
THE FEAR OF BEING MEDIOCRE LAW STUDENTS IN HYPER-COMPETITIVE SOCIETIES: A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

Aman Sanjay Shah, BA LLB (Thakur Ramnarayan College of Law, Mumbai)

ABSTRACT

In hyper-competitive academic environments, many students experience a fear of being “mediocre” which can significantly influence their psychological well-being and academic behavior. This research examines among the law students aged 18 years to 25 years, focusing on how intense competition, performance expectations, and social comparison shape student’s perceptions of success and failure. Using a survey-based methodology conducted among 1st years to 5th years of law student’s, the study analyses the relationship between fear of mediocrity and psychological outcomes such as anxiety, self-doubt and academic pressure. The research also analyzes the issue from a legal and social perspective considering how educational policies and competitive cultures within legal education may indirectly contribute to such fears. By identifying common patterns in students’ experiences this study aims to highlight the need for balanced academic environments that support both excellence and mental well-being.

The paper states that law schools should do something about students’ mental health. They should make new rules to help students and focus only on grades. Law schools need to think about student wellness as something they are responsible for. This study is part of a conversation about what is fair for students, what schools should be responsible for and how law schools can change to make things better, for everyone.

Keywords: mediocrity fear, law student’s, hyper-competition, psychological impact, legal education, mental health, institutional accountability.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary legal education, the core of this pressure lies a significant psychological concern: the fear of mediocrity. While this may relate to what psychological literature describes as atychiphobia, or the fear of failure, it more specifically reflects an anxiety about not standing out in highly competitive environments. Law school trains students to present arguments for both sides of a case with clarity and confidence. However, beyond the classroom, many students face a more internal and persistent conflict one that is not fought with an external adversary, but within themselves. However, for many students studying laws, it is not failure itself, but being considered as mediocre students that causes more concern. It has been found that law students experience higher rates of stress, anxiety, and psychological disorders due to the nature of competitiveness at their schools. This form of anxiety appears to be increasingly associated with competitive legal education systems across jurisdictions, including India. This paper seeks to examine the phenomenon of fear of mediocrity and its impact on the psychological well-being of law students, their academic decision-making, and the legal implications within highly competitive educational institutions.

The idea of a “hyper-competitive society” involves situations where people are evaluated based on their performance, their ranks, and achievements. Academic works have discussed such societies with emphasis on negative aspects of competition in academic life because it may affect the intrinsic motivation of learners as well as increase psychological tension. Competition here does not refer only to career opportunities but also affects the educational environment, relations between people, and how people perceive themselves. Social comparison theory gives insight into this situation as it implies that individuals evaluate their skills and value themselves based on comparison with other people.¹ The concept of “mediocrity” may therefore be understood not only as average academic performance, but also as a subjective psychological state in which a student perceives themselves as inferior to their peers due to the absence of exceptional accomplishments. Legal education systems across jurisdictions, including India, the United Kingdom, and the United States, provide well documented examples of such competitive environments. Law schools operate within structured systems of evaluation such as academic rankings, merit-based scholarships, moot court competitions, and

¹ Leon Festinger, A Theory of Social Comparison Processes, 7 Hum. Rel. 117 (1954).

selective internship opportunities that continuously position students in comparison to one another social comparison² creates such an atmosphere where the fear of underachievement becomes another. Social comparison creates such an atmosphere where the fear of underachievement becomes constant and significant; besides, it is made worse by the growing problem of perfectionism amongst students across the world.

This can clearly be seen in the context of India. The education provided by Indian law colleges, which is regulated by the Bar Council of India³ and heavily influenced by the existence of 27 National Law Universities in the country, follows a system focused around rankings. Entry to these universities through the Common Law Admission Test⁴ is extremely competitive, resulting in about 3,200-3,500 students gaining admission every year out of more than 60,000 applicants. Such intense selection creates an atmosphere where students will constantly find themselves in need of performing. Moreover, in the process of learning, students may adopt some of the criteria imposed by the institution in question, including internship with some prestigious organization. Thus, not being able to fulfill these goals during the first years of studying at the university may be perceived as personal incompetence regardless of the intellectual abilities of a student in reality. It is important to note that such prolonged psychological stress is a serious problem for the right to life guaranteed by Article 21 of the Constitution.

The matter does not exist only in India, but also across the globe. The competitive nature of studying law has increased, and its consequences for student mental health are widely recognized.⁵ Studies conducted in the USA show that depressive episodes among law students become increasingly common while they are obtaining a degree, reaching as much as 40 percent at the end of their study program. Likewise, the studies conducted in the UK demonstrate that the level of distress among law students is elevated due to various factors related to studying in a competitive environment.⁶ Also, in Australia, studies confirm that psychology distress among law students is notably higher than in the case of

² Thomas Curran & Andrew P. Hill, Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis, 79 *Psychol. Bull.* 410 (2019).

³ Bar Council of India, Rules of Legal Education, 2008, <https://www.barcouncilofindia.org>

⁴ Consortium of National Law Universities, Common Law Admission Test (CLAT), <https://consortiumofnlus.ac.in>

⁵ Law Student Mental Health Statistics, *Clio* (2025).

⁶ Wendy Larcombe et al., Law Students' Psychological Distress, 22 *Legal Educ. Rev.* 71 (2012); Michael Appleby & Judy Bourke, Promoting Law Student Mental Health Literacy (2014).

people belonging to general population or students in other fields.

While there is an ample amount of literature related to mental health concerns among law students, the phenomenon of anxiety related to mediocrity fears remains unexplored. Existing scholarly studies tend to focus on such clinical issues as depression, stress, and burnout, not paying sufficient attention to psychological factors behind those. Some investigations may be conducted concerning academic stress but not addressing a highly competitive environment at law schools specifically. As for legislation, Article 21,⁷ deserves special attention due to being related to the right to live with dignity and mental wellbeing, as well as the institution's obligations towards its members in terms of taking good care of students' psychological and overall wellbeing. Thus, the current investigation is aimed at the analysis of the mentioned phenomena related to mental wellbeing in legal education.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine the nature and lived experiences of fear of mediocrity among law students;
- To assess the psychological aspects of the mentioned issue and find out whether they relate to perfectionism, anxiety, and burnout;
- To investigate the role of institutional culture and peer competition in generating and sustaining this phenomenon;
- To assess the influence of factors such as gender and year of study on the manifestation of this fear;
- To study the coping methods used by students (adaptive and maladaptive ones);
- To reveal whether laws and especially Article 21 can protect law students from psychological concerns.
- In order to make suggestions for reforms in institutions and legal aspects that aim to reduce psychological problems caused by hyper-competitive conditions in educational

⁷ India Const. art. 21.

institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The fear of mediocrity by law students may also be viewed as a psychosocial phenomenon that has arisen from institutional structure, social pressures, and individual identity formation within the field. Law schools act as entry points into upper-class professional careers, fostering an atmosphere for individuals ranging in age from 18 to 25 where success, competitiveness, and identity are intertwined. The subsequent literature review is a synthesis of research in educational psychology, legal education, and sociocultural studies. In the Indian setting, there has been a considerable growth in legal education institutions, covering over 1,500 schools and millions of learners. The psychological health of Indian law students is relatively understudied compared to other research worldwide. Structural elements within the Indian system, including the five-year LL.B., hierarchical differences between schools, and socio-economic diversity among students, exert decisive influences on competition and feelings of mediocrity.

