Partnering with educators to recognise and respond to students in distress: Taking a systems approach to staff capability building

New ways of working in partnership, Oral

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Abstract:

Teaching and professional staff are often the first to notice and respond to student wellbeing concerns. However, many staff report feeling unprepared to assist students in distress which may inhibit effective action. Equipping university staff with the knowledge and skills to recognise and refer students in need is a critical strategy for increasing access to support services. ‘Gatekeeper training’ commonly takes the form of mental health awareness and literacy training for staff in regular contact with students (e.g. Mental Health First Aid). Research indicates such training is helpful in improving knowledge and attitudes, but its effectiveness in achieving practice change in staff and increasing uptake of available support services by students is unknown. In practice, there are also a number of system and role-based barriers to effective and sustained staff action that need to be addressed. Acknowledging that staff capability building occurs in the context of a complex university system, the current project sought to enhance the effectiveness of gatekeeper training within RMIT University. Drawing on Systems Theory and Michie’s Behaviour Change Framework, three streams of integrated activity were co-designed with teaching and professional staff and implemented: 1. A blended Professional Development program adopting transdiagnostic recognition and response protocols embedded within the RMIT context. 2. System reform in streamlining pathways to support for students when facilitated by staff. 3. Targeted resources to reinforce staff action outside of the training environment and over time. Preliminary data evaluating the effectiveness of this approach will be presented.

Biography:

Vanna Garrick is an educator, facilitator and project manager with extensive experience in mental health promotion. Vanna has previously implemented national mental health initiatives in education settings, such as KidsMatter in primary schools and MindMatters in secondary schools. Vanna now has a lead role implementing the Framework for Enhancing Student Mental Wellbeing in RMIT University.