments to negatively impact wellbeing can be traced back to the late 20th century.[5] An influential 2004 US study conducted by Kennon Sheldon and Lawrence Krieger observed that a law student sample reported higher levels of wellbeing than a non-law comparator sample at the commencement of their degrees. However, by the end of the first academic year wellbeing amongst law students had substantially declined, and did not return to the pre-law school baseline during subsequent years of the degree.[6] This research provided an empirical basis for framing law school environments as unduly challenging to wellbeing.

Within Australia, the 2009 'Courting the Blues' report catalysed a proliferation of research into the wellbeing of Australian law students. The report found that 35.2% of law students sampled reported heightened psychological distress, compared to 17.8% within a medical student sample, and 13.3% within the general population.[7] The implications of the Courting the Blues report 'hit Australian legal educators hard',[8] motivating several additional quantitative inquiries into Australian law student wellbeing throughout the 2010s.[9] These studies found further evidence that wellbeing normatively appears to decline during the first year of law school,[10] and that Australian law students report substantively worse wellbeing outcomes relative to the

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5 G. Andrew H. Benjamin et al, 'The Role of Legal Education in Producing Psychological Distress Among Law Students and Lawyers' (1986) 11(2) *Law & Social Inquiry* 225.

6 Kennon M. Sheldon and Lawrence S. Krieger, 'Does legal education have undermining effects on law students? Evaluating changes in motivation, values, and well-being' (2004) 22(2) *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 261 ('Motivation, Values and Well-being').

7 Norm Kelk et al, 'Courting the Blues: Attitudes towards depression in Australian law students and lawyers', *Brain & Mind Research Institute: University of Sydney* 12.

8 Molly O'Brien, Stephen Tang and Kath Hall, 'Changing our thinking: Empirical research on law student wellbeing, thinking styles and the law curriculum' (2011) 21(2) *Legal Education Review* 149.

9 For a thorough review of research arising from the 'Courting the Blues' report, see Claire Carroll, 'Alert but Not Alarmed: A Response to Parker's Critique of Wellbeing Scholarship in Law' (2019) 29(1) *Legal Education Review* 1.

10 Anthony Lester, Lloyd England and Natalia Antolak-Saper, 'Health and wellbeing in the first year: The law school experience' (2011) 36(1) *Alternative Law Journal* 47.

general population.[11] Importantly, this body of evidence suggests that law students do not appear to enter law school with atypically poor wellbeing. Rather, their wellbeing seems to decline to atypical levels during the first year of law school.[12] This implies that the challenges imposed by studying law may play a substantive role in explaining reports of poor wellbeing among law students. Moreover, given that the most apparent declines in wellbeing occur during the first year, the transition into law school environments likely represents an especially critical stressor.[13] Overall, this body of research supports the framing of law students as a population whose wellbeing warrants concern and action from legal educators.[14]

In response to evidence pointing towards concerningly poor law student wellbeing, researchers have theorised potential reasons *why* law school environments may be particularly challenging to wellbeing. Perhaps the most immediately apparent explanation is that studying law may be more academically challenging and stressful relative to other university disciplines. Law degrees impose substantial academic workloads which endanger study-life balance.[15] The initial challenge of adjusting to academic time-demands greatly exceeding those previously experienced may be particularly detrimental to wellbeing, which aligns with evidence indicating first-year declines in law student wellbeing.[16] Students may also construe certain Priestley 11 subjects as especially time-intensive and conceptually challenging. Such subjects may diminish the wellbeing of students presently completing them, but also students from earlier years who anticipate such subjects as looming aversive experiences.[17] Others have argued that academic stress may be amplified by absence of clear assessment guidance and feedback.[18]

Features of law school cultures and pedagogy may also undermine wellbeing. Law schools are highly competitive environments.[19] Law

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[11] Nerissa Soh et al, 'Law student mental health literacy and distress: Finances, accommodation and travel time' (2015) 25(1) *Legal Education Review* 29; Wendy Larcombe et al, 'Does an improved experience of law school protect students against depression, anxiety and stress?: An empirical study of wellbeing and the law school experience of LLB and JD students' (2013) 35(2) *The Sydney Law Review* 407.

[12] Lester, England and Antolak-Saper (n 10) 48-9; O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8) 158.

[13] Imogen Moore and Verona Ní Drisceoil, 'Wellbeing and Transition to Law School: The Complexities of Confidence, Community, and Belonging' in Caroline Strevens and Emma Jones (eds), *Wellbeing & Transitions in Law: Legal Education and The Legal Profession* (2023) 17.

[14] Caroll (n 9) 19.

[15] Susan Armstrong and Michelle Sanson, 'From Confusion to Confidence: Transitioning to Law School' (2012) 12(1) *QUT Law Review* 21.

[16] Ibid 30-1.

[17] Chantal Bostock et al, 'Fear of administrative law?: Student emotions around studying administrative law at an Australian university' (2025) 35(1) *Legal Education Review* 6.

[18] Rachael Field and Sally Kift, 'Addressing the high levels of psychological distress in law students through intentional assessment and feedback design in the first year law curriculum' (2010) 1 *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 65.

[19] Helen Stallman, 'A qualitative evaluation of perceptions of the role of competition in the success and distress of law students' (2012) 31(6) *Higher Education Research and Development* 891.

degrees attract unusually competitive students, and subsequently place such students into environments which propagate, codify, and reward competitive behaviours.[20] Cultural norms within law schools may foster narrow and competitive views of 'success',[21] and over-emphasise the importance of status and prestige,[22] both of which can discourage collaboration and camaraderie between students.[23] The nature of study at law school is predominantly individual and self-directed, which could further contribute towards feelings of isolation.[24] Moreover, encouraging students to 'think like a lawyer', meaning to adopt analytical and adversarial ways of viewing the world, may itself be deleterious to wellbeing.[25]

Adopting a theoretical perspective, a recurrent research approach has been to consider the potential psychological impacts of law school using the framing of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is a prominent macro-theory which posits *autonomy, relatedness,* and *competence* as fundamental psychological needs which enable intrinsic motivation and wellbeing.[26] SDT is frequently applied to social environments and/or institutional cultures, wherein environments have the dual capacity to "facilitate or forestall" wellbeing depending upon whether the environment supports these three fundamental psychological needs.[27] Applied to law school contexts, several authors[28] have suggested law school environments are not conducive to

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20 Ibid.

