**“Make Glorious Mistakes!”**

**Fostering growth and wellbeing**

**in HE transition**

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**Abstract**

*This paper uses Keele’s Legal Essentials module as a case study to evaluate how curriculum design can promote wellbeing in first-year Law students, by supporting their transition to HE and fostering a sense of belonging to the Law School community. Module design is grounded in recognition that the orientation process for new law students should emphasise the importance of wellbeing[[1]](#footnote-1) and that wellbeing initiatives are most effective when integrated into the curriculum.[[2]](#footnote-2) Legal Essentials aims to give new Law students an early experience of a community grounded in collaboration and authentic critical engagement,* *where risk-taking is fostered and supported. Module delivery incorporates co-teaching and panel-style discussions, including more senior students and members of the wider legal world. Academics, students, and professionals thereby share their own experiences of learning, practice, and wellbeing, modelling a community where vulnerability is not a weakness and collaboration is encouraged.*

***Keywords:*** *transition,**curriculum design, community, wellbeing*

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**1. Introduction**

This paper examines how curriculum design can promote wellbeing in first-year Law students. It focuses on two vital, inter-related functions of legal education: how curriculum design can support students’ transition to higher education; and how it can help foster their sense of identity as members of the Law School community.[[3]](#footnote-3) The paper uses Keele’s new Legal Essentials module as a case study through which these questions can be analysed. It will describe how the module is designed to respond to the challenges facing student wellbeing, including recognition of some particular characteristics of Law students revealed in the literature. It will examine the effect of traditional legal education on the wellbeing of both students and academics, with reference to the sense – or absence – of positive identity, community and belonging. The paper will then consider the issues raised by transition to higher education, before going on to discuss Legal Essentials’ curriculum design for wellbeing. It will conclude with an analysis of student feedback, team refection, and suggestions for future module and curriculum development. Throughout the paper, the impact of Covid on student and staff wellbeing will be considered.

The data on student wellbeing is well documented,[[4]](#footnote-4) and emerging research into the impact of Covid-19 on education reveals an additional risk of ‘reduced motivation toward studies, increased pressures to learn independently, abandonment of daily routines, and potentially higher rates of dropout’ resulting in ‘an unprecedented mental health burden on students’.[[5]](#footnote-5) The literature also highlights long-standing concerns over Law students in particular. Law students are highly vulnerable to comparing themselves negatively to others; they are concerned about not being as “smart” as other students, and they often feel “lost” because they believe that they do not understand as much as everyone else, especially in the first year.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, legal education, which tends to emphasise doctrinal content and linear thinking, has the effect of promoting ‘personality traits such as defensiveness, perfectionism and pessimism which can lead to unhappiness’.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is partly due to how Law students are trained to approach legal issues; the LLB degree seeks to develop their logical, analytical and rational capabilities, as illustrated by concepts such as “Thinking Like a Lawyer”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Law students find themselves early on in an adversarial environment, where legal issues are presented as problems, and where students are asked to advise one side. Legal Essentials was designed to respond to these problems and give new Law students the experience of a community where vulnerability is not a weakness and collaboration is encouraged. It aims to develop students’ sense of belonging through active engagement with the educational community.[[9]](#footnote-9)

*Why Legal Essentials?*

Legal Essentials is a redesign and blending of Induction and the Legal Skills module, comprised of four concurrent and inter-related streams focused on “thinking”, “making”, “doing”, and “being” Law. *Thinking Law* encourages students to think critically and become confident in analysing and challenging legal concepts, arguments, and decisions. *Making Law* involves understanding and critically examining the English legal system, with an emphasis on access to justice. *Doing Law* focuses on scholarship and subject-related study skills. *Being Law* supports students to develop their personal and professional resources, helping to build affiliation with the School community and foster an authentic sense of identity that will benefit their wellbeing. Our motto is *“Make glorious mistakes!”*, borrowed from writer Neil Gaiman’s 2011 New Year message:

I hope that in this year to come, you make mistakes. Because if you are making mistakes, then you are making new things, trying new things, learning, living, pushing yourself, changing yourself, changing your world. You're doing things you've never done before, and more importantly, you're Doing Something. So that's my wish for you… Make New Mistakes. Make glorious, amazing mistakes. Make mistakes nobody's ever made before. Don't freeze, don't stop, don't worry that it isn't good enough, or it isn't perfect, whatever it is: art, or love, or work or family or life. Whatever it is you're scared of doing, do it. Make your mistakes, next year and forever.[[10]](#footnote-10)

We include this message in our welcome and induction materials and refer to it throughout the module, to emphasise the importance of engagement and to encourage students to see their academic and personal development holistically, in a challenging but supportive and collaborative community.

