

Definition of a Volatile Indicator

A Volatile Indicator helps you identify the very first sign of underperformance – immediately. But it has a much more important impact than that...

Consequences for learners

As soon as learners get behind with their work they are at risk of underperforming and possibly leaving without successfully completing their programme of study.

Learners who are behind are generally unhappy. They have to work on too many assignments at once, instead of the stretching, but manageable amount you and your team designed in your scheme of work.

Learners who are behind often rush their work, producing assignments unrepresentative of their ability level.

The horrible feeling of being behind can increase exponentially with time; so much so that learners quickly begin to weigh the value of staying on the programme versus cutting their losses and leaving.

It is our moral responsibility as educators to ensure learners do not get more than a week behind with their work – ever.

Consequences for staff

Learners who are behind with their work cost staff a great deal of time and emotional energy. In this climate of increasing guided learning hours (tutor contact hours per week), no staff can afford to have underperforming learners.

Too many underperforming learners can cause staff to weigh the value of staying in teaching versus leaving.

Underperforming learners usually leads to underperforming success and high-grade rates, which in turn leads to short-notice inspection and the added pressure of regular external scrutiny.

The solution

Teachers need to be able to identify the **first sign** of underperformance **immediately**.

To be clear, this does not mean waiting until the standard of assessed work begins to slip, or work is handed in late. Given the all-too-typical marking turnaround time of two weeks, assessed work is simply not reactive enough, not **immediate**.

Imagine a slider inside each of your learners, with zero at the bottom and 10 at the top. Can you spot the moment it dips from 10?

In 2010, at the [Centre for Creative Quality Improvement](http://www.cqi.org.uk), we devised the concept of the *Volatile Indicator* as part of our work on using low-level/learning-level data to improve success rates in Learning & Skills provision.

A *Volatile Indicator* (VI) is something learners do every week. It is established at the start of the programme as the cultural norm of the course. The moment this norm is missed could be the first sign of a turn in the learner's motivation, which could be **for internal or external reasons**. The underlying motives, then, for the interactions around the VIs are to spot the first sign that motivation is slipping, find out why it's slipping, and to re-energise it. Issues could/will be many and varied, such as: poor time management, external problems, don't understand the relevance of the topic, can't see a future in the programme of study, any of the many forms of abuse, etc. Only once the reason for the underperformance has been identified can the tutor determine the level of positive intervention needed to get the learner back on track.

The criteria for an effective *Volatile Indicator* are that it must:

- be very easy and quick to measure
- be 'measured' every week
- not feel 'contrived'
- have clearly and fully understood expectations by staff and learners, and
- trigger **positive, motivational** action by both staff and learners when expectations are not met.

What would be a suitable *Volatile Indicator* for use with each of your learner groups?

And here is potentially the most important benefit of using a really good VI: the best examples deepen learners' love for their subject, ensuring that they never slip from 10.

Once you've given this some initial thought, download some of the examples we've started to collect to further develop your ideas: <http://www.ccqi.org.uk/good-practice-resources/volatile-indicator-examples>.