

## Article

# Why make the effort? Exploring Recovery College Engagement

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**Why make the effort? Exploring Recovery College Engagement**

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# Why make the effort? Exploring Recovery College Engagement

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Whilst there is growing evidence to suggest that the Recovery College (RC) environment supports students towards their mental health recovery (Meddings *et al.*, 2015b), students' initial motivations for engagement, alongside factors that may hinder or support attendance, have yet to be exclusively explored.

**Design** – All new RC students were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview three months following their enrolment. Four participants completed an interview which were later analysed using Thematic Analysis.

**Findings** – Four themes emerged within analysis: Making the effort; Being “too unwell”; Friendly Environment and Glad I came. These are discussed alongside the literature, and it is proposed that whilst there is a substantial struggle involved in engagement with a RC, likely related to mental health and social factors, the RC environment, peer support and support of the tutors helps students to overcome the impact of this.

**Research limitations/implications** – Due to the small sample size and exploratory stance of this study, additional research into the complexities around engagement with RCs is strongly recommended. Only students who had attended at least one RC course chose to participate in this study, therefore an under-researched population of non-attendees may provide a valuable contribution to further understanding.

**Originality/value** – This is one of the first studies to qualitatively explore factors which may support, or hinder, initial and ongoing engagement with a RC. It is proposed that a greater understanding of these important issues could be used to increase RC accessibility and inclusion.

**Keywords** – Mental Health, Recovery, Recovery College, Co-production

**Paper type** – Research paper

## Introduction

Recovery Colleges (RCs), as proposed by Perkins *et al.* (2012) are part of a shift to recovery focused organisational change in mental health services: A central focus on education and peer support aims to develop people's strengths in overcoming mental health difficulties. In light of this, RCs offer co-developed and co-facilitated psychoeducational workshops. This operates on college principles,

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3 whereby service users, carers and staff members self-enrol to become 'students', and select courses  
4 from a prospectus.  
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7 Although the need for RC outcomes to be defined remains pivotal to development (Meddings *et al.*  
8 2015b; McGregor *et al.* 2016), a collection of studies have highlighted the benefits of RC attendance  
9 for students and the organisation in which they are located (Zabel *et al.*, 2016); with Meddings *et al.*  
10 (2015b) concluding that attendance at the RC has consistently been found to be useful, and help  
11 people progress towards their recovery goals. However, as noted by McGregor *et al.* (2014), the  
12 crucial elements of RCs need to be further explored.  
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17 The emphasis on co-production and peer support within RCs is, arguably, the most widely noted  
18 component of relevant academic discussion. Meddings *et al.* (2014) found that peer trainers offered  
19 hope and inspiration to students, and the collaboration between 'professional' and 'lived'  
20 experience has consistently been reported to be highly valued (Meddings *et al.*, 2014a; Meddings *et*  
21 *al.*, 2015; Newman-Taylor *et al.*, 2016; Zabel *et al.*, 2016), in addition to tutors personal values,  
22 empathy and knowledge (Meddings *et al.*, 2014; Zabel *et al.*, 2016). Research has also highlighted  
23 the importance of the RC learning environment; such as offering a safe, supportive and non-  
24 judgemental space (Zabel *et al.*, 2016; Zucchelli and Skinner, 2013), practical exercises (Zabel *et al.*,  
25 2016), adding structure to the day (Meddings *et al.*, 2014; Zabel *et al.*, 2016), offering space to  
26 socialise, and the ability to learn new skills (Meddings *et al.*, 2014b). However, whilst there is  
27 satisfactory research into students' experiences whilst attending a RC, there has been little  
28 exploration into the initial motivations that may support, or hinder, this attendance.  
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37 Dunn *et al.* (2016) proposed that motivation, psychological wellbeing, physical illness and lack of  
38 communication were all factors that reduced engagement, in their small-sample study of non-  
39 attendees. Additionally, Zabel *et al.* (2016) suggested that a person's stage of recovery was also a  
40 potential barrier to engagement. Motivations for attendance and continued engagement however,  
41 have yet to be substantially explored within this setting. It has been proposed that focused research  
42 within this area can provide an additional framework for RCs to promote inclusion and engagement  
43 within a setting that is suggested to be highly beneficial to both service users and the organisation in  
44 which it operates (Zabel *et al.* 2016). In a contrary view, radical service users, survivors, and refusers  
45 of services can be critical of aspects of the recovery concept, notably a perceived unhelpful inter-  
46 relationship with neoliberal policies linking self-reliance with austerity inspired welfare cuts (see  
47 RiTB <https://recoveryinthebin.org/recovery-in-the-bin-19-principless/>). These and other social policy  
48 critics also question whether the user-inspired notion of recovery has been diluted and co-opted by  
49 a more narrow bio-psychiatry (Harper & Speed 2014, Pilgrim & McRanie 2013). Regardless of the  
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3 point of view, the work of recovery colleges and people's experiences within them appear to be  
4 important areas for inquiry.  
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9 This study therefore aimed to explore students' motivations for enrolment and attendance with RCs,  
10 factors that may support or facilitate their learning within this setting, and barriers to attendance. As  
11 literature remains in its infancy stages, a qualitative approach was used to explore students'  
12 perceptions. Interviewees were recruited when students first enrolled with the RC, to promote  
13 inclusion of students who did not attend any courses, however interviews took place three months  
14 (one college term) after enrolment, once students were able to attend and engage with the RC  
15 programme.  
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### 23 **Approach**

