Partnering with Refugee Background Students to support successful tertiary study
Kristen Sharma, Victoria University of Wellington

Prevailing attitudes towards refugees in the media, and society as a whole, are often negative (Parker, 2013), painting a picture of refugees as ‘queue jumpers’, ‘sponges’ of the welfare system, and as having a culture and religion at odds with the host culture.

Refugees are acutely aware of this marginalisation. Such a stigma is one of the barriers to higher education that refugees must overcome (O’Rourke, 2011). Yet former refugees are an asset to any institution. Refugees are often multi-lingual, adaptable, motivated to succeed, have cross-cultural communication skills (Naidoo, 2018), resilient and intellectually curious (O’Rourke, 2011). In addition, it is a human rights issue focusing on enabling participation to develop capabilities (Naidoo, 2018).

This presentation will outline how staff at VUW have this year worked with Refugee Background Students (RBS) to change the prevailing narrative to support RBS success and empowerment. Efforts include fostering a stronger community through communication and opportunities to meet, through giving students a voice and by working in partnership as RBS start their own VUWSA affiliated club.

Early successes have been an increase in connections between students, staff, and outside agencies that support RBS, an increase in participation in RBS events, and the initiation of the club by RBS. Members of the club hope to foster mentoring relationships as new RBS enter the university, empower students as they make decisions about their future careers, and highlight stories of RBS success. One challenge, however, is to avoid the unintended outcome of “motivation porn” (Rivers and Webster, 2017).

References:


Learning outcomes
- To provide attendees with ideas and inspiration for working with refugee background students at their institutions.
- To recognise that success stories should not have the unintended consequence of disempowering others.
- To create links between staff at different institutions to support Refugee background students.

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