21 Caroline Strevens, 'The wrong message: Law student well-being in the contemporary higher education environment' in Emma Jones and Fiona Cownie (eds), *Key Directions in Legal Education: National and International Perspectives* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1st ed, 2020) 125; Barry Yau, David Catanzariti and Joanne Atkinson, 'The information gap: A comparative study of the paradigms shaping perceptions of career success for law undergraduates and professional legal training students in Australia and the latent implications of non-professional legal career opportunities for law graduates in England' in Rachael Field and Caroline Strevens (eds), *Educating for Well-Being in Law* (Routledge, 1st ed, 2020) 74.

22 Yau, Catanzariti and Atkinson (n 21) 83.

23 Stallman (n 19) 897-8.

24 Amanda Zacharopoulou and Catherine Turner, 'Peer assisted learning and the creation of a "learning community" for first year law students' (2013) 47(2) *The Law Teacher* 19.

25 Molly O'Brien, 'Facing down the gladiators: addressing law school's hidden adversarial curriculum' (2011) 37(1) *Monash University Law Review* 43; Tony Foley and Stephen Tang, 'On Being, Not Just Thinking Like, A Lawyers: Connections Between Uncertainty, Ignorance and Wellbeing' in Rachael Field, J. Duffy and C. James (eds), *Promoting Law Student and Lawyer Wellbeing in Australia and Beyond* (Routledge, 2016) 132.

26 Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, 'Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being' (2000) 55 *American Psychologist* 68.

27 Ibid 71.

28 See eg, Rachael Field and Jan H. F. Meyer, 'Threshold concepts in law: Intentional curriculum reform to support law student learning success and well-being' in Fiona Cownie and Emma Jones (eds), *Key Directions in Legal Education: National and International Perspectives* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1st ed, 2020) 142; Kennon M. Sheldon and Lawrence S. Krieger, 'Understanding the Negative Effects of Legal Education on Law Students: A Longitudinal Test of Self-Determination Theory' (2007) 33(6) *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 883 ('Understanding the Negative Effects'); Strevens (n 21).

students experiencing meaningful and supportive connections with peers and faculty (relatedness), authentic volition in determining their career paths and goals (autonomy), and feelings of mastery and capacity to succeed (competence). Indeed, the foundational research by Krieger and Sheldon (2004) interpreted their findings using SDT, wherein data indicated that intrinsic motivation, as well as wellbeing decline throughout the course of a law degree.[29] Furthermore, in a later study, Krieger and Sheldon found that students who retained higher levels of intrinsic motivation throughout law school reported better academic performance and greater wellbeing in later years.[30] To summarise the above research, there is a prevailing understanding that students who choose to study law may be entering into environments which are, due to a myriad of reasons, not supportive of wellbeing.

While existing research provides an invaluable preliminary evidence base, further work is required to reach a more fully realised understanding of *why* law students display poor wellbeing.[31] Authors have called for further qualitative research that centres the student voice as a crucial step towards understanding factors affecting law student wellbeing.[32] Existing qualitative studies have highlighted that law students often describe challenges in handling demanding academic workloads,[33] and in adjusting to environments where previously well-established academic self-confidence is shaken by comparatively lower grades and negative comparisons with other high-achieving peers.[34] The implications of competitiveness in law schools are well reflected within the qualitative literature, with academic competition, competition for jobs, and grading curve systems felt to undermine collegiality between students.[35] Law students also frequently report a perceived lack of guidance on how to study and prepare for assessments, which is interpreted as detrimental to wellbeing.[36]

III CURRENT STUDY

The current study aims to extend the literature towards more holistic understandings of contemporary law student experiences. Much of the existing qualitative research into law student wellbeing has either used

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29 Sheldon and Krieger, 'Motivation, Values and Well-being' (n 6) 261.

30 Sheldon and Krieger, 'Understanding the Negative Effects' (n 28) 883.

31 Kathryne Young, 'Understanding the Social and Cognitive Process in Law School that Creates Unhealthy Lawyers' (2021) 89(6) *Fordham Legal Review* 2575.

32 Ibid.

33 Armstrong and Samson (n 15) 30; Emma Jones, Gilly Sharpe and Vickie Barrett, 'Student Transition, Sense of Belonging and Habitus' in Caroline Strevens and Emma Jones (eds), *Wellbeing & Transitions in Law: Legal Education and The Legal Profession* (Springer International Publishing, 2023) 137.

34 O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8) 173-4; Armstrong and Sanson (n 15) 31; Lydia Bleasdale and Sarah Humphreys, 'Identity, well-being and law students' in Rachael Field and Caroline Strevens (eds), *Educating for Well-Being in Law* (Routledge, 1st ed, 2020) 172.

35 Stallman (n 19) 895-6; Young (n 31) 2858.

36 O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8) 173; Armstrong and Sanson (n 15) 32; Larcombe et al (n 11) 425.

brief text-response methods,[37] has focused on a specific issue or concept within law schools,[38] or has primarily sought student recommendations, rather than understandings of student experiences.[39] There is a growing appreciation of the need to conceptualise law school as a complex environment which shapes the values and experiences of those residing within it.[40] As such, we conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews with law students to explore the lived experiences of navigating law school environments. In doing so, we hoped to improve understandings of *how* and *why* attending law school impacts wellbeing.

IV METHOD

A *Setting*

The study was conducted at a prestigious Australian law school which offers both undergraduate (Bachelor of Laws) and graduate (Juris Doctor) law degrees.

B *Design and Recruitment*

Ethics approval was granted by The University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (2023/583). Participants were recruited via advertisements on law school social media and newsletters inviting students to discuss their "experiences at law school and the factors that influence their wellbeing". Twenty-one interviews were conducted via Zoom during October-November 2023 and March-April 2024 (20 by first author, 1 by second). See Table 1 for a demographic summary of participants. Participants were reimbursed with a $15 supermarket gift-voucher.

A semi-structured interview design was used. Verbal consent to participate was taken at the outset of interviews. Initial questions explored students' motivations for studying law and their overall experience at law school. Participants were then asked to reflect on factors that influence their wellbeing, their perception of the law school culture, and ways their wellbeing could be better supported. Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept with many different conceptualisations and no universally recognised definition.[41] We did not instruct participants to understand wellbeing according to any specific model or definition. Full interview schedule is available in Appendix A. Interviews ranged

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37 Larcombe et al (n 11); Jones, Sharpe and Barrett (n 33).

