

The VESPA Handbook

VISION — EFFORT — SYSTEMS — PRACTICE — ATTITUDE

40 new activities
to boost student
commitment,
motivation and
productivity

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin

The A Level Mindset

Revised Edition

40 activities for transforming student commitment, motivation and productivity

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin

The A Level Mindset

40 activities for transforming student commitment, motivation and productivity

ISBN: 978-178583024-2

In *The A Level Mindset*,

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin share the secrets of coaching students to develop the characteristics, habits and mindsets which will help them realise their potential. They have identified five key characteristics that all students need to be successful: vision, effort, systems, practice and attitude. These characteristics beat cognition hands down. Successful students approach their studies with the right behaviours, skills and attitudes: they understand how to learn and revise effectively, they're determined and organised, they give more discretionary effort and they get top results. Success at A level is a result of character, not intelligence.

The GCSE Mindset

40 activities for transforming student commitment, motivation and productivity

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin

The GCSE Mindset

40 activities for transforming student commitment, motivation and productivity

ISBN: 978-178583184-3

The GCSE Mindset

offers a wealth of concrete, practical and

applicable tools designed to supercharge GCSE students' resilience, positivity, organisation and determination. At a time when GCSE teaching can feel like a conveyor belt of micromanaged lessons and last-ditch interventions, Steve and Martin – acclaimed authors of *The A Level Mindset* – suggest a different approach, underpinned by their VESPA model of essential life skills: vision, effort, systems, practice and attitude.

Praise for *The VESPA Handbook*

Martin Griffin and Steve Oakes clearly understand what makes both students and their teachers tick! In this highly practical handbook, they've taken leading-edge educational research and combined it with their own teaching experience to create a host of easy-to-follow activities, many of which can be completed in the brief window of tutorial time. This is a fantastically rich resource that should be required reading for anyone working with young people who aren't yet fulfilling their potential – it should certainly be on the bookshelf of every head of sixth form.

Becky Cox, School Effectiveness Adviser, HFL Education

There's a lot to love in *The VESPA Handbook*. I really like the fact that it's rooted in reality and is extremely useful for the teacher who has concerns for all their students. The advice and direction offered to teachers is exemplary, privileging honest attainment and success at a human level, which, in turn, makes the handbook indispensable. I'm grateful to Martin and Steve for writing it.

Hywel Roberts, teacher and writer

This book superbly builds upon the first editions by enabling students and teachers to deliver activities bespoke to need. Activities you can pick up and deliver that need no previous study or experience can be used by schools and colleges to support their learners in a variety of capacities to enable both academic and well-being progress. With a keen focus on developing metacognitive skills and enabling learners to self-evaluate their own development needs, it encourages educational practitioners to think beyond the curriculum and more about key life skills essential for learners' ongoing transitional journey to further and higher levels of study and career pathways. These activities will definitely refresh and uplift the VESPA model further.

Siân Farquharson, Post-16 Professional Learning Lead Partner, Education Achievement Service

Post-pandemic, nothing is quite what it once was. More students than ever seem to need extra support to enable them to study effectively. This latest book in the brilliant VESPA series acknowledges things have changed. This handbook provides teachers with a superbly curated set of new activities for students, which are organised upon the original VESPA structure but are shaped to address the new normal in the classroom. It's an essential resource for anyone trying to boost students' commitment to their studies.

John Tomsett, erstwhile head teacher, consultant and author

Steve and Martin have the incredible ability to frame ideas and suggestions to develop learner habits in a way which just simply makes sense to teachers and students alike. Their research is relevant, and their suggestions are presented in an inviting style while challenging our students to truly reflect on how they are as learners and how they could be much more successful. A true staple of a successful curriculum.

Suzanne Ingram, Deputy Head Teacher, Spalding Grammar School

The VESPA Handbook begins with a vital question: what are the characteristics and behaviours of successful students? In this fascinating student guide, Oakes and Griffin explore the mindsets and practices of successful students, using their findings to help readers achieve similarly impressive results. With a range of sensible strategies and a wealth of practical advice, this is the perfect book for students who are keen to improve their study skills and reach their full academic potential.

Mark Roberts, English teacher and Director of Research, Carrickfergus Grammar School

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Crown House Publishing Limited
www.crownhouse.co.uk

First published by
Crown House Publishing
Crown Buildings,
Bancyfelin,
Carmarthen,
Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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First published 2024.

Images on pages 196, 197 and 199 © 4Sight Education Ltd, 2024

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN: 978-178583710-4
Mobi ISBN: 978-178583719-7
ePub ISBN: 978-178583720-3
ePDF ISBN: 978-178583721-0
LCCN: 2024932494

Printed and bound in the UK by
TJ Books, Padstow, Cornwall

Authors' Note

Imagine you're set this challenge.

Every day, you must arrive at a designated room at a specific time. Once there, you're given a jigsaw piece. The piece will be small, the image on it an elusive and unreadable splinter of something bigger.

The next day, you're going to show up and be given a second piece. It will fit into the first. There's still not enough to speculate about what image might be represented, but the following day you'll get a third, and it will fit the first two.

