
LEVEL 3 EXTENDED PROJECT QUALIFICATION

7993

Report on the Examination

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Introduction

AQA moderators have sampled EPQ submissions from a large number of centres, with entries ranging from single students right through to several hundred. Variation was seen both in centre delivery of the qualification and in the quality of the assessment. This report will focus first on centre delivery and then on the quality of assessment.

Centre delivery

Much excellent practice was seen. Students benefitted from well thought out Taught Skills programmes, skilled and enthusiastic supervision and strong management of the specification delivery by Centre Coordinators. However, this was not always the case:

There are still some centres where staff and students appear to think that the EPQ is about writing a 'good essay', and that recording evidence of planning, researching, reflection, etc. is a nominal exercise. Indeed, the EPQ research report was frequently referred to as an 'essay' by supervisors, coordinators and students. In many such cases, the emphasis seems to be on the final product with insufficient attention being paid to the project process. Moderators saw many centres where students were encouraged to use the Production Log to plan an essay rather than to plan and manage a project. In such centres, assessment generally was focussed too heavily on the reports, rather than on research and the management of the project. A substantial number of projects were seen where even at the 'Record of initial ideas' it was clear that the student knew exactly what they wanted to write about. These students set out at the 'Planning review' planning their 'essay', setting out proposed paragraph headings. Such students frequently did not undertake open-minded research; they actively sought research that would fill these paragraphs and support their pre-held ideas/opinions. Indeed, moderators saw supervisors actively encouraging students to write essay plans as early as the 'Planning review' stage, and some centres even had students starting to write their reports at 'Planning review'.

In other centres, students followed a rigid delivery model where all students seemed to be following a centre-determined set of generic objectives eg, find and evaluate 3 resources by xxx, write the introduction by yyy. One centre insisted that all students should print off and annotate four separate pieces of research, to provide evidence of critical analysis. Another centre insisted that, having selected a topic to research, all students should then find four key themes within the chosen topic and research these themes separately. For some students this resulted in thin research into the four themes, bolted together in a disjointed report. All students in this centre considered first the research into the four themes in a 'literature review', and then discussed the four sections of research. In many cases just one of these four themes, fully researched, would have been more than enough.

Frequently seen was the enforced use of centre templates for Gantt charts, source evaluation tables and pre-populated PowerPoint templates. Little evidence of student autonomy was seen in such submissions. Some centres provided a template and required all students to complete a centre-devised research journal; this then often became a 'what I've done' diary, rather than providing evidence of project planning. Such journals are helpful as a 'memory aid' and certainly can play a useful role, reminding students of what they have been doing between reviews written up in the Production Log. However, there should be no need to include them in the project submission.

It was very disappointing to see that some centres used exemplar projects; students were seen to be copying an exact format for a report. For example, the following sentence comes directly from a student's Production Log at 'Project product review': "I was able to base my essay on the

subheadings the exemplar student had used plus adding a couple which were specific to my project”.

Centres should ensure that students make their own decisions, for example which planning tools to use, how best to evidence resource evaluation, the structure of their research report, the format of their presentation and what evidence to finally submit. This genuine autonomy and decision-making provides evidence for AO1 and AO3 as well as a giving the student ownership of their own project.

Taught Skills

The taught skills programme should underpin the whole qualification, but there was strong evidence to suggest that some centres were paying lip service to the expected delivery time of 30 hours. Where 30 hours is used properly with carefully planned sessions, students clearly benefit from learning and developing the skills that are expected to be seen evidenced within a completed Extended Project. In too many centres the evidence of skills teaching was thin and the evidence of skill development within students’ projects was minimal.

It appeared that some taught skills programmes were not focusing on skills but were more concerned with ‘how to get a good grade in the EPQ’. This is unfortunate for the students involved because when every student within a centre approaches the qualification in an identical centre-determined fashion, as mentioned above, the evidence of autonomy is thin.

Many centres were not teaching project management skills. This is possibly because such centres had failed to understand that the EPQ is not merely the creation of a ‘long essay’.

Source evaluation was not always taught well. Many resource tables did little to evaluate sources, with ‘usefulness’ being the main consideration. Students need to ask themselves “Should I use this source at all?”, rather than “How useful have I found this source to be?”. They should be encouraged to think carefully about any source and its suitability for inclusion. Questions such as “Who is the author, are they an expert in the field?”, “When was this written, is the data still relevant?”, “Is it written in suitable depth to be appropriate for level 3 research?”, “Might there be bias?” etc.