24 A working group of seven individuals who had previously attended RC courses collaborated with the  
25 research team to develop the research aims, design and procedures. It was agreed that one-to-one  
26 semi-structured interviews would be most appropriate, ethically and practically, to discuss personal  
27 motivations for attendance alongside barriers that may have hindered this. It was also noted that a  
28 depth focus in this preliminary study could then shape wider analysis to ensure that areas for further  
29 research originate with RC participants themselves.  
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### 38 *Methods*

39 All new enrolments at a RC in the North West were invited to participate between September and  
40 October 2016. The RC's inclusion criteria were adopted, thus participants were over 17 years of age and  
41 using mental health services. This research design did not include staff members or carers. The study was  
42 promoted by RC staff and advertised using flyers; if students were interested in taking part they were  
43 offered a research pack, including an information sheet, consent form, and interview themes, and details  
44 were passed to the research team with their consent. A total of 89 individuals met the inclusion criteria  
45 during the study's recruitment period. 27 of these students requested an information pack and 11  
46 consented to take part in the research. Three months following enrolment participants were invited to  
47 complete a semi-structured interview. Four participants opted to take part, all of whom identified as  
48 male. The average age of participants was 42 years (*SD*, 12.4). Whilst this sample size is admittedly small  
49 and implies a limitation of the study, a commitment to in-depth interviewing to a certain extent redeems  
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3 this. We feel that despite the small sample the findings are sufficiently interesting and original to justify  
4 publication and discussion.  
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6 All interviews took place at the participants local RC, with an equal split between two RC sites in the  
7 North West, and lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. Semi-structured themes included things that helped  
8 and/or hindered attendance at the RC, things that helped or hindered learning within courses, and if  
9 attendance at the college affected their mental health in any way. Interviews were audio-recorded.  
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### 13 14 15 16 *Data Analysis*

17 All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed with contribution from wider research team using  
18 thematic analysis (Ritchie *et al.* 2014), via cyclical reading and re-reading of the text. Analysis was  
19 facilitated and themes were organised using NVivo software.  
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### 23 24 25 26 *Ethical Considerations*

27 Ethical opinion was obtained from the NRES Committee North West (16/NW/0580), Health Research  
28 Authority, Research and Development locality team and University of Central Lancashire Ethics  
29 Committee. Information sheets were provided when participants first enrolled onto the study, when  
30 invited to interview and directly prior to the interview process, ensuring informed consent was obtained.  
31 Standard processes were followed for data security and confidentiality and clinical judgement used to  
32 promote the emotional wellbeing of participants during all research stages. A Public Patient Involvement  
33 group was also involved in the research design and structure.  
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### 41 **Findings**