38 Armstrong and Sanson (n 15); Stallman (n 19); Bleasdale and Humphreys (n 34); Yau, Catanzariti and Atkinson (n 21).

39 Larcombe et al (n 11).

40 Jones, Sharpe and Barrett (n 33); H. M. Stallman and J. Duffy, 'Beyond the curriculum: The wellbeing of law students within their broader environment' in R. Field, J. Duffy and C. James (eds), *Promoting Law Student and Lawyer Wellbeing in Australia and Beyond* (Routledge, 2016) 192.

41 Rachel Dodge et al, 'The challenge of defining wellbeing' (2012) 2 *International Journal of Wellbeing* 222.

from 15 to 54 minutes. Interviews were transcribed by an AI program. Transcripts were checked against audio recordings to ensure verbatim transcription.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Interview #	Age	Gender	Domestic / International	Undergraduate / Graduate	Year of Study
1	24	Female	International	Undergraduate	Fourth
2	22	Male	International	Undergraduate	Third
3	19	Male	Domestic	Undergraduate	Second
4	28	Male	International	Undergraduate	Missing
5	19	Male	Domestic	Undergraduate	First
6	19	Female	International	Undergraduate	First
7	20	Female	International	Undergraduate	Third
8	21	Female	International	Undergraduate	First
9	23	Female	Domestic	Undergraduate	Fourth
10	24	Female	International	Undergraduate	Fourth
11	27	Female	International	Graduate	First
12	21	Female	Domestic	Undergraduate	Third
13	25	Female	Domestic	Graduate	Second
14	22	Male	Domestic	Undergraduate	Fourth
15	25	Female	Domestic	Graduate	Fourth
16	20	Female	Domestic	Undergraduate	Third
17	19	Female	International	Undergraduate	Second
18	33	Female	International	Graduate	Second
19	19	Female	Domestic	Undergraduate	Fourth
20	19	Male	Domestic	Undergraduate	First
21	21	Female	Domestic	Undergraduate	Fourth

C *Data analysis*

This study aimed to examine the lived experiences of law students and the ways studying law might influence wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth explorations of student narratives. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was identified as the most appropriate analytical methodology.[42] Our analytic focus was largely experiential and semantic, although several codes captured latent meanings. We used a critical realist framework to construe the experiences of our participants as real and valid, while recognising that

[42] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: a practical guide* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022).

our interpretations of these experiences are shaped by research context and research situatedness.[43]

The first author read the transcripts multiple times before systematically coding all data using NVivo 14. Codes described specific aspects of the overall experience of being a law student, with particular focus given to the intersection between law student status and wellbeing. Candidate themes were created and revised in consultation with the fourth author. Suitability of candidate themes was checked against relevant quotations and the dataset as a whole before being further revised.

D *D Reflexivity Statement*

Both analysts were academic psychologists, one (first author) a PhD candidate and the other (fourth author) a highly experienced social psychologist. While both were familiar with research into university student wellbeing, neither had researched law student wellbeing prior to data analysis. This was an intentional choice to encourage more inductive analysis.[44] Neither analyst holds a law degree, and therefore we represented an outsider perspective on life in the law school. While this outsider status allowed for analysis not influenced by personal experiences of studying law, it may also have limited understanding of participant experiences. Furthermore, the first author had recently completed undergraduate studies at the university where the interviews were conducted, and being of a similar age and background to participants, likely projected their personal university experiences onto students' narratives to some degree. Therefore, while we aimed to produce a thematic analysis which authentically gave voice to students' experiences, we recognised that our own experiences inevitably coloured our analysis of their stories.

Additionally, while not involved in transcript analysis, the second author was an academic psychologist with expertise in qualitative methods, while the third author is a law professor who provided guidance in interpreting results.

V RESULTS

Our analytic process culminated in the development of four themes: 1) '*Pressure to play the game':* Hyper-competitive environments and the law student experience, 2) *'Rules of the game':* Academic expectations as both unachievable and unclear, 3) '*Not a level playing field':* Inequities and otherness within the law school context, and 4) *'Finding your team':* Restorative impact of togetherness and support. The law student experience was often described in terms of competition and pursuit of personal glory, akin to a 'game' or sport. Thus, we conceptualised these themes as exploring aspects of the law school 'game'.

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[43] Ibid 169.
[44] Ibid 55.

A *'Pressure to play the game': Hyper-competitive environments and the law student experience*

The law school environment was first and foremost characterised as competitive. Many narratives focused on challenges engaging with, and existing within, this hyper-competitive setting. An initial explanation is that students compete academically because prestigious legal profession jobs demand excellent marks. Urgency of academic competition is intensified by perceived job scarcity.

I feel like for law students as well, it does matter quite more significantly than other, um, subjects or careers, because from what I've seen for law students, they always want a distinction or as a specification or requirement on the job description. They're always like, we want someone with superior grades or excellent results – 19, Male, Domestic, Undergraduate, Second-Year (#3)

Students identified that the most conventional legal professional path would be to apply for summer clerkships during their penultimate year, as these clerkships were perceived as the most secure and prestigious path for achieving ongoing graduate positions.[45] Clerkships at top-tier corporate law firms are coveted, and application success depends largely on academic performance. Prospects of clerkship success were a focal stressor for many students. For some, receiving a prestigious clerkship position might constitute 'winning the game'.

Everyone feels a lot of pressure when it comes to clerkships. And I mean like a lot of pressure, like obviously you will feel pressure like in any like applying for anything. But clerkships are like the be-all end-all. – 20, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Third-Year (#16)

The understanding that academic performance causally affects career prospects would logically incentivise academic competition. However, this was arguably not the primary explanation given for the 'hyper-competitive' law school environment. Instead, students drew attention to the 'type of students' who attend law school. It was recognised that the high admission criteria required students to be unusually driven and competitive to gain admission. Feelings of competitiveness were discussed as stemming largely from environments made up of this self-selecting, academically elite student base.

Another one is definitely the, the very competitive atmosphere, especially when the room is just full of law students, like the

[45] Student responses reflect their perceptions of recruitment within the specific city in which interviews took place. Prospects and strategies for achieving graduate legal employment vary between Australian jurisdictions. Information from employers regarding graduate recruitment and employment in relation to clerkships was not sought for the purpose of this study.

competitiveness is just in the air – 24, Female, International, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#1)

Interestingly, several students discussed unspoken but pervasive norms of what it means to 'do law school right'. These norms usually centred around the idea that law students 'should' be relentlessly competitive. Students felt pushed to 'keep up' with peers in academic, professional, and extracurricular settings throughout each stage of the law school journey, lest they face the indignity of 'falling behind'. A fourth-year student discussed struggling to not be influenced by such expectations.

