

LERN Final Report Perceptions of wellbeing in Law Teachers

Caroline Strevens and Dr Clare Wilson
University of Portsmouth
December 2015

Rationale and aims of the project

The research question was: What is the perception of law teachers in HE of their own psychological wellbeing and that of their students?

There were three main objectives: First, to detail how law teachers understand psychological wellbeing. Second, to explore how they experience and maintain their own wellbeing. Third, and finally, to explore how they may seek to maintain the psychological wellbeing of their students.

Research in Australia and America has shown that law students' wellbeing significantly decreased during their undergraduate degree (see Field, Duffy and Huggins, 2014 for a review). Little research to date has explored the expectations of academic staff in dealing with stressed students. Second, implicit in such research is the assumption academic staff have a role to play in the maintenance of psychological wellbeing in their students. However, substantially less attention has been paid to the wellbeing of those staff. For example, Kinman and Wray (2013) reported in the UK those "On all but one of the Health and Safety Executive stressor categories, [respondents] in higher education reported lower well-being than the average for those working in the target group industries (including education)" (Pg 2). Thus, it is crucial to understand how staff understand and manage their own wellbeing.

Much of the research has been conducted outside of the UK. Higher Education in the UK has undergone a radical transformation in the past decade. Thus, it may be particularly timely to explore how well academic staff are managing their psychological wellbeing.

Research suggests that we flourish in our work (and lives in general) if certain conditions of self-determination and self-motivation are met (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2008). A detailed understanding of how academics manage their wellbeing will allow research to develop effective strategies for the management of psychological wellbeing in this group and to facilitate effective strategies for our students. This work is being extended into studies of other professions and of the legal profession itself by members of the Wellness Network for law (see <http://wellnessforlaw.com/>) including a team at Portsmouth comprising the two current authors. Research into wellbeing of students is in its infancy in the UK. However we know of no studies that concern law teachers in the UK. If we are to promote our students' wellbeing then we would argue that it is essential we as academics also understand wellbeing and are able to effectively manage our own.

Methodology, problems or difficulties faced and response to them

Internal funding from Portsmouth Business School allowed us to conduct 24 face to face interviews of law teachers across England and Wales during the summer of 2014. As a result of the LERN funding, a focus group was held with law teachers in January 2015 and then this data informed the online UK Law Teacher survey conducted in the early summer of 2015. The survey included five psychometric scales (i.e., Ryff's wellbeing scale; Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale- DASS-21; the Adult Hope Scale and the Valuing Questionnaire). There were also a number of open-ended questions about staff wellbeing and student wellbeing as well as

questions about use of drink and drugs (these are listed in the appendix, which we have numbered in this report for ease of reference).

We asked the Chairs of the UK Law Learned Societies (SLS, ALT SLSA and CHULS) to circulate the survey link and this resulted in over 200 who started the survey and 185 who completed it.

Of the 185 participants who completed the survey, 125 (68%) were female, and 59 (32%) were male. 149 (80%) were full time and 36 (20%) were part-time. The Mean Age was 46 years, (standard deviation = 10 years and an age range of 26-69 years). On average, teachers taught 255 hours per academic year (although there was a huge variation, as some taught mainly tutorials and others taught multiple units with large 200+ classes).

The method of surveying initial attitudes and thoughts on wellbeing was productive and yielded a number of interesting results, but some of the psychometric scales were perceived by participants to be unduly negative. However, as wellbeing is partly defined in relation to the lack of wellbeing, it was felt these questions were an essential part of the picture. Full analyses of all of the responses are ongoing.

Key Findings

Perceptions of Law Teacher own stress and/or wellbeing

Statistical Analyses of Law Teacher Stress and Wellbeing: 68% did not report any major signs of Depression (with 15% reporting some major symptoms); 70% did not report any major signs of Anxiety (with 13% reporting some major symptoms); and 58% did not report any major problems with Stress (with 14% reporting some major symptoms). On average, Law Teachers were hopeful of the future – they scored 24 out of a possible score of 32 on Agency Hope (knowing you have the abilities to do what you want to do in the future) and 23 out of 32 on Pathways Hope (knowing you know how to get there in the future). Further, on average Law Teachers were moderate (16/30) on making progress towards valued goals and less likely to feel they were being obstructed from valued goals (9/30). On measures of wellbeing, Law Teachers were highest on Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others and Purpose in Life, and lowest on Environmental Mastery, Self- Acceptance and Autonomy.

We next divided the group by those who reported significant Stress (42%) and those that did not (58%). Not surprisingly, the Stress Group were significantly higher on Depression, Anxiety and being obstructed from valued goals; and significantly lower in all Hope and Wellbeing measures than the Non Stress Group. Finally, as stress can be positive (we get stressed when we are challenged to do things that are important to us), we further looked at those High on Personal Growth, and stress. In that analysis, the significant differences between the Stress Group and the Non Stress Group disappeared for the other wellbeing measures (Autonomy, Positive Relationships with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-acceptance) except Environmental Mastery.

Open ended responses(Q2): **Stress** was mainly associated with work, negative thoughts, too much to do, too little time, pace of change, university management putting on pressure, concerns about increased responsibility but less control, work becoming harder/ significantly less enjoyable and dealing with anger (their own and others). Both students and management were mentioned as a cause of stress and also as a promoter of wellbeing.

Wellbeing was associated with home life, personal relationships, keeping work separate, the 'small things' in life, caring, giving (to students), learning not to care about work and to put self first (before work), family support.

