

GREATER MANCHESTER MENTALLY HEALTHY COLLEGES

School to college transition

WIGAN AND LEIGH COLLEGE
APRIL 2021



Wigan and Leigh College is a large general further education college with three main centres in Wigan and two in Leigh. The borough of Wigan and Leigh has a population of 322,000. A higher proportion of the population in the borough is employed in manufacturing compared to the wider North West region and the rest of the country.

Unemployment in the borough is lower than in the rest of the region and the country. A large proportion of the population are outside the labour market due to long-term sickness.

The population in Wigan and Leigh has a lower proportion of people with qualifications at level four and above, and a higher proportion with low qualifications, than other boroughs in the region and the rest of the country.

School to college transition

This is part of the Greater Manchester Mental Health in Further Education Colleges programme. Due to the concentration of student numbers in a relatively small number of education settings and the short timeframes involved we recognised that a more bespoke approach to further education colleges would be needed.

The aim of this programme is to:

- Develop the capacity of further education and sixth form colleges in Greater Manchester to collaborate in support of the mental health and wellbeing of their staff and students
- Identify good practice that can be shared across the system

There are 21 colleges in Greater Manchester (9 general further education colleges and 12 sixth form colleges) and approximately 90% of 16 to 18yr olds in Greater Manchester are in colleges. During an academic year approximately 51,000 out of 56,000 16-18-year olds will study at these further education and sixth-form colleges.

The Association of Colleges (North) has been awarded funding for Year Three of this programme to deliver a wide-ranging programme across Greater Manchester to raise awareness and support development of the mental health agenda within individual colleges.

Our aim

Our aim was to support learners in their transition from school to college who report mental health issues round LGBTQ+ or transgender identification. The activity has enabled us to support students, whilst at the same time providing excellent CPD for our staff, delivered by professionals in the mental health field, to equip them with up to date knowledge and skills which will empower them to support our students with their mental health and wellbeing.

Our students

This activity has enabled us to support all students within the college, but a particular focus has been on students joining us in September 2020 who disclose mental health issues around LGBTQ+ or transgender identity.

Our challenges

- Moving to a large college from a smaller school environment is a challenging time for students, particularly since the lockdown of 2020.
- Previous analysis has shown that students can often present with anxiety around how they 'fit in' to the overall college community.
- Students may arrive with pre-conceived ideas of how staff and other students will behave towards them, or the language that may be used.
- Without the correct support, these young people may experience increased anxiety and fail to achieve on their chosen academic programme.

What we did

- The college already has a successful LGBTQ+ group and in 2019/20 we saw the positive effects this had on attendance, achievement and individual student confidence. Our starting point therefore was to speak to this group to gather information around the issues and experiences that had adversely impacted on their mental health to inform the training to be prepared for staff and students.

What we offered

- Training sessions were delivered to personal tutors by professionals external to the college entitled 'Be the Difference' and 'See the Real Me'. These were specifically designed to raise awareness of how learners may feel and will be followed up by workshops throughout the year.
- Members of staff were selected to form champions/buddy network to support new learners and ensure they receive any further support throughout the year to ensure they remain in learning.
- Drop-in sessions were arranged as requested by staff and approved by student council to cover topics such as 'Language, context and impact on mental health'; LGBTQ+ and disabled 'Breaking free from the label'; 'Creating a safe and aspirational learning environment for a Trans student'; and 'Celebrating a fully inclusive community through the curriculum'

- A calendar of drop-in sessions for students with head of studies team was prepared and circulated.
- A question time event around mental health issues was hosted by the college in December 2020 with a panel formed from professionals who work in the mental health field. This event was opened up to other students to allow them the opportunity to ask questions.

What we found

The impact of the project will be assessed as the academic year progresses but early indications from feedback are:

- Student feedback has confirmed they feel able to raise concerns about identity with staff and are happy in college
- College has welcomed new members to the LGBTQ+ groups, although physical meetings have been limited due to students self-isolating when required.
- Student attendance has been maintained both physically prior to lockdown, and virtually post lockdown
- Students have remained on programme
- Staff have received valuable CPD which has provided an insight into current concerns and anxieties faced by our students
- The training offered opened up new avenues of communication and ideas which led to the question time session being added to the outcomes of the project

Next steps

Lockdown has meant that physical meetings have discontinued but wherever possible, virtual meetings have continued. Further drop-in sessions are planned for the rest of the academic year and a full evaluation of the effects on attendance and retention will be completed at the end of the year. Further question time style events will be planned to incorporate other concerns/issues raised by students and further drop-in sessions and workshops will be offered to staff.



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