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Virtual Tutorials in Adult ODL: A WizIQ Case Study of Wawasan Open University

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Abstract

Wawasan Open University (WOU) was established in 2007 with the sole aim of providing affordable and accessible higher education opportunities to working adults in the fields of business, technology, education and liberal studies. As part of its Open Distance Learning (ODL) delivery, WOU provides tutorial support for students every semester through 5 sessions of 2 hours each. These tutorials are considered to be crucial in the learning process as they provide an opportunity for students to get their doubts clarified by a subject matter expert (tutor) in a synchronous environment. In the initial years, the University used face-to-face and video conferencing modes for conducting tutorials. However, both these modes have their own limitations. As a possible alternative, WOU has since ventured into Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) in the form of WizIQ to remedy some of these limitations. This paper discusses in detail the processes which took place in migrating to WizIQ tutorials and provides some best practices for implementation.

Keywords: open distance learning; students support system; virtual learning environment; VLE; virtual tutorial; WizIQ

Introduction

Wawasan Open University (WOU) is a relatively young not for profit higher education institution in Malaysia. It was established in 2007 to provide low cost, flexible access to higher education for Malaysian adults. The University has committed itself to "*the expansion of opportunities in higher education and excellence in teaching so as to increase the level of knowledge and scholarship among all Malaysians*." WOU has been using its flexible modalities to make higher education accessible to all—anytime, anywhere—and to create a lifelong learning community for aspiring individuals regardless of their previous educational, ethnic or socio-economic background. In the last six years nearly 12,000 adult learners have experienced the learning opportunities at WOU.

At present, WOU offers over 40 undergraduate degree programmes in the fields of business, technology, education and liberal studies. It also offers MBA, M.Phil and Ph.D programmes at the postgraduate level. All WOU programs are accredited by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and approved by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Approximately 150 individual courses are offered each semester via Open Distance Learning (ODL) under these degree programs. The total number of new student enrolment per semester is around 1,000 whereas approximately 4,000 students are active in total in a given semester. Nearly 88% of WOU students are working adults between the ages of 21 to 40 years where male students constitute about 57.5% of the total student population.

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In the ODL mode of delivery, students are provided with specifically designed self directed course material for self study. There are no lectures to attend. The students submit two Tutor Marked Assignments (TMA) as their course work assessment and face a final proctored exam to pass the course. There is however additional student support provided throughout the semester to ensure the smooth completion of the course.

Student Support System

The student support system at WOU can be divided into administrative and academic. The administrative support is mainly provided by the 6 regional support centres (RC) scattered in various parts of Malaysia. The main roles played by these centres include building awareness among the community in the region about the programmes and courses, guide students during enrolment, provide administrative support, and arrange for tutorials.

The academic support at WOU is twofold. The first is a dedicated online Learning Management System (LMS) based on the moodle platform which allows students, tutors and course coordinators to interact in a virtual environment. The LMS provides 24x7 access to course materials, additional learning resources, online activities and discussion forums. The second line of support is provided via face-to-face tutorials conducted once a month during the semester. Tutorials are an important component of any distance programme, as it provides an opportunity for students to get their doubts clarified by a subject matter expert (tutor). Though there is no rule of thumb to say how many sessions are ideal for a course in a semester, WOU has decided on five sessions reflecting the five study units in a course.

The University appoints tutors every semester for the courses being offered. These appointments are based on their academic qualifications and teaching experience with respect to conducting the two hour tutorial sessions. The tutors are provided generic tutoring and counselling training as well as content specific training. A detailed course specific tutor guide is provided to tutors with a set of slide presentations for each of the study units covered in course. The slide presentations provide a structured framework for effective facilitation of a tutorial which takes the form of a discussion than a lecture.

Issues Faced

The monthly tutorials are crucial for the smooth delivery of the course. Initially, the University focussed on face-to-face tutoring at the RC. Video conferencing facilities were introduced later on to allow one tutor to cover multiple centres. This resulted in some reduction of costs involved in hiring individual dedicated tutors for each course at each RC.