Now, there's also a side of really this competitiveness and this sense of scarcity or this sense of like, if we don't do all of these things and all these moots and all these competitions and get the best marks, then we're going to fail and we'll never be lawyers and I'm competing against you. No one says that, but there's that feeling at the back of people, maybe even in the back of my mind a little bit – 23, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#9)

This pressure to compete permeated throughout student narratives. Even social life was occasionally discussed in competitive overtones, with finding a 'law friend group' part of succeeding at law school.

Oh, but law school is so cliquey, and you have to be part of a friend group, or you're not a real law student. You're not validated – 20, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Third-Year (#16)

One student felt judged for not wanting to 'play the game' and pursue corporate law positions. She positioned herself as distinct from the 'normal' law student who would theoretically have no such reluctance.

For some of us, it can make us feel a bit, I don't know, a bit judged for not being in that kind of environment or wanting to fight for the position and things like that…. You're kind of looked at as doing law school wrong – 25, Female, Domestic, Graduate, Fourth-Year (#15)

Some students felt the law school and student societies tacitly endorsed competition by primarily platforming top-tier corporate firms. One student felt depicting success in this way encouraged myopic, corporate-oriented career perspectives.

The law student society keeps promoting flagships, commercial laws, and then law school kind of encourages or indirectly encourages the culture of maybe being competitive, too much focus on commercial law, not much support on being collective or promoting social justice in general – 28, Male, International, Undergraduate (#4)

Similarly, a fourth-year student felt pursuits which did not tangibly advance one's legal prospects were questioned and devalued by peers.

There's just this culture of, like, hyper-competitiveness and toxicity where, oh, you have a part-time job as a barista. Well, that's not actually, like, that's not relevant to your degree. What are you doing? You should be working as a paralegal somewhere. You should be volunteering at, like, X, Y, and Z legal centres. – 21, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#19)

The above suggests a tendency to view all elements of students' lives through a utilitarian lens, appraising actions in terms of potential benefit to the law school 'game'.

Crucially for wellbeing, competitiveness coloured, and usually degraded, relationships between students. A recurring sentiment was that law school felt individualistic, as if students are 'on their own'.

But I definitely know none of my friends, none of us have ever gone into a room after a class and been like, OK, cool. This is what I struggled with. Can someone help me and go through it? So I think it's very much like an individualistic kind of culture – 25, Female, Domestic, Graduate, Fourth-Year (#15)

The structure of law classes contributed to feelings of individualism and isolation, with content taught very quickly and little time allocated to inter-student discussion. Several students contrasted the individualistic feeling of law classes with more collegial non-law units. 'On-calls', a form of assessable classroom participation wherein assigned students are intermittently called upon to answer questions about class content were identified as particularly stress-inducing and individualistic.

It's very competitive. So, and I feel like people just stick with their groups and so if they're in the class, I feel it's, it's very private. Like they don't tend to share notes or, um, help or anything. Um, like my other major is French and the class is just very like social, very relaxed people talk and joke around and everything. – 19, Male, Domestic, Undergraduate, Second-Year (#3)

Several participants describe interactions with peers who seemed calculating, dishonest, and secretive. The framing of other students as rivals led to reluctance to be collegial. Occasionally this sense of duplicity made participants question whether students might sabotage one another, eroding trust and goodwill between peers.

It really does feel like it's an every man for, like, himself kind of atmosphere where you kind of question whether the people who you're approaching or who are approaching you might have your best interests at heart – 21, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#19)

At times students sensed that peers were pretending to be more assured and confident than they truly were. Multiple participants discussed peers 'putting on fronts' to outwardly conform to an idealised law student image. One participant characterised this phenomenon as students behaving like 'little professionals', while another used 'playground corporates'.

Like when you enter a law school you really think that everybody's very put together and everybody knows what's happening but when I get into a class I realise that nobody knows what's going on, everybody just pretends – 20, Female, International, Undergraduate, Second-Year (#17)

Intriguingly, interviewees noted that students were incentivised to appear competent because many subjects assessed classroom participation. On-call marks were also determined by whether a student appeared to understand assigned content. Therefore, the need to 'perform' intelligence was perceived as embedded in curriculums.

In law, it's more, more serious. Um, you get judged on your week or your participation as well. So there's a lot of competitive people who just like raise their hand and say smart things. – 19, Male, Domestic, Undergraduate, Second-Year (#3)

Relatedly, several participants expressed reluctance to appear vulnerable, as this would reveal that they were struggling with law school. This reluctance appeared partly predicated on the concern that admitting vulnerability would be met with scrutiny from peers, rather than support.

I think sometimes it doesn't feel like you can ask for help at law school during those times, because I think maybe it's like students don't want to look like they're struggling, don't want others to know what's going on. But I think a lot of people do go through the same thing – 25, Female, Domestic, Graduate, Fourth-Year (#15)

A fourth-year student described how her peers responded to a fellow student whose struggles with mental illness had disrupted their studies.

On the surface, we're all very, like, progressive in terms of mental health... We want to create an illusion of support almost. But then when you see someone who's genuinely struggling with depression, anxiety, any kind of mental illness, really, and it has a, like, significant toll on their ability to complete their studies, to, like, come to these law society events, to, like, actively participate in these, like, cliques, then they kind of get slammed because it's not freely presented in a way that's, that's cute or manageable – 21, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#19)

Here, the peers seemed to have reacted negatively to a failure to 'play the game' and successfully present as impervious and highly competent. The same student had earlier described feeling that law students 'aren't supposed to be weak'.

Finally, being surrounded by overtly intelligent and competitive peers prompted negative social comparisons. A recurrent sentiment was that the law school environment caused students to lose belief in themselves. Several students felt they had lost confidence due to an inability to compete with their cohort. Pride at previous academic performance was contrasted with dishearteningly poor performance at law school. Participants discussed peers who routinely provided erudite contributions during class to ostentatiously display their intelligence, work ethic, and grasp of the content. Amusingly, various pejorative terms existed to describe these students, such as 'gunners' or 'sweats'. Concerns surrounding inability to 'keep up' with peers, both academically and professionally, were widespread. Participants often observed that other students seemed to manage law school with relative ease and questioned why they personally experienced greater difficulty. However, as stated above, students also recognised that peers might partly be pretending to find law school easy.