What was most notable about the responses was that there was significantly more discussion on stress than on wellbeing. Further, there was little to no mention of peers (for support or otherwise).

(Q3) Law Teachers chosen sources of help for own stress, or lack of wellbeing. The main responses included: Family (about 70% responses), professional (outside department and including University counselling and doctor) but less often -line manager (although some expressed reluctance for fear of adverse consequences or lack of empathy). Very few chose colleagues or to sort it out themselves.

Perceptions of Law student stress and/or wellbeing

(Q1): **Stress:** these answers were very broad and substantially more detailed than the answers applied to oneself although about 50% responses discussed stress only. About 20% responses mentioned balance. The description of student stress differed from stress in relation to themselves in that students stress covered all aspects of student life. It was described as wider than assessment pressures and contextual. Student stress was described as feeling overwhelmed and concerned for the future. There was no mention of lack of time.

Wellbeing: being able to develop methods themselves to overcome stress, confidence and optimism in the future, managing balance, whole person but no need to be too comfortable, self-awareness, satisfaction, having a sense of community.

Issues of student stress or lack of wellbeing Law Teachers feel able to handle (Q6): The top answer was academic issues, but a surprising number were happy to deal with all issues but that usually meant they were confident in their ability to refer problems on to professionals (that is, they did not think they needed to sort out all the students problems, but rather that the student could come to them with any problem and that they would know who to refer them on to). Some did report using their own life skills to listen and show empathy but they did not consider this to be as good as a professional.

Issues of student stress or lack of wellbeing Law teachers feel they would like help with (Q7): the two top topics were mental health issues and serious personal issues (divided into emotional and financial).

Issues of student stress or lack of wellbeing Law teachers felt they should not have to deal with (Q8): Mental health came top of this list but this was because there was a sharp division of views between those who thought they should deal with academic questions and those who did not mind being the first port of call for all issues.

Some concluding thoughts about the value and impact of the project and plans for the future

There were six main concluding points we wish to make.

First, Law teachers demonstrated great dedication to their work and to their students. However in doing so, in some cases, their ability to recognize and consider their own wellbeing (and handling of stress) was less well developed than that of understanding student issues in this area. Future work might best explore how to

help some teachers who are struggling, recognize this a little more clearly so that they might receive the appropriate help and support.

Second, perhaps not surprisingly, stress was more commonly associated with work, whereas wellbeing was more often associated with family and friends. Indeed, there was also concern expressed about balancing work. Many felt that there was barely time to think, with expectations around 24/7 emails, REF goals, and management expecting staff to 'go the extra mile', many are left feeling exploited with little control over their day. Future research might attempt to rebalance work more and allow greater wellbeing to be centered on work.

Third, and related to the previous comment, there has also been a dramatic shift in the working lives of those in mid-career (most of the current respondents). Much previous research has explored the 'ladder' problem from the perspective of the new and the retiring academic (that is, getting on the ladder and getting off the ladder). However, little research has explored those half way up the ladder, and when the ladder radically shifts in scope, leaving some to wonder if they are on the wrong proverbial ladder. This was expressed in numerous ways in our survey and focus group, with respondents mentioning that this wasn't what they had expected their career to be like, that they had been happier at earlier points in their career, and that, sometimes, their promotion felt like a big mistake as expectations and pressure from above and below had exponentially increased.

Fourth, there was very little of mention of peer support (eg, friendship) that might help at work. That may be due to performance / competition or it may just wasn't considered by the present sample. Future research might ask more directly about sources of support as it was an important area neglected by the present survey.

Fifth, regarding student wellbeing, the top need made apparent was for clear sources of help with mental health issues and financial issues when dealing with students. Future research might greatly benefit the working lives of teachers by constructing, distributing and evaluating such resources.

Sixth and finally, future work needs to explore stress in a more nuanced manner – looking for stress that may be perceived to be a challenge rather than a threat, and that creates meaning in our lives, stretching us to grow. Indeed, that may be useful for both teachers and students alike. Future work might fruitfully explore a small intervention package looking at informing teachers about the different types of stress, and their consequences, and how to move between the two productively to limit their impact on health and wellbeing.

Appendix 1

1. How do you define student stress and/or wellbeing?
2. How do you define your own stress and /or wellbeing?
3. If you felt you needed it, where would you seek help for your stress and/or lack of wellbeing?
4. Imagine the following is an email from one of your students. Please read the email and respond to it below: I am in my first year at University and it's a struggle. I didn't think this would happen to me, I have never had problems like this before. I worry a lot that I really won't be able to get a good mark, that I am not as bright as

everyone thinks I am. I also am not making friends as easily as other people. Lately it has all been getting me down. I am not sure what to do and I can't really talk to anyone about it. This just doesn't happen to me! My family are all really proud that I am here and so I don't want them to know I am struggling. I feel like a failure. What can I do? Please help me!

In the space below, outline what advice you would give this student. Please give as much detail as possible.

5. What are some of the major issues for student stress and/ or wellbeing do you deal with?
6. Regarding student stress and/or wellbeing, which issues do you feel that you are able to handle well (if you could give examples that would be helpful)?
7. Regarding student stress and/or wellbeing, which issues do you feel that you would like help or guidance to deal with better (if you could give examples that would be helpful)?
8. Regarding student stress and /or wellbeing, which issues do you feel you should not have to help students with (again, if you could give examples that would be helpful)?