The existing video conferencing facilities at WOU are unable to cope with the current expansion of the University with respect to bandwidth, support staff and infrastructure requirements for conducting concurrent sessions. As such, WOU has been forced to revert back to the face-to-face method of conducting tutorials. However, this has resulted in a large increase in operational costs. Furthermore, the low student enrolment for certain courses does not financially warrant the appointment of a dedicated tutor. Additionally, it has become a daunting task to locate component tutors in each region particularly for higher level specialist subjects. From the students' perspective, a major limitation of face-to-face tutorials is the requirement of physical presence at the RC. Given that the majority of WOU students are working adults, this is not a favourable proposition. As such, many students skip tutorial classes especially since attendance is not compulsory. In order to overcome these issues while maintaining a high level of quality student support, WOU has explored an innovative way of providing tutorial support to all students. This paper discusses how WOU has adopted the use of WizIQ to provide tutorial support for its adult ODL students.

WizIQ Virtual Tutorials

Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) are fast gaining acceptance as a viable method for synchronous / asynchronous teaching and learning. According to Kaley (2004) VLE combine the socio-cultural advantages of *place-based learning* with the efficiency of *remote learning*. Some of the key features which allow VLE to be effective include integration, desktop sharing, virtual whiteboards, video recording, video streaming, instant messaging and breakout rooms (Hensman, 2010). When considering the widespread benefits of using VLE, Barajas and Owen (2000, p. 44) argue that ". . .a strong feature of VLEs is their potential (technology wise) to operate at an international and even at a global level. VLEs allow institutions to extend their reach beyond local and national geographical borders."

WizIQ is one such VLE which is sparking wide interest in the domain. According to their website wiziq.com, the WizIQ system is described as

> The WizIQ Platform includes everything you need to take your teaching online, from a virtual classroom, to functionality to create and deliver courses with assessment tools and content sharing feature. WizIQ provides exclusive features that save time and enhance collaboration between students and teachers. WizIQ also integrates with other Learning Management Systems and websites through well-documented API, allowing anyone, whether a middle school teacher, a private tutor, a test prep company, a university, or anything in between to start teaching online (WizIQ, 2013).

WizIQ is not the only VLE available. There are other solutions both proprietary and open source. During the initial feasibility study, we tested several of these VLE which include Big Blue Button, Adobe Elluminate, Google Hangout and Skype Premium. However, after experimenting with these VLE, we found WizIQ to be the best fit solution for WOU requirements. Similar to Tan (2013), these requirements are as follows:

- Small numbers of attendees;
- Learners who are unable to attend a session on the site and/or at a specific date/time can join in a session no matter their locations and their time;
- Learners may be at different levels;
- 1–2 moderators may lead a session;
- A variety of learning activities to engage learners;
- Supporting group work and discussions;
- One-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many interactions.

Furthermore, as argued by Van Raaij and Schepers (2008), the ease of achieving the following prerequisites was also considered in the decision to use WizIQ:

- System contains functionalities that increase study productivity, and that its interface is easy to use.
- Teaching staff should feed the system with useful and up-to-date content.
- Course management should stress repeatedly that they find it important that students make extensive use of the system.

WizIQ at WOU

In 2012, WizIQ was first used by the tutors of the School of Science and Technology (SST) who had familiarity and sufficient skills to handle the system. Later on in 2013 the School of Education Languages and Communication (SELC) initiated WizIQ tutorials. The SELC tutors were oriented to

use the system by providing training with some hands on sessions. In an attempt to standardise the use of WizIQ across WOU, a Standard Operational Policy and Procedure (SOPP) was developed in 2013. This SOPP provides details about the purpose, scope, definitions / acronyms used, responsibilities and authority of various stake holders when using WizIQ for conducting tutorial sessions. The workflow and the stakeholders involved from the scheduling to the delivery of a WizIQ class are shown in Figure 1.

