

The A Level  
Mindset  
Student  
Workbook

40 activities for  
transforming  
commitment,  
motivation and  
productivity

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin

**To the thousands of A level students we have had the honour of teaching and, more importantly, learning from.**

**To Phoebe, Max, George and Agatha; you have all of this to come.**

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When you enter a mindset, you enter a new world. In one world – the world of fixed traits – success is about proving you’re smart or talented.

Validating yourself. In the other – the world of changing qualities – it’s about stretching yourself to learn something new. Developing yourself.

*Dweck (2007), p. 14*

# Introduction

There isn't a direct link between success at the end of Year 11 and success at A level.

You might think that those students who succeed at the end of Year 11 continue this pathway and succeed again at the end of Year 13. But instead something else happens: some students make giant strides between 16 and 18, leaping up from pretty modest results in Year 11 to outstanding results in Year 13. Others go from great performance at 16 to modest grades at the end of their A level courses. Some students hit ceilings, others make sudden breakthroughs.

We've spent years studying what it is about 'ceiling students' that stops them progressing, and what it is about 'breakthrough students' that makes them suddenly improve. Here's the outcome: there isn't a link between GCSE performance and being a breakthrough student or, indeed, a ceiling student. *Past performance doesn't guarantee future performance.* Whatever happened to you in your GCSEs doesn't define what you'll achieve in your A levels.

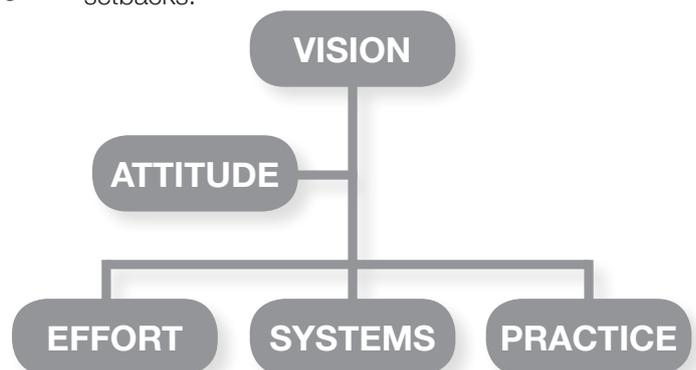
Instead, the factors which determine students' A level success are their habits, routines, attitudes and approaches to study. Paul Tough summarises it pretty neatly in the following observation. It is your behaviours, not your intelligence, that will determine

your results: 'Economists refer to these as non-cognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us sometimes think of them as character' (Tough, 2013, p. 5).

## VESPA

Our work suggests that students who are successful score highly in the following characteristics or qualities:

- » **VISION** – they know what they want to achieve.
- » **EFFORT** – they put in many hours of proactive independent study.
- » **SYSTEMS** – they organise their learning resources and their time.
- » **PRACTICE** – they practise and develop their skills.
- » **ATTITUDE** – they respond constructively to setbacks.



# Introduction

These characteristics beat cognition hands down. We've found that ceiling students have significant gaps in one or more of these characteristics. And regardless of their academic success at 16, our studies show that these learners will hit the ceiling at A level if they don't address and strengthen those weaknesses. Conversely, students who score highly for the qualities above can and do make significant breakthroughs at A level, unlocking performance that far outstrips their target grades.

**Students who are success seekers are not bluffed by setback, poor performance, failure or academic adversity. They take the lesson to be learnt and move on.** Martin (2010), p. 22

## The VESPA Activities

The activities in this booklet are designed to:

- » Raise awareness about the impact a quality/ characteristic can have on your potential success.
- » Encourage you to reflect on the strength of that quality on a personal level.
- » Engage you in a task that develops you as a learner – a reflection, discussion, coaching conversation or experiment.

Each session is designed to take fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. We've included eight tasks under each heading, giving you a total of forty to start experimenting with.

Good luck!

## Authors' Note

We have made every attempt to recognise the work of those who have inspired many of the ideas and concepts that we have used in this book. We would like to make particular reference to the work of Peter Clough, Carol Dweck and Angela Lee Duckworth for inspiring us to develop this system, and to thank the many students who have listened, experimented, commented, criticised and helped us tweak (and sometimes just ditch!) the tools we've developed.

Special mention must go to the staff and students of the Blue Coat School, where we have worked together for the past seven years. To Julie Hollis, an exceptional head teacher who has given us the time, space, trust and resources to design and develop this system. To Hayley Elliott and Tom Wild, who have contributed more than we could thank them for. And to our team of sixth form tutors, who've been game enough to try everything out and frank enough to give us the feedback we've needed.

The Blue Coat School is an outstanding 11–18 comprehensive school in Oldham, Greater Manchester. It is a teaching school and the lead school in the Cranmer Trust and the Northern Alliance. For more information about the school, the alliance and the trust, please visit:

[www.blue-coat.oldham.sch.uk](http://www.blue-coat.oldham.sch.uk)

[www.northern-alliance.net](http://www.northern-alliance.net)

# 1. Vision

## 5. Vision Activity: The Perfect Day

Every primary school child in the country will be able to tell you what they want to be. Why? Because at that age teachers encourage children to express their hopes and dreams in writing activities with titles like, 'When I grow up ...' Look in your old school books and you will find you've done this too.

But no one asks teenagers to write about what they want to be. It's as if, by this age, we're embarrassed to have hopes and dreams. We shouldn't be. *Having hopes and dreams is more important at this age than at any other time of life.*

So, put your headphones in, get some music on and write without shame. It will be like the old days! Here are some questions to help get you thinking. Your task is to have a go at describing your perfect day at work to help you develop a long-term vision.

» Are you working indoors or outdoors?

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» Do you work at home or away from home?

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» Who are you with?

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» Are you leading a team? Part of a team? Alone?

.....

.....

» When do you start or finish your day?

.....

.....

» What are you wearing to work?

.....

.....

# Vision

» What is your workspace like?

.....  
.....

Your answers to these questions might not tell you precisely what kind of job you should be aiming for, but they will help establish what interesting work looks like for you. Look over your answers.

If you had to pick one of the above as a non-negotiable – in other words, something you would need in your work to be truly happy – which one would it be?

.....

## Final Thoughts

We've found the following topics tend to emerge as important factors in student responses. Do any apply to you? Ideas about travel, being outdoors, working in teams, celebrating successes, helping others, playing challenging games, creating fictional worlds, responding artistically to something, exercise and physical activity, companionship and leadership.

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Education A/AS Level Study Guide