

August 2023

# interim evaluation snapshot



# headspace Early Career Program

## Background

The Early Career Program (ECP) commenced in January 2022 and has been focused on growing and developing the clinical workforce in youth mental health, specifically in psychology, occupational therapy and social work. The program supports allied health students and places recent graduates in headspace centres located in Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland. The headspace ECP includes four elements:

**Student placement program:** Psychology, occupational therapy, and social work students undertake clinical placements according to their discipline and course structure.

**Graduate program:** Graduates are employed in the ECP for two years and undergo two 12-month rotations in headspace centres. At least one of these rotations will be in a regional or remote area.



Figure 1.  
Program model overview

**Clinical Educators:** Clinical Educators are employed in headspace centres and provide supervision to students and graduates. They liaise with universities to establish and grow student placement programs across all disciplines. They also support graduates on rotation in centres including the translation of educational content into practice.

**Education program:** The Graduate Education program supports the development of capable and confident early career practitioners, through the growth of key capabilities outlined in the ECP graduate capability framework (refer Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** headspace Graduate Program Capability Framework

## The evaluation

headspace National is leading an internal evaluation of the ECP utilising a developmental evaluation approach focussed on embedding ongoing evaluation, reflection and learning into all phases of the program lifecycle. This snapshot report provides an overview of the initial 18 months of program implementation, exploring early outcomes, impact on workforce development and growth, the experience of service providers and stakeholders, program sustainability, and key learnings of the ECP so far.

The evaluation engaged multiple stakeholder groups and data sources, including: online surveys, focus groups, implementation reports, program data, and service activity data – incorporating the personal accounts, experiences, and insights of headspace Centres, Clinical Educators, graduates, students, and headspace National staff.

## What we found

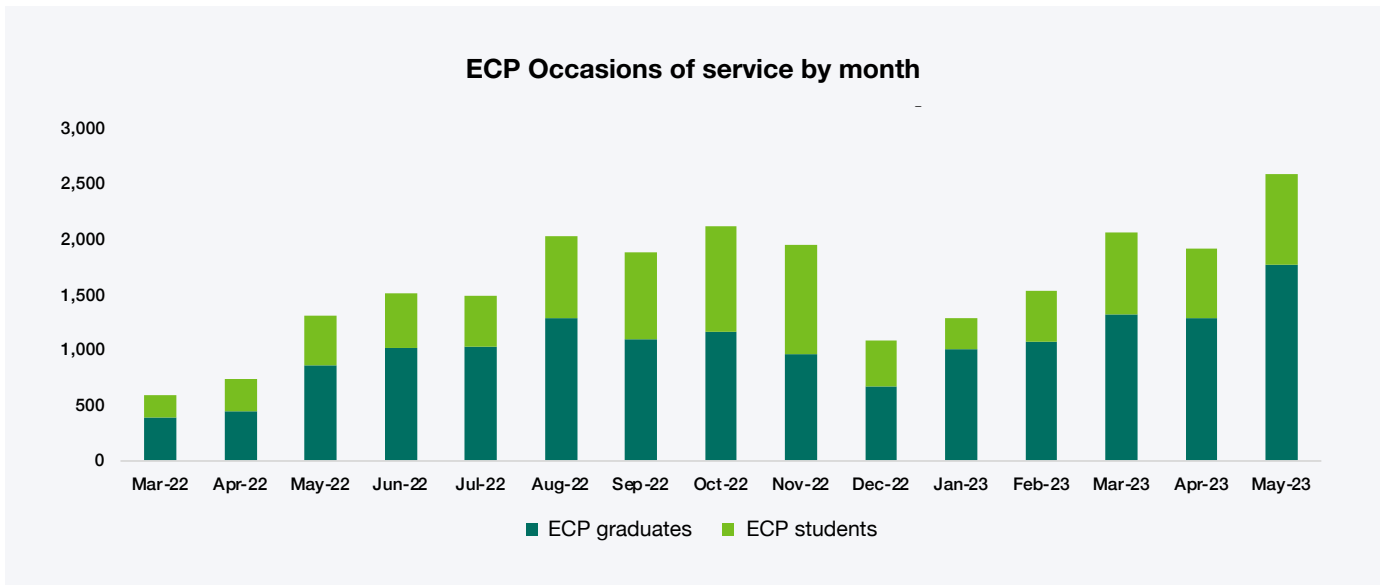
### The Early Career program has increased centre capacity

In the first 18 months of implementation, a total of 504 students and graduates have been engaged in the headspace workforce as a result of the ECP. This is made up of 102 graduates and 402 students supported by Clinical Educators based across 48 centres.

