

All their own work

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Independent projects are a great way for students to develop skills. But how can they be judged fairly?

Peter Kingston reports:

Every August, ministers are forced to answer claims that A-levels are getting easier. Though the government counters these charges robustly, it now accepts that the exams have become an inadequate proof of readiness for university.

The suggested solution is an "extended project" (EP) that young people can do in addition to their A-level subjects. And it is to be launched in colleges and schools next autumn. But even before the EP becomes operational, some educationists are warning that the arrangements for assessing it are going to wipe out its benefits for students. Instead of offering young people an exciting chance to get their teeth into some independent learning, the EP will become just another qualification, they say.

Universities, including Cambridge, are reluctant to place much faith in the projects when making admissions decisions because of the impossibility of ensuring they are the candidates' own work.

The EP is being introduced to help young people develop their ability to study and carry out research on their own, says the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Teenagers need to boost their "personal, learning and thinking skills". According to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), which has been entrusted with overseeing its introduction, the EP is a "single piece of work of a student's choosing".

Whether it is a dissertation, a presentation of findings from an investigation, a design, an artefact or a performance, it will "strengthen programmes of study for 16- to 19-year-olds" by testing a wider range of skills. Those doing an EP will have to show that they planned, prepared and researched it.

For A-level students, an EP will be an optional extra. However, anyone taking the advanced form of the new diplomas, the first of which are also to be launched in September, won't have a choice. The EP will be a compulsory part of the package.



One fervent enthusiast is Dr John Guy, the principal of Farnborough sixth-form college in Hampshire, which has been running an EP pilot for the exam body AQA.

"We ran it for the first time last year, when 68 students completed it," he says. "We reran it this year and, to our astonishment, 138 students completed it."

A week before Christmas, this second cohort of students returned from gap years and universities to receive handsome bound copies of their projects at a special awards ceremony at the college.

Assessment controversy

The problem, says Guy, comes in assessing the projects. The Farnborough students' work was given a distinction, merit, pass or fail. But controversy surrounds how the EP is to be marked, and how it should be used in an individual's application to university.

In the QCA's consultation on EPs, twice as many respondents - 60% compared with 34% - wanted a simple "merit, pass, fail" system, rather than a scale with five grades or more. The QCA has nevertheless chosen a seven-grade scale, from A* at one end to U (unclassified - fail) at the other. Furthermore, it has decreed that an EP is to be equivalent to an AS-level, or half an A-level.

The exam boards say EPs will require up to 180 "guided learning hours", in which candidates are supervised by teachers and directed in their study. Ucas, the university admissions organisation, has allocated the EP a maximum of 60 points on its tariff. (An A-level A grade scores 120 points.) And EPs will contribute to school and college league table scores.

This is all a big mistake, says Guy, who fears that these attempts to measure EPs and squeeze them into the armoury of qualifica-

tions defeat their entire purpose. If EPs are finely graded and allotted Ucas points, they will become just another exam, he says. Schools and colleges will be interested only in getting their students A* grades, rather than ensuring that they benefit from an opportunity for independent learning. In short, they will quickly learn how to "play" them. "The liberation that the EP has given to students here will be lost when it gets defined as being a taught course over a number of weeks and offered as an alternative to an AS-level," he says. "It's not an alternative to an AS, it's an additional opportunity for youngsters to sense greater coherence across the work that they are doing."

The Farnborough student guinea pigs had to pick research topics that fell in areas between two or more of their A-levels. "We want to develop coherence between subjects taught in a post-16 curriculum, and all the better

if they themselves discover links that they hadn't thought of, and maybe that the teachers hadn't thought of before," says Guy.

Each student is allotted a supervisor, who may also find the project illuminating. "I supervised a youngster who was looking at the physical properties of an alloy called nittinol. I didn't know anything about nittinol," Guy says.

Teachers are going to assess the EPs, and their marking will be moderated by exam boards. But Guy doubts markers can comply with the accuracy demanded. In a seven-grade scheme, the bands are so narrow that it is unlikely two markers would place a piece of work in the same grade.

Like masters' degrees

He believes EPs should be assessed like master's degrees, as either adequate or inadequate. "The marvellous thing, in our two years of doing it, is that students ask one another not what grade they've got but rather what they've done their project on."

Geoff Parks, director of admissions for Cambridge University's colleges, welcomed the EP. "Our support for its introduction is primarily because of the benefits we recognise in the skills which will develop in learners, and the consequent easing of the transition from studying in secondary to higher education," he says. "We are anxious not to risk undermining this clear benefit by placing undue emphasis on the EP as an instrument for admission selection because of its vulnerability to external influence."

"It's not our job to say whether this qualification should play a specific role," says a spokesman for Ucas, adding that it had allotted the EP points in its tariff at the request of the DCSF.

A DCSF spokeswoman says it is essential for the new diplomas to be graded in the same way as A-levels, which means the EP, which forms a compulsory part of them, has to be graded the same way too.

"We believe it is important to recognise the achievement of the highest attaining students. A simple pass/fail approach would not differentiate between those students who have produced a really outstanding project and those whose project is adequate."