



GUIDE TO PROACTIVE MOTIVATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT (PaMS)

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1. INTRODUCTION

“The best predictor of student retention is motivation – retention services need to clarify and build on motivation and address motivation-reducing issues. Most students dropout because of reduced motivation” (Professor E. Anderson, Retention Conference, San Diego, 2003)

The aim of this paper is to increase student retention through 'Proactive Motivational Support' (PaMS) from tutors. There is some evidence (see later) that short frequent proactive motivational support can increase student retention over more conventional tutorial based support. This paper will outline the theory and evidence behind this approach but readers can skip this and go straight to Section 5 p.5 'Proactive Motivational Support in practice' if they wish.

2. LEARNING MOTIVATION THEORIES

There have been a number of developments recently in aspects of learning psychology that suggest it may be worth experimenting with different approaches to student support and teaching. The basis of this approach is the attempt to influence students' motivation directly, instead of either expecting it to be already present or attempting to enhance it by example and exhortation. It's not that example and exhortation don't work – it's just that there may be more effective ways of enhancing motivation.

The advantages of addressing learning motivation directly is that students who are highly motivated will be more likely to overcome problems that would otherwise have halted them in their studies – they will become that most desirable creature in distance education, the 'independent learner'.

There are four approaches that may be of particular interest

- 'Theories of self'
- 'Self-affirmation theory'
- 'Strengths approach'
- 'Positive Psychology'

2.1. Theories of Self (Dweck, 1999)

Dweck argues that our motivation and effort is very strongly affected by how we think of ourselves, and in particular our beliefs about our own intelligence. Some people believe that their intelligence is fixed and cannot be changed by effort - she calls these 'entity theorists'. Others believe that their intelligence is malleable and can be changed by effort - she calls these 'incremental theorists'.

Dweck's motivational method was to teach students that their intelligence is indeed malleable and can be changed by effort. She was able to show that students with such incremental beliefs try harder and are not as disrupted by outside events or encountering problems as entity theorist students.

She also found that praising students for their effort was more effective than praising them for their achievement: students praised for achievement tended to develop an entity theory of intelligence and when they met an obstacle tended to give up. Students praised for effort would keep that effort going in the face of obstacles.

2.2. ‘Self-affirmation’ theory (Cohen, Garcia et al 2006)

Cohen et al use short ‘self-affirmation’ exercises with students to help them externalise their values and validating their sense of social self. Again the researchers were able to demonstrate increased success especially amongst vulnerable groups.

2.3. ‘Strengths approach’ (Anderson 1998)

This approach relied on enhancing students’ learning skills by focusing on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. Focussing on weaknesses has historically been a standard OU approach - students are advised as to what their weaknesses are and how they might overcome them through remedial work. But Anderson says “Remediation may work in the short term but will demoralise students for achievement in the long run. The best that anyone can become by focusing on their weaknesses is mediocre”.

The Strengths approach tries to identify a student’s strengths and then to build on them and see how they can be transferred to the skills needed for study.

This approach shares common ground with that of ‘Positive Psychology’.

2.4. ‘Positive Psychology’ (Boniwell, 2004)

‘Positive Psychology’ is a relatively recent area of research. As classical psychology focuses on people’s weaknesses and why they are unhappy, so positive psychology focuses on why people are happy and on their strengths. (You may have come across it as it has recently become fashionable in political circles to focus on ‘well-being’ rather than simple economics).

It clearly has links with the Strengths approach and an ex-OU psychologist Dr. Ilona Boniwell has drawn up a programme for using it in student support:

- 1. Emphasise the positive during initial contact**
- 2. Identify underlying values, goals & motivation**
- 3. Encourage narration (life story, putting life in perspective, making sense of it)**
- 4. Encourage ‘positive affect’ (hope and elevated thoughts)**
- 5. Focus on existing assets & competencies**
- 6. Draw out past successes and high point moments**
- 7. Identify resources, protective factors & potentials of students**
- 8. Validate effort rather than achievement**
- 9. ONLY THEN, if possible, talk about uncertainties, fears, lack of skills**

This is the main basis for the PaMS approach – see section 5.