42 The analysis identified four broad themes: *making the effort*; *being "too unwell"*; *friendly*  
43 *environment*; and *glad I came*. These are summarised below and illuminated with selected  
44 quotations from the data.  
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#### 51 *Making the effort*

52 This theme relates to how attendance at the recovery college often represented a substantial effort  
53 for participants. On occasion, other social issues exacted a toll on individuals' resources such that  
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3 they had little energy left to attend. More typically, students demonstrated commitment to attend  
4 and overcome barriers, and this in itself was indicative of success and a sense of recovery.  
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7 All participants interviewed had attended one or more courses at the RC. Motivations for attendance  
8 included curiosity, socialisation and wanting to learn; participants noted how they enrolled onto  
9 courses that they felt would “help” and “do [them] the most good”.  
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12 Two participants did not attend courses that they were enrolled on, with both stating that this was  
13 related to housing problems. One participant had arranged to re-enrol onto the course once they  
14 had moved, with the other stating:  
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17 I didn't attend one course. Only because, erm, I ended up in a bit of a mess  
18 really [...] I wasn't really settled where I lived, and I was in the process of  
19 trying to move, and just, not quite on form really.  
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24 Some participants discussed how they “forced” themselves to attend courses, stating “I really didn't  
25 want to go yesterday, and I sort of like, had to give myself a kick up the arse and say, come on I  
26 better go.” This idea also links with the notion that participants generally viewed attendance in itself  
27 as a part of the ‘mental health recovery’ process, for example:  
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30 I wouldn't have gone out; if I hadn't had been on them I probably wouldn't  
31 come out. And I, I look at my time, and I've, I've come on them all. Erm, so I  
32 mean that's something in itself, isn't it. [...] Even though it was hard to  
33 come out, I've still gotta come out. I've still gotta tryna keep on coming out,  
34 you know.  
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39 All participants stated that they would like to attend courses in the future, with one stating “I can  
40 only show my recommendation by wanting to come back as soon as I can”.  
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#### 45 *Being “Too unwell”*

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47 This theme illustrates the struggle to learn in face of prevailing mental health difficulties. This was a  
48 matter of degree for different people, but in the extreme the impact of negative experiences, such  
49 as low mood, interacted complexly with motivation and self-efficacy to the detriment of learning.  
50 That said, these individuals nevertheless stuck with the course and attempted to struggle through.  
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54 Participants noted factors such as physical disabilities, anxiety and mental health difficulties to have  
55 a negative impact on their learning within this setting. For example, one participant suggested that  
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3 “the course would have less effect with somebody like me, than somebody who’s got a lighter form  
4 of depression, which is more reasonably developed” and another participant stated:

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6 They don’t work because of how I feel, do you know what I mean, because of  
7 how I feel inside. I hate getting up every day feeling depressed and stuff. And  
8  
9 the coping techniques are like, it’s almost like too late in time.  
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12 Participant’s generally had negative view of self-efficiency, with perceptions that their difficulties  
13 were “too severe” for any effective support. Nonetheless, participants continued to attend courses,  
14 despite these beliefs, with one participant stating that although “I wasn’t very good at the creative  
15 class”, “I know I’d go back for it, yeah, you know, and hopefully I’ll be a bit more creative” and  
16 another proposing that “maybe it’s too soon. Maybe I’ll look back on them courses and they’ll give  
17 me a little bit, erm, to free my anxiety, you know ... Because things like that do work afterwards,  
18 don’t they.”  
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### 26 *Friendly Environment*

