What makes a good Extended Project title?

Personal Interest

The choice of the title for an Extended Project is important as it sets the scene for everything that follows. The first thing to bear in mind is that the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) is designed to provide students with an opportunity to select a project which *genuinely interests* them. It could be that the topic they want to work on has a link to their plans for future work or study, or it could be a personal interest or hobby that provides the rationale for the project. A good first question, for students who have no idea at all, is to ask them what they are thinking of doing after their project is complete, then suggest that they choose something which links to this. If, for example, they hope to go on to study a course in psychology at university, it would make sense for them to work on a research question which has a psychological aspect. Or if they hope to go on to train to be an engineer, an engineering artefact would be a sensible choice. This may seem obvious, but it isn't always clear to students that it is worth making a connection to their potential future areas of work or study.

Thinking about the Outcome

In thinking about whether or not a title is a good one it is important to consider the sort of project which it is likely to lead to. Whatever the outcome, all projects have to involve a process of planning, researching, developing and reviewing. The emphasis in the assessment criteria is very much on the fact that *a project is a process***.** That process, at Level 3, should occupy around 80 guided learning hours of time, and should include ideas, techniques, theories and vocabulary which are of Level 3 standard. There should be some sophistication to the work. So, some immediate questions to ask of a student when they first come up with an idea for a title are as follows:

Is this something which will lead to a project taking around 80 hours worth of work?

Some projects are simply too ambitious; more commonly, students chose tasks which can be done in much less time.

Is it something which will need to be carefully planned?

Sometimes, students choose projects which are essentially nothing more than tasks (e.g. " I want to find out what I need to do to become a nurse"; " I want to learn to play a new song on my guitar"; " I will make some posters for our school trip"). The EPQ is designed to challenge students to develop their skills in managing time

and resources. They should choose projects which require significant planning, leading to a process of research and development, rather than simply being tasks.

Is the project something for which research is going to be necessary?

In all units of the qualification, the research base is central. It is the platform from which successful project development work can be launched. As with the requirement for planning, if a student opts to do a straight-forward task, there will be nothing to research, and it will be hard to meet the requirement to use research resources. Suppose that a student decides that her project will be to record herself playing some rock music. This would be a poor choice of objective, since no research will be involved.

Will the project involve substantial development work in order that the chosen objectives are met?

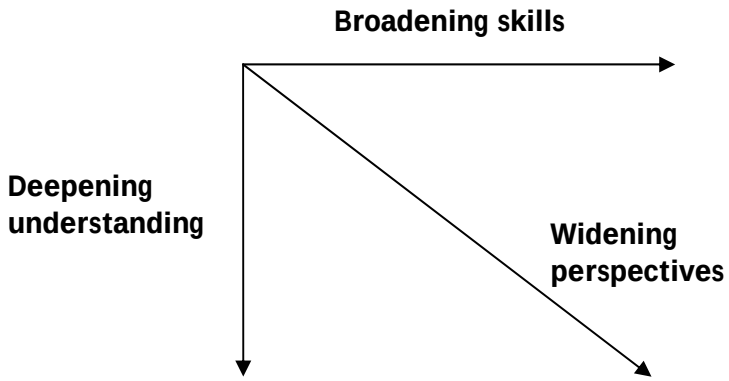
AO3 (the development and realisation criterion) is worth 44% of the marks. In terms of time allocation, that corresponds to around 35 hours worth of work. If a student has chosen as their title a question which could be answered by writing a short essay, it will not constitute a worthwhile Extended Project.

Will the student be able to evaluate their project once complete?

The evaluation, or review, involves asking how successful the project has been. One part of this involves discussing the extent to which the initial objectives have been met. This means that the objectives need to be clear and specific. If the chosen objectives are vague, it will not be possible at the end to enter into a meaningful discussion of the extent to which they have been met. Suppose a student chooses to 'design an advert'. This objective is too vague; there is no specification of what is to be advertised, or where the advert will be used, or whom the target audience is. It will therefore be impossible to evaluate the success of the advert. By contrast, consider a student who chooses to 'design a series of short documentary-style advertisements to heighten awareness of the requirements that employers face under the Disability Discrimination Act'. This is a highly specific, focused design brief containing within itself the criteria for evaluation (Were the advertisements made? Were they in an appropriate format? Were they suitable for the target audience? Did they have the desired effect when shown to a test audience? etc)

