Go Further

Ethics and Extended Project Qualifications

Teacher's Edition

Go Further – Ethics and Extended Project Qualifications

Ethical reasoning provides a powerful and helpful way of deciding on the right course of action

About this guide

These materials have been developed to complement and extend the EPQ ethics guide produced by Wellcome. They are intended for use in a taught course in which students are preparing to carry out a research project for an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), and when supervising/mentoring EPQ students individually. They could also be used to support more general student project work.

If used in their entirety, the materials presented here would require two lessons of approximately 60 minutes each. Each main section supports one such lesson.

We envisage that students will each have their own copy of the student's edition of *Go Further – Ethics and Extended Project Qualifications* (**bigpictureeducation.com/ extended-projects**) and the Wellcome EPQ ethics guide (**wellcome.ac.uk/EPQethics**), either hard copy or electronic files. The EPQ project guides/companions published for AQA, Edexcel/Pearson and OCR are also relevant. See the references at the end of the student's edition.

The materials include case studies based on real student projects, but the names are not real, and other identifying details have been changed or removed.

Time to think

Introducing ethics

The aim of these materials is to get students to think about ethical issues and how they may be addressed, rather than simply providing them with a set of rules and tick-boxes. We therefore start with a general introduction to ethical reasoning before focusing specifically on research ethics.

The EPQ ethics guide produced by Wellcome summarises the regulations and guidelines that govern how researchers should work and shows how research ethics relate to the EPQ. (Note that the EPQ ethics guide focuses on issues that are relevant to particular types of project, rather than setting out general rules of behaviour such as avoiding plagiarism.)

Activity 1:
What is wrong with telling lies?

In this short starter activity, encourage students to concentrate on listing reasons why lying is generally considered wrong. Try to avoid getting into discussions about situations when lying might be considered acceptable (e.g. 'white lies') – the focus should be on 'serious' lies that are widely regarded as wrong. The pair/small group discussion of reasons could be broadened into a whole-class discussion, but beware of letting it take more than a few minutes.

Ethical frameworks

Activity 1 has set the scene for an introduction to ethical frameworks – ways of thinking about ethical issues. The student materials describe three commonly used frameworks (consequentialist/utilitarian, rights and duties, virtue ethics), all of which can readily be employed when thinking about right/wrong actions both in the context of research ethics and more generally.

Ethical research

Attention now turns specifically to research ethics, explored through three activities and illustrated by two case studies.

Resources (one per student)

- Go further – Ethics and EPQs student edition
- Wellcome EPQ guide (wellcome.ac.uk/EPQethics)
- Paper and pens
- 3 different coloured highlighter pens, if working on hard copies

Activity 2:
A virtuous researcher

In this short activity there is no right answer – no definitive list. The point is rather that students should think about what it might mean to be virtuous in the context of doing research. They are likely to list traits such as 'fair', 'honest' and 'considerate' as applying to the character of a virtuous researcher, and there is likely to be considerable agreement between students.

Activity 3: Research ethics and ethical frameworks

This activity explores the three ethical frameworks. Students will each need a copy of the Wellcome EPQ ethics guide. If working on hard copy, they will each need access to three different colours of highlighter pen.

The main aim here is to get students to read the guide, to engage with its content and to gain some familiarity with the three ethical frameworks. Students should each be able to point to at least one place in the guide that refers to each of the frameworks.

The two case studies presented here are intended to show how easily things can go (ethically) wrong when students perhaps get carried away or encounter a problem. It is worth pointing out that in many ways Mindi and Ethan were conscientious students and, at least to start with, their case studies illustrate a good approach to project work.

Activity 4:
Why is that wrong?

This activity delves into the ethics violations in the two case studies. Students should be able to see that Ethan violated the ethical research guidelines about informed consent. In this particular example, the situation was made worse by the party-goers being recorded behaving in ways that they might later find embarrassing and would not wish to be recorded. Even if they later said they did not mind, that would still not make Ethan's actions acceptable. Emphasise to students that informed consent must be obtained in advance, not retrospectively.

Using a utilitarian approach, it can be argued that Ethan's actions were likely to make many of the party-goers unhappy, so what he did was wrong. From a rights-and-duties perspective, it can be argued that people have a right to privacy, and being recorded in what they thought was a 'private' situation violates that right. And it is hard to argue that filming alcohol-fuelled party-goers without their knowledge or consent is something that a virtuous person would do.

In Mindi's case, her questionnaire upset people and made them unhappy, so was unacceptable from a utilitarian perspective. The questions violated people's right to a private family life, and a virtuous person would be more considerate and respectful of sensitive issues concerning family relationships and health.

Mindi's project illustrates the importance of considering the likely impact of research on the people asked to take part. While ethical concerns can arise in any area of study, research relating to family, health, culture or religion is particularly likely to involve sensitive issues.

