

I came on board as Editor-in-Chief for Volume 19 of the Legal Education Review (LER) in 2009, having been Production Editor for the previous two volumes. I saw four volumes to fruition, and was pleased particularly with the contributions of our authors on student wellbeing and embedding Indigenous perspectives in the law curriculum. There was a standout article in each volume, and they warrant individual mention here.

In Volume 19, Massimiliano Tani and Prue Vines' important article showed the link between law student attitudes to education and the alarming rate of depression in law school and the legal profession. In Volume 20 Melissa Castan, Jeannie Paterson, Paul Richardson, Helen Watt and Maryanne Dever's study on commencing law student expectations and career aspirations, showed a particularly high level of optimism amongst both male and female law students, in marked contrast to the reported levels of depression and stress in later year law students and in the legal profession. What was happening to law students during their time in law school – was law school a toxic environment? In Volume 21 Molly Townes O'Brien, Stephen Tang and Kath Hall shared the outcomes of their empirical research into the relationship between student distress and the law curriculum, identifying changes in student thinking styles, self-concept and sense of wellbeing. And in Volume 22, Wendy Larcombe, Ian Malkin and Pip Nicholson published their research into changes in law student wellbeing across the course of their law studies. The article reinforced the link between non-intrinsic student motivations and psychological distress, and also showed that student expectations have a role to play. Students with high levels of psychological distress often still expected themselves to perform at the top of their class. Cumulatively, these articles are helping shed light on the dynamic of law student and lawyer depression, and I look forward to reading further research on this topic in coming issues.

For Volume 23 I passed custody of the LER to the very able Professor Nick James, who had served as Associate Editor for the previous three volumes. As with all changes in leadership, Nick has brought with him a fresh and exciting focus, starting with the interesting special issue topic of critical legal education. I have continued on with the journal, as Executive Editor.

During my time as Editor-in-Chief, the low point was the introduction of journal rankings in Australia, through a process that lacked transparency, procedural fairness and accountability. It was everything that went against the principles of law we teach, and is an indictment on us all, and particularly the then Chair of the Council of Australian Law Deans (CALD). Australian Deans were sucked into a process and lacked effective leadership to properly resist. The Australian Research Council (ARC) had, in mid-2008, tried to force the Law Deans' hand by issuing a draft rankings list based on the American Washington and Lee Journal Rankings, thereby shifting the debate from whether we should rank journals, to how we should rank them. This was followed by a listing by a steering committee hastily established by the Council of Australian Law Deans (CALD) and given no clear guidelines or adequate time, and I understand the draft rankings were largely the work of one law academic who ranked the journals she read and published in highly, and others lowly.

In the wash up, the LER moved from an A\* in the education list to a C in the law list, without there being any request made to us to provide any metrics to those undertaking the ranking. I wrote to the ARC seeking an indication of the criteria upon which the journals were ranked, the process by which journals were consulted, and the established procedures for review of decisions. The response was extremely unsatisfactory. It did not refer to the fact that other journal editors were approached about their acceptance and rejection rates, using a template provided by the ARC, nor did it provide a copy of such a template for the Committee to complete. Instead the draft rankings were simply confirmed and LER remained a C journal. Upon writing again to the ARC, we were told not to worry,

the error could be corrected in the next round of journal rankings. Of course, the rest is history – the journal rankings were officially disbanded in mid-2011, but continue to be used as a proxy indicator of research quality, and there is simply no way to correct the obvious error for LER. It is a testament to our authors and the strength of our journal that we continued to receive articles of similar volume and quality, and we steadfastly refused to drop our editorial standards.

Another key shift that took place in the years of being Editor-in-Chief was the shift in focus from graduate attributes to Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs). I congratulate the work of Professors Sally Kift and Mark Israel, Discipline Scholars in the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), in their broadly consultative process in establishing six TLOs for the LLB as the minimum learning outcomes to meet a level 7 (bachelor degree) course under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) administered by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). The six TLOs are Knowledge, Ethics and Professional Responsibility, Thinking Skills, Research Skills, Communication and Collaboration, and Self-Management.

Since then much has been said and written about the TLOs and although they were intended to set the lower bar – the minimum required for any LLB – they are being bandied about as if law schools should be striving for compliance with them. I fear that what we will see is a ‘race to the bottom’ and minimalism will breed homogenisation. Law schools should perform above and beyond the TLOs – the low bar – and perform at the level of graduate attributes – the high bar – which allow for differentiation amongst law schools, with some taking more of a social justice focus, others through international focus, technology, or producing ‘practice ready’ graduates.

Lastly, let me comment on the current predicament of law academics. Gone are the days when sabbatical was a sabbatical, when being a law academic meant taking time to reflect upon the law and be led by interest and curiosity to further knowledge through research. Now are the days where one must be teaching and research active, and the pressure to publish for ‘points’ tempts authors to largely regurgitate that which has been said in their legal area a dozen or more times before. Meanwhile other useful pursuits such as texts and monographs continue to fall by the wayside, pointless (but by no means pointless). They are not to be blamed for this – the increases in workload and crystallisation of promotion criteria drive those who wish to play ball to jump, while those who do not, to run from the profession. It is indeed timely that the subject of our Special Issue in 2013 is on critical legal education and specifically a critique of the impact of neoliberalism on legal education. I for one look forward to reading it.

Dr Michelle Sanson  
Editor-in-Chief 2009 to 2012