Links between the EPQ and other subjects

Extended Project work should extend students in one or several directions. These are illustrated on the diagram below:



If a student is working on an artefact or performance, it is quite possible that they are already doing similar work for other qualifications (e.g. Art and Design, Theatre Studies) or as part of an interest or hobby they have (guitar playing, amateur dramatics etc). For their EPQ, they should show that they have extended themselves in a new direction, perhaps by learning a new technique or acquiring a new skill. So, for example, an art and design student might choose to start working in a new medium (e.g. ceramics), or a guitarist might teach themselves the techniques needed to provide the accompanying sound-track to a video.

Many projects work well when they explore a question or approach a problem from the standpoint of more than one subject. This provides a very natural way in which students can stretch themselves beyond the confines of a single subject area. For example, a history student might have encountered a topic which they wish to explore further, and which can readily be addressed by looking at what other disciplines have to say. Suppose, for example, a student has studied World War 2, and wishes to look further into the question of whether a war can ever be said to be just. They could examine the philosophical background to the 'just war theory', then apply this framework in examining whether World War 2 could be described, entirely or in part, as a just war. In this way, they would be using historical research, together with application of ethical and philosophical arguments. This is an example, then, of how an EPQ can involve extension by the synthesis of different subject perspectives. As a general rule, successful research questions can draw on an historical episode which is explored in its own right and then used as a spring-board into a discussion of the issues which are raised. The issues in question may well be of a social, political, ethical or philosophical character.

A final dimension of EPQ work is that of depth of understanding. Whilst many successful projects will involve synthesis of different subject perspectives, others may stay within one subject area but probe a specific question or topic with much greater depth than would normally be achieved in a coursework assignment, for instance. Thus, a science student might carry out an investigation/field study which involved more substantial data collection, and a deeper level of analysis, than they could do as part of an A level course, or equivalent Level 3 programme. Suppose, for instance, that a student, a keen cyclist, wishes to investigate the potential improvement in performance which could be achieved by changing the width of the tyres on his bike. Whilst this could be carried out as an A level investigation, it could count as a successful EPQ if there was substantially more data collection, accompanied by more in-depth analysis, than would be possible within a 20 hour or so coursework project. There would also be the potential, here, for secondary research into trends in tyre design, and a careful analysis of existing studies as part of the data collection exercise.

Using an Appropriate Form of Objective

Having a clear, specific, focused central objective for the project is crucial. The form that this objective takes will vary according to the type of project outcome the student is working towards. There are 4 types of project outcome to choose from, and each type has its own requirements and a slightly different form of objective:

Unit	Form of Objective
P301 Dissertation	Research Question
P302 Investigation/Field Study	Research Question/ Hypothesis
P303 Performance	Response to a Commission or Question
P304 Artefact	Response to a Design Brief

The key point here is that these forms of objective can help to give shape and focus to the project. If a student simply picks a topic area (e.g. the mind) there will be so much that they could explore that they are quite likely to produce work which lacks structure, focus and direction.

Dissertations

Successful dissertations should be based on a *research question*, not just on a topic. The best questions focus on a specific issue – often, a controversial one – which gives the student scope to review other peoples' arguments and ideas, and then go on to state and defend their own answer to their chosen question. So, if they start with a topic like 'the mind', they should do some research into this, and may well discover that people argue over how the mind is related to the brain. So an initial research question might be: "Is the mind separate from the brain?" After further research, the student will find that there is a large literature on this question, addressing the history of psychology, and philosophical arguments over the mind/body problem. Where, in all this, should they focus their project? It would make sense to look at one particular set of arguments. So, they might consider whether, for instance, scientific developments support the theory that the mind can be identified with the brain. This will give them a focal point to the project, and they will soon discover that there is plenty to research and argue about. (They may, as a result, narrow this even further, perhaps to focus on scientific developments in the twentieth century, such as magnetic resonance imaging of the brain).

Dissertations will largely be based on secondary research (primary research can be used, but if this is the major type of research being done, the project will probably do better as an investigation). The student is expected to be able to state and defend their own answer to their chosen research question. This means that they need to be able to construct arguments of their own, as well as respond to counter-arguments.