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28 Appreciation of the tutors and dynamics of the course were discussed as having a positive effect on  
29 participant’s experiences and learning. Such relational aspects of the experience attest to a more  
30 social concept of mental distress, but interestingly, this extended to developing down to earth  
31 comprehension of fairly complicated bio-psychological processes. Conversely, too much self-  
32 disclosure amongst peers appeared for some to adversely affect their appreciation.  
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37 Participants discussed the group dynamics and physical environment of the RC as being “friendly”  
38 and supportive, with a particular emphasis on the tutors, such as “I think [name of tutor] is great,  
39 really good tutor”. When discussing what they had learnt, participants specified content that they  
40 had personally identified with, for example:  
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44 It’s my Amygdala in the back on the brain thing that stuck with me, in my  
45 case. Because that’s where I think I am, in fight or flight all the time.  
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49 It was suggested that the course content was “common sense” and “it was more the style of delivery  
50 than the fact that they were delivering new information”. This practical method of delivery was  
51 relayed by participants as a positive, with one person also noting that they “got more out of the  
52 practical exercises in mindfulness sitting here in a group, rather than doing it on a one to one basis  
53 or being sat at home to do it.” However, some participants also noted how listening to other  
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3 people's difficulties could have a negative effect on their experience, suggesting limitations, for  
4 them, of the desirability of peer support:  
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6 I think because people do instinctively digress about their own condition,  
7 and that can be boring and, at times annoyingly boring [...] I mean the  
8 interaction was good, erm, and it's just, it could go too far.  
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#### 14 *Glad I came*

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17 This theme outlines the appreciative comments that were expressed by participants, and how they  
18 believed attendance at the RC has a positive effect on their mental health in terms of presenting  
19 difficulties and management plans. Participants expressed an appreciation for the RC and courses  
20 attended.  
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24 Participants noted how attendance at the college temporarily reduced their mental health  
25 symptoms; one stated that the course gave them "a bit of breathing space", with another discussing  
26 how they felt their anxiety reduced through the teaching time, and "relaxed [them] a little bit".  
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30 Positive comments about the RC, such as "it's a good gesture that these courses are on [...] I thought  
31 they were good" and "I'm glad I went on [the course]", were echoed across interviews. Additionally,  
32 participants noted that "there weren't any [courses] that I didn't find useful at all. They were all, I'm  
33 glad I came to them all".  
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#### 38 **Discussion**

