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## Reflections on belonging and a law student pledge

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## Reflections on belonging and a law student pledge

### Abstract

In 2017, the School of Law at the University of Wollongong commenced an experimental initiative through the introduction of a Law Student Pledge. It was designed as a symbolic statement to students that from the day they begin their law studies they become a member of the legal professional community. In this way, it invited First Year Students to commit to core values, attitudes and practices seen as important to developing a positive professional identity. This article reports on learnings following the implementation of the Pledge over 3 iterations and reflects upon its impact on shaping students' sense of belonging. As an empirical project, this research incorporates both the student voice as well as the academic perspective, via the methodology of reflective practice. The research will consider whether the Pledge provided an opportunity for students to engage in a community of shared identity or became a perceived 'imposed' requirement to belong.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Creating a sense of belonging is important for students, particularly during transition/first year.
2. Reflections on the use of a Law Student Pledge ('the Pledge') as a tool to foster a sense of belonging.
3. The introduction of a Law Student Pledge invoked a range of responses from students and staff. Reflective practice led to multiple iterations and improvements implemented.
4. Aspects of the Pledge that focussed on well-being were most positively received by students.
5. The Pledge may have some utility in maintaining student connection and sense of belonging in a remote learning context.

### Keywords

belonging, professional Identity, well-being

## Introduction

The School of Law at the University of Wollongong (UOW) commenced an experimental initiative in 2017. The *Law Student Pledge* was designed and introduced as a signifier to students that, from the day they begin their law studies, they become a member of the legal professional community. It invited First Year Students to engage with core values and practices seen as important to developing a positive legal professional identity.

Developing a sense of belonging is an important aspect of any successful transition. However, questions of belonging, particularly as related to youth identity, often focus upon ‘who is “a stranger”, and who does not belong’ (Baak et al., 2019). The Pledge was intended as a vehicle to inculcate students to the Law School community. Understanding however, the complexities of belonging for young people, the Research Team was committed to seeking feedback on its effectiveness to improve and refine it as appropriate.

This article reports on learnings following the implementation of three iterations of the Pledge and reflects upon its impact on shaping students’ sense of belonging. As an empirical project, this research incorporates both the student voice, captured through surveys and focus groups, as well as the academic perspective, via the methodology of reflective practice. The analysis identified the key themes of identity, community and boundaries as significant to a sense of belonging. In particular, this paper considers the question of whether the Pledge provided an opportunity to engage in a community with shared identity, or was perceived as an ‘imposed’ requirement to belong. Finally, it contemplates the role of the Pledge in fostering a sense of belonging within the context of online delivery and social isolation, driven partly by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Transitions and Belonging

The complexities in transition from secondary studies to university are supported by well-established scholarship, with a significant focus on the importance of the first year experience (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Sharp, Bond, Mundy, Murray, & Quilter, 2013). Developing a sense of belonging is an important aspect of any successful transition. ‘Belonging’ refers to ‘a sense of connectedness to other people, places, cultures, communities, and times’ (Hitch, Pépin, & Stagnitti, 2014, p. 242). Belonging, at its core, is relational and includes connections to individuals and groups. People are social constructions. Their views, opinions, values and even actions are influenced by others (Abrams & Hogg, 1990).

This connection to others creates a stronger sense of belonging where the networks are more clearly identified, through membership of groups or communities. In this way, ‘people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others (whether members of the same group - ingroup - or of different groups - outgroup ), is largely determined by the groups to which they feel they belong’ (Abrams & Hogg, 1990, p. 2). The group identity provides a frame of reference for members. It effectively provides a short hand way of understanding the behaviors and views that are appropriate in a given situation (Turner, 1991).

An important component of a positive sense of belonging is ‘how people balance their need to be included in social groups with their need to be different and distinctive’ (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). However, difficulties relating to belonging, particularly for youth identity, often focus on ‘the question of who is “a stranger”, and who does not belong’ (Baak et al., 2019). This is inherent in the notion that inclusion requires exclusion; the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Belongingness has been identified as having ‘multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and

on cognitive processes. Lack of attachments is linked to a variety of ill effects on health, adjustment, and well-being.’ (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497).

It is now well established that the successful management of first year transition should be a high priority for universities seeking to improve on outcomes for student well-being (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006). The Research Team sought to use a Pledge as a vehicle to provide ‘connection, membership, attachment and a sense of security’ (Habib & Ward, 2019). It was intentionally designed to situate students in the law as well as creating an attachment to the locus or place for their legal studies journey (Inalhan & Finch, 2004). In this way, it endeavoured to foster a sense of belonging – to the School as both a location and identity, and to the ethics and values of the broader legal profession.

