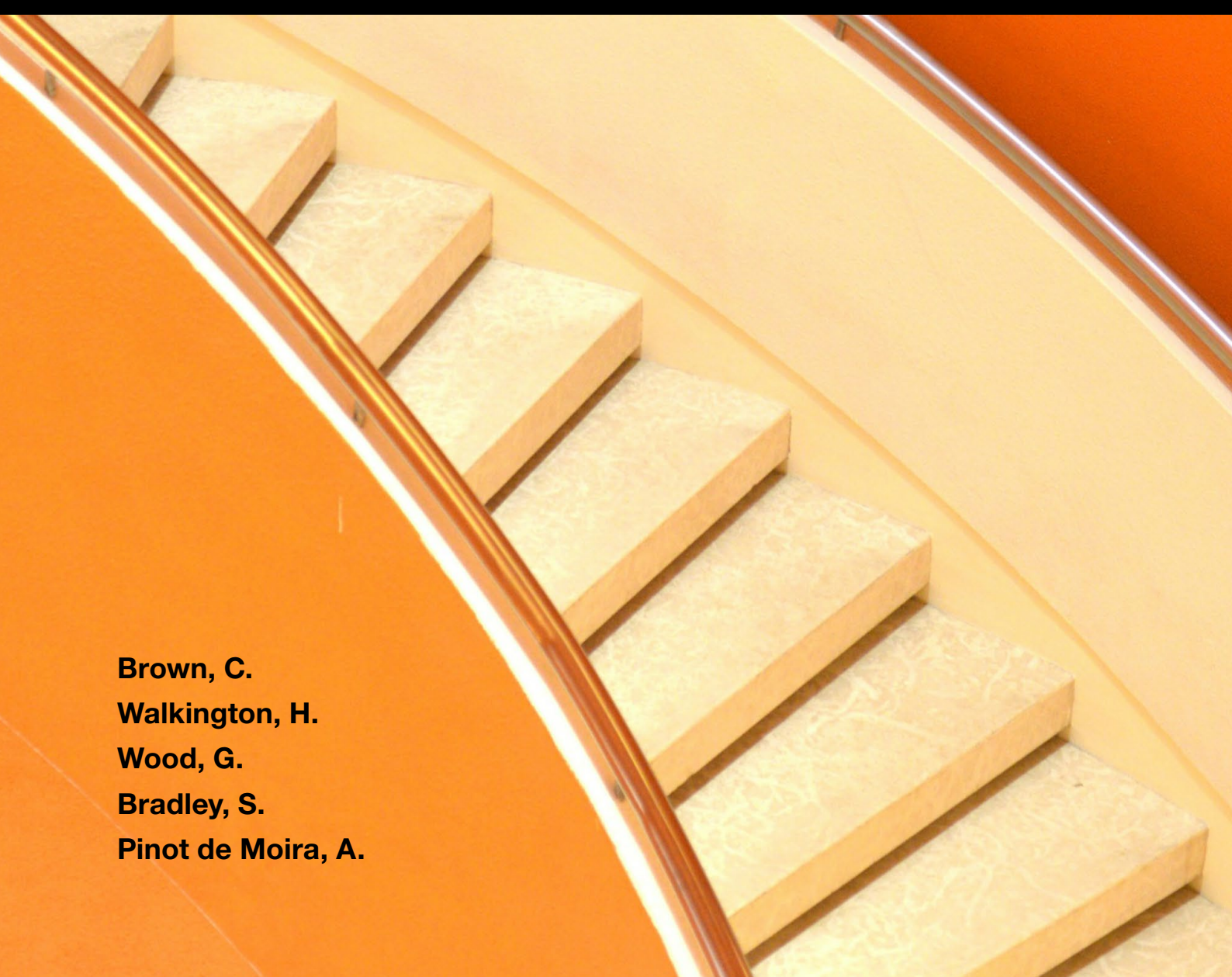


# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## The Extended Project Qualification: An Opportunity for All?



**Brown, C.**  
**Walkington, H.**  
**Wood, G.**  
**Bradley, S.**  
**Pinot de Moira, A.**

## Executive summary

### 1.1. Background

The Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) is a project for sixth form students (typically aged 16-18 years) aimed at developing academic and project management skills by carrying out independent research on their chosen topic. It is a standalone qualification worth up to 28 UCAS points, so can contribute to entry requirements for Higher Education (HE). The EPQ was originally introduced to combat disengagement and underachievement by broadening the sixth form curriculum and promoting self-regulated, independent learning (Tomlinson, 2004). Research indicates it has many benefits; some associated with academic success in terms of benefitting both A level outcomes (Jones, 2015) and degree performance (Stephenson and Isaacs, 2019; Gill, 2017; Dilnot et al., 2022), as well as offering benefits beyond grades by developing a wider invaluable skills set. This includes developing learner agency, self-awareness and engagement, empowering students to take control of their own learning and allowing them to exercise autonomy beyond more narrow and restrictive forms of study (Stephenson & Isaacs, 2019). The EPQ further offers an opportunity to explore areas of personal interest, validate skills and competencies, improve confidence (Cripps et al., 2018), enhance general, non-subject specific skills (Williamson & Vitello, 2018) and develop independent research skills, project management and critical thinking.