It will be difficult to develop the argument/ counter-argument structure if the research question is one which only requires a descriptive response. If, for example, a student interested in a career in nursing chooses as her research question, 'What do I need to do to become a nurse?', the answer can be stated, based on relatively little research, simply by describing the entry paths into that particular career. So there will be little scope for any deeper, more evaluative, analytical research, and very little scope for putting forward arguments. A better question would be, 'How effective is an academic training programme, compared with on-the-job training, as a preparation for becoming a nurse?'. This question requires thought about what is involved in being a nurse (hence, some *analysis*). It will require thought about evaluating the merits of different training programmes (What counts as a successful programme? How can this be measured?) It would lead quite naturally into either a dissertation, if secondary research is used, or an investigation, if there is to be primary data collection, creation of a hypothesis, and data analysis. It would give scope for argument and counter-argument, and hence will move the student away from purely descriptive writing

As well as the problem of selecting 'closed' questions which give no scope for argument, students can go wrong by selecting questions for which there is no suitable research material available. At Level 3, A level standard ideas should be present in the work. If the only sources used are non-academic websites, for instance, this will limit the depth of the project. It is important, therefore, that the question chosen is reasonably academic. Some students err by choosing questions which they cannot reasonably address given their background knowledge, but this is less common. More often, the questions chosen leads to research which does not involve any academically credible sources.
A question such as 'Are there too many foreign players in the English League?' will probably lead the student to look at football magazines, newspaper opinion pieces and blogs. This would be a better project if it also included research into some academic sources. In this case, there will be material which could be studied – for instance, reports of the sport's governing body in which policies are stated and justified, and perhaps also academic studies of changing patterns of player employment as globalization affects the game. Once some of this material has been researched, this question could be used, perhaps with some refinement. The question could evolve into: 'Was the FIFA decision in 2008 to limit the number of overseas players in UK teams in the best interests of the development of the sport?'.With this question, there is a much clearer focus for the project, and there will be research material which can be brought into play as the basis for argumentative moves.

Investigations/Field Studies

Investigations/ Field Studies may also be developed in response to a research question (e.g. 'Have restrictions on advertising made any difference to the eating habits of young children?') However, since in this unit the focus is on primary data collection and data analysis, in most cases the question should take the form of a *testable hypothesis*. This hypothesis may emerge once some research into secondary literature has been done. It will serve to give shape and direction to the investigation, which will in effect be an attempt to gather and analyse data in order to find out where the truth about the hypothesis lies. Suppose, for example, that a student interested in the effect of advertising on young people discovers that there are claims that the ban on junk food advertising in television programmes targeting under 16s will lead to a 10% reduction in levels of childhood obesity. This claim could be turned into a testable hypothesis to be researched using both primary data collection (e.g. into the attitudes, eating habits and trends in BMI values of under 16s) and collection and analysis of secondary research studies.

Performances and Artefacts

In practical projects (i.e. artefacts and performances), whilst a research question may have a place, the key focus to the project should come through the initial