Throughout my whole, like, education journey, I was, I regard myself as, you know, as a rather outstanding person when it comes to academics. But since I entered into law school, that kind of pride has just basically faded away. Like, you just feel like you are such an ordinary individual in this community. – 24, Female, International, Undergraduate, Fifth-Year (#10)

B *'Rules of the game': Academic expectations as both unachievable and unclear*

As discussed above, students feel pressured to 'play the game' of law school. Given the importance of the 'game', it is worth considering its 'rules', meaning the academic demands and day-to-day tasks of being a law student. Narratives about the academic experience of law school centred two key perspectives. Firstly, the academic demands placed upon law students require so much time that managing workloads often feels impossible. Secondly, many students feel they do not receive adequate guidance on how to prepare for assessments and how to manage the challenges of law school, causing stress as students do not know 'how' to play the game.

When asked to reflect on the experience of attending law school, many students immediately drew attention to the academic workload, particularly the volume of readings. Students described constant pressure to keep up with readings and the frenetic pace with which content is taught. The tension of fitting hundreds of pages of readings into busy weekly schedules was often viewed as a defining feature of law school life.

It's the workload in terms of massive amounts of reading and just, yeah, the content, like for even certain subjects where you have two seminars a week, it's like one seminar is a whole topic, next seminar, a whole other topic. So I think it's just, there's this, I guess, imbalance with needing to teach us a lot of information in a short time. But again, this expectation that we somehow can absorb it in this really rushed environment – 25, Female, Domestic, Graduate, Fourth-Year (#15)

A common sentiment was that academic workloads were not just demanding, but often simply felt impossible, especially when trying to maintain a sense of study-life balance. Students described trade-offs between managing workloads and upholding self-care routines and sleep schedules. Periods where multiple law assessments were scheduled closely together were identified as 'pushing students to their limits'.

You will constantly be reminded that these are all the readings you need to do. And you have a feeling that you need to finish them. But the reality is that it's just impossible to just keep up with the reading. It's impossible to keep up. And it's impossible to finish them. So yeah, that's like, like one big thing in the whole law culture is that everyone is kind of like shouldering just like too many readings, and like, not knowing whether they were able to even, able to finish them – 24, Female, International, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#1)

Inability to finish readings was problematised by classes designed on the assumption that students have completed the readings beforehand. Therefore, students feel unable to complete readings prior to classes, diminishing the benefit of attending class, causing them to fall further behind. The above and below quotations portray this inability to keep up as ingrained in law student culture.

It's like a catch 22 where if you don't read before you like, go there, then you kind of won't understand what the person is saying. But then if you do that… then it's like impossible to try and because you literally have one day in between to do the reading for the next one....But I think for a lot of other people, it's just, you know, it's just, it's just accepted. Like, okay, you're just gonna not be like up to date… I would say that's like the majority approach. - Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#21)

Evidently, the challenge of managing intense workloads is a major aspect of day-to-day life. Another stressful element of academic life is that students were often confused about 'how' to study effectively. This confusion was mostly expressed through complaints about marking transparency and assignment feedback. A first-year student recounted his surprise at the lack of guidance he had received on his first assessments.

I think a lot of people are very confused about where they get their grades from and how things are marked. And I think more transparency in terms of that could definitely help improve well-being, because I think it's really hard when you're trying to strive for something high, and then whenever it's just, you don't even know how you're able to achieve that – 19, Male, International, Undergraduate, First-Year (#20)

The student portrays this confusion as broadly felt amongst his first-year peers. Indeed, multiple students described slowly 'figuring out' what was rewarded in assessments by trial and error, rather than this having been made clear by teachers or markers. It was recognised that most units focused more on teaching their specific content, than on elucidating the writing skills required for good marks. Several students suggested that marking felt punitive. The following student conveyed a sense of mysticism surrounding what constitutes a 'good' assessment response.

I would really love to see like, well, what an HD (High Distinction) essay looks like, or what an HD problem question response is. I feel like that'd be really, really helpful – 19, Male, Domestic, Undergraduate, Second-Year (#3)

Confusion regarding assessment expectations was compounded by sentiments that assessment feedback was often limited and did not clarify how to improve in future.

There needs to be more feedback. Like there are some units where you get basically three lines of mid-sem feedback too late to act on it and you don't actually get your final exam back at all, unless you voluntarily go to a review session for the purposes of appealing your mark. So like the first few years of law school, I basically felt like I was fumbling around because I would get marks where I'd lost a lot of marks, but I would have absolutely no idea as to why – 22, Male, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fifth-Year (#14)

Participants illustrated a difficult, uncertain, and stressful relationship with their academic work. As discussed previously, students interpreted academic performance as a critical metric for success in the broader law school game. However, students were confused about what is required to achieve this desired performance. Figuratively, students feel pressured to 'play the game' but the 'rules of the game' are unclear. Unsurprisingly, participants expressed gratitude for resources that helped clarify optimal study approaches. In particular, Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) were identified as beneficial by multiple students.

C *'Not a level playing field': Inequity and 'otherness' within the law school context*

Students were quick to reject the idea of law school being a 'level playing field'. Specifically, pre-existing connections and familiarity with the legal world were felt to meaningfully alter the difficulty of the law school game. The image of the 'typical' law student being affluent and privately educated was prevalent, with the public/private high school divide a recurring differentiator between 'types' of students. Wealthy private school students were consistently portrayed as the most confident and visible student group.

My impression of the cohort is essentially it's mostly private school educated people. They seem like they're enjoying themselves, like they're very involved in events and whatnot and very, I guess, vocal in general. I think that the general consensus, especially from people from my sort of background who are not super well off socioeconomically, is that it's not great and the culture of the community is pretty bad – 22, Male, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fifth-Year (#14)

An international student recognised the number of students with familial legal connections while engaging in extra-curricular competitions.

You can tell whether the student's parent is a lawyer or not in a social event, especially in competitions or mooting, because they're much more well-equipped. Or if you go into their LinkedIn profiles, they were in debating teams since high school, they have clerkships or interns in first year or working in a law firm with the same last name of the firm... You can see these differences – 28, Male, International, Undergraduate (#4)

Familial legal connections may increase likelihood of finding legal jobs during the early years of law school, a key step in 'keeping up' in the law school game. A publicly educated student discussed her experience interacting with private school students, describing how familiarity with the legal profession and affluent social settings established insider/outside dynamics between students.