Much use of inappropriate resources was seen this summer, and many supervisors appeared unconcerned at the lack of scrutiny undertaken by students. Many students provided little or no critical evaluation of sources. In some cases, students had clearly been told to use a resource table. However, for many students this seems to have been a stand-alone tick box exercise and they have not related the information gleaned to their projects at all. For example, one student identified that Wikipedia was an unreliable source, but then went on to use it as one of their sources anyway, with no comment as to whether they were going to restrict use to established detail or via corroboration of the source elsewhere.

Referencing proved to be a big challenge for many students. Many reports had poor referencing. Sometimes inconsistent referencing methods were used. Some referencing did not tie up with the bibliography, often due to the inappropriate use of tertiary sources. Many reports contained no referencing at all. All taught skills programmes should include referencing and use of bibliography. Moderators saw many inappropriate bibliographies this series, eg lists of URLs.

Few centres used the taught skills programme to teach students about primary research design. Few centres were seen to encourage students to consider what, if anything, primary research

would add to their projects. In many centres, all students were prompted to carry out primary research, even for topic areas where ample secondary research existed or where the sample size turned out too small to be statistically valid.

Ethics and Risk Assessment were missing from the taught skills list in many centres. In some cases, this resulted in referrals to the AQA Safeguarding lead when students were found to have undertaken inappropriate or potentially harmful research. Many centres that had not taught ethical research practices often resulted in students undertaking ill-advised questionnaires/surveys and the inclusion of 'informed consent', for example, was rarely seen.

Many centres had not included health and safety/risk assessment recommendations specifically relevant for artefact projects in their Taught Skills programmes.

However, it was pleasing to see much work from centres where the learning in the Taught Skills programme was directly linked to the decision-making processes undertaken as part of the research. Real and genuine skill development was evidenced via the Production Logs, presentations and within the written reports. Such centres have provided so much for their students, they are to be applauded for their excellent delivery of the specification.

Project Approval

Much excellent practice was seen of Centre Coordinators thoroughly scrutinising student proposals and giving detailed consideration of each proposal in Part C of the students' Production Logs.

However, there were some students who selected topics at the 'Record of initial ideas' stage without thorough research of feasibility. For many of these students, approvals were given for proposals with very vague aims and little to no established research bases. Many such proposals were approved without any recommendations from the coordinator, even though they really needed refinement to bring clarity. Vague aims and objectives inevitably affected the final outcomes.

Frequently, Part C Coordinator approval was not being used to deliver the expected degree of scrutiny on project proposals. This includes both the depth and strength of the research basis offered by the student in proposal Part A, and safeguarding concerns raised either by artefacts involving work with potentially dangerous equipment, or by projects that might bring the student into contact with material discussing, for example, sexually explicit themes, extreme ideologies, or mental health concerns. Frequently in Part B, even when the student had offered very little detail, the supervisor had approved the resources suggested.

Many examples were seen of students picking something for their project that involved practical skills they already had, and then being approved to produce an artefact of some kind. These submissions generally contained very little evidence of developing skills.

A number of projects were approved where students had been inspired by a Netflix series, for example 'How to Become a Tyrant' and 'Thirteenth'. Students' report content often mirrored the series, with other sources used to provide synthesis. Such approaches rarely achieved high marks.

Many titles asking questions starting with 'To what extent....' were seen. Some centres were seen to be actively recommending 'To what extent...' type titles. However, many students following this path did not set out criteria to enable measurement of 'extent'. Sometimes these titles were managed well and produced good outcomes. However, many students embarked on their project without a clear conceptual framework about how the 'to what extent' aspect would be considered.

Few students, and it seems supervisors, understood that to answer such a question students need to consider how important X is in causing Y, ways in which X's importance is perhaps not so great or certain, and then assess the importance of other factors A, B, and maybe even C to Y in relation to X's importance. Many responses to the 'to what extent...' titles tended towards summary/description with underwhelming/vague conclusions.

