

## **Preparing sixth-form students for the transition into higher education: developing key research skills through the EPQ**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

The Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) is a Level 3 qualification which allows students to develop an independent research project on a topic outside of their A-Level studies, culminating in either a dissertation or artefact final product (both research-based, with a written component) (AQA, 2023). The University of Southampton Learn with US Transition Programme provides free interactive workshops and guidance to sixth-form students in state schools undertaking the EPQ, particularly targeting schools that meet our widening participation (WP) criteria (The Learn with US Transition Programme, 2023).

The persistence of long-standing awarding gaps at university, especially for WP and minoritised students, demonstrates the importance of improving equality, diversity, and inclusion at all stages of the student lifecycle, including the transition into higher education (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Matheson, 2018). Research from the University of Southampton observes that higher proportions of students with an EPQ achieve first class and 2:1 degree awards compared to the proportion of students that don't have an EPQ. In addition, an exploratory analysis of our most recent research (as yet unpublished) indicates that the EPQ may also contribute to reduced awarding gaps for students from underrepresented backgrounds in HE.

Our approach to developing interventions targeted to address specific milestones of the EPQ project can be used to inform practice for other Learning Developer practitioners, including:

- Embedding interactive activities into workshops to maintain interest and build confidence.
- Emphasising the transferability of research skills in a range of contexts.

- Encouraging students to direct their own learning through developing dialogue and asking questions, instead of providing a 'right' answer.
- Linking up to post-entry academic skills support to enable a smooth transition to university (Stoten, 2014; Cripps et al., 2018; Gill, 2018; Stephenson and Isaacs, 2019).

Feedback from students and teachers consistently demonstrates that this approach develops key research skills, and student confidence in viewing themselves as potential members of a university community (Cripps et al., 2018).

**Keywords:** extended project qualification; EPQ; widening participation; access and participation plan.

### ***Community response***

The Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) is a piece of work of a student's choosing that demonstrates evidence of planning, preparation, research and autonomous working. Students can undertake a project on a topic of their own choosing, which may or may not be linked to their A-level subjects. It is worth 50% of an A Level, compared to old AS Levels, which are only 40% of an A Level.

The presentation initiated a lively discussion among colleagues who had experience working with local schools. This study offered valuable insight into the transition challenges and the impact of EPQ on students' academic achievements at higher education institutions. EPQ equips students with the academic and research skills necessary for success in higher education.

**Image 1. The skills possibilities are almost endless.**

I found the session really interesting. I have previously worked with local schools supporting some of their EPQ students with finding and using information sessions. However, I wasn't aware of the impact of a good EPQ on students' achievements and progression at university.

The presentation highlighted the importance of providing students with opportunities for academic growth and skills development beyond traditional coursework. The attendees were inspired to adopt and share such initiatives, ensuring more students can benefit from this valuable experience.

I have shared your slides with my colleague, who works more closely with our school liaison and APP team and is very enthusiastic about your research. Thanks so much for making me think about what more we could do to help support local schools with EPQ. The talk highlighted the potential benefits of EPQ to ensure a smooth transition and the positive impact on students' academic achievements and wellbeing. Focusing on pre-entry support in the transition to university is vital to student success, especially in the first year of undergraduate studies. Students from WP or minoritised backgrounds can attain the same level as their non-WP peers. They are not deficient or lacking in aspiration but require targeted support to respond to structural disadvantage. The presentation

encouraged colleagues to reflect on their roles in promoting equitable educational opportunities for all students.

I also found the session interesting. For a long time, I have considered the possibility of working more closely with our colleagues in sixth forms and colleges to understand more about their starting points at university. I also feel we can support students from underrepresented groups to prepare for university more effectively, so I am particularly intrigued by this initiative. Thank you for sharing, it has given me a lot to consider.

The attendees' engagement and several questions raised during the presentation showcased the colleagues' interest in the University of Southampton's EPQ initiative. They were keen to learn about the key characteristics of a successful EPQ and the outcomes of the initiative. They were also interested in the programme's impact on students' university applications and admissions results. The attendees questioned the proportion of students supported by the EPQ initiative who were offered a place at the University of Southampton and the number of students who accepted a place at the University after completing the programme. These questions reflected the colleagues' interest in understanding the effectiveness of the EPQ initiative on student outcomes.

I'm intrigued by the Southampton alternative offer in terms of what constitutes a good EPQ? Additionally, what proportion of the students that are supported by the pre-entry Enhancement team then go on to be offered and accept a place at Southampton? Does the University feel it is worth investing even if the students don't end up at your institution? I suspect yes, but I wanted to ask!

The presenter stated that the University of Southampton data required further quantitative analysis to understand what sits behind these observations. The attendees showed interest in schools' selection process to identify potential students to participate in the EPQ. They were keen to know the impact of this process on students' application, admission, and progression data. Additionally, the attendees raised their concerns about the funding and evaluation of the initiative across the University. They sought clarity on whether the EPQ was a recruitment initiative or access fund driven.

I would agree with the above comments. I am intrigued to know how schools select the students for EPQ and whether this selection affects the data.

I would like to know more about how this is funded and evaluated across the university. Is it a recruitment initiative or access fund driven?

### ***Author's reflection***

With thanks to the ALDinHE community for their engagement with our EPQ focussed work, both at the conference and for the comments and questions articulated through this reflective piece. I had a truly enjoyable experience presenting at the ALDinHE Conference for the first time and I am delighted with how well our project has been received. In particular, I am thrilled that it has provided inspiration for how the learning development community can engage more widely across their institutions to support transition initiatives with schools and colleges, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds. I hope the responses provided here will address some of the questions posed and promote further collaboration.

