

## Wigan Online Learning

[www.wigan.gov.uk/Services/EducationLearning/AlternativeEducation/WiganOnlineLearning.htm](http://www.wigan.gov.uk/Services/EducationLearning/AlternativeEducation/WiganOnlineLearning.htm)

Wigan Online Learning (WOL) aims to provide a positive educational experience for approximately 60 Year 10 and 11 students regarded as disaffected by or excluded from other forms of education.

### Tags:

14-16, Re-engagement/inclusion, Learning Platform, NEET, Home Access, Personalisation

### Harnessing technology system outcomes:

Technology confident effective providers  
Improved personalised learning experiences  
Engaged and empowered learners

### Sectors:

Secondary (KS4), 14-19

### Innovation

WOL exemplifies personalisation of learning which is achieved through a balance of online provision and face-to-face tutoring and through the innovative use of multi-agency working. Different elements of the provision are designed by tutors and other professionals such as drugs and alcohol awareness workers; selected elements are then integrated in a unique way relevant to the needs of a particular learner. WOL also exemplifies continuity of provision allowing a student to continue with the programme if, for instance, moved in and out of borough.



## Background

In 2005 Rob Jones, the current WOL manager, created a flexible educational programme specifically aimed at disaffected and disengaged students. Mr Jones was aware that, firstly, many of these young people had experienced negative and often antagonistic relationships with both staff at school and adults more generally. Secondly, disengagement from education is often part of a complex combination of factors, and in order for students to benefit from the support offered by non-educational specialist services, the same issues of trust, engagement and straightforward access were needed. Thus Mr Jones developed WOL, which was adopted by Wigan in 2006.

His approach is characterised by anchoring online learning in a personal tutor/student relationship which is sensitively fostered through both online and face-to-face support. Education is integrated with local services also working with these young people such as Connexions and relationship and sexual health support.

## Technology

Each learner is provided with a home computer and broadband access for the duration of their time with WOL. WOL is currently exploring the universal use of 3G cards for student internet access, with the advantage that 3G is portable and both cheaper and faster to install than lines. Tutors use Macromedia Breeze to provide both banked and live interactive lessons. The First Class Ed platform is used to allow 24-hour access to over 1,500 activities including learning tasks, advice and chat rooms within the WOL community. Critically for these students, First Class provides a non-threatening space for learning, discussion and relationship building. The anonymity it permits makes it easier for students to seek advice on more sensitive issues. As staff regularly monitor conferences outside school hours this has also allowed crisis intervention.

## Teaching and learning

WOL has a learner interest-led curriculum through individualised timetables. The majority of learning occurs online at home and is supported online by a personal tutor. This is integrated with a comprehensive range of individual and group face-to-face support, such as weekly home visits, drop-in sessions, sports and activity days. It is found that most home learning occurs outside normal school hours, with 11:00am-1:30pm and 7:00-11:30pm being the busiest times.

Learners negotiate their own programme of study with WOL staff. For some learners the main aim may be to re-engage in education, for others this may extend to taking GCSEs and work placements. No elements of the curriculum are compulsory, though many learners request tuition in Maths and English. WOL will consider extending its curriculum to any topic that may interest

a particular student, therefore the learners have access to a wide range of subjects.

The weekly tutor home visits provide an opportunity for parents and carers to become more included in the students' education than normally afforded by mainstream school. Currently WOL is exploring how to encourage parents and carers to work alongside students towards Edexcel qualifications.

## Impact

*"It's helped me gain confidence and provided me with the chance to sit GCSEs which a year ago I did not think would be possible."*

Wigan Online Student

Three quarters of students are actively engaged in AQA units, with eight GCSE entries made in 2007. All work that shows evidence of a completed learning gain is assessed by a panel and recognised by internal certificates. In 2008, all 40 Year 11 leavers have destinations secured to extended work placements, employment and college.

In an evaluation in 2007, tutors reported that since joining the programme over 90 per cent of WOL students had made 'some' or 'definite' progress in the areas of ICT skills, literacy and collaboration skills. However, the most significant areas of improvement were seen in the areas of social skills, relationships with WOL staff and confidence and self esteem.

*"I used to kick off with all teachers, I don't now."*

*"(I) think I get on better with people now, specially (sic) adults."*

Wigan Online Students

Notably the rebuilding of trust in adults can be seen in the almost complete absence of conflict with tutors. The evaluation notes that, of the 12,000 mails posted by the young people to their tutors in 2006-07, there were only five incidents of offensive language or verbal bullying and no incidents of offensive or inappropriate images.



## Challenges

WOL relies on the competence and flexibility of its systems administrator. It needs to be recognised that this is a key role as students tend to quickly become disaffected if the technology fails.

The annual cost of running WOL is approximately £4,000 per student. Mr

Jones has fostered the confidence of referring schools. This relationship not only allows students to bring their average pupil weighted units to the initiative, but also the schools collectively contribute an additional £100,000 a year to support the service. Despite this, WOL runs on a tight budget. This is particularly challenging as students with more diverse needs are referred to the programme and so WOL continually needs to adapt its provision to cater for additional requirements.

## Wider Adoption

Mr Jones praises Wigan Local Authority for allowing WOL the autonomy and flexibility to evolve around the needs of the particular young people it seeks to engage. Recognising that WOL has attracted attention from a large number of other local authorities, Wigan Local Authority are currently investigating the most appropriate way in which they can offer support and advice so that its success can be replicated elsewhere.

