Raising equity and diversity awareness within a Faculty of Engineering.

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of an initiative implemented in a faculty within a large university to provide a safe and inclusive study and work environment for students and staff who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI). By recognising diversity and utilising strategies already firmly in place, relationships have been built to elicit feedback and consultation which has led to the development of a safe and supportive peer environment, the enhancement of inclusive practice and the increase of visibility for the LGBTI community within the Faculty.

Introduction

Recognising the importance of providing an inclusive study and work environment that removes unnecessary, unlawful and unfair barriers, the University of Auckland is committed to supporting all those who have the potential to succeed. As a part of a University wide strategy Rainbow networks have been set up within each Faculty to support Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) students and staff. Established at the end of 2014, the Rainbow Engineering Network, despite being in its early days of existence, has achieved several early successes, including increased visibility, funding and high level support. This paper identifies key factors that led to the successful launch and implementation of an equity initiative within a Faculty of Engineering.

Literature

Members of LGBTI communities are known to be at a greater risk of serious health issues such as depression, substance abuse and suicide (Stevens, 2013). Research suggests that these health issues are due to the LGBTI community being repeatedly exposed to violence and other negative behaviours and attitudes that stigmatise and discriminate against the LGBTI community (Adams, Dickinson & Asiasiga, 2012). Various initiatives are taking place across New Zealand to help prevent these health issues.

The Rainbow Tick programme is one such initiative that can help organisations create policies and processes that recognise and welcome gender and sexual diversity and aid an inclusive practice (Rainbow Tick, 2016, para. 2). Individual schools and tertiary organisations provide educational programmes and resources to encourage and support conversations and policy development around sexuality and gender identity (Ministry of Youth Development, 2015). The University of Auckland has been proactive in including LGBTI staff and students in the Equity policy. The University's Equity office has led the development of initiatives and programmes to support LGBTI students such as supporting students who identify as transgender to have their name legally changed and the creation of stickers that can be used so that LGBTI friendly staff and students are easily recognised.

Approach

When the Rainbow Engineering Network (referred to throughout this paper as "the Network") was formed, the approach taken was to utilise the long-established equity strategies already in place to develop a programme that would be sustainable. Students were included in the development of the Network and engagement strategies were established in consultation with the students. The intent from the outset was to embed inclusive practices within the faculty and student engagement was vital to the successful embedding of these strategies.

For the purpose of this paper, the framework has been outlined below as Recognising Diversity, Student Engagement and Inclusive Practice.

Recognising Diversity

Increasing diversity and creating a more inclusive work and study environment is a key feature of student engagement strategies within the Faculty of Engineering. Resources have been prioritised for a Women in Engineering Adviser and a Kaiaarahi (support for Maori and Pacific students). These positions are responsible for strategies to enhance the participation, retention and success of women and Maori and Pacific students. These two dedicated positions champion support for the Women in Engineering Network (WEN) and the Tuakana Learning Community (supporting Maori and Pacific students) and work with the students to develop events and initiatives that enhances the faculty culture for these key groups.

These equity strategies already in place consist of having a dedicated champion/support person who can oversee and facilitate the students and help formulate a visible identity so that the culture can be embedded into the Faculty, provide advocacy as required and create a safe space for students from these groups, if they require it. There is a visible presence within the faculty and the pride of belonging to these groups is shown by the students wearing t-shirts with their logo branded on them. The use of social media by all student groups including clubs and societies is also very strong within the faculty. These strategies of having a dedicated champion and support person to help increase the visibility and of building a network utilising a social media presence were vital in the creation of the Rainbow Engineering Network.

Learning from these strategies, the Rainbow Engineering Network designed a logo for t-shirts to be branded and created a private Facebook page to interact, share and read about events and information relevant to the LGBTI community. A public page was created so that event information could be visible to everybody and the Faculty's Facebook page is used to advertise events. These strategies allowed the Network to be embedded within a culture that is already predominately within the faculty.

Student Engagement

Building on what we know works in other targeted equity initiatives, the organisation and leadership for the establishment of the Network was driven by a Student Support Adviser in the Student Development and Engagement Team. The initiative has been fully supported by senior leaders, including the Dean and Deputy Dean. Key to the success of the Network has been the high level commitment from the faculty in addition to resources in the form of staff and funding for initiatives.

Simple strategies were developed based on feedback from the students. Fortnightly drop-ins were organised. The intent of these sessions was to meet, listen and share individual

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experiences so that those who may have been going through or had gone through similar experiences could be supported. The meetings were held in the faculty and were open to everyone, whether they were members of the Network or supporters.

