

# First-year law student peer mentoring via podcast

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Dr Anita Mackay  
La Trobe Law School

(Research assistance by Tiziana D'Costa)

# Overview

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- Brief background about the first year law subject
- Overview of podcast series
- How the podcast is a form of peer mentoring
- Three aims of series
- How the podcasts fit with transition pedagogy and support student wellbeing
- 'Hidden' benefit: interviewees engaging in reflective practice

# Legal Institutions and Methods

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- Foundational law subject; approx. 200 students across 2 campuses in first semester, and 50 students at one campus in second semester.
- One assessment is a report on observations of court proceedings.
- High proportion of first in family students
- As coordinator I have tried to actively address the challenges associated with transition to university (exacerbated by lockdowns in 2020 & 2021).

# Podcast series

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- Began in 2017; approximately 2 podcast recordings per year
- Total of 14 students interviewed across 12 recordings (2 x interviews with 2 students)
  - 9 female; 5 male
  - 4 mature-age students; 10 school leavers
  - 2 students at the regional campus; 12 at the main campus
- Sample questions:
  - “what was a highlight of LIM for you?”
  - “what do you know now that you wish you knew at the beginning of the semester?”
- Specific topics: online learning, repeating the subject, exam success

# Recruiting students to interview

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- Inviting students I have gotten to know in my own seminar groups.
- Call out on the LMS at the end of semester; interviews take place in the following semester.
- Once established, easier to recruit students because they found the podcasts useful when they commenced and they want to give something back.
- High proportion of students interviewed go on to be part of the Law Students' Association executive.

# 1. Allay commencing students' concerns about studying law

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- “if you haven't done legal studies I don't think you should be worried at all ... the subject doesn't assume prior knowledge”
- “it's not like your being thrust into a super intensive law subject where you need to already have key research skills and key problem-solving skills; the subject is specifically designed to cater to everyone no matter their background”
- “as a mature aged student who hasn't done VCE legal studies for 10 years it's a really great refresher”
- “it's not as intense as you think the first semester of university might be”

## 2. Generate excitement amongst commencing students

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- Content: “it galvanised me a bit and made me a bit more passionate. It gave a human face to the topic because the law can be dry”
- Visiting court: “going to court made it more of a practical experience to see court proceedings right in front of your eyes”
- “seeing the actual operation of the case in court is really rewarding and really helps you get a practical sense of what you are learning”
- On campus classes: “the seminars honestly were a highlight of the semester; going in and working with different people every week; going through case briefs – honestly it was the best preparation...seminars were so practical and just a load of fun”

### 3. Practical tips for success from peers

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- Attendance: “attend all your seminars; if you’re confused the best place to be is in the seminars”
- Study groups: “benefit of getting to know people and having study groups is you’re all trying to figure out what the answers are and you can bounce questions and answers off other people”
- Time management: “have an organised schedule that makes the semester go smoothly and not be too difficult”
- Self-care: “maintain a balance and that doesn’t only mean a work balance; I think having a social life balance as well. Making sure you have distributed your time”



# Transition pedagogy & wellbeing

- Addresses 'imposter syndrome' and the 'confusion, self-doubt and uncertainty' that first-years experience (McNamara et.al., 2009:7) (Podcast Goal 1)
- Transition pedagogy recommends that the first year of university 'should foster a critical sense of belonging and student identity, through involvement and connectedness with the student's university and discipline experiences' (Kift, 2015: 54) (Podcast Goal 2)
- First year is 'where students establish (or not) their self-efficacy and positive patterns and habits of study' (Kift, 2015: 54). (Podcast Goal 3)
- Engagement as a way of 'promoting psychological health' article recommends academics 'consider ways in which students might actively help themselves to cope with the rigours and stresses of law school' (Duffy et.al., 2011:253) (Podcast Goal 3)
- Same article recommends academics 'demonstrate concern for students and their learning' because 'students will better engage with their legal education if they are taught by academic staff who show a genuine interest in them' (Duffy et.al., 2011:251).

# Reflective practice

- Threshold Learning Outcome 6(b) Self-management requires graduates to ‘reflect on and assess their own capabilities and performance’.
- Support for teaching reflective practice in first year e.g. Noakes and Cody, 2022; McNamara et.al., 2009; Field & Duffy, 2009.
- Considering first impressions (including emotions) ie. how their perspective changed from before commencing the subject to during
- How much they learnt during the semester
- The highs and lows during the semester
- How the subject has been useful in later subjects (subjects in the following semester).
- Specific example: student who failed the student on their first attempt, then passed on their second attempt. Spoke about what she did differently.

# Conclusion

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## Cons

- No interaction between mentors and mentees
  - neither mentors/mentees developing inter-personal skills
  - mentees cannot ask their own questions
- Does not build type of connections between year levels that in-person peer mentoring schemes can

## Pros

- Peer-mentoring that is not resource intensive (minimal time commitment for both mentors and the subject-coordinator)
- Captures advice that students can access 'on demand'
- Interviewees reflecting on their own experiences and self-development
- New students reassured and perhaps more likely to succeed if find their peers' advice helpful
- Supports transition to law school and student wellbeing

# References

- Noakes & Cody (2022) 'Building a (Self) Reflective Muscle in Diverse First-Year Law Students' *Legal Education Review*
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