The kind of public school, private school divide. And I was from a public school. And they, all the private school kids, like there was just this lingo. And I knew I had a lot of friends from college as well. And it really felt like a different world... When I first started, and I go to my friends, like mansions in (affluent suburb), and like their parents houses, I was just like, wow, and their parents were lawyers, and I'd hear their parents speaking and know the legalese – 23, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#9)

Conversely, lack of socioeconomic privilege creates many additional barriers to law school success. Students highlighted the

option of not working alongside university as particularly advantageous given law school workloads.

The law school sent out an email… where they very openly said that it's best if the students don't, like, have jobs, like, that they're only committed to their studies so that they can get good grades and excel. But I feel like that is, like, beyond elitist to expect that. – 21, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#19)

Several students described 'otherness' and difficulty fitting in as having substantially diminished their wellbeing and sense of belonging to law school. Otherness was primarily discussed in contrast to the hegemonic image of the 'typical' law student who is privileged, self-assured and outwardly exceptional. Students who did not feel they conformed to this archetype, frequently provided narratives centring 'otherness'. A fourth-year student from a low SES background explained her difficulty finding respect and belongingness within classroom settings. She had earlier identified male former private school students as particularly overbearing, an impression shared by multiple participants. Ironically, she questioned her intelligence during this particularly eloquent social commentary.

It kind of affirms that we can't really take up as much space in the classroom setting. I'm thinking of the classroom as the default kind of space. And I guess in a way it makes me think that any kind of contribution that you do make, it doesn't really have the same validity or gravity compared to what our counterparts might be saying. And then I guess you can just get deeper and deeper and just think, oh, being from (non- affluent suburb), maybe, is it actually true that these stereotypes, might they actually have some weight in regard to my intelligence and my ability to work as hard as everyone else, my ability to keep up? – 21, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth- Year (#19)

Otherness and inequity were frequently discussed by international students. Language barriers were identified as disadvantageous given the volume of readings and emphasis on written argument.

I think if I'm a native speaker, I can focus more on the logic of law or something like that, but now I'm struggling with the vocabulary or how to understand the whole long sentence – 27, Female, International, Graduate (#11)

Increased social difficulties faced by international students were additionally recognised as disadvantageous in law school due to the importance of networking. A fourth-year international student described feeling 'inferiority' within law school social settings.

I think being international is about the, it's not, it's more of a social thing... Because a lot of good, you don't get, like, a lot of, like, important

or valuable information or opportunities actually comes from social networking. So I think that feeling inferior on that side has also impacted my wellbeing. There's just feeling of inferiority all the time – 24, Female, International, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#1)

D *'Finding your team': Restorative impact of togetherness and support*

To complete the metaphor of law school as a game, students felt more able to manage law school when their studies felt like a 'team game' rather than an 'individual game'. By this we mean that students felt safer and more equipped when they felt supported by others, as feeling supported diminished the sense of navigating law school 'on their own'.

The suggestion that social support protects student wellbeing is hardly groundbreaking. What was intriguing was how students articulated the benefits of social support. As previously mentioned, many students found law school individualistic and felt peers often seemed inauthentic and self-serving. Several students felt their capacity to manage law school was positively transformed by finding small groups of likeminded peers with whom they could have honest and supportive connections. These genuine connections were contrasted with disingenuous interactions often experienced with the broader cohort.

I don't want to paint an image of the law school as, like, the ninth circle of hell or anything. But, like, I've been lucky to find, like, two good friends who are also on the same wavelength as me. They've also had these kind of negative experiences with people. So, like, when we are together I think it's very humanising where, like, we can talk about our struggles and we can talk about, like, if we failed an exam or not. And they weren't, they're not judgmental or anything. They're quite supportive. – 21, Female, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fourth-Year (#19)

Feelings of social support extended beyond small tight-knit friendship circles. As mentioned above, many students felt peers were often non-supportive. While in our sample this was probably the majority perspective, this view was not universal. Multiple students identified feelings of camaraderie and 'going through it together' as vital to their capacity to navigate law school. PASS programs and extra-curricular student societies were identified as enabling opportunities for camaraderie.

As we got into second semester people started just being honest about like I'm behind and I'm stressed and that massively increased the sense of like camaraderie and actual and safety um around other people. Whereas I felt very cold-shouldered by some people whenever I would try and be vulnerable um in first semester – 25, Female, Domestic, Graduate, Second-Year (#13)

Teachers provided another source of support. Students generally described very positive experiences with law school faculty who were seen as passionate and highly intelligent. Some students identified specific inspirational and compassionate teachers as enabling them to persevere with their studies.

And the teachers are very. I used to think. I used to feel. Before I came I thought it would be too traditional. But it's not really daunting, full of Oxbridge types... But they're all super nice. They're all like. You don't have to be perfect. It's okay. We understand this challenge. I was constantly surprised. How supportive they are. – 33, Female, International, Graduate, Second-Year (#18)

Conversely, teachers were occasionally seen as dismissive or ambivalent. A fourth- year undergraduate student felt some teachers would become adversarial or lawyer-like when responding to student queries. The description evoked a sense of students and teachers existing as opposing parties.

If you're the subject of one of those condescending emails, for example, that you reach out, you ask a question and you get back this passive aggressive sort of email talking down on you, you're not really going to feel super comfortable going to class with that teacher anymore. – 22, Male, Domestic, Undergraduate, Fifth-Year (#14)

Moreover, at times teachers were perceived as needlessly strict and harsh, particularly when students appeared unprepared. Multiple students described instances during on-calls where classmates were publicly castigated for poor responses, although these stories were caveated by assurances that such incidents were uncommon. A second-year graduate student recounted the following incident with a lecturer.

She just kind of publicly shamed me because I was reading right before class and she thought that I was not prepared and she just had lots of really disparaging things to say about our cohort, and like it's getting dumbed down and no one's as good as they used to be and you should all stop complaining, the readings used to be worse – 25, Female, Domestic, Graduate, Second-Year (#13)

To summarise, teaching staff occupied a dynamic space in students' lives. Empathetic and compassionate teachers contributed to the sense of students having 'a team behind them'. At other times, adversarial or disinterested teachers compounded the feeling of law school as an individual game.

