

Ethics and safeguarding in Project Qualifications

All educational providers have a responsibility, enshrined in legislation, for the safeguarding of students and the protection of children. It's the responsibility of the centre to ensure that all research undertaken for Project Qualifications meets these regulatory requirements.

We take safeguarding responsibilities very seriously and external moderators must refer work to the malpractice team if they feel a centre submits student work that suggests these ethical responsibilities have not been met. If we're concerned that a student may be suffering or at risk of suffering harm or abuse we will notify their centre Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). If we believe there are safeguarding governance concerns in a centre we are obliged to raise these concerns too.

There are also educational reasons for an emphasis on ethics. Students aren't just learning how to undertake their own independent research, they're also encountering the often-challenging issues regarding the impact of the research itself, on participants; on the researcher and the school and wider community.

What safeguarding considerations are relevant to a student's project?

As the Project Qualifications allow students freedom to choose topics that interest them for further exploration, the range of issues we see covered is very diverse. Students can be, perhaps understandably, attracted to more controversial, topical and social issues. For this reason, careful consideration must be given to ensure students are not placing themselves or others at risk.

Below are some of the broad considerations Supervisors and Centre Coordinators will need to reflect on when reviewing and approving a student's proposal for their Project. Examples are provided which are reflective of some of the issues we have seen in previous cohorts. Please note that it's often not the topic of the project that is the safeguarding concern, but rather the unguided research approach taken by the student. This isn't an exhaustive list.

Harm to self

Students putting themselves at risk or in criminal situations

This might include:

- interviewing or corresponding with serving criminals. For example, writing to the convicted criminal requesting information or answers to interview questions when researching a topic related to a true crime
- not telling anyone where they're going when visiting interview subjects as part of their project research
- researching online topics such as terrorism, risking being contacted by terrorists and radicalised or committing a criminal offence
- using the dark web during their research and exposing themselves to illegal, dangerous or traumatic material.

Students not considering the emotional impact upon themselves

This might include students:

- choosing a topic which is deeply personal to them and of an unresolved nature eg mental health issues, bereavement or abuse
- choosing a topic which they don't have personal experience of, but is emotive or traumatic and they're poorly equipped to cope with learning about this topic in an intense and independent way.

Students engaging in social experiments that put themselves at direct risk or risk of criminalisation

This might include:

- taking or manufacturing drugs for example as part of a project focused on the physiological or psychological effects of drugs
- carrying knives or other weapons in public for example a student might plan to use these items in an artefact or research experiment
- posing as a criminal to gauge public reaction as part sociology focused investigation
- breaking laws (possibly unintentionally due to a lack of knowledge) such as those related to the production of child sexual abuse imagery. For example, producing body art by painting and then photographing a student under the age of 18.

Harm to others

Students probing sensitive subjects that may affect another young person, without the knowledge and skills to keep that young person safe

This might include questionnaires or interviews with young people about self-harm, eating disorders, abuse etc. For example, introducing social media and websites images related to self-harm as part of a research interview focused on this topic.

Experiments on younger children

This might include surveys or focus groups with younger children which expose them to age inappropriate themes/information or harmful/traumatic material. For example, surveying a group of Year 7 pupils asking about their knowledge of drug taking or alcohol consumption.

Key considerations

- Supervisors and Centre Coordinators must consider whether they think the topic is appropriate from a safeguarding perspective. You may wish to discuss this with your centre DSL.
- Supervisors and Centre Coordinators must ensure that the methodologies students intend to use are appropriate. Student surveys can have little research value but can cause considerable harm if ill thought out and distributed to a younger group of children
- If children are to be used as research subjects, specific, written consent must be gained from their parents or carers.
- Students aren't to be left in sole supervisory capacity of a group of younger children
- No laws can be broken during the course of completing a Project. AQA will take appropriate action if this is found to be the case.

Supervisors must ensure that students carry out their research ethically and safely and have considered ethical issues throughout the project process. This can be done by:

- using the initial ideas meeting to refer to the ethical considerations raised in the Taught Element to challenge the student to apply these to their initial ideas.
- encouraging students to use Proposal Part A to clarify the student's application of ethical principles and risk assessment.
- presenting the Centre Coordinator with adequate information in Proposal Part B so they can make a sound judgement on approval of the project proposal.
- seeking the advice of the Centre Coordinator who can liaise with the AQA Adviser as required.
- once the student's project proposal is approved the Supervisor has a responsibility to ensure that any proposed safeguards are followed by the student. If their plan develops and the ethical nature of the research changes, for example the student decides on follow up interviews to a questionnaire, then the Supervisor may need to ensure the student has considered the ethical impact of this change.
- In centres where ethical responsibilities are taken seriously, there's no need to advise students to avoid controversial topics in their research. This applies also when students use their own experiences in their research or as inspiration.
- In cases where material may be upsetting for the student, it's useful to involve a colleague to support supervision. It may also be appropriate to involve the school's designated safeguarding lead to support and advise the supervisor and student.

If you have any safeguarding concerns about an individual student you must discuss this with your centre Designated Safeguarding Lead as per your Safeguarding Policy.