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Welcome and acknowledgement of Country by Executive Dean, Bond University Faculty of Law - Day 1

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Recommended citation(APA):

James, N. (2018). *Welcome and acknowledgement of Country by Executive Dean, Bond University Faculty of Law - Day 1*. National Wellness for Law Forum, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia.

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Welcome

National Wellness for Law Forum – 15 February 2018

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Bond University, and welcome to the 7th National Wellness for Law Forum. My name is Professor Nick James, and I am the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Law here at Bond. I would first like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we are gathered, the Yugambah - Kombumerri peoples, and on your behalf I pay our collective respects to elders past and present.

Welcome presenters and delegates. Welcome colleagues, from Bond Law, from within the academy, and from the practising profession. Welcome students from Bond and from other law schools. Welcome visitors from afar, including Caroline Strevens, Head of the Portsmouth Law School, Rachel Spearing, Master of the Inner Temple in London, and Elizabeth Kelley, criminal defense lawyer from the US. And a special welcome to her Honour Associate Judge Mary-Jane Ierodionou (aero die canoe) of the Supreme Court of Victoria, and Marie Jepson, Founder and Executive Director of the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation. Welcome all, and thank you for making your way to the Gold Coast to continue this very important conversation about wellness and resilience within law schools and within the legal profession.

This Forum is an initiative of the Wellness Network for Law. The Network is a community of legal academics, practitioners and students who are committed to addressing the high levels of psychological distress experienced in law; and promoting wellness at law school, in the legal academy, and in the profession. The Network seeks to achieve these aims through supporting a deeper understanding of the causes of psychological distress, and through the development of strategies for preventing and addressing distress and for fostering well-being within law schools and the profession.

The Network was established as part of Professor Rachael Field's National Teaching Fellowship in 2010, and has thrived due to the support of numerous academics and professionals, as well as the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation and its founder Marie Jepson. Thank you Marie. The Network is now hosted by the Bond University Centre for Professional Legal Education. Here at Bond we place an enormous emphasis upon the quality of the student experience, and student wellness is a priority, so we are very proud to be associated with the Network.

This is the 7th National Wellness for Law Forum. The previous Forums were held in 2012 at RMIT; in 2013 at Melbourne University; in 2014 at QUT; in 2015 at ANU; in 2016 at the College of Law in Sydney; and last year at the University of Adelaide. It is the latest instalment in a conversation that has been taking place for many years internationally, but which in Australia really gained momentum with the publication in 2009 of the Brain and Mind Research Institute's report, *Courting the Blues*. This now well-known survey of 741 law students from 13 universities, 924 solicitors and 756 barristers found that more than one in four barristers, more than one in three solicitors and

almost half of all law students were at a high or very high risk of suffering from a diagnosable mental illness. Since the publication of the report, further Australian research has been conducted to affirm the report's findings, to identify the factors that contribute to law student and lawyer distress, and to identify measures that successfully promote wellness in law.

Wellness became a point of focus within my own teaching and research shortly after publication of the BMRI report. I had been tasked with designing and delivering a brand new first semester law subject at my law school – not this law school – and I decided to include in the module on legal education a presentation and class discussion on the topic of law student and lawyer wellness. After presenting some of the data and outlining some of the scholarship I commenced a class discussion by asking the students why they thought the issue existed and what we should be doing about it. One student called out – from the back row of course – ‘if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen’.

Around the same time, Rachael Field paid a visit to my law school – not this law school – and together we delivered a presentation on this topic to the academics. We were confronted by one senior academic who argued quite forcefully that in attempting to promote student wellbeing, and encouraging changes to legal education to make it less psychologically damaging, we were being too soft and in fact doing our students a disservice. The legal profession is challenging and unforgiving, they argued, and we needed to be hard on law students to toughen them up for legal practice.

I began to realise the enormity of the challenge we face. It isn't just about understanding the causes of law student distress and developing ways to better develop resilience and promote wellness. The challenge includes persuading certain law academics, certain law students and certain legal practitioners that the problem exists and that it needs to be taken seriously.

Of course, we have come a long way since 2009. The issue of lawyer and law student wellness has been a prominent topic of conversation in law for a number of years now. The Council of Australian Law Deans in 2013 produced its report Good Practice Guidelines for Promoting Law Student Well-Being, and law schools across Australia have adopted its recommendations. Wellness initiatives have been established by law societies and district law associations, and within law firms. We will be hearing about many of these initiatives over the next few days.

And yet ... Just a few months ago I attended a luncheon in Sydney where the other guests at the table included managing partners of various law firms. The topic of work life balance came up, and the managing partner of one large, well known law firm stated quite firmly: ‘I tell graduates not to expect any work life balance at this firm. Here we work hard and we play hard, and the rewards flow to those who are prepared to work long hours and put the client and the firm ahead of any personal concerns.’

Lawyers are still suffering. Law students are still suffering. Law academics are still suffering. Our work is not yet done. Our conversation must continue.

I will hand you over now to the person without whom none of this would be possible, the driving force behind the Law Wellness Network, my very dear colleague, Professor Rachael Field.