Another driver behind the initiative was to introduce and integrate an ethical approach to studies that sets students up for the development of a positive professional identity (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2019; Littrich & Murray, 2019). This sense of positive identity focuses upon the notion of future belonging:

If you can start to see an authentic sense of who you are going to be as a lawyer and relate to what you are learning at law school, then you will be more successful and your psychological well-being will be supported. This is because developing a sense of who you will become as a lawyer will give you a sense of personal and professional verification, a positive self-view, a sense of identity salience and a resulting feeling of ‘fit’ (Field et al., 2019, p. 17).

## Development of the Law Student Pledge

The School of Law at the UOW has a long-standing commitment to providing an integrated, innovative and supportive first year transition pedagogy for commencing law students (see Sharp et al., 2013). In 2017, the Research Team developed the *Law Student Pledge* as a new initiative for first year law students (see Appendix 1).

Oaths, or pledges, serve a number of important functions in law: used primarily as a regulatory mechanism, to set aspirations, and to provide ethical guidance (Andrews, 2009). While introduced broadly around the world in universities (Boothe-Perry, 2011; Kehner & Robinson, 2012), a student Pledge in a law school was something that was novel in Australia.

The Pledge was designed to encourage students to engage with their professional and ethical identities from the commencement of their law studies by inviting students to commit to key values and ethical standards expected in the legal profession (See Mundy, Murray, Littrich, & Tubridy, 2020).

Given the innovative nature of the project, the Research Team has been committed to engaging with student feedback, collaborative practice and ongoing reflection and improvement. In 2018, the Research Team redesigned the original Pledge as the *Statement of Law Student Ideals* (see Appendix 2) with a greater emphasis on physical and mental well-being, social justice values and respect for other students and academic staff (Murray & Mundy, 2019). In 2020, the Research Team introduced a new iteration as the *Law Student Pledge* [Figure 1].

The current version of the *Law Student Pledge* brought together all of the Research Team’s learnings, and student feedback, from the previous iterations. The current Pledge retains the emphasis on ethical identity, well-being, social justice and respect but now further strengthens a sense of belonging by expressly linking the Pledge to the *New South Wales Law Society Statement of Ethics* as well as making a clearer connection to their first year Pod seminar groups. A ‘Pod’ is a class of approximately 25 students that students will remain in for all of their classes in first session,

of first year, at the School of Law at UOW. The Research Team's goal was to provide commencing law students with a more explicit link between the Pledge and the future expectations of legal practice as set out by the New South Wales Law Society. By discussing and evaluating the Pledge in their own Pod seminar group, the aim was to embed the key values of integrity, respect and intellectual courage within their weekly seminars.

**Figure 1**

Law Student Pledge

As a law student, I understand I am expected to uphold the highest standards of personal and professional conduct and that these standards apply from the commencement of my studies. I acknowledge that, whether I choose to practice as a lawyer or use the knowledge and skills I gain studying law in another field, I commit to study law with diligence and integrity.

I acknowledge that the study of law is a commitment to understanding and respecting the rights of others, with a focus on social justice for all. I will treat fellow students and academic staff with respect. I will be mindful of the importance of my own mental and physical well-being as I progress through my studies and beyond.

I will have the courage to question and think independently. I understand my actions reflect not only upon myself, but also upon the university and the legal profession. I commit to conduct myself with the high personal and academic integrity expected of a student of law, as a future professional and community leader.

The *Law Student Pledge* is integrated into the first year law curriculum via two subjects: *Foundations of Law* in their first session, and *Ethics and Professional Responsibility* in their second session. Students engage with the Pledge in their first week of seminars in *Foundations of Law* and then again in seminars at the end of the session. A 'session' – referred to in many parts of the world as a semester - is a 13 week unit of study. This approach enables students to revisit and reflect on their initial views of the Pledge at the conclusion of their first session of law studies. This reflection is further supported by a lecture provided to students from the Dean of the Law School on the core values of the Pledge. The following session, the Pledge is integrated throughout the subject *Ethics and Professional Responsibility*, with a particular emphasis on ethics and fostering a positive professional identity.

## The Research Methodology

As outlined in the previous section, this research project has evolved over a 5 year period (2017-2021) with each of the three iterations being informed by the feedback received from students and teaching staff, effectively adopting a 'feed forward' reflective practice approach (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Adopting a reflective practice approach has been central to the project's methodology as it allows for the integration of theory and practice in meaningful ways, and recognises the role of the research team's professional, educational and institutional knowledge as key to making sense of the findings and their meaning in light of practice complexities (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Reflective practice is not only a popular theoretical framework for reflecting on professional practice (Finlayson, 2015), it involves

‘recognising what seems to work and what doesn’t, being aware of associated feelings, being aware of what judgements are made and what those judgements are based on and being conscious of values, ideas and assumptions that inform our sense-making of events, observations or experiences’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 6).