You're going to keep collecting pieces a day at a time for two years. Sometimes the new bits you receive will fit with pieces you already have, but sometimes – and this comes as a surprise – they'll seem to be entirely unrelated. Sometimes you'll be given duplicates of pieces you've already collected – this will feel frustrating. And sometimes you'll get pieces that seem to belong to different jigsaws altogether.

Sometimes the images on the pieces are sharp and recognisable, and at other times they'll be fuzzy. Since you're only human, on occasion you'll lose pieces you've been given in the past. Now and again, you'll forget to slip the day's piece into its slot when you get home and wind up a week later with a jumbled pile of homeless pieces.

There are days when you'll be unwell and miss a delivery, and if this happens often enough, gaps will open up in your jigsaw, weakening the overall picture. To make matters worse, when you look back at older pieces, you'll find that whatever image was once there has begun to mysteriously fade.

When your two years are up, you'll have pieces running into many hundreds. Your final challenge will be to assemble this multitude of components and then demonstrate your complete understanding of the picture shown. And you'll take a test, the results of which will have the potential to change the course of your life.

Oh, and you're building maybe ten jigsaws simultaneously. Good luck!

Let's stay with this metaphor just a little while longer. What skills might you need to complete this epic task successfully?

Authors' Note

When you're learning something in increments like this, two years is a long time. There are going to be days – whole weeks even – when you'll wonder why you're bothering, so you're going to need to figure out how to stay motivated, imagining a positive outcome down the line. And, since that jigsaw doesn't build itself, you'll need the determination to get out of bed every day, collect your piece and think hard about where it fits with the others.

Other skills spring to mind: storing your pieces will be crucial – losing them, misplacing them or leaving them scattered randomly will destroy your ability to read the image. There's also the issue of the fading pieces to tackle; without proper attention, those colours will bleach to nothingness. And what of the psychological pressures? That test at the end looks scary; you'll need to develop the ability to handle stress, beat frustration and remain optimistic, even during setbacks.

Where some education books focus on how individual teachers might sequence and deliver pieces of information in the clearest, most helpful and supportive way, engaging as many learners as possible, this one is different.

It looks at how we might help learners to manage the process of acquiring each new jigsaw piece of knowledge and skill. We're going to be exploring the characteristics, qualities and habits of successful students, and we'll share forty replicable tools and tactics that all students can use immediately in and out of the classroom – activities that will help them to set goals, work more efficiently, organise their resources, revise more effectively and solve problems.

All of which is going to help them build better jigsaws.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the wonderful team at Crown House for their patience and positivity during the writing of this book. A lot has changed since we first put pen to paper five years ago – not least the concept, the title, the scope and much of the content. And that's without mentioning the small matter of a global pandemic. So, thanks go to David Bowman and Beverley Randell, and to Tom, Amy, Lucy, Jonathan and all the other members of the team who have helped. Thanks also to Emma Tuck, whose perception and attention to detail have improved the prose immensely, and to all the others who read rough drafts and made suggestions.

Perhaps most importantly, though – if you're a teacher or leader who has read our work, used the materials, shared the books, spoken enthusiastically about VESPA, suggested the model to others, written research about it, completed a qualification based on it, requested that we visit to discuss the model further, thanked us for our newsletters, used our psychometric, shouted about us on social media or stayed behind to say hello after a training session – thank you.

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Introduction

Introduction

We've been teaching for twenty-five years apiece, but for the last fifteen or so, we've also been building a body of work on another related project. Working with young people at Key Stage 3, 4 and 5, we've had one research question in our minds: *what are the characteristics and behaviours of successful students?*

When we began this project back in 2010, the whole thing was pretty rough and ready. We had some developing awareness of what we could see the highest performing students doing, but we were far from sure. When we watched them in class, as we often did, we saw them do things differently: they'd take more detailed notes, sit towards the front if given a choice, hand homework in early and request that it be checked through, keep their focus on the progress they'd made even when times were tough, or make a note of the kind of grades they wanted by the end of the course. Gradually, over the next four years, we continued to watch students, interview them, collect further behaviours and experiment with thematic groupings, so we could more easily codify what we were seeing.

What interested us back then – and still does now – was the potential for improving outcomes for all students by clarifying and democratising access to the tactics that high-performing students were using. It's a topic we're still obsessively investigating. Over the

last decade and a half, we've spent lots of our time talking to students in the UK and beyond about things like:

- » The struggles they face in their studies.
- » The solutions they develop for those challenges.
- » The revision methods they use.
- » The strategies they have for staying positive and motivated when work is hard.
- » The ways in which they organise their files of notes.

We also speak to teachers about their impressions of their learners to see if we've missed anything. What we've been trying to flesh out for all these years is our understanding of what exactly we should be telling our students to do differently when they study. This means avoiding survivorship bias: there's little point in gathering the habits of the most successful learners if those precise habits are also in evidence among the ones who fail. Research from academics around the world has been incredibly helpful, and you'll see a lot of it referenced in this book, but there's something particularly special about collecting primary data: impressions from real students doing real work. Every time we discover something new, some nugget of information or facet of behaviour that distinguishes the most successful, we try to

write it up, turning it into a resource which makes that tactic learnable by others.

