



**Evaluation report
Samen Hier Student Community**

October 2022

**SAMEN
HIER[®]**



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Introduction

The Samen Hier Student Community is a joint initiative by the Unicef Student Team The Hague (USTTH) and Justice & Peace. The initiative is student-led and aims to build an inclusive network between (international) students and refugee youths in the Hague. The Student Community is part of Samen Hier - the community sponsorship movement in the Netherlands where groups of friends or acquaintances can contribute specifically to safe havens and safe routes for refugees.

The initiative came to be because of the similarities between (international) students and refugee youth. All of them can be perceived as newcomers to The Hague. The USTTH team noticed similar challenges between both groups, such as feelings of loneliness and isolation. That's why together with Justice & Peace (coordinator of Samen Hier The Hague), USTTH set up a Samen Hier student community, to bring students and refugee youth together and foster sincere mutual exchange, connections and friendships. The first edition of the student community took place in early 2021, with 7 groups (each group consisting of 4-5 people). After the successful pilot, the second edition started in April 2022, again 6 groups participated.

This report will elaborate on the experiences, impact and developments of the Student Community that participated in the second edition. First the set up, profile of the community and their motivations will be presented. Secondly the results are shown, with a specific focus on the reduction of isolation, fostering genuine friendships, and increasing dialogue. At last the report presents lessons learned and tips for other student-led organisations how to successfully set up a Samen Hier Student Community in their city.

The Samen Hier Student Community

The set up

The full duration of an edition is equivalent to a university semester. After a recruiting and matching period, students and refugee youth get paired in groups based on their language and interests. The groups consist of 2 students and 2 newcomers. Each group is paired with a community builder, who initiates the first meeting and supports groups if they need help to plan meetings or face any cultural barriers. During the semester the groups engage in weekly meetings to bond, exchange experiences, and have fun. Furthermore, the groups take part in community-building events with the other groups of the initiative.

The second edition took place in early 2022. Initially, it was planned to start from the beginning of February until the end of March. However, the actual start was in April due to an extension of the recruitment period. The semester ran around 8 weeks until the beginning of June. During the recruitment period, there was a distinct difference in recruiting students and refugee youth. The recruiting of students for the Samen Hier Student Community turned out to be effective. The USTTH experienced great interest from students to participate in the student community. This was mainly because of the network and connections that the USTTH has already established at Leiden University Campus The Hague. Eventually, there were over 50 applications while there were only 20 spots available. To inform newcomers with a refugee background about the community, USTTH made use of Justice & Peace' network in The Hague. By reaching out to multiple people and support organizations like Inclusion and VluchtelingenWerk Den Haag newcomers got involved with the student community. This led to the matching of 7 groups where 3 students were paired with two 2 newcomers with a refugee background (in one instance with 3 newcomers). Each group was matched with a community builder: a team member of the Unicef Student Team The Hague who can support groups to facilitate meetings and sometimes even joins them in the activities to interpret of support groups in case of cultural barriers.

The participants

The whole student community consist of a variety of nationalities. Most refugee youth came from Yemen, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iran, and Iraq. Their ages ranged from 17 to 35. Most of them had been in the Netherlands for a longer period of time ranging from one year up to three years. Almost half of them were also students now or were students in their country of origin. They had backgrounds in economics, political science, architecture, and international law.

Most of the students came from countries inside the EU, like Germany, France, The Netherlands, The UK, and Italy. However, there were also two Americans. The students

followed different study programs including International Relations & Organizations and International Studies at both The Hague University of Applied Sciences and Leiden University College.

Motivations to participate

The motivations of the students and newcomers to participate in the student community have been retrieved from intake interviews before the start of the semester and exit surveys at the end. The intake interviews were conducted by members of USTTH and consisted of a series of 11 open-ended questions.

Students stated that they mainly participated because they wanted to enlarge their network by meeting new people and forming friendships. They also wanted to experience more cross-cultural engagements. Furthermore, the students found it important that refugee youths in the Hague have the opportunity to get in touch with people who are like-minded and helpful in facing personal challenges.

“I wanted to get to know people outside Leiden University College and interact with people from different backgrounds. Where we can share things about our cultures, histories, and interests. And of course, it’s important to also have some fun.”

“I wanted to be part of a community project that bridges the barriers newcomers face when coming to a new city by meeting university and like-minded students.”

“I wanted to hear more about the issues that migrants face when coming to the Netherlands, but most importantly build friendships and make sure that people don’t feel isolated.”

The refugee youth participated in the student community mainly to meet new people and to make new friends. As well as to practice their Dutch and English. Furthermore, they hoped that the initiative would help them with integration into Dutch society, specifically into the society of the Hague itself. And also, to increase their network for school and career opportunities.

“I’m trying to build a new life in the Netherlands. By participating in the student community, I hope to become part of Dutch society. I hope to engage in social contact. Right now I feel a bit lonely over here and during this period I hope to make some real friends with whom I can do fun activities. I also like to practice my Dutch with the student.”

“I participated in this program because I wanted to make friends, improve my English and get to know more about different cultures by learning from students in the program.”

“I expect this time that I get to know new people and learn from their experiences. The difference from the last time I participated is that I have more knowledge now myself. We shouldn't forget that 'refugee' describes a status, not a person. It can be a permanent status, but often it is not. I won't be a refugee forever and in the future, I will also be able to welcome people. The first time, I needed more guidance, but this time I can support newcomers myself in the challenges they face.”