Following each iteration of the project, student feedback was captured via an anonymous online survey towards the end of each year. Academic teaching staff involved in the delivery of either the first session subject, *Foundations of Law*, or the second session subject, *Ethics and Professional Responsibility*, were emailed to invite them to share their personal views on the Pledge and their perceptions on the reception and engagement of students with the Pledge in the classroom. The Research Team met regularly at key points to forward plan, reflect on the feedback and consider any necessary revisions in light of our collective reflections and professional judgement.

Human Research Ethics approval was obtained from UOW and the research was conducted in accordance with human research ethics guidelines. A total of 63 participants provided feedback over this time, comprising 56 students and 7 teaching staff.

Students were recruited to participate each year via several email communications forwarded to all first-year law students enrolled at UOW. As part of the communications, a contact point for further information was provided as well as making students aware that we were interested in hearing from them regardless of their views on, or support for, the Pledge. The survey solicited responses about their views on the School’s introduction of the Pledge; their initial response to the Pledge; what they thought were the aim(s) or purpose(s) of the Pledge; and whether they felt the Pledge had influenced any aspects of their studies and, if so, how? Finally, students were asked if there was any particular aspect(s) of the Pledge that they felt was helpful or unhelpful to them.

All written survey responses were imported into the NVIVO-12 software program to support data analysis. An initial thematic coding process was undertaken for each survey by a member of the Research Team, driven by the data and the literature (Peel, 2020; Wen & Zammit, 2020). Each remaining team member then reviewed the coding individually and finally it was reviewed through discussion as a team, increasing engagement with the data to ensure rigour and quality in analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2020). On completion of this coding and review process, a more granular thematic analysis was undertaken on the particular theme of belonging (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Belonging and Positive Identity Development**

While our aim in introducing this curriculum innovation was to foster a sense of belonging, the feedback gained through the reflective practice exercise highlighted some of the difficulties inherent in this intention. The Pledge provoked a widespread range of responses; from the inspired and motivated, to the begrudging and disapproving, as well as the downright indifferent.

As outlined in the previous section, through thematic coding analysis of the empirical data collected on the Law School Pledge across all iterations – both the student surveys and the staff responses – the Research Team identified a number of themes that linked to belonging (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These are Identity; Community; and Boundaries, each of which are explored below.

Although the analysis demonstrated often-contradictory reactions to the Pledge, these contrasting viewpoints are not always correlated to opposition and competition, but at times demonstrate the complementary and balancing requirements for developing a sense of belonging.

## ***Identity***

The Team designing the Law School Pledge had a clear vision for its inclusion in the curriculum. One of the key drivers was a desire to influence the students' developing sense of professional identity. It was hoped that the Pledge could have some impact upon shaping the students' sense of belonging and the broader positive impact this could have for their future self and professional careers.

Professional identity refers to a range of 'interpersonal factors including beliefs and attitudes, values, motives and experiences; social identity; and occupational and organisational factors' (Clanchy, Minahan, Cardell, & Bialocerkowski, 2021). Historically the focus for developing a professional identity was squarely on the workplace. Essentially, how a person understands their role as a lawyer, for example, would largely be shaped when they were surrounded by lawyers and 'lawyering'. As outlined in section 2 above, more recently there has been shift in recognising the importance and possibilities created by proactively focusing upon the developing of a positive professional identity during university (see, eg, Rachael Field et al., 2019). University is now recognised, particularly for the professions, as a space for students to shape their understanding and values of what it means to be a professional (Littrich & Murray, 2019).

A growing body of scholarship has revealed a link between the concept of professional identity development and the individual's sense of belonging to a group (Cardoso, Batista, & Graça, 2014). Central to the development of a positive professional identity is a "sense of connectedness" (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018). This has been evident in studies in a range of fields including medicine (Weaver, Peters, Koch, & Wilson, 2011), engineering (Hatmaker, 2013), pharmacy (van Huyssteen & Bheekie, 2015), nursing (Maginnis, 2018), and education (Ivanova & Skara-MincEne, 2016).

It was hoped that the introduction of the Pledge at the very beginning of law school, and then its reinforcement at later points in the curriculum, would support students to consider and cultivate a positive professional identity by allowing them to "try to assimilate and replicate observed behaviour that is accepted and rewarded in the legal context." (Hall, O'Brien, & Tang, 2010, p. 33). Additionally, it was hoped that the Pledge would provide the opportunity for students to "think about and critique the values and assumptions that sit behind what you are being taught at law school" (Field et al., 2019, p. 13).

The design took a two-fold approach to stimulating positive professional identity development and supporting belonging: an intrinsic emphasis – encapsulating the issue of individual well-being; and an extrinsic motivation – looking to a long-term contribution to social justice.