However, the characteristics and behaviours we've spent three books detailing took some years to come into focus. Back in 2010, all we had was a jumbled list of actions that typified the learners making the most progress. Whenever we were stumped by exam outcomes we didn't expect or by progress that had seemingly faltered, we'd dive deep into the student's behaviours. How had they behaved in and out of class? How had they approached their studies? What had been missing? We quickly realised that past performance didn't guarantee future performance; that a range of metacognitive factors played a significant role in determining the grades students achieved.

But we had a decision to make: what factors looked like they might be the most important? Which could we most easily change? The research was confusing. Some studies we read extolled the virtues of self-efficacy; others found links between time management and exam outcomes; still others made a case for confidence or conscientiousness as key characteristics.

Eventually, after four years of hard work, we finally arrived at a model that we thought accurately identified the most important

behaviours we were seeing. It was the VESPA model, and its components are:

- » **Vision.** Students who got great exam grades had a developing awareness of what success looked like for them. They had some sense of how education was going to be valuable, and had begun clarifying their aims and ambitions. They also had a stronger bias for action than others, tending towards doing rather than just ruminating.
- » **Effort.** Successful students were outworking their peers, often significantly. Once we began to quantify effort, we quickly found high-performing students who were working four or five times harder in a typical week than those who underperformed. They were proactive setting themselves work rather than passively waiting for instructions.
- » **Systems.** High-performing students organised their learning materials in a way that meant they understood the structure and content of the course; they knew where its edges were, what was on the syllabus and what wasn't. They also looked ahead, organised their time, completed work in multiple sittings and sequenced activities so they met deadlines.
- » **Practice.** The students with the best grades revised differently. They began like the others did, rewriting their notes and checking study guides and textbooks, but

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soon after that they were designing study sessions in which they used the information they'd learned to solve problems under timed conditions. They operated at the edge of their ability and obsessed over the things they couldn't do rather than restudying the topics they felt confident about.

- » **Attitude.** There was a psycho-emotional component to the success of the learners who made the most progress. They had developed habits of mind which promoted determination and tenacity; they felt they were in control of the grades they were going to get, saw feedback as a vehicle for further development, managed to stay positive when study was hard and maintained a belief that they were capable of even more improvement.

Little did we know, as we assembled this model at a comprehensive school in Greater Manchester back in the autumn of 2014, that 3,500 miles away in Canada, three researchers were beginning work on an experiment that was to discover something remarkably similar.

That same year, Associate Professor of Economics Graham Beattie began working alongside Jean-William Laliberté and Philip Oreopoulos to study a huge group of undergraduates at the University of Toronto

(Beattie et al., 2016). Our contexts couldn't have been more different; while we were treading the corridors and classrooms of an urban comprehensive in the North of England, Beattie, Laliberté and Oreopoulos were working with students studying at Canada's most prestigious university.

Founded in 1827, the University of Toronto is something of a hallowed institution. Like some of the UK's oldest universities, it is composed of a series of semi-autonomous colleges. In 2023, the Times Higher Education Rankings graded Toronto as Canada's best university, standing at eighteenth worldwide* – sitting comfortably in the tranche just below Oxford, Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, alongside UCL, Cornell and New York University – although with a research profile that puts it comfortably in the world's top ten. In the year of the study, the average admissions grade of the students involved was 87% (Beattie et al., 2016, p. 8) – the UK equivalent of, let's say, an A* and two As at A level.

As the students arrived at university for the first time, no doubt excited to settle into their new accommodation, explore their new city and experience life at undergraduate level, the research team asked them to complete a one-to-two-hour 'warm-up exercise' – to fill out a series of questionnaires. These

* See <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking>.

questionnaires, the researchers informed the students, would be worth 2% of their final first-year mark and would involve simple, short prose answers to questions about ‘procrastination, study habits, social identity, academic expectations, grit, risk aversion, time preference, [and] locus of control’ (p. 3) as well as, for the subset we’re interested in, levels of effort, persistence of interest, the ability to defer gratification and finally, a goal-setting exercise.

Just over three thousand students took part in the subset we’ll discuss – a huge sample.

Once the three researchers had collected the data, they simply waited. At the end of the first year, all the undergraduate students had to complete an exam. The stakes were high: they had to pass to complete the first year successfully and progress to the second. A career in the classroom might lead us to believe that past performance equals future performance, and that the precise grades that students achieved before arriving at university might be the only predictor of success at this new level. Furthermore, we might think that, since the students had all done exceptionally well previously, there would be little issue with underperformance in the cohort.

That wasn’t the case. Instead, there was a normal distribution curve of performance, with the highest performers averaging twice the marks of the lowest. The researchers

chose two samples: the outliers at the top and bottom of the year. The ‘performance gap between the two outlier groups [was] colossal,’ they noted (p. 10). ‘Divers’ fell in the bottom 10% of their year group, averaging 40% in their exam and having to retake the test (every single diver had to be placed on probation at the end of the first year). ‘Thrivers’, by contrast, ended up in the top 10%, with an average score of 81%, outperforming most of their peers.

The research team then went back to the questionnaires of these two distinct groups to ask themselves whether the questionnaire responses collected in the first two weeks at university could have predicted exam performance many months later. First, though, they put a potential misconception to bed. Past exam performance was indeed a good indicator of whether a student would dive or thrive, but, ‘When no demographics are included,’ they noted – and here the italics are ours – *‘less than 20% of the observed variation in college grades is explained by admission grades’* (p. 14).

