
The Power of Deep Knowledge

An AQA Policy Briefing on Level 2 Project Qualifications
July 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

‘Project qualifications’ have grown in prominence in recent years amid increasing interest in the benefits to students of both developing deep knowledge of a specific topic, as well as the self-directed process involved in acquiring this knowledge. Project qualifications are often found in baccalaureates, such as the International Baccalaureate Organisation’s Diploma Programme (Level 3) and its Middle Years Programme (Level 2).

Level 3 Extended Project Qualifications (EPQs) have received particular interest with a growing number of UK universities welcoming applications from students who have taken the qualification.¹

However, although many younger students also complete the Level 2 equivalent of EPQs this qualification has not received the same level of interest in policy debate.

This AQA policy briefing therefore explores:

- What is a Level 2 Project Qualification?
- Who takes Level 2 Project Qualifications?
- What are the benefits of the Level 2 Project Qualification?

The briefing concludes with a set of recommendations for policymakers.

2. WHAT IS A LEVEL 2 PROJECT QUALIFICATION?

A project qualification is taken by students who wish to undertake in-depth independent research into something about which they are passionate. It is usually taken alongside other qualifications, both academic and vocational.

The AQA Level 2 Higher Project Qualification involves some teaching of necessary research and project management skills, as well as supervision and assessment of the student’s progress. The project involves extended autonomous work by the student. It requires a total of 60 guided learning hours.

Students are required, with appropriate supervision, to:

- choose an area of interest
- draft a title and aims of the project for formal approval by the centre
- plan, research and carry out the project
- deliver a presentation to a non-specialist audience
- provide evidence of all stages of project development and production for assessment.

¹ For example, see Bennett R and Matthews C (2019) ‘Mini-dissertations help thousands of pupils boost their university chances’, The Times, London

The topic and aims are approved by the student's school or college, who provide a supervisor – but most of the project entails autonomous research.

The final output of a Level 2 Project Qualification can be either a written report, or an artefact and written report.

In addition to the deep knowledge they acquire of their chosen topic, students have the opportunity to develop a range of transferable skills including ability to undertake independent research, adaptability, oracy and autonomy of decision making.

The AQA Level 2 Project Qualification is the equivalent to half a GCSE at higher tier. It is marked by centres and externally moderated by exam boards. Grading for the qualification runs A* to C.

Examples of AQA Level 2 Project Qualifications

- “After the Olympics in 2012 was the regeneration of East London successful?” - the student had a keen interest in geography and urban regeneration, and having enjoyed the London Olympics, was keen to assess the longer-term success of the regeneration of the site after the event
- Does money buy you happiness - What are the essential ingredients of living a happy life?” – a student researched a variety of disciplines, e.g. philosophy, economics, psychology, and undertook primary research into current attitudes to money and happiness, to develop a well realised report which successfully synthesised the range of research materials
- “To what extent can long term memory be improved to assist in academic studies” - the GCSE student wanted to investigate how to improve long term memory with the view that if you could improve memory it would make study more interesting, motivating and rewarding. They were also keen to develop a project based around psychology and how the brain works to support their possible sixth form and university choices. They engaged in a range of research into how the brain and memory work, and also used practical activities and programmes to develop their own memory skills and delivered a report on their findings.

How do Level 2 Project Qualifications differ from Level 3 Extended Project Qualifications?

Although the model of taught skills supporting autonomous project development is identical, it is important to note that Level 2 and Level 3 Project Qualifications do feature some differences:

- Level 2 is GCSE standard; the Level 3 Extended Project Qualification is A-level standard
- The outcome for the Level 2 project is a 2,000-word written report or artefact and written report. The Level 3 EPQ outcome is a 5,000-word written report or artefact and written report.