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40 During their research into non-engagement with RCs, Dunn et al., (2016) identified motivation,  
41 psychological wellbeing and physical illness as barriers to attendance. Likewise, anxiety, mental  
42 health difficulties and physical illness were also identified as aspects which may reduce attendance  
43 within this analysis, with these factors additionally being noted to hinder learning within a course.  
44 Whilst participants discussed practical support that overcame physical difficulties, the focus on being  
45 'too unwell' to get the most out of courses was notable across analysis. Although this concept has  
46 been proposed by Zabel *et al.* (2016) as a barrier to RC engagement, the complexities of how  
47 perceptions of mental health influence engagement have been further identified within this study.  
48 For example, despite expressing that their difficulties were "too severe" for effective support,  
49 participants continued to engage, displaying elements of hope that these difficulties would, in fact,  
50 subside, and viewed attendance in itself as part of their recovery. Further, participants discussed  
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3 how their personal motivations could facilitate, or hinder, engagement with the RC. The idea that  
4 participants “forced” themselves to attend RC courses suggests that additional psychological factors  
5 may influence engagement and attendance. Perceptions surrounding mental health, and the  
6 psychological processes that may support or hinder students’ personal commitment to attend, are  
7 therefore likely to have a major effect on engagement with RCs, both positively and negatively, and  
8 thus require focused attention and research.  
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13 Participants stated that they felt the RC environment was safe and discussed how the delivery of  
14 courses supported their learning. These findings have previously been outlined in literature  
15 (Meddings *et al.*, 2015a; Zambel, *et al.*, 2016; Zucchelli and Skinner, 2013) as being valued by RC  
16 students, and thus are likely to contribute to continued engagement and attendance. Participants  
17 also reflected on supportive group dynamics enhancing their learning, as previously noted by  
18 Meddings *et al.* (2104), however they also recognised the negatives of “too much” self-disclosure.  
19 Furthermore, although previous research has also highlighted the importance of learning from other  
20 students in RCs (Meddings *et al.*, 2014; Meddings *et al.*, 2015a), participants in this study  
21 conclusively agreed that they felt their learning mainly came from the tutors themselves. There is a  
22 possibility that these findings may be related to all tutors at the RC studied also having lived  
23 experience of mental health difficulties – thus the benefits of peer support outlined in literature may  
24 come directly from the tutors, without the risk of ‘over-sharing’ which has been associated with  
25 student peers – however this would require further investigation before any tangible conclusions  
26 can be drawn. Nonetheless, tutors’ personal values have been previously identified by RC students  
27 as having a significant effect on their learning (Meddings *et al.*, 204b; Zabel *et al.*, 2016) which has  
28 been echoed in this analysis.  
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39 The recruitment of all students who enrol with a RC, inclusive of attendees and non-attendees, had  
40 the potential to offer an alternate narrative of RC’s when compared to research that focuses on  
41 students who have attended multiple courses. However, as only students who attended one or more  
42 course consented to take part in this research, it is likely that an under-researched population of  
43 individuals who show an interest in engagement, but are potentially unable to overcome barriers to  
44 attendance, remains. It is possible that the relatively low number of participants in this research also  
45 reflects the struggle involved in RC attendance; if motivations such as being a friendly, group  
46 environment, where there is peer support and opportunity to learn, contribute toward overcoming  
47 the struggles associated with attendance then it is understandable that many students did not  
48 overcome these to attend an interview whereby few of the above were offered. This could suggest  
49 that this research only explored perceptions of highly motivated students, or those adept at  
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3 struggling to overcome barriers. Thus, additional data collection techniques should make use of the  
4 proposed factors that increase engagement alongside flexible and adaptive methods to increase  
5 accessibility to an under-researched population, and continue to explore factors that may influence  
6 their engagement. Awareness of these could further support continued RC development and  
7 accessibility.  
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11 In the light of more critical commentaries on recovery practices, it may very well be the case that  
12 'refuseniks' are unsurprisingly absent from the student roll and hence among the interviewees here.  
13 The affinities for bio-psychological understandings and language may to some extent be explicable in  
14 these terms, or simply reflect the dominant socialisation processes within standard services.  
15 Conversely, appreciation for relational and peer supportive aspects of experiencing the recovery  
16 college may be more in tune with foundational recovery principles and hold promise for a greater  
17 emphasis on social models of distress going forward.  
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21 Finally, it is worth noting that although the research aims were to focus on factors involved in  
22 engagement with a RC, thematic analysis outlined general appreciation for the RC as a whole. This is  
23 consistent with previous literature and continues to support Meddings *et al.* (2015b) proposal that  
24 RC's are useful for supporting people with mental health difficulties in their recovery. Whilst the  
25 findings proposed require additional support from larger, and potentially more inclusive, samples,  
26 this research has started to identify the complexities that may be involved in RC engagement. It is  
27 proposed that RCs offer time and resources to explicitly discuss students' practical and personal  
28 barriers to attendance and engagement, and individualised support plans subsequently offered to  
29 support them to attend something that supports mental health recovery, and offers "a bit of  
30 breathing space".  
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## 42 **Conclusion**

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44 These findings suggest that there is a substantial struggle involved in engagement with a RC, likely  
45 related to subjective mental health and social factors, however the RC environment, peer support  
46 and support of the tutors helps students to overcome the impact of this. Subjective experiences of  
47 mental health difficulties are suggested to influence engagement in both positive and negative ways,  
48 and focused research in this area is thus strongly recommended. These and future research findings  
49 in the field deserve an ongoing deliberative discussion that is cognisant of wider socio-political  
50 critique. This is necessary if the increasing focus on recovery as an organising principle for mental  
51 health care services is to transcend narrower bio-psychiatric co-option and challenge the powerful  
52 constraints of neoliberal austerity policies in the lives of contemporary mental health service users.  
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5 The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the  
6 Department or Health.  
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