


Do you really know what is driving your exam groups? 



The power of knowing what drives your key exam groups

A practical look at how understanding mindset and behaviour can transform outcomes for key exam groups.

INSIGHT
BEHAVIOURS

The power of knowing what drives your key exam groups

As we enter the final and most critical stage of the school year, something important begins to shift.

For many students in key exam groups, motivation becomes more focused, more intense and sometimes more fragile. GCSEs, A-levels and other high-stakes assessments move from being a distant concept to an immediate reality.

At this point, one question matters more than almost any other:

Do we really know what is driving our students right now?

Because in these final weeks, outcomes are shaped not just by curriculum coverage or revision timetables - but by the underlying psychological drivers that determine how students respond to pressure, challenge and support.

Behaviour is often the final chapter - motivation is the story underneath

Teachers and leaders are used to looking for visible indicators:

- Who is revising?
- Who is completing intervention tasks?
- Who appears confident?
- Who is becoming disengaged?

But these behaviours can be misleading.



Two students may show the same outward response - tiredness, avoidance, anxiety, perfectionism - yet be driven by completely different internal motivations.

For example:

- One student may be deeply **mastery-driven**, striving to improve and understand.
- Another may be highly **performance-driven**, fearful of losing status or disappointing others.
- A third may be experiencing growing **hopelessness**, unsure whether effort will make any difference.
- A fourth may be quietly **self-handicapping**, protecting their identity from the risk of failure.

Without clarity about these drivers, well-intended support can easily miss the mark.

Why motivation shifts in exam season

As exams approach, several psychological changes typically occur:

1. Stakes become personal

Students begin to connect outcomes with identity, future pathways and perceived self-worth.

2. Time pressure increases

Working memory load rises. Revision demands compete with fatigue and stress.

3. Social comparison intensifies

Students become more aware of how others are performing.

4. Fear of failure becomes more visible

Some students respond with urgency and effort. Others respond with avoidance or emotional withdrawal.

5. Belief becomes decisive

At this stage, **self-efficacy - the belief that effort will lead to improvement - may be the single most important factor in success.**

This is why understanding motivational drivers is not a luxury. It is a strategic necessity.

The leadership question: do we know what drives our exam cohorts?

Schools invest huge energy in:

- Revision programmes
- Intervention sessions
- Target tracking
- Exam preparation events

These are essential.

But the impact of these initiatives depends on whether they align with what students actually need psychologically.

Consider these questions:

- Do we know which students are motivated but anxious?
- Which students are capable but losing belief?
- Which students are working hard but in unproductive ways?
- Which students are disengaging because the pressure feels overwhelming?
- Which students need reassurance - and which need challenge?

When leaders and teachers can answer these questions with confidence, support becomes more precise.

Messaging becomes more powerful.

Interventions become more efficient.

The power of precision at the most important moment

The final exam phase is not simply about knowledge recall. It is about emotional regulation, resilience, belief and sustained effort.

Students are asking themselves:

- Can I do this?
- Does this matter?
- Is it too late?
- What will people think if I fail?

When adults understand these inner questions, they can respond with clarity rather than assumption.

And when messaging aligns with motivation, something powerful happens:

- Engagement stabilises
- Effort becomes more consistent
- Anxiety becomes more manageable
- Outcomes improve

A final reflection for school leaders

At this stage of the year, data dashboards and predicted grades matter.

But so does insight.

Because the difference between a student who succeeds and one who drifts may not be ability. It may be belief.

It may be identity. It may be fear. It may be hope.

So as you prepare your key exam groups for the final stretch, consider asking:

Do we really know what is driving them now? And are we adjusting our support accordingly?

When we understand the drivers behind behaviour and effort, we give students something more powerful than revision.

We give them the conditions to succeed.

Adjusting support based on motivational drivers

Understanding drivers allows adults to respond differently.

For mastery-oriented students

- Emphasise progress and improvement
- Provide structured challenge
- Celebrate process-based success

For performance-driven students

- Reduce identity threat around outcomes
- Reframe mistakes as information
- Focus on controllable actions

For students with low self-efficacy

- Provide early success experiences
- Use modelling and guided practice
- Make improvement visible

For avoidant or overwhelmed students

- Simplify starting points
- Break tasks into achievable steps
- Maintain calm, consistent expectations

For students experiencing hopelessness

- Rebuild belief through small wins
- Strengthen relationships and encouragement
- Show clear pathways to improvement

In each case, the academic strategy may look similar on paper. But the *tone, timing and emphasis* of adult support makes the difference.