The first round of graduates commenced their placements in March 2022, with service delivery by graduates and students increasing steadily throughout the year (refer Figure 3). By 31 May 2023, graduates and students had provided a total of 24,044 occasions of service to 11,027 young people attending headspace services<sup>1,2</sup>. Graduates have delivered 15,352 occasions of service and students 8,692. These combined efforts have accounted for eight per cent of all occasions of service, and 13 per cent of all young people seen in headspaces services in Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, and Western Australia, demonstrating strong impact on service capacity.

<sup>1</sup> The number of serviced young people is determined by the combined count of unique individuals accessing headspace services, including instances where they may have received assistance from both a headspace centre and eheadspace.

<sup>2</sup> A review of service activity data identified an underestimation in the total number of occasions of service delivered over the life of the program so far. To address this, the program is currently undertaking a data compliance improvement project aimed at improving practices and ensuring occasions of service are accurately captured and recorded.



**Figure 3.** ECP student and graduate occasions of service by month (1 March 2022 – 31 May 2023)<sup>3</sup>

Participating headspace centres have reported significant improvements in their workforce capacity and ability to effectively manage centre demand as a result of the ECP, with 83 per cent of Clinical Educators and 77 per cent of Centre Managers agreeing that that the program has increased their Centre’s capacity to provide clinical services to young people.

*“[The ECP has] increased our capacity to complete more assessments and brief interventions, better meeting demand in our region.”*

- ECP Clinical Educator

### The Early Career program is increasing the capabilities of the future mental health workforce

Overall, graduates and students reported that they gained valuable skills and experience through their participation in the program, with 88 per cent of graduates and 99 per cent of students agreeing.

*“I was able to put my knowledge, experience and skills into practice with the help of a supportive environment. I have upskilled myself in many different sectors and learnt many things from the different multidisciplinary professions here.”*

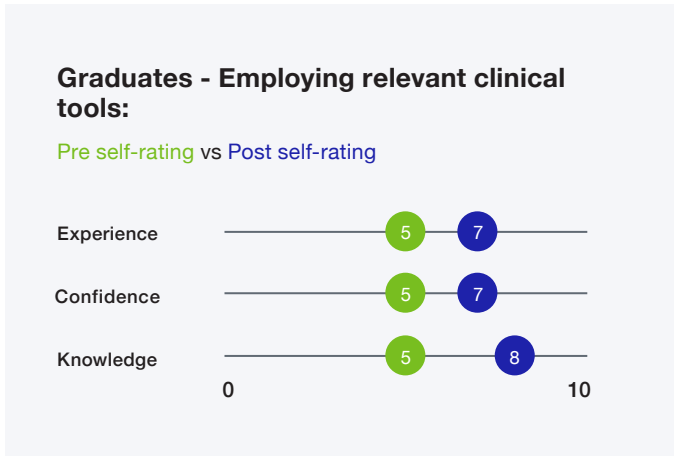
- ECP student

The Graduate Program Capability Framework (refer Figure 2) outlines core capabilities the ECP aims to develop, which include knowledge, experience and confidence in utilising clinical tools and understanding young people’s mental health. There have been overall increases in self-reported knowledge, confidence and experience against all key ECP capability areas for both students and graduates pre- and post-participation in the program (refer Figures 4-9). These results highlight the effectiveness of the program in the development of key clinical knowledge and skills in our future mental health workforce to enable appropriate and effective support of young people.