3. PROACTIVE SUPPORT, FRONT LOADING AND FOCUSING ON VULNERABLE STUDENTS

In addition to these four possible models there are three other characteristics of this method that are important – proactive support, ‘front loading’ and focusing on vulnerable students.

3.1 Proactive support

All the theories discussed here work on the basis of proactive support – the need to take the initiative to contact students rather waiting for them to contact us. This is pithily summed up by Anderson:

“Student self-referral does not work as a mode of promoting persistence. Students who need services the most refer themselves the least. Effective retention services take the initiative in outreach and timely interventions.” (Anderson, US).

So in using motivational theory it is vital to initiate contact with students. That contact should be as interactive as possible so the phone is probably the best method with email and letters as back-up.

3.2 Front loading

Tutors will know that most dropout occurs very near the start of the course and often before the first assignment. So it’s important that proactive support is focused right at the beginning of the course. The importance of using a motivational approach here is that, paraphrasing the words of Julio Garcia of Harvard, “Using motivational techniques can be like flicking a light switch – you are releasing the motivation that students had all along but was hidden”.

Once they are motivated I believe that students are far more likely to be able to overcome problems affecting their learning, identify what preparatory work they need to do, and generally be more self-reliant and less demanding of their tutor.

3.3 Focusing on vulnerable students

Clearly PaMS is potentially a time-consuming method. It should be applied to all students at course start but after start it might most usefully focused on those students who are most vulnerable to dropout. There is a statistically based questionnaire which you can use to assess a student’s vulnerability as Appendix 1 but as a rough guide you can use a student’s previous educational qualification to identify the most vulnerable – ‘O’ level or GCSE or lower. Of course you can also use some gut instinct as a result of your first contact with them. You can then focus your subsequent proactive effort on those students.



4. THE IMPORTANCE AND EVIDENCE FOR A PROACTIVE MOTIVATIONAL SUPPORT APPROACH IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

4.1 The importance of motivation in distance education

Many distance educators argue that motivation is even more important in distance education than in conventional education. This is because of the comparative isolation of distance education students from other students, their tutor and the institution itself, as well as the additional difficulties that mature part-time students may face in managing families, jobs and

4.2 Evidence outside the UK Open University

There is evidence from distance education outside the OU from various sources – Visser (UK), Rekedahl (Norway), Chyung (US) and others all of whom used proactive motivational approaches of different kinds – See Simpson (2003) *‘Student Retention in Online Open and Distance Learning’* Taylor and Francis.

4.3 Evidence from within the UKOU

(i) The PaSS Project

The Proactive Student Support Project (PaSS project) involves a phone call to students from Regional Centres before course start. Given that it is just one call of around 5-10 minutes the results are very consistent and highly statistically significant as well as being financially self supporting (the increase in Higher Education Funding Council for England grant because of higher retention is considerably more than the cost of the project – returns of the order of 600% have been estimated. This would generate an increase income to the UKOU of the order of £2m if applied to all new students).

Year	Students in trial	Increase in retention of experimental group over control
2002	2866	3.91%
2003	1354	5.11%
2004	931	4.28%
2005	10,130	7.6%

Table 1 Retention increases in the PaSS Project

(ii) Y162 project

This is a private project on the Openings course I tutor Y162 'Starting with Maths' where, instead of giving long phone tutorials at relatively infrequent intervals as required by the Course Team, I make shorter but more frequent motivational contacts by phone and email. Often there is no tutorial content in the contact at all.

