

The Extended Project: good or bad idea?

Just what you need: another academic commitment. But before you dismiss it out of hand consider the many benefits of the Extended Project Qualification...

Picture (or, if it's happened, re-live) the scene: there you are (were), trying to juggle your A-level studies with your sports/drama/music/voluntary work commitments, a hectic social life and your part-time job. On top of all this, your teachers then suggest(ed) you take on the Extended Project Qualification (or EPQ). Have they gone collectively mad? How can you possibly fit any more into your life? In fact your teachers do have your best interests at heart and in the competitive world of higher education the Extended Project could make a really positive difference to how universities view your UCAS application. How, exactly??

What exactly is the Extended Project?

It is a qualification which requires students to research and produce a single, in-depth piece of work on a topic of their choice. The great thing about the EPQ is its flexibility. It could be related to your current A-level subjects: maybe you have found a particular module or project incredibly fascinating and would like to find out more? But it could equally well be linked to a hobby or interest like drama, sport, music or politics. To illustrate this flexibility, here are some examples of real, recent student projects: "a cultural comparison of Japanese Manga and American superhero comics"; "can science explain the nature of happiness?"; a dance choreography based on slavery; "how has English affected the German language?"; "is graffiti art or vandalism?". Before you get overwhelmed with enthusiasm and start planning for a huge, seminal, impressive-sounding topic just remember that your project needs to be manageable: don't choose a theme more suited to a full PhD thesis or even a book, such as "the Chinese economy" (this has been tried!). You need a

much more focused subject or you will be working on it for the rest of your adult life. It is really best to get your teachers' advice here.

The Project can be in the form of a dissertation (like an extended essay), a report of an investigation, a design, an artefact or even a performance or group project (although for this you will need to make sure your role is clearly defined). Students can take the EPQ alongside their AS/A2 studies or as part of their Diploma, either in their first or second year of sixth form, depending on what the school or college thinks works best.

Having decided on your topic, you will carry out all the relevant research using a range of resources which you can get from your school and public libraries, relevant journals and the Internet. Your local university might even allow you access to some of their resources, possibly including their library, so it is worth checking this with your school. Once you have completed your research you will then have a mass of data, facts, theories, evidence and so on which now needs to be distilled to manageable proportions and presented in usable form. You could (indeed, should) deploy an impressive range of communication skills and media to present your project's outcomes and conclusion.

Will the EPQ help me prepare for university?

The Extended Project will definitely give you a taste of the type of independent research-led study you will be faced with at university – and which often causes problems for students who have not experienced it before. It might also involve giving a presentation of your findings to a panel of teachers, which is similar to a university seminar where a student researches and presents a piece of

work for discussion by a group of their peers. For art and design themes, it might mean subjecting your work to a 'crit', whereby your work is displayed and analysed by your teachers. Although these forms of torture might not appeal right now think how useful it will be to have experienced their full horror in advance – and to have survived.

Will the EPQ enhance my UCAS application?

Undoubtedly, yes! The skills it develops – planning, research, self-motivation, decision-making, problem-solving and independent thought – are exactly the sort of qualities an admissions tutor is looking for. However, the way you present your Extended Project in your personal statement will be very important. It isn't enough to simply say that you are doing it; you will need to go into some detail about how you are approaching it, even if you have only just started your research. Make sure you state clearly what your project is about, your reasons for choosing the topic, any research you have already undertaken and the skills you are developing as a result.

Will it give me extra points?

The good news is that the EPQ carries tariff points equivalent to half an A2, so if you achieve A* for your project, this is worth 70 points, an A, 60 points, and so on. You might find that some universities do not include it in their offers, though, so always check on this, but even if this is the case it can only help to build up a really positive picture of your research skills and therefore make you more attractive to admissions tutors. The points might also make a difference when you get your A level results: if you have dropped an A2 grade, for example, the EPQ might just possibly tip the balance in your favour.

So it goes without saying that it is well worth taking the Extended Project: it will develop your transferable skills (and being able to fit it around the rest of your busy life means you can add time management to that list) which will add value to your UCAS application and help you cope academically when you get to university. A win-win situation – maybe your teachers aren't so mad after all.