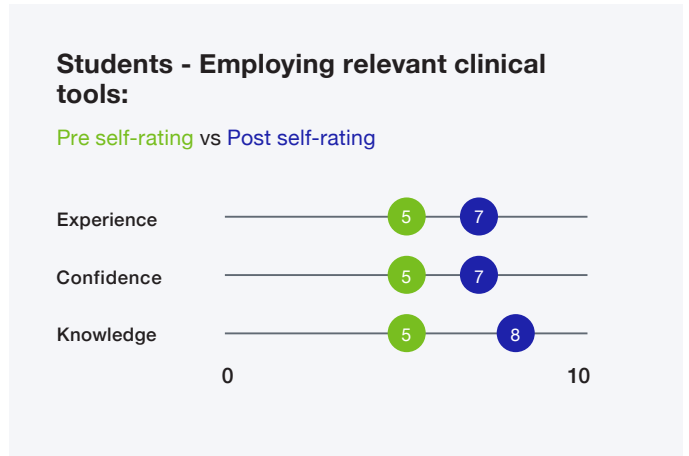
*“I have been able to grow professionally a lot through the few months I have been in this field. A positive impact for me would be that my confidence as a clinician has grown a lot and that I have been able to develop clinical judgement that I trust.”*

- ECP graduate

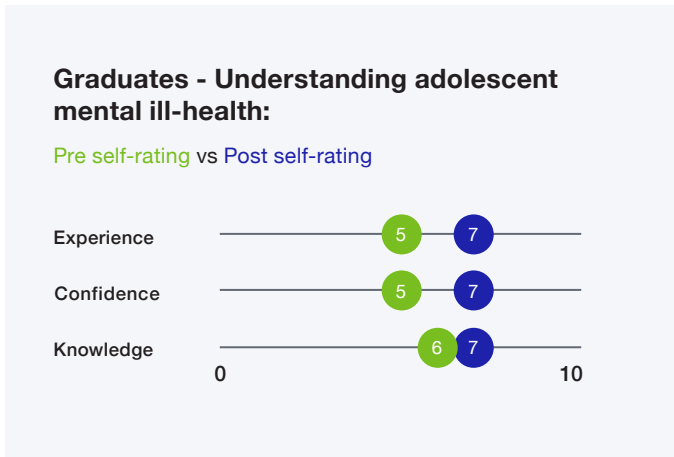
<sup>3</sup> The declines in service delivery, particularly at the end of the year, are the result of seasonal effects that are observed across the centre network, such as school holidays, Christmas closures and university placement terms.



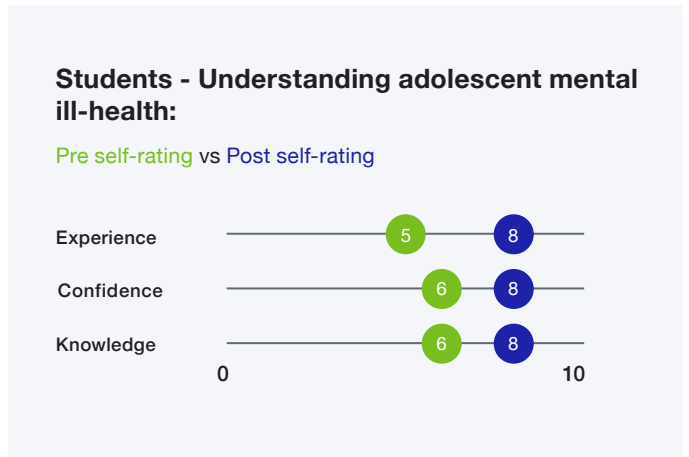
**Figure 4.** Self-reported growth in employing relevant clinical assessments and interventions (graduates n=42)