There was a sense that some centres and students held a view that 'bigger is better'. Working titles were chosen and approved that were either academically ambitious or were simply unrealistic within the context of the EPQ ie a Level 3 qualification with an expectation of 90 hours independent work. In the best cases, this issue was identified and successfully resolved at the mid project review stage. Sensible decision-making in such cases was an important aspect of process and provided evidence of developing academic research skills; a more focussed, less ambitious and appropriate title was finalised. In other cases, however, ultimately what ended up being written was essentially a descriptive introduction to a complex topic that did not really address the (over-ambitious) question in a thorough way.

Many centres did not provide a clear and unequivocal statement ruling out dual accreditation where there was an overlap between an EPQ title and Level 3 studies. Some centres appeared to think that overlap with subjects was a positive. There were vague statements written such as 'don't excessively overlap' or 'draws upon study at A-Level' without clear statements regarding how dual-accreditation would be avoided. Many centres underestimated the importance of checking for dual accreditation issues before approving proposals. Misunderstanding was frequently seen, for example, where a supervisor thought that it was appropriate for a student to carry out a project on the effectiveness of Offender Profiling because it is covered in their Psychology lessons.

There was considerable concern about dual accreditation where students were entering the EPQ in Year 11, without any declared Level 3 qualifications.

Variable Centre Coordinator practice was seen at proposal, with some failing to tick any of the boxes at Proposal Part C, leaving it unclear whether the project was ever approved. Some Coordinators wrote the same generic approval statement on all students' projects – sometimes even forgetting to change the pronouns. Signatures and names of supervisors were often not included.

Supervision

Some excellent supervision was seen, offering both challenge and support but never interfering with student autonomy. However, some supervisors did not challenge students much, for example, when objectives set at the planning stage were generic and vague rather than project specific. In many cases, final titles were seen that invited descriptive or narrative responses, and therefore the reports simply explained or recounted an issue, historical event, scientific concept etc. The topics themselves were often potentially very fruitful, but there was nothing 'at stake' in the question posed by the student. In such cases there was always a sense that the supervision had lacked challenge.

In one centre, every student undertook the EPQ and their form tutor was their supervisor. Production Logs indicated that students had not been given much individual supervision, with advice shared often the same for all students with the same supervisor. This was unhelpful in the development of individual projects.

At the other extreme, many supervisors seemed to direct their students' work. Many statements such as 'my supervisor told me to... include/remove/research, etc' were written in Production Logs. Generally, an increase was seen in centres where supervisors were too specific in the advice given to students. In most cases this resulted in loss of autonomy, and this affected marks that could be awarded for AO1 and AO3. In some cases, however, the assistance given to students was such that projects were referred to the exam board because the supervisor's 'assistance' clearly affected the quality of the submitted project and had not been taken into account during the centre's assessment process.

Primary research

Unfortunately, some centres were found to be insisting on the inclusion of primary research, however minimalistic, and there were many instances seen of inappropriate primary research. Some supervisors encouraged students to conduct primary research even when this added little value to their analysis or findings, as it was not statistically significant. For example, one student conducted primary research by interviewing people about different treatments for Alzheimer's, but the research demonstrated that most people did not know enough about the different treatment options for their contribution to the research to be of any value.

There was rarely any evidence of the thought process that has gone into the planning of primary research. There were occasional comments about anonymity/confidentiality but much less consideration about what this actually means. Very few instances were seen where the development of a questionnaire or an interview protocol was shown. Little care was seen preparing and trialling the interview questions. Where questionnaires were prepared, it was rare to see piloting, and little thought was given to the appropriateness of the research participants with respect to the questions being asked. Rarely was a full risk assessment/ethical review undertaken before such research commenced. The safeguarding considerations relating to research participants were not often documented. Where interviews were conducted, only rarely were interview transcripts included.

Some students conducted interviews with no consideration of the effects of their questions. For example, asking parents and students about mental health issues, or asking parents about the effects of their poverty on their children

One supervisor suggested that a student should create a primary survey relating to 18 rating horror films and send it to sixth formers, despite many participants presumably being under this age.

Several students had chosen sensitive topics to research and undertook primary research with potentially vulnerable participants (eg young school children) without any consideration of consent.

Where ineffective primary research was conducted, Production Logs frequently became dominated by reflections on questionnaires, and the wider research and project journey of the EPQ were lost. Small sample sizes were often used to make very bold conclusions, and academic research was neglected.