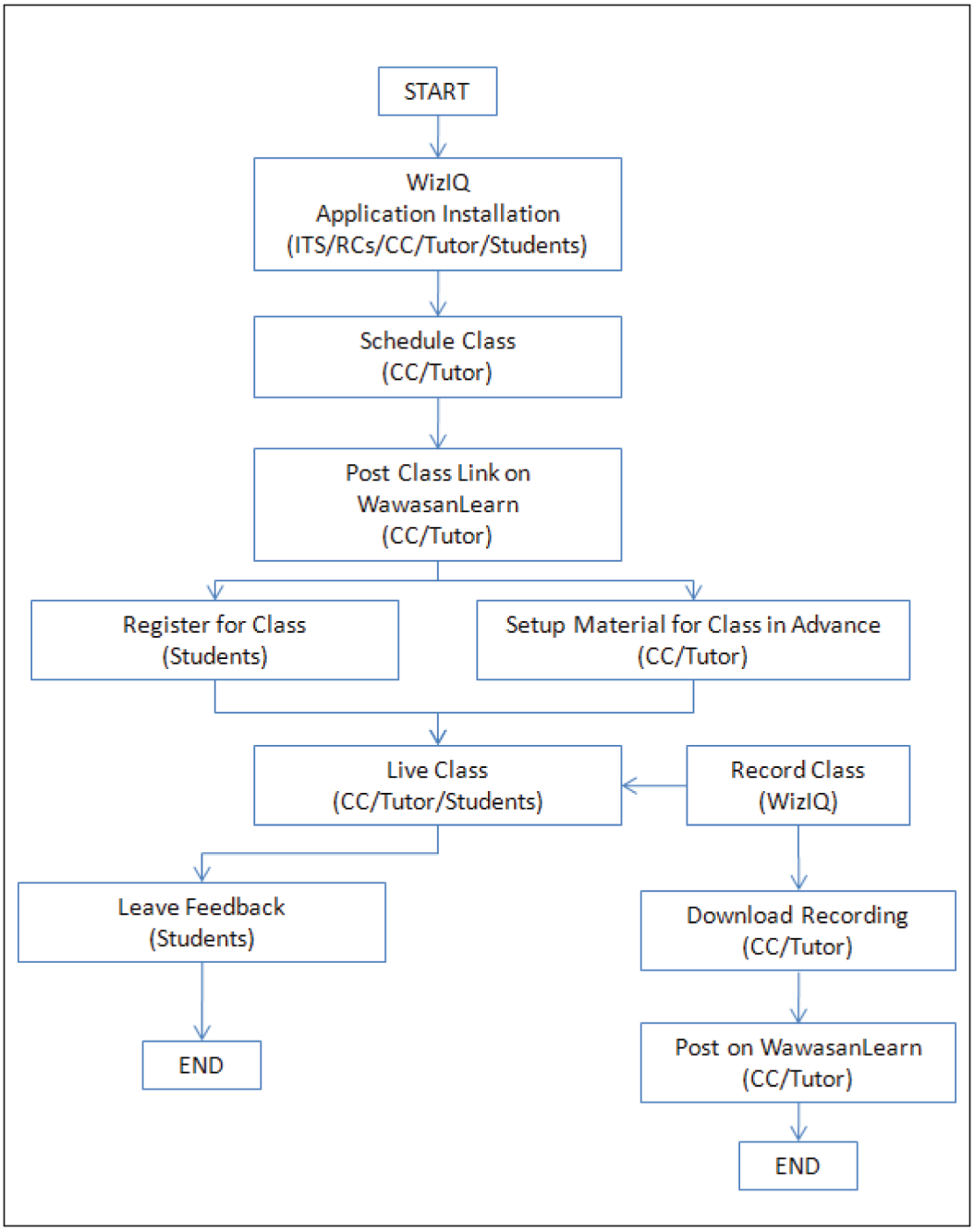


Figure 1: Flowchart for conducting WizIQ virtual tutorials

Note: ITS- Information Technology Support; CC—Course Coordinator.