VI DISCUSSION

This study's aims were two-fold. Firstly, we hoped to extend the literature towards a more richly felt understanding of present-day law student experiences. Secondly, by considering these experiences, we hoped to reflect upon possible approaches for supporting law students.

A *Improving academic guidance, marking transparency and assessment feedback as a means of supporting law student wellbeing*

Several students described a surprising lack of direction on how to prepare for assessments in early years. Students would frequently receive lower-than-expected marks, and assessment feedback would not clarify how to improve in future, a process felt to compromise wellbeing. Reviewing the literature following data analysis revealed the ubiquity of such feedback from law students.[46]

Law academics have suggested clearer feedback, transparency around assessment marking, and guidance on 'how' to study could support wellbeing.[47] However, no empirical research has evaluated such initiatives. Our sample characteristically staked immense significance on academic performance, were highly driven academically, and were unlikely to have experienced meaningful perceived academic failure prior to law school. Several existing studies echo these law student characteristics.[48] Given these sensibilities, confusion around assessment expectations may be particularly stressful for law students.

Our findings also align with the theory that law school environments may be deleterious to the three basic psychological needs of self-determination theory (autonomy, relatedness and competence).[49] Naturally, students receiving poor marks who lack a clear vision for improving in future may struggle to experience competence. Initiatives which clarify the 'rules of the game' may therefore meaningfully support wellbeing.

B *Importance of addressing competitive environments within law schools*

It is well recognised that law schools are competitive, and that this competitiveness has implications for wellbeing.[50] For our sample, competitiveness was the defining feature of law school. Our sample also suggested that competitiveness was largely propagated by interactions

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46 Armstrong and Sanson (n 15) 31; O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8) 173-5; Larcombe et al (n 11) 425; Zacharopoulou and Turner (n 24) 203; Jones, Sharpe and Barrett (n 33) 150.

47 Field and Kift (n 18) 65; Armstrong and Sanson (n 15) 34-7.

48 See eg, Moore and Ní Drisceoil (n 13) 19-20; Bleasdale and Humphreys (n 34) 180-1; O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8) 173-4.

49 Sheldon and Krieger, 'Motivation, Values and Well-being' (n 6); Strevens (n 21).

50 Stallman (n 19) 896.

between highly driven law students and scarcity of graduate employment opportunities. Deconstructing competitive law school environments is therefore a challenging proposition. Furthermore, competition is not necessarily negative, and law students have indicated that competitive environments help prepare them for the legal profession.[51] It is most worthwhile to consider the facets of competitive environments that may endanger wellbeing.

Competitive environments appeared to degrade wellbeing for three main reasons: 1) normalising narrow and largely unobtainable ideas of 'success', 2) encouraging negative social comparisons that threaten self-confidence, and 3) making it difficult for students to form supportive relationships.

1 *Expanding ideas of 'success' in law school*

Previous researchers have described an 'information gap' wherein law students have limited understandings of the breadth of career opportunities available to them.52 Disproportionate visibility of high-tier corporate firms in law schools (for instance at career fairs or sponsored events) may equate 'success' with gaining corporate graduate positions and diminish awareness and prestige afforded to non-corporate career pathways. [53] This view resonated with our participants. Pursuing non-corporate career paths required resisting the 'pressure to play the game'.

Moreover, graduate positions in prestigious corporate firms demand excellent marks which can only be received by a minority of students. Troublingly, this guarantees that most students will fail to obtain this metric for success. Myopic ideas of success appear to encourage relentless career mindedness, the 'pressure to play the game', which is likely detrimental to intrinsic motivation and wellbeing.[54]

Therefore, it is crucial to expand notions of what constitutes 'winning the game' in law school. Platforming and advocating the benefits of more academically attainable and diverse graduate positions could reduce the contingency between grades and career prospects and, by extension, the academic competition this contingency propagates. Furthermore, expanding awareness of 'what a lawyer can be' could enhance autonomy in career choice.[55]

2 *Creating classroom environments that reduce negative social comparisons*

Consistent with existing research, being surrounded by exceptional peers prompted negative social comparisons which eroded self-confidence.[56] The classroom was the locale for many negative social

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51 Ibid 895-6.
52 Yau, Catanzariti and Atkinson (n 21) 75-6.
53 Ibid.
54 Strevens (n 21) 129-30.
55 Moore and Ní Drisceoil (n 13) 29; Yau, Catanzariti and Atkinson (n 21) 87.
56 Bleasdale and Humphreys (n 34) 181; O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8) 177-8.

comparisons, with students questioning their competence relative to vocal and outwardly confident peers.

Existing research indicates that law students construe assessable classroom participation (ACP) as enhancing learning, making classes more engaging, and improving oral communication skills. [57] The current study suggests that, while ACP likely has several positive pedagogical outcomes, its use may increase frequency of negative social comparisons within law classroom. Participants interpreted ACP as incentivising the 'performance' of intelligence. Students could be academically rewarded for presenting as highly capable during class and, students would be discouraged from revealing lack of understanding or preparedness. Classroom contexts such as these appear to have contributed to feelings on intellectual inferiority and loss of self-belief. Authors have proposed reforms designed to make law classroom environments more conducive to honesty and collegiality between students.[58] Such reforms might focus on features of classroom environments and curricula which foster negative social comparisons and discourage students from displaying lack of understanding.

3 *Fostering supportive relationships between law students through collaborative learning*

Finally, competitive environments appeared to undermine relationships between students. A key challenge for supporting law student wellbeing is to encourage supportive rather than adversarial relationships between students. [59] Law classes were consistently identified as more individualistic and less conducive to developing friendships than non-law classes. By contrast, Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) were repeatedly identified as enhancing feelings of community. These sessions provide academic guidance, which students greatly desire, as well as rare opportunities for students to work together in non-assessed environments. Given the feedback that many students struggled with the isolating and individualistic nature of legal study, PASS models, either embedded within, or independent of the curriculum, may be particularly beneficial to law students. PASS programs for incoming students could help facilitate the formation of tight-knit friendship groups which several students identified as instrumental to law school survival. Returning to self-determination theory, collegial learning opportunities such as PASS could promote feelings of relatedness.

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[57] Anna Huggins and Alex Steel, 'The Relationship Between Class Participation and Law Students' Learning, Engagement and Stress: Do Demographics Matter?' in Rachael Field, J. Duffy and C. James (eds), *Promoting Law Student and Lawyer Well-Being in Australia and Beyond* (Routledge, 2016) 67.

