



ACT Recovery College Evaluation

Final Report in Brief

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“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

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Executive Summary

“A Recovery College is an adult learning centre at which all courses focus on an individual’s management of mental illness and promote self-directed individual recovery.” (A Mental Health Recovery College for Canberra, 2017, p. 6).

Beginning in 2018, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government invested \$1,078,000 over three years to support a pilot of a Recovery College in the ACT. This innovative pilot sought to establish demand for a College and greater understanding of how it might contribute to the existing mental health sector in the ACT.

La Trobe University was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the ACT Recovery College in December 2019. This project evaluated the ACT Recovery College over the course of its two-year pilot, focusing on students’ and other key stakeholders’ experiences, recovery related learning outcomes, and the College’s reach and fit within the broader ACT mental health system.

During the evaluation period, the Recovery College supported 234 students in their recovery journey. Seventy-five percent of these students were women. Students were aged 18 years and older, with the largest cohort of students aged between 40 and 50. Fourteen percent of students identified as coming from culturally diverse backgrounds, and 12% identified as LGBTQIA+. A wide range of courses have been on offer that have been co-produced with the involvement of lived experience educators, staff and other stakeholders. On average, 70% of students who enrolled in a course completed it, accessing diverse social, educational, personal development and vocational opportunities embedded in the College’s activities.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION

This comprehensive evaluation included a total of 82 participants and a range of data collection methods including a survey, interviews, focus groups, and documentation analysis. The findings provide strong support for the College and demonstrate the success of the pilot. The findings are highly consistent with previous studies that have used the same measures and contribute to the growing body of evidence regarding the value of the Recovery College model. Participants identified the College as fulfilling an otherwise unmet need for social inclusion, vocational opportunities and holistic, recovery focused education.

In surveys and interviews over 90% of participants in the evaluation agreed or strongly agreed that the Recovery College promotes learning, thriving and growth, and more than

80% of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that staff are compassionate and the Recovery College is safe and attractive.

“...it's not going to be easy and it'll take time, but I can see the end goal of where I want my life to go; where I see myself in the future. I believe my life is worth something.” (End of Year Survey respondent, 2019)

The overall findings about the structure of the College are represented in Figure 1. Co-production is at the foundation of the College's work. The input of subject matter experts and lived experience educators are essential. The doors represent the accessibility of courses and the welcoming attitude of College staff. A book represents learning and a plant represents personal growth by students. The steppingstones are students' reported recovery outcomes, paving the way to social and vocational participation outside the College. Finally, the roof symbolises the partnerships with other stakeholders and resourcing essential to the the College's success.



FIGURE 1. OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION FINDINGS

Recovery College students described a place for learning new skills, connecting with others, and gaining knowledge in a safe and welcoming space. Staff, external stakeholders and supporters (including family members) all reported that the courses run by the College had a positive impact. The College cultivated a sense of belonging for everyone who accessed it.

"It makes me feel connected, included and hopeful instead of abandoned, isolated and desperate." (Online survey respondent, student)

People who experience mental illness in Australia report higher levels of unemployment, social isolation and loneliness compared with the general population. But students attending the College described how it provided 'steppingstones' to new possibilities in relation to connection, education and employment.

"[I] joined a new volunteer group that another student recommended which helps my sense of self and confidence and builds skills." (End of Term feedback respondent, Term 3, 2019)

"...the opportunity to work as a paid casual educator bringing my lived experience to the design and facilitation of courses [had] emotional, social, professional and financial benefits for me." (Online survey respondent, student)

Students valued the input of subject matter experts from different professional backgrounds as well as input from staff and educators with lived experience expertise.

"It has encouraged me to make better choices, knowing the research and evidence behind it." (Online survey respondent, student)

"Mental health issues are normalised, and don't feel like such a "problem" or something to be ashamed of." (Online survey respondent, student)

There was considerable concern among participants about losing the support of the College at the end of the pilot. Greater certainty and adequacy in funding, and a fit-for-purpose venue, would build upon the College's achievements thus far, and ensure positive

experiences and outcomes for students into the future. Offering hope that the Recovery College will continue also provides an important source of hope to students.