Table 1: Outline of the activities covered in the training program

	Activity	Inputs
1.	Log in procedures for tutors/students	
2.	Scheduling a class	Date, time duration, any special instruction to students, profile of the tutor
3.	Preparation for the class	Uploading the materials before the actual class
4.	Features and their use	• Teacher's point of view a. Chat: Message to group, message to a given individual student b. Attendance taking c. Live presentation by the teacher using slides, video, word and pdf documents. Using video with start, stop and start d. Using white board (many) and writing, drawing etc e. Consolidation of interaction (chat) • Students point of view (access permission to be given) a. Chat b. Audio interaction by students c. Video interaction by students d. Using whiteboard
5.	Structuring and Conducting the actual class	
6.	Possible scenarios during the class	• Presentation without using any aids • Presentation with aids • Start-stop-start • Consolidation with the help of students

As mentioned earlier, the first initiative to use WizIQ by WOU was taken in 2012 for tutoring three courses. This was followed by seven courses in the January semester and 15 courses in the July semester of 2013. This number is likely to increase further in the semesters to come with WOU taking the policy decision to encourage the use of WizIQ for courses with low student enrolment numbers. Furthermore, it is making provisions to provide more information and training in the effort to orient students / tutors to the WizIQ environment. An outline of the activities in the training program is shown in Table 1.

Advantages of WizIQ

From the Institution's Perspective

One of the major advantages of using WizIQ from an institutional perspective is the potential cost savings with respect to hiring tutors. In the July semester of 2013, WizIQ tutorial support was provided for 15 courses offered by the SELC. Table 2 shows a comparison between the numbers of tutors hired to conduct WizIQ tutorials vs. the number of tutors needed to conduct face-to-face tutorials. From this comparison it is apparent that in actual term the University saved the cost of hiring 21 tutors by using WizIQ. Additionally, students and tutors saved the time and cost involved in travelling to the RC.

Table 2: Comparison between the number of tutors hired to conduct WizIQ tutorials vs. the number of tutors needed to conduct face-to-face tutorials

Number of RCs covered by a single tutor	Number of courses	Number of tutors appointed to conduct WizIQ tutorials	Number of tutors required to conduct face-to-face tutorials	Number of tutors saved by using WizIQ
One	4	4	4	0
Two	4	4	8	4
Three	4	4	12	8
Four	3	3	12	9
Total	**15**	**15**	**36**	**21**

The use of WizIQ is also advantageous to WOU from an operational and logistical perspective. Table 3 highlights these advantages, identified empirically and supported by professional wisdom, in comparison with face-to-face tutorials and video conferencing tutorials.

Form the Students' Perspective

The use of WizIQ for tutorials benefits the students with respect to four distinct advantages:

- As students of ODL they need not necessarily travel to the University's RC to attend the tutorials. They can login from any location based on internet availability.
- Every student attending the tutorial via WizIQ is a front row student having equal access to the resources and tutor.
- Even if students miss a particular tutorial session, they can login to the WizIQ system at a later date to go through the recorded version of the session in an asynchronous manner.
- The student can revisit the class recording while attempting the TMA or during revision time in preparation for the exam.

Lessons Learnt

Based on the observations made during the initial orientation sessions and the feedback gathered from six tutors, a few key lessons were learnt regarding the smooth running of the WizIQ tutorials.

Initially, the tutors had problems in using the system as they were not familiar with its features. Furthermore, they were unaware of its potential when making the transition from the face-to-face environment. Similarly, students too had problems in getting acquainted with the technology. This was mainly due to the lack of understanding with respect to do's and don'ts in using the system. Hence the biggest challenge was to train and provide handholding support during the familiarisation period.

Another issue faced by the students was the lack of adequate and consistent Internet bandwidth at their homes to follow a synchronous WizIQ tutorial. This was less of an issue in the cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang where the Internet infrastructure is robust but proved to be a significant challenge in the outskirts. As a remedial action, students facing difficulties in terms of Internet connectivity were encouraged to join the WizIQ tutorials from the RC where infrastructure had been improved to provide sufficient bandwidth.

The guidelines in Table 4 are provided to the tutors through the SOPP mentioned earlier for the smooth running of tutorials via WizIQ.