Legal Essentials involves an intensive, high-contact, extended induction period in weeks 1-3, scaffolded by a further five weeks of skill- and self-development alongside the core Law modules which begin in week 4. During the first three weeks, we deliver a range of knowledge, activity, skills, and wellbeing sessions through a mixture of seminars, workshops, lectures, and panel discussions, introducing the four Legal Essentials streams. Module assessment is a two-stage process: in week 5, an online multiple-choice quiz tests students’ knowledge of the English legal system; and in week 9, students write a critical analysis of a short article on a current socio-legal issue, or an analysis of a topical case. Feedback on the written exercise is given before the main assessment period, so that students better understand how to approach their core module assessments.

Module delivery incorporates co-teaching, including “live performances” of critical discussion, to show that law and legal knowledge is up for debate – including team members’ own research! We also use panel-style discussions, including more senior Law students and members of the professional legal community. The teaching team models authenticity, vulnerability, and resilience (for example, by relating our own experiences of imposter syndrome and coping with setbacks and rejection – see further, section 4). Through teamwork, open discussion, and debate across the four streams, and the co-creation of some aspects of the module (see section 5), the aim is to give new Law students an early experience of community grounded in collaboration and authentic critical engagement.

Of course, module delivery had to adapt to the move from in-situ to online learning during the Covid pandemic in 2020-21. One of the consequences of the online pivot was the loss of synchronous whole cohort or large group sessions – replaced by shorter, recorded lectures – with tutorials or seminars remaining “live”, albeit online. This made sense for courses that were based on the traditional lecture and tutorial/seminar format, but the extended Induction part of Legal Essentials was not designed on this basis. We therefore had to lose our whole-cohort, co-taught, panel-style, live discussion and debate sessions, and we did not have the resources to deliver them across the small group seminars in the same way. This meant we had to work harder to avoid lapsing back into the traditional educational approach.

**2. The effect of traditional legal education on wellbeing**

*Student wellbeing*

Whether online or in situ, research suggests that Law students experience a particular alienation from the personal dimension of their learning experience, which can negatively affect their mental health. Tani and Vines’ comparative study[[11]](#footnote-11) of Law and Medicine students highlighted some telling differences between the cohorts, including a prevalence of certain characteristics[[12]](#footnote-12) amongst Law students. For example, more Law students are likely to be studying the degree for external reasons, such as parental influence; they are less likely to find their subject intrinsically interesting; are more likely to believe that employers look at grades rather than personal or social characteristics; tend to dislike group work; are less likely to say that they are at university to learn; and are more likely to view friendships through the prism of networking and career advancement opportunities. Such traits ‘may indeed have a significant impact on law students’ likelihood of developing depression’, particularly as ‘law students may have feelings of less autonomy and less social connectedness than may be optimal for mental health’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moreover, the competitive nature of Law students is a likely indication of reduced personal autonomy, as it suggests a dependence on external measures for self-evaluation and self-esteem.[[14]](#footnote-14)

It is therefore important to foster a positive academic identity, and a sense of community belonging, to ameliorate these tendencies. Students’ capacity to develop a strong academic identity is closely related to their social identity; to their concept of self, arising from their membership of – and sense of belonging to – a social group. People with stronger social identities are less likely to blame negative life events on internal causes such as personal shortcomings;[[15]](#footnote-15) furthermore, social connectedness may enhance individual motivation.[[16]](#footnote-16) Lack of social connectedness is the ‘strongest predictor of all adjustment outcomes’ and a key risk factor in depression,[[17]](#footnote-17) and such psychological issues can inhibit learning and promote disengagement.[[18]](#footnote-18) Unfortunately, Law students experience barriers to recognising and seeking support for their wellbeing, whether professionally or from their social networks.[[19]](#footnote-19) Young people in general are less likely to feel they have someone to rely on or a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood,[[20]](#footnote-20) yet good social networks and peer relationships clearly have a protective influence against mental health difficulties.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is important to recognise that mental health is not simply a problem for individuals,[[22]](#footnote-22) but rather a problem for communities –including Law schools.