There were some submissions with impressive rigour, where appropriate primary research was collected and analysed to great effect. Good practice was seen concerning the ethics process needed for surveys/interviews, etc.

Use of Production Log

Use of the Log was variable. Where the process nature of the qualification was well understood, the Log tended to be used well, with students, supervisors and centre coordinators making full and detailed entries.

However, some very thin Logs were seen where centres had not understood the process-driven nature of the qualification and focused on the product. Some centres had entered only very able students who produced excellent written outcomes, with limited importance being placed upon the Production Log. In these cases, evidence was thin in respect of the Assessment Objectives because the process nature of the qualification had been lost.

There was a minority of Logs that students appeared to have completed retrospectively.

Presentation

Some really excellent practice was seen, for example centres organising showcase presentation events with parents, governors and students attending to create a real sense of importance and value. Usually this resulted in detailed planning for the presentation and careful revision following rehearsal, with visual media used with careful judgement by students. Some students sought feedback on their presentation from students in attendance, in order to provide another layer of material to reflect upon. This proved very effective and added depth to the 'Summary and reflection' in the Log.

By contrast, in some centres, presentations were given to 2 people only - usually the supervisor and the coordinator. This is perfectly acceptable, but some very poor presentations were seen of this type, with minimal preparation and poor use of Presentation Part B by the supervisor.

The EPQ presentation provides an opportunity for students to be reflective of their EPQ journey. Some centres had the presentation just focussing on the findings and the essay planning. Moderators reported much loss of opportunity for students to use the presentation as a showcase for the whole project process.

There were many centres where the supervisors had clearly thought very carefully about the questions they were going to pose following the presentation. They made excellent use of the opportunities provided by Presentation Part B to bring evidence into the public domain. However, many 'Presentation Part B' records were superficial and/or formulaic. Many centres logged administrative details (eg, nature of presentation, audience numbers) well, but not the student responses to the questions they were asked. Q&A information was "all questions were answered very well", but no details were given. In other cases, questions were recorded but answers were not. Some centres recorded the answers to only 1 or 2 questions and did not recognise the opportunity that the presentation offers to plug gaps in evidence relating to project management, research details or findings, etc. Many Q&A entries focused on product-related questions only.

Artefact products

An increase in the submission of artefact projects was seen this series, but this was not always accompanied by an understanding of how such projects should be undertaken. Many centres approving artefact projects did not seem to be aware that there needs to be research evidence available that will enable the student to make design decisions related to the production of the artefact. Nor did they insist upon the need to have clear criteria by which the success of the

artefact can be judged. Many students took the EPQ as an opportunity to exercise their own creativity, paying lip service to research. Some students seemed to believe that an artefact is an 'easy' option, with the mistaken view that all they have to do is make something that they might be interested in. In such cases there was a lack of evidence about key aspects of the research, design and development stages. There was no establishment (as part of the initial planning) of key evaluative criteria against which the outcome could be independently assessed.

Many students did not document their processes well, eg prototypes and research that underpinned the final product. There was frequently a lot of work evident in producing an artefact, but a lack of research to underpin it. Such submissions were often significantly over-marked. Many times, centres marked and commented on the completed artefact rather than the process of the EPQ.

Many students seemed to think that 1000 words is a maximum number of words for their written report. It is in fact a minimum. Moreover, students did not understand how the written report should relate to the artefact, with some very unconvincing links, if any link at all. This resulted in what could be best described as a 'hybrid' project; an artefact of some kind was created together with a very short free standing 'essay'. In other cases where the report did relate to the artefact, the research component was often superficial. The short research report that 'underpins' an artefact product should include a bibliography and be fully referenced; many artefact reports were submitted without either referencing or bibliography.

Centres are reminded that, where a product is an artefact, it should have a documented and testable purpose. Planning should include allowing time for appropriate testing of the artefact so that fitness for the intended purpose can be established. There were some students who used appropriate audience/user review of artefacts as part of the design process, and subsequent design iterations were clearly outlined. But many artefact projects were missing independent evaluation of the product at the end of the process. There may have been some evaluation by the student, but there was rarely any external evaluation being undertaken. In some cases, there may have been feedback sought from the 'intended audience/user', but students frequently used their friends or family as this audience and there was little/no objectivity.