	My tutorial group % pass (number of students)	Whole course % pass (number of students)	Difference in retention % points (my group-whole group)
2006	93.3% (15)	71.1% (398)	+22.2%
2007	92.3% (13)	62.3% (403)	+30.0%
2008	73.3% (15)	58.4% (483)	+14.9%
AV.	92.8%	66.7%	+22.4%

Table 2 Retention rates of motivational vs conventional contacts on Y162

The data so far suggests that this approach has a gain of roughly 25% points in retention. This may not yet be statistically significant however.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR STAFF ATTITUDES

Some of the theory outlined above may have implications for staff supporting students. Anderson (op.cit.) suggests that there are two kinds of staff in universities:

- 'Survivalists' – who believe that student progress is ultimately about the survival of the fittest. These may be 'entity theorists' and their purpose in teaching is partly to maintain standards and weed out the unfit who do not deserve to survive.
- 'Supportists' – who believe that students can overcome most problems with support. These may be incremental theorists who believe that students who appear to be lacking motivation or effort need appropriate support to help them recover their motivation. Their purpose is to help students be best they can be.

There may be a third category who look a little like survivalists:

- 'Fatalists' – who believe that students are destined to succeed or fail and that their job is just to teach as well as they can and let things fall where they may.

But Anderson says even the most 'Supportist' staff can find themselves experiencing 'Survivalist' (and 'Fatalist') attitudes when faced with particularly vulnerable students. It's vital to try to be as non-judgemental as possible and remember that even the weakest-looking student may have a chance to succeed if their motivation can be 'switched on' in Garcia's words.

6. 'PROACTIVE MOTIVATIONAL SUPPORT' IN PRACTICE

This is a suggestion for a basic plan of proactive motivational contact with new students. Much of it will feel familiar as I think it's probably only what a tutor might do instinctively. But there is a difference in this approach – your main aim is to develop and enhance their motivation rather than to teach them. Obviously if questions about the course come up you will deal with them.

1. Pre week 1- Introductory letter or email

Most of the letter could be your usual introduction. But I also suggest that it should contain a little of Dweck's intelligence theory. You could suggest to students that, whilst the course may well be difficult in many places, through effort they can succeed on it – it isn't out of their reach because, contrary to what they may have been told their intelligence can be changed by effort - increased effort will increase their ability to learn.

A suggested text that you could add to your introductory letter in appendix 1.

2. Week 1- Introductory phone call (10 minutes)

In this call I suggest that you start on the Boniwell 9 point plan for contact, and using the Cohen/Garcia self-affirmative theory. There's clearly overlap between the points so you won't stick rigorously to this format but go along with how the conversation develops. Use point 1 'Emphasise the positive' throughout, always looking for the opportunity to be upbeat and encouraging.

2. Identify underlying values, goals and motivation (what one aims to achieve).

Get them to talk about what they see as important in their lives, what they are looking for and why they are taking this course.

3. Encourage narration (life story, putting life in perspective, making sense of it).

Ask them to tell you as much about themselves as they feel comfortable doing.

What's the story of their life?

4. Encourage positive emotions (hope and 'elevated' thoughts)

Get them to express their hopes about the future and what they hope their long term future will hold for them.

This may be enough for a first call but see how it goes. If you decide it feels right then by all means go onto the content of Week 2/3 call.

B. Week 2/3 or pre TMA01 - Follow-up phone call (10 minutes)

– perhaps with students you've identified as the most vulnerable

5. Focus on existing assets and competences.

Talk to them about the things they feel best at. Your aim here is to see what strengths could be useful when applied to learning. This may not necessarily be easy for various reasons:

(i) They may not be aware of their particular strengths. For example a woman with few formal qualifications at home looking after children may well have developed high levels of stress and time management skills, but may be unaware of them or how important such skills are to successful learning and how they might be transferred to the study environment.

(ii) They may see strengths as weaknesses. For example a person who finds it easy to ask for help may see that as being dependent and weak when in fact such a talent can be very helpful in learning.

(iii) They may have been told by authority figures that a particular strength is a weakness, or at least not a strength. For example a person who is good at networking may have been told as a child to stop chatting in class and not realise that collaboration with others can be a very useful talent for study.

So it will be important to say “OK – you know that’s a really useful skill for this course.”