"I wasn't sure recovery was possible in my case. I can see changes I'm making in my life and positive progress I've already made." (Online survey respondent, student)

Recommendations

The findings of this evaluation are consistent with national and international evidence that Recovery Colleges are an important innovation for mental health, social inclusion and personal recovery. It is our overarching recommendation that ACT Health continue to fund a Recovery College in the ACT. The following recommendations are made with a view to ongoing improvement, building on the successful foundations already laid by the College.

MAINTAINING AND ENABLING A SPACE FOR LEARNING

- 1.** Priority should be given to identifying an alternate site to improve the accessibility of the building and location, and accommodate larger classes, which are valued by students for generating active group discussion and mutual support.
- 2.** The expressed needs and preferences of students should be reflected in induction and course planning templates for educators, especially the provision of practical information, hands-on activities, discussion, group work and use of multimedia (e.g., videos and music).
- 3.** Maintain and monitor the provision of a safe environment for learning, through student feedback, and strengthen workforce strategies to support this aim, such as access to co-reflection spaces, supervision and training.

CO-DESIGN & CO-PRODUCTION

- 4.** Invest in strategic planning aimed at expanding the College's reach and partnerships with Canberra Health Services and other health and community services to enable mutual exchange and co-production.
- 5.** Establish a student committee (as initially planned) to foster greater engagement, and opportunities for co-design, feedback and improvement.
- 6.** Retain the College's governance structure of a core organising committee or governance group, consisting of staff, educator, student, supporter and external stakeholder representatives.

WORKFORCE SUPPORT

- 7.** Secure sustainable funding that ensures adequate staffing, including management, student support and administrative support staff.
- 8.** Extend educator remuneration to include time for course development, review and co-reflection and/or supervision.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

- 9.** Provide extracurricular social activities aimed at providing students with opportunities for peer connections, engagement and community participation.
- 10.** Continue to include courses that foster student' connections with the wider community.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

- 11.** The return to face-to-face courses, public health restrictions permitting, should continue to foster the creation of safe spaces for learning and mutual support.
- 12.** Further develop the College's capacity to offer a mix of online and face-to-face courses.

ASPIRATIONS

- 13.** Pursue opportunities to explore and promote greater gender, cultural and language diversity among students and educators.
- 14.** Explore opportunities to increase the participation of LGBTQIA+ and First Nations people.

Introduction

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Recovery College Pilot is an initial investment by the ACT Government to support a greater understanding of community demand for this innovative model.

Recovery Colleges have been defined as “...adult learning centre[s] at which all courses focus on an individual’s management of mental illness and promote self-directed individual recovery. Recovery Colleges aim to help people with mental illness regain control of their lives, manage their illness, and participate more in the community.” (A Mental Health Recovery College for Canberra, 2017, p. 9). Recovery Colleges have been found to improve the mental wellbeing, knowledge, self-management and social support of students, whilst reducing stigma and acute mental health service use. Recovery Colleges also support people to identify and achieve their personal recovery goals.

The ACT Recovery College two-year trial commenced in April 2019, funded by ACT Health, which was extended for the period January – June 2021. The College is managed by the Mental Health Community Coalition (MHCC) with the support of a consortium of government and community stakeholders. It is open to all Canberrans over 18 years of age who are interested in learning about mental health and wellbeing (MHCC, 2017).

La Trobe University was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the ACT Recovery College in December 2019. This project aimed to conduct an evaluation of the ACT Recovery College over the course of its two-year pilot, focusing on student and key stakeholders experience, recovery related learning outcomes, and the College’s reach and fit within the broader mental health system in the ACT. The evaluation team provided an interim report in November 2020 and, following further consultation, data collection and analysis, we are pleased to provide this brief version of the final report. For more information please refer to the full report.

