

Recovery Colleges in Flanders

Work in progress - Situation in October 2018

The **Flemish Mental Health Association** (VVG¹) and Mentalis², two umbrella organisations in mental health care, pooled forces to support regions in Flanders starting their own Recovery Colleges.

Today, every regional Mental Health Care network in Flanders, a total of 13, has started with a Recovery College. They form a partnership with regional actors and follow the example of IMROC and the key elements and principles of a Recovery College have been translated into their practice.

Each region organizes an open range of courses based on its own strengths and possibilities. The principles of recovery and co-creation between people with experiential knowledge and formal knowledge (professionals) are central in their approach.

The Flemish initiative

The Flemish government provides a part-time coordination function until the end of 2019. From these resources, regions are supported in their start-up. Every three months a meeting is organised for exchange of good practices and information between the regional Recovery Colleges. Efforts are being made to establish a digital platform where all possible materials such as training courses can be exchanged between the regional Recovery Colleges. One central website (www.herstelacademie.be), includes all the information concerning all Recovery Colleges in Flanders and collects all the information of the regional Recovery Colleges on one website. The aim of this Flemish initiative is to expand towards a fully-fledged learning network.

Recovery Colleges on the rise

It all started in 2009, six health care professionals of the Ahasverus Mental Health Centre in Halle-Vilvoorde (near Brussels) followed a Peer Support & Self-Help training course at the Recovery Innovations Center in Arizona, USA. Inspired by the idea, they looked for ways to translate what they had learnt to their everyday work. A group of people with lived experience and health care professionals joined in with enthusiasm to examine the possibility of establishing their own Recovery College.

In 2012, their initiative was given the Reintegration Award of the Flemish Mental Healthcare Association (VVG). With financial support from the King Baudouin Foundation, the promoters and a number of students took part in a training course at the Recovery College in Nottingham in April 2014. They found this course to be particularly inspiring, encouraging them to go ahead with the project. With the concepts of "co-creation", "positive" and "structure" in mind, the project started by training the trainers. The course content was properly structured and a website was launched. During the 2015/2016 academic year the first complete set of courses was offered to the students. Thirty trainers, divided into groups of two, offered 21 different courses, with 107 sessions for 295 students. Course subjects included "Recovery and You", "Recovery after Burnout", "Mindfulness", "Recovery and

¹ VVG is the interest organisation of Mental Health in Flanders

² Mentalis is an intersectorial competency platform for preventive and outpatient mental health care in Flanders.

Communication" and "Training the Trainer". The Recovery colleges now occupies a strong position within the regional network, with increasing success.

In other regions in Flanders Recovery Colleges were developed too. Flemish Brabant and Antwerp started September 2016. In the first quarter of the 2016-2017 academic year, Antwerp set up 10 courses, of which 39 sessions were given to 148 students. Flemish Brabant, also with 10 courses, provided instruction to 70 students in 48 sessions. From January 2017, Brussels, Bruges, Mechelen, Geel and the region of Ghent launched their own Recovery Colleges. The other regions will start in 2018.



Figuur 1 Recovery Colleges in Flanders - okt 2018

The Flemish government provides an incentive for the regions for 2018 and 2019. This supports the start-up of a partnership in a region.

Positive experience

It is a pleasure to hear our students telling us about their positive experience. They all point out the positive effect of the "We" feeling rather than the "Me&My Illness" feeling. It appears that what we offer gives an answer to what people want. It would be very interesting to conduct an inquiry to find out more about the key success factors of a Recovery College.

A Recovery College gives organisations an opportunity to invest in recovery-oriented practices. The initiative enjoys wide-scale acceptance. Our objective for 2019 is to have one Recovery College in each regional Mental Health Care network of Flanders (7,693.439 inhabitants) and one in Brussels (1,199.000 inh.). We will continue to develop our learning network and we hope that in doing so we can learn a great deal from experience and enthusiasm in neighbouring countries and among our partners, in particular IMROC.

Developing a Recovery College is above all a task of and with people, to be realised one small step at a time. It will take time and dedication, but we believe in it and we enjoy it.

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