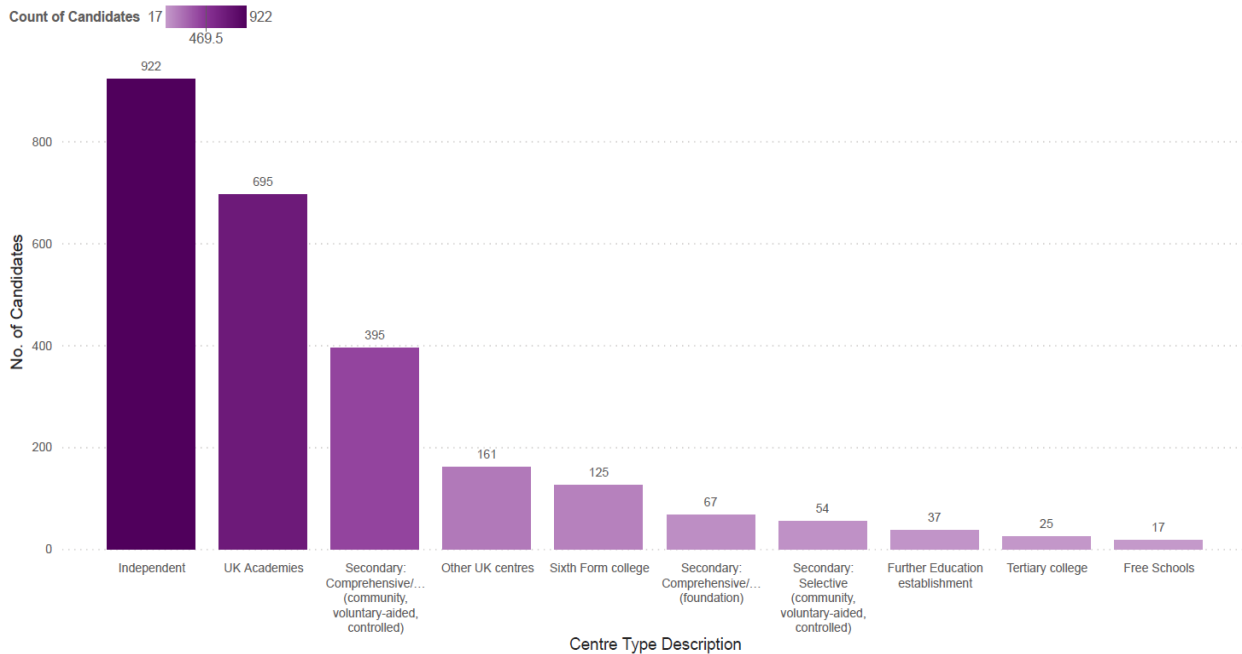
3. WHO TAKES LEVEL 2 PROJECT QUALIFICATIONS?

AQA is an education charity and exam board, the largest provider of General Qualifications in England, and a provider of project qualifications at both Level 2 and Level 3.

The number of students who took Level 2 Project Qualifications with AQA in 2019 was 2,498, rising from 1,913 in 2018 and 2,133 in 2017. Although not representative of all students, analysing AQA data on Level 2 Project Qualifications does provide some insights into the role that the Level 2 Project Qualification has in the curriculum in England.

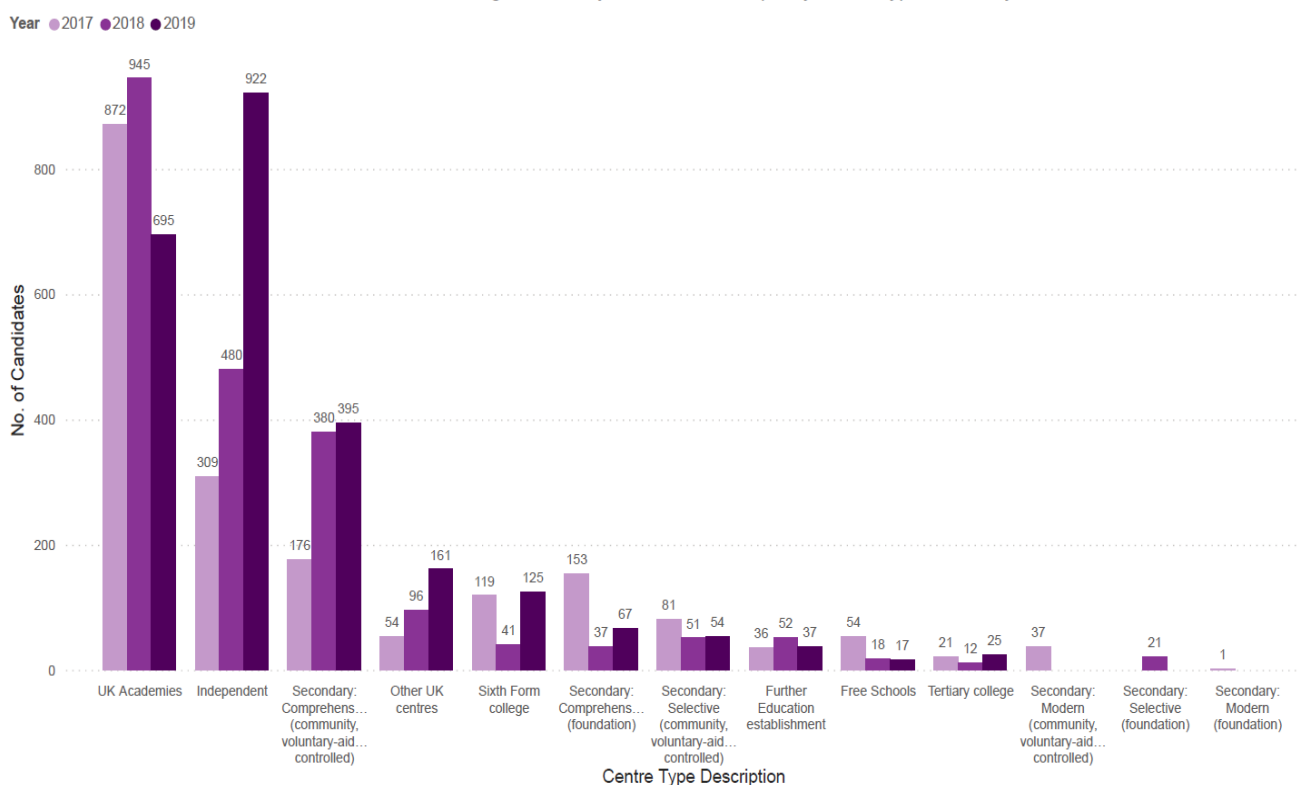
Entries for Level 2 Project Qualifications come from a wide range of centres, but particularly from independent centres and academies, who both account for around one third of AQA's entries:

