



CASE STUDY: MENTAL TOUGHNESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Mental Toughness Questionnaire (MTQPlus)

Mental Toughness describes the mindset that every person adopts in everything they do. It is closely related to qualities such as character, resilience, grit, etc. It is defined as: “A personality trait which determines, in large part, how people respond to challenge, stress and pressure, irrespective of their circumstances”.

Most personality models and measures assess the behavioral aspects of personality (how we act). Mental Toughness differs in that it assesses something more fundamental – “how we think”. In other words, why we act and respond emotionally to events. It enables us to understand mindset in a very practical way.

It is applicable in virtually every sector. In education, it is beneficial for developing self-awareness in students (and staff) about the mindset qualities which are important for their success and wellbeing. Through a 74-item questionnaire, the MTQPlus assesses mental toughness across the 4C's and eight factors outlined below.

Mental Toughness Scale	What this means, what does MTQ48 assess...the 8 factors
CONTROL	<i>Life Control</i> – I really believe I can do it
	<i>Emotional Control</i> – I can manage my emotions and the emotions of others
COMMITMENT	<i>Goal Orientation</i> – I set goals – I like the idea of working towards goals
	<i>Achievement Orientation</i> – I'll do what it takes to keep my promises and achieve my goals
CHALLENGE	<i>Risk Orientation</i> – I welcome new and different experiences – I stretch myself
	<i>Learning Orientation</i> – I learn from what happens - including setbacks
CONFIDENCE	<i>In Abilities</i> – I believe I have the ability to do it – or can acquire the ability
	<i>Interpersonal Confidence</i> – I can influence others – I can stand my ground if needed

Benefits

Mental Toughness, measured by the MTQPlus, has emerged as a significant factor in the development of young people. Over recent years, research and case studies have emerged which show that Mental Toughness is strongly correlated with

- **Retention** – more likely to complete a programme.
- **Performance** – Explaining up to 25% of the variation in an individual's performance. There is a close link between Mental Toughness and performance of young persons on exams and tests.
- **Positive behaviour** – More engaged, more positive, more 'can do'. They are more likely to engage in the class and the school (asking questions, engaging in discussion, etc.)
- **Well-being and Mental Health** – More contentment, better stress management and more able to deal with the pressures, stressors, and challenges of everyday life.
- **Peer relationships** – Develop peer relationships faster and form stronger relationships.

- **Aspirations** – Correlated with aspirations to do better than the prevailing norm.
- **Employability** – Secure employment quicker, get the job they want more readily and earn more.

The Programme

Presented here is a case study from a business school at a University in the UK. The business school decided to implement an innovative Personal and Professional Development Programme following a student satisfaction survey.

The response from the survey indicated that students did not feel their personal development was well supported in the business school. Responses showed that students overwhelmingly wanted to receive support in a range of areas which, at the time was only represented as self-awareness in the faculty skills framework.

Students said they wanted to receive support in;

- Personal development (life or soft skills)
- Self-awareness
- Growth mindset
- Personal wellbeing
- Mindset and mental toughness including self-efficacy
- Emotional management
- Tenacity
- Self-belief
- Assertiveness
- Resilience in dealing with, learning from and valuing failure

The faculty, like many other universities, was also facing retention issues.

The universities response was to create a new personal and professional development module and introduce it to first-year students. The module comprised of exactly what students said they wanted.

Departments in the faculty chose to implement the module either as a unit approach worth 15 credits with a summative assessment of a Personal and Professional Development skills portfolio or through an embedded approach. This consisted of teaching the key themes of the unit and assessing Personal and Professional Development skills via other first-year units or delivered through the programme personal tutoring framework.

Aims of the Programme

The programme aims:

- To improve academic performance by identifying at the start of the academic year, students who may struggle to deal with challenges. This provides the ability to focus attention on those most in need and to allocate resources where appropriate.
- To build self-awareness in students, and staff. To equip students with knowledge about Mental Toughness and where the elements of their own Mental Toughness may create issues for them or help them to thrive.
- To introduce students to a concept that will be valuable for supporting them in their studies and how they approach learning.
- To evidence, the impact of any development and enrichment programs the university may already have in place.
- To prepare students for further study or employment and equip them with the skills needed to deal with the challenges and opportunities they face.

The Process

The initial stage was to scope and launch the project; tailoring the programme to meet the needs of the university and identifying desired outcomes, setting clearly defined aims and objectives.

The second stage involved training those involved in the project rollout within the university, including lecturers, support staff, counsellors and staff from the placements team. This involved attending a two-day Licensed User Training programme and completing the MTQPlus measure.

Students completed the MTQPlus as early in the academic year as possible - the initial baseline assessment. This data was then analysed to provide a basic summary of findings which will signpost development activity.



Results

Whilst the programme is still ongoing, initial results indicated that first-year students average scores across all mental toughness factors were below the average of 5.50.

Initial findings showed that first-year students were scoring highest on the interpersonal confidence scale, although still slightly below the global average.

Interestingly, the lowest average score of 3.40 was on the achievement orientation scale suggesting students were unlikely to do what it takes to achieve goals and targets. This supported what was being observed at the university with students struggling to meet deadlines.

This programme is still ongoing and is currently being extended to second- and third-year students. The programme will allow students to be tracked and supported throughout their entire time at the business school. We look forward to examining the data that comes with this and supporting students through the journey in higher education.

The next stage is fundamental; development activity through the use of the Mental Toughness Development toolkit. Most tend activities in the toolkit are approximately 10-20 minutes long and can be delivered in groups or on a one-to-one basis. The key to development is purposeful practice (along with self-awareness and reflection) so a small selection of targeted activities is sufficient.

The business school chose to embed Mental Toughness Development activities through the implementation of Personal and Professional Development Module. This was implemented in two ways:

1. A unit approach – a unit of 15 credits with a summative assessment of a PPD skills portfolio.
2. Through an embedded approach – in which the key themes presented in the unit are taught and PPD skills are assessed via other units or delivered through a personal tutoring framework.

At the beginning of the next academic year, students will retake the MTQPlus. We will then analyse the data, measure against desired outcomes and produce a written report identifying areas of change and implications.

The process is then typically repeated across the following academic year.