The Law School during the Covid pandemic was, of course, a very different place. While we were keen to move away from some of the *content* of traditional legal education, we had not foreseen the move away from traditional *delivery* of legal education that happened in 2020-21. The online pivot meant that there was no “community” in the traditional, physical sense. Moreover, both students and staff were coping with a highly stressful set of circumstances. As Jones highlights, there is ‘evidence that high levels of stress and stress over a longer duration can result in memory impairment and inhibit neural plasticity. Students will “worry more than learn” and begin to practice avoidance tactics’. [[23]](#footnote-23) This high level of stress on both sides, coupled with an unprecedented move away from in-person contact, was a clear challenge to the sense of community we were so keen to foster. There was a marked effect on staff wellbeing as a result.

*Staff wellbeing*

Peake and Mullings capture vividly the challenges facing the mental health of academic staff:

Academics are possibly the worst “role models” for a different sort of academy, as the model that most of us embrace continues to be one of continuous achievement, and a capacity to take on work that is infinitely elastic. Indeed, we could be considered ideal neoliberal subjects because (supposedly) we respond well to the discourses of meritocracy and individual responsibility, achievement, advancement, persistence, competition, and the winner-takes-all ethos that currently structures and disciplines all in places of higher learning.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Academic life is characterised by ‘…isolated, individualized working practices; intense workloads and time pressures; long hours and the elision of barriers between work and home’.[[25]](#footnote-25) This situation was exacerbated during the pandemic. The first year of Legal Essentials – particularly the extended intensive induction period – was certainly stressful for the teaching team. We consciously tried to maintain our sense of team belonging; we met regularly in informal settings whenever we could and gave each other personal and practical support. During the pandemic, however, opportunities for informal support and stress relief had to be actively sought out rather than being readily available to us. It meant that it was much harder for us to be ‘leading by emotional example’.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Added to this is the emotional labour involved in teaching.[[27]](#footnote-27) University lecturers report significantly higher levels of emotional labour than other occupations, including mental health nurses.[[28]](#footnote-28) A key reason for this is the dissonance lecturers can experience between their teaching personae and their true feelings.[[29]](#footnote-29) But when emotional labour is conducted for the benefit of students, or for a teacher’s own reward and satisfaction, rather than because of organisational demand display rules, job satisfaction can actually increase.[[30]](#footnote-30) This is why authenticity in teaching and learning is so important. Unfortunately, it can be so difficult to achieve, especially in the present neoliberal university landscape, with its culture of individualism that fails to make adequate room for autonomy[[31]](#footnote-31) or authenticity.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In summary, while Law students (and indeed Law academics) may traditionally be trained and encouraged to think in a logical, rational manner, it is unrealistic to deny the centrality of emotion to law and legal education. Indeed, ‘the life of the law is, to a great extent, about the emotional life of a community; about its emotional relationships, its troubles and temptations, its conflicts and forms of resolving them’.[[33]](#footnote-33) So when Law teachers ‘try to motivate students… they are appealing for an emotional response, a response which can become a launching pad for the emergence of the intellectual response’.[[34]](#footnote-34) Encouraging students to draw on their emotions to construct learning experiences can be a challenge, but it can also be a powerful tool. Legal Essentials’ wellbeing focus is underpinned by these humanist and person-centred approaches[[35]](#footnote-35) to design, delivery, and feedback and by bringing together a team of lecturers with diverse academic and personal histories to support students’ transition to HE.

**3. Law students at transition**

Learning and teaching in higher education involves a transition from pedagogy towards andragogy. Andragogy constructs the learning experience as intrinsically motivated and self-directed.[[36]](#footnote-36) Higher Education institutions have traditionally assumed that students will arrive fully formed as self-motivating, organised, mature adults, but in fact we inherit new learners who are not necessarily equipped for active participation in, or recognition of, their learning. The challenge of moving from pedagogy to andragogy is due to two key gaps between further and higher education. Firstly, there is an institutional gap, because further and higher education curricula are structured so differently. Secondly, there is an interpersonal gap, in how students relate to academics and their own peers, in the modified and student-led environment. The “active participant” in learning is an ‘individual and intricate interaction of values, goals, motivation, expectations and engagement… imbued with, and profoundly influenced by, emotions’.[[37]](#footnote-37) This suggests a significant emotional discrepancy occurring within the student at transition.