Students might wonder which framework they should use. There is no best one. Rather, students should develop a questioning approach to ethical issues rather than rely on any framework to tell them what to do. The frameworks are most useful to help students articulate reasons for a particular ethical decision.

Further work

This extension work suggests possible starting-points for a literature research EPQ exploring research ethics.

Right all along

Right from the start

This section emphasises that an ethical approach to project work starts with the planning, and it draws attention to the ethical checklist provided with these materials. While completion of the checklist is not a requirement for the EPQ, we strongly encourage its use as it will go some way to preventing some of the problems that can arise during project work, and it provides evidence of thoughtful planning. We suggest that EPQ students should get their ethical checklist – and their health and safety risk assessment – countersigned by their supervisor before proceeding with their project.

Good plan?

The two case studies presented here both describe projects where something could have gone ethically wrong, but a change of plan meant that things went right.

Activity 5: Ethical checklist

During this activity students will familiarise themselves with the ethical checklist. They can find a copy of the ethical checklist on page 15 of the student's edition. For this activity students will need the ethical checklist on page 15 of the student's edition.

In the first part of the activity, students should be able to refer to at least one of the three ethical frameworks when explaining why each question is important. For example, the first question refers to risk, and the implication is that any risk of harm should be minimised – as required by a utilitarian approach. There is also an implication that people taking part in research have a right to know what's involved and a right to decide whether to take part.

The second part of the activity makes the point that Ethan's and Mindi's projects would not have gained ethical approval if the checklist had been used. Neither Dermot's original suggestion of human/animal testing nor Florence's idea about using medical records would gain approval, but their revised plans were much better.

Best-laid plans

This section makes the point that working ethically doesn't end with the completion of an ethical checklist. Rather, students should be constantly alert to the ways in which they are working and ready to take action if things look like going wrong.

Activity 6: What to do?

This activity explains how for many ethical questions there is not a well-defined right answer. As with many ethical questions, there is not a well-defined right answer. However, students should appreciate that the main aim should be to minimise any upset. Petra and her friends should not continue working in the churchyard during the funeral, any conversation should be respectful and apologetic, rather than defensive, and a follow-up letter would probably be appreciated.

Students should also be able to suggest that Petra should have established, beforehand, the times of any church services or other events, and avoided being in the churchyard during those times.

Activity 7: Show and tell?

In this activity students explore the importance of confidentiality. A key point here is that the questionnaire responses are confidential. Showing the comments to anyone else, or talking about them, would cause upset.

In a real project on which this case study is based, the project student asked a teacher to collect the questionnaires. The teacher read them, and showed the hurtful comments to the colleague referred to, causing upset and anger. While the student should not have asked anyone else to pick up the questionnaires, the message here is that teachers, too, have an ethical responsibility.

The Research Ethics Guidebook (ethicsguidebook.ac.uk) contains other examples of problems arising during research, and explains how the researchers addressed them.

Right the way through

The final two case studies draw attention to the need to behave ethically towards other researchers by reporting results honestly and by avoiding plagiarism. As with previous case studies, Heather and Sol both started off well. Their projects were well-focused and well-planned, they worked hard and did a lot of very good and interesting work, but – possibly driven by a wish to produce what they perceived as a 'good' project report – went ethically astray towards the end.

Activity 8: Good report?

During this activity students will wrestle with ethical dilemmas they might face when writing up their own projects. Points emerging in discussion of plagiarism might include:

- another researcher whose work is plagiarised could miss out on getting the credit and recognition for what they have done
- people reading a report of plagiarised work are, effectively, being lied to

It's worth acknowledging that 'writing in your own words' can be difficult, particularly when the content is unfamiliar and challenging. With someone else's words readily to hand it can be hard to avoid reproducing them. Suggest to students that they write brief notes while reading their source material, then close the websites, put away the books and allow at least a few hours before trying to write their own account, which they should do with reference only to their own notes and not to the original sources.

Points emerging in a discussion of reporting altered or incomplete data might include:

- if data do not fit an expected pattern, then maybe the expected pattern is incorrect – if so, the data might indicate something unexpected and interesting, and 'correcting' the data might mean that the researcher misses out on making a new discovery
- altering data is a form of lying as it involves giving incorrect information
- reporting selected data involves lying by being 'economical with the truth'
- other researchers might waste time and resources trying to reproduce and build on incorrect results

Emphasise that data and the results derived from them should always be reported completely and honestly. If (after checking for possible mistakes) results do not fit an expected pattern, then students should comment on any differences and attempt to account for them.

Right at the end

Finally, remind students that ethical considerations are an integral part of their project and should be discussed in their report.

Further work

This extension work could be carried out for homework. A key point is that such misconduct is regarded very seriously. Researchers found to have acted unethically often face the loss of their career and reputation.

Resources (one per student)

- Go further – Ethics and EPQs student edition
- Wellcome EPQ guide (wellcome.ac.uk/EPQethics)