

**CHANGING OUR THINKING:  
EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON LAW STUDENT WELLBEING, THINKING  
STYLES AND THE LAW CURRICULUM**

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ABSTRACT

We surveyed first-year students at the ANU College of Law on various measures of wellbeing, thinking styles and motivations for attending law school. We followed up our surveys with a student–faculty dialogue retreat. The results of our work confirm that, even in a law school where formal mentoring programs are in place and where resources for student counselling are readily available, law students suffer symptoms of psychological distress at levels higher than their age peers in the general public. During the first year of law school, many students experience psychological struggles, changes in their thinking styles, and changes in self-concept and sense of wellbeing. By the end of the first year many students in our sample showed increased rational thinking and lower experiential thinking. Lower levels of experiential thinking were associated with increased symptoms of psychological distress, while students with a higher propensity toward experiential thinking showed little change in depressive symptoms from the beginning to the end of the year of law study.

In extended deliberations on law student wellbeing, faculty and student retreat participants highlighted their sense that law school changed them in important ways, making them more rational, analytical, competitive and adversarial. Law school also promoted feelings of insecurity, inefficacy and isolation. To address these changes, participants made a variety of proposals for curricular reform, which are discussed here. Specific changes in law school curricula – including proposals for greater transparency, clarity and guidance about course work, for more positive and formative feedback, and for more social and intellectual engagement – are identified as having potential to improve law student wellbeing.