

Bringing recovery to the youth – a review of discovery colleges

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Abstract

Purpose – While the research literature on Recovery Colleges is relatively well-established, comprehensive research concerning Recovery Education for young people is currently scarce. The purpose of paper is to provide an overview of determinants of, and barriers to, the successful implementation of youth-adapted Recovery Colleges, known as Discovery Colleges, and to explore the wider impact of Discovery Colleges and Recovery Colleges.

Design/methodology/approach – In consultation with a Recovery College Peer Educator, three undergraduate applied psychology students conducted a literature review with no date limits on publications in the Google Scholar and PubMed electronic databases.

Findings – A total of 15 publications were included. Determinants for successful implementation included the importance of previously established Recovery College foundations, service and content accessibility and evaluative feedback. Barriers were primarily related to differences in how development, identity and environment between adults and young people impact positive educational outcomes. The wider impact of Discovery Colleges highlighted an improvement in relationships between service users and health-care professionals, an improved attitude towards education; improvements in well-being, self-worth and social connection; and promotion of transformative learning and personal autonomy. Through this, Discovery Colleges also continue to challenge the contemporary medical model of mental health.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this was the first literature review conducted specifically focussing on important factors in establishing Discovery Colleges. This literature review provides an important overview for both service users and staff members in how the development and implementation of this exciting and relatively new initiative can be further explored and enhanced going forward.

Keywords Mental health, Young adults, Recovery, Recovery education, Youth mental health, Discovery college

Paper type Literature review

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Introduction

Poor mental health is one of the leading causes of disability worldwide, with epidemiological studies estimating that approximately one in three will meet diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder at some point in their life (Merikangas *et al.*, 2009). While approximately 75% of poor mental health emerges between early adolescence and young adulthood (Malla *et al.*, 2015), only a small proportion of individuals meet severity in distress to warrant traditional intervention during this age period. Epidemiological studies on mental health problems for young people in an Irish context have revealed that at the age of 13, one in three will likely have experienced poor mental health, with an increased rate to one in two at age 24 (Cannon *et al.*, 2013). Consistent with previous research, the authors conclude that when assessing lifetime experience of mood disorders, only 15% of young Irish adolescents are estimated to meet diagnostic criteria that warrants traditional intervention.

Ireland has in recent decades seen a development in mental health policy and practice that moves toward a recovery-oriented mental health framework (Costello, 2021). In contrast to

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the traditional symptom-illness-treatment model of mental health, a recovery-oriented framework highlights the value of connectedness, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment (Leamy *et al.*, 2011). Recovery Education refers to educational services on mental health topics, either through a central hub, called a Recovery College, or through delivery in multiple community settings. Recovery-oriented educational services aim to provide individuals with learning opportunities to allow for creation, self-exploration and assimilation of knowledge for recovery to occur in their own lives and centres around lived experience, co-production of recovery material and peer support [Health Services Executive (HSE), 2018]. Following the success of Recovery Colleges, the first Irish youth-adapted Recovery College, termed Discovery College was piloted in 2019 with the aim of expanding this service to young people (Costello, 2021). While the literature on Recovery Colleges is relatively well-established, comprehensive research concerning Recovery Education for young people is scarce (Thériault *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, based on existing literature, this literature review will provide an overview of determinants of successful implementation of Discovery Colleges, barriers to achieving successful implementation of Discovery Colleges and the wider impact of Discovery Colleges and Recovery Colleges.

Determinants of successful implementation

In terms of the implementation and development of Discovery Colleges, driving factors highlighted in existing literature primarily pertain to the importance of foundations, accessibility and evaluation. Research has emphasised that Discovery Colleges are based on and adapted from the Recovery College model, which is underpinned by the four principles of the National Framework (Costello, 2021; Hopkins *et al.*, 2018a; Hopkins *et al.*, 2018b). In this way, foundations established in Recovery Colleges are transferrable to and can aid the successful implementation of Discovery Colleges. Research suggests that through co-production, sharing knowledge through lived experience enhances group culture (Hopkins *et al.*, 2018a). Additional factors to consider when establishing Discovery Colleges include the importance of openness, utilizing resources and flexibility. Costello (2021) promotes open communication in co-production by outlining the objectives of the co-production process prior to same. In establishing a new Discovery College, Hopkins *et al.* (2018a) recruited a learning consultant and acquired mentorship from existing Recovery Colleges to ensure that learning principles were sufficiently embedded. Additionally, flexibility in combining a commitment to fidelity to the Recovery College model with real-world practicalities that allow tangible progress is imperative (Hopkins *et al.*, 2018a).