6. Draw out past successes and high point moments.

When have they felt that they've done something well? How did they do that? What allowed them to achieve that success?

7. Identify resources, and protective factors.

Students tell us that their most important sources of support are (in order) their friends and family, their tutor, other students, their employer and only finally the OU itself. So it may be a good idea to discuss these sources of support and encourage and tell them it’s ok to use them.

9. ONLY THEN, if possible, talk about uncertainties, fears, lack of skills.

Obviously students will raise their uncertainties and fears at all points. Your role is not to dismiss them but to acknowledge them as real (when they are) but always emphasise that with effort and support such things can be overcome – they are not a permanent feature of the student's learning. And that effort in itself is good because it will increase their intelligence. Assure them that the important thing is to get the TMA in and that it really doesn't matter at this stage how good it is – the important thing is to get it in.

C. Week 4/5 or post TMA01 phone call

If a student has not done very well on the TMA then it may be useful to refer back to Boniwell's 8th point and Dweck's findings about rewarding effort rather than achievement. Most OU tutors instinctively do this anyway but it will be particularly important for the first assignment.

D. Subsequent weeks - email messages

The usefulness of the PaMS approach is that a student who is well motivated may need less support and is more likely to overcome problems for themselves. So after TMA01 it may be enough for most students to maintain regular, say fortnightly contact through short 'motivational messages' via email – see the next section.

7. PROACTIVE MOTIVATIONAL SUPPORT USING EMAIL

7.1 Introduction

There has been interest in using written messages to enhance student retention in distance education for a number of years.

Lya Visser (1998) was amongst the first to specifically identify enhancing students' motivation as a function of messages. She also used a series of postcards working on a course run by the International Extension College. She looked at a model of motivation due to Keller (1987) – the ARCS model (Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction) which suggested that any contact must clearly catch the students' attention, must be seen to be relevant to their needs, enhance their confidence and promote their satisfaction with their experience.

Visser then used Keller's model to devise a 'Motivational Messaging System' (MMS) of short messages to students. She claimed - albeit from a relatively small scale study - that such a system had significant retention effects. Her findings were that short messages were as effective as long ones, and that the source of the messages – tutor or institution (sometimes on behalf of the tutor) - did not seem to make a significant difference to their effects.

7.2 'Motivational emails'

The advent of email makes it much easier to send messages to students. In addition, as suggested earlier, there are more sophisticated findings about learning motivation due to the work of Professor Carole Deck and various 'Positive Psychologists'. So over the last three years on a UKOU course on which I teach ('Starting with maths' Y162) as well as using the PaMS method with phone calls I experimented with sending a series of 'motivational emails' based mostly on the work of Dweck and the suggestions of the positive psychologist Ilona Boniwell.

I cannot ascribe the results in Table 2 to the use of either the PaMS approach or the use of emails - they may be due to the combination of these approaches.

Nevertheless the simplicity of this approach may make it worthwhile describing it in more detail for tutors who'd like to use it on their own courses. Some of the emails are specific to Y162 but they could be omitted or other topics could be substituted at the tutor's discretion.



7.3 ‘Motivating learning by email’ – style length and content

I mix ‘News Emails’ with ‘Study Tips’ which contain what I hope are motivational elements. They are sent at regular intervals to all students on the course. Where students are not on email I am careful to see that they get them by post at the same time as the others. I don’t refer to them as ‘motivational’ as I suspect that would create a reaction against them as a kind of manipulation. The style and content are as follows:

Style - The emails are written in a deliberately light-hearted style but always contain serious ideas about learning and overcoming learning problems. The humour is an essential part as it helps to get them read, demystifies learning and acts to lower stress levels (humour being the best de-stressor we have – I often think we don’t use it nearly enough in distance teaching). I also use short anecdotes – psychologists suggest that stories are a particularly effective way of communicating points and getting them remembered.

Length - The emails are always short; I try to keep them down to the length of a newspaper feature – about 400 words.