Objectives

The purpose of the project was to co-produce a recovery-oriented evaluation of the processes and outcomes of the ACT Recovery College. This research addresses the following four objectives:

1. Identify the role and operations of the Recovery College and its relationship with the broader mental health system in the ACT.
2. Investigate the experience of students, including whether the College provides a safe space to learn about mental health, recovery and wellbeing.
3. Explore the impact of course participation on mental health, recovery and wellbeing outcomes for students.
4. Explore the perspective of educators, other staff, family members, partners, friends or other supporters (supporters) and other key stakeholders including MHCC members, ACT health staff, and other mental health service providers (e.g. GPs, private psychiatrists), regarding the operation and outcomes of the College.

Research questions

1. What is the reach of the ACT Recovery College in terms of the type of student involvement and engagement in College and course activities by demographic, level of participation and completion rates over time?
2. What are the student self-reported outcomes from their involvement with the Recovery College and its courses?
3. What is the student experience of the Recovery College and its courses as judged by student satisfaction and participation?
4. What are the views and experiences of other key stakeholders involved with the Recovery College (directly and indirectly) including educators, other staff, administrators, supporters, Mental Health Community Coalition members and other relevant stakeholders on the model, implementation and learning outcomes, and integration with the broader health system?
5. To what extent does the ACT Recovery College 'fit' within the ACT mental health sector in terms of its value and expectations of the sector?

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND EVALUATION APPROACH

The principles of co-production that are central to the operation of the College were applied to the process of undertaking the evaluation (Roper, Grey & Cadogan, 2018). This was demonstrated through the inclusion of a consumer researcher on the team plus working with a steering committee, that included students of the College. The principal investigator co-chaired the steering committee with a lived experience member. This co-chairing assisted to ensure power in the project was shared and modelled ways of working that honoured co-production principles.

The evaluation drew on the following data sources:

1. Internal and publicly available documents supplied by the Recovery College (See Appendix 2)
2. Deidentified data collected from students by Recovery College staff on enrolment with their expressed consent for evaluation purposes.
3. Feedback collected by the College from students at the end of course sessions, at the end of each term, and in their end of year survey.
4. Feedback collected by the College from educators at the end of course sessions.
5. An online survey completed by College students and alumni and members of a range of other stakeholder groups.
6. Interviews with a range of stakeholders, including College students and alumni.
7. Focus groups discussing the findings of the above data sources with included stakeholder groups.

Survey, Interview and Focus Group Participants

Participants in the evaluation reflected a diverse range of perspectives and experiences with the College. In total 82 participants took part in the ACT Recovery College evaluation. Participants from a range of stakeholder groups engaged across three research activities: an online survey; interviews; and focus groups, as detailed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS ACROSS DATA SOURCES (N=82)

	STUDENTS	SUPPORTERS	STAFF & EDUCATORS	EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS	TOTAL
Online survey	34	7	31	18	61
Interviews	7	2	12	6	17
Focus groups	9	2	13	2	17

Participants were able to identify as belonging to more than one cohort. Overall, the age of participants ranged from 20 to 73 years with a mean age of 47 years; seventy per cent of the participants identified as female, approximately reflecting the demographics of the student group (75% female; 24% male; 1% genderqueer). The age of the student participants ranged from 20 to 66 years with a mean age of 44; eighty-six per cent of student participants identified as female. A small number of participants came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Findings

A summary of the findings drawn from the multiple data sources, in relation to each evaluation question, is provided below.

QUESTION 1: WHAT IS THE REACH OF THE ACT RECOVERY COLLEGE?

Initial enrolment data for the period May 2019 to March 2020 was provided by the College, describing 234 students who had attended the College during that period. Target groups for College courses include “people with mental illness, carers and family members of those with mental illness, and professionals working in mental health.” (MHCC, 2017, p. 9).

Personal lived experience of mental health challenges

Of those students for whom it was recorded on enrolment ($n = 203$), 82% identified as “a person with lived experience of mental distress or mental health diagnosis”. Of those who provided information on past service use in the two years prior to their enrolment: 35% ($n = 145$) had been hospitalised for a mental health condition; 19% ($n = 121$) had “received clinical treatment or care in relation to a suicide attempt”; and 14% ($n = 146$) had “sought treatment for any drug and/or alcohol concerns”.