L2 Project Qualification candidates broken down by Centre Type in 2019



Comparing entries by centre type over 2017-19, the overall pattern is consistent, but does feature a clear rise in the number of entries from the independent sector.

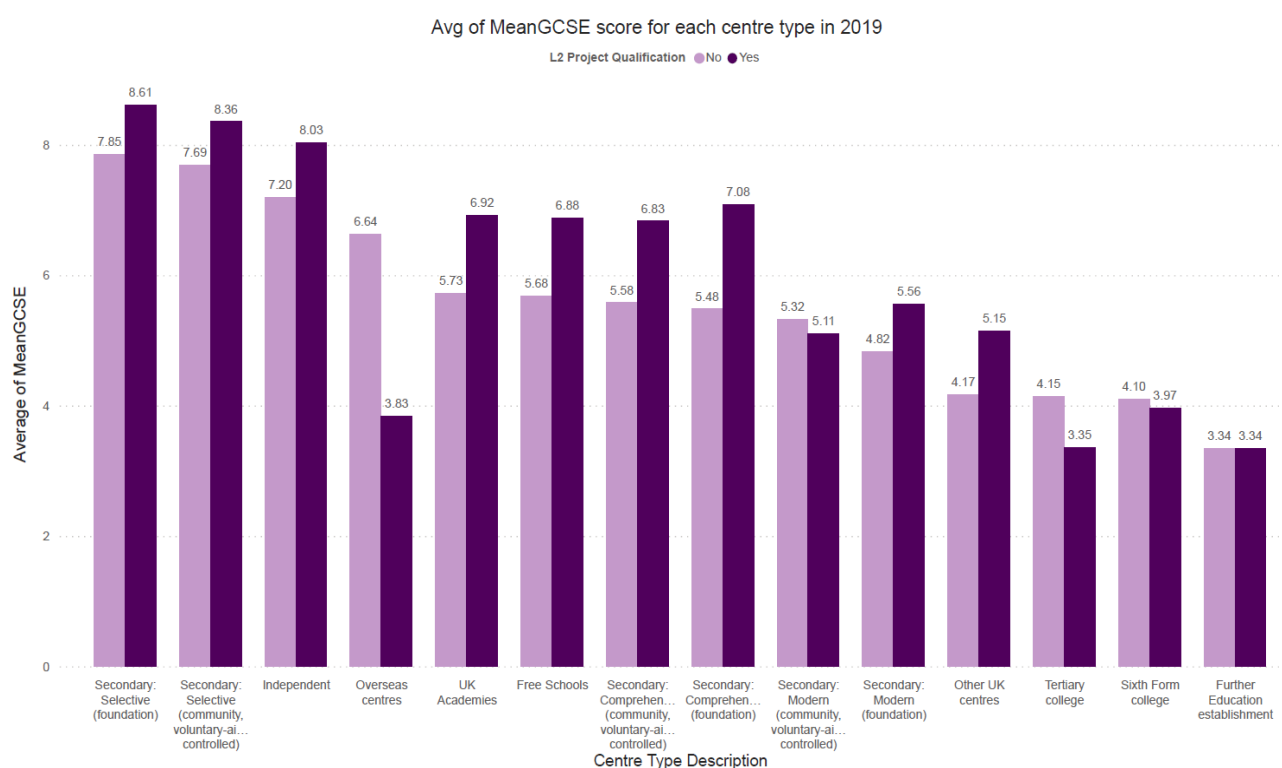
No. of candidates taking the L2 Project Qualification split by Centre type for each year



At 52.3%, the percentage of entries from female students to the AQA Level 2 Project Qualification in 2019 slightly exceeds that for males.