Many artefact projects were submitted with insufficient supporting evidence eg, photographs etc. In contrast to this, there were some submissions where the sheer volume of the materials included was overwhelming. This made it really difficult to pick out which document was actually the EPQ report. One artefact project included a report of 12,500 words in addition to numerous appendices.

It must be noted that despite the many inappropriate artefact submissions there were also many superb artefact submissions that were marked accurately by centres. These projects were a delight to moderate.

5000-word report products

In many centres, excellent practice was seen, with students working hard throughout their project to keep the aim of writing a report of approximately 5000 words as stated in the specification. However, there were many who ignored this requirement and some students wrote substantially more than 5000 words. In other centres, reports were well below the word count guidance, with all reports being around 3000 words.

Rubric infringements

Several projects were found to have failed to submit the three compulsory elements of an Extended Project submission. There were students who did not write a research report and submitted just a Production Log and an artefact. There were students who had not submitted evidence of the delivery of a live presentation, and there were students who submitted incomplete Production Logs. Centres are asked to make students aware of the note written on page 3 of the Production Log: 'failure to complete or submit a compulsory element may result in a mark of zero being awarded'.

JCQ instructions/malpractice

Unfortunately, the JCQ regulations that govern this qualification are not well understood by all. Supervisors were seen to be advising students to ask third parties (friends, parents, university students or even teachers) to proofread and comment on their work prior to submission. Credit can only be given for a student's unaided work. Assistance of this type is not permitted unless noted clearly on the Student record form, with marks adjusted so that award of marks is solely for a student's 'unaided achievement'. The only person who should be reading a student's EPQ work is the student's supervisor.

Suspected plagiarism continued to be reported, including plagiarism between 2 students with Production Logs having almost the exact same text, including spelling errors.

Admin

- In many centres, lack of attention had been paid to basic administrative requirements, such as student names on log pages, dating of pages, checking signatures, etc.
- Many projects were sent as unattached sheets of paper, sometimes in plastic poly pockets. Projects should be submitted using treasury tags or staples, and report pages should be numbered.
- Many centres (where the Supervisor and Co-ordinator were the same person) did not have a senior member of staff countersigning Part C of the proposal/approval process.
- Some centres had not considered legibility of the submitted evidence, with documents printed out in unreadably small font sizes. This includes the practice of printing work on A4 paper but scaling it down to A6 size to allow on-script computer annotations. Font size should be considered before any printing is undertaken.
- Students in some centres attached all of the research papers that they have read and early drafts of reports. This resulted in unwieldy submissions in which relevant evidence can easily be missed. Too much extraneous material reduces the effective communication within a submission.
- By contrast, additional evidence that would have greatly assisted the moderation process (such as print-outs of primary research questionnaires, Gantt charts, other production tools) was often lacking.
- Sometimes presentation evidence was not printed correctly, slicing off the side/bottom of the slides, etc.

- In some centres, illegible handwritten Log entries were made by supervisors on the 'Record of marks' page and at 'Presentation Record part B'.
- Some centres did not write any comments on the 'Record of marks' page and expected moderators to interpret an in-house tick sheet in order to make sense of the centre marks. Use of such sheets can be very helpful to supervisors. However, a research journal should not be used instead of the Production Log by students, but as a tool to help write the Log well. Any in-house marking grid should be used to help facilitate excellent use of the 'Record of marks' page by supervisors.

Centre assessment

Whilst much centre assessment was found to be in line with the AQA standard, there were some centres where the standard had not been applied correctly to the evidence submitted by students.

There were many projects where very large differences were seen between AQA moderator application of the standard and the centre's misapplication of this standard. Centres where this has been the case are advised to make good use of the many standardisation materials that are available within Centre Services and if possible, to send a representative to an AQA Teacher Standardisation event.

Typically centres whose marks were seriously off the standard had, for the most part, submitted projects with very sparsely used Production Logs. High marks for AO1 were being awarded when there was very little evidence of planning; sometimes Logs had almost empty review pages. Retrospective diaries were not an adequate replacement for the Log entries, as there was so little discussion of potential content or how the work was to be managed. Some centres were also not fully appreciating the need for the detailed completion of the Log to support the high marks awarded for AO3. Some supervisors inappropriately gave nearly full marks for submissions with briefly completed Production Logs where there was little evidence of the research journey and the decision-making that brought about the eventual product. There were some centres who had drilled students in how to complete their Production Log, which frequently resulted in sufficient evidence to just support a top band mark in AO1. However these Logs often lacked evidence of research-driven decisions and changes to support AO3.