Moreover, the process of transitioning to higher education also involves an expectation that students actively develop their own response to learning[[38]](#footnote-38) (outside of the institutional structure) and an ability to be able to think about their own thinking and learning (meta-cognition).[[39]](#footnote-39) This may be a challenge for students who have not hitherto positively recognised themselves in the learning process. Legal Essentials incorporated tasks to support the development of meta-cognition, helping students recognise themselves and their actions within the transition process. The extended induction encourages students to reflect on their previous participation and activities in the learning process, providing opportunities for self-evaluation early in the module (see further, section 5). The aim is to move the student towards a positive self-image built on new experiences, and the confidence to accept change and challenge as part of the new learning process.[[40]](#footnote-40) The significance of this opportunity for change mirrors the signposts towards a growth mindset.[[41]](#footnote-41) A fixed mindset[[42]](#footnote-42) at the transition stage creates a sense of low self-efficacy and hopelessness: “I don’t understand” or “I can’t do it” is seen, not as a temporary hurdle to overcome, but as a permanent obstruction. This, understandably, has a negative impact on both learning and wellbeing, and can lead to shame, anxiety, and disengagement. Module, design was therefore underpinned by a focus on active participation; a move away from teacher-led learning[[43]](#footnote-43) towards encouraging exploration, risk-taking, and the making of mistakes in the process. This shift in focus was also aimed at reducing the anxiety about changes to the teaching environment and study practices.[[44]](#footnote-44) During the induction weeks, purposely positive dialogue was designed to build trust in the Law School community, allowing the student to trust that they would be supported and guided through the initial learning process[[45]](#footnote-45) and their progression to other course modules. Recognising also that Law students tend to take an instrumental, extrinsically motivated approach to their studies,[[46]](#footnote-46) Legal Essentials has also drawn on self-determination theory to support and develop students’ sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence in the learning process (see further, section 5).[[47]](#footnote-47)

**4. Session Design for Wellbeing**

*Pilot: Wellbeing Awareness*

Before Legal Essentials was implemented, we developed an hour-long pilot session on wellbeing awareness called “It’s OK not to be OK”,[[48]](#footnote-48) to be delivered to the first-year cohort midway through the first semester. The session aimed to raise awareness that studying Law can be psychologically and emotionally challenging; to remove stigma attached to mental health difficulties; and to encourage students to see the Law School as a supportive community. During the session, we used Mentimeter to discover how students were feeling and how they were coping (or not). We used Mentimeter so that students could contribute anonymously – and we could respond – in real time. We also had a discussion panel made up of lecturers, our Learning Support specialist, and a PhD student who had also been a Keele undergraduate. The aim was to normalise the challenges facing students and to show that these challenges can be survived. We used the panel discussion as a means of modelling openness; panel members shared their own experiences and thereby gave students a real-life illustration of a supportive academic community.

Students’ responses confirmed the research findings: 55% had already experienced a decline in their mental health by week 6, with “friends”, “workload” and “stress” cited as the most common causes. As a result, students commonly felt “frustrated”, ‘suicidal”, and “low”. In response to these worrying answers, the panel had to show we acknowledged their distress and were not going to shy away from difficult topics; the students had revealed their vulnerability and we had to give them a sense of safety and optimism. We shared our own experiences of similar feelings and talked about how we got through them. Importantly, we shared how we had experienced failure as academics, to show that setbacks were not a measure of their potential – they were, indeed, part of life. We emphasised how important it was to be kind to themselves and to seek support – and we gave them clear signposts to sources of this support.

Benefits

Students told us that they would take away messages such as “help”, “talk to people”, “coping strategies”, “you’re not alone”, “it’s OK not to be OK”; and – our personal favourite – “everyone has shit”! The session was a good example of student-led teaching and co-creation of learning. We designed the session with a framework based on research into legal education, but most of the discussion was driven by students’ answers to the poll. Some students actually asked questions during the session and shared their own feelings and difficulties. This showed that they felt safe in the environment we had created. By using Mentimeter to allow anonymity, and by showing students that their peers – and their teachers – had similar feelings, it seemed to give some of them the confidence to share their struggles out loud. The session was also a good example of modelling “community” by showing students what a collaborative and supportive learning community looks like. Following the session, our Learning Support specialist reported an increase in students being willing to disclose difficult feelings, as part of their academic skills discussions. We had similar feedback from personal tutors. This helped to inform our planning for the Legal Essentials module – treating first-year induction and skills training holistically, as a process involving the “whole student”.