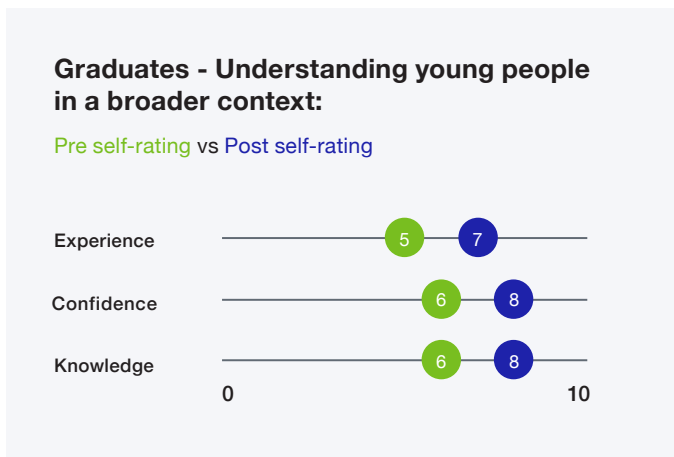
**Figure 7.** Self-reported growth in employing relevant clinical assessments and interventions (students n=103)



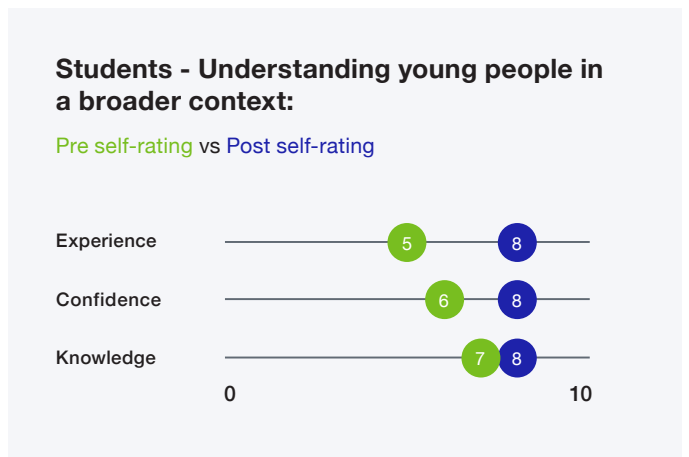
**Figure 5.** Self-reported growth in applying an understanding of adolescent development and mental ill health in your practice (graduates n=42)



**Figure 8.** Self-reported growth in applying an understanding of adolescent development and mental ill health in your practice (students n=103)



**Figure 6.** Self-reported growth in understanding young people within their broader social, family and cultural context (graduates n=42)



**Figure 9.** Self-reported growth in understanding young people within their broader social, family and cultural context (students n=103)

Additionally, the ECP is assisting early career professionals to feel better prepared for their future professional practice, with 86 per cent of graduates and 97 per cent of students agreeing they feel better prepared for their future careers (refer to Figure 11).

The notion that the ECP is better preparing graduates and students for their professional practice is also supported by Centre Managers, with 92 per cent agreeing that the program has provided a well-structured and effective program that builds graduate capabilities.

*"(The ECP) proves a commitment by headspace National and federal government to invest in youth mental health and workforce capacity building"*

- Centre Manager



**Figure 11.** Perceptions of feeling better prepared for future professional practice among Graduates (n=42) and Students (n=103)

## Key program enablers

The evaluation has identified some key enablers that support the success of the ECP. Firstly, the Clinical Educator role is a key enabler to increasing headspace’s workforce capacity. The appointment of Clinical Educators allows centres to take on more student and graduate placements, builds the capacity of existing clinicians and relieves workload pressure from Centre Managers and Clinical Leads. Most Clinical Educators (88 per cent) felt that the ECP increased Clinical Leadership capacity and 92 per cent of Centre Managers agreed that the Clinical Educator role adds value to their Centre.

*"[As a result of the Clinical Educator, our centre now has] improved depth in leadership team – having that additional role, where previously it was myself and the Clinical Lead, has added a range of perspectives and ideas about how we can improve the learning of the team."*

- Centre Manager

Evidence collected suggests that ECP centres have effectively built graduate and student placement infrastructure that supports the sustainability of the program. This includes improved procedural placement infrastructure, with 94 per cent of centres reporting that the ECP has helped improve graduate and student supports within the centre. Additionally, centres have reported strengthened relationships with universities that support the pipeline of students and graduates into the program, with centres highlighting the role of the Clinical Educator in facilitating both of these improvements.