Addressing - I address them individually and copy and paste the message content. I believe I get a better response than using a group email and it only takes a little more time. It would be a help if the OU could develop a simple email merge system.

Scheduling - I don’t use the same emails every year but I aim to ensure that students get something each week in a course starting in June and ending in October. I also try to use recent news items each year to provide some freshness.

7.4 Examples of ‘motivational emails’

Study tip 1 – Getting organised - a Funnel in your letterbox?

“So how would you sum up your experience of being an OU student so far?” I said. Pete thought for a moment “Well Ormond” he said “ – it’s a bit like having the narrow end of a funnel jammed in your letterbox. And scores of people standing round the wide end chucking stuff in.”

Is that how it’s feeling for you? Are you already having second thoughts about study? Here are a few suggestions:

- Organise the stuff from the funnel into 3 piles – one for course material, one for admin guff and one for support information – stuff about your tutor, who to contact and of course ‘Sesame’. Then throw the admin stuff away – no! I’m only kidding. Keep it somewhere safe – you will need it.
- Look at the course material. It may be easier not to try to read it all in one go – just skim through and get a feel for it.
- Do try to get to your first tutorial if you can. Not only will it make it easier contacting your tutor afterwards but it’ll be great for meeting other students – your next best resource.

If you can’t get to it then don’t worry but do contact your tutor. It’s not easy to phone someone out of the blue but they will be really pleased to hear from you – it can be a lonely job.... Ask them for a list of students on the course who’d like to make

contact. Again it's not easy to contact other students – they're all much brighter than you aren't they....? No they're not. They're all in the same boat wondering what's going to drop out of the funnel next. [It must be a steam boat].

- The first assignment – this is the biggest hurdle that all students face. Do your best and get it in. Your tutor won't mind if it's not the greatest assignment they've ever read - 'the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single assignment on crime as a social construction' as Chairman Mao used to say.
- Get the family and friends on side – their support will be the most helpful you get. There's a simple leaflet in the 'Advice' area on FirstClass that you can give them and there'll shortly be an OU web page just for them.

Now all you have to do is get on with it.....

Best wishes

Study Tip 2 – Catching up

If you started your OU course in February you're now nearly halfway through. And like 62.7% of OU students at this stage you're a bit behind with your course (actually I made that figure up – but I bet it's not too far wrong). So what you need is a course on Time Management.

Well, actually no, because the last thing you've got time for is another course. So this is the world's shortest guide to how to catch up with your studies. Just remember the word SPUD:
S - stands for the 3S study system (pat. applied for):

- **Skim** bits of the course - you don't have to read everything thoroughly. You can sometimes get a good idea of what's important by skimming through a unit.
- **Skip** – you can actually skip some bits if you need to – ask your tutor's advice
- **Scrape** – you don't have to do well at everything – sometimes it's ok to aim to scrape through a bit of the course if you need to just to catch up.

P - stands for the slogan: 'Perfectionism is the Enemy of Progress' which is another way of saying it's ok to scrape. You really don't have to get 90% on that assignment...

D - stands for various ways of finding the time:

- **Defer** – there may be things you think you have to do which you can put off for a while
- **Delegate** – there may be things you can get someone else to do
- **Downgrade** – there may be things you don't have to do to such a state of perfection – see P.
- **Decommit** – a fancy way of saying there may be things you don't have to do at all

U - ah; you noticed the absence of U. I couldn't find a U – suggestions welcome. But I did find a number of quite fascinating words – did you know that the rounded elevation in the tympanic membrane of your ear is called the umbo? And that a uropod is an abdominal appendage of a crustacean? And – oh sorry – I've just increased the number of students behind to 71.6%...

Best wishes

Study tip 3 - Make lists!

One day I'm going to write a best-selling sequel to the 'Da Vinci Code' called 'The Baldock Cipher'. Baldock is a little town in Hertfordshire and I think the Holy Grail is buried there. You see Baldock's original name is 'Baldac', the Old French form of Baghdad (yes, really. Would I kid you? Don't tell the US marines). This is because the Knights Templar founded it in the 12th century as their English HQ, naming it after their international HQ in Baghdad. So when it came to hiding the Holy Grail where better than Baldock?

