

Exploring inclusion and wellbeing initiatives in legal education and practice

On 7 June 2024, a diverse, intersectional community of researchers, educators, practitioners and students came together to explore inclusion and wellbeing in legal education and the legal profession. This free to attend 1-day hybrid event was organised by Rachael O'Connor (Associate Professor in Legal Education, University of Leeds and LawCare trustee) alongside two student research assistants (Sedek Abraham and Praewa Tang, University of Leeds) and funded by The Law Teacher, in association with the Association of Law Teachers.

In elite professions and disciplines like law often characterised by a lack of diversity (particularly in more senior positions), long working days, billable hours and significant pressures, inclusion and wellbeing are vital concerns. However, rarely are they considered together. This event sought to build on reverse mentoring research conducted within legal education, higher education and the legal profession.

Advertising for the event, including the call for contributions on the day, made clear that anyone working/living in the law (as an educator, student, researcher, practitioner or other role) or related sectors was welcome to participate and attend. This resulted in an extremely rich range of expressions of interest to speak on the day, as outlined below.

Collaborative work between the University of Leeds and LawCare has highlighted a lack of research and evaluation around equity, inclusion and wellness initiatives and, particularly, the involvement of aspiring and junior lawyers in such conversations or initiatives. It has also been evident in our work that the firms, lawyers (at all levels of seniority) and students involved have valued being part of a community striving to make legal education, recruitment, supervision and practice more inclusive and healthier to work

in. The more community-based, sectoral approaches we can develop in exploring this work, as opposed to firms and education providers competing with one another in this space, the more well-informed inclusion and wellbeing initiatives and their impact can be. This one-day event contributed meaningfully to this broader agenda and, I think, made everyone in the room feel part of something important and special which will long outlast this one-day event.

Whilst acknowledging that studying and practising law can be extremely challenging, a key aim of this event was to generate hope through the mutual hearing of experiences, practices and ideas to move us towards more inclusive and healthy practices in the law going forward and I certainly think that feeling of hope and optimism was achieved.

The day involved both interactive sessions, short lightning-style presentations and opportunities to collaborate and get to know the group. Attendees were encouraged to contribute thoughts, ideas and lived experiences on the themes of inclusion and wellbeing throughout the day.

In terms of the speakers, it is difficult to do justice in this short summary as to the lessons learned and experiences shared. However, you can get a flavour of this from the snapshots below.

We kicked off our first series of lightning style presentations (5 minutes presentation with 3 minutes for audience questions) with Andy Darnton from LawCare who shared reflections from [the 'Life in the Law' work](#) and reminded us of our 'collective responsibility' in our range of roles to make life in the law a better experience for all. Next up, Ria Smith talked to us about how, too often, we can let mature students down by making assumptions about the life and experience status of our students, particularly in pro-bono work. Ria challenged us to think differently about this through sharing the University of Wolverhampton's Law Student

Representation Project. Karen Sullivan (Court of Protection Officer) then had us up on our feet, moving along a continuum of responses to various prompts about disability – Karen encouraged us to ‘change the narrative’ around disabled people in the law to support a more inclusive profession. Amira Asantewa (Grit) also challenged us to reframe our perspectives around ‘resilience’ and how much wellbeing and inclusion development comes not from any sort of ‘magic’, but from ordinary, everyday intentions and action – something we can all play a part in. We then explored vicarious trauma with a presentation from Maisie Nicholls (Seesuu) who discussed, linking to Andy’s opening message, our collective moral obligation to recognise the connection between lawyer wellbeing and trauma. We closed the first round of lightning presentations with Emma Williams (Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP) sharing her experiences of being involved in inclusion and wellbeing work as a lawyer in a US City firm. Emma shared how often ‘those who belong the least, thrive the most’, pinpointing how much the legal profession needs diverse lawyers to truly achieve its goals but also noting the many challenges that people must navigate to have these positive experiences in the law.

After well and truly having our brains stimulated by these fantastic lightning presentations, we were treated to two longer, interactive workshops. The first from Caroline Strevens (University of Portsmouth) explored ‘Black Box Thinking for Professional firms’ and had us all contributing to a shared, virtual document as we explored how the five dimensions of ‘high reliability organisations’ could be adopted and adapted in the legal profession. Caroline called for a whole organisation approach to mindfulness, to develop meaningful culture change. This was followed by a cross-institutional interactive session on reverse and reciprocal mentoring with event host Rachael O’Connor, Zi Yang and Simon Lee (both Aston University), plus Vicky Martin and Catherine Shephard (both Manchester Metropolitan University). We had a good laugh during this session as we asked attendees to consider how they learn from their colleagues,

particularly those perceived as more junior than them, alongside sharing our own experiences of this form of mentoring. Zi reminded us of the importance of our identities beyond our job roles – ‘I’m not just a researcher, my identity is more than my job’ – something critically important to wider wellbeing.