[58] O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8) 181-2; Wendy Larcombe, 'Towards an Integrated, Whole-School Approach to Promoting Law Student Wellbeing' in R. Field, J. Duffy and C. James (eds), *Promoting Law Student and Lawyer Wellbeing in Australia and Beyond* (Routledge, 2016) 24.

[59] O'Brien (n 25) 1-2.

C *Otherness, threshold concepts, and diversity at law school*

For many students, feelings of 'otherness' had a major bearing on wellbeing. The advantages afforded by socioeconomic privilege, private school education and familial legal connections were interpreted as creating inequities and insider/outsider dynamics between students. Field & Meyer suggested that a key challenge in transitioning to law school is acquiring *threshold concepts*, meaning the terminology, discourse and processes which make up the legal profession.[60] Lack of understanding of threshold concepts makes disciplines feel alienating, whereas understanding promotes belongingness, competency, and autonomy.[61] Our data indicates that threshold concepts may therefore represent a source of inequity within law school contexts, wherein students are arriving at law school with disparate pre-existing understanding of threshold concepts.

Our findings resonated with existing scholarship on inequity and diversity within law schools and the legal profession. Previous research has reflected upon the experiences of 'non-traditional' law students, meaning students who differ from the supposed 'traditional' law student who commences law school shortly after high school and whose privileged upbringing makes them unusually well-resourced for success.[62] Australian legal cohorts are becoming increasingly diverse.[63] Greater diversity within law schools is inherently positive for the legal profession. Ensuring the legal profession is representative of the broader community is necessary for ensuring equal access to justice.[64] Increasing diversity within the legal profession and judiciary requires empowering diverse students to succeed while at law school.[65] Empirical research into the unique experiences of diverse law students is essential for informing such initiatives. Encouragingly, recent studies have examined the experiences of Muslim[66] and LGBTQIA+ students in navigating law school contexts.[67]

Problematically, 'non-traditional' law students are often described as being at a deficit (i.e deficit framing).[68] Indeed, the term 'non-traditional' itself implicitly frames such students as deviating from pre-existing norms, with alternative terms such as 'new' or 'diverse'

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60 Field and Meyer (n 28) 147.

61 Ibid.

62 Anna Cody and Sandy Noakes, 'Valuing diverse students: an ethical response to building success in first-year law students and broadening the legal profession' (2022) 25(1-2) *Legal Ethics* 68.

63 Sandra Noakes and Catherine Renshaw, 'Centring new students' 'non-traditional' strengths: A challenge for legal education' (2025) 35(1) *Legal Education Review* 139.

64 Cody and Noakes (n 62) 69.

65 Brian Opeskin, 'Dismantling the Diversity Deficit: Towards a More Inclusive Australian Judiciary', (Cambridge University Press, 2021) 111; Cody and Noakes (n 62) 65-6.

66 Maria Bhatti and Sandy Noakes, 'Belonging in Law School and the Legal Profession: Muslim law students' experiences' (2025) 48(3) *UNSW Law Journal* 834.

67 Aidan Ricciardo et al, 'Understanding, promoting and supporting LGBTQI+ diversity in legal education' (2022) 56(3) *The Law Teacher* 307.

68 Noakes and Renshaw (n 63) 141.

students being more suitable.[69] Concerningly, several students within our sample, most saliently international students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, described their own experiences using deficit framing. This was typified by students lamenting their perceived deviation from the narrow mould of the 'typical' law student. We perceive two key implications of this finding for legal educators. On the one hand, we argue that it is important to rigorously communicate threshold concepts during the early years of law school to ameliorate overt structural inequities that disparities in threshold concept comprehension may create. Moreover, our data indicated that understandings of 'what a law student should be' appear to be tied up in the concept of the 'traditional' law student, a concept which positions diverse students as 'outsiders'. As others have argued, it is crucial to disabuse law students of the notion that diversity represents deficit. Rather, law schools should emphasise the strength and value that diverse students bring to law school contexts.[70] Centring the strengths of diverse students, may in turn reduce the frequency of feelings of otherness within law school contexts.

D *Further approaches*

Student narratives highlighted several more approaches for supporting law students including auditing workloads to reduce overall time-demands, avoiding scheduling assessments close together and encouraging supportive relationships between students and law faculty.

E *Limitations*

This study's findings should be interpreted alongside its limitations. Our sample comprised students from a single prestigious metropolitan Australian law school who engaged with a social media advertisement. As such, this study does not make claims regarding generalisability across different law schools. Importantly, most participants were undergraduates and interviews often discussed recent transitions from high school to university. The experiences of our students are likely far less relevant to law schools not offering undergraduate degrees. Moreover, given that participation was voluntary, the study is also susceptible to self-selection bias wherein participants with strong views about law school experiences may have been more likely to participate.

Students were also not prompted to understand 'wellbeing' according to a specific definition. Consequently, participants will have interpreted wellbeing in different ways. The decision not to define wellbeing may have contributed towards the focus towards lack of wellbeing throughout interviews. Additionally, as aforementioned, the non-legal positionality of the first, second and fourth authors may have diminished our ability to fully understand students' experiences.

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69 Cody and Noakes (n 62) 68.

70 Noakes and Renshaw (n 63).

VII CONCLUSION

The current study extends the literature towards more holistic understanding of the ways that law school environments shape wellbeing. Our sample described the complexities involved in navigating their law degrees. Richly appreciating these complexities enhances our understanding of potential approaches for supporting law students.

As a concluding observation, we reiterate that data analysis occurred prior to reviewing the literature. Intriguingly, we discovered several Australian studies reporting strikingly similar findings, with some having been published more than ten years prior.[71] This begs the question, why are Australian law students still voicing the same concerns? The issue does not appear to be lack of theoretical understanding regarding potential approaches for improving law student wellbeing. Rather, there seems to be a paucity of implementation and evaluation of approaches which student feedback suggests may support wellbeing. This disparity between theoretical understanding and practical implementation is not unique to legal education but rather applies to higher education more broadly.[72] Practical applications of theoretical understandings for supporting law students represent the critical next step towards creating law school environments which empower wellbeing.

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71 See, especially, O'Brien, Tang and Hall (n 8).

72 See, eg, Rebecca Upsher et al, 'A systematic review of interventions embedded in curriculum to improve university student wellbeing' (2022) 37 *Educational Research Review* 100464.