This came to mind because I was looking at my 'To Do' list the other day and found 'Find Holy Grail, make million pounds, retire' at number 438. But there may be a quicker way to make money. An American, David Allen, has made a million dollars by – you guessed – writing about lists. He calls it the 'Getting Things Done' system and charges \$595 a seminar. Easy money you might think but there is some sense in the idea. One of the difficult things about being an OU student is all the stuff that competes for your time and attention alongside your studies. All this uncompleted stuff creates distraction and stress just by being there. The best way to get rid of that stress is to get the stuff out of your head and onto a list.

Start by writing down everything you've got to do. Divide your list into whatever categories you like – mine has headings 'Work' ('Write article for 'Sesame)'), Home' ('fill hole in window frame'), 'Deadlines' ('1 April - conference paper due'). Then I have subsidiary lists – 'Things to be done today' ('phone daughter') kept by my phone, and 'Things I've just thought of' ('make dentist's appointment') on a scrap of paper in my shirt pocket. This sounds complicated but works for me – you choose what suits you. If you like the Web you can use <http://www.tadalist.com/>.

Now the useful bit. You don't have to complete one thing on your list before moving onto another. When you've got a little time you just take some small actions on any of the things on the list that will move them forward. For example this article has been written over several weeks in 5 minute bursts. Now I can do the nicest thing with lists which is to scratch this item off completely.

And if you're passing through Baldock late one night and see a shadowy figure at the crossroads with a spade you'll know that number 438 on my list has finally made it to the top...

Best wishes

Study tip number 4 - Survival Guide for You and Your Family

In every survey, students rank the support they get from family and friends as among the most significant factors in their success.

But how can you make more of this support by helping them to help you?

Helping them (advice for you)

- ✓ Right at the start negotiate together the time you'll need to study so everyone is clear what is study time and what is family time.
- ✓ Share your timetable so that you're all aware of particular 'pressure points': when TMAs are due or in the lead-up to exams.

- ✓ If your course includes a residential school prepare everyone for 're-entry' syndrome: you're likely to be flying, but also exhausted after a week of academic highlights; partners may be equally exhausted after 'holding the fort' and assume you've been away on holiday.
- ✓ Show them articles such as this one so they know they're not alone in sometimes feeling they may as well be doing an OU degree themselves!

Help you (advice for families)

- ✓ Offer practical help with tasks like proof-reading assignments, programming the video recorder, taking the children out of the house at critical times, providing transport to exams and so on.
- ✓ Some students find it hard to seek help when they're stuck. Encourage them to use the other support systems that are available: their tutor, regional advisory services, first class chat rooms, OUSA's Student Support Links etc.
- ✓ Be prepared for the moment when your student wonders whether it's all worth it and needs your help getting in touch with their motivation again.
- ✓ Be willing to put your own needs second from time to time.
- ✓ And finally, if you can't beat them, think about joining them.and the many hundreds of husbands, wives, sons, daughters, aunts, nephews and grandparents who have already signed up to study alongside their loved ones.

Best wishes

Study Tip 5

I've been putting off writing this Note....

Do you suffer from Procrastinitis? No it's not a disease of the lower bowel, it's the name I've invented to describe the condition of people who, like me, chronically postpone and put off things they know they should be doing – procrastinators in other words.

Procrastination is now a respectable subject for psychological study. Earlier this year there was an international conference on procrastination in London (no, it ran on schedule). Apparently students are particularly prone to procrastinitis because learning is often self-scheduled, performed alone and to exacting standards, all factors that enhance people's tendency to put things off – especially when writing assignments. Reports suggest that nearly 80% of students suffer occasionally.

Oddly procrastinitis seems to affect more academically gifted students.