Support people

Of those students for whom it was recorded on enrolment ($n = 174$), 37% identified as “a person supporting someone with mental health conditions”.

Professionals

Of those students for whom it was recorded on enrolment ($n = 162$), 27% identified as professionals “working directly with people with lived experience or in a field related to mental health”.

Course demand and completion

College progress reports, from June and December 2019, indicate that course demand was growing with many new students enrolling and growing waiting lists for many of the College’s courses. Staff in the co-design committee reported this high level of demand was not impacted by the transition to online learning in the context of COVID-19. Completion rates for courses varied with multi-day or week courses at around 70%. Requests for inclusion of students under the age of 18 years were also reported in College progress reports. Groups of potential growth include men, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and health professionals, who the College have identified as underrepresented in their courses. Efforts to co-produce courses to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are underway.

QUESTION 2: WHAT ARE THE STUDENT SELF-REPORTED OUTCOMES OF INVOLVEMENT WITH THE RECOVERY COLLEGE AND ITS COURSES?

In feedback collected by the College, students reported learning goals related to:

- Gaining **tips, strategies and tools** to manage their mental health as well as personally challenging themselves to try new things;
- Improved **knowledge** of mental health diagnoses and interventions, personal recovery, community resources and vocational opportunities;
- Enjoyment;
- Self-reflection and discovery; and
- **Connection** with others.

“...it [the College] provides a safe, non-threatening, non-judgemental, non-compliance environment which they can explore mental health journey and give themselves that agency and empowerment to take back control that the medical system and other systems that they’ve been involved in have taken away from them or robbed them, that’s why I think Recovery College is a benefit.” (Interview participant, staff)

Achievement of each of these learning goals was reflected in feedback collected by the College at the end of each course session, term, and in the end of year survey, and in responses to the online evaluation survey. The most prominent themes related to the positive impact of the College on personal recovery outcomes, such as a sense of connection with others and empowerment through greater understanding of themselves and things they could do to promote their recovery.

“It’s just been amazing. And she would not have had that without Recovery College, because there isn’t another form of activity that just gives you that safe, not really guided but the guidance is there if you want it. So, with all the other things that she’s done, it’s been interesting and helpful, like helpful here and helpful there. But the craft, the creative art was, she’s a very different person now.” (Interview participant, supporter)

Additional benefits, unanticipated by students on enrolment, related to personal recovery were also noted, including a sense of hope, purpose and agency in their lives, and reduced feelings of internalised stigma.

“Through my involvement in the College, I feel less ‘weird’.” (End of Year Survey respondent, 2019)

Survey and interview responses indicated that staff, external stakeholders and supporters all reported that the courses run by the College had a positive impact on students.

These benefits extended to supporters who felt valued when engaged in College activities. Supporters, who included family members and friends, outlined how the person they support became more engaged with their recovery journey after participating in the College.

Findings indicated that the majority of participants reported improvement on most of the PeerZone Star items included in the survey (See Appendix 6), especially in the domains of enjoyment, self-esteem and control over one’s life (See Findings under Question 2 for more details).

“It provides me with an opportunity to be linked into the community, during daylight hours, at a pace which I can manage. Being included improves my confidence and helps me to feel more stable and less distressed.” (Online survey feedback, student)

QUESTION 3: WHAT IS THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF THE RECOVERY COLLEGE AND ITS COURSES?

Students' reported experiences of the College suggest it is an inclusive and safe space to learn, share their own knowledge and connect with people with similar experiences. Students were asked to complete the Mind Australia Satisfaction Survey (MASS) as part of the survey and the 34 participants who completed this measure rated most items of the MASS positively. A small number of students expressed a neutral or no comment grading of the items, specifically with regards to spiritual or cultural needs being met. Students reported the highest agreeance with regards to their experience of being treated respectfully by staff and being listened to by staff and this was also a feature of our interviews and focus groups.