Events throughout the semester

During the semester groups were given the freedom to choose and plan their own meetings, many of them met to grab a coffee or go for a walk. Many planned brunches and picnics at Malieveld, whilst some went out for drinks in the evening with other groups. Apart from group-specific activities, there were some events planned for the whole community, including an international potluck dinner at Leiden University College, and a picnic at Scheveningen. Planning these kinds of events has not proven to be as easy sometimes. USTTH struggled to plan big group events due to timing issues, participants were often not available at the same time. Exams and holidays turned out to be an obstacle to plan community events. Therefore, the turnout was not what they hoped. This led to improvised online events like speed dating and breakout room games and conversations. They facilitated this over Zoom and the turnout was surprisingly high.

Results

As mentioned before, all participants were asked to digitally fill out an exit survey at the end of the semester. It included questions about personal motivations and expectations, the connection within the groups, social networks, intercultural dialogue, feeling of inclusion, language improvement, the program set-up, and future improvements for both the students and newcomers. When it was not possible to use an objective scale, the survey made use of the Likert scale (this means: strongly disagree/disagree/neutral/agree/strongly agree with). The results below are based on 9 filled-out exit surveys from the second edition of the student community.

In general, the majority mentioned that their expectations have been met during their participation. They foremost liked the openness and inclusive sphere and that there was a chance to mix with other groups in the student community. Furthermore, all would recommend the student community to other students and refugee youth in the Hague. And all but one would like to participate again in the near future.

The other results below are focused on the goals of the Samen Hier Student Community and can be identified as the reduction of isolation, fostering of genuine friendships, and increasing dialogue.

Isolation

The interviewees were asked if they introduced their group members to their wider network. Four of them mentioned that this was the case and they also described that this happened more than once. Furthermore, four interviewees mentioned that their participation in the student community made them feel more at home in the Hague. This came from both refugee youth as international students.

“This initiative helped me to make connections with different students and that has made me feel like I am home.”

“It felt good to meet people outside of the university bubble and to hear about how they’ve experienced their integration process in The Hague.”

Friendship

The last goal of the student community is to foster genuine friendships within the student community. More than half of the questioned said that the meetings this semester were informal and friendly. Also, the majority has not experienced any disagreements in the group. And all except one would have liked to stay in contact with the others after the



semester. Furthermore, all but one felt that during the semester the sense of distance has decreased over time as they got to know each other better. And four participants mentioned that they felt a strong sense of trust within their group. Lastly, the majority of the questioned also expected to stay in contact with their group members after the semester.

“The two newcomers in my group were extremely lovely people and I would still like to meet them and keep in touch occasionally.”

Dialogue & mutual understanding

The majority of the interviewees said that during the semester the sense of distance between the participants decreased over time. And all have mentioned that they learned several things from other group members. Examples that were given were cultural customs, political histories of their home countries, and personal interests.

“With one group member especially I had very deep talks in which they shared their personal background and the cultural situation in their country of origin. This knowledge made me very aware of the privileged position that I am in. Moreover, it showed me how easy it can be to connect with people from different cultural backgrounds, there are always shared conventions/joys.”

“I learned more about other countries I did not know much about. I remember in the first meeting we were all talking about where we were from and we showed pictures from our ‘homes’.”

Lessons learned

The experiences so far and the feedback from the community show that there is a good foundation to continue with the Samen Hier Student Community. We learned that the student community has stimulated the creation of new relationships and was perceived as an informal and equal community in which people wanted to learn from each other. Because of the initiative, a part of the community stated that they feel more at home in the city. Besides, all of them would recommend participation in the student community to other students and refugee youth in the Hague. Based on the evaluation Justice & Peace formulates a couple of recommendations for a successful continuation of the student community.

Take into account study programmes and holidays

The majority of the interviewees mentioned that because of their busy schedules, it was difficult to meet every week. For the groups it seems more realistic to meet every other week instead. Some groups were not able to meet as much as they wanted too. USSTH could also consider to match groups based on their individual availability (hours per week) or resembling study programmes.

Invest in the preparation and guidance of the community

A majority of the interviewees mentioned that some group members seemed more interested to meet up than others in the group. To manage expectations and stimulate equal relations USTTH could emphasize more the expected commitment from community members, and advice groups to talk about their expectations at their first meeting. Also, to increase the turnout at live events for the whole community, the USTTH can try to already plan the community events prior to the start of the semester, and present the agenda at the kick-off event. That way everyone knows about the community events from the start, and can reserve those days in their agenda's.

Make it possible for the community to have an active role

Four participants mentioned that they would have been interested in organizing events with their own group for the whole student community. Therefore, it could be interesting to give the groups the chance to come up with suggestions or ideas about possible events and activities suitable for the whole group. This would make the student community less "top-down" and the activities will possibly better reflect the interests of the community. With the support of the USTTH, groups or individual members can organize and facilitate events or activities during the semester.

Set up a realistic planning for recruitment and matching

The USTTH has learned that contact with existing local networks is crucial to reach refugee youth in The Hague. Last time the network was informed a little too late, making the number of applications lower than expected. So to make the student community known, it is wise to inform the local network as early as possible when registration for a new edition has opened. By doing this, there is a better chance of reaching a bigger group of refugee youth for the application period. Also make sure to start the recruitment and matching process in time. Start recruiting at three months prior to the kick-off, and reserve one month prior to the kick-off for the whole matching process.

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