Quick guide to Ethical Principles for the EPQ

Why are ethics important?

All educational providers have a responsibility, enshrined in legislation, for the safeguarding of students and the protection of children. It is the responsibility of the centre to ensure that all research undertaken for the EPQ meets these regulatory requirements. We take safeguarding responsibilities very seriously and external moderators refer to the malpractice unit any centre that submits students' work that suggests that these ethical responsibilities have not been met. There are also educational reasons for an emphasis on ethics for EPQ. Students are not just learning how to undertake their own independent research, they are also encountering the often-challenging issues regarding the impact of the research itself, on participants; on the researcher and the school and wider community. A consideration of ethical issues is a key part of the taught skills element for all students, not just those undertaking primary research with human subjects, and is also a higher-level evaluative skill which is assessed as part of the EPQ. It is appreciated that those teachers involved in the delivery of the EPQ may need support in teaching research ethics, and this short guide is a starting point.

Why ethical principles?

Many students just want a list of do's and don'ts but at this level it is appropriate to expect that they think deeply about the implications of their research. The British Psychological Society has produced a set of ethical principles which can be applied by all students and teachers.

- **Respect**: This includes a consideration of the impact on all those involved in the research, be they participants in research, students, colleagues, different cultures or diverse groups within schools, colleges or the wider community.
- **Competence**: As well as research skills this includes the appropriate interpersonal skills and maturity required to undertake the tasks proposed. For those involved with the EPQ it implies a responsibility to ensure that all are appropriately trained for the roles undertaken.
- **Integrity**: This includes honest reporting of the research procedures and findings to enable others to make assessments, as well as taking into account personal bias and assumptions when interpreting data. For students it includes avoiding plagiarism and for staff it includes professionalism and accountability.
- **Responsibility**: This includes a responsibly on researchers for the well-being of those involved in their research as well as taking responsibility for the wider impact of their actions. It is meaningless to make someone responsible if they are unable to respond appropriately so training for competence is an integral element. Each role has its own responsibilities discussed below.

Ethical principles for the Centre Coordinator

The centre coordinator is responsible for ensuring that supervisors carry out their roles ethically and that the work submitted by the centre is ethically sound. There are several ways to do this: -

- Supervisor **training**, ensure that professional and research ethics are included in training sessions.
- The **Taught Skills Element** should include input on ethical considerations before students decide on their aims and methodology.
- The **Part C: Centre coordinator's approval of candidate proposal** stage of the project process is the coordinator's opportunity to influence specific project proposals from an ethical point of view before the student begins to plan their project research. This it is a crucial role and to reach a sound judgement there needs to be enough information available in the student's Part A candidate proposal, and the supervisor's Part B supervisor's comments. Information on the proposed research process and evidence that ethical principles have been considered may be in the initial ideas section. If this is lacking then resubmission is required, with a request to the student that this is included prior to resubmission.
- **Consult your projects adviser**: Each EPQ centre is allocated a project adviser who can provide advice on assessing the appropriateness of project proposals and support you with planning training and the taught skills element. projects@aqa.org.uk can provide adviser contact details.

Ethical principles for Supervisors

Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that students carry out their research ethically 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 skills element and to challenge the student to apply these to their initial ideas.
- Encouraging students to use Part A candidate proposal to explain the ethical principles applied to their project proposal. Part B supervisor's comments can be used to clarify the student's application of ethical principles to ensure the centre coordinator is presented with adequate information to make a judgement on approval of the project proposal
- Seeking the advice of the **centre coordinator** who can liaise with your adviser as required.
- Once the student's project proposal is approved the supervisor has a responsibility to ensure that the 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.
- Throughout the project process and particularly at the **presentation** it may be appropriate to ask student how they have considered ethical principles regarding project development decisions and applications of their research. This may provide useful evidence of evaluative skills when applying the assessment criteria.
- In centres where ethical responsibilities are taken seriously there is 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 is 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.
- Use the following **Ethics Committee** activity.

A student activity: 'The Ethics Committee'

This activity could form part of the Taught Skills Element. The questions can be given to students, however the activity needs to be supervised to ensure that i) students understand the ethical principles involved, and ii) the supervisor can use the outcomes to inform their judgement regarding the suitability of student proposals.

The ethics committee is formed of EPQ student peers whose job is to ensure each proposal is ethically sound prior to submission. Students take it in turns to present their project proposals and answer questions posed by their peers. Below are some suggested questions for students to select and adapt.

Generic questions for all proposals
1. How do you think your research findings could be of benefit to others?
2. Does your research have the potential to inform others about different cultures or help overcome prejudice and misunderstanding between different groups?
3. Have you considered the applications of your research and to what extent are you able to influence its outcomes?
4. What qualifies you to undertake this research?
5. How have you taken any health and safety issues into account?
6. Give an example of how you will respect views different from your own?

Questions for research using human participants
7. How will you ensure that all participants are fully informed about the research before they decide to take part?
8. How will you protect the confidentiality of participants and make sure that the experience of participation is a positive one for them? What will they get out of it?
9. How will you ensure that your participants can withdraw at any stage and that they have the chance to see and influence the way you have used their input?
10. How will you ensure all participants are fully debriefed after the research stage?

Questions for socially sensitive research into controversial topics.
11. On balance why do you think the outcomes of this research outweigh any potential for harm or unsettling others?
12. If you are aiming to bring about some positive change how will you ensure your actions actually make a positive difference?
13. If you are using live models or participants in your artefact/presentation how will you protect them and ensure the experience is positive for them.
14. If you are using online research tools for surveys or creating blogs, websites or social media then how will you protect the safety of your participants and yourself?

Sources of further support:

- In the first instance supervisors can look to their centre coordinators for support; coordinators can access advice from their adviser. projects@aqa.org.uk   can provide adviser contact details.
- For more on the British Psychological Societies ethical principles visit bps.org.uk
- The **Wellcome Trust** provide an ethics guide for EPQ which is excellent for anyone considering a survey, experiment or observational study. This is linked from our website here.
- AQA offers face to face CPD training events for supervisors and coordinators, please see the professional development page for details of upcoming courses linked here.
- Many universities provide materials supporting the EPQ which include ethical considerations. See the higher education page.
- There is a free Futurelearn online course on research for the EPQ which includes ethics and can be used directly with students over 8 x 1 hour sessions. There is also a shorter three week Futurelearn course designed for the EPQ.
- Some students want to use their research to bring about a positive change, these are best treated as Social Action Research and advice on how to supervise such projects can be found here.