Limitations

Attendance at the session was less than 50%. The only slot available to us was aFriday morning, which may have been a disincentive, particularly as students knew it did not count towards assessment. In addition to this instrumental approach, it is likely that many students simply thought, “I’m already OK, thanks”*.* During the session, there was a small reduction in the number of responses to our questions. Students may have found it difficult to articulate their feelings; or they may have felt inhibited in doing so. Some of the responses were immature, but theresearch on student response systems such as Mentimeter had warned us to expect this.[[49]](#footnote-49) It is possible that such responses were driven byembarrassment or shame.We chose not to indulge these, and instead we focused on the meaningful responses.

*It’s OK not to be OK* was delivered again as a standalone session in the first year of Legal Essentials (2019-20). Students’ responses to the questions were broadly similar, confirming that the challenges to Law student wellbeing at transition are ongoing. Delivery in the 2020-21 academic year was of course affected by the move to online teaching during the pandemic. As there was no synchronous large-group teaching, and the session design required a large group to provide the safety of anonymity, we tried instead to integrate wellbeing messages into other module sessions, as the following examples illustrate.

**5. Integrating Wellbeing into Curriculum Design**

*(i) Skills Development*

Legal Essentials takes a holistic approach to legal skills and reminds students that they bring acquired academic skills with them on transition to HE. For example, in a week 1 seminar, we ask students to reflect on and share their existing characteristics and qualities – academic and personal – along with those they want to develop. We devised a skills template to aid thinking and discussion, and we shared our own experiences of personal and academic skills development – past and present – as examples. This enabled us to deliver the messages from the original themes of *It’s OK not to be OK*: life and study – getting the balance right; coping when things go wrong; recognising when you are not OK; and support for wellbeing. We revisited this discussion in week 8 as our final seminar: we asked students to reflect on their development; celebrated any “wins” (academic or personal) and signposted them to sources of support where necessary.

*(ii) Induction Project: “It’s Not Fair!”*

This project was designed in response to the move to online learning in 2020-21 and took place during the first three weeks of the module. It aimed to acclimatise students to online learning and – through supported group work – to develop their sense of belonging to the Law School community. Students worked in small groups to devise and present arguments on a legal issue that made them feel “It’s not fair!”: a law that they would like to introduce, repeal, or amend. Popular topics included legalisation of drugs and prison abolition*.* Emphasis was placed on students working together to create interesting arguments. They were not required to undertake formal legal research, although research advice was available from our Library colleague had they wished to do so. Mindful of programmes like “Thinking like a lawyer” being criticised for having ‘pessimistic and depersonalizing’[[50]](#footnote-50) effects and valorising the adversarial approach,[[51]](#footnote-51) teams were not required to argue against each other; the ethos was co-operative rather than adversarial.

This was another good example of co-created teaching and learning; of building communities of practice through small group activities. We wanted students to take risks and be creative in their ideas and arguments, and we did not want to place any barriers to their engagement, such as a requirement for specific skills or expertise.[[52]](#footnote-52) However, students exceeded our expectations; they all undertook some research; all used visual aids in their presentations; and all team members took part in some way – even if it was simply managing the slideshow. Following each presentation, other members of the seminar group were invited to ask questions and/or make comments on the arguments presented, leading to some interesting discussions. And following the seminar, students completed a template giving constructive feedback on each other’s presentations, for sharing within their seminar group. The project gave us an insight into the kinds of issues that students were interested in, and we were able to reflect their interests in the rest of the module and in the assessment. For example, in view of the popularity of the *Prison Abolition* topic, one of the subsequent Critical Analysis sessions was centred on an abolitionist article, and one of their Critical Writing assessment choices was an article on prison reform. This meant that we could relate the Induction project to their wider learning across the module.

*(iii) What sort of lawyer am I?*

Research suggests that the first year of the Law degree should be used to encourage students to develop a 'positive professional identity’.[[53]](#footnote-53) This positive identity can, in turn, increase intrinsic motivation and develop students’ understanding of the broader role of legal education in society.[[54]](#footnote-54) Students had evaluated positively a session given the previous year that included a panel of legal and law-related professionals, but for logistical reasons it was not possible to replicate this in the pivot to online delivery during 2020-21. Instead, one of the team liaised with a diverse group of legal professionals to record semi-structured videos for the students to watch asynchronously. We asked students to consider which professional(s) they most related to, and why; and what key messages they took from the videos. It was interesting – for us and the students – to note that all the professionals mentioned “authenticity” as being an important factor in their success and happiness. This was an important message for the students to hear, and it may have helped them see the link between work and wellbeing.