So, what *did* determine the students who ended up in the two samples? The patterns they discovered are fascinating.

Vision played a part. Divers and thrivers set different types of goal; where thrivers focused on the process of learning and the purpose of acquiring a degree – the kinds

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of work they might end up doing or the real-world problems to which they would contribute solutions – divers had goals that specified levels of wealth or status. Thrivers had what we call ‘do’ goals; their language focused on active verbs – ‘building’ networks, ‘solving’ problems, ‘working’ at challenges, ‘contributing’ to teams – what the study called ‘philanthropic goals’ (p. 21). Divers, by contrast, had what we refer to as ‘have’ or ‘be’ goals; stative verbs about ownership such as ‘having’ a house or car or ‘being’ rich. The process of acquisition, and the associated work, wasn’t part of the equation for divers; it was all about the outcome. Interestingly, the study suggested that the divers might have spent more time thinking about the future than the thrivers, but their goals didn’t positively impact subsequent behaviour.

What else did the study discover? The researchers found that *effort* played a significant role in success, perhaps the most significant. Divers worked less hard than thrivers. ‘Overall,’ the study concludes, ‘our findings suggest that effort (study hours) ... is the key predictor to an exceptionally successful transition to college’ (p. 17). Quite simply, thrivers were ‘willing to study more hours per week to obtain the higher GPA [grade point average] they expect’ (p. 21).

A student’s ability to organise their time emerged as essential. Divers’ *systems* for

managing time and attention weren’t as strong; so much so that they took much longer to submit their data back at the start of the academic year. Despite being fresh at university and no doubt eager to get off to a good start, they used the two weeks they’d been given to complete the questionnaires poorly and tended towards filling them in at the last minute. Their written responses had far higher incidences of words like ‘procrastinate’ and ‘all-nighter’ (p. 13).

The way students revised – their *practice* – played an important role too. Divers ‘self-report cramming for exams’ (p. 20), which suggests a set of approaches that emphasise the importance of quick, surface-level retention of material rather than steady, strategic year-long learning.

Finally, there were a series of *attitudinal* traits that emerged in written answers which suggested a difference between divers and thrivers. ‘Discipline’ was a descriptor thrivers used more often of themselves, as was ‘responsibility,’ and, interestingly, ‘practice’ – all words, the researchers conclude, ‘which are indicative of conscientiousness’ (p. 17).

They might have been conducting their study 3,500 miles away from us, and in a very different context, but if the researchers had wanted to find evidence of the five VESPA characteristics being predictors of academic

success, they couldn't have done a much better job.

It's strange to think that we didn't know of this study at the time. In fact, we only came across it in 2020, six years after we'd developed the VESPA model and some years after we'd begun writing about it, beginning with *The A Level Mindset* in 2016, and followed by *The GCSE Mindset* in 2017 and *The Student Mindset* in 2018.

Even now, we feel a strange kinship with Beattie, Laliberté and Oreopoulos. Now and again, we'll check in with their Google scholar pages to see how they're getting on.

Embarrassing but true.

Using this book

This could be the first time you've read anything about the VESPA model – and that's fine. Or this might be the fourth book you've bought exploring the VESPA model – that's fine too.

The materials we include here are all entirely new and all written post-COVID-19. There are no activities that also appear in *The A Level Mindset*, *The GCSE Mindset* or *The Student Mindset*, and no activities that depend on the reading of those books to work effectively. If you're here for the first time, consider this as good an introduction to our work as any other book; and if you enjoy delivering the activities

here, you've got just over eighty others waiting for you in our earlier publications. If you know the first eighty-or-so activities back to front, think of *The VESPA Handbook* as an expansion pack – forty new resources to play with.

Although our previous books have been distinguished by activities specifically attached to key stages, that isn't the case here. In our own classroom practice, since the publication of our books, we've found ourselves using the activities we enjoy the most and that, personally, we've found had the greatest impact with students regardless of their key stage. So, we've liberated you from that concept in this collection.

If you're a head of Year 9 wanting a curriculum of tutorial study to prepare students for their GCSE years, this book is for you. If you're a head of Year 11 looking for a series of resources that focus attention and encourage a greater commitment to out-of-class study, this book is for you. If you're a head of sixth form looking to improve the levels of proactive independent learning in your Year 13 cohort – well, you get the idea. Assistant heads charged with improving learning outcomes at particular key stages might get something from the material here, as might deputy heads keen to strengthen pastoral support or teaching and learning. We hope there's value here for as many of you as possible.

Introduction

Each of the five main chapters of the book will take you through an element of the VESPA model. We've structured these chapters in the same way each time: first, we define what we mean by the element and then describe what we might see when it's lacking in learners. After that, we give you a brief overview of some of the most interesting research attached to the element and a summary of the findings. Finally – and perhaps most importantly – we give you a list of the behaviours that we see in students who have a strength in that area. We've collected these through interviews with students and teachers, and we've ensured that they're replicable. So, when you're supporting students, you can suggest – or have them pick – the behaviours you or they think they can incorporate into their studies.