- **The Hyper-Competitive Nature of Indian Legal Education:**

The Common Law Admission Test is the admission exam used to enroll up to 3,200 to 3,500 undergraduate students at 27 National Law Universities out of over 60,000 candidates per year (Consortium of NLUs, 2024). Yet, the existence of competition in the context of legal studies in India cannot be viewed as natural . Studies like Deb et al. (2015)⁸ reveal that about two-thirds (63.5%) of Indian students face serious academic stress while studying at school. Other regional surveys have also documented high levels of academic stress among primary and secondary school pupils. Academic stress continues into the CLAT preparation period, when candidates have to compete within law universities. Therefore, law students experience a competitive environment that starts before university admission and lasts throughout their learning process.

- **Theoretical Framework:**

Several well-known theories in psychology can explain the phenomenon of fear of mediocrity in law students. Carol Dweck's theory about mindsets (2006)⁹ argues that students with fixed

⁸ Sibnath Deb et al., Academic Stress among Indian High School Students, 12 Int'l J. Psychol. & Behav. Sci. 63 (2015).

⁹ Carol S. Dweck, Mindset: The New Psychology of Success (2006).

mindsets believe intelligence to be a constant factor. This belief makes them interpret all academic failures as evidence of personal insufficiency. Thus, fear of mediocrity can result from the tendency to perceive any challenges in studies as manifestations of inability. Albert Bandura's idea of self-efficacy (1997)¹⁰ can also be used to understand how law students' self-confidence can get undermined in competitive environment. Comparing oneself constantly with high performers often leads to loss of confidence, triggers performance anxiety and avoidance of studying. Finally, Dennis Conroy's multi-dimensional model of fear of failure (2001)¹¹ explains that this emotion goes beyond performance-related fears. The fear of failure includes such components as the threat of embarrassment, lack of self-respect, and low social status play roles in such situations. The components become relevant due to the specific context of legal education involving class ranking, moot court participation, and internships.

Despite the usefulness of the three theories, the phenomenon of fear of mediocrity cannot be completely understood using these concepts. Together, the theories mentioned above provide explanations as to why the law students experience performance anxiety and fear of failure as well as why their perception of competitions is that of threats.

- **Imposter Syndrome in Indian Legal Education:**

The psychological phenomenon known as impostor syndrome has emerged as an important issue faced by students at the top-ranked institutions that are characterized by a high level of competitiveness, especially in Indian premier law institutions such as National Law Universities. The phenomenon is mostly connected to the intense preparation culture that exists before Common Law Admission Test, with persistent academic pressure playing a major role in creating self-doubt and inferiority among students. According to several emerging empirical works, students who prepare rigorously for examinations tend to experience high levels of stress, low self-efficacy, and fear of failure. In turn, these issues can be seen as manifestations of impostor feelings. Research conducted in other countries can provide valuable insights. For instance, Qasem et al. (2025),¹² using standard measures such as DASS-21 and YIS scales in their study of 1,120 students, found that about 35% of respondents reported frequent feeling impostors. The same issues are relevant to the Indian environment, as some institutions have

¹⁰ Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (1997).

¹¹ James P. Conroy et al., *Fear of Failure: An Approach–Avoidance Motivation Model*, 17 *J. Sport & Exercise Psychol.* 140 (2001).

¹² Qasem et al., *Impostor Syndrome and Psychological Distress Among University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study Using DASS-21 and YIS* (2025).

already observed increased cases of psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and distress.¹³ For example, this was demonstrated in institutional reports produced by the Indian Institutes of Technology. Overall, impostor syndrome appears to be one element of psychological vulnerability experienced in competitive educational systems.

- **Perfectionism as a Predictor:**

Perfectionism defined as the perception that others impose excessively high standards plays a significant role in the development of impostor syndrome among students. In the context of Indian legal education, externally imposed standards particularly from family, community, and peer networks may increase psychological pressure which contribute to impostor experiences among students. Research demonstrates that socially prescribed perfectionism is more related to psychological distress compared to self-oriented perfectionism,¹⁴ which means that the first one negatively affects mental well-being more and should be taken into account when dealing with problems related to the psychological issues.

- **Social Comparison and Identity-Based Stressors:**

The social comparison theory proposed by Leon Festinger,¹⁵ is helpful when considering competitive interactions in the sphere of legal education. Students in Indian law schools compete through various means, including public moot court competitions, awarding of academic accolades, and appointment to the editorial board of the law reviews. Similarly, prior to being admitted to law studies, applicants need to pass the Common Law Admission Test. In the course of the preparation, performance assessment becomes regular practice, which helps rank students. Visibility of academic successes in large social groups might exacerbate the problem, which can be relevant in the Indian context where conceptions of success can often be impacted by the social environment. For example, in Indian culture, the definition of success can be defined by family or communities,¹⁶ which implies that sharing information about successful academics in larger social networks would add pressure on individuals. Thus,

¹³ Ministry of Education, Government of India, Report on Student Mental Health and Well-Being in Higher Educational Institutions (2024); see also BMC Public Health (2024) (discussing student mental health trends in India).

¹⁴ Thomas Curran & Andrew P. Hill, Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis, 79 Psychol. Bull. 410 (2019).

¹⁵ Leon Festinger, A Theory of Social Comparison Processes, 7 Hum. Rel. 117 (1954).

¹⁶ Patricia Uberoi, Family, Kinship and Marriage in India (Oxford Univ. Press 2006).

individuals' comparisons can extend to social networks beyond peers, making individuals susceptible to social comparison anxiety.