Procrastinators are sometimes perfectionists, putting work off because conditions aren't exactly right or assignments aren't as good as possible. And it can be difficult to overcome - "Telling a procrastinator to 'just get on with it' is like telling a chronic depressive to 'just cheer up'" says one psychologist, "It simply doesn't work". In other words if you suffer from procrastinitis then you've probably got it for life.

But there may be ways you can ensure that it doesn't affect your learning by managing your procrastinitis. One Canadian university suggests a five-fold strategy – realistic goal setting, planning, 'making a molehill out of a mountain' (breaking down a big task into a set of smaller ones), working out why you procrastinate (perfectionism, fear of failure, disappointing others and so on) and seeking help.

A study adviser at a UK university suggests linking up with another student (even another procrastinator) to keep you both on schedule. So you could get together with other

students maybe via your tutor or a Course Conference. But in my experience course conferences seem full of people who are already working on Assignment 03 when you're still on Assignment 01 which can be very dispiriting. So I suggest you link up with just one other person in whatever way you can.

And how did I manage to finish this note? Well there's another strategy – but it involves threats and bribery from my nearest and dearest....

Best wishes

Study tip number 6 - “I’ve got those ‘why-the-heck-am-I-trying-to-study-blues....’”

So it’s summer at last – the long light evenings, the children playing, the garden flowering, the sun shining – well, let’s not get carried away. Still it can be a difficult time to keep studying and an easy time to say the hell with it and give up. But that might just be premature.

Indeed we did a small survey a couple of years ago and discovered that nearly half of the students who withdrew between July and October had already done enough on continuous assessment to have passed their course by just passing the exam. Of course many of them may well have wanted to do more than just pass or may have had other excellent reasons to withdraw. But I do suspect that some may have been the victim of mid-course blues, lost their motivation and have withdrawn unnecessarily.

Losing motivation can effect everyone of course – I remember passing a door in a corridor (it was the Vice Chancellor’s actually*) that had a sign on it - ‘Please do not disturb – currently suffering Loss Of Will To Go On’.

So if you’re suffering from LOWTGO what can you do?

1. **Check your progress.** If you’re not sure what you’ve still got to do to pass then ask your tutor [you may be pleasantly surprised].
2. **Remind yourself about your motivation.** If you’re wondering why you’re still slogging away then it’s often helpful to get back in touch with your motivation. Talk it over with your family friends, tutor, other students, even your boss, and remind yourself why you took this on in the first place. You’ll find you’re not alone in feeling like this from time to time.
3. **Deal with ‘Study Stress’.** Another reason that students drop out at this time of year is the sheer stress of studying. It’s particularly hard to concentrate when the demands of the outside world are more than ever. Then loss of concentration can lead to anxiety about study which can lead to study stress which leads to even worse concentration and so on in a horrible downwards spiral. If you feel yourself getting study stress here’s a few ideas that might help:
 - Relax. Try the occasional physical relaxation when you’re studying – lean back in your chair, let your arms dangle by your side, breathe out and say ‘stop’ to yourself. Then carry on when the stress has dripped out of your fingertips [ugh!]. Or just go for a walk.
 - Negative thoughts. Everyone has ‘negative thoughts’ – “I know I’ll never understand this”, “I’ve not got enough time” and so on. What you need is a ‘coping thought’ that contradicts the negative thought – “I’ve understood tougher stuff than this”, “I’ll just make the time” and so on. I won’t tell you what my coping thought is though – it’ll only get me into trouble with The Management.

- Lower your sights. I sometimes wish that I could give all distance students a motto: ‘Perfectionism is the Enemy of Progress’ [it would sound better in Latin]. You don’t have to learn everything and assignments don’t have to be perfect. So stop worrying about it - skip what you have to and Get the Thing In. And don’t think of that as skiving off – it’s ‘Strategic Study’ and Very Respectable too.