Accessibility is another important component to consider for the successful implementation of Discovery Colleges. Research consistently suggests that Recovery Education courses are available to the whole community, regardless of experience or circumstance. Additionally, Costello (2021) promotes various stakeholder involvement in all stages of development and delivery. This is further reflected by Hopkins *et al.* (2018a), who has suggested that an important initial step for establishing a Discovery College is to conduct a workshop bringing various stakeholders (including young people, families, friends, clinicians, mental health professionals and community members) together to discuss how the Discovery College model could be beneficial to the community. Furthermore, it is important that the course content itself is accessible to all students. Costello (2021) ensured that all learning styles were catered for in Discovery College sessions through the inclusion of video clips, group work and individual learning opportunities. Moreover, research by Hopkins *et al.* (2018a) highlights that the use of an educational model emphasises an effort to work towards individual's goals and strengths rather than being restricted by diagnosis and treatment frameworks. This is further evidence to support accessibility as a determinant of the successful implementation of Discovery Colleges.

Finally, research by Costello (2021) suggests that an evaluation process can be an effective determinant of the successful implementation for Discovery Colleges. According to student

feedback, learning to cope with mental health challenges and gaining knowledge were identified as key motivators for attendance. This is further reflected in research by [Hopkins et al. \(2018b\)](#), stating that positive evaluations demonstrated the importance of Discovery Colleges as part of a holistic approach to the care of mental health in young people. In this research, facilitating factors identified by young people included speaking up, a flexible, respectful and supportive learning environment and engaging course content. Evaluation enables students to use introspection, which is further encouraged through the use of open-ended questions ([Hopkins et al., 2018b](#)). Therefore, attaining such feedback facilitates the growth of Discovery Colleges as future workshops can use this information to develop the initiative.

Barriers to successful implementation

The existing literature on Recovery Education through Discovery Colleges have acknowledged barriers that may hinder positive educational outcomes for young people. While adult and youth Recovery Education are underpinned by the same recovery-oriented philosophy, distinctions between young people's and adult's recovery processes include differences in development, identity and environment ([Dawson et al., 2019](#)). When evaluating young and adult experiences of Discovery College education, [Hopkins et al. \(2018b\)](#) found that young people were less able to emotionally regulate during workshops, which served as hinderance to course material engagement. Consistent with these findings, previous research has found that emotional regulation skills typically develop during adolescence ([Silvers, 2022](#)) and that young adults generally have poorer emotional regulation skills compared to older adults ([Orgeta, 2009](#)).

Research suggests that young people tend to be more biomedically oriented in their understanding of what constitutes ill mental health, thus identifying with a biomedical framework ([Moberg et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, as young people more often identify with mental health problems in a traditional symptom-illness-treatment context, this may create an ambivalence to the meaning and goals of recovery and may potentially serve as a barrier to both attending workshops and engaging in recovery education. Moreover, while recovery education is underpinned by agency and co-production, children under the age of 18 are by law subordinate to parents and/or guardians ([Moberg et al., 2022](#)) and require parental consent to engage with Discovery Colleges. As children under 18 are not legally independent, this could halt Discovery College engagement opportunities from this age demographic, potentially leading to loss of valuable input and hindering Recovery Education participation. It is important to acknowledge that the aspect of subordination influences how identity is shaped and expressed and eventually how meaning is created. From this perspective, it is imperative to understand that when attempting to remove barriers in implementing Discovery Colleges, differences in identity between adults and children should be a central aspect in exploring how youth Recovery Education can cater to the specific needs of young people. Finally, [Moberg et al. \(2022\)](#) outline that family inclusion is an important component in young people's recovery process. The family's involvement has been outlined as a crucial support structure in youth Recovery Education ([Hopkins et al., 2018b](#)), and input from Discovery College participants has emphasized the need for widening the scope to allow for inclusion of family members, for example through receiving information on recovery education and by attending workshops ([Costello, 2021](#)).

Environmental barriers to Discovery College participation have been outlined in the literature. In their qualitative study drawing on experiences of current and previous employed Discovery College staff, service managers and lived experience facilitators in a Discovery College setting, [Hopkins et al. \(2018a\)](#) found that barriers to educational outcomes included accessibility to learning spaces and feasibility of having a youth workforce. While it may be preferable to locate Discovery College educational spaces away from treatment spaces (e.g. hospitals or mental health facilities), having yet another

physical location to which young people must navigate may discourage participation rather than enhance it. Consistent with the broader Recovery College literature, elements like distance, cost of travel and time inconveniences have been outlined as barriers to Recovery Education (Thériault *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, similar to concerns raised toward the disconnectedness of health-care services (Malla *et al.*, 2015), having Discovery Colleges located in isolation to broader health care could increase the risk of adopting a “siloe approach”, potentially impeding on young people’s access to mental health services. These aspects inform the challenges involved in establishing a consistent youth workforce. While it is crucial for young people to partake in co-production and co-facilitation, this may not always be feasible. The lack of youth representativeness in Discovery Colleges may therefore hinder satisfactory implementation of youth-oriented recovery education (Hopkins *et al.*, 2018a).