As part of the reflective process, through each iteration of the Pledge a greater focus was placed upon well-being, positive identity and social justice. As can be seen in Appendix 1, well-being was not articulated in the initial version, although there was reference to professional identity. A growing body of scholarship on identity development in law (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2013; Hall et al., 2010) and the Research Team's own views, encouraged the explicit addition of well-being and social justice in the second version. Following the largely positive response to their inclusion, individual well-being was reinforced in the current version, moving up from the final paragraph to the central section. Additionally, social justice was strengthened by coupling it with concepts of respect and the rights of others, inviting students to see the benefits of committing to something bigger than self.

The inclusion of well-being was identified and welcomed by the students positively. It was the most common response to the survey question: "What were the most helpful aspects of the Pledge?" (emphasis added throughout):

‘To encourage law students to take care of their own **well-being**’

In fact, one student felt that it did not go far enough:

‘I feel that it focuses a lot on personal characteristics and not so much on the health and **wellbeing of students which I believe is most important for a student to succeed and support their community** to the best of their abilities in the future; by being in the right mindset and their physical and mental health are in check.’

While encouraging a focus on healthy well-being, there was some minor perception that the notion of a Pledge, with the implication of obligations, may itself have some negative impact on their welfare.

‘I would also argue to a certain extent that the encouragement to stand by a Pledge of moral conduct could be somewhat **anxiety** inducing in terms of trying to keep students onto a particular path.’

Students themselves recognised both the internal and external stimuli to positive identity. A number of students included reference to well-being as well as social justice, or some sense of a bigger purpose. The importance of balance between the intrinsic and extrinsic was also noted.

‘I found it reflective of key aspects of UOW that convinced me to come to this university and pursue a law degree, e.g. **social justice focus**, notion of caring for one's mental wellbeing’

‘I particularly loved the reminder to stay mindful of my **well-being!** It gave the pledge a lovely element of balance.’

While the internal focus was the most prevalent positive response, a significant number of students identified and highlighted the Pledge's role in connecting the student to their future professional identity.

‘The Pledge has shaped how I see the legal profession and helped me to realise the important role that lawyers play in **society**. At first law to me was just another job on the list of possibilities but it has helped me realise that there is so much more to it than being a job. In fact, I have come to the idea that a lawyer who sees themselves as just performing another job in society is probably not a very good lawyer, in that they are missing the important historical and **social significance of their role and their place in upholding justice**

One seminar leader<sup>1</sup> saw that this process could potentially address issues increasingly identified in law students, and other professionals, known as “imposter syndrome” (Grenardo, 2021).

It may also assist students who struggle with imposter syndrome/ a feeling that they don't belong in law school, to make the Pledge with other students. Doing so may assist students in developing a sense of belonging and encourage them to consider how they can choose each day to engage with their studies as law students in a manner consistent with who they are and who they are seeking to become - future officers of the court.

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<sup>1</sup> Seminar leaders are academic members of staff – often referred to as tutors in other disciplines/Schools.



Survey responses indicated that the Pledge did have an identified impact upon students' formative notion of professional identity. This was evident in responses to the question: "Has the Pledge had an impact on your professional and ethical identity as a law student and/or future professional?"

'Absolutely, it is what began shaping my identity in this area. Before reading it I thought of myself as simply a 'uni student', whereas afterwards I began really thinking about being a law student in particular, and a future law graduate or lawyer. It instilled a sense of **professional, community and individual responsibility** in me that I didn't have beforehand.'

These responses indicated a sense of belonging to a profession that is concurrent with an emerging sense of professional identity. Looking beyond the short-term educative usefulness of the Pledge, the focus on social justice and belonging to a larger community resonated with a number of students.

'I think what has stuck with me in particular is that it's not about whether you are becoming a lawyer or not, it's just a general high expectation that is required in any profession, in the way that we conduct ourselves. Being a community leader, respecting the rights of others and being committed to **social justice** are the three important things that influenced choosing a law degree.'

In addition to the positive and negative responses, it must be noted that a large number of students did not provide feedback on the Pledge. While reasons for this are not known, one seminar leader articulated the possible ambivalent feelings of some students towards the first version of the Pledge:

'I have mixed feelings about the Pledge. I think that it is better than doing nothing, but it feels like a bit of an American concept that may not necessarily translate to Australian students, particularly the current generation of students.'

In writing the second and third iterations of the Pledge, the Research Team took a particular focus to ensure it felt more authentic to an Australian cohort. This was the driver behind the change of name. Unfortunately, the *Statement of Law Student Ideals* was seen as less clear in its intention and a decision was made to return to the *Law School Pledge* for its current form.

### **Community**

Another theme identified by the Research Team upon analysis of the student responses was termed community: belonging to a group in both the 'present' and 'future'. That is, some students saw the Pledge as something relevant to them now as law students, fostering a sense of belonging to a current student cohort, while responses from other students suggested an assumption of the Pledge as something more relevant to the future when, upon entering practice, they would be part of the legal profession.