- **Legal and Institutional Analysis:**

Regulatory authorities responsible for higher education institutions in India include the University Grants Commission and the Bar Council of India.¹⁷ In turn, the Bar Council of India Legal Education Rules¹⁸ contain minimum standards associated with infrastructure, faculty qualification, and provision of legal education services. However, no requirements exist regarding institutional responsibilities in providing support to student mental health. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, among 170,924 suicide cases reported in 2022, 7.6% were linked to students, with many connected to exam-related stress.¹⁹ These data prove the necessity of reconsidering regulatory approaches. This regulatory silence raises questions regarding the extent to which the right to mental well-being under Article 21 can be meaningfully realized within educational institutions. See also University Grants Commission, Guidelines on Student Mental Health (2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

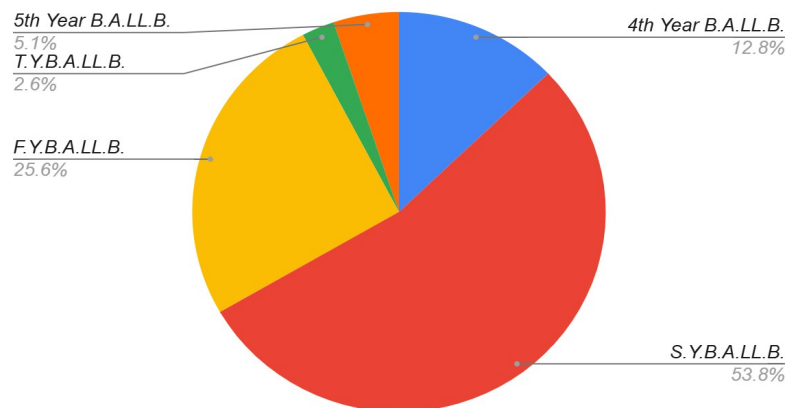
The study utilizes a systematic survey tool featuring 11 main questions distributed over thematic areas, representing all years of the BA.LL.B program. The survey gathered demographic information, experiential insights on academic stress, parental hopes, self-concept, career goals, mental health, and perspectives on institutional change. Information was collected using a survey that people filled out by themselves. This survey was sent out through Google Forms.

¹⁷ University Grants Commission Act, 1956, No. 3 of 1956; Advocates Act, 1961, No. 25 of 1961.

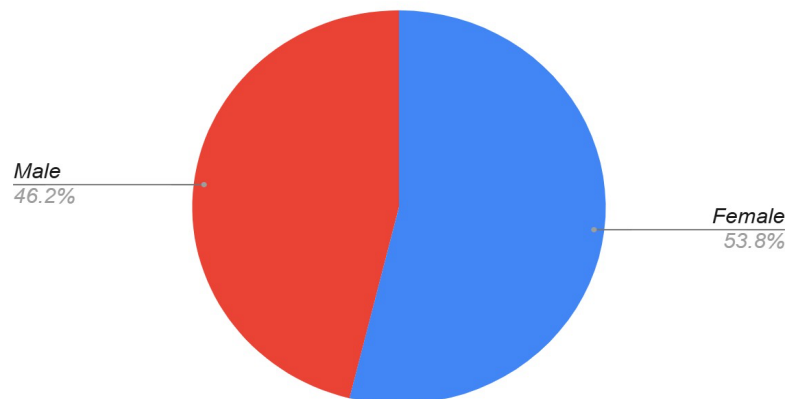
¹⁸ Bar Council of India, Rules of Legal Education, 2008 (India).

¹⁹ Nat'l Crime Recs. Bureau, Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India 2022 (2023).

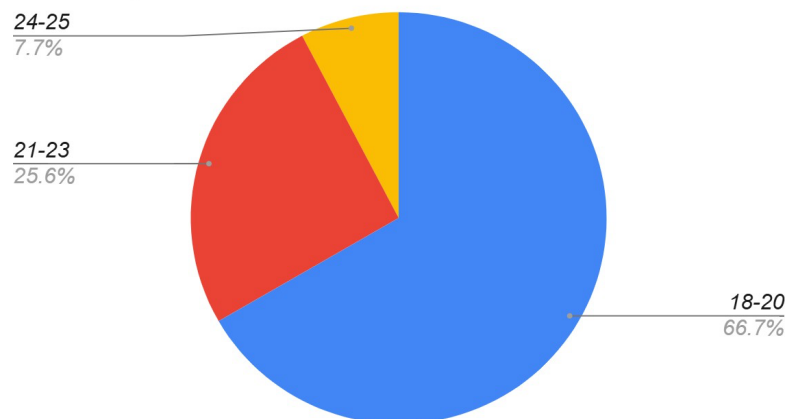
Count of Class



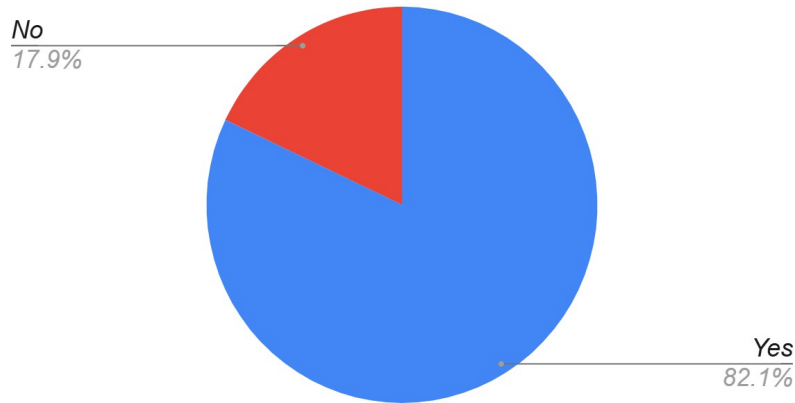
Count of Gender



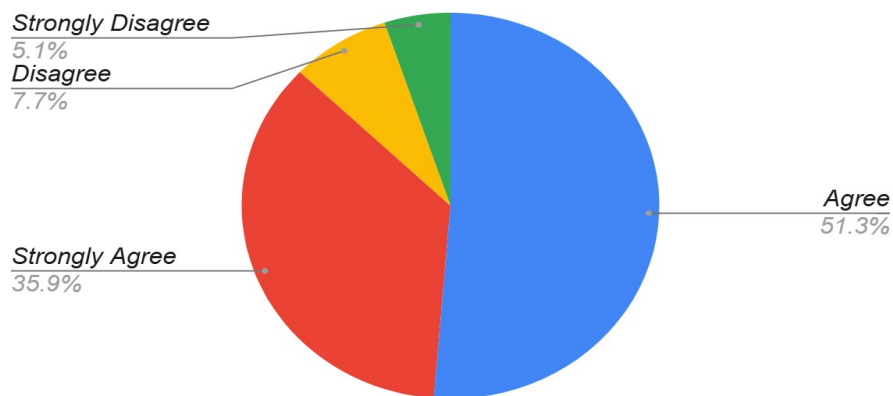
Count of Age



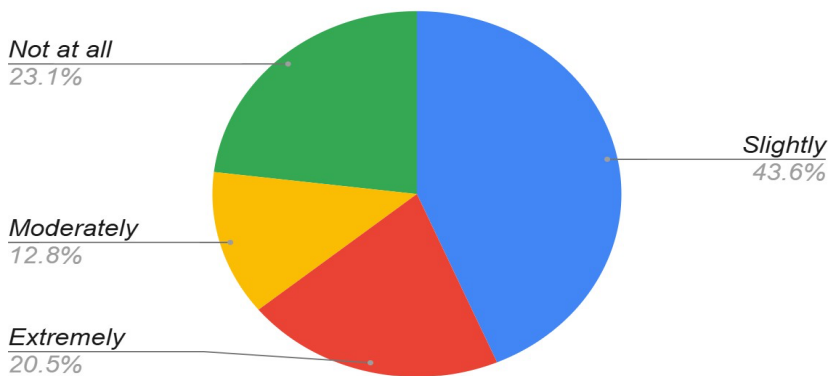
1. Are you a first-generation law student (i.e., no family member is in the legal profession)?