### **Successful outcomes for EPQ students**

Arguably, all outcomes for the EPQ are successful because students learn a range of skills and a process for applying them, which will be relevant to them at university or in the workplace. However, the characteristics of a good EPQ are those which most closely reflect the sentiment and requirements of the assessment objectives in fulfilling a research project of their choice. Students can complete a 5000-word essay or investigative report. Alternatively, they may produce a design, performance or artefact that reflects their research, alongside a minimum 1000-word written report. Whilst the assessment objectives differ slightly across exam boards, students are typically asked to demonstrate their approach to *managing* the project (20%), their *use of resources* (20%), *development and realisation* of the project (40%) and how they reflect and *review* (20%) their work. Students will demonstrate this through the completion of their final project, production log and presentation. A truly successful project is where a student provides evidence of how they have engaged with the iterative process of research, selecting a project focus, reading around the topic to develop feasible research questions, which they seek to address through sound academic enquiry. Their written work will convey critical thought and reflection, following academic conventions concerning referencing, writing structure and style. Students are expected to present their time and project management tools as

well as provide evidence of their ongoing reflection and how this advances the project to fruition. In essence, a good EPQ is similar to an undergraduate piece of work and one of the key reasons why it has been shown to be a good preparator for success in HE (Gill, 2017).

The EPQ similarly has benefits for student attainment at Key Stage 5 (Jones, 2015; Gill, 2016) where it 'enhances the odds of achieving a higher grade A-level (A\*-B) by 29 per cent [. . . even . . . ] after controlling for other available explanatory variables – of which mean GCSE prior attainment score is the most critical' (Jones, 2015, p.1).

As such, the EPQ has long been considered a force for educational good at the University of Southampton, where we were the first university, in 2013, to formally recognise it within our admission process. The EPQ alternative admissions policy offers students a second, alternative offer alongside the traditional offer, in lieu of an A or A\* in the EPQ. For example, a typical grade offer to study History is AAB, so for a student presenting with an EPQ we would offer them AAB or ABB with an A or above in the EPQ. Whilst our admissions process equates the skillset of an A or an A\* in the EPQ to the knowledge demonstrated by a higher A-level grade in one subject, that is not to say that we do not recognise the success of other grades in the qualification. Students will always be able to draw and build upon the skillset they have developed through the EPQ in their university studies, irrespective of grade.

### **EPQ selection in schools**

We observed that in its inception, the EPQ was heavily adopted by independent and selective schools. Similarly, the qualification was often offered to 'gifted and talented' students or those considered academically adept to take on the challenge of the EPQ. However, there is now greater variation in the types of schools offering the qualification and in the students undertaking it, with greater recognition of the qualification's value to all students. Nevertheless, our aim is to continue to promote the qualification, encouraging the uptake of it in schools where there is a high proportion of students from underrepresented backgrounds, ensuring the EPQ can be a truly equitable educational offering.

## **Learn with US Transition Programme funding – past, present and future**

Irrespective of funding, the programme's primary aim has always been to respond to the perceived disconnect between the academic and research skills academics expect of students, and the ability of Level 3 curricula to facilitate them. The EPQ presents an opportunity for students to realise their talents as a set of transferable skills that bridges this disconnect, facilitate successful academic transition and promote success.

From 2009-2020, the programme was funded as a recruitment initiative and, since then has been an access funded project. As a recruitment initiative, we did not track students' participation through our institution, though we have observed that the University of Southampton attracts a higher proportion of students who have completed an EPQ than the national average. Many factors are likely to influence this, alongside the impact of the Learn with US Transition Programme. Firstly, our position as a high tariff Russell Group institution means we recruit high achievers who are perhaps more inclined to undertake the qualification. Secondly, our admissions policy also possibly makes us a more attractive prospect for EPQ students.

Our institutional data has corroborated some of the findings in the literature, as explored within the presentation. Specifically, we observe higher proportions of students who have completed an EPQ progressing through their studies with us. Similarly, compared to their non-EPQ counterparts, we see higher proportions of EPQ students achieving first-class and upper second-class degrees. Whilst this is not a causal relationship, this includes all EPQ grades, highlighting its continued value. More recently, and indeed more interestingly, we have observed a positive relationship between having completed an EPQ and a reduction in the awarding gap for key underrepresented groups, specifically Black students, those with a mental health or social/communication disability and students from IMD Q1 postcodes.

This provides part of the rationale for the pivot towards Access and Participation objectives, and, in particular, the programme's recent inclusion in our draft Access and Participation Plan (APP) submission. The Learn with US Transition Programme has the potential to mitigate for 'Risk 1: Knowledge and Skills', detailed in the Office for Students' (OfS) Equality of Opportunity Risk Register, which is the focus for new APPs (OfS, 2023a). Our planned evaluation for this project will seek to understand the effect of the programme and the EPQ on the success of key student groups from Key Stage 5, through admissions

and onto degree success. In the past, our focus has been at a macro level, supporting the qualification because of the understood benefits. Moving forwards, we want to understand its value on a micro level and will track students we engage with through the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), alongside a wider evaluation of how we can facilitate student confidence, self-efficacy and belonging in the academic environment. We will be publishing this work in Summer 2027. This work will support us in addressing the stretching targets of the APP that are pertinent to our institution, simultaneously embracing the moral imperative to positively contribute to students' equitable outcomes, irrespective of where their success occurs.

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### **Further reading**

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