Then we dive into the activities. There are eight for each of the VESPA headings, so forty in total. We have designed them to take about twenty or thirty minutes to deliver. Not all of them will suit your tastes, preferences or context, and that's completely normal; some will strike you as useful (we hope!), others might not. Some you might envisage delivering to large numbers of students via an assembly; others will strike you as deliverable to a tutor group or class; still others might look like they'll work in a seminar or coaching setting. We've tried to cover all bases, so pick and choose.

After the forty activities, we take you through a chapter on curriculum design. Some of you will consider the activities best suited to developing metacognition through tutorial programmes. That's certainly how we've used them, and the mini schemes of work we've designed all assume a pastoral context for delivery. But that doesn't mean it's the only way; some of our curricula would work just as well delivered in twenty-minute bursts in a classroom context. If that's the lens through which you see the material here, that's OK as well. We've spoken with staff who use the VESPA resources as a first-aid kit: when an issue arises in their class (a number of students miss a deadline, for example, or a posse stay behind to claim they don't know how to revise), the activities are ready and waiting to be delivered. Both approaches work – it will be what you're trying to achieve, and on what scale, that will determine how you use the material.

And, of course, you don't have to use our curriculum designs at all. Every organisation is different: some place an emphasis on systems, others feel their students need a big dose of vision. There's no requirement to balance out delivery so that every aspect of the model gets equal airtime, and there's certainly no obligation to approach each element of the model separately and in acronym order. When we're designing schemes, we'll often assess what we want

to get out of a particular period of time – what messages we want to communicate, what ideas we want in the ether, what conversations and reflections we want our students to have – and then build something that helps us get there. You could ignore our suggestions and do the same!

We finish the book with a chapter exploring the power of the VESPA questionnaire. Thousands upon thousands of students have taken the psychometric test since it was first developed; it gives both students and staff a useful starting point for reflection and discussion about the role metacognitive skills play in the learning process. Coaching conversations are quickly elevated when both coach and coachee can refer to the reports

generated by the questionnaire software. We provide some examples of what these reports look like and hear from five leaders who use the online psychometric questionnaire and associated resources to support their students.

Lastly, in the conclusion, we continue a tradition begun in our first book and followed in the others, by drawing together the main strands and concepts we've discussed in ten concluding observations.

So, whatever it is that interests you, whatever change you're trying to make and whatever ambitions you have for your learners, we think that there will be something useful for you here.

Good luck with your project!

If you have high control over the outcome, there's no need to have general goals – you can afford to get specific.

But if you have low control over the outcome, general might be better.

1. Vision

Vision: the level of goal awareness and goal orientation shown by a student; their growing understanding of their reasons for studying, and their developing sense of what success might look like for them.

What Do We See When Vision is Low?

Like any of the metacognitive characteristics in the VESPA model, vision is not a fixed, unwavering element of personality. We can't dismiss low-vision students as permanently impossible to motivate. Students' levels of vision, goal orientation or dedication are malleable. They change in response to circumstances, culture, events in personal or

family life, conversations, sudden epiphanies or exciting lessons.

When vision is missing, we'll see proxies for it that might include some or all of the following behaviours. Students might seem disengaged or bored. They might have little awareness or understanding of why education benefits them or what success might look like for them. They may have few or no ideas about how education opens doors to

certain careers, or they might have no access to alumni programmes which clearly and persuasively show them where last year's students ended up. They might have begun to feel exasperated with themselves and others, envious of those who seem dedicated and feel the first tremors of a growing anxiety: what am I doing this for? Why are others enjoying this and I'm not? Is there something wrong with me? They might be firm believers in the passion myth; since they don't yet know that passion for something arrives as a result of growing mastery, they hunt around, convinced that if they could just find the one thing they're passionate about, everything will be OK again.

It's a complicated cocktail of difficult feelings. But we can help low-vision students navigate themselves through them.

Research Spotlight: What the Evidence Indicates

Let's focus on one important element of vision: goal setting. Evidence for goals positively impacting on performance is interesting to explore because not all research finds that students who set goals necessarily perform better.

For example, studies with young primary school pupils sometimes find little impact from goal setting, which we might expect when we consider their only gradually developing

ability to defer gratification. But even with students of high school age, the research isn't unequivocal. One of the reasons could be the type of goal students set. For a quick – and, it's important to note, hugely simplified – summary of just some of the different types of goals students often set themselves, consider the following list. (The labels are all used in the literature around goal setting, but the student quotes and the order in which the types of goal are presented are ours.)

Achievement goals focus on seeking a positive outcome:

- » Performance goals: 'I want to be the best in the class. If not, I want to be at least in the top three or beat a particular individual.'
- » Mastery goals: 'I'm aiming to demonstrate an improvement in my ability to execute on this particular skill, which I've been reflecting on, tracking and practising.'
- » Do-best goals: 'Regardless of the outcome, I want to feel as if I've done myself justice and feel a sense of satisfaction.'
- » Challenge-seeking goals/personal bests: 'I know how I tend to perform in these situations and I have data to evidence where I'm up to. I'm aiming to use feedback, reflection and practice to achieve my highest score yet.'