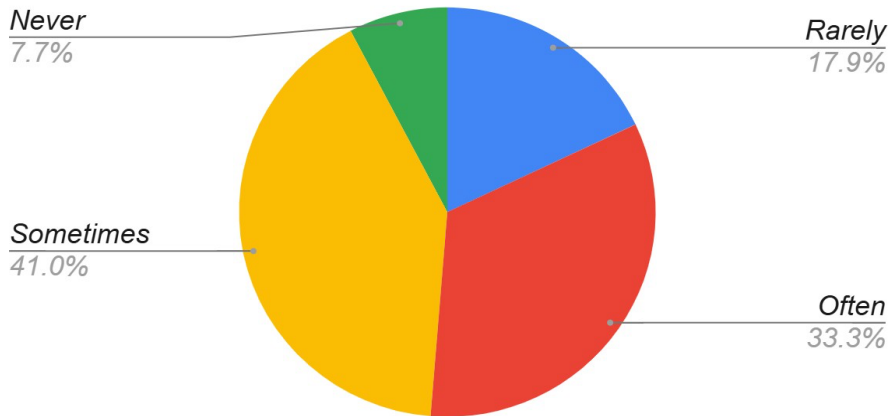
2. Compared to students with a legal family background, do you feel disadvantaged in terms of guidance, exposure, or opportunities (internships, networking, etc.)?



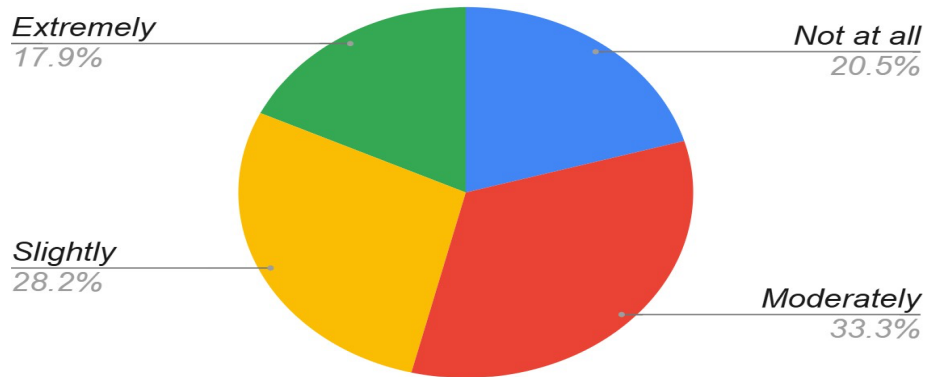
Count of 3. Do you feel that being an "Mediocre" law student would negatively affect your identity, how you view yourself?



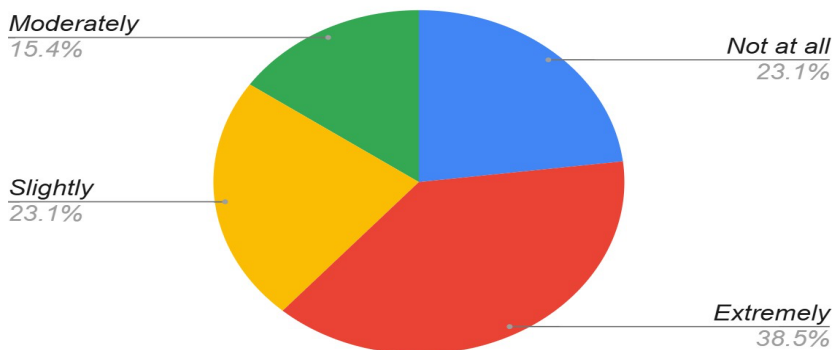
4. How often do you worry about not achieving enough success like in [Grades, Internship, Competitions and other activities] as compared to other law students?



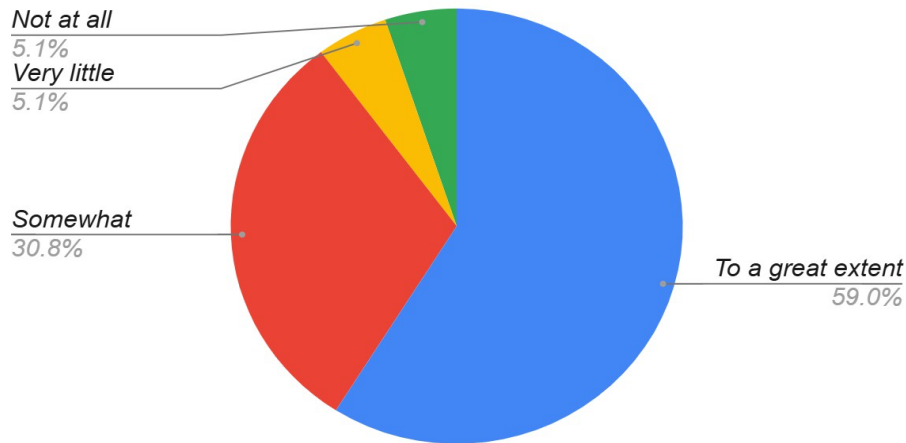
5. To what extent do expectations from family, teachers, or society increase the pressure to succeed in your legal career?



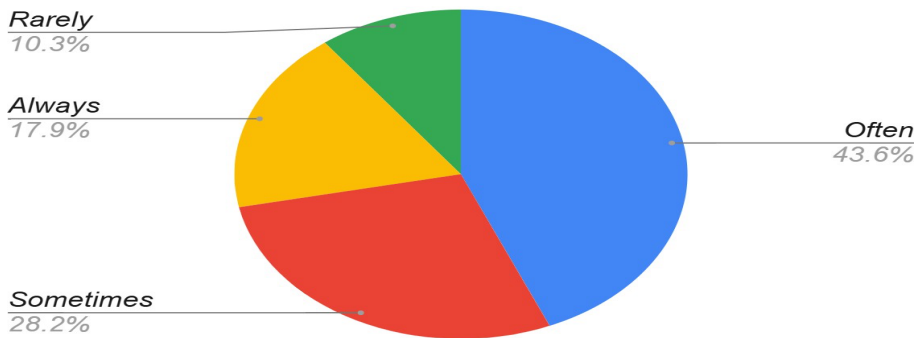
6. Have you ever feel that "if I do not achieve something exceptional, I will disappoint my parents."