Many projects that had been marked leniently in AO1 lacked clear aims and objectives. Some students had a clear title, such as "Can feral children recover?" but then did not clarify what they meant by 'recover', or what would count as being 'recovered'. Not establishing the criteria by which they could judge their conclusions was a significant issue for many students.

High marks in AO1 require evidence of detailed project planning and not just a focus on essay planning. High-level AO1 marks were given in some centres with only essay planning being evidenced. Another cause of over-marking appeared to be failure to recognise the level of higher skills required in AO1 where high marks were awarded when monitoring was mainly quantitative.

High AO2 marks were inappropriately awarded for submissions with little evidence of critical evaluation and analysis of sources.

Inappropriately high marks were sometimes awarded to AO4, with very brief 'summary and reflection' entries in the Log and little other evidence to contribute. Sometimes conclusions were not evidence-based; they contained largely student belief/opinion.

Projects largely completed in Year 12 were sometimes over-rewarded; the second year A-level standard was apparently misunderstood. Some centres were found to be entering students for this qualification in Year 11 and starting it in Year 10. Apart from the issues of potential dual accreditation for such students, moderators reported that generally a clear difference was found between the outcomes of the KS4 and KS5 students.

Many supervisors did not provide detailed commentaries in the 'Record of marks' or include any annotations either on the body of work or within the Production Log. Some provided minimal notes in the 'Record of marks' together with minimal annotation, with only ticks or AO1 / AO2 etc. written sporadically across the Production Log and/or final product. It was not always clear why the marks were being given. In many cases blank/incomplete Log pages were not acknowledged in centre comments.

Assessment commentary from some centres was inconsistent. Some supervisors provided extensive and individualised comments, and other supervisors used cut and paste to insert comments that were sometimes irrelevant to the individual projects. Frequently in such centres, there was variability within the accuracy of marks sampled. Inappropriate matching of student evidence to the assessment criteria was seen in many cases. Frequently, comments were made that credited effort and hard work, often leading to the inappropriate awarding of marks.

However, it must be stressed that much robust assessment was seen and many supervisors provided lengthy paragraphs on the Record of Marks justifying their marks very rigorously by reference to evidence within the submission. Most centres were found to be marking within tolerance of the AQA standard.

Internal moderation

Variable quality of internal moderation was seen.

- Some centres did not undertake robust internal moderation, with “rubber-stamping” of the marking of supervisors seen.
- Some internal moderation offered brief comments with little reference to the actual project evidence.
- Some centres awarded full marks to some projects, and AQA moderators were surprised to discover there had been no internal moderation of these maximum mark projects.
- Several examples were seen where every student had a different supervisor; no supervisor had more than one student to supervise. Where internal moderation was carried out in such centres, the final mark was usually within tolerance. However, some of the projects were not internally moderated and the marks of these projects often fell outside of moderation tolerance.
- In other cases, internal moderation sampled each supervisor. Where a supervisor was found to be lenient, the sampled projects had marks reduced, but other projects marked by the same supervisor did not receive any internal scrutiny. Often at external AQA moderation, the same leniency was found as was found during internal moderation, with submitted centre marks (for the projects that had not been moderated internally) falling outside of moderation tolerance.

- Much internal moderation documentation was submitted that lacked clarity, and it was hard to discern the actual final mark.

However, many centres had moderated and annotated in detail. Many used their own mark sheets, which allowed for more detail/clarity. Very thorough scrutiny of student evidence was undertaken to ensure that centre marks were all at the AQA standard.

Finally

It has been a privilege to moderate the work submitted for this qualification. Many students fully embraced the qualification, with some mature and effective reflection on the learning and outcomes. Their 'journey' was well documented in fully completed Logs, and their products, clearly the result of careful research, were a pleasure to read. The dedication and professionalism of many supervisors and coordinators has allowed these students to develop skills that should serve them well as they embark on the next stage of their education/career.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.