**6. Research goals, methodology and results**

*Research goals*

We collected data on the first year of delivery of Legal Essentials in 2019-20. Our aim was to understand students’ experience of transition to HE, rather than simply to assess module delivery module resources. We did not want to simply duplicate the existing school survey which gathers data on the general student experience, teaching, and delivery of modules. Our survey questions aimed instead at focusing students on the utility or helpfulness of each teaching session.[[55]](#footnote-55) We asked students to evaluate their own developing knowledge and skills; the extent to which they felt part of the Law School community; and how confident they felt in navigating sources of support.

*Research method*

We asked students to evaluate their own experience of the 3-week extended induction by means of a brief[[56]](#footnote-56) self-administered[[57]](#footnote-57) online questionnaire,[[58]](#footnote-58) before their core modules commenced in week 4. The questions comprised short statements with a numerical evaluation to indicate levels of agreement or disagreement. Our questionnaire was designed to capture both quantitative data in the form of numerical scores[[59]](#footnote-59) and qualitative feedback through individual comments. We chose a questionnaire as the most efficient way of collecting data, although in future it would be useful to combine this method with a focus group to capture richer data.[[60]](#footnote-60) The benefit of using the online survey included easier administration and distribution, as well as the data being automatically complied.[[61]](#footnote-61) The online aspect helped ensure the survey was anonymous, and meant students could choose whether or not they participated,[[62]](#footnote-62) thereby limiting any effects that staff may have had on the survey process.[[63]](#footnote-63) We reminded students that the survey was part of a teaching and learning design research project. We had explained the research as a team at the beginning of the induction process, and again at the point of questionnaire release, requesting consent to use the anonymous responses. The survey launch was supported by a question-and-answer session hosted by member of the teaching team. The whole level 4 cohort (193 students) was invited to complete the questionnaire; 43% (83 students) answered all or part of it.

*Results*

Respondents tended to favour the law-based sessions in the “Making Law” and “Thinking Law” streams, eg *Judicial Law-making*, *Legal Reasoning* and *Critical Analysis* – more than the explicitly “personal” sessions, eg *It’s OK not to be OK*, *Team Building* and *Mindfulness in Study*. These findings seem to reflect the research on Law students’ instrumental approach to their studies, and their prioritisation of developing knowledge of law and legal study skills over the intra- and interpersonal realm. This suggests, in turn, that the cohort was more focused on the transition into the *subject* rather than the transition into higher education itself. Nevertheless, feedback does suggest that Legal Essentials has supported, at least to some extent, the wellbeing of students in their transition to HE. The efficacy of the “Being Law” stream is reflected in the data showing that, after three weeks, 95% of respondents had a clearer sense of the Law School community; 75% felt confident asking for help; and 80% felt supported by the School.

The responses emphasise the importance of integrating wellbeing more deeply, giving subliminal wellbeing messages throughout the course – in much the same way as a caregiver will smuggle vegetables into a pasta dish for a reluctant child! The danger of “smuggling” wellbeing messages into the module (and the curriculum more broadly) is that some students may not acknowledge the need to discuss their wellbeing openly. This can be ameliorated by making the messages a natural part of both teaching and general interactions with students. For example, we can begin sessions by encouraging students to “check in” with themselves (and we, as teachers, can also do this as a means of modelling self-awareness and self-care): how are they feeling today? Are they tired, confused, unprepared or bored? Are they excited by the topic but nervous about asking questions? Are they stressed about something outside their studies? And we can scaffold messages of support throughout the module by signposting to academic and emotional sources of help.

Finally, students were asked to identify the most important thing that they had learned during the three-week induction. Students found messages regarding *study*, *legal skills* and the “*make glorious mistakes”* ethos to be key learning points in their transition. These findings emphasise the need for induction to have a non-judgmental and practical underpinning, to support students in transition to the core modules and the degree as a whole. Aside from the development of practical skills, which enhance competence and confidence, a significant feature of the feedback was students’ awareness that they were at the start of their undergraduate journey, with no expectation on them to be immediately accomplished in this new venture. Allowing the students to recognise that they can make mistakes is a powerful signpost towards the ongoing and voluntary nature of learning.[[64]](#footnote-64) This initial examination of student voice gave us markers that would positively affect student wellbeing when integrated into the module and the degree.

