

Recovery colleges: An international Innovation in Mental Health and Wellbeing.

A stepping stone for students and our wider communities

Monday 4 December.

Blog by Dianna Smith, PhD student at Australian National University and previous manager of ACT (Australian Capital Territory) Recovery College Trial

What a fantastic afternoon this was. Being able to meet with an enthusiastic group of people who got to talk about their passion was uplifting and energising. The symposium was organised by the Care Economy Research Institute (CERI) at La Trobe University, whose aim is to establish platforms for researchers, consumers, policymakers and industry to co-design and implement the next generation of services to improve people's health and wellbeing across Australia. Held at the La Trobe University City Campus, eleven speakers spoke about Recovery Colleges and how they work. Around forty people were in the room with us and sixty joined us online, from a variety of organizations in Victoria, Australia and around the world, Satellite Foundation, Victoria Eating Disorders, Northern Health, Monash University, New South Wales Health and Quebec Recovery College to name a few .



After a warm welcome and acknowledgment of Country from the Co-Chairs Tessa Zirnsak (La Trobe University) and Dean Kolovos (Victorian Collaborative Centre), Lisa Brophy (La Trobe University) briefly outlined the recovery college concept and why we are there. She mentioned the strong international movement around recovery and Recovery Colleges. The goal for the afternoon was to build the momentum in Australia to open and maintain more Recovery College, especially in university settings, that we had an amazing opportunity to scale up possibilities for mental health.

All the presenters were only given 15 minutes to talk about Recovery Colleges and they all kept with time but also gave us a massive amount of information to digest, showing their passion for their work and the effect it can have on peoples' lives. Bryher Bowness (King's College, London) started the ball rolling with a quote that came from the evaluation of my own College, the ACT Recovery College Trial.



“In the Recovery College, there are people of all kinds of backgrounds and lives, so we are all a little different and strange to the outside world. But in the community made by the College, we all come together and work to help each other. Some of us are veterans of trauma and have healed, some are still on the recovery journey, and some haven’t begun to heal and recover. I wanted it to look like all the characters were helping someone out of a hole; a rabbit hole that many people get stuck in with mental health.” Georgina Rice

She used this to illustrate that Recovery Colleges are not about clinical recovery but are about finding our strengths and learning how to manage our personal recovery so that we can live a satisfying and fulfilling life. She talked about the characteristics of a Recovery College including coproduction, the importance of have both experts by experience and by training working together, that they are: based on education principles; recovery orientated; strengths-based and person centred; progressive and open to all. She emphasised one of the main qualities of Recovery Colleges, which is co-learning, that all people who attend a Recovery College, the staff, volunteers, educators and students, are all learning together. She mentioned the history of Recovery Colleges in UK, that this model commenced with a trial in 2009 and has grown exponentially until there are now 88 Recovery College established and running in the UK and around 220 in world.

Bryher went on to talk about the concept of running a Recovery College in a university setting and the proposal to open a College within LaTrobe University. University based Recovery Colleges have been successfully implemented in Ireland. Research has shown that university-based Recovery Colleges can introduce the use of lived experience and the collaboration of experts by experience and by training, enhance the student identity, facilitate steps into further education and reduce stigma.

Heather Lamb spoke about her personal journey as a carer and how attending a Recovery College affected and changed that journey. She talked about walking into the ACT Recovery College for the first time, the welcome she received at a particularly difficult time of her life when she was coming to terms with becoming a carer again. She talked about her journey through the College starting with attending as a student, moving on to develop and facilitate two different courses, meeting people that reactivated her passion for advocacy and started on her path to volunteering and then working in her present position of a lived experience researcher. She also postulated that a university-based Recovery College would especially benefit people who are young carers, who are dealing with all the changes in their life that come with attending university whilst also trying to accommodate their existing caring duties and responsibilities.

Lucy Mahony and Christopher Stefano (headspace) talked very passionately about their work in the [Discovery College](#), which is the first in the world to look at and explore youth mental health recovery and wellbeing. The Discovery College is co-produced by young people for young people. However, the College is open to everyone who is interested in attending, it is an excellent way of learning about the issues that young people face and how to support them in ways that they

would like to be supported. It caters for different styles, holding courses and panels, both online and in person, it uses blogs, and podcasts to share knowledge, skills and techniques. Feedback from participants have shown that the College offers a unique perspective, that they enjoy the lived experience sharing and the community feel, the fact that it: is a safe space; that it is accessible and inclusive; they learn from one another and have the opportunity to build connections.