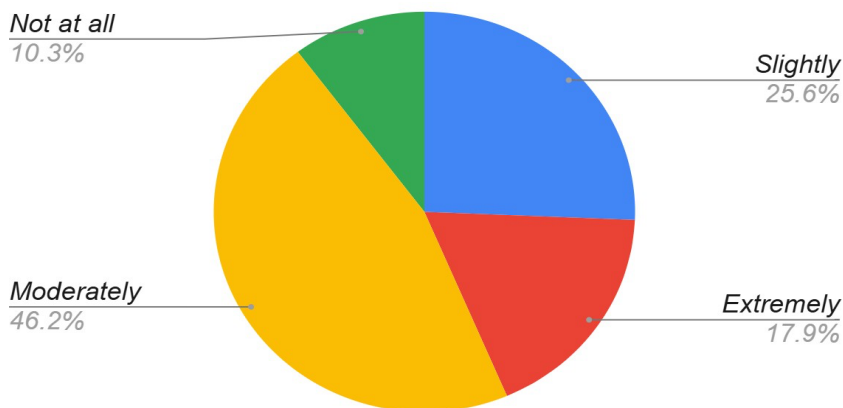
7. How much pressure do you feel to secure a well-paid or prestigious legal career (such as judiciary, corporate law, or litigation)?



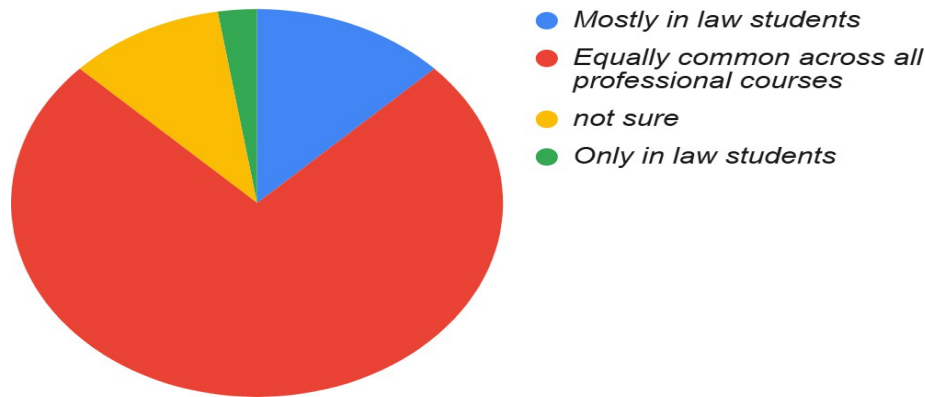
8. Do you find it difficult to maintain a healthy balance between Academics, personal life, and mental well-being?



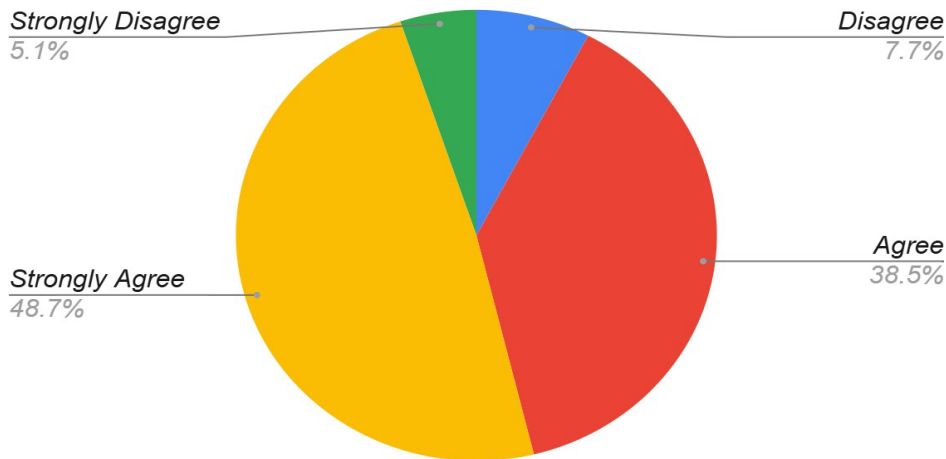
9. When you face academic setbacks (such as low grades or failure in competitions), how does it affect your emotional state?



10. Do you believe that the fear of being mediocre is limited to law students, or is it common across other professional courses (e.g., engineering, medical etc.)?



11. Do you think there should be legal or policy reforms to regulate academic pressure and promote mental well-being in educational institutions?



Principle Findings:

The table below presents the key findings derived from the analysis of survey responses. These findings are organized thematically and serve as the empirical foundation for the conclusions and recommendations of this study.

Table 1: Principle Findings

Key Finding	Observation / Insight
Disadvantage for First Generation	Law Students Approximately 65.8% are first-generation law students who feel more disadvantaged than those from families where members are lawyers.
Mediocrity & Self-Identity	A significant proportion expressed that being a 'mediocre' student would negatively impact their self-perception, reflecting imposter syndrome.
Academic Anxiety	Being worried about poor academic performance in grades, internship placements, competitions, etc. is one factor experienced by law students.
External Pressure	Family expectations, social pressure, teachers' expectations are perceived as sources of academic pressures for law students.
Disappointment of Parents	Most of the participants related to the fear of disappointing their parents because of failure to perform well.
Career Pressure	Pressure to Excel Career expectations include getting a job in top-notch firms/organizations, e.g., judiciary, corporate law, litigation, etc.
Work-Life Imbalance	Difficulty in balancing academics, personal life, and mental well-being.
Emotional Vulnerability	Emotional Well-Being Negative academic performance affects emotional health.
Cross-Disciplinary Issue	The majority of participants think that the fear of mediocrity is not confined to law; it also encompasses engineering, medical, and various other professional fields.
Policy Demand	Respondents predominantly favor legal or policy changes aimed at reducing academic stress and enhancing mental health in educational settings

THEORETICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

- Understanding Hyper-Competitive Societies:

Among law students this anxiety is rarely confined to isolated events such as examinations; rather, it tends to be chronic, triggered by multiple contexts including internship applications, moot court outcomes, placement processes, and continuous peer comparison. Academic pressure in this context, represents the effect of expectations imposed by institutions, families, and the students themselves. When these factors operate simultaneously, the fear of mediocrity may no longer appear irrational but instead emerges as a rational response to structurally competition within legal education. In the Indian context, evaluative criteria, such as the results of the All India Bar Examination (AIBE) test, positions in the Common Law Admission Test, and further placement opportunities in Indian society, commonly serve as visual manifestations of meritocracy and achievement. It causes a continuous culture of comparison where learners are taught to assess their performance in terms of the results that their classmates have achieved from the very beginning of their studies.