Avoidance goals focus on averting a negative outcome:

- » Performance-avoidance goals: 'I want to perform anonymously so that I don't stand out as in any way incompetent.'
- » Mastery-avoidance goals: 'I know there's a specific way I tend to mess this up. I'm focusing on avoiding that error in my execution.'
- » Failure-avoidance goals: 'I know what the pass mark is. I'm going to go into the exam focused on that, and just make sure I get over the line.'

Simply assessing these seven approaches to goal setting might have us thinking of specific students we've taught in the past. We might also have experience-based ideas about which goals are likely to positively impact on academic performance and which aren't. In case you're wondering, the research is constantly developing as more goal types are added to models. Two academics from the University of Lausanne summarise one aspect helpfully for us: 'Consistently in achievement goal research, pursuing performance-avoidance goals has been associated with a decrease in achievement' (Świątkowski and Dompnier, 2021, p. 1).

And, when it comes to the difference between two achievement goals – performance goals and mastery goals – we consistently see further interesting differences. One 2004

paper found that 'performance-oriented students tend to embrace surface learning [which is] characterized by more memorization and less effort. In contrast, deep learning, which frequently appears among student[s] who are mastery-oriented, probably lasts longer and raises the quality of students' learning' (Alhadabi and Karpinski, 2020, p. 2; see also Duff, 2004). Other studies find that mastery goals increase intrinsic motivation as well as reducing anxiety and improving enjoyment of learning (Greene et al., 2004; Ranellucci et al., 2015).

Hopefully, one thing is clear: simply having a goal isn't enough. We need to help students set goals that will work for them – encouraging them away from avoidance towards achievement and raising their levels of self-efficacy.

What else does the evidence tell us? Any exploration of goal setting takes us to the work of Professors Edwin Locke and Gary Latham who, from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, have explored goal-setting theory in several much referenced books and papers. Their focus is often on goal difficulty and performance. 'Hard goals,' they write, 'lead to greater effort and persistence than easy goals, assuming the goals are accepted' (Locke and Latham, 1990, p. 29). Specificity is also something that interests them; they spend time exploring, through meta-analyses, the power of specificity, concluding that 96%

of the studies analysed 'showed significant, or contingently significant effects in favour of specific, hard goals' (Locke and Latham, 1990, p. 30). In comparison, they report, subjects with do-best goals use less stringent standards to assess themselves and are therefore more likely to experience dips in performance.

The phrase 'assuming the goals are accepted' will surely catch the eye of any teacher. Working with students all the time, as we do, we're likely to have observed that the learner's psychological enrolment in the process of improvement is crucial to extracting greater levels of commitment.

Professor Andrew Martin's work at the University of New South Wales is interesting in this respect. He took eighty-nine students from both primary and secondary schools and put them through two maths exams a year apart, the first in August 2012 and the second in 2013. In preparation for the second test, forty-one of the students set themselves challenge-seeking personal best goals before the exam; the other forty-eight had a goal selected for them. Both groups were balanced as far as possible for gender, age and other demographics.

The goal-setting group were given a questionnaire asking them to outline their aims for the approaching test. They were provided with lots of possible goals and had

the freedom to commit to whichever goals they wanted. Afterwards and separately, they were asked to set themselves a challenge-based personal-best goal with the following prompt: 'Last year you scored xx/40 in your mathematics test. Can we encourage you to set a Personal Best (PB) target for this year's mathematics test that is higher than last year's test?' (Martin and Elliot, 2015, p. 7). Once the student had chosen their own challenge goal, they were reminded regularly (by text) of this goal in the days running up to the test.

The second group were given the same questionnaire and had the chance to respond to the same goal options. Afterwards and separately, however, they were given a goal and were not reminded of their goal once it had been set.

Both groups received no teaching specific to the test, and the test they sat was not identical to the previous year's, but what the researchers call 'parallel' – that is, similar in structure and challenge (forty questions, a mix of multiple choice and short answers).

So, what happened? The group who had been given a goal scored 74% on test one, and a year later had slipped to 71%; a drop in performance was recorded across every subgroup. In the absence of test-specific teaching, we'd expect the attrition of time on memory and understanding to impact on outcomes, as well as the increased

weariness and pragmatism that often come with the onset of adolescence. The group who had chosen their own personal-best goal fared better. They scored 75% on test one, and a year later scored 78% – a statistically significant boost in performance that was replicated across every subgroup, despite facing the same challenges as the other group.

When We're Working with Students ...

Although the evidence indicates that challenging achievement goals which target specific improvements in performance with reference to previous outcomes and are chosen by the student are likely to yield the best academic performance, we might not start there. Why? Because a student who has never set themselves an academic goal – and there are plenty whose lack of agency and self-efficacy prevent goal setting – might need to begin with something simpler. Modelling the process of goal setting is a powerful place to start.

Here are a few approaches we've found useful.

1. Try beginning with a one-week do-best goal

We might ask the student to consider the week ahead. 'Where would you like to be by

Friday? Let's picture the situation: you go into the weekend tired and ready for a break, but also feeling delighted that you've done your best and dealt with a number of issues. What might they be? What do we want to achieve in the next few days to make that happen?'

