

LAW STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO EDUCATION: POINTERS TO DEPRESSION IN THE LEGAL ACADEMY AND THE PROFESSION?

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 2,528 students across all faculties at the University of New South Wales was carried out in 2005 to collect information about their experiences and expectations of university life and study. Analysis of the data showed some unexpected and significant differences between law students' attitudes to their university education when compared with students in a number of other faculties. The fact that law students reported different responses to questions about their choice of course, expectations of results and perceptions of employers' preferences in graduates suggested that we should further analyse the data to ascertain the extent and kind of differences between law students' and other students' responses. Law students' experiences and attitudes, as they emerged from the further analysis, showed a comparatively low level of personal autonomy and a strong element of competitiveness compared with medical students and with students from other faculties. The psychological literature suggests that lack of autonomy and lack of social connectedness are important factors in depression. The results of this study thus indicate a number of factors which might assist in helping us understand why law students are more likely to develop depression than students in other disciplines. The paper outlines strategies to foster student resilience and also directions for further research needed to confirm or disprove the associations between depression and attitudes to university education suggested by the present study.

Key Words: law students – depression – attitudes – autonomy – social connectedness

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