While much of the previous research has focused on the benefits of the EPQ, this research instead examines the significant knowledge gaps in the geographic and demographic factors relating to the EPQ and the influence of these factors on young people's life chances. There is very limited evidence of the geographic, social and economic factors shaping which schools and colleges offer the EPQ, which students they offer it to, and which students choose to participate and complete the award. It is also noteworthy that previous large-scale studies focus on data before the education reforms which, from 2015, required students to stay in education and training until the age of 18. This research aims to address these gaps using a robust mixed methodology focused on addressing the following questions:

1. Do institutional and student characteristics (including type of school or college attended, geographical measures of deprivation, a student's prior attainment, socio-economic status, ethnicity and sex) relate to EPQ uptake and Key Stage 5 (KS5) attainment?
2. In what ways, and for which groups, has COVID-19 impacted engagement in the EPQ across 2019-2021?
3. What are the barriers to participation in the EPQ?
4. What practices help deliver good outcomes in schools and colleges which provide wide access to the EPQ?

There is ongoing policy interest in educational opportunity related to geographic inequalities (DfE, 2017, 2021; H.M. Gov, 2022). This interest aligns with recent government initiatives which focus on an 'Opportunity Mission' (H.M. Gov, 2024), aimed at breaking down the barriers to opportunity for every child, including a sustained rise in young

people's school outcomes, building young people's life skills and delivery of a broad and enriching education to provide pathways to good prospects for all. The opportunity mission aims to break the link between a child's background and their future success and to build skills for opportunity and growth. This project examines the potential of the EPQ to support this vision by specifically exploring the ability to close gaps in opportunity afforded by access to the EPQ (i.e. close the gap in provision) and the ability to realise potential benefits associated with completing an EPQ (i.e. inclusive practices creating opportunities for all students to participate and succeed, as well as targeted practices creating opportunities for disadvantaged students to participate with an equal chance of success). Given the significance of post-16 education for lifelong learning and occupational opportunities (Robinson, 2019), the research contributes to an understanding of how to narrow gaps, widen HE participation and support transitions to employment.

## 1.2. Methodology

The mixed methods research design included a literature review, analysis of administrative datasets, spatial mapping using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and primary data collection (interviews and focus groups with teachers and students) and analysis. This is reflected in the structure of the report which moves from quantitative analysis of pupil-level data (academic years 2015/16–2021/22), to spatial analysis of provider-level data (2018/19), which informed the sampling of schools and colleges for the qualitative work. The research was conducted in two main phases based on the research questions (see Table 1 below).

*Table 1 Overview of methodology*

PHASE	METHODS	RESEARCH QUESTIONS
PHASE 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature Review</li> <li>Quantitative analysis of NPD data</li> <li>Geospatial analysis mapping EPQ provision in relation to measures of deprivation</li> </ul>	1-3
PHASE 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Qualitative interviews with school staff involved in EPQ</li> <li>Student focus groups</li> </ul>	2-4

This work extends and updates previous research (Gill, 2017) to include an exploration of the relationship between EPQ uptake and attainment controlling for a wider range of socio-economic and demographic factors. It uses large scale administrative data spanning a seven-year period and incorporates the academic years most affected by COVID-19. As with any quantitative analysis, however, it cannot hope to explain all factors affecting performance, nor can it assert a causal relationship between EPQ uptake and HE progression. The interviews offered in-depth exploration of educators' experiences of delivering the EPQ from a carefully selected sample, using a spatially targeted approach. This allowed us to explore the benefits and challenges of taking an EPQ for students from disadvantaged geographical areas, in contrast to previous research which has given little attention to inequalities. In addition, the interviews are supported by focus groups to capture student voices which are often underrepresented in discussions around assessment.

### 1.3. Key findings

#### 1.3.1. Uptake and attainment

From a seven-year period (2015/16-2021/22) using National Pupil Database (NPD) data for England involving just over 2.7 million records, we found:

- Access to, and uptake of, the EPQ is unequal; only 11% of KS5 students were awarded the EPQ across the years studied, 21% in independent schools, 15% from academies, around 13% from community/foundation, voluntary aided and free schools and just 6% in FE/sixth form colleges. It was taken by 15% of those in the least deprived areas and 6.5% of those in the most deprived areas. A greater number of females (13%) than males (9%) took the EPQ.
- Overall uptake for the EPQ is highest for those in independent schools, students in the least deprived areas, those with higher prior attainment, White students and female students.

There is considerable interest in whether the EPQ supports or undermines attainment at KS5 (Jones, 2015; Gill, 2016; Thompson, 2023) although, because the motivation to study for an EPQ is not measured, it is not possible to robustly identify the impact of the EPQ on attainment. However, controlling for background factors, it seems that:

- In terms of overall KS5 attainment, devoting time to the EPQ does not appear to undermine attainment in other subjects. Indeed, students with higher prior attainment appear to perform better at KS5 when they also take an EPQ. Even for students with the lowest levels of prior attainment, where studying the EPQ might have a slight negative impact on their KS5 grades, it could still offer additional opportunities.
- The findings suggest the EPQ is associated with a reduction in the attainment gap for boys at KS5.