In designing the Pledge, the Research Team kept in mind that many law students choose not to follow traditional legal practice pathways and many may not practice at all. Increasingly students use their law degrees to gain employment in other fields (for example, banking, finance, management, HR). This inclusive approach was articulated to students when the Pledge was introduced, in order to ensure that we were not alienating any student who did not see conventional lawyering in their future. There was explicit exposition that the standards set out in the Pledge were something seen as relevant to them both as law students and as future professionals, whatever that might look like.

In analysing the responses that aligned with the 'present' aspect of this dichotomy – a current sense of belonging at law school - there were both positive and negative connotations identified. As to the former, one student commented:

‘I thought it was great and encouraging. Gives a sense of **belonging** to a program with the highest regard for respect and integrity.’

Other positive comments included:

‘It emphasises that the expectations start now – it’s important to be aware of this.’

‘It is a really good idea to introduce and regulate standards of law student behaviour. It contains just the right amount of information.’

‘I thought it was a good idea, I liked the idea of having a standard to **aspire** to in my work as a law student.’

‘My finance and commerce subjects should have something like this. I’m now in 3rd year of Uni, and looking back the pledge is relevant to everything so far’.

‘It gave me a sense of being a part of something bigger and also made me aware of the weight of studying and practising law.’

Students with comments along the above lines appeared to view the Pledge as a positive ‘guide’ as to what was expected of them, collectively, as law students. The last two comments above also suggest some students felt that a higher standard was expected of the group to which they belonged (ie the law student cohort) compared to students in other disciplines. The reference in the last response to ‘practising law’ also indicates that the lines between the poles of ‘present’ and ‘future’ are blurred, with some responses indicating aspects of belonging that relate to both.

As to negative responses relating to the ‘present’, these appeared to view the Pledge as being primarily aimed at controlling student behaviour, particularly in relation to academic misconduct:

‘It is about behaviour management. This serves a purpose, but lack of trust is implicit.’

‘...these pledges and declarations are the equivalent of ‘mere puff’ moralistic speeches. Most of the values it raises are important of course but it’s not much more than common sense to know that plagiarism is bad and punishable and that we should strive to be “good students”’

‘I actually saw it as more of a warning about how to behave, not a positive reinforcement of law school - which is not necessarily all that bad, it’s good to let the students know the expectations of them at the start.’

While such responses were critical or perhaps suspicious of the reasons for Pledge, there is a recognition that the principles espoused in the Pledge were being applied to the group to which they currently belonged, namely, the law student cohort, and more specifically, the first year UOW Law student cohort. The negative responses are perhaps indicative of the conflict between the need to belong and the need to be different, to retain one’s individuality, and a reaction against a feeling of pressure to conform (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

As to their ‘future’ community, a significant proportion of student responses indicated recognition of the Pledge as setting out a code of conduct that was aligned with the high standard of behaviour that would be expected of them as legal practitioners.

Within those responses that recognised this ‘future’ aspect to the Pledge, some students viewed this positively, indicating that, as law students, they had begun the journey to becoming a legal professional and that the Pledge was establishing the foundation for a standard of behaviour expected of lawyers and for entry to the profession. For these students, the Pledge seemed part of a continuum of behaviour or standards. Such responses included:

‘When I first read the pledge, it got me really excited to be a **part of the law community** but also raised awareness that this is an important course and that my behaviour really does reflect my studies and future career in law.’

‘It is a reminder to us as students that we are not just embarking on study for another job, in holding our expertise at the end of the degree we are going to be held responsible for acting to **ensure justice is maintained in the community**, which is something I think people don't often consider when first entering legal studies.’

Some students saw the Pledge as something more relevant to them in the future, than relevant to now, with their responses focusing on the standards expected of legal practitioners:

‘It serves as a reminder of the ethical expectations of the **profession...**’

‘I understood the purpose of the statement as being a way for students to fully grasp the intensity and importance of the **legal profession.**’

Other students, while recognising that a high standard of conduct would be expected of them in the future if they entered legal practice, expressed a sense of resentment or negativity in relation to the idea that such standards should apply to them now, when they had only just commenced their law studies. For these students, there was arguably a ‘disconnect’ between the student of law and the legal professional in terms of expected behavioural standards suggesting a reticence to identify as belonging now as a student to a wider group that encompassed members of the legal profession:

‘Honestly, I felt a bit put out. I'd barely been at law school for a day and then I was being pressured to consider (and in theory, sign) statements that were being imposed on me.’