Students entering for Level 2 Project Qualifications are typically high-attaining. The mean (average) GCSE score for students in 2019 was 5.73, and 5.72 for students who did not take a Level 2 Project Qualification. For students who took the AQA Level 2 Project Qualification, the mean GCSE score was 7.11. However, although such a correlation can be observed, this does not necessarily imply causation between taking the Level 2 Project Qualification and average GCSE score.

For the majority of centre types, centres that offered Level 2 Project Qualifications typically achieved higher mean GCSE scores in 2019.



4. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LEVEL 2 PROJECT QUALIFICATIONS?

Feedback from students and teachers regarding the AQA Level 2 Project Qualifications indicates a number of benefits:

- they provide a unique opportunity for students to engage in an independent research project within the framework and support of a recognised qualification, and to focus their time on a topic they are passionate about
- the taught skills element of the projects equips the student with the skills to plan, research, synthesise resources, and realise a project outcome
- the nature of the qualification means that students work autonomously, make decisions about their own work, and choose how to progress and develop their project to a successful outcome, supported by a supervisor – skills that can be transferred to other areas of work and enhance progress and engagement with the curriculum.

Although Level 2 Project Qualifications can be taken by students of any age, there are also perceived to be a number of benefits of Level 2 Project Qualifications for Key Stage 4 students completing GCSEs.

For example, many of the taught skills focus on independent research, critical thinking and engagement with source materials, and decision making about the suitability of sources to contribute to the project report. In learning these skills on their project, GCSE students can use these skills in other courses of study, for example:

- rigour in using sources and reference/research material related to their GCSEs
- learning to independently make decisions about their own work
- dealing with challenges in terms of time management, how to deal with failure and adapt their plans to deliver their projects.

Perhaps most significantly in the context of GCSE students, a Level 2 Project Qualification enables students to engage in deep study of a topic, based on an area of personal interest or an extension of something studied within the KS4 curriculum.

More widely, completing a Level 2 Project Qualification may be the first time that many students have been able to pursue their own research project and been the leader in the decision making about this. This can be an empowering situation to be in and can lead to discoveries not only in terms of what the young person is able to do academically, but also what they are able to do in terms of their own commitment and resilience in delivering a project.

While it is worthwhile to note the benefits of Level 2 Project Qualifications, it is also important to note the workload requirements for teachers and for students - the qualification will involve extended autonomous work by the student, in addition to 60 guided learning hours – often in the context of students studying for other qualifications.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Entries to Level 2 Project Qualifications are clearly very low relative to the number of students who enter for GCSEs each year.

However, entries are growing and the established nature of the qualification, as well as the benefits reported by students and teachers engaged with the qualification, suggest policymakers should consider carefully the potential role of the Level 2 Project Qualification in future.

Several policy recommendations can be made:

- **Research the benefits and impact on progression**

Given interest in Level 2 Project Qualifications and the positive feedback of students and centres, policymakers should undertake independent research to provide a solid evidence of the academic, progression and other benefits of the qualification, as well as wider outcomes for students.

On the basis of such evidence, it will be possible to more reliably and rigorously evaluate the optimal role of Level 2 Project Qualifications in the curriculum.

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- **Enable more centres to find space in their curriculum for Level 2 Project Qualifications**

Although AQA is just one provider of Level 2 Project Qualifications, the striking differences in entry patterns across different types of centres set out above suggests that some centres find it easier than others to offer the qualification. Differences across centre type could relate to various factors, such as awareness of the qualification, difficulties accessing funding or enabling the right supervision of students.

It is clearly desirable for students to have access to as broad a curriculum as possible, and variations in take-up by centre suggest policymakers should consider interventions to support those centres with no experience of project qualifications develop the capacity to offer them and find space in their curriculum.

- **Explore the role of Level 2 Project Qualifications as the ‘missing bridge’**

Debate around the balance in the Key Stage 4 curriculum between a focus on so-called ‘traditional’ academic knowledge vs. practical skills and ‘employability’ is a perennial feature of education policy debate.

In the context of this debate, Level 2 Project Qualifications potentially represent a ‘missing bridge’ between different competing visions for the Key Stage 4 curriculum. This is because the qualifications give students the opportunity to acquire deep knowledge of a topic by extending beyond what is covered in the GCSE curriculum, while also giving students the opportunity to develop a range of research, practical and project management skills.

There is an opportunity for policymakers to explore whether increased uptake of the qualification could be used to give more students an opportunity to acquire both deep knowledge of a subject and specific skills, and therefore be the ‘missing bridge’ between different visions for the Key Stage 4 curriculum.

ABOUT AQA

AQA is an education charity and the largest provider of GCSEs, AS and A-levels in England. We set and mark over half of all GCSEs and A-levels taken in the UK every year. As an independent education charity, our income is reinvested back into AQA’s charitable activities. It also funds our cutting-edge research, which sits at the heart of our assessments.

This briefing was prepared by Policy team at AQA with the support of the Curriculum and Research teams.

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