They talked passionately about the way that university-based Recovery Colleges could play a role: in establishing empathy; building stronger community connections and transforming the future workforce. University based Recovery Colleges can assist in reducing stigma, play a part in changing systems, producing a trauma informed, more resilient work force leading to an increased capacity to take care of each other better.

The next presenters Liza Hopkins, Anna Gould and Shelley Anderson (Alfred Health) talked about the issues of establishing an adult version of the Discovery College in an acute and community mental health service. They talked about introducing the concept through taster courses which were run up to the COVID outbreak. They mentioned the phases of co-production, co-development, co-facilitation and the need to close the circle with co-evaluation. Participating in a Recovery College meant learning how to sit in discomfort, that one of the challenges was training junior medical staff in the importance of co-production and working in concert with lived experience.

Their presentation eloquently demonstrated one of the important findings of being involved in a Recovery College for professionally trained people in that they learn to be more open about their own lived experience. Shelley, a clinician who was an educator stated that being involved with the college opened up so many conversations including that she had lived experience of being a carer, something that no one in her work environment was aware of before her involvement with the College.

Liza spoke about the need to build the evidence base, need evaluation to be built in as an essential component of any Recovery College. That we need to be especially vigilant to close the co-production circle with co-evaluation. We need to explore the fidelity to the model, the outcomes for participants of all types, ensuring we are capturing everyone we should be, look at the barriers to developing and sustaining colleges in Australia.

Two presenters from the Mind Recovery College, Carolynne White and Shay Elliot (Mind Australia), took up the baton and talked about their Recovery College, which was the first to be opened in Australia, which 10 years on is still offering courses at all sites of Mind, in their community-based centres and residential services. They were currently undertaking a review of College looking at the policy environment, impacts of the NDIS review, listening to people, past and new to RC. Carolynne spoke of some of the challenges of ensuring the continuance of the College including funding, incorporation into clinical services, the shift from educational

principles to psychoeducation and what that means for keeping to the fidelity of the Recovery College model, how to secure a pathway to education.

One of the most important elements of Recovery Colleges is that they grow and develop to meet the needs of the community that they are in. Shay gave a fantastic example of this by talking about Rainbow Recovery which developed as part of the Mind Recovery College in NE Victoria. A set of eight LGBTQI+ courses were developed and facilitated in response to people saying that there were no LGBTQI+ courses available and that they would really like some education for this group to assist both members of the group and others who were interested in how to support this group.

Jess Wilson (University of Tasmania) talked about another aspect of developing a Recovery College in Central Coast (New South Wales), something that need to be undertaken before the college is even opened, the community codesign of model for a college. She talked about a five stage co-design process, that they were using:

1. community consultations – focus or discussion groups to explore what is needed, what would have been helpful to their community.
2. community based survey – asking similar question and building on the information gathered in stage one but including a wider participant audience.
3. Analysis of both stage one and two information
4. co-design workshops – explore key values and needs, safe space for people with an explicit conversation on power, focus on skills and experiences.
5. member checking – consolidated finding to be brought back to the people who have been involved for their comments.

These stages gather a solid foundation of information for funding.

The Mayo Recovery College in Eire recorded a presentation for the seminar but due to technical difficulties could not be shown. This presentation showed how they had developed a successful university-based Recovery College that has been running for 10 years. This model has been used in other locations in Eire so that there is now 10 such Colleges running. All participants in the room and on line (which included Donal Hoban from the Mayo College, which shows real dedication as it was around 2:30 in the morning in Mayo!) would be sent the presentation to view. This is included [here](#).

Information on the established Australasian Recovery College Community of Practice (RCCoP) and how to join this group was given. The Community of Practice are a group of people, mainly staff of Recovery Colleges around Australia and New Zealand but also including other people who are interested in Recovery Colleges. They have regular meetings where they discuss different aspect of establishing and running Recovery Colleges. The next meeting is on 6 February 2024 and will be a special event with Jane Rennison, Senior ImROC Consultant, Trainer and Recovery College Lead joining the group to revisit the ImROC defining features of a Recovery College and share some of the current challenges and opportunities that Colleges in the UK are currently exploring in relation to maintaining fidelity to the defining features. To be

included on the mailing list for the RCCoP please email dianna.smith@anu.edu.au or C.Harcla@alfred.org.au and they will add you to the list.

A Q and A session followed the presentations which feedback from the participants indicated wasn't long enough. Feedback also mentioned that more information on the challenges faced in developing and running Recovery Colleges in Australia would be appreciated. Maybe this could be the focus of the next seminar!!!

Thanks to CERI for hosting the symposium, as well La Trobe University and the Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health & Wellbeing, for facilitation of such an informative, rejuvenating and thoroughly enjoyable event.