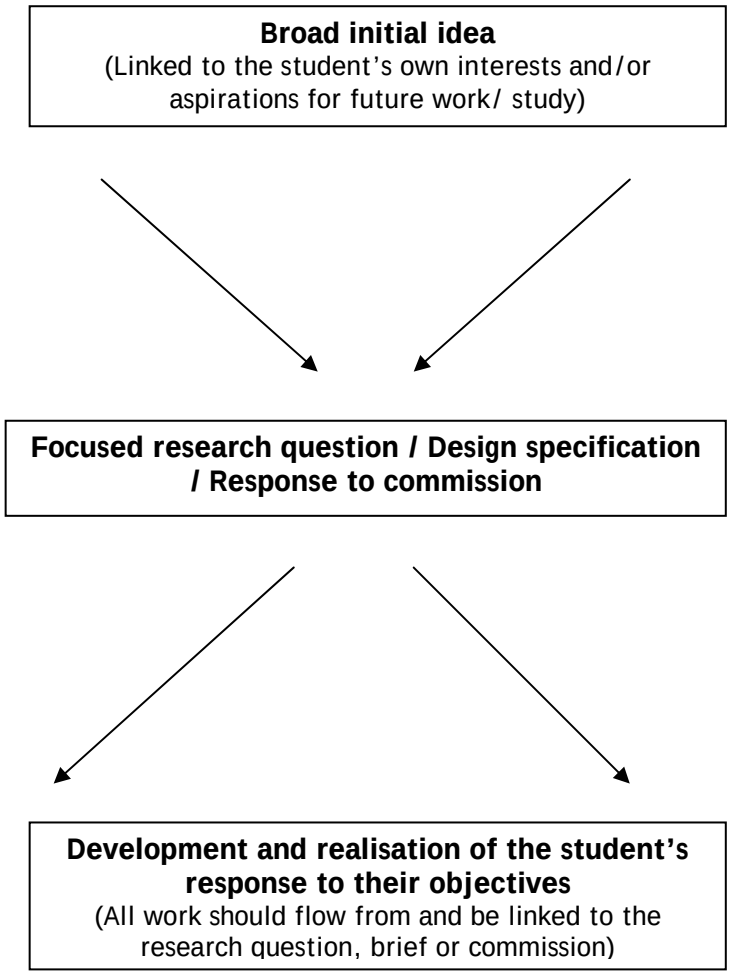
brief. Artefacts and performances involved practical production of an object or an event, which is created for a specific purpose, and usually, with a specific client or audience in mind. The connection to the client or audience should be used to help give the creative process shape and direction. It makes sense, therefore, for these types of outcomes to be produced either in response to an actual brief or commission, or for the student (or their supervisor) to posit a hypothetical client. Suppose a student wants to produce some fine art. This on its own does not provide much by way of a focused objective. If, on the other hand, they are 'commissioned' by their school to produce the artwork to be used in advertising the school play, then a clear direction for the project is established. The student's choices of influences, materials, techniques and design processes should all be evaluated in terms of their suitability for this particular purpose. Note too that, even though a brief has been set in this way, there is still plenty of scope for the student to make choices about how they respond to the brief and thus to shape the specification for the artwork they will aim to create.

Performances should be shaped by consideration of the audience before which the work will be performed. For many performance projects, consideration of the audience will be the key to giving shape to the project, and helping the student to turn their initial performance theme or topic into something which can be evaluated in terms of its effectiveness and suitability. Suppose, for instance, that a student is 'commissioned' by their school to adapt Gulliver's Travels for a year 9 audience. The student will have to consider what is appropriate to that age of audience. They will have to consider what length of piece will work, what effect the work should have (is it designed to inform, entertain, or provoke the audience?), how the text of the work needs to be adapted given the age of the audience, what balance of action and dialogue will work best etc.

With performance and artefact projects, the brief or commission should provide the primary focus to the project. However, a research question (or set of questions) can still be used to help give shape and direction to the work. But in most cases, the brief or commission should determine the research question (rather than conversely). So, for example, if a student is commissioned to devise a piece of theatre to illustrate the cultural problems faced by immigrants, research will clearly be needed into the performance topic, as well as into genre and performance techniques. In some cases, the performance piece may be produced in response to a question, but in such situations it is important that the question actually does serve to give direction and shape to the project process. A question such as 'Can I recite one of John Donne's poems?' does not really add anything to the objective of reciting a poem.

The Ideal Shape of a Project

The general journey that a student goes on when doing a project can be summarized like this:



Refining the Objective

Objectives need to be refined during the early phase of project work. Ideally there will be progress towards a clear, sharply focused objective. It is perfectly acceptable for students to produce more than one draft of their project proposal form, and in fact this is to be encouraged as part of the process of refining the central objectives.

Criteria for good titles

For all projects:

Is the title likely to lead to a process of planning, research, development and review?
Is the Project sustainable over a significant period of time?
Does the Project span several subject areas in a creative way, or involve development of new skills or deeper understanding?
Is the Project at all interesting, to the student or anyone else?

For Dissertations:

Is there a central (controversial) issue or question the learner can respond to?
Does the Project give an opportunity for the development of a personal perspective?
Is there research material which can be accessed by the learner?
Is there scope for the development of argument and counter-argument?

For Investigations/ Field Studies

Is there a testable hypothesis?
Is it clear what primary research and data collection will be needed to answer the question?
Are there secondary research studies which can be used to provide relevant data for analysis?

For performance and artefact projects:

Is there a clear brief or commission to which the student can respond?
Has the student taken into account the needs and interests of the audience or end-user?
Will the choice of objective lead into research addressing media, materials, techniques and processes?