- Psychological Impact:

The worries about the future outcome of the educational path can lead to an increased level of anxiety in students, potentially affecting their focus and sleeping habits and academic success.²⁰ If the problem is not addressed, the stress will become a permanent condition influencing thinking and decision-making abilities when making career choices. In the context of legal education, evaluative mechanisms such as the All India Bar Examination and ranking systems associated with the Common Law Admission Test may serve as significant sources of performance related stress as they are often determinants of professional success. Exposure to such stress can result in burnout a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and diminished academic engagement.²¹ Over time, this process may also affect students' self-concept leading them to equate personal worth with academic achievement.

²⁰ Richard S. Lazarus & Susan Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* (1984); see also Debra A. Hope et al., *Anxiety Disorders and Their Treatment* (2d ed. 2010).

²¹ Christina Maslach & Michael P. Leiter, *Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications*, 15 *World Psychiatry* 103 (2016).

- **The Educational Structure and Its Psychological Consequences:**

Legal education occupies a distinctive position within the academic landscape as it is not only intellectually demanding but also structurally hierarchical. Matthew Stropus and Brian Taylor observe that law schools generate performance hierarchies ranging from examination rankings to moot court competitions that differentiation as a core institutional value.²² From the outset students are made aware either directly or indirectly, that only limited number will secure prestigious internships, judicial clerkships, or positions at leading law firms.

The survey data in this study indicate that a significant proportion of first year and second year law students report feelings of inadequacy within the initial months of their legal education. This finding is consistent with the longitudinal work of Lawrence Krieger and Kennon Sheldon, which demonstrates a marked decline in psychological well-being following entry into law school particularly in environments characterized by competitive grading systems and diminished intrinsic motivation.²³

Such structural competition within legal education fosters performance anxiety, where the fear of failing to meet external standards begins to overshadow the intrinsic pursuit of knowledge. This phenomenon is explained using Self-Determination Theory proposed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan.²⁴ According to this concept, when the motive for engaging in activities is driven mainly by external motivators rather than inherent interest, people tend to display lower well-being, decreased creative potential, and higher levels of anxiety features frequently identified among law students and junior lawyers.

- **Mental Well-Being in the Context of Legal Education:**

Growing concern for mental well-being among law students has recently been observed globally. A study by Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe, and Katherine M. Bender reports notably high rates of depression (approximately 40%), anxiety (37%), and suicidal ideation (6%) among law students significantly, exceeding those observed in other academic

²² Matthew J. Stropus, Moot Court and the Structure of Legal Education, 12 *Legal Writing J.* 45 (2006); Brian Z. Tamanaha, *Failing Law Schools* (2012).

²³ Kennon M. Sheldon & Lawrence S. Krieger, Understanding the Negative Effects of Legal Education on Law Students, 33 *Pers. & Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 883 (2007).

²⁴ Edward L. Deci & Richard M. Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (1985); Edward L. Deci & Richard M. Ryan, Self-Determination Theory, 49 *Can. Psychol.* 182 (2008).

disciplines.²⁵ Although comparatively underexplored similar concerns are observable in the Indian context, where familial expectations and the social prestige associated with legal education contribute to heightened psychological pressure. The findings of the survey show that apart from academic-related stress, students may experience emotional exhaustion, feelings of doubt in themselves, and insomnia. In light of the current situation, Albert Bandura's theory²⁶ of self-efficacy comes into play, which implies that a person's confidence in one's abilities could be shaken under conditions of hyper-competition.

- **Corporate Life and the Amplification of Competitive Identity:**

The fear of mediocrity does not remain confined to the academic environment but extends into the professional field. The corporate legal sector operates through clearly defined performance hierarchies, particularly between partners and associates. Edgar Schein's theory of organizational culture²⁷ shows that the values of professional institutions are transferred both formally and informally by means of stories, organizational practices, and policies, which are quickly adopted by novices. Law students interacting with commercial organizations and their employees during their internships experience a rise in anxiety levels and increased fear of outperformance after returning to the academic environment. This observation is consistent with the findings of Blake Ashforth and Alan Saks research on organizational socialization.²⁸ At an individual level, this dynamic may give rise to what can be described as “anticipatory identity anxiety” a condition in which students begin to fear becoming the type of professional perceived as average or replaceable within highly competitive corporate environments.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

- **The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017:**

The Mental Healthcare Act came after the criticism received against the existing Mental Health Act, 1987 for its custodial model that focused more on institutionalization rather than upholding the patients' rights. This new Act is a revolutionary change, as it views mental health care as a rights-based matter and makes sure that Indian law fulfils India's international

²⁵ Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe & Katherine M. Bender, Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help, 66 J. Legal Educ. 116 (2016).

²⁶ Albert Bandura, Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change, 84 Psychol. Rev. 191 (1977).

²⁷ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (5th ed. 2017).

²⁸ Blake E. Ashforth & Alan M. Saks, Socialization Tactics: Longitudinal Effects on Newcomer Adjustment, 41 Acad. Mgmt. J. 149 (1996).

obligations under Article 25 and 26²⁹ of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. For law students and professionals, understanding of the Act's provisions is essential both as a component of professional legal knowledge and in light of its growing relevance to student mental well-being within competitive educational environments. However, how much these rights become enforceable in educational institutes is still a question.

Key Provisions of the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017:

Section 3: Determination of mental illness.

Defines mental illness by reference to nationally or internationally accepted medical standards, including the latest International Classification of Diseases issued by the World Health Organization and restricts arbitrary classification of individuals as mentally ill except for treatment or legally recognized purposes.³⁰

Section 4: Capacity to make mental healthcare and treatment decisions.

Recognizes that every person, whether with or without mental illness, have the competence to decide matters related to their mental healthcare if it can be proven that they have sufficient understanding, appreciation, and communication abilities.³¹

Section 18: Right to access mental healthcare.

Every person shall have the right to access mental healthcare and treatment from public or private institutions and providers that receive funding from or operate under the authority of the Government, emphasizing affordability, accessibility, quality, and non-discrimination.³²

Section 21: Right to equality and non-discrimination.

Ensures that the above right is further strengthened through equal treatment and non-discrimination by making persons with mental illness have an equal right to access healthcare

²⁹ Mental Healthcare Act, No. 10 of 2017, India Code (2017); United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities arts. 25–26, Mar. 30, 2007, 2515 U.N.T.S. 3.

³⁰ Id. § 3.

³¹ Id. § 4.