Reactions to the Pledge changed over time for some students. Responses collected from teaching staff and from some students suggested that student perception of how the Pledge related to them as law student and future legal professional respectively and how it might connect the two was limited in the first semester of first year when students were only just beginning their studies. For some students, these things were perhaps better understood in second session, when after studying the mandatory ethics subject, they had a better understanding of the requirements for admission to practice. One seminar leader commented:

‘My perception...is that students didn't really understand the Pledge in first semester as they didn't understand the nature of Law School and the profession. Talking about the Pledge in second semester, when they have more experience of the law and have started studying professional ethics, seems to be more valuable as they have a better understanding of what joining a profession means...the Pledge makes more sense as it can be placed in better context.’

In reflecting upon this feedback, the Research Team nevertheless considered it fundamental to the purpose of the Pledge to introduce it at the beginning of their studies, and then provide appropriate scaffolding and deeper discussion over time. We did, however, identify the need to provide more information and training to the seminar leaders to ensure that they were able to provide sufficient content to students at the various points throughout the year.

Overall, for most students and staff there was a recognition (though in some cases a belated recognition) of a sense of being connected to others through the Pledge for both present and future communities.

## **Boundaries**

As identified in Section 4 of this article, a reflective practice approach has been central to the methodology of this research and the analysis of the students' comments demonstrated contrasting themes on the boundaries of belonging. That is, the Pledge evoked responses of both inclusion, such as shared values and a shared future, yet also exclusion, such as feelings of elitism and imposition. While the responses suggesting that the Pledge was inclusive reflected the aims of the project, the Research Team was surprised to see that, for some students, the Pledge was perceived as exclusive. For example, some student comments used the word 'pretentious', or a synonym of pretentious, to describe the Pledge:

'**Slightly pretentious** - though it has the potential to guide expected behaviour, simple faculty or campus rules suffice'

'Good in principle, left a bit to be desired, felt fairly **self-centered, almost egotistical** in a way'

'I found it very confusing and almost **elitist** that we needed to have a pledge to study law at UOW'

'My response initially was that the pledge was a part **pompous**. Although, the class was my first legal educational experience'

'thought it seemed a bit **pretentious**'

Yuval-Davis suggests that '[i]dentities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)'. While acknowledging that '[n]ot all these stories are about belonging', Yuval-Davis states that 'such stories often relate, directly or indirectly to self and/or others' perceptions of what being a member in such a grouping or collectivity ... might mean' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 202). Drawing on the work of Yuval-Davis, it is arguable that these narratives of 'who they are not' were evident in the above comments. That is, perhaps the view of the Pledge as pretentious did not align with how students saw themselves and therefore there was resistance to the Pledge. This raises interesting questions of exclusion. Did students feel that they were being excluded by the Pledge because it did not align with their 'cognitive stories' of who they are? Or did students feel the Pledge excluded others and therefore created boundaries of exclusion? This is connected to how first year law students may have attached broader meaning to belonging to the legal community. As Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 203) argues:

Belonging, therefore, is not just about social locations and constructions of individual and collective identities and attachments, but also about the ways these are valued and judged. Closely related to this are specific attitudes and ideologies concerning where and how identity and categorical boundaries are being/should be drawn, in more or less exclusionary ways, in more or less permeable ways.

These attitudes and boundaries can be seen in the above comments from students. Similarly, another aspect of exclusion was the feedback that the Pledge was perceived as an unnecessary imposition. Some staff expressed initial concerns:

'...I confess I was a little dubious at the potential engagement of students with the pledge. I thought they may struggle at first to see its relevance. I also felt some may consider it an imposition of sorts.'

The idea of the Pledge being viewed as an unwanted or unfair imposition was reflected in some of the student comments collected by one seminar leader. Several student comments referred to the Pledge as ‘daunting’ or ‘overwhelming’ or being used for the purpose of ‘behaviour management’ and showing a ‘lack of trust’. This was also evident in a few of the individual student comments such as:

‘... it felt like I was being told how to behave despite all ideals being basic common knowledge as to how a student should work and act during university.’

However, the analysis of the students’ comments also showed that the Pledge produced feelings of inclusion. In particular, students identified that the Pledge articulated shared values and a shared sense of future:

‘I thought it was a nice way for Law students to see the **core values** embodied throughout not only **our degree** but through **our future professional lives**.’

‘When I first read the pledge it got me really excited to be **a part of the law community**’

‘I guess like many students initially, the pledge does evoke a sense of **pride and passion** in the **work we are fortunate enough to deal with**.’

The use of the words ‘a part of’ and the collective pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ when discussing the future in the above three comments demonstrates a sense of inclusion and collectivity. The notion of a shared identity and shared values also came through in staff feedback with one seminar leader remarking that in the feedback she had received from students she saw

‘a core message/recognition from all groups that they see the pledge as an important guide to develop and maintain their unique identities’.

The idea that the Pledge could foster a sense of shared goals and values among students was also noted by another seminar leader who commented on an exercise that students undertook in seminars to draft their own Pledge. The seminar leader indicated that students demonstrated

‘...an ability to draw on the bigger themes of the course, including critical engagement, the centrality of ethics and even the pod goals they collectively formulated in week 1’.

