PRINCIPAL MODERATOR'S REPORT

EXTENDED PROJECT QUALIFICATION

SUMMER 2023

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General Overview

Administration

This year, for the first time, all centres were asked to submit their moderation samples electronically through Surpass; the on-line assessment platform used by WJEC. The system has proven itself to be very reliable with work uploaded by centre exams officers being immediately accessible to members of the moderation team. The long wait for the delivery of expensive and bulky postal parcels is no more which is a welcome development. However, it is appreciated that, for some school-based colleagues, any change involving digital platforms can be a worry. Therefore, judging by our experience this summer, I would offer the following advice. Firstly, it helps greatly if candidates can complete all their work in the WJEC Extended Project Learner Record. As I mentioned in last year's report, this means that the exams officer can simply upload one single file to Surpass. Again, this summer, difficulties tended to arise where centres were uploading multiple separate files as, invariably, some work tended to be missed, such as the EPF4 presentation slides. Moreover, it meant in some cases, moderators were having to open up as many as fifteen separate files which was needlessly time consuming. Secondly, in some cases moderators also found it difficult to read uploaded material due to the format being different; for example, some Gantt charts and source evaluation tables were vertically divided making them very difficult to interpret. We appreciate that some charts can indeed become very large but, if this is the case, candidates should be encouraged to produce a number of sub sections and, if necessary, upload screen shots of the material. There is little point in uploading a table that is so reduced none of the detail can be read.

Finally, regarding administration, it is also worth reminding centre staff of the need for all signatures to be in place before files are submitted. There is no need for actual handwritten signatures to be copied and pasted into the Learner Record as a typed or 'electronic' signature is still acceptable. Candidate declarations have always been a requirement of the qualification, given the issues of plagiarism and malpractice. These issues have, of course, been highlighted in the national news this year with the development of AI technologies and the likes of ChatGPT. As with any kind of malpractice, the onus is on the centre to investigate any breach of the JCQ Code of Practice (Information for candidates - non-examination assessments: September 2022) and, if necessary, withdraw candidates who have entered work that is not their own. As always, EPQ centre coordinators need to reinforce the message given by exams officers and senior leadership colleagues that the use of such technologies will likely lead to serious consequences such as disqualification; an unwelcome development for any candidate who did not fully appreciate the regulations.

Trends

Dissertation based projects remained clearly the most popular outcomes with the vast majority pursuing analytically focused questions. There were still a stubbornly small minority, however, that still engaged in 'future gazing' type questions or tasks that were not even framed as a question. Both of these are to be avoided as they provide little scope for evidence-based conclusions.

Similarly, fewer candidates are wasting time carrying out small scale survey questionnaires that produce little in the way of valid data. Instead, more candidates appear to be taking a more worthwhile route regarding primary research by interviewing experts in their field. However, it is important to remember that there is no requirement to carry out primary research; the emphasis is always on what constitutes the most appropriate research for a given topic.

In terms of topic areas, there was a wide range of material covered, though this year there seemed to be a significant number focused on both mental health and gender issues. Again, as noted in last year's report, centre staff need to ensure their candidates pursue research with an open mind, rather than simply looking for research that endorses their own previously held opinions. In the same vein, candidates sometimes need to be reminded that a dissertation is a formal piece of academic writing; it is not like talking to a friend or recounting a personal story. Here close attention to a formal system of referencing and the acknowledgement of all sources is again important in meeting academic requirements.

In terms of artefacts, there was a good range of material from paintings to podcasts and books to digital products. As always, the most successful artefacts were those explicitly rooted in the research, rather than simply manufacture focused. Moreover, it is perhaps again worth emphasising that, as a general rule, artefact-based project should not be phrased as a question but should have a clear statement of intent. For example, 'To research, design and manufacture a …' Above all, candidates need to provide clear evidence that their artefact has been completed successfully. In the case of coding a computer game, for example, a short video clip with the candidate playing and narrating the outcome works better than pages of coding language.