Following all that interaction, it was time for food! To remove the pressures associated with ‘networking,’ we had the option to do some mindful, crafting exercises in the lunch break although the vast majority of people whiled away lunch chatting to one another which was great to see. We also had fully vegan catering on the day to support people to explore plant-based alternatives.

After a plant-fuelled break, we kicked off the afternoon with an energy filled interactive session led by Donna Smith (Odonnata GTC) and Jane Bradley-Smith (City Law School) where we got a taster of the ‘Burn Bright’ initiative seeking to tackle burn out in the law. Donna and Jane supported us to pay attention to our ‘deposits’ i.e. the things that enhance our wellbeing and to notice and value what is good in our lives regularly in order for these deposits to ‘accrue interest’, offsetting some of the more challenging aspects of our lives. We then launched into our second and final set of lightning presentations. Maral Nosratzadeh (University of Leeds) shared their research on disabled women in the legal profession, emphasising the growing need for the profession to collect intersectional data that cuts across gender, disability and other identity characteristics so that we can truly make the legal profession more diverse. Alicia Collinson (Thrive Law) joined us virtually to explore the SRA’s role in wellbeing. Alicia also reminded us to ‘practice what you preach’ when it comes to lawyer wellbeing, recognising that we can’t support others to be well if we neglect ourselves. Next, we heard from Steve Clarke (Brave Ascent) and his vision for sustainable wellbeing practices in the legal profession. Steve reminded us that we have two ears to signify that we need to listen twice as much as

we speak! Steve explored how internal reflection and introspection can lead to refraction beyond ourselves, encouraging us to ‘see rainbows’ and share positive approaches with others in the profession – an inspiring metaphor which encapsulates the optimism in the room and online throughout the day. Laura Hughes-Gerber and Noel McGuirk (Lancaster University) co-delivered a presentation on co-creation and law student wellbeing. They advocated for the embedding of wellbeing into legal education, rather than it being a ‘bolt-on’ and demonstrated how student wellbeing needs may be different at different times, demanding a flexible, co-created approach. Co-hosts Sedek and Praewa then presented on their findings from the University of Leeds/LawCare reverse mentoring scheme involving aspiring lawyers and junior lawyers from under-represented backgrounds mentoring senior legal professionals on issues relating to wellbeing and inclusion. Sedek and Praewa highlighted the criticality of senior lawyers and supervisors being open with junior lawyers about their own wellbeing experiences, to support more junior colleagues to feel confident to take up space in these conversations. This section of presentations closed with a pre-recorded discussion from Varda Mone and Abhishek Thommandru (Alliance University) discussing gender inclusion in law. Powerfully, they suggested that ‘the time is now for change’ and this further empowered the group to think about their next steps after the day’s presentations.

Our final interactive session of the day was facilitated by Sarah Wilson (University of York), exploring ‘How Law and History study looks to build confidence and resilience in uncertain times’. A core theme of this session was on how we can empower students to face the world, acknowledging how it can often be a ‘scary place’. Sarah called for universities to be bolder and to consider (and teach) the law in its societal context, not just now but also in the future. Through using the Law and History module at York as an example, Sarah supported us to consider how we embed students’ lived experiences in our teaching.

If you'd like to find out more about any of the sessions, you can find a link here to the full abstracts.

The day ended with a whole group reflection, led by Rachael, giving us the motivation to take our learnings forward after we left the room. We closed with a few quiet, independent minutes when everyone was asked to set themselves at least 1 goal or pledge they wanted to commit to in the space of either inclusion and/or wellbeing as a result of the things they heard during the day. We also had a follow-up Padlet where people interested in further collaboration and sharing could connect.

The event left me feeling super hopeful about the future of wellbeing and inclusion in legal education and the legal profession. It also really brought home to me how important it is that we collaborate across existing divides, rather than working in silos. This includes those in the legal profession and education but also those outside it, such as people working in mental health practice and other areas like organisational behaviour. Together, we are absolutely stronger and there is so much that legal educators and professionals can learn from beyond our own walls – something to focus on in 2025!