Try making the outcome as visual and visceral as you can. Encourage students to imagine what it would feel like to reach these goals – what a relaxed, stress-free weekend they would have and the things they could do with their time. Then conclude with two or three actions that are comfortably within their control. 'So, you're saying that tidying up your notes in English would make you feel much better. You also mentioned catching up on those missing notes in history. And you've also mentioned speaking to your teacher about that missing textbook. When might we try to schedule these jobs?'

2. Use a short-term checkpoint for a do-best goal

Here, we might refer to the organisation's short-term calendar: 'It's parents' evening in two weeks' time. Let's imagine what a great parents' evening would look like. What would your teachers be saying? What improvements might they mention? How might your parents respond? Wouldn't it be great to give them some good news!' Then discuss the possible actions that would close the gap between the current reality and the vividly imagined

future state. 'What actions could we plan over the next two weeks? What might make a difference?' When we're dealing with these marginally increased time periods, we'll often suggest a midpoint check-up. 'So, by the end of this week, you'll be looking to have done this. Let's schedule a quick meeting so you can bring me up to date with what you've ticked off your list.'

3. Add a specific achievement goal, but choose a context where levels of control are high

We might introduce discussion of an achievement goal here, but select carefully. 'So, you'd like your test grades in science to improve. What scores are you getting at the moment? Are you entirely happy with those scores? If we decided to aim for something higher, what would be sensible?' Try to ascertain levels of control and likely success. We don't want students telling us they don't know why their scores are low or they haven't really got time to focus their attention in that direction. We're looking for learners to tell us, 'Yes, I know what my current scores are. I know I can do better. I just need to do more of ...' Outcome Control (Activity 5) might help here. Once we're clear on a goal, we should attach actions associated with improved performance as above, and track them if necessary.

4. Introduce multiple achievement goals attached to a short- to medium-term checkpoint

At this stage, we might begin discussing a range of connected aims around a period of testing, an assessment week across a few subjects or a set of mock exams. 'Are there three or four subjects where you'd really like to make improvements? Which ones would they be, and why? What kind of improvements might you want to see?' Again, see if you can ascertain the extent to which the student has control over the outcome. 'Do you know what you need to do to improve, or does it all feel mysterious?' Introduce the idea of a personal best. 'What has your best result been so far? Why did it happen? If you were to try and beat that, what would you need to do?' Then, as above, attach actions.

5. Introduce and discuss more abstract, longer term goals when levels of self-efficacy have improved

Here, we might ask some of the questions we've wanted to from the start, but we've known that beginning with them, particularly with a student who has never set goals before, would result in confused shrugs and silence. 'Have you ever thought about what success looks like for you? Imagine it's results day, and you're opening that email and reading your exam results for the first

time. What would have you punching the air?' Then, you might begin an exploration of the student's 'why'. 'Results like the ones you've just mentioned would open a lot of doors. Some of those doors might interest you, some might not. Can you give me an idea of which doors you'd want to explore further? Imagine you were only allowed to take one subject after your exams – just one door. Which would it be and why?' Record these hopes and aspirations, and then – you've guessed it – discuss the kinds of actions necessary for those outcomes to happen. Prioritise the actions and schedule the first one or two if you can. And remember, longer term goals need to be thriver goals, not diver goals (see Introduction).

Twenty High-Vision Behaviours

We've spent plenty of time with highly motivated and goal-oriented students with a clear vision for what success looks like. Whenever we find ourselves working with them, we aim to gather together their characteristics so we can share them with others. We always try to tease out replicable behaviours, so the language we use isn't abstract or slippery; rather, we want habits we can encourage others to add to their repertoire.

The lists under each element of the model aren't exhaustive, of course, but here are the twenty behaviours we see most regularly among high-vision students.

- 1 I have personal bests that I'm trying to beat when I submit new work.
- 2 I have a clear idea of what I need to know in order to understand everything well, so I ask the teacher to clarify tasks that I'm not 100% clear on.
- 3 I have begun researching how other people got to where they are.
- 4 I have imagined what a good set of exam results look like for me. I have written them down somewhere, like a commitment to myself.
- 5 I have mental lists of things I hope for, from small to big academic achievements.
- 6 I have started to find out about current affairs by reading a news site, watching TV news or choosing a documentary to watch.
- 7 I have thought about what good work looks like, and I'm aware of that as I work.
- 8 I know why education is important to me – I have thought it through, maybe even written it down.

9 I like to ask questions for clarification in lessons and make contributions, such as volunteering answers or offering opinions.

10 I often talk to my friends about my subjects, going over complicated topics or sharing enthusiasms.

11 I seek out extra material (textbooks, articles, handouts, revision sites) to deepen my understanding of a topic.

12 I set targets, like a grade or a certain type of feedback to work towards, often with a timeframe in mind.

13 I sometimes have another class member I compete against.

14 I take an interest in certain careers or courses and seek out video clips or online articles about them, just to see if they might be for me.

15 I try to get involved in school life, joining clubs, helping others and building relationships that will help me as I go along.

16 I want teachers to say good things about me at parents' evenings or in written reports, and work to make sure those things are more likely to happen.

17 I'm happy to watch a film or read a book chapter connected to my learning, so I can find out more and make connections.

18 If the teacher suggests an out-of-class activity or opportunity, I consider it.

19 My attendance and punctuality are very good, and I work to maintain them.

20 When entering a lesson, I'm focused and immediately look for the starter task.

How might a list like this be useful? Here's just one way in which it might change student behaviour.