The ‘Pod goals’ were a set of goals or objectives that each ‘Pod’ developed in the first week of their first session. The fact that students incorporated aspects of those collective goals into their draft pledges suggests an understanding of the Pledge as something that transcends the individual and reflects shared values.

The comments from students show how the Pledge could evoke layers of responses: for some students it was an inclusive instrument of shared values while for other students the Pledge was perceived as creating boundaries of difference and exclusion. Yet it is arguable that both responses of exclusion and inclusion are forms of processing the ‘imaginary boundary lines’ of belonging and deciding ‘whether they are “us” or “them”’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204). The importance of values in these imaginary boundary lines of belonging is well recognised. Given belonging is ‘always a dynamic process’, (Yuval-Davis, 2006) these responses of first year law students may also be examples of a process of an evolving re-evaluation of values and imaginary boundary lines as students transition to law school.

## Belonging in a more remote world

A strong sense of connection in education is often associated with presence in the room (Arbelo, 2020; MacMahon, 2020). In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the urgent and rapid

move to remote teaching and learning at UOW and, indeed, by universities across much of the world. Marler et al point out that the rapid spread of the pandemic saw about 91% of universities worldwide quickly transition to remote learning in 2020. They posited: ‘The fact that online learning is already associated with feeling alienated, lonely, and overall negatively about the learning process, online learning in the context of the pandemic is certainly cause for concern for students’ psychological well-being.’ (Marler et al., 2021, p. 2).

As the pandemic continued to impact the delivery of education throughout 2021, with the likelihood that the delivery of education would be forever changed, the Research Team were interested to explore whether the Pledge could operate as a supportive tool in the context of remote learning. Might the Pledge help to forge a sense of belonging in a time of physical distance and disconnection?

Recent studies of university students in China and the United States have indicated that the health fears, lockdown, quarantine measures and disruption to work and study brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted negatively on student well-being, causing psychological distress (Dewsbury & Mermin, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Marler et al., 2021; Wang & Zhao, 2020). Dewsbury and Mermin’s study of 91 students found that most students said they were stressed and felt disconnected from their university due to the sudden move to remote learning brought on by COVID-19. They found that the students’ concerns about connecting with their academics and their reduced social connection were greater than their concerns about their own health regarding COVID-19 (Dewsbury & Mermin, 2021, pp. 171-172).

Marler et al’s study in late 2020 sought to ascertain the impact that the sudden move to remote learning had on the sense of belonging and well-being of students at St Louis University. Their study (sample = 238) found that ‘when students feel they belong to a university and are socially accepted by peers, faculty, and the institution, they are likely more motivated to learn even during a pandemic that separates them physically’ (Marler et al., 2021, pp. 6-7). Further, they found that ‘college students who maintain academic motivation while feeling supported by their institution feel less distressed about the ongoing pandemic’ (Marler et al., 2021, p. 7).

As part of the reflective process on the current iteration of the Pledge, in 2021, an additional survey question (Q7) was added which asked students about whether the Pledge influenced or supported them during the period of remote learning and, if so, how.

Out of 32 responses received, two thirds of students (n=20) answered question 7 negatively using responses such as ‘No’, ‘Not really’, ‘Not particularly’, ‘Not considered’. There were 2 students who indicated they were ‘Not sure’. However, approximately 1/3 of students (n=10) responded positively, suggesting that the Pledge did influence them or provide particular support during remote learning. Their responses suggested that it served as a reminder of key values and the importance of well-being during this time. Positive responses included:

‘Yes, as a student who started off with remote learning in 2021, I think it was a good introduction to not only Foundations of Law but also Law school as a whole.’

‘Yes, I always remember the part of the Pledge that reminds us to value our well-being and take care of ourselves emotionally, mentally, and physically.’

Some students (n =4) expressed qualified support for the proposition; that is they indicated that the support or influence was limited or otherwise moderated their answer. For example:

‘...the pledge did help start off the feeling of being part of a cohort/profession, which continued for much of first semester. However, it has been too easy to lose that feeling during online learning.’

‘Not fully. Perhaps only furthering my understanding that I have to be encouraging and supportive of other students in online seminar classes.’

Closer examination of the negative responses indicated that, for some students, the remote learning environment undermined some of the core aims of the Pledge. Others appeared openly against the notion of the Pledge providing influence or support during remote learning:

‘No, I feel remote learning has almost reduced it.’

‘I do not feel that the Pledge has influenced or supported me during remote learning. I feel that to the contrary in some ways - the remote learning environment has caused myself to focus more on events at home and during online seminars rather than think about the Pledge or reflect on it.’