**8. Discussion and conclusions**

*What worked well, and why?*

The team approach is integral to Legal Essentials. The collaborative approach to delivery enabled students to be introduced to staff they would be working with in core modules post-induction – again, aimed at enhancing the sense of community in the Law School. The collaborative approach to design also gave the teaching team a valuable sense of community, as evidenced in our team meetings. The team was also able to draw on support staff (librarians, career advisors and professional services) and student groups, including the Student Union and Law Society. Incorporating a range of voices and expertise (including the Head of School) encouraged the team to step out of traditional teaching mode and focus on the module goals in an authentic and innovative manner. Many of the team had previously been involved in pastoral care and student support roles, which helped us interrogate our goals and learning outcomes, and the routes to achieving them, in a safe and supportive environment. The experience has encouraged a new focus on teaching and learning theory as well as opening more avenues for personal reflective practice.

Furthermore, the design and delivery process enabled the team to consider their own learning experiences and individual teaching voice within a shared vision. This pedagogic “group consciousness” empowered the team to respond to in-session changes, technical issues, audience responsiveness etc in a mindful and cooperative manner. The allocation of teaching topics supported the specific skills and diverse teaching experience of the academics involved. The group approach to planning encouraged an examination and awareness of our different motivations, interests, skills, and limitations, which directly informed the development of the four streams (thinking, doing, being and making law). This thematic approach also encouraged the team to be persistently mindful of the individual student - their personal needs, educational needs, and inherited educational experiences - and how these could impact on their transition experience.

Sessions were delivered to a range of group sizes and incorporated a range of methods including peer learning, co-delivery, reflection, and panel discussions. There was an intentional balance between large and small group teaching, as the teaching team agreed that it was important for students to feel that they belonged to a whole cohort as well as their own seminar group. The module was underpinned by a strong ethos of community and social justice, which gave the project context and a foundation to build upon. The focus on connection was enhanced by the additional drop-in sessions, where students could meet with academics to ask questions about transition, timetabling, school administration, personal tutoring, and academic expectations.

The online pivot necessitated by Covid-19 did affect this aspect of delivery: our School did not offer synchronous whole-cohort or large-group sessions and so the sense of belonging to a whole year group was limited. We tried to ameliorate this through online drop-in sessions available to the whole cohort, where students were able to meet with students outside their own groups, and where common questions and concerns could be responded to. Some of these sessions were co-hosted, so that students could meet and converse with other members of the teaching team. In addition, the team made a conscious effort to communicate with the cohort through Microsoft Teams, sharing relevant news items and other information on a regular basis. We also used video recordings to welcome students, so that they had the experience of “meeting” the team and other colleagues such as learning support and library services.

The intensive, extended induction front-loaded the student experience. The team used the opportunity of the induction space to give the students time to think about their study of law before they began studying their core subjects. Induction to the university was run parallel, enabling students to become integrated into both the school and the institution at an earlier point in the academic year. Delivery planning considered whether students had any fixed commitments to university activities or induction from other schools, which was especially important for students on combined degrees. The support from the Head of School, the senior management team, and professional services was also vital, due to the high level of staffing and intensive use of resources required to plan, design, and deliver the module – particularly the concentrated induction element.

*What were (and are) the limitations?*

Time is the biggest limitation! Time has several practical implications for planning and delivery. During the planning process, we have had to be aware of both staff workload allocation and staff turnover. Working within a large team means that such undertakings are incredibly resource intensive. It is therefore vital to get the whole Law School (and beyond) involved: the Head of School, Heads of Year, the wider pastoral team, careers team, library team, student union, student services, learning support, student representatives, and the Student Law Society. This supports the message of community in a practical manner and creates broader opportunities for direct contact with the student, supporting them to collaborate in an existing environment, rather than expecting them to go out and seek school links with little knowledge or affiliation. Having a large team inevitably means that some design goals will inevitably be diluted in response to practicalities, and so it is important to maintain an overall vision of what we want to achieve. Regular team meetings are important, not least to ensure that new members fully understand and commit to the module ethos. One way of responding to this need for consistency is to retain a core team to reflect and facilitate the development of the modules in response to student voice and assessment results.

There is a risk of staff and student burnout after the intensive 3-week induction. The benefits of the extended induction must be balanced against the original impetus for Legal Essentials: our awareness of the challenges to Law student engagement and wellbeing and our resulting desire for a more holistic approach to induction and legal skills. It is true to say that we, as a team, are still working on achieving this. The pivot to online and blended learning has inevitably disrupted module delivery for the 20-21 and 21-22 cohorts, making it increasingly important to address students’ learning and personal challenges.