Try a never/sometimes/always analysis

This approach is simple but effective. Encourage students to make three columns – 'never', 'sometimes' and 'always' – and to give themselves a tick depending on how often they do that behaviour. The 'nevers' become possibilities for them to consider. Not all of them will look possible or easy, but some might be immediate tweaks they can make to their studies.

1. Vision Activity: Diver Goals and Thriver Goals

Three researchers (from the University of Pittsburgh in the United States and Toronto in Canada) worked together to find out what made students in their first year of university particularly successful or unsuccessful (Beattie et al., 2016). They got three thousand students in the first two weeks of their university courses to fill out a questionnaire. They had all applied to study economics at degree level and had good college grades.

The questions asked them about how hard they planned to work, what their typical study routines were and, most importantly, to outline their hopes and dreams. It's this last section of the study that is particularly relevant to us in this activity. The questions the students had to answer were:

- » What are your two most inspiring goals?
- » What kind of person do you want to be later in life?
- » What qualities do you admire in others?

A year later, the researchers took the students who had ended up in the top 10% of their year group and compared them with the students in the bottom 10%. There seemed to be some superficial differences at first, but what struck the researchers was the nature of the goals the students had set for themselves. The students at the top and the bottom had both set goals, but those goals were expressed very differently.

Vision

Here's a summary:

Bottom 10%	Top 10%
1 'be rich'	1 'build something'
2 'get rich quickly'	2 'I can contribute to the human advancement of ...'
3 'being successful'	3 'I want to try something different'
4 'having so many successful businesses'	4 'fix people's problems'
5 'have my own company/have my own house and car'	5 'independent person who can deal with problems'
6 'receive a high level of education'	6 'working in the field of computer science'
7 'be an actuary'	7 'build a strong foundation to succeed'

One group of students – the ones on the left – had *diver goals*. These focused on ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ something – usually rich or having/receiving something – money, a house, a particular job, status or power. These were goals about an outcome, not a journey.

The other group had *thriver goals*. These placed emphasis on activity and a sense of purpose – building, contributing, trying, fixing or dealing with problems. These were goals that didn’t specify an outcome but gave detail about a process or journey.

And the outcomes were clear. Those students with *thriver goals* were significantly more successful. They’d avoided procrastination and worked harder.

Here's a list of ten other goals set by the same students. Can you guess which were top 10% students and which were bottom 10% students? It's pretty easy once you see the patterns, but in case you need them we've snuck in the answers below.

1 'to enjoy working hard and working smart'

2 'to own a big company'

3 'to build my network, name and career'

4 'become a very rich guy'

5 'helping tackle space research to deal with overpopulation'

6 'be rich where I do not have to worry about running out of money'

7 'a person who changes the whole goddamn world and also can contribute to the whole society'

8 'to be a person like Bill Gates'

9 'to provide assistance to others in need of help and support'

10 'to be a successful businessman''

* The odd-numbered goals were set by top 10% students and the even-numbered goals were set by bottom 10% students.

What Goals Do You Have?

There’s nothing wrong with wanting wealth and riches. The problem comes when your goal is just about wealth and riches, and doesn’t emphasise action – as if the wealth and riches are a magical outcome that just happens. Beattie et al. showed that students in the bottom 10% actually spent longer thinking about their futures than top 10% students did – *but* they were just dreaming about what it might be like to be a millionaire. They did less work than their peers.

So, instead frame your goal in terms of what you might want to *do*. Emphasise action – the journey or the process.

Try these starters to help:

- » I want to build ...
- » I want to help solve the problem of ...
- » I want to tackle the issue of ...
- » I want to develop skills such as ...
- » I want to work every day in the ... industry.
- » I want to deal with the issue of ...
- » I want to help people ...

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Remember, if you set goals like this, there's still every chance that you'll end up very wealthy and successful. You'll also have the advantage of knowing a little about how you're going to make a change in the world. It's a win-win situation.



Steve Oakes has twenty-five years' teaching experience. He is the assistant head teacher, director of sixth form, at The British School Al Khubairat. Prior to assuming his current position, he was the assistant director of sixth form at a comprehensive school in Greater Manchester – twice rated outstanding by Ofsted – where he worked with his co-author, Martin Griffin, for eight years.



Martin Griffin has been a head of faculty, assistant head teacher and deputy head teacher. He was the director of sixth form at an outstanding comprehensive school in Greater Manchester, and has since worked with hundreds of schools and colleges across the UK and beyond, designing and implementing programmes to improve students' engagement, independent study, and academic success.

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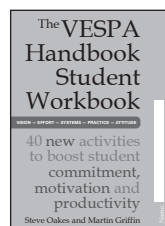
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Siân Farquharson, Post-16 Professional Learning Lead Partner, Education Achievement Service

Steve and Martin have the incredible ability to frame ideas and suggestions to develop learner habits in a way which just simply makes sense to teachers and students alike.

Suzanne Ingram, Deputy Head Teacher, Spalding Grammar School

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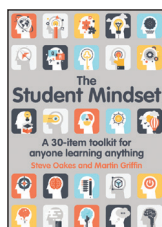


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