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of uptake and attainment in relation to place-based measures of deprivation, a single academic year's data (2018/19) contributed to spatial analysis indicating that:

- Population-adjusted EPQ uptake was lowest (below 10%) in large urban areas, post-industrial towns and deprived coastal areas.
- The highest uptake levels (above 50%) were found in market towns, reflecting instances of localised EPQ provision (opportunity) and high participation amongst the local population.
- Providers in less deprived areas showed both higher EPQ uptake and a greater share of top grades compared to providers in more deprived areas. However, the difference in attainment levels for top grades (percentage A\*/A) between the least and most deprived areas was relatively modest, at around 5–10 percentage points.



### 1.3.2. Barriers and practices

Teacher interview data was mostly gathered from schools and colleges located within, or in close proximity to, disadvantaged areas offering the EPQ at scale to a wide range of their students. Interview data showed that:

- Teachers perceived a broad range of barriers to EPQ uptake, retention and success, with drop out being the most important barrier to benefits associated with the award. Teachers reported that the students most at risk from dropping out were those with: low prior attainment; restricted time due to paid part time work, caring responsibilities, or long commutes; and limited cultural capital relevant to research.
- The retention of students at each stage in the EPQ is a balance between institutional resourcing and procedures, student persistence and staff motivation and skills. The cost of staffing was a significant barrier for senior leaders.
- Beneficial outcomes for the EPQ extend beyond attainment (grades) to include skills development for both students and educators. Benefits for students included reduced tariff offers by Higher Education Institutions, information literacy, lifelong learning skills and enhanced confidence and aspirations for employment or further study. Teachers benefitted from enriching professional development.
- Two broad educational approaches were reported by teachers to support retention and successful outcomes: the majority focussed on inclusive practice and developing a sense of belonging for all students taking the EPQ; a small number used targeted approaches, with practices such as writing interventions, flexible timetabling and networking with external contacts, aimed at retention and success for specific student groups.
- EPQ was prioritised where it was seen as integral to an institutional sense of belonging and student 'experience' and was important for broadening the curriculum.

## 1.4. Key messages and recommendations for policy and practice

### 1.4.1. Messages for national policymakers and stakeholders

The EPQ offers benefits to students beyond just a graded qualification, for example, improving research and critical thinking skills, non-subject specific skills and learner agency. It is viewed by many staff and students as a transformative experience. Therefore, national policymakers and stakeholders should:

- Promote the EPQ to raise awareness and recognition of its value to HE and employers.
- Support institutions to adequately resource the EPQ and to share effective practice for its delivery so that all students can participate.
- Proactively target areas of geographical deprivation that currently do not have access to the award using the [GIS Web app](#). This will open the benefits of the EPQ to more students. The [GIS Web app](#) will also be helpful for awarding organisations, higher education institutions making contextual offers, local authorities and senior leaders of 16-19 educational establishments.

### 1.4.2. Messages for awarding bodies

- Educator perceptions vary about the levels of guidance they can provide to students. Clearer guidance on levels of support and the use of previous work as examples could enhance teacher confidence. Further guidance on how to support and assess creative project options would benefit providers of the award.

### 1.4.3. Messages for providers, educators and Higher Education Institutions

- Provide inclusive opportunities for young people to take the EPQ, regardless of prior attainment.
- Embrace and support a variety of assessment options to cultivate student creativity and sense of belonging for diverse student interests.
- With targeted support, the benefits of the EPQ can be realised for a broader group of students to ensure an opportunity for all. This might be most effective when the support addresses research literacy, specifically writing skills.
- Highlight the wider skills and employability benefits of the EPQ to all teachers, students and parents so that they understand its strategic value beyond just a grade.
- To facilitate students' choices and realistic perceptions of the strategic value of this qualification, HEIs should clearly signal whether their courses give reduced offers based on having an EPQ. Knowledge of availability of the EPQ to students (e.g. lack of EPQ provision in a geographical area) should be taken into consideration when making contextual offers.

### 1.4.4. Further research

- Analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for years 2015/16—2021/22 could be undertaken to explore participation and longer-term outcomes of EPQ students.
- Advanced spatial analysis methods could be employed to model EPQ opportunity and access, using travel-time catchment areas for local providers.
- Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from EPQ centres that have chosen to close provision, or centres who do not currently offer the qualification, could be undertaken to enhance understanding of structural barriers to access.
- Conduct a quasi-experimental study to measure the impact of taking an EPQ.
- Conduct qualitative research on the opportunities afforded by the EPQ for those students who do not go into HE.



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UNIVERSITY

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<https://doi.org/10.24384/n8ge-5t58>

Front cover: photo by [Ambrose Chua](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Report design: Jayne Stuart, Oxford Brookes University