*"The support from my supervisor was incredible. I think she had a great balance between supporting and enabling learning and challenging situations. The staff at this headspace have also made this placement be a lovely experience as they frequently went out of their way to support and make me feel like my voice mattered. I think it's important to invest in team culture like this and give them the praise they deserve, it's culture that even the young people can see when entering the service."*

- ECP student

The prioritisation of support for regional centres has been another key program enabler. As workforce shortages are more severe in regional and remote locations, the ECP has prioritised supporting centres in these areas through growing their student programs, prioritising regional placements, and encouraging all graduates to undertake one of their placements in a regional or remote location. In 2023, more than half of graduates (52%) have been placed in regional and remote locations.

## Program outcomes

The ECP is perceived positively by centres, evident through workforce growth and enhanced clinical leadership. Program satisfaction is high with 98 per cent of students, 76 per cent of graduates and 82 per cent of Clinical Educators satisfied with the ECP. The high level of satisfaction reported by students bodes well for them returning to headspace as graduates when they have completed their studies.

Graduates have expressed high levels of satisfaction with many elements of the ECP, especially with their training, clinical practice and onboarding. Notably, 92 per cent of graduates reporting high levels of satisfaction with the recruitment and orientation processes.

*"This has been an excellent opportunity to travel for work, which has been supported by headspace national and my centre. Having the opportunity to travel and work regionally is a unique experience and one I am really grateful for. Having such supportive clinical supervision as new grad has been the greatest. I would recommend this program to my friends!"*

- ECP graduate

External stakeholders, including community, university and government sectors, have demonstrated a high regard for the program through their notable levels of interest and active engagement. Additionally, the ECP has a strong positive reputation among program participants, as indicated by their likelihood to recommend the program to others.

- 97 per cent of students expressed their likelihood to recommend others to pursue a student placement with headspace
- 91 per cent of Centre Managers and Clinical Educators agreed that their service would recommend other services/ Centres to participate in the program

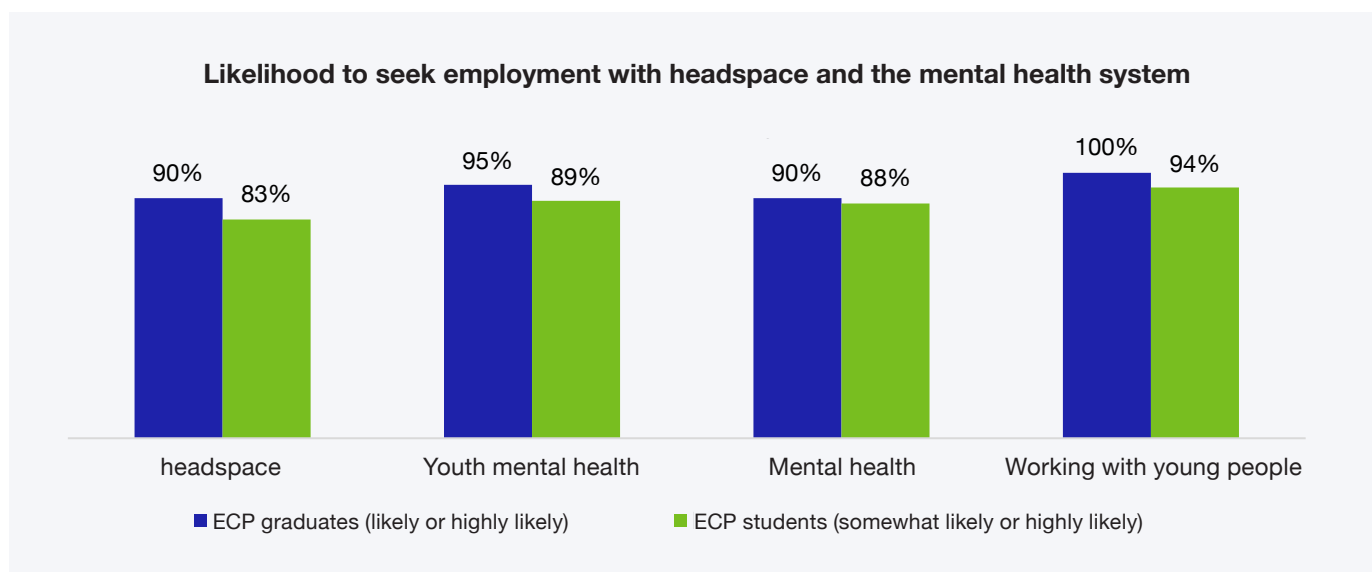
Following their experience with headspace, both students and graduates are reporting strong intentions to work in youth mental health, with 89 per cent of students and 95 per cent of graduates expressing their likelihood to pursue careers in this field (refer Figure 12). These results indicate that the program's impact on the youth mental health workforce is likely to endure over time and students may transition to become graduates after completion of their studies.