³² Id. § 18.

services like those with physical illness.³³

- **The University Grants Commission (UGC) Regulations:**

The University Grants Commission has provided regulatory guidelines on mental well-being in higher education institutions, such as the 2023 Notification on Mental Health and Well-Being in Higher Education Institutions (UGC Notification No. F.6-1/2022(CPP-II)).³⁴ The notification makes it mandatory for higher education institutions to have counseling facilities, appoint qualified counselors, and frame policies on student mental well-being. The above requirements have been made under the provisions of the University Grants Commission Act, 1956, specifically Section 12, wherein the Commission is authorized to take any measure for maintaining higher education standards. However, law schools lack enforcement mechanisms and monitoring of compliance with the above rules.

- **The Bar Council of India (BCI):**

The Bar Council of India is a statutory body established under the Advocates Act, which is mandated under Sections 7 and 49 of the Act to set regulatory standards pertaining to the standards of legal education in India. The BCI has formulated Bar Council of India Legal Education Rules,³⁵ whereby it has laid down certain minimum standards regarding the infrastructure, curricular structure, and faculty qualification in law schools. Nonetheless, the provisions contained in the rules deal only with the academic and institutional standards of education without any express requirement regarding the provision of mental health facilities within such institutions.

- **The Prohibition of Ragging in Educational Institutions:**

The UGC Anti-Ragging Regulations place strict responsibilities on higher education institutions to ensure complete prohibition of ragging in its various forms, which includes the prohibition of any acts that would cause physical or psychological harm to the concerned students. The Supreme Court of India in *University of Kerala v. Council, Principals Colleges*

³³ Id. § 21.

³⁴ University Grants Commission Act, No. 3 of 1956, § 12, India Code (1956); Univ. Grants Comm'n, Notification No. F.6-1/2022(CPP-II), Mental Health and Well-Being in Higher Education Institutions (2023).

³⁵ Advocates Act, No. 25 of 1961, §§ 7, 49, India Code (1961); Bar Council of India, Rules of Legal Education, 2008, r. 3(6).

Kerala,³⁶ reiterated that educational institutions owe a duty to create a safe and conducive learning environment for its students, whereby no activity can be undertaken that would create mental or emotional distress for the students. Thus, the judicial pronouncements above clearly reflect the judicial recognition of the concept that any institutional setting which could lead to the creation of any psychological harm to the concerned students due to peer pressure or competition may constitute institutional liability. It follows from above that the stress created by high competition in education can also be included under the scope of institutional stressors.

Constitutional and Legal Challenges

- Article 14 - Right to Equality:

Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to equality, stating that the State shall not deny any person equality before the law or equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. As per the landmark decision in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*,³⁷ 1992, Article 14 is concerned with the equality before the law. It states that under Article 16(1), there is a guarantee of equal opportunities in matters of public employment. Thus, in a way, Article 16(1) is the expression of Article 14, since both the provisions aim to provide equality in their respective fields.

- Article 19(1)(a) - Freedom of Speech and Expression:

The Constitution of India provides under Article 19(1)(a), the right to freedom of speech and expression which includes liberty of expressing one's convictions and opinions either orally or in writing or even through printing or any form of visual or auditory communication. In the case of *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala*,³⁸ 1986 the Supreme Court held that the right to freedom of speech and expression guaranteed in Article 19(1)(a) also includes the right to not be compelled to speak or write anything contrary to conscience and conviction. Three students were ordered to be expelled for their unwillingness to sing National Anthem as per their religious convictions. It is significant in the light of the fact that often times, the right to silence is denied to students who have to conform to certain performance narratives.

³⁶ *University of Kerala v. Council, Principals, Colleges, Kerala*, (2009) 4 S.C.C. 590 (India).

³⁷ *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992 Supp. (3) S.C.C. 217 (India).

³⁸ *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala*, (1986) 3 S.C.C. 615 (India).

Article 21 – Protection of Life and Personal Liberty:

Under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, all persons are entitled to the right to life and personal liberty which means that there will be no deprivation of life and personal liberty except in accordance with the procedure established by the law. In a landmark judgement in *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*,³⁹ 1978 the Supreme Court expanded the scope of Article 21 and defined the term "life" to encompass the entire range of rights necessary to achieve a meaningful life. It also laid down that the "procedure established by law" must be a fair, just and reasonable procedure and cannot be arbitrary, oppressive or unreasonable. The concept of dignity included in Article 21 extends to psychological well-being.

Gaps In The Legal Framework And Institutional Loopholes:

One of the most critical gaps in the legal framework regulating legal education is the lack of a binding obligation on educational institutions to ensure structured psychological support for students. Although the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 follows a rights-based approach towards mental healthcare services, it fails to impose any statutory duties on universities to implement psychological support programs for their students. Moreover, the guidelines published by the University Grants Commission, although comprehensive, are only suggestive and not obligatory in nature. As for the regulatory framework provided by the Bar Council of India, it addresses issues related to academic standards, infrastructural facilities, and faculty qualifications but fails to consider the psychological health of law students.

At the institutional level, efforts to promote mental health among law students continue to be reactive and not preventative. For example, many students with anxiety problems, who face stress because of the competitive academic environment in which they have to operate, are left unattended until it is too late. Besides, the fear of poor academic performance or other professional issues may deter students from availing themselves of counselling services. Furthermore, competitive grading and ranking systems in universities may increase pressure on students with varying grades.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results obtained from the above study, the fear of mediocrity in law students appears

³⁹ *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, (1978) 1 S.C.C. 248 (India).

to be more than just a personal problem. It is an institutionally based challenge arising from structural issues in the legal education system itself. As such, reforms and regulations are necessary in this area.

1. Mandatory Mental Health Infrastructure in Law Schools:

Mandatory mental health counseling centers must be established in all law schools and universities. Mental health services must be incorporated as part of the mandatory requirements for institutional accreditation in organizations like the Bar Council of India and the University Grants Commission.

2. Prevention Frameworks and Early Identification

It is recommended that institutions of legal education introduce prevention frameworks involving mental health assessments, feedback mechanisms, and other orientation-level support programs. These steps could enable early detection of the problem before it escalates.

3. Reform in the Competence Assessment Systems:

Competence assessment systems need to be changed to reflect comprehensive criteria for determining student competence instead of solely relying on ranking and competitive evaluation. The introduction of collaborative work, research and practice could achieve that goal.

4. Sensitization of Faculty and Administrative Staff:

Faculty and administrative staff should receive sensitization training on detecting possible signs of psychological distress and recommending relevant interventions. They will serve as primary points of academic contact for students.

5. Legal and Regulatory Mechanisms of Accountability:

While the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 serves as a rights-based framework for mental health protection, the implementation of its provisions in educational settings is insufficient. Therefore, there needs to be a greater focus on institutional accountability in respect of students' well-being.

6. Student Mentoring and Discussion Groups:

Establishing student mentoring programs and discussing student psychological well-being at regular intervals might contribute significantly to reducing stigmatization of psychological problems and creating a positive atmosphere in the institution.