Table 3: Relative advantages of using different modes for conducting tutorials sessions

Issues	Face-to-face	Video Conference	WizIQ
Number of RC covered by one tutor	One	Five centres (in the context of WOU)	Seven RC. Tutors and students could log in from any place
Requirements of equipment/ facilities	Very less Computer with projector facilities	High Video conferencing equipment. Leased line connections. Computers with projector facilities at RC	Low Computer with WizIQ software application
Training requirements	Yes	Yes	Yes
Probability of attendance of students	Medium	Medium	High
Cost of travel(tutors and students)	High	High	Low
Number of competent tutors required	One per RC	One for a group of RC	One for a group of RC
Cost of hiring tutors	High	Low	Low
Channels for learning	Minimum	Minimum	Multiple
Facility for recording tutorials	None	Available, provided that the necessary equipment is installed	Available. Recording done automatically by the system
Scope for revisiting tutorial classes	None	Yes, provided that copies are made of the recording and made available at RC	Yes, without any additional cost towards equipment. Students can view the recording from home
Scope to consolidate students' questions and responses	None	None	Yes
Channel for students' interaction with tutor	Oral	Oral	Oral and written (Chat)

Conclusion

As ODL practitioners, we at WOU have found the WizIQ system to be very useful in conducting virtual tutorials. It allows the University to provide better learning support to students through multichannel learning without additional technology inputs. We find WizIQ to be a good alternative to replace face-to-face tutorials and video conferencing tutorials wherever the student numbers are small (less than 5 in each RC) distributed among three or four RC. This formula reduces the number of tutors needed to be hired to one; resulting in a more cost effective program.

Furthermore, though the technology has the potential to facilitate about 500 students in a single virtual class, it was found to be more effective for smaller numbers due to technological and

Table 4: Guideline for running a WizIQ tutorial

Step	Activity	Rationale
1.	Login and create a WizIQ tutorial class	Schedule the tutorial class on the system in advance.
2.	Post the class link on the LMS public forum so that the students can follow and join.	Allow student to register for the class in advance so that class information, automatic reminders and rescheduling notices are sent to the student.
3.	Request the students to join at least 10 minutes in advance.	Avoid delays caused by last minute entrants.
4.	Setup your class with teaching notes, slides, TMAs, YouTube videos, etc. well before the class begins. You can use multiple whiteboards in WizIQ for this.	Setup the teaching plan and material in advance to avoid delays in uploading materials during the class. This also helps save internet bandwidth.
5.	If you are using the PCs at rooms 5 or 15 on level 2 (HQ), you can get a headset on loan from the library. Make sure you do this well in advance. If you prefer to use your own laptop, you may do so.	Encourage the tutors to use the WOU infrastructure to conduct the tutorials. This is due to the conducive teaching environment, lack of distractions, better internet bandwidth and availability of support staff.
6.	Students attending the class do not need webcam and microphone. Built in speaker is fine, however a good headset will give better results.	To optimise the learning experience.
7.	Avoid the use of video streaming as much as possible. This will result in better utilisation of bandwidth and a smoother session.	Reduce lag and delays caused by poor internet bandwidth and infrastructure. This is a common issue in many countries in the Global South.
8.	Ensure that your PC has the latest updates. Update the WizIQ desktop application when prompted. Advise your students accordingly. The PCs in the RC will need to be updated with the latest WizIQ software application accordingly.	Reduce technical issues caused by incompatibilities.
9.	Your class is recorded by default. You can upload the recording onto the LMS after the class.	Allow the students to re-visit the recording offline.
10.	The students can join the class from home, the nearest RC or wherever there is internet connectivity.	To provide maximum flexibility, reduce travelling costs and encourage better attendance.

pedagogical reasons. The technological reasons include the scope for student-tutor and student-student interaction through chat, audio/video and pedagogical reasons include minimising the chances of variations in tutors inputs, tutors to have scope to review the recorded sessions, reflect and make changes in the presentation styles and interaction strategies.

Keeping in view the experiences gained in using WizIQ in the last two years, WOU intends to (i) increase the use of WizIQ for conducting tutorials sessions (ii) develop a comprehensive strategy to conduct more face-to-face training and hand holding to tutors and (iii) improve the Internet bandwidth infrastructure required for using WizIQ.

Further to undertake an experimental study to see the effectiveness of WizIQ technology over others with respect to the nature and type learning which occurs among students and experience of students attending to tutorials. It is anticipated that these steps will go a long way in making the effective use of the technology and further improving its optimal use by other Schools of the University and some guidelines emerging for reference for other potential user agencies.

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