It may be true that most level 4 students come to HE with prior experience of a full timetable from FE (even if delivery has been largely online during the pandemic), and so we should not necessarily make assumptions about their capacity to cope with the intensive induction. Nevertheless, the impact of Covid-19 on the FE experience must still be considered, to mitigate any disrupted teaching that students have suffered. Students (and staff) were also more physically isolated for a protracted period, and some may have found the lack of in-person contact difficult to cope with. We should also recognise that the pandemic will have had a significant impact on students’ motivation, energy levels and even their sense of structure, and this should be factored into post-Covid (more accurately, inter-Covid) module design. For the 2021-22 cohort, we have designed Legal Essentials as blended learning, with the express aim of facilitating students’ adjustment back into a more structured educational environment. Daily teaching sessions will introduce students to, and maintain contact with, the Law School community from day 1. We have designed weekly learning plans to help students navigate their timetables and the preparation and reflection work we are asking them to undertake. We release any asynchronous recordings on the Monday of each week, so that students have early access to the introductory materials that will be scaffolded in practice throughout the week.

The challenges for staff should not be underestimated. The pressure on the team, and the risk of early burnout, was brought into sharp relief during the pandemic. During the intensive 3-week induction, team members are teaching over a full week programme as well as undertaking other teaching and administrative duties. At Keele, we have tried to mitigate the pressure by scheduling core Level 4 modules to begin in week 4, after the intensive induction has ended. However, team members also teach at other undergraduate levels as well as on postgraduate programmes, and these all begin earlier. The support of the Head of School, senior management, and other module leaders is key in helping to manage staff workload so that those delivering the induction element are not overwhelmed. The awareness and commitment of the wider School team also is essential in supporting students to further translate and embed Legal Essentials messaging in subsequent modules. To support this, the team has found it useful to involve module leaders at a strategic and design level as well as in the delivery of teaching sessions. It is important that members of the wider Law School do not assume that students necessarily join core modules with the ability and confidence to navigate their new environment – they will not emerge from Legal Essentials magically transformed and ready to handle all aspects of their legal education! Early meetings with personal tutors, and the drop-in sessions, will help both students and staff to acknowledge where they stand in the learning process – and to recognise that transition itself is an individual process.

In terms of planning, the team is ultimately at the mercy of timetabling limitations: length of sessions, timing, staff availability and the availability of appropriate rooms for the sessions are all factors that must be considered. The timing of assessments also needs to be considered in conjunction with other teaching across the programme. For example, the MCQ assessment MCQ in week 5 of Legal Essentials risked a conflict in the focus of the learner, with students beginning their core modules a week previously. For 2021-22, there is no other delivery in Legal Essentials during the MCQ week, so that students can complete the assessment in the time that they would otherwise have spent in a teaching session. A broader solution is to ensure that students and staff use a year-based scheme of work to assist in planning commitments and to support awareness of activities outside of the module.

*What lessons can other Law Schools learn from Legal Essentials?*

* We are not always afforded extensive planning time, and often due to the academic cycle this is not prioritised – but Law Schools should recognise that effective design is just as important as delivery.
* Colleagues expressed, during our meetings, that they considered the module design to have been enhanced by the team’s diverse backgrounds; our team has had experience of legal practice, FE teaching, counselling, and even religious ministry!
* Law Schools should look for natural opportunities to redevelop modules. Sometimes these occur due to organisational or curriculum modification, and each gap or change is an opportunity to try new things, not knowing if they’re going to work, but being open to the learning experience (as we would wish our students to be).
* Teaching creativity is fostered in the group setting, and that group includes both academic(s) and students. Being mindful of this collaboration encourages us to design teaching that places the student centre to the planning process – respecting both the individual as well as the learner.

Legal Essentials is still in the process of “becoming”. Our initial design has been continually reflected on and moderated, through student and staff feedback and through the demands placed on HE during the pandemic. Nevertheless, we have retained our core principles and will continue to integrate wellbeing within legal skills teaching. We will also work towards better integration of wellbeing within the whole Law degree – aiming to involve the whole School as well as the whole student. As Neil Gaiman says, ‘don't stop, don't worry that it isn't good enough, or it isn't perfect... Whatever it is you're scared of doing, do it’.[[65]](#footnote-65)

(6925 words)

**Figures**

*Figure 1 shows the overall response to the Legal Essentials intensive induction, highlighting that most of the 83 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statements regarding their experience of transition to HE.*

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Figure 1

*Figure 2* *captures the themes identified by 31 students who commented, as the most important thing that they had learnt from Legal Essentials during the three-week intensive induction.*



Figure 2

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