Assessment

2023 marked a return to the 2019 standard following the adjustments made in recent years due to the pandemic. On the whole, much good practice was noted in the samples submitted. One key area worth highlighting is that of internal standardisation which continues to be an issue in some centres. As a centre coordinator myself until recently, I fully appreciate that candidates can be late in submitting completed projects which, in turn, puts time pressure on centre staff to carry out standardisation, especially when there are a large number of supervisors. However, for internal moderation to be meaningful it is vital that the form in EPF6 is used with comments included as to why an original mark was changed. Simply crossing out a mark and replacing it with another does little to inform the moderator of the reasoning involved. Similarly, it is of course equally important that the new agreed mark is replicated in IAMIS and on the front cover of the Learner Record. This summer, for example, there have been instances where three different marks have been evident in the supervisor's EPF6; the front cover and IAMIS which is of course very confusing.

Aims and objectives

Last year, I commented on the setting of dissertation questions which I hope centre coordinators found useful. This year, from a range of projects sampled, I thought it would be worth revisiting the topic of aims and objectives. These are first identified by candidates in EPF1 Section 4 and the best examples are well worded, with candidates appreciating how they underpin the whole Project. Aims are general statements describing what the candidate hopes to achieve.

They should be written in broad terms of the knowledge and understanding that is needed in order to answer the research question or to fulfil their artefact statement of intent. Objectives meanwhile are specific action statements that identify the steps the candidate is going to take to realise their Project. Objectives therefore need to be practical, measurable and achievable tasks that are clearly and concisely stated. Vague and weak statements such as, 'to learn more about…' and 'to get better at ...' should be avoided. Instead, aims should emphasise terms appropriate for a Level 3 qualification, for example, 'to analyse... to evaluate... to compare and contrast the… to develop a detailed knowledge and understanding of...' In a number of projects this year, candidates made no reference to their actual topic area when writing their aims and objectives which is surprising, given they underpin the whole Project. It is also good practice for candidates to assess the extent to which they achieved their aims and objectives at the end of the process, for example in their EPF2e Final Interview and/or their presentation, however weaker candidates tend not to.

Presentations

I have bemoaned the standard of many candidate PowerPoint slides in a number of previous reports but this year it has been noticeable that more candidates produced well designed material that would have heled to engage audiences. Well selected infographics: summary diagrams and embedded video clips are becoming less rare, although the overly wordy and repetitious bullet point list has some way to go before they become extinct. To help in this cause, I would encourage all centre staff, when they look at a draft presentation, to ask the question, 'how are these slides better than something a Year 7 candidate could produce?' Above all, get candidates thinking about how they intend to use slide material and what techniques they can employ to make their presentation eye catching with real impact.

CPD opportunities

I would encourage all centres to attend the autumn 2023 on-line CPD event. As usual, the event will provide delegates with access to a range of moderated projects from this summer series, together with detailed commentaries on their strengths and weaknesses. However, in addition, we will be giving attention to the new Learner Record template that is being introduced and how centres should approach it. We appreciate that the Summer 2024 entry will invariably include a mix of old and new paperwork from centres, depending on whether candidates started the qualification this year or are only beginning in September. However, for the Summer 2025 entry, it is a requirement that all entries will be in the new format. The CPD event will therefore go through the key changes and explain the expectations of how candidates can make best use of the new documentation to evidence their learning gains. The present Learner Record has been in use since the Specification went live in 2015 and, conscious of workload pressures on both teachers and candidates, the new documentation is much simplified. The new Candidate Production Record: Candidate Assessment Record and Candidate Assessment Pack are available now on the WJEC Extended Project web page and I would advise centre colleagues to access them at their earliest convenience.

Final words

I always feel it is important to take this opportunity to thank centre staff for their considerable work in guiding their candidates to achieve success in the qualification and this year is no exception. Candidates continue to undertake wide ranging research and produce often very thought-provoking projects, sometimes going well beyond what could be expected of a 17 or 18-year-old. This is of course in no small measure to the professional advice and guidance provided by you in your taught courses and regular one-to-one meetings. Thank you for all that you do. For some candidates, the qualification can be a real short-term help in reaching the Higher Education institution of their choice. However, I hope that you agree with me that the real benefit of the EPQ is that it actually trains them to be successful when they are at university. The Project gives them that rare opportunity in education; to follow a topic of their own choosing and passion. It has therefore been a great pleasure to have been the WJEC Extended Project Principal Moderator since 2016 but, with the march of time, I have decided that this year will be my last. A new Specification is due in 2025 and by departing now, it will allow my successor to play an instrumental role in its development and implementation. I therefore wish you all continued success with the qualification and, more importantly, good health and happiness for the future.