‘No, how on earth would it support me? The only thing that supports someone doing remote learning is information on the prospect of when it would end and any sort of social interaction with students that I have not yet had the opportunity to talk with yet.’

Interestingly, some of the students who offered a negative response to Q 7 responded positively to Q9 which asked ‘Are there any particular aspects of the Pledge that you felt were helpful to you?’ suggesting that there may have been benefits to the student that they were not necessarily aware of. For example, one student who had simply answered ‘No’ to question 7 responded more fully to Question 9 as follows:

‘The part about looking after your own mental wellbeing resonates with me and I'm sure a lot of other students, as it is a part of the pledge that is often lost along the way of trying to balance a career and studies. It is particularly important during these difficult times in lockdown.’

Similarly, two other students who had both responded ‘Not particularly’ to Question 7 responded to Question 9 respectively as follows:

‘I thought that the part regarding mental and physical health was a really helpful addition, which is important to keep in mind as one goes throughout studying and into their career.’

‘To know I'm not alone and my welfare is important.’

While the Pledge was not designed or introduced with the specific purpose of supporting students in the context of remote learning, the above student comments suggest that there may be potential to build in enhanced support in future iterations. More research needs to be done before there can be any real assessment as to the utility of a Pledge as a tool for fostering connection and belonging, and thereby helping to reduce student stress and disconnection, in the remote learning environment. Some of the responses highlighted above suggest, however, that for some students the Pledge may have played a role in helping them maintain a feeling of connection with their fellow students, their teachers, the University and the legal profession and that some aspects of the Pledge, particularly those aspects around student well-being and self-care, provided positive assistance.

## Conclusion

The introduction of the *Law Student Pledge* in 2017 found its origins in a desire to assist students to better understand and appreciate the transition from high school to university, by focusing on their purpose for embarking upon their studies. It aimed to signify a sense of belonging to the here and now of law school while also being a guiding symbol for their future professional identity. Through the mechanism of the Pledge, it was hoped that the students’ sense of belonging to a community of practice would be germinated.

Feedback collected over the three iterative improvements of the Pledge uncovered an expected range of responses on whether it was viewed as successful in engendering a sense of belonging. Some reactions focused on its present usefulness for them as students navigating law school; others displayed a focus on long-term goals of entering the legal profession. This highlights the multi-faceted nature of belonging. Although many responses, spanning the positive, negative and neutral, could initially be considered as inconsistent, analysis identified three key facets related to belonging: identity - belonging to one's self; community - belonging to a group; and boundaries - testing the limits to see where one belongs. Ongoing improvements on the Pledge will work to further investigate these themes.

Overall, the *Law Student Pledge* is believed to be beneficial in raising awareness on the relationship between connection and developing a positive professional identity. Fostering a sense of belonging is an ongoing process that thrives with attention to well-being, coupled with a sense of being valued as part of a community with shared identity. As articulated by one student, in response to the question, 'Has the Pledge had an impact on your professional and ethical identity as a law student and/or future professional?': *'I hope to carry it with me - I like the holistic nature of the Pledge. To value myself, my role as a future lawyer, the profession as a whole...'*



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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **SCHOOL OF LAW, UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

#### **LAW STUDENT PLEDGE<sup>1</sup>**

As I begin the study of law, I acknowledge and accept that I am joining an academic community and embarking on a professional career that imposes special obligations upon me. I understand that becoming a lawyer has both privileges and responsibilities. Accordingly, I will uphold the standards that are expressed in the UOW Student Charter. I understand my actions reflect not only upon myself, but also upon the university and the legal profession. I commit to serve my community with integrity and to study law with diligence. I will, at all times, uphold the highest standard of academic integrity and ethics, and conduct myself with dignity befitting a law student and future professional. I understand that my conduct as a law student prepares me for my future role as an officer of the court which I will become on admission as a lawyer, in which I am expected to uphold the highest standards of integrity in all my conduct that begins now as part of my university studies. I will treat student and academic staff, and other members of my community with courtesy and the utmost respect. This pledge I take freely and upon my honour.

<sup>1</sup> This Law Student Pledge has been adapted from the University of San Diego's Student Oath.

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Statement of Law Student Ideals**

As a new law student, I commit to study law with diligence and integrity. I acknowledge that whether I choose to practice as a lawyer or use the knowledge and skills I gain studying law in another field, I will be expected to uphold the highest standards of personal and professional conduct and that these standards apply from the commencement of my studies. I acknowledge and commit to the UOW Student Charter and will conduct myself with the highest standards of integrity expected of a student of law, future professional and community leader. I acknowledge that commitment to the study of law is a commitment to understanding and respecting the rights of others. I will treat fellow students and academic staff with respect, and will be mindful of the importance of my mental and physical well-being as I progress through my studies and beyond. I will have the courage to question and think independently with an active commitment to social justice.