7. Diversification of Career Paths Awareness:

The promotion of knowledge about various careers available to graduates is recommended. Careers include those in academics, public policies, governance, law and legal aid services, etc. By providing students with an expanded understanding of career paths and their options after university, law schools can help alleviate excessive pressures in legal education.

These recommendations collectively aim to shift legal education from a purely competitive framework toward a balanced model integrating academic excellence with psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis done above, it becomes apparent that the problem of the fear of mediocrity amongst law students is caused by the current nature of legal education systems which include highly competitive nature, strict assessment and huge social pressure that leads to different types of psychological problems such as fear, burnout and low self-confidence.

Under Article 14, 19(1)(a), 21 of the Indian Constitution, this problem can be resolved constitutionally. Particularly, the idea of substantive equality (Article 14), freedom of speech (Article 19(1)(a)) and right to live with dignity (Article 21) suggest that while having an opportunity to study, a person needs to be provided with psychological well-being as well. Moreover, according to the Supreme Court decision made in the case of *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, dignity and justice comprise part of "life" and "liberty".

Nonetheless, in terms of the current regulatory context, the situation looks somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the rights-based approach to mental health protection established by the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, can be employed in addressing students' psychological problems. On the other hand, while the UGC, BCI, and other institutions provide certain recommendations related to maintaining psychological well-being of students, no enforceable

obligation regarding protecting their mental health exists in this regard. Consequently, the competitive nature of legal education systems remains unchecked. As mentioned above, many law schools maintain an approach focused on performance indicators, ranking, and hierarchical evaluation, rather than paying attention to the well-being of students. Moreover, while some protective measures are provided, they are mostly reactive rather than constituting an inherent part of the educational process itself.

In conclusion, the findings presented above indicate that there is a need to adjust the policy regulating legal education to take students' psychological problems into account along with the issue of academic strictness. The problem of fear of mediocrity cannot be addressed effectively without making proper changes. Otherwise, the legal education system will continue producing law graduates who are professionally skilled but still suffering from psychological issues caused by self-doubt and competitiveness.

REFERENCES

- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W. H. Freeman.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A Theory of Social Comparison Processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140.
- Conroy, D. E. (2001). Progress in the Development of a Multidimensional Measure of Fear of Failure: The Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI). *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 14(4), 431–452.
- Sheldon, K. M., & Krieger, L. S. (2007). Understanding the Negative Effects of Legal Education on Law Students: A Longitudinal Test of Self-Determination Theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33(6), 883–897.
- Organ, J. M., Jaffe, D. B., & Bender, K. M. (2016). Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns. *Journal of Legal Education*, 66(1), 116–156.
- Krieger, L. S. (2002). Institutional Denial About the Dark Side of Law School, and Fresh Empirical Guidance for Constructively Breaking the Silence. *Journal of Legal Education*, 52(1–2), 112–129.
- Benjamin, G. A. H., Kaszniak, A., Sales, B., & Shanfield, S. B. (1986). The Role of Legal Education in Producing Psychological Distress Among Law Students and Lawyers. *American Bar Foundation Research Journal*, 11(2), 225–252.
- Appleby, M., & Bourke, J. (2014). Promoting Law Student Mental Health Literacy, Help-Seeking Attitudes and Self-Efficacy. *Legal Education Review*, 24(1), 1–28.
- Consortium of National Law Universities. (2024). *Common Law Admission Test (CLAT): Statistical Overview*. Consortium of NLUs.
- Bar Council of India. (2008). *Bar Council of India Rules of Legal Education*. Bar

Council of India. <https://www.barcouncilofindia.org>

- National Crime Records Bureau. (2022). *Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2022*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
- University Grants Commission. (2023). *Notification on Mental Health and Well-Being in Higher Educational Institutions (No. F.6-1/2022(CPP-II))*. UGC.
- University Grants Commission. (2020). *Guidelines on Student Mental Health*. UGC.
- Deb, S., Strodl, E., & Sun, J. (2015). Academic Stress, Parental Pressure, Anxiety and Mental Health Among Indian High School Students. *International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, 5(1), 26–34.
- Flett, G. L., Hewitt, P. L., Blankstein, K. R., & Gray, L. (1998). Psychological Distress and the Frequency of Perfectionistic Thinking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(5), 1363–1381.
- Qasem, F., Al-Turki, H., Gawdat, D., & Al-Zaidi, M. (2025). Impostor Syndrome and Academic Stress Among University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 19(1), 1–10.
- Aldwin, C. M. (2007). *Stress, Coping, and Development: An Integrative Perspective* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, AIR 1978 SC 597 (India).
- *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, AIR 1993 SC 477 (India).
- *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala*, AIR 1987 SC 748 (India).
- *University of Kerala v. Council, Principals, Colleges, Kerala*, (2010) 1 SCC 353 (India).
- *Mental Healthcare Act, No. 10 of 2017* (India).
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The 'What' and 'Why' of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.

- Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2019). Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences from 1989 to 2016. *Psychological Bulletin*, 145(4), 410–429.
- Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (1991). Perfectionism in the Self and Social Contexts: Conceptualization, Assessment, and Association with Psychopathology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(3), 456–470.
- Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241–247.
- Daicoff, S. (1997). Lawyer, Know Thyself: A Review of Empirical Research on Attorney Attributes Bearing on Professionalism. *American University Law Review*, 46(5), 1337–1427.
- Stropus, M., & Taylor, B. (2010). Turning Down the Heat: Removing Pressures from the Law School Environment. *Journal of Legal Education*, 60(1), 68–89.
- Baxi, U. (2002). *The Future of Human Rights*. Oxford University Press.
- Mathur, R. (2018). Legal Education in India: Present Status and Future Vision. *Indian Bar Review*, 45(2), 15–34.
- Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001). Job Burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 397–422.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (2000). The Role of Rumination in Depressive Disorders and Mixed Anxiety/Depressive Symptoms. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 109(3), 504–511.
- Advocates Act, No. 25 of 1961 (India).
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, arts. 25–26. U.N. Doc. A/RES/61/106.

- World Health Organization. (2022). World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All. WHO.
- Padesky, C. A., & Mooney, K. A. (2012). Strengths-Based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: A Four-Step Model to Build Resilience. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 19(4), 283–290.
- Khaitan, T. (2015). *A Theory of Discrimination Law*. Oxford University Press.
- Pathak, R. (2017). Legal Education in India: Challenge and Change. *Journal of Law and Social Policy*, 9(1), 42–59.
- Indian Institutes of Technology. (2023). Annual Student Wellness Reports: Mental Health Trends in Premier Engineering Institutions. IIT Consortium Report.
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Ashforth, B. E., & Saks, A. M. (1996). Socialization Tactics: Longitudinal Effects on Newcomer Adjustment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(1), 149–178.