



**AUSTIN FRIARS SCHOOL  
DEMONSTRATES THAT IT  
DEVELOPS LIFE SKILLS IN  
PUPILS AS WELL AS  
DELIVERING EXCELLENT  
ACADEMIC RESULTS**

## Can you develop life skills in pupils and evidence it?

Austin Friars School, Carlisle, has, over the 2017/2018 academic year, carried out a unique and bold exercise to assess to what extent the school develops life skills in its pupils – with very positive and interesting results.

The study used the Mental Toughness Questionnaire which, in early 2017, was used by the Independent Schools Council (ISC), to examine life skills development in 10,000 pupils in 58 schools across the UK. It is used widely in State schools thus providing a database for benchmarking.

Initially developed as a concept by Professor Peter Clough, Head of Psychology at Huddersfield University, Mental Toughness describes a personality trait that describes how individuals respond to stress, pressure, challenge and opportunity. These pretty much describe a pupil's life.

It describes 'how we think' which is an important determinant on 'how we act' and 'how we feel'. This helps us to understand why we behave the way we do. Published research on secondary school pupils shows that mental toughness is a significant factor in attainment, wellbeing, positive behaviour and aspirations. It is sometimes more commonly described as mindset or attitude.

## What did Austin Friars do?

The study was carried out by AQR International who carried out the ISC study. AQR works across the world in state and private sectors in c. 80 countries as well as in major businesses where the same qualities are paramount.

The initial results in September 2017 showed that pupils at Austin Friars appeared to develop levels of Mental Toughness during their time at the school to a level which would place them in the upper quartile of the ISC study at the point of completing their secondary education.

A more significant question was – “Can we evidence that pupils at Austin Friars develop the mental toughness and, by implication, their life skills during each Academic year and can Austin Friars use this information to improve even those initial assessments?”.

As a result, all pupils who completed the MTQ48 measure were re-assessed at the end of the Academic year to examine whether there was a change in mental toughness which could be attributed to their experience at Austin Friars.

## What emerged – what had Austin Friars achieved?

Initial analysis of the results confirms that, generally, the average mental toughness of a pupil increased from a score of 4.31 to an average score of 4.75. Impressive in its own right, this level of mental toughness would place Austin Friars in the top 10% of schools in the Independent Schools survey.

Austin Friars is a non-selective school and so each year's intake can be quite different in term of academic ability. The challenge for any school is to make the most of the abilities that the pupils possess.

Year by year analysis showed:

| Year         | Sept 2017 | May/June 2018 | Difference |
|--------------|-----------|---------------|------------|
| 7            | 3.85      | 4.13          | 0.28       |
| 8            | 4.35      | 4.49          | 0.14       |
| 9            | 4.26      | 5.43          | 1.17       |
| 10           | 4.56      | 5.47          | 0.91       |
| 11           | 3.88      | 3.86          | - 0.02     |
| 12           | 4.39      | 5.15          | 0.76       |
| 13           | 4.76      | 4.66          | - 0.10     |
| Whole School | 4.31      | 4.75          | 0.44       |

The school has a programme of events with each year group which are designed to develop pupil life skills. We can see that the school has made a positive difference throughout the life of the pupil.

The apparent minor negative changes in two of the years coincide with the fact that these are the two years where pupils sit key national and international examinations – GCSEs and A levels. In other words, these are the pressure years. It's not unusual to see more significant reverses in confidence and commitment in these circumstances and it's a positive sign that the school has prepared pupils for these pressures and when they are applied, that pupils do not respond more negatively.

Adding some context to the results, the global norm for an adult is a score of 5.5. We do not expect adolescents to have this level of mental toughness – they are on the journey to develop this and to acquire the life skills that an adult would possess. Studies show that in adolescence average mental toughness scores tend to range between 3.90 and 4.25. These scores are more significant than this.

Studies also show that mental toughness scores for adolescents drop in years 8 and 9 (sometimes called the "lost years"). This was evident in the ISC study. This exercise at Austin Friars shows that by understanding the mindset of adolescents and focusing activity in the right way, this dip can be avoided and actually developed in a positive way. Ultimately this means that as pupils' approach important examinations they do so with a stronger mindset.

## So, does all of this translate into tangible outcomes?

One of the most important is examination performance (as well as wellbeing and behaviour).

During this study, Austin Friar's pupils achieved an outstanding set of GCSE results with 46% of all grades at A\* or A equivalent. 17% of the "new" GCSEs were awarded Grade 9, compared to a posted national average in the UK of 4.3%.

"The School does not narrowly select on the basis of ability, and we are, therefore, delighted that our high achievers and pupils across our broad ability range have achieved such superb results with 94% of all grades at A\* – C or equivalent." said Headmaster, Matt Harris."

"Developing life skills is an integral part of the curriculum at Friars, it's a key element of the school's ethos" Mr Harris added. "Parents trust us to develop academic abilities, but most are equally concerned that we help develop mature young people who can confidently move on and make a success of their lives outside of and beyond school. These results provide a good indication that we, at Austin Friars, are becoming increasingly effective at developing the whole person. They are also consistent with improvements in Academic performance".

From AQR's perspective, these results are impressive in several ways.

Firstly, it is courageous of the school to examine itself in this way – its strong evidence of a true desire for continuous improvement across all fronts.

Secondly, and quite uniquely the results indicate that Austin Friars is effective in this regard across all year groups and does so progressively. Mental Toughness data for most schools shows a dip in middle years – sometimes described as the “lost years”. The Austin Friars experience suggests that with care, this dip can be largely avoided.

Finally, the school looked at the initial results, already impressive, and used that information to work out how to do things “even better”. The mental toughness concept assesses Control, Commitment, Challenge and Confidence. The plan now is to analyse and evaluate this valuable data, with the support of senior University academics to understand the results more closely and to continue the journey towards sustained excellence.

Moreover, there is now a substantial amount of data about specific aspects of mental toughness and how they relate to individual pupils – one size doesn't fit all. It is still rare for a school to evaluate and evidence what they are doing in this area. Many schools claim to develop these skills but don't put it to the test. We do see that it is often the better schools which seek to confirm that they practice what they preach.

Headteacher Matt Harris noted “This has been an important exercise. It's pleasing to know that we can evidence what we believe we are doing. Equally importantly, the study has shown us and will continue to show us where we can direct attention to improve even on this. We're determined to provide our pupils with the best all-round education possible.”

Anyone interested in knowing more about this exercise and other work that AQR carries out please contact [headoffice@agr.co.uk](mailto:headoffice@agr.co.uk).

## Mental Toughness concept and framework