In keeping with the intent to raise the visibility of LGBTI staff and students in the faculty, the Rainbow Engineering Network was launched to celebrate its establishment. The event took place during lunch time in a highly visible space and senior leaders supported the Network by speaking and being present. The Launch was well attended by staff and students which provided acknowledgement, acceptance and support for the establishment of the Network and for its members.

The Network has also been able to embed itself within the club culture and participate at events where other clubs are represented such as Orientation and Courses and Careers Day.

Inclusive Practice

Having an engaged student network has enabled key learnings to take place regarding the needs of the members which has led to adjustments in practice to increase inclusivity. When surveys are sent out to students, the Student Development and Engagement Team are mindful of how they ask the question regarding gender and typically ask "which gender do you identify with" giving the option of "male, female, transgender or other (please specify), rather not say" rather than the previous standard male/female answer.

The Women in Engineering Network has adapted its process of registering female students via their given name and legal sex to now incorporate an opportunity for transgender students to connect and join the network.

Members of the Rainbow Engineering Network have also worked together to contribute towards policy documentation by addressing and raising awareness of the key issues that are typically faced by transgender students that are often overlooked by others in everyday life. One such issue is regarding gaining access to toilets that are normally specified as either "male" or "female" which can lead to apprehension and anxiety as the choice of which toilet to use is usually based upon who is around at the time. The Faculty is about to embark on a comprehensive building programme and LGBTI voices have been included in the consultation phase of the building programme to ensure that an inclusive environment is created, such as provision for gender neutral toilets.

Findings

In the short space of time since the Network was established, there have been a number of key findings. The most visible and equally most difficult to measure with such small numbers has been the increased confidence and self-esteem of members. Initially, when the Network was first established, members were apprehensive about being visible as a Network and asked for the meetings to be held outside the Faculty. Within less than a year meetings now take place in the student area which is a highly used and visible space. This suggests that members are comfortable within the Faculty and that the level of visibility provided has normalised the presence of the LGBTI community within the Faculty.

The fortnightly casual drop-in meetings are well attended by members and the feedback received has been that the opportunity to meet as a network has been a success as it creates a feeling of connectedness and belonging.

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The Network has a small number of key leaders who identify multiple ways to further engage students. These members are highly engaged and attend meetings and events as much as their timetable allows. They have also made the most of leadership opportunities and have raised the profile of diversity within the Faculty by being profiled to help recruit new students to the Faculty.

Currently limitations exists in that there is no process in place to identify LGBTI staff or students as this information is not asked or recorded on a database when a student or staff member enrols or starts working at the University of Auckland. Another barrier is due to the sensitivity around the nature of the Network, not all members are at the stage where they feel comfortable being "out" and choose to become a silent member receiving information but not necessarily actively participating or being engaged in events and activities.

Discussion

Within the Faculty there has been a history of having key people as the champions of equity initiatives. The Faculty has a dedicated Women in Engineering position and a Kaiarahi position (leading the Tuakana initiatives) which have been important to have from the beginning to drive the initiative.

The University Rainbow Network and the groundwork laid by other faculties supporting the initiative have played a key role in providing students with a sense of belonging. Having a sense of belonging also helps keep our members connected with the university after they have graduated. This has been highlighted by our recent graduates who have signalled that they would like to help support students once they are out into industry.

The measure of success for the Network so far has been based upon the level of engagement received via informal feedback, participation and the support provided to those who require it. As the Network grows and becomes more established, a way of measuring the success of providing a safe and inclusive learning environment for LGBTI students would be to obtain qualitative data via a questionnaire to gauge member feedback on their own personal experience of studying at the University of Auckland and belonging to the Rainbow Engineering Network. Questions relating to the usefulness of the Network and the impact it has had on their wellbeing, study and connectedness to the Faculty could be asked. The questionnaire could also be provided to alumni so that they can reflect on their University experience once they are out into the Engineering industry.

Conclusion

As a result of the establishment and visibility of the Rainbow Engineering Network, its members have created a supportive environment. Operating like a club, the Network has been able to embed itself into the faculty culture by participating in key events where other clubs are represented. The Network has also been able to provide consultation on a number of key areas which has led to enhancing inclusive practices. Although still in its early days the Network has made an impact on the culture and has raised the awareness of diversity and increased visibility within the Faculty.

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