But if none of this works for you and you decide to withdraw then always remember that withdrawals are never held against you, they don’t appear on your final transcript of studies and that you are always warmly welcome back. As a colleague said to me, “The only way to get out of the OU is to die. Even then we only put in a change of address....”
Ormond

* alright no it wasn’t

8. POSTSCRIPT

The important thing about the PaMS approach is that it is flexible. The only key is to be constantly encouraging. And yes, there will occasionally be students who really cannot cope no matter what support you give them. The vital response to that situation is to validate the fact that they made an effort and that in itself is the best thing anyone can do.

Good Luck! – I will be pleased to hear any comments from your own experience in using these methods

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APPENDIX 1 - POSSIBLE TEXT TO ADD TO THE INTRODUCTION LETTER

Is your intelligence 'fixed' or 'malleable'?

Recent findings¹ in psychology suggest that what we think about our own intelligence or IQ may be the most important factor in how successful we are as learners.

Psychologists say that people fall into two groups -

- 'Fixed' intelligence people - these people believe that their intelligence is fixed at birth and can't be changed by external factors or their own efforts.
- 'Malleable' intelligence people - these people believe that their intelligence is not fixed and that it can be changed through effort.

These beliefs affect how people learn, particularly when they run into difficulties or fail an exam. People who believe that their intelligence is fixed may work hard. But when they run into difficulties or failure they tend to believe that they've reached the limit of their intelligence and give up.

People who believe that their intelligence is malleable will see difficulties as a sign that they need to try harder. This is because they believe that effort will overcome such difficulties in the end. Failure is merely feedback that says that they need to make more effort.

IQ is not fixed

We now know that (despite what we used to believe) that intelligence is not a fixed quantity for life. We know that it can be developed, for example by a good environment and personal endeavour. As psychologists² now say "People often overestimate the importance of intellectual ability. Practice and perseverance contribute more to accomplishment than being smart". In other words the 'malleable' people are right.

We also know that this may apply particularly to learning. We are all hard-wired to be able to learn at birth. Unfortunately sometimes we're put off learning at school or elsewhere and come to believe that we can't do it. That's not true - with enough effort anything can be learned, even if it needs a lot of effort.

Malleability is the key

Malleable people don't see something hard to understand or a poor grade as a comment on their basic intelligence. They just see it as a sign that they need to ask for help and try again. In the words of Winston Churchill they'll "Keep bugging on".

So remember - your intelligence is malleable! With effort and support you can succeed on this course - and everything else. It may well take some effort but that's good; something that you learn with effort will not only increase your ability to go on learning but will stay with you much better than something that was easy.'

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¹ Dweck, C. (2000) *'Self-Theories'* Psychology Press

² Hoppe and Stanjovic (2008) *Sci Amer Mind*

APPENDIX 2 CALCULATING NEW STUDENTS' VULNERABILITY FACTOR

Start with 60 points and then add or subtract points according to the student's status

	Initial Score : 60 points
1. Are they male or female? Male : Subtract 5 Female: No change	Revised score: points
2. How old are they? Under 25 : Subtract 15 Age 30 or above : No change	Revised score: points
3. New to distance learning : subtract 10 Previously unsuccessful distance student : subtract 15 Previously successful distance student : No change	Revised score points
4. How many courses are they taking in total this year? 1 course : Add 5 2 or more courses : No change	Revised score: points
5. What are their current highest educational qualifications? Degree or equivalent : Add 17 A-level or equivalent : Add 12 O level, GCSE or equivalent : No change None to CSE : Subtract 21 Other : No change	Revised score: points
6. How would you classify their occupation? Working- professional occupation : Add 10 Working- other occupation : Add 5 Not working or other: No change	Revised score: points
	Final score : Points

SCORING

4-40 points – high vulnerability. Predicted probability of success without intervention = 10% to 30%

40-70 points – medium vulnerability. Predicted probability of success without intervention = 30% to 60%

70-92 points – low vulnerability. Predicted probability of success without intervention = 60%- 80%

REMEMBER: this is a statistical prediction. A student with (say) a 40% chance of success merely means that their known characteristics suggest that they are in a group where 40 out of 100 students pass. This is only a guide as to which students may need more focus than others.