Wider impact of discovery and recovery colleges

The wider impact of Recovery College attendance can include improved relationships between service users and health-care providers, improved sense of well-being and self-worth and improved attitudes toward education. One impact of Recovery Education is an improvement in trust and understanding between service users and clinicians. An example of this improvement pertains to a study conducted by Frayn *et al.* (2016) who, during the process of setting up Recovery Colleges in a forensic setting, showed positive feedback from those who attended. It was reported that patients engaged more with the medical team after workshops (when both clinicians and service users were present and engaged), and that the medical team gained insight into how patients feel about different methods of medical treatment. Similarly, research by Hunter *et al.* (2022) demonstrated improvements in participant relationship with mental health services. Furthermore, service provider/practitioner perspectives shifted after hearing lived experience from participants during the co-production phase. Participants also reported an improvement in the trusting relationship they have with the health-care professionals as a result of partaking in Recovery College workshops.

Thériault *et al.* (2020) conducted a literature review of Recovery Colleges and found that attending workshops was associated with improved quality of life and well-being, increased self-knowledge and self-management skills and attainment of personal and recovery goals. Many studies analysed in their literature review demonstrated that participants felt that Recovery Colleges “strengthened their social network and offered opportunities for meaningful interactions” (p. 930). Other findings from their literature review showed that participants found attending Recovery Colleges useful for motivating change and acquiring an understanding of new perspectives. In addition to these findings, Hunter *et al.* (2022) conducted a comprehensive study on the evaluation of Recovery Education services in Ireland, where one of the outcomes reported was the empowering environment present within the Recovery Colleges which enable participants to develop their voice, which leads to developing a comfortability in sharing lived experience and feeling understood during participation in workshops. This has been further reflected in research by Moberg *et al.* (2022), who found agency and participation to be a central component which underlies the paradigm shift from a medical to a more holistic model.

When examining the educational outcomes of participation in Discovery Colleges, statistical analyses conducted by Hopkins *et al.* (2018b) showed a small but significant improvement in attitudes towards education in youth participants pre and post session. From this perspective, Recovery Education has been described as a “lightbulb moment”, when participants realise that they have agency over their mental well-being (Hunter *et al.*, 2022, p. 38). Further, the authors argue that Recovery Education helps participants to build self-worth and confidence and helps participants realise that they have a responsibility for their well-being. Intertwined with this is perspective change, which is an exploration of

where those “lightbulb moments” come from. The enabling environment helps participants to learn new ideas that they can use to improve their well-being. For example, one participant said “the fact that you can have mental illness and still have good mental health. That’s a really [. . .] strong kind of idea for me” (Hunter *et al.*, 2022, p. 41). This demonstrates the way in which the RC model can lead to improved attitudes towards education and how Recovery Education in this regard can help destigmatize mental health.

Conclusion

This literature review aimed to investigate the key elements involved in the implementation, development and impact of Discovery Colleges based on the existing research literature. Determinants of the successful implementation of Discovery Colleges emphasised in literature include the importance of Recovery College foundations, accessibility and appropriate use of student evaluative feedback. However, research has highlighted barriers that may hinder educational outcomes for young people in the context of Discovery Colleges, including development, identity and environment. In terms of the wider impact of Discovery Colleges and Recovery Colleges, there is evidence to show improvements in relationships between service users and health-care professionals, an improved attitude towards education, improved well-being, self-worth and social connection. Moreover, the Discovery College model can stimulate perspective change and feelings of autonomy and promotes a paradigm shift from the medical model towards a more holistic one, in turn aiding the de-stigmatisation of mental health. Going forward, the recovery model for young people needs to be further evaluated and continuously re-examined. Additional research is needed in this area to establish the impact of Discovery Colleges, specifically through mixed-method and longitudinal research. Through this, factors associated with the effectiveness of the Discovery College model, including maintenance, generalisability and cultural impact can be further explored. Furthermore, research should aim to investigate how to best operationalise the involvement of family members (including parents, siblings and extended family members) within the Discovery College model, such as their increased participation in processes such as co-production. In conclusion, while the existing literature portrays important insights into the implementation and development of Discovery Colleges, further research needs to be conducted in this area to fully comprehend its wider impact on young people’s mental health.

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