"Yeah, I've found one of the key things about the Recovery College is the fact that it is a safe place, and the staff seem well-trained in mental health and dealing with students who might be in crisis at one point or another. So, yeah, their caring compassion is something I haven't come across in any other field of mental health. And the fact that they can make that a safe place for students to come and learn is, I think, one of the Recovery College's strengths." (Student focus group participant)

Students most valued interactive course activities that enabled them to engage with content, learn from others and apply practical skills.

Staff felt that the College had cultivated a sense of safety. Efforts to create this space are evident at all levels of College policy and practice, including the inclusion of the MIECAT DoNoHarm framework in student and educator induction and course materials. However, many participants in our interviews, including students and educators, discussed the ongoing challenges of balancing mutual discussion and learning with establishing and maintaining a safe space for learning, particularly for people with trauma histories. Hence, it was acknowledged that this is a persistent challenge.

Students were also asked to complete the Development Recovery Enhancing Environment Measure (DREEM). This tool measures the recovery-orientation of organisations, in this case the College. Overall, the 35 students who completed DREEM, as a part of the survey or during an interview, expressed a high degree of overall satisfaction with more than 70% of the survey participants strongly agreeing that staff are compassionate, and the Recovery College is safe and attractive. However, only 10% of survey participants strongly agreed with the item that the College was sufficiently resourced.

Stakeholders emphasised that the College had cultivated a sense of belonging for everyone who accessed it, including students. The space was described as welcoming (although

physically lacking), peer-oriented, and as having capacity to meet people where they are at on their recovery journey.

QUESTION 4: WHAT ARE THE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED WITH RECOVERY COLLEGE?

Educators, staff, supporters and external stakeholders shared very similar perspectives on the College. Key themes included a lack of resources, sector relationships and belonging. One participant summarised that the College requires:

“...support (including financial support) for the expansion of the College. Currently housed in a small venue. Would be great to see capacity to hold courses in other venues across ACT. Financial capacity for additional admin support would also help - seems to be a very high workload for team.” (Online survey respondent, External stakeholder)

Stakeholders placed significant emphasis on the relationships between the College and the ACT health sector more broadly. Some thought the College needed more promotion to prospective students, mental health services and other potential referrers including General Practitioners (GPs).

Stakeholders also identified that the College was a place that cultivated a sense of belonging. Stakeholders felt that their engagement with the College was an opportunity to be “part of something very meaningful and filled with purpose” in their work roles.

...it was just one of my favourite days at work, ever. It was just beautiful just to see how they came together... and, really different people, you know? [...]. All these different people that wouldn't normally have anything - it's not about having something in common - but just coming together, you know? And, here they were and it was a lovely warm. They were just a beautiful bunch of people. So that helped but, certainly, I think for some of them it was – there was a real social element to it. There sure was for me.” (Interview participant, external stakeholder)

Stakeholders were able to identify that, despite the challenges they faced in their roles as staff, educators or supporters, the College has a significant role in the recovery journeys of its students.

Stakeholders' feedback suggested that the partnerships with ACT Health in the establishment and governance of the College have not translated to active involvement of

Canberra Health Services staff in co-production and delivery of College courses. Funding precarity and scarcity, and a mostly casual workforce, has negatively impacted on the full realisation of co-production and partnership principles described in the original model.

QUESTION 5: TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE ACT RECOVERY COLLEGE ‘FIT’ WITHIN THE ACT MENTAL HEALTH SECTOR IN TERMS OF ITS VALUE AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE SECTOR.

As discussed above in relation to Question 4, staff, external stakeholders and supporters responding to the survey indicated a need for the College to be better engaged with local health services.

Engagement, through sharing information about the College and referring potential students, was particularly emphasised, and College progress reports indicate most students were not referred by health professionals. Supporters believed that the College was useful as an addition to clinical and other support services.

Across all data sources, students valued the opportunity the College provides for social connection and mutual learning with others experiencing mental health challenges. Participants from all informant groups expressed the view that the College was unique in its offerings, and that it had a meaningful and significant contribution to the available services in the region.

Feedback from all data sources suggests that, for those participating in College courses as both students and educators, the College is fulfilling an otherwise unmet need for social inclusion, vocational opportunities and recovery focused education.

As reflected in earlier findings regarding the sense of connection (see Question 2) and safe space (see Question 3) created by the College, student and educator participants to the online survey emphasised the importance of the College as a community.

“It is an oasis of hope, inclusion and connection.” (Online survey feedback, student)

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

Feedback from all sources indicated that the COVID-19 related public health restrictions presented personal and professional challenges for those involved with the College, provided new opportunities for learning and engagement, and highlighted existing limitations in both human and infrastructure resources at the College. The College was seen to have dealt with these challenges very well in the shift to online delivery. However, participants also looked forward to the College returning to face-to-face delivery.

In Conclusion

This evaluation is consistent with national and international evidence that Recovery Colleges are an important innovation for mental health, social inclusion and personal recovery. Recovery Colleges offer a genuinely different model based on an education-focused and recovery-oriented approach that enables positive experiences and outcomes for students as well as other stakeholders and supporters. Our findings suggest high levels of satisfaction with the ACT Recovery College among students, and consistent evidence that the College offers a recovery-oriented environment from all participants.

"It makes me feel connected, included and hopeful instead of abandoned, isolated and desperate." (Online survey respondent, student)

Recovery College students described a place for learning new skills and gaining knowledge in a safe and welcoming space. The College was seen by many as providing 'steppingstones' to new possibilities in relation to connection, education and employment. Many who have attended the College did so to connect with others and this was generally achieved. Participants said the College gave them a sense of belonging and mutual support.

"...it's not going to be easy and it'll take time, but I can see the end goal of where I want my life to go; where I see myself in the future. I believe my life is worth something." (End of Year Survey respondent, 2019)

There is some room for improvement with students suggesting that courses could be enhanced in terms of focus, content and delivery. Some would like to do more practical activities, some were looking for greater enjoyment and social connection, and some wanted courses to be more focused on their personal recovery goals, including employment.

Offering a safe learning environment is a strength of the College. Some participants emphasised the challenges of balancing mutual sharing, discussion and learning with interpersonal safety, especially when people attending courses have a history of trauma. Thus, this represents an ongoing challenge for the College and its courses.

The College has worked collaboratively with ACT Health and community organisations to expand the reach and further develop available resources. However, greater engagement with Canberra Health staff in the co-production of courses and mutual learning has been highlighted as an area for improvement. Students valued the input of subject matter experts

from different professional backgrounds and felt that more of the College's courses could benefit from similar input. The uncertainty and need for more funding of staff roles was said to limit the potential for meaningful co-production with students, health professionals and community partnerships.

Although this project did not specifically study the cost-effectiveness of the ACT Recovery College, findings suggest that the College can indirectly contribute to cost-saving. Particularly because the findings from this project highlighted the role of the ACT Recovery College in promoting improved mental health and wellbeing and growth towards economic participation. Several students and educators identified the College as beneficial to their personal and professional development. The College helped them to expand their skills and gain confidence towards becoming educators; thus, moving from recipient of care to provider roles.

Many students expressed concerns about losing the support of the College through discontinued funding and it is our overarching recommendation that ACT Health continue to fund the Recovery College in the ACT. It is notable that in February 2021 the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, for reasons very similar to this evaluation, have recommended that each Adult and Older Adult Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Service in Victoria establish and run a Recovery College, in the context of the considerable benefits they have now been established to offer.

Finally, while the College was perceived to be a warm and welcoming place, many participants commented that larger classrooms, more spaces, more materials and equipment (e.g. computers, stationary) and having a College that was more centrally located in Canberra would greatly help it to realise its potential. The evaluation identified emergent resourcing challenges, including for the workforce, as the pilot progressed. The pilot has thus provided an opportunity to identify the range of resource needs of the College and how to anticipate and communicate those needs to government. Clear communication about the College's needs is an important way of avoiding unrealistic pressure on staff and external stakeholders in relation to their contributions. There is an ongoing need closely monitor resourcing needs in future to ensure adequate funding.