*"The placement at headspace helped me rediscover and solidify my passion for working in the mental health setting as well as the importance of having a supportive multidisciplinary team. It made me understand that the age group headspace focuses on is appropriate for early intervention and could yield the most positive outcome, which makes me want to work with them in the future."*

- ECP student

*"headspace has been a great place to experience working with young people and in mental health, I intend to pursue work in the headspace network."*

- ECP graduate



**Figure 12.** Student and graduate likelihood to seek employment within headspace and the mental health system (graduates n=42, students n=103)

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## Program enhancements

A developmental evaluation approach identified and addressed early implementation challenges proactively. Data, reflection and learning in the establishment year of implementation helped drive this process, leading to ongoing improvement in program satisfaction and results.

Some of the main enhancements made to the program within the initial 12-18 months include:

**Graduate education content delivery:** Ongoing graduate and staff feedback on course content and its delivery continues to influence positive changes in the provision and delivery of education content. Graduates have indicated high levels of satisfaction with the online learning content, with a notable increase from 79 per cent of graduates who commenced their placements in 2022 rating the course content as good or excellent, to 90 per cent among those who commenced in 2023.

**Attracting and recruiting graduates to the ECP:** In the lead up to planning for 2023, significant improvements were made in the recruitment process, university engagement strategies, and graduate placement location matching processes based on feedback received in the first year. These improvements have helped to enhance the attraction and recruitment of graduates into the program.

**Graduate orientation, transition and relocation phases:** Improvements to the relocation and transition process have led to increased satisfaction with graduate relocation, rising from 64 per cent among graduates who commenced their placements in 2022, to 70 per cent among those who commenced in 2023.

**Learnings implementing the Clinical Educator position:** During early implementation, 61 per cent of Clinical Educators felt they understood their role well, while others mentioned some aspects lacked clarity. To address this, the ECP increased engagement opportunities, provided more resources, and improved onboarding. Despite the initial concerns, both centres and Clinical Educators have since reported high satisfaction with the overall program.

## Conclusion

The ECP has made significant progress towards short and medium-term outcomes, notably contributing to headspace centre capacity by engaging 504 students and graduates and delivering more than 24,000 occasions of service to 11,000 young people. This also includes 48 per cent of all graduate occasions of service being delivered in regional and remote areas, where workforce shortages are the most acute. Despite being early in its implementation, the program's impact on workforce development is evident, with stakeholders reporting increased capacity to manage demand and deliver services to young people, aided by the valuable role of Clinical Educators. Both students and graduates have shown substantial growth in core capabilities, particularly in employing relevant clinical assessments and interventions.

The challenges associated with implementation of evidenced based practices are well known, the ECP offers an opportunity to build the knowledge and skills of early career clinicians whilst supporting evidenced based practice more broadly in the large and diverse headspace network. Stakeholder satisfaction with the program is high, and the positive reputation of the ECP is widespread. With a strong procedural, educational and relational infrastructure the program has built the foundations of a sustainable program and both students and graduates are reporting strong intentions to work in the field of youth mental health. As a result of continuous program refinement based on feedback and data, the program is poised to further enhance workforce development and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the Australian early career mental health workforce, ultimately improving mental health services. Evaluation of the program is ongoing, including considerations for program sustainability, expansion and broader application of the model.



headspace centres and services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities.



headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and emerging and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.



headspace is committed to embracing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the provision of health services. headspace welcomes